

Towards a Missional Ecclesiology A Prospective Issue for a Danish Missiological Journal?

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Sammendrag: På bakgrunn av en analyse av det danske missiologitidsskriftet *Ny Mission* – 39 numre utgitt mellom 1999 og 2020 med mer enn fem hundre artikler skrevet av nesten 300 forfattere – tar artikkelen utgangspunkt i at *Ny Missions* neste fase kanskje vil være kjennetegnet ved en større vektlegning av *misjonal kirke* i Danmark. Artikkelen diskuterer hvordan en *misjonal ekklesiologi* i et sekularisert Europa kan forstås, anbefaler en tenkning hvor kontinuiteten med kontinentets lange kristne historie vektlegges og lar artikkelen munne ut i en rekke anbefalinger for en misjonal ekklesiologi for Vesten.

Nøkkelord: Dansk Missionsråd – misjonal kirke – Hans Raun Iversen – Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen.

Abstract: On the backdrop of an analysis of the Danish missiological journal *Ny Mission* – of the 39 issues published between 1999 and 2020, featuring more than five hundred articles by almost three hundred writers – the article takes its point of departure that perhaps the next phase of *Ny Mission* will be characterized by a larger emphasis on *missional church* in Denmark. The article discusses how a *missional ecclesiology* in a secularized Europe may be understood, recommends a thinking where continuity with the continent's long Christian history is emphasized and concludes the article by proposing a number of recommendations for a missional ecclesiology for the West.

Keywords: Danish Mission Council – missional church – Hans Raun Iversen – Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen.

Introduction: Mission and Church Belong Together

This article takes as its point of departure the possibility that the next phase of the Danish missiological journal, *Ny Mission*, published by the Danish Mission Council, might be characterized by a greater emphasis on *missional church* in Denmark. It discusses how a *missional ecclesiology* in a secularized Europe may be understood, recommends a thinking where continuity with the continent's long Christian history is emphasized, and concludes by proposing a number of recommendations for a missional ecclesiology for the West. The choice of introducing the issue of *ecclesiology* here is based on the premise that the main agent in *mission* in Denmark is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, cf. Hans Raun Iversen's view that this church is an ideal mission model. Named «the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark», it has 4.3 million members out of a population of 5.8 million.

A biographical note on the author of this article may be relevant here: As an ordained Lutheran theologian and pastor, I am obviously a «church person». However, I am also a «mission person». Baptized and ordained into the Lutheran Church of Norway, which has 3.7 million members out of a population of 5.2 million, it was marriage to a Danish woman that enabled my spending twenty years in Danish mission organizations, shared between Africa and Denmark.¹ Summing up, I have experience from two distinct participants in the *mission of God (missio Dei)*: the local church and the mission society. In the following, I will discuss various aspects of the relationship between mission and church, including the concept of a *missional ecclesiology*.

The Timeless Case for a Missional Ecclesiology

If a missional ecclesiology is now needed in Denmark, and indeed in «the West» – that is, Europe and North America – a number of questions arise, primarily *why* and *how*? The *why* is two-fold: *Why ever?* and *Why now?* The *why ever* is addressed by arguments about the timeless mission of the church. Church and mission are two sides of the same coin and the case for a missional church should be uncontroversial for anyone who has witnessed mission work in practice at close hand or has any historical knowledge of how churches have originated. The historical pattern is that mission is what has caused the church to exist in the first place, as well as venture across frontiers from the beginning.² Mission preceded the church and gave birth to it then and still does. Therefore, it is possible to view mission as not only the mother of theology, as the great scholar of mission, Martin Kähler, did, but also the mother of the church. Although the churches and mission societies may not be the only institutions participating in God's mission, they are certainly among the institutions most likely to interpret their

1 At the time of writing, I'm a parish priest in Norway.

2 Cf. B. Sundkler et al. (eds.), *The Church Crossing Frontiers: Essays on the Nature of Mission: In Honour of Bengt Sundkler* (Lund: Gleerup, 1969).

activities and *raison d'être* in light of such a theology. Therefore, that churches *have* a mission is a mild statement. Rather, modern mission theology presupposes that the churches participate in a mission which belongs to God himself. It is a mission which has, theologically speaking, trinitarian origins. Ivan Illich refers to this Christian mission as «the social continuation of the Incarnation.»³ Also, the fact that in the third article of the Apostolic creed the Holy Spirit is juxtaposed with the holy catholic church (not the «Roman Catholic Church», but *catholic* in its original meaning: universal) may be interpreted as a sign of how closely the early church identified itself and the mission in which it participated with the trinitarian God. The church, having been extrovert and open from the beginning, freely shares a universal message, meant for all. In line with this and until this day, the churches have invited anyone to listen to the Gospel inside their walls as well as venturing outside these very walls to let their message be seen and heard in various forms, such as words, deeds, or both.

Introducing Lesslie Newbigin

When it comes to the question of why *now*, i.e., why a missional church is on the agenda these years, it makes sense to introduce Lesslie Newbigin.⁴ He is credited with the introduction of the focus on missional church as the obvious remedy to its decline in the West. Indeed, he was possibly the first to seriously analyze the West as a mission field. In his book *Foolishness to the Greeks*, he divides Christianity into three stages. The first was the early church where it was persecuted and without political influence. Then the second was the Constantinian/Christendom period (named after the conversion to Christianity of emperor Constantine early in the fourth century) when it was closely intertwined with political power for more than a thousand years. The third is the present post-Enlightenment one, when that symbiosis ceased. Newbigin does not nostalgically long for a return to the early church, but does indeed defend the church's role during the Christendom period, when the world needed it to play a part on the political stage as deliverer of vital networks and a shared religious curriculum.⁵ However, he claims that the era of Christendom is now over and the barbarians

3 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 494.

