

MISSIO DEI IN A POST-CHRISTIAN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The first part of this paper will provide a limited overview of the genesis and development of the *missio Dei* concept during the last fifty years from a theology of mission perspective. Initial effort will be made to look at the setting and the circumstances surrounding *missio Dei*'s first appearance, namely the World Missions Conference held in Willingen, Germany. Following this point of entry, the definition of *missio Dei* and the broader perspective that has developed from various theological standpoints will be presented and accessed. Finally, the first part of this paper concludes investigating the *missio Dei* framework as it has been integrated into biblical theology.

Once the overview of *missio Dei* has been presented, the second part of this paper will attempt to establish its practical ramifications in forming a contextual missional approach to ministry in Europe. Terminologies such as post-Christian, postmodernism, secularization and the European Dream will be addressed, as they relate to getting a handle on ministry in contemporary Europe. The underlying assumption is that there are truths and ideas within the *missio Dei* framework to be realized that will facilitate greater missionary effectiveness in reaching secular Europeans with the claims of the gospel. Since I have been involved in a church planting ministry in Germany for over twenty-five years, most of the references will be made to the German setting which in many ways reflects the general European context.

PART ONE

THE *MISSIO DEI* CONCEPTION

Background

During September of 1952 in Willingen, Germany, 181 delegates gathered from all parts of the world for the Fifth World Missions Conference. The Willingen Conference took place just as a truce had been worked out in the Korean War; yet the danger of a worldwide nuclear catastrophic conflict loomed in the hearts and minds of many. The Western missions enterprise found itself to be in a period of crisis after World War II, as the world was now divided between the East and West block nations.

For the Willingen delegates, the greatest shock of all was still being felt after the troops of Mao Tse-tung in 1948-1949 forced all missionaries to leave China, which was one of the great mission fields for the West.

One third of all mankind could no longer have a missionary witness as missionaries are no longer allowed in many countries. There was especially a very humiliating, unsettled feeling among the Willingen delegates as they were very aware that many Chinese Christians watched the deportation of missionaries with an almost clandestine sigh of relief.¹

The Hamburg University missiologist Walter Freytag, who was part of the German delegation at Willingen, spoke to the current crisis in missions. He stated that the world events of the day were a definite setback for the expansion of Christianity, which could be compared to the setbacks that resulted due to the aggressive expansion of Islam some twelve centuries before.²

¹ Wolfgang Günther, „50 Jahre missio Dei.” Available from http://www.ekkw.de/angebote/mission/missionsfestival/deutsche_version/hintergrundinfos_guenter.htm; accessed 14 September 2007.

² Walter Freytag quoted by Günther, “50 Jahre Missio Dei.”

But we must now agree: What happened in China, can also occur tomorrow in Tibet, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Japan as well as the entire Near East.³

Toward a Definition of *Missio Dei*

According to Jacques Mattney from the WCC's Commission on Missions, the Willingen Conference's greatest achievement was to establish mission in the doctrine of God, or, as some mission theologians would assert, to establish a trinitarian framework for mission.⁴

That the term *missio Dei* itself seemed not to have appeared in Willingen is of less importance. The influence of conferences has much to do with people who interpreted them later anyhow, as we know very well for having done it ourselves.⁵

Richard Bliese, a Lutheran theologian, asserts that George Vicedom's missiological work which took place after Willingen, has developed into the "classical" view of *missio Dei*.⁶

God is the acting subject in mission. Mission is neither initiated by the church nor is it to serve the church. The church is a community in response to the *missio Dei*, bearing witness to God's activity in the world by its communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. Vicedom does not exclude the church from the mission of God, as latter Dutch theologians were tempted to do. In the mission of God, God is both the sender and the one being sent. This accounts for the Trinitarian structure of the *missio Dei*. From this content of mission, Vicedom argues that the purpose of mission is salvation. God's revelation is God's mission, and God's mission is always for the sake of salvation. The mission of the church, therefore, is a continuation of the redemptive act of God.⁷

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jacques Matthey, "Congress "Missio Dei" God's Mission Today." *World Council of Churches* Web site, available from <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/willingen.html>; accessed 28 August 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Richard H. Bliese, "The New Missiology: A Call to Freedom." *Gurukul Lutheran Theological College* Web site, available from <http://www.gltc.edu/gurukul/05-projects/projects/print/frontiers-04.htm>; accessed 17 September.

