

Reimagining Mission in the Postcolonial Condition

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Reimagining Mission
in the Postcolonial Condition

*A Theology of Vulnerability and Vocation at
the Margins*

Boekencentrum *Academic*, Zoetermeer

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1. Introduction

1.1 EXPLORATION OF THE RESEARCH TOPIC

The 10th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in 2013 in Busan, South Korea, presented a new statement on mission and evangelism, entitled *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*.¹ This statement is the first official declaration by the World Council of Churches on the mission of the church since the 1982 document, *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*.² The adoption of this landmark statement signals profound shifts in the theology of mission. One area that has undergone significant change is the social location of mission: instead of being directed *at* the margins, mission is conceptualized as originating *from* the margins of society.

The perspective of marginality offers a compelling incentive to reconceptualize mission encounters from the periphery. The adoption of *Together towards Life* signifies the willingness to rethink the foundation, goals and social location of mission anew. At the same time, *Together towards Life* represents a critical perspective on the history of the missionary enterprise. The incentive for formulating a new statement on mission and evangelism lies in the perceived shift of Christianity's 'center of gravity' from the global North to the global South. The ensuing question that governs this document is therefore: 'What are the insights for mission and evangelism – theologies, agendas and practices – of the 'shift of the center of gravity of Christianity?''³

My dissertation, which equally attempts to rethink mission theology for contemporary contexts, locates itself therefore in a wider ecumenical current in order to rethink mission in the context of World Christianity. I associate myself with the World-Christian turn, which signals the breakthrough of the World Christianity paradigm within theology.⁴ In contrast to *Together towards Life*, I will problematize the language of the shift of the center of gravity by pointing out the dangers of a numerical approach to World Christianity. One of the main tasks of this introductory chapter will therefore be to interact with contemporary definitions of World Christianity and to scrutinize critically the presuppositions embedded in

¹ 'Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes', *International Review of Mission* 101, no. 2 (2012): 250–80.

² *Mission and Evangelism* is not replaced but complemented by the new statement. 'Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation', in *You Are the Light of the World: Statements on Mission by the World Council of Churches 1980-2005* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 4–38.

³ 'Together towards Life', 251.

⁴ Paul V. Kollman, 'Understanding the World-Christian Turn in the History of Christianity and Theology', *Theology Today* 71, no. 2 (2014): 164–177.

these definitions.

In tandem with its articulation of the necessity to rethink mission within World Christianity, *Together towards Life* promotes a postcolonial missiology, which actively strives to dismantle and subvert lingering colonial approaches to mission. The term postcolonial signals in a temporal sense the period after colonization. At a more complex level, the word postcolonial denotes an explicit stance to engage the legacy of colonialism and to strive actively towards a decolonial position.⁵ The entanglement between mission and colonialism is famously explained by David Bosch:

The very origin of the term “mission,” as we still tend to use it today, presupposes the ambience of the West’s colonization of overseas territories and its subjugation of their inhabitants. Therefore, since the sixteenth century, if one said “mission” one in a sense also said “colonialism.” Modern missions originated in the context of modern Western colonialism.⁶

A postcolonial missiology is therefore characterized by a critical and honest assessment of the enduring legacy of colonialism within mission theology and practice. This dissertation will make use of various directions and methods to advance a postcolonial methodology.

Firstly, a critical assessment of the legacy of terms used in missionary discourse is called for. In the second chapter, I will employ postcolonial geography in order to offer a critical evaluation of spatial metaphors in use in missionary discourse; terms such as mission field and frontier. The second chapter has therefore a transitional character: it uses the postcolonial framework established in this introductory chapter and further establishes a postcolonial geography. The second half of the dissertation consists of three thematic chapters that build forth upon this postcolonial framework. The third chapter focuses on the epistemological priority of theologizing from *below*, from the perspective of multiple and interlocking marginalizations. Theologizing from below signals a break from theologizing from above, which denotes a hegemonic approach to theology; a form of theology that is at home in contexts of empire.⁷ In order to advance a mission theology from below, one must take seriously the epistemological priority of those who are relegated to the margins of society. Thirdly, in order to avoid all associations with totalizing systems, postcolonial theologizing cherishes its fragmentary character.⁸

⁵ Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera Rivera, *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 302–3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 423–24.

⁸ Recent theologizing about the fragment signifies the abandonment of a totalizing thought system in theology. These types of theology are characterized by their epistemic humility and attempt to overcome all totalizing tendencies. William Myatt, ‘Public Theology and “The Fragment”’: Duncan Forrester, David Tracy, and Walter Benjamin’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 1 (2014):

Fragmentary theology is characterized instead by epistemic humility, distaste for conformism and the desire to disclose ‘theological pathologies.’⁹ With Bosch’s scathing criticism in mind, one could argue that this entanglement of mission and colonialism is indeed a ‘theological pathology’ and should be addressed through the development of a postcolonial mission theology.