4 Born in 1909, he was a Reformed missionary in India from 1936 to 1974, interrupted by a stint in Geneva from 1959 to 1965 as the general secretary of International Mission Council as it was integrated into WCC. From 1947, he was a bishop, and in 1974 he returned back to the UK.

5 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 101: «When the ancient classical world, which had seemed so brilliant and so all-conquering, ran out of spiritual fuel and turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together, should the church have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order? It could not do so if it was to be faithful to its origins in Israel and in the ministry of Jesus.»

(alluding to the non-Christians who sacked the Christian Roman empire in 410) may already be, not only at the gates, but at the helm of some former Christian countries, to paraphrase the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.⁶ Such a situation raises tremendous challenges for the present and future church in the West, and perhaps even greater for the Western governments should they get too detached from the most vital source of their values and much more.

Is the West Really Pagan? The Quest for a Proper Analysis

Newbigin has thus inspired a quest among missiologists to come to terms with a *post-Christendom* Western culture in which the Western Christians reside, perhaps as *resident aliens*, as another of his books is called. As other missiologists, his necessary analytical process has the underlying goal of identifying what God is doing today and how the church should pool its resources for the Kingdom of God. However, Newbigin's claim that the West is not secular but outright «pagan»⁷ is sometimes mistakenly taken at face value. A more fruitful response to his claim would be a deeper reflection on and analytical curiosity about the West's relation to religion and Christianity and vice versa. The outcome of such analyses should inform missional thinking and practice in the Western context. Whether the conclusion emphasizes Christianity's decline or its resilience through changing circumstances, such an analysis should make use of not only statistical sources but qualitative studies as well. Such studies could include interviews with a wide range of people engaged in contemporary missionary practice, such as pastors engaged in funerals and local parish work, lay people bearing witness to Christ in their workplaces (e.g., in the media, the arts, and young Christians bearing witness in their schools).⁸

Was Europe Ever Really Christian?

Whether Newbigin's assessment is an adequate analysis or a warning cry, it is helpful to ask whether there ever was such a thing as a «pure» Christendom in the first place - even in Europe. A fruitful detour could be via an analytical perspective from Pakistan where the long-time priest John O'Brien concluded that «the underlying religion there

6 Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek*, 134.

7 Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek*, 20.

8 In Denmark and Norway, the churches have their own research institutions delving into various issues of interest: cf. <https://www.fkuv.dk/> (Folkekirken's Uddannelses- og Videnscenter) and <http://www.kifo.no/> (Institutt for kirke-, religions- og livssynsforskning). Moreover, the theological faculties facilitate a number of studies from church practice.

largely remained the aboriginal.»⁹ Moreover, a Sri Lankan Jesuit priest, Aloysius Pieris, has produced an analytical model that also appears relevant in Europe, distinguishing between *cosmic* and *meta-cosmic* religions:

A cosmic religion is an open-ended spirituality that awaits a transcendental orientation from a metacosmic religion. It is therefore not a question of one replacing the other, but one completing the other in such a way as to form a bidimensional soteriology that maintains a healthy tension between the cosmic *now* and the metacosmic *beyond*.¹⁰

The relationship between the cosmic and meta-cosmic types of religion may be compared to the one between the hosting heliport and the landing helicopter. In the case of Europe, «the heliport» would be the pre-Christian religions and «the helicopter» would be Christianity.

Rather than regarding the relationship between the cosmic and meta-cosmic types of religion as contradictory, Pieris considered their functions to be complementary. The complementarity between the cosmic and the meta-cosmic types of religion plays out in individuals, on social levels, and in theology.

Similarly asking whether Europe was ever really Christian, Anton Wessels points to the continuing legacy of pre-Christian European cosmic religion.¹¹ When it comes to modern challenges to Christianity in Europe, rationalism has played such a role since the Enlightenment.¹² More recently, Eastern religious influences have added to the idea of a less Christian Europe.¹³

Based on these arguments, one may conclude that Europe neither is nor ever was a purely Christian continent. However, with the historical dominance of the church and its close relations to the political rulers, there is still no doubt that Europe has indeed been a continent of «Christendom» and the question is whether somehow this situation persists, despite the secularization processes.

9 O'Brien identified as many as eight layers in the archaeology of lived religion in Pakistan. See J. O'Brien, *By the Finger of God: Healing and Deliverance in Pakistan. Witchcraft, Demons and Deliverance*. C. Währisch-Oblau and H. Wrogemann (Berlin: Lit, 2015): 229–259.

10 A. Pieris, *Asian Theology of Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 54.

11 Anton Wessels, *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian? The Interaction Between Gospel and Culture* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

12 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 262–267.