⁷ Ibid.

Tormod Engelsen, a Lutheran Norwegian missiologist, affirmed in a lecture celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Willingen that this conference set the stage so missiology could evolve as a truly global ecumenical discipline.⁸ The *missio Dei* concept thus has become an important element in the missiological discipline as an evident product of the historical Willingen gathering. The concept itself has been elaborated on, thoroughly discussed, and has been interpreted in a very wide cross-section of theological perspectives.

Matthey believes that *missio Dei* gives us the larger picture of God's ultimate plan to reach the nations of the world.

Missio Dei has been and can be a constant reminder that the church is not the ultimate goal of mission. In that sense, *missio Dei* plays a similar critical function to the message of the kingdom of God in the New Testament, as has been emphasized in our consultation.⁹

For Arthur Glasser the final conclusion of Willingen and the notion of *missio Dei* show the Church pictured as a mighty army that lives in tents.¹⁰

God then calls the church to take down their tents and move forward. God does accompany his people as his goals and intentions are being fulfilled with the sending of his Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the Church is fulfilled.¹¹

The Broader Focus of *Missio Dei*

David Hesselgrave describes the events at Willingen as bringing about a changed focus from a church-centered mission to a global one. The church-centered paradigm was no longer

⁸ Tormod Engelsen, "Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology." *International Review of Mission* 92, no 367: 481.

⁹ Matthey.

¹⁰ Arthur F Glasser, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Shawn Redford, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 245.

¹¹ Ibid.

acceptable for effective mission in light of the various challenges and problems being faced worldwide in a post-colonial missions era. The place of the kingdom in the plan of God began to supersede that of the church.¹²

Bevans and Schroeder point out that Willingen led also to a form of secularization of *missio Dei* which was largely due to the influence of the Dutch Theologian Johannes Hoekendijk who spoke at the Willingen meeting.¹³

For Hoekendijk God needs no help in articulating himself; the church's missionary efforts only get in the way. If anything, the church simply points out what God is doing in the world; and that is all.¹⁴

Hesselgrave accurately shows that a shifting emphasis of *missio Dei* came into play as time went on, which is best exemplified by the WCC's Fourth Assembly for Christian Youth held in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968. This conference took place in a very politically turbulent time, its theme profoundly stating, "Behold, I make all things new."¹⁵

Although only 5 percent of the delegates were young people, they were highly visible - in sit-ins, sit-downs, stand-ups, pickets, boycotts and vigils. Never had youth been so vocal in their critique of the ecumenical establishment. A position paper on "Youth in God's World" was presented to the assembly by the youth constituency and, at the closing worship youth delegates demanded the integration of youth into all aspects of WCC work. They also carried placards bearing extracts from the assembly's own official decisions to make the point: "Practice what you preach!"¹⁶

Hesselgrave then summarizes the way many were beginning to view *missio Dei*.

¹² David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2005), 321.

¹³ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 291.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "History of youth and the WCC." *World Council of Churches* Web site, available from <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=3820>; accessed 17 September 2007.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The Christian mission was placed on its head. The world was to be allowed to set the agenda. Instead of the divine order of God-church-world, the new order was to be God-world-church. Instead of taking its marching orders from God directly, the church was to take its marching orders from God as mediated through the world.¹⁷

One cannot overlook the liberal theological and political bent of the *missio Dei* perspective which began to be accepted by many of the councilor Protestant persuasion within the WCC. Matthey notes that in the unsettling sixties and even into the seventies, the theological perspective of the day was to give great appreciation to the secularization process that was taking place in the West. It was a favoring of the “non religious approach to humans and societies and thus criticizing the church in an exaggerated way. By consequence, evangelism practically disappeared from the mission agenda of mainline churches in the West and North.”¹⁸ In addition, the “boundless” widening of the understanding of mission provoked uncertainty as to the meaning of that mandate.