In the third, fourth and fifth chapters of this dissertation, I will offer the reader three themes, or fragments, that I consider to be beneficial for the re-imagining of postcolonial mission encounters. As already indicated, the first theme will be marginality, in order to problematize the center-periphery structure as the foundational role for colonial mission practices. The quintessential role of marginality in a postcolonial mission theology leads to the second theme, namely the advancement of a missiology of vulnerability. Vulnerability signifies human openness, relationality and denouncement of invulnerability. Living out vulnerability in this way leads to openness for the vulnerable *other* through recognition of one’s own vulnerability necessitated by the epistemological priority of the perspective from the margins. The third theme of vocation suggests that the lens of vocational presence can provide an incentive for responding to one’s call in life not by negating marginality and vulnerability, but to find vocation within these situations.

This introductory chapter will first guide the reader through an exploration of the current situation of mission in the context of the Netherlands. The goal of this section is, on the one hand, to give the reader factual information about the context in which this dissertation is written, such as data on the deployment of cross-cultural missionaries and the terminology that is frequently used. On the other hand, this introduction also problematizes certain developments and tendencies of contemporary mission practices. Consequently, the detected problems and omissions lead to the research question and the outline of the argument that this dissertation will advance.

1.2 MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NETHERLANDS

This section explains the context in which conversations about mission are conducted within the Netherlands. This dissertation has been written both for Dutch and international audiences. The distinction between national and international becomes increasingly questioned within a postcolonial framework which seeks to destabilize the pervasive fiction of home and homeland.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the particular debates about mission in the Netherlands inevitably bear upon this research

86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰ The second chapter will explore in more detail the difficulties with the concept of home and homeland.

project. For international audiences, who are not well versed in the specific trajectory of missiological reflection in the Netherlands, this paragraph serves as an introduction. In this section, I will therefore discuss first how the ecclesiology of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands [PCN]¹¹ articulates the foundational role of mission for the church. The assessment of these formal statements on mission leads to a short evaluation of the mission praxis of the PCN and on the role of language to describe mission workers.¹²

1.2.1. *Protestant Church in the Netherlands – Policy*

Mission is firmly anchored within the church order of the PCN. The tenth article of the church order, which is concerned with the missionary, diaconal and pastoral work of the church, affirms that the devotion to mission should permeate the totality of the church's existence.¹³ Furthermore, the church order affirms the role of the local congregations:

On account of its missionary task, the congregation is devoted in its entire existence to witnessing and ministry to those who do not know the Gospel or are alienated from it, so that they too may share in the salvation in Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The church order places therefore the primacy of the missionary involvement of the church with the local congregation. The emphasis on the local congregation is affirmed as well in the first policy document of the PCN, *Learning to Live out of Wonder* (2005), which states succinctly that 'the congregation is therefore missionary. She is there to translate and bring the World to life over de [sic, EDH] borders of the church and Christianity.'¹⁵ In the same document, the missionary calling of the church is listed as the third of twelve policy points, which focus on

¹¹ The Protestant Church in the Netherlands [PCN] is a merger of the Netherlands Reformed Church, Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. After an extensive process that spanned over half a century, the PCN came formally into being in 2004. See for an overview of the history of the merging process: Arjan Plaisier and Leo J. Koffeman, eds., *The Protestant Church in the Netherlands: Church Unity in the 21st Century: Stories, Lessons and Expectations* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014).

¹² This section focuses mainly on the development of the PCN due to the limited scope of this research. For an overview of the mission of churches with a majority of members with a background of migration, see Daniëlle Tabitha Koning, *Importing God: The Mission of the Ghanaian Adventist Church and Other Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2011).

¹³ 'Kerkorde en Ordinantie van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland', 2016 2004, sec. 10, <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/Lists/PKN-Bibliotheek/Kerkorde-en-ordinanties-compleet.pdf>. 'Church Order of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands: Article I - XIX', 2004, sec. 10, <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/Lists/PKN-Bibliotheek/Churchorder-protestant-church-articles-I-XIX-2004.pdf>.

¹⁴ 'Church Order of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands: Article I - XIX'.

¹⁵ 'Learning to Live out of Wonder', 2005, 2, <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/Lists/PKN-Bibliotheek/Learning-to-live-out-of-wonder-2009.pdf>.

the role of the local congregation.¹⁶ The connections with migrant churches and cross-cultural partnership are listed under the ‘the cooperation with other churches and organizations.’ The missionary element of these partnerships is defined through the emphasis on a mutual learning process between the Dutch church and the partners abroad.¹⁷ As a result, a distinction is made between on the one hand the local mission of each congregation, which primarily extends to the immediate sphere of influence of these congregations and, on the other hand, the mission of the church abroad, which is subsumed under the heading of ecumenical contacts. This means therefore that mission is something that happens within the Netherlands, not necessarily abroad. The international realm is the location of ecumenical assistance.