13 P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

Europe as an «Evangelized Culture»

Looking at the future of Christianity in Europe, and perhaps sharing Newbigin's pessimism, Pope Benedict XVI established a new Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization to counter what he termed the «abandonment of the faith» in cultures which had for centuries been «permeated by the Gospel.»¹⁴ His successor, Pope Francis, however, seems to have chosen a more positive accentuation, acknowledging the significance of the continued legacy of the churches' presence in the West for centuries. Calling it an «evangelized culture,»¹⁵ the idea suggested is that European culture is so thoroughly Christianized that it doesn't even realize it. Adding to this argument, Tom Holland's book *Dominion* constitutes a paradigm shift for the many who have never been taught how to identify the pervasive culture-shaping influence of Christian institutions and theologies on the societies of which they have long been part.¹⁶

Emphasizing both the break and the continuity between Europe's more religious past and less religious present, the philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva contributes with a fruitful metaphor for the situation of the continent's contemporary culture and philosophy as detached from its Christian source: «The vision of human complexity to which I am attached [born in Bulgaria in 1941, with its history of Communism and Orthodox Christianity, now living in France] ... springs from Christianity, though it is now detached from it, and aspires to elucidate the perilous paths of freedom.»¹⁷ In other words, Europe's roots are Christian, but there is a disconnect from them in this era.

14 K. Kim and P. Grogan, *The New Evangelization: Faith, People, Context and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–2.

15 Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (London: Crown Publishing Group, 2014), 68: «The Christian substratum of certain peoples – most of all in the West – is a living reality. Here we find, especially among the most needy, a moral resource which preserves the values of an authentic Christian humanism. Seeing reality with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing. It would show a lack of trust in his free and unstinting activity to think that authentic Christian values are absent where great numbers of people have received baptism and express their faith and solidarity with others in a variety of ways ... The immense importance of a culture marked by faith cannot be overlooked; before the onslaught of contemporary secularism an evangelized culture, for all its limits, has many more resources than the mere sum total of believers. An evangelized popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society, and possesses a particular wisdom which ought to be gratefully acknowledged.»

16 Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2019).

17 Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), 78.

The Danish Debate Concerning Missional Church

Because Denmark is part of the «Western» or European cultural sphere, Lesslie Newbigin's thinking has enriched its missional reflection, as seen in several *Ny Mission* articles. In an indirect debate about the situation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, two Danish theological scholars have both referred to Newbigin, but arrived at differing positions in their understanding of the missional situation in Denmark. A defining question concerning a missional church is what we mean when we say «the church»? Is it most of the baptized members or only the strong core congregation? One who has been deeply engaged in the work of stimulating the «life and growth» of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark is the retired Associate Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Copenhagen, Hans Raun Iversen, a fact which is shown in the *festskrift* published in his honor.¹⁸ Another Danish scholar who has also been engaged in this endeavor is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Missiology at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen. He has also written about missional ecclesiology.¹⁹ He emphasizes that the normal situation of the church is to be a minority.²⁰

Hans Raun Iversen does not enter into the discussion of whether the church is a minority or majority, but has other emphases, drawing from qualitative research as he categorizes the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark into three types: The first group is the «culture Christians» who attend church for special occasions, such as funerals and baptisms. They are quite practical about their Christian witness, some of them conscious about it while others are not. The second group is the «church Christians» who attend church on a regular basis. Iversen thinks about them when referring to Newbigin's claim that «the *congregation* is the hermeneutic of the Gospel.» For the Gospel to be public someone has to be visible about it in a culturally recognizable form, attending services regularly and comprising a congregational «core», and church Christians do just that.²¹ The third group is the «Charismatic Christians». They are the ones with the most intense faith, which is sometimes contagious. Together, these three groups make up the members of the Evangelical Lutheran

18 Lisbeth Christoffersen et al., *Den praktiske teologi i Danmark 1973-2018: Festskrift til Hans Raun Iversen* (København: Eksistensen, 2019).

19 See, for example, Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, «Folkekirke, mission og pluralistisk samfund» in: *Norwegian Journal of Missiology* 73, no. 1 (2019), 23–33.

20 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, «Beyond Christendom: Lesslie Newbigin as a Post-Christendom Theologian» in: *Exchange* 41, no. 4 (2012), 380: «Also, the Christian church now seems to be re-appropriating its distinctive identity, as the church in most Western societies now exists as a minority.»

21 Hans Raun Iversen, «Kulturkristendom, kirkekristendom og karismatisk kristendom: Kristendomsformernes baggrund og samspil i folkekirken.» in: *Ny Mission* 1, no. 1 (1999), 35.

Church in Denmark and their interplay takes place in the church services and in the congregational boards. All three make unique contributions to a joint witness about Jesus Christ, and they generally appreciate each other's presence.²² As mentioned already, to Iversen, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark represents, despite its many shortcomings, an ideal mission model. Such a church always wants to «share the joy and insights of the faith with those on the outside». It wants to «make Christ known and offers itself so that even today faith may be established and signs of the Kingdom of God, just like Jesus Christ did it in his earthly life.»²³ Iversen believes that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark as an entity of the three types of Christians has «succeeded in keeping an image of Christ alive among the Danes,» especially through its ceremonies, education, and diakonia.