This total openness allowed other religions to be looked upon as being just as valid as Christianity, implying there should be no marked difference, as every man is on his own journey in the God search. The traditional Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to God the father, was being rejected by many in the liberal camp.

Because of this time-bound or contextual interpretation of *missio Dei*, one can say that it contributed to aggravate the already existing split within Protestant mission organizations and led to the formation of two competing movements as from 1974 on. Interestingly enough, it seems now that the reference to a trinitarian and God-based approach to mission appears meaningful also to evangelical mission theologians and even to Pentecostals, even if those seem to prefer the more biblical notion of kingdom of God. It could be that, thanks to its character as an umbrella, *missio Dei* could in future become a point of convergence after having contributed to division.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hesselgrave, 322.

¹⁸ Matthey.

¹⁹ Ibid.

For Matthey, ecclesiology within the ecumenical encounter continues to be where the main point of contention lies between denominations. A true renewal of the *missio Dei* theology will give the needed space “at its core to the concern of evangelism, of sharing the gospel with people. A holistic understanding of mission includes a clear commitment to evangelism.”²⁰

Wolfgang Günther does not find it problematic that *missio Dei* has become such a broad theological concept where various groups can hang their hats. From a German Lutheran standpoint the “broadness” itself increases the motivation for mission in general.²¹

Because (*missio Dei*) offers the same roof under which various biblical motivations for missions can seek cover, this only helps to give within our own churches the necessary space for the various streams or directions that one finds.²²

Hesselgrave points out that the Bangkok 1972/1973 CWME gathering became the logical conclusion of Uppsala, where “Salvation today was interpreted as “humanization”—a divine invitation to all people to develop their “full humanity”.”²³ After the Bangkok gathering, world mission for many becomes a holistic enterprise that encompasses spiritual as well as socio-political aspects as the kingdom of God is established in the nations.

Bangkok acknowledged the need for contextual theologies and recognition of cultural identity as shaping the voice of those answering and following Christ. The delegates struggled with situations of exploitation and injustice expressed also in relations between churches. In order to enable local churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific to set their own priorities in witness, a temporary "moratorium" on sending money and missionaries from the North was proposed.²⁴

20 Ibid.

21 Günther.

22 Ibid.

23 Hesselgrave, 322.

24 “Bangkok Conference on World Mission and Evangelism.” *World Council of Churches* Web site, available from <http://cwme.wcc-coe.org/index.php?id=555&L=&type=98>; accessed 17 September 2007.

***Missio Dei* and Biblical Theology**

Many well-meaning theologians have taken the helpful concept of *missio Dei* and formed it into a shape that has little similarity with the biblical text. From this point of view the church has become archaic and outdated as is it only an expression of missionary colonialism. Bevans and Schroeder acknowledge by the 1980s that there was a reemphasis once again, with the *missio Dei* concept being bedded in a trinitarian foundation that has its expression in Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal mission theology.²⁵ *Missio Dei* based in the trinitarian understanding of God's nature and his very existence remains still the great factor for motivation in the mission endeavor. Bevans and Schroeder elaborate on the importance of a sound Christology in the discussion of *missio Dei*, and their Catholic perspective can easily be supported by Evangelical and Pentecostal missiologists alike.