The 2012 memorandum *The Heartbeat of Life* aims to convey ‘the vision for the life and work’ for the PCN.¹⁸ The document consists of four themes which describe the witness of the church. The fourth theme outlines the ecumenical and missional character of the church, formulated as ‘together with all the saints: being a church with others.’¹⁹ The document claims: ‘Our church is a manifestation of the worldwide church, nothing more and nothing less.’²⁰ In addition, a warning against provincialism is issued: ‘There is more church than the church in the Netherlands. We shouldn’t become parochial in our thinking.’²¹ The overall tone of this section of the document is optimistic about the growth of faith in non-Western contexts and the ability to learn about the burgeoning faith in the Majority World.

1.2.2. *Protestant Church in the Netherlands – Praxis*

Both the church order and the first policy document of the PCN are characterized by a strong missionary impetus. In the same year however, on the eve of the formal merger of the mother denominations of the PCN, Jan Jongeneel complained about the lack of missionary zeal and passion in those denominations.²² He considered

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ ‘Protestantse Kerk Nederland - Visienota: De Hartslag van het Leven’, accessed 4 August 2014, <http://www.pkn.nl/overons/protestantse-kerk/missie-en-visie/Paginas/Visienota-2012.aspx>. The memorandum is translated into English and German by the PCN. References in the text are to the English translation.

¹⁹ ‘The Heartbeat of Life - Memorandum Concerning the Vision for the Life and Work of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands’, 2012, 24–26, <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/overons/protestant-church/Paginas/Statements.aspx>

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

²¹ Ibid. See for an overview and analysis of the current state of affairs with regard to missional dynamics in the Dutch protestant churches: Henk de Roest, ‘Pionieren en lekepreken. Een praktisch-theologische analyse van de nieuwe missionaire dynamiek in de Nederlandse kerken, met name de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland’ (Dies Natalis lecture, PThU, 2013).

²² Jan A. B. Jongeneel, ‘Christelijke Theologie als Missionaire Theologie’, *Kerk en Theologie* 55, no. 1 (2004): 42–53.

it problematic that the line of Dutch theological thinking which stressed the missionary task of the church, as expressed through influential theologians such as A.A. van Ruler, J.C. Hoekendijk, H. Berkhof and J. Verkuyl, was discontinued by a younger generation of theologians. Henk de Roest, professor in the practical theology at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands,²³ used Jongeneel's observation to contrast the enthusiasm for mission in the early 2000s with the landmark shift that took place in approximately the next decade.²⁴ From the perspective of the early 2010s, one can conclude that terms such as missional church, pioneering and new forms of being church have become part and parcel of the ecclesial discourse in the Netherlands. The usage of these terms is not confined to the more evangelically inclined part of the church, which has historically been more comfortable to use this terminology, but has spread throughout various segments of the church. However, the adoption of a mission-centered discourse has not been without its difficulties. De Roest lists six objections that are commonly voiced to the recent missional focus of the church, which range from the profoundly theological to the practical.²⁵ De Roest has supervised empirical research regarding the nature of activities which are employed by local congregations in order to become a missional church. He concludes that a significant number of these activities are ill-defined in terms of expected outcome and their missional character. As a result, the term 'missional' can be applied to almost any activity that local churches carry out: from celebrating birthdays to kids' activities to Christmas services. Moreover, most of those activities were structured along a 'come-to-us' format, revealing that the activities mainly took place on church premises and persuaded outsiders to participate in these church activities. The activities were, in the vast majority of cases, organized without explicit cooperation with other denominations.²⁶ Although the research of De Roest points to problems within the missional praxis, I consider the renewed missional élan as a positive development, so far as it points to a church which truly tries to be church in the world, and is not first and foremost concerned with its own inner life and continuity. In 2014, the PCN celebrated her 10th anniversary. The commemorative church service was broadcast on national television and was attended by the Dutch king and queen, who are members of the PCN.²⁷ The 10-year milestone was an occasion

²³ See for an overview of publications regarding the mission of the Protestant church in the Netherlands (PCN): https://www.pthu.nl/Over_PThu/Organisatie/Medewerkers/h.p.deroest/recent-articles-and-downloads/ (accessed September 29, 2016).

²⁴ De Roest, 'Pionieren en lekepreken. Een praktisch-theologische analyse van de nieuwe missionaire dynamiek in de Nederlandse kerken, met name de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland', 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9–11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5–7.

²⁷ The liturgy of the church service is available via this link: <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/actueel/campagnes/Tien-jaar-Protestantse-Kerk/Paginas/Viering-Vieren-en-Verbinden.aspx> (accessed January 31, 2016). The video recording of the commemorative church service is available via this link: http://www.npo.nl/pkn-10-jaar/14-09-2014/VPWON_1229868 (accessed January 31, 2016)