In an article from 2012, Nikolajsen assesses some of Iversen's views of understanding the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark as a missional church positively, but also criticizes Iversen for lacking «a profound perception of the importance and relevance of the church as a distinct community of faith.»²⁴ To me, Nikolajsen's criticism appears a bit unprecise. Iversen's understanding of the church as a distinct community of faith comes across when he claims that without “church Christians,” «the church would not be church, but an empty house – a ceremonial institution without a congregation.»²⁵ It appears to me that Iversen has a profound understanding of the importance and relevance of the church as a distinct community of faith, but perhaps his contributions on that topic may have been overshadowed by other dominant interests in his research, such as the various sociological groups of the church as well as its historical development in the Danish context.

In a book from 2021, Iversen comments on Nikolajsen's understanding of Newbigin's attitude towards the Constantinian church as one of «ambivalent critique.» Iversen appears to disagree with Nikolajsen, emphasizing that Newbigin thought the church would have failed its calling if it had just washed its hands and not put itself at its disposal as a state church in a world empire whose religious cohesion was dissolving. It did not imply that a ‘Christian society’ emerged, but that the church had to learn to unite a state and national position with still being a church in mission.²⁶

I agree with Iversen that at various points in history the church has had to take a political burden upon itself. Both Iversen and Nikolajsen, however, would agree that

22 Iversen, «Kulturkristendom, kirkekristendom og karismatisk kristendom», 35.

23 Iversen, «Kulturkristendom, kirkekristendom og karismatisk kristendom», 37.

24 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, «Missional Folk Church? A Discussion of Hans Raun Iversen's Understanding of the Danish Folk Church as a Missional Church» in: *Swedish Missiological Themes* 100, no. 1 (2012), 36.

25 Iversen, «Kulturkristendom, kirkekristendom og karismatisk kristendom», 25.

26 Hans Raun Iversen, *Folkekirke, brugerkirke, kirke i mission* (København: Eksistensen, 2021), 234 (my translation).

such a burden would always carry a great risk for the church of becoming too cozy with power and thus lose its prophetic credibility. Iversen criticizes Nikolajsen for underestimating the ability and sometimes the need for the church to be incarnational through politics. Iversen writes: «He does not acknowledge creation theology to the extent of imagining the church as incarnational to the extent that it can and sometimes must take upon itself a societal role of political nature.»²⁷ Here, Iversen's criticism appears a bit unprecise to me. Nikolajsen has argued that the church should «allow its distinctiveness to constitute the basis for its engagement in, and openness to, society, [so that] it can contribute distinctively to a pluralistic society».²⁸ My own view is that historical circumstances vary, and sometimes the church has the ear of the governments and its core values such as care for the weak are «incarnated» into society from above having been inspired from below or not. Iversen appears to have such a majority perspective in mind, assuming Denmark is (still) a Christian country. In other situations, however, the church feels small and powerless and does not see obvious signs of its influence, resolving to remain firm in its witness as a light in the darkness. Nikolajsen appears to regard Christianity to be one among several religions in a pluralistic society, thus apparently assuming Denmark is no longer a Christian country. In such minority or pluralistic situations, «witness» comes across as a more relevant concept for the church's engagement in society than «incarnation».

Iversen further argues that Nikolajsen's apparent alignment to Newbigin's pessimistic assessment of the Western situation does not take into account that Newbigin writes from an English experience, whose church life is different from the Danish equivalent. However, Nikolajsen has never shared Newbigin's radical understanding of England as a neopagan country, which should be interpreted in light of Newbigin coming back to England after having been a missionary and bishop in India for decades. Nikolajsen denotes Western societies as post-Christendom societies and most often pluralistic societies. It appears likely, however, that Nikolajsen's view of the predicament of the church in the West has been colored by the research he has done in the theology of the Anabaptist Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.²⁹ It would also seem that Newbigin's assessment of the «pagan» situation in the West has come to be shared by American theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder.³⁰ Like Iversen and Nikolajsen, I find that Newbigin's understanding of England

27 Iversen, *Folkekirke, brugerkirke, kirke i mission*, 234.

28 For example, see Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, «Christian Ethics, Public Debate, and Pluralistic Society» in: *International Journal of Public Theology* 14, no. 1 (2020), 19.

29 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, *The Distinctive Identity of the Church: A Constructive Study of the Post-Christendom Theologies of Leslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015).

30 Cf. Andrea D. Snavelly, *Life in the Spirit: A Post-Constantinian and Trinitarian Account of the Christian Life* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2015).

as a neopagan society does not fit a description of the complex realities of Denmark, and it may not even be an accurate description of the situation in England. Denmark is different from both England and North America. The reasons why Iversen emphasizes the continuity between Christianity and Danish culture, while Yoder and Hauerwas, in contrast, emphasize the need for discontinuity between Christianity and the North American political power, should be looked into. It appears as if Iversen speaks into an interpretation of the Danish situation as exaggeratedly secular and finds evidence to rectify it, whereas Yoder and Hauerwas speak into a North American situation where religion and power politics have been excessively intertwined, therefore seeking to have it rectified by comparing it to the pacifist ideals of the pre-Christendom church. Iversen's and Yoder's respective definitions of what a true Christian is, are likely to differ. In the case of North America, degrees of utopianism should be assessed and so should reactions to excessive religiously legitimized political power.