Christology is an integral part of mission from this perspective, but there is room as well for the work of God's Holy Spirit to lead men and women further into God's unfathomable mystery and to allow Christians to recognize God's surprising presence outside of exclusively Christian parameters. Mission is the basic and most urgent task of the church, not because without human action so many might not reach some kind of fulfillment, but because to be Christian is to become part of God's life and God's vision for the world.²⁶

Paul Hiebert states that evangelism outside of the church is incomplete and the church without evangelism is ingrown.²⁷

²⁵ Bevans and Schroeder, 291.

²⁶ Ibid, 303.

²⁷ Paul Hiebert, "Missiological Education for a Global Era," in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Book for Circle, and the Sandals: Essays in Honor of Paul P. Pierson*, ed. J. Dudley Woodbery, Charles Van Engen, and Edgar J. Elliston (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 40.

There is a danger, however. If we speak of mission as *missio Dei* but do not define *Dei*, we are free to equate the Kingdom utopias—with Marxism, capitalism, or socialism. The Kingdom of God to which we bear witness is the Kingdom defined by Christ, its king.²⁸

Clearly for Hiebert the church has a very central role to play within the kingdom. The church is where the kingdom is already established on earth and it exemplifies a foretaste of those things yet to come. Within the church, evangelism is central.²⁹ According to the world- renowned South African missiologist David Bosch, evangelism is not some kind of marginal activity that is to be taken lightly by Christians.

Evangelism is announcing that God, Creator and Lord of the universe, has personally intervened in human history and has done so supremely through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth who is the Lord of history, Savior and Liberator. In this Jesus, incarnate, crucified and risen, the reign of God has been inaugurated.³⁰

From a biblical perspective Köstenberger and O'Brien see the one mission of God being to send his son Jesus "as the missionary par excellence and in whose mission the twelve Apostles and Paul participate as witnesses."³¹ It was important for the apostles and Paul to proclaim the gospel, and it would not become just an accidental occurrence that the church would one day be established. The first task included within the scope of Paul's missionary commission was primary evangelism.

Paul's ambition was to go where the gospel had not yet been preached (Rom 15:20-21). His strategy focused on preaching and evangelizing as well as gentiles and God-fearers in local synagogues. The apostle proclaimed the gospel, and, under God, converted men and women. *But he also founded churches as a necessary element in his missionary task.*

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 412.

31 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 147.

Paul's aim was to establish Christian congregations in strategic (mostly urban) centers from where the gospel could spread further to the surrounding regions.³²

Hiebert implores us to move past evangelism and church planting activities toward a genuine focus on the kingdom of God. "This reminds us that mission is first and foremost the work of God (*missio Dei*)."³³ G. Goldworthy comments that the kingdom of God is possibly the one theme that can be as a whole integrated into biblical theology.³⁴

The kingdom is the focus of both creation and redemption: God's plan of redemption is to bring in a new creation. The entire biblical story, despite its great diversity of form and foci is consistent in its emphasis on the reign of God over his people in the environment he creates for them. The kingdom depicted in Eden is lost to humankind at the beginning of the biblical account. The history of redemption begins immediately the kingdom is lost, and tells of the way the kingdom of God will finally be established as a new people of God in fellowship with him in a new Eden, a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth.³⁵

If one defines the kingdom of God as the present and final salvation offered in Christ, then this can only be restricted to salvation history as Engelsviken points out, in his lecture celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Willingen.

This is the „realm“ where salvation is found, through faith in Christ and participation in his church. It is primarily a future eschatological reality, to be equated with eternal life, in a new perfect creation.³⁶

Arthur Glasser asserts that the whole of *Heilsgeschichte* is in actuality a history of *missio Dei*, entailing God's plan for the entire nations of the world.³⁷

³² Ibid.

³³ Hiebert, 40.

³⁴ Graeme L. Goldworthy, "Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Desmond T. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, et. Al, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 620.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Engelsviken, 483.

³⁷ Glasser, 245.