Summing up, Iversen and Nikolajsen reflect familiar positions in the Danish church landscape: Nikolajsen is apparently more aligned with pietistic, conservative theologians who traditionally emphasize the distinctiveness of the church, whereas Iversen is more aligned with Grundtvigian theologians who tend to emphasize the continuity between the Danish church and the Danish society in terms of culture and history. These groups, popularly distinguished as «serious» and «happy» respectively, both have origins in nineteenth century revivals in Denmark. Perhaps as a result of an increasingly secular climate in the Danish context, however, in recent years their mutual skepticism appears to have weakened. These years, representatives of these traditions meet more often and there are signs that the Grundtvigians have rediscovered the indispensable value of the «church Christians,» whereas pietistic Christians acknowledge the value of «culture Christians» and people outside their own circles. More open to learning from what is good in the other, it appears as if there has been a movement towards a spirit more resembling that of «receptive ecumenism», an ecumenical concept that also makes sense intra-confessionally.

Break or Continuity: Missional Ecclesiologies in European History

The consciousness of participating in *God's mission* has arguably been lower among churches in contexts where the majority of people are already baptized, such as Denmark, than in places where millions have turned to Christianity in the past two centuries, such as Africa. Whereas such majority churches in the West may have seen their main task as that of «servicing» their members with Word and Sacraments, they were at times enriched or threatened by revival movements. In Scandinavia, some of these were tellingly called «Inner Mission», and they vocally interpreted their activities as mission. But their concept of mission was broader than just bringing someone from another faith or lack thereof into the Christian community. As part of a majority Christian society, these revival movements assumed that calling baptized co-citizens back to a living faith comprised part of God's will and mission. Some of

these movements refrained from calling the people in need of a revival or a return to God «non-Christian». Having internalized core Christian sacramental theology, they assumed that the sacraments were valid regardless of a pastor's faith or lack thereof. A baptized person, therefore, was a Christian whether the faith was dormant or not.³¹ In other words, they did not have a problem seeing their mission directed towards fellow baptized Christians.

Anabaptists, however, had a different view of the sacraments and consequently of their baptized co-citizens. To enter the real communion of believers, a whole new baptism was required, so the argument went. In other words, baptism as a seal of the covenant with God was not unbreakable, and neither was baptism as a continuity with an individual's Christian past enough, but a whole new start was necessary. These two approaches, by the «Inner Mission» and the Anabaptists, may be labelled «renewal and continuity» and «rebirth and break with the past» respectively. They have co-existed for centuries in European Christian practice. With a wide definition of mission, both approaches may be said to be valid expressions of mission, whether the «target group» is considered to be dormant Christians in need of awakening or lost souls in need of a new birth. However, identifying with the former, I view the latter's approach as a theological misreading of the situation. Although it is always possible to denounce the Christian faith, I consider the validity of baptism to depend on factors beyond the individual's shifting proximities to the faith throughout his/her life. But whether it is awakening dormant Christians or inviting non-Christians to be part of the Body of Christ, it is mission. And in Africa, I have seen and assumed that God's mission is ever wider than «converting» people. It includes diakonia, advocacy, dialogue, and other expressions.³² The holistic mission of God is a broad enterprise.

The Interdependence between Mission Societies and Churches

Whereas some missional church advocates seem to decry the existence of mission societies, rightly claiming they were an emergency solution because the «official church did not want to take upon itself a range of catechumenal, diaconal and missional tasks,» the fruits of the mission societies are immense and have obviously been used in a unique way in the *mission of God*. They are not to blame for the «disintegration of church and mission,»³³ because mission societies planted the Protestant churches and engaged in holistic mission that included diaconal and educational efforts and often institutions. The division of labor is not dissimilar to the Catholic church's, where

31 Cf. the Donatist controversy, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley, 2011), 405–407.

32 Arngeir Langås, *Peace in Zanzibar: Proceedings of the Joint Committee of Religious Leaders in Zanzibar, 2005–2013* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 114.

33 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, «Missional ekklesiologi: En teologihistorisk analyse af en ekklesiologisk tradition.» in: *Norwegian Journal of Missiology* 63, no. 1 (2009), 20.

the mission orders such as the Holy Ghost Fathers specialized in «crossing frontiers» whereas the parish structure did the local mission of «tending the garden at hand.» But I do believe that the local and national churches can learn a lot from missiology's grappling with a wide range of issues, especially because the religiously pluralistic situation may be new to local and national churches such as the Danish one, but not to mission societies, most of which have deep experience from mission in pluralistic contexts.

The interdependence between mission societies and other para-church organizations on the one hand and the local church on the other should be recognized, because it has borne fruit. Hence, both should continue to exist and would be poorer without the other. They all participate in the mission of God; the local church with its sacraments is indispensable because it is the source from which all disciples draw their wisdom and energy. The local church also preaches the Gospel on many occasions, but it does not have the organization, the resources, or the experience to replace the specialized ministry carried out by parachurches and mission societies.

Having spent many years working in mission societies, I am now a parish priest in Norway, and thus reminded of other angles of the issue of missional church. Parish priests may argue that mission is what the pastors and the congregations have been doing since the churches originated in Denmark and Norway around a thousand years ago: The Word has been preached and the Sacraments have been administered. The pastors have brought the Gospel near in situations such as funerals, weddings, and baptism ceremonies. Through the church as an institution and the pastor personifying its message in countless interactions, the Gospel has found its ways into public and private culture for centuries. The priest-centered way of thinking about mission was always challenged by actual mission practice, be it through monastic centers, church-run educational and diakonial institutions, traders, or other lay witnesses. Moreover, the conscious development towards the empowerment of lay people was helped by Martin Luther's thinking about «the priesthood of all believers». With the end of the state churches' monopoly on preaching in Denmark in 1839 and in Norway in 1842, the structures were ready to accommodate mission associations with significant lay participation as well as revivals and new denominations. The significance of this is that the number of Christians who saw themselves as witnesses to Christ and personally involved in mission necessarily increased – , especially among those directly involved in the revival movements such as «Inner Mission» – but also the large number of people collecting money and praying for mission work overseas carried out by mission societies. Although this development contributed to a missional church, it was mostly organized by the mission societies, not from the local parish.

Participating in the Mission of God, but why? A Contribution to Rethinking Salvation

The biblical witness implies that the church, as aligned with the Holy Spirit and sent by God the Father and God the Son, is not here on earth for herself but as an instrument for the salvation of the world (John 3:17). When it comes to the question of salvation, the church has historically been concerned with the salvation of souls and eternal life in heaven. However, as attractive as the individual's salvation and eternal life in heaven may sound, one may criticize such an understanding for having too much focus on the individual as well as on the eternal side of salvation. (Though I readily admit that it is the assurance of salvation given at my baptism, made possible without my efforts – because Jesus has already paid for my sins – that takes away my fear of death). Going back to the preaching of Jesus, theologians agree that its center was «the Kingdom of God».³⁴ They also agree that this kingdom's temporal aspect is paradoxical; it is «already, but not yet.» Salvation, as an approximate synonym to the Kingdom of God, has as much to do with this worldly existence as the eternal existence. Our salvation starts here. There may be signs here and fulfillment «beyond», but those signs may be more than just that; namely, real experiences of salvation and the freedom of slaves.³⁵ Just as Jesus fought for the salvation of a number of people, be it from stigma, sickness, death or other conditions that stifled their lives, so the church in continuation with the saving ministry of Jesus has been inspired by Him to work for the salvation of human beings. There are thousands of examples of God saving people, through his church, from illiteracy, violence, disease, hopelessness, stigma, etc. Other entities have fought for similar causes, be they human rights activists or states, providing security, justice, and health. In other words, it is possibly part of human nature or human culture to fight for or nurture life. Sometimes the fight is unethical and competitive, sometimes it is ethical and cooperative. Usually, the church has been on the side of life, but there are exceptions when it hasn't.

In our time, we are coming to terms with a paradigm shift in thinking caused by an increasing awareness of the devastating effects of global warming on the biological conditions for human life on this planet. As a theologian, I try to interpret the new situation by means of the methodology at my disposal: The normative biblical message responding to a context that is quickly changing. According to my observations, the generational differences in responding to the crisis are obvious. The older people often shrug and say: «It won't happen in my lifetime.» The younger people are worried and accusing the powerful generations of indifference to the future of the coming generations. As for me, I belong to the generation that will soon occupy leadership positions all over the world. I am convinced that these issues should not be put on the shoulders

34 G. E. Ladd and D. A. Hagner, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54.

35 Langås, *Peace in Zanzibar*, 247.

of individuals and reduced to technicalities on how to recycle garbage. They demand political decisions on many levels -- international, national, and local. They also need cooperation across sectors, for which the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals provide an impetus and an example. I also believe that the new situation calls for a rethinking of what salvation entails and imagining what Jesus would have done had he descended on earth this year. If God created the world, which I believe he did, he did it with the best of intentions so that all of his creation may flourish. Human beings may have been created in the image of God in a special way, but the continuously predatory and exploitative behavior towards animals and the rest of creation means that we are on a death course. The aim of exploitation is fundamentally to live, but our expectations and demands are unsustainable and unfortunately contagious. With the steady rise of CO² in the atmosphere and the growth in human population at the cost of wild nature, I am not looking forward to the future. It could be imaginary, but I almost feel in my lungs that the air is getting worse, as if I'm trapped in a sealed greenhouse.

Would Jesus save us from this? Apocalyptic Christians long to see the end of the world and the return of Christ to save them like Superman, but they are only just beginning to discover the slow apocalypse coming through the climate catastrophe and the deterioration of biological living conditions, such as pollution and poison. Jesus would applaud all the efforts being done to save the world and perhaps take credit for their vision; that life is worth fighting for and that the destruction of it was not what he intended. What can the church do in this situation? It could bless the good efforts and stimulate right thinking and action in the years ahead. The church is perhaps too slow to provide much to the powerful networks of thinkers of the world. Some of its institutions such as the WCC and the Vatican, are noticed and influenced by other elite institutions, such as the UN. In those circles, the churches could share the cries of its suffering members, but also pray and bless. The media could report it and the urgent fight for the climate would be viewed as theologically motivated and ethically unnegotiable. When politicians take the threat seriously the church should rejoice because Jesus came that we may have "fullness of life" (John 10:10), which is biological as much as spiritual.

How the Church Can Serve and Be Missional Today

Because of the needs of the world for moral guidance at this point in time, perhaps the church needs to intensify its reflection on how it can best serve the needs of our time. This is not a new agenda. Newbigin inspired *The Gospel and Our Culture* network in North America, whereas the former bishop of Oslo, Dr Andreas Aarflot, in 1990 wrote about this issue in the book *La kirken være kirke (Let the church be church)*.³⁶ Inevitably, this topic does not only concern how to keep the church healthy in terms

36 Andreas Aarflot, *La kirken være kirke* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 1990).

of recruitment, management, education, etc., but how to interact constructively with other sectors of society for the common good. In its own theological self-understanding, the church does not see itself as solely one among many sectors in society, but as representing *Civitas Dei* (The City of God) versus the political authorities representing *Civitas Terrena* (The Earthly City). Both are serving God and man, however. The issue of how the church should relate to the political realm is a huge one, especially in the post-Constantinian West, because the lines are drawn differently from context to context. In 2006, the Danish prime minister said religion should stay out of the public sphere. Yet, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark is formally a part of the state, administered by a ministry of church affairs. And then again, the same church's congregations have a certain freedom and so do the pastors. The US and France have separated church and state in principle, yet both countries make use of churches at big national events. The quest for a «public theology» has started in Germany and Denmark as a departure from the assumption from the 1960s that the church had to participate in the public sphere playing by the secular world's rules, even letting go of its own religious language. The result was arguably a mute church, becoming increasingly marginalized in the public imagination. The Anglo-American world has its own well-developed thinking on the issue of public theology, but it appears as if the constructive ones thinking about the «common good» have been ignored by the policymakers in the past few decades and drowned out by the loud so-called «Evangelicals» whose vision has been fatefully limited.

Missional Church Starts with Ecclesiology

A key riddle concerning missional church starts with ecclesiology: who comprises the church and who represents the church? The reasons for why bishops and pastors are leaders in the church are obvious: they are educated in the core ideology of the church, and they symbolize Christ and the church by performing rituals that constitute the church. However, many churches have administrative leadership held by non-clergy or laity. These also represent the official church, but usually leave the theological talk in public to the theologians and concentrate on their administrative tasks. Taking the Lutheran thinking about the priesthood of all believers seriously, however, any baptized Christian who also believes the Gospel, represents the church. This is arguably in line with Jesus' intention, namely that anyone is capable of bearing public witness about Christ:

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us' (Mark 9:38–40).

This is perhaps a bit radical, because ideally every Christian should be trained well to give a theologically sound account of his/her faith.³⁷ But the Gospel is «on the loose» and the church cannot control it. Artists and others are already busy sharing it in many ways: in glimpses and sometimes even unintentionally. The role of the theological experts would be to recognize, confirm, nurture, and encourage what is already being shared of Gospel values through music, art, dialogue, cooperation etc. Although it also involves some guidance, many missionaries learn on the go. *God's mission* is vast and many participate in bringing the Kingdom of God closer through hard work or prophetic signs. Perhaps interpreting the contributions of «anonymous witnesses» as signs of the Kingdom of God is too optimistic. Maybe some would be more modest in the way they portray their contributions, but I think many more are justified in seeing their contributions as part of the mission of God, be it administrative work in the congregation, raising a child, running a country, or saving a patient. I want people to «interpret backwards». Find the Gospel motivations in what they already do instead of focusing on all that is not done (typical for the churchgoer) or not seeing any religious motivation in what they do (typical of most).

For the church to serve the world in the best manner, it needs a certain amount of resources to «keep its own house in order.» Theological education is one area, and financial sustainability is another. When it comes to the Norwegian situation, the congregations are usually staffed with one or two pastors, an organist, a deacon or a «faith-teacher» for children and teenagers, a bellringer, a church warden, and a secretary. Of course, without full-time staff, much less would be accomplished. Even so, to do more than the bare minimum, there must be a vision to do more, a non-obstructionist culture and structures, as well as church members who want to prioritize it. There is also the board of the congregation which has the legal power.

The Timeless Mission of the Church

One may ask to what extent the accuracy of Newbigin's assessment of the church as in a post-Constantinian situation matters for the church, assuming that such a large «ship» as the church carries on with its mission regardless of circumstantial changes. Perhaps his analysis matters more for this world's «Constantines», who are interested in working out what should be the new or alternative «soul of the nation» once Christianity has abandoned that role. As interesting such a topic might be, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss that matter.

The shifting fortunes of Christianity may feature signs of its decline and its growth at the same time. There are various variables that could be measured such as the numbers of baptisms. They could decline among one segment of the population and

37 Cf. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."
1 Peter 3:15

increase among another, such as migrant populations. Numerical indicators could also be supplemented by qualitative ones, such as the level of «intertwinement» of the Christian values with a culture's institutions, history, and ethics.³⁸ For a missional church the mission remains the same, regardless of context or numerical strength. Be it as a majority church in a «post-Christendom» setting or as a minority in Islamic, pagan, syncretistic contexts or other, the church has often existed in pluralistic societies. And wherever it has been, it has been *sent (missio)* by God to *serve (diakonia)*. This mission/service is holistic and includes both words and deeds. The treasure with which the church has been entrusted to share is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. An ecclesiology true to the origins, history, and core identity cannot be other than a *missional* ecclesiology. It can be articulated in a wide variety of ways, constantly redeveloped in light of the biblical material, church history, and the diverse and changing contexts in which the church finds itself.

Taking Context Seriously: Avoiding Demonization and Misreading of Europe

If mission theology is in the process of «coming home» in Europe, in Denmark and elsewhere, it can make use of lessons learned through mission practice and reflection on other continents. In its participation in God's mission the church must take context seriously, including the political circumstances and the cultural situation in which it serves. Mission history has shown that it is possible to misread the context. In the past, missionaries sometimes «demonized» otherwise constructive or ambiguous cultural practices that could have served as a bridge between the old religion and the fulfillment brought by the Gospel. The same misreading of the context may take place in a «post-Christendom» Europe. It is possible to demonize a culture, be it a «pagan» one or a secularized one. In the case of Europe, what is easily labelled a secularized culture may, as mentioned above, simultaneously and just as validly be understood as a long «evangelized culture». Demonizing a secularized culture may also sever bridges otherwise needed to present the Gospel as a historical and cultural continuation for a generation that longs to come home to God and come home in their culture-- a culture which has been shaped for centuries by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The process of developing fruitful missiological ecclesiologies in the European context would arguably include a certain deconstruction of theological assumptions shaped in historical circumstances and unnecessarily cemented into dogma and positions. The process would lead to a softening of perceptions, rethinking and simplifying what the church is, what its mission is, and how to serve in the large variety of contexts in which its local expressions play out. Starting from below in dynamic practice and simple narratives rather than from above in pre-articulated static theories would be wise. Theological thinking should give preferential attention to the former rather

38 Lisbeth Christoffersen, «Intertwinement: A New Concept for Understanding Religion-Law Relations» in: *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 19, no. 2 (2006), 120.

than the latter. In addition to theories and principles, analyzing and giving voice to observable lives, actions, initiatives, paintings, texts, music, etc. should be considered. Such a prioritization would not only benefit a missional ecclesiology but could possibly contribute to a renewal in a methodological approach in Europe (i.e., “from below”).

A Balanced Ecclesiology

Many voices have tried to advise the church on how to think and act in the changing context of the West. As a Westerner, I have an insider’s perspective, and with almost a decade’s experience as a missionary pastor in Africa, I also have an outsider’s perspective. In the following, I will outline what I find important in the quest for a missional ecclesiology for the West.

The first step towards a balanced ecclesiology for anyone attached to the church, however, would be to acknowledge the church’s limitations and its uniqueness. This is a challenge because the concept of church is multidimensional, meaning it is linked with historical developments, institutional arrangements and theological complexities, virtually always interacting with «everything». The churches’ more recent self-understanding as dialogical only adds to the fruitfulness and complexity of such ecclesiological exploration. In addition to analytical curiosity or lack thereof, many relate to the church and its values, representatives, and representations while invested with intensely personal or existential preunderstandings. A balanced ecclesiology recognizes that the church cannot be perfect, simply because it is a human enterprise deeply influenced by fallible human beings. At the same time, what the church claims to strive for-- although more or less wholeheartedly-- is beyond what is «human» in its limited immanent form. The world would be very different without the church, and those of us with a love for the Gospel know we would have felt lost without it. The church’s holy books and people were the preconditions for our knowledge of the Gospel, attainment to the Christian fellowship, meaning of life, and so much more. Thus, a balanced ecclesiology assumes from the outset that the church is at the same time both an imperfect human institution and something beyond that.

Conclusion: Recommendations for a Missional Ecclesiology for the West

This article will conclude with the following recommendations for a missional ecclesiology for the West:

1. A missional ecclesiology for the West knows that its epistemological foundation/core is the twin dogma of the Trinity and the Incarnation. It builds upon that foundation.
2. A missional ecclesiology for the West is not ashamed of the Gospel. It explores how the church may participate in *God’s mission* in its context while making use of its own languages and analyses.
3. A missional ecclesiology for the West is discerning, making use of multiple sources in its quest to understand the historical and existential role of the

church in its contexts, as well as critically assessing to which extent this role has been attuned to the ethical principles of the Gospel.

4. A missional ecclesiology for the West reflects upon the church's relation to political power. It is aware of liberation theology, inculturation theology, as well as the theology of reconstruction.³⁹ It explores how the church dreams to infuse all creation, including institutions, with the Holy Spirit, while also retaining its freedom to raise its prophetic voice.
5. A missional ecclesiology for the West knows that the church is not the only instrument in God's mission. It analyzes how the church is joining hands for the common good with credible partners, whether their visions are transcendental, Kingdom-inspired, pragmatic, or immanent.
6. A missional ecclesiology for the West is deeply rooted and self-aware, but just as interested in how the church can serve the world, be it through prayer, contemplation, extrovert diakonia, open dialogue, non-manipulative evangelization, pastoral care, conscious advocacy, Eucharistic fellowship, or by other means.
7. A missional ecclesiology for the West retains a global outlook and shares its passion for the truth with academia and the media. As a science linked to the theology and history of the church, it has a passion for the future of creation and shares it with the political world, the environmental movement, and others.
8. A missional ecclesiology for the West knows the importance of the church keeping its own house in order for it to be a credible witness of Jesus Christ. It works to strengthen financial management and sustainability, recruitment of future generations, ethical guidelines, human resource management, ongoing education as well as innovative partnerships and networks.
9. A missional ecclesiology in the West results in a movement that is active and pro-active, clear about its Kingdom of God goals and co-operating with people of good will who share these goals fully or partially in order to reach them. The movement is more concerned about saving the world than saving itself, but understands its own significance in God's plan to save the world.

³⁹ Langås, *Peace in Zanzibar*, 216.