It follows then that the goal of *missio Dei* is to incorporate people into the Kingdom of God and to involve them in his mission. Because the Father is the Sender, Jesus Christ the One who is sent, and the Holy Spirit the Revealer, it follows that the noninvolvement in mission on the part of the church is to be deplored.³⁸

Engelsviken is quite taken in with British missiologist J. Andrew Kirk's thesis that *missio Dei* flows from the very nature of God and reflects who he is in terms of "love, community, equality, diversity, mercy, compassion, and justice."³⁹

I would personally like to add to this list of divine realities the supreme quality of God, namely his holiness, without which it is impossible to have communion with God. Therefore sanctification as well as justification are basic requirements of communion with God, and at the same time gifts that are granted by grace to believers in Christ (1 Co. 1:30).⁴⁰

It is imperative for Engelsviken that the aim of *missio Dei* includes the vertical relationship of the believer to God which then naturally flows into a horizontal relationship to all of mankind.⁴¹

It is noteworthy that few proponents of *missio Dei* speak about the vertical life-giving relationship to a living God that has created us in his own image for living communion.

In my opinion, the time has come to reaffirm at this anniversary not only the *missio Dei* version of Willingen 1952, but also the vision of the church as the instrument or agent of the *missio Dei*. I see no conflict between the two visions, and a new emphasis on the role of the church.⁴²

38 Ibid.

39 Engelsviken, 485.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid, 486.

42 Ibid.

For Engelsviken, the missional church emphasis of the last decade only helps to highlight, as well as bring to focus, a new freshness to the discussion of the church's participation *in missio Dei*.⁴³

Engelsviken refers to John Hicks and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who both have used the *missio Dei* concept in a very broad universalistic manner as they acknowledge that God is not limited in his revelation to mankind through Christianity alone. Specifically, Smith believes that God does reveal himself through Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.⁴⁴ As an Evangelical Pentecostal I am taken back that Engelsviken does not reject overt forms of universalism when he states:

I believe that theologians and missiologists in Europe need to grapple with the question of a theology of religions that is open to the work of God also in other religions, while at the same time confessing and proclaiming the unique *missio Dei* in which God the Father is the only source of all mission, Jesus Christ the only Lord and Saviour and the Holy Spirit the only divine lifegiver and power.⁴⁵

Not to be sidetracked by Engelsviken's flirting with the allures of universalism, the overriding message of the mission of the kingdom is very evident indeed. According to Andreas Köstenberger, the time span between Pentecost and Jesus' return is a time of active mission for all of the church to be engaged in.⁴⁶

Believers are charged to preach the gospel of the kingdom to all the nations, to make them Christ's disciples, and to be his witnesses to all ends of the earth. In the pursuit of mission, the church is promised to presence of Jesus and the aid of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 494.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Mission," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Desmond T. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, et. Al (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 668.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Missio Dei implies that we take the Great Commission words of Jesus in a very serious and literal fashion. A commission remains a commission, and it is everything other than an option as M.J. Harris summarizes in his view the one overriding theme of the New Testament.

The coordinating motif of the entire NT is God's provision, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, as a way for humans to become reconciled to himself and to lead lives that are pleasing to him.⁴⁸

According to Günther, the church has no option to decide whether it wants to be missional or not. From his perspective the discussion after Willingen was falsely stated.⁴⁹

The church does not have a missional obligation—as if fire has an obligation to burn. Either it burns, then it is a fire. If it does not burn, it is not a fire. In this way the church is missional or it is not the church.⁵⁰

The church has always been the called out few as an army marching across enemy territory to proclaim a message that many do not want to hear. During the time of the early church, as well as today in Europe, the gospel proclamation evoked much controversy and open disdain. Paul's experience in Athens is not that different from what many experience in the secular European or even in the North American context today.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, What is this babbling trying to say? Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. (Acts 17: 19)⁵¹

Having looked at some of the underlying issues of *missio Dei*, the time has now come to take these ideas and attempt to apply them in a missional approach to ministry within a secular

⁴⁸ M. J. Harris, "Salvation," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Desmond T. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, et. al (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 766.

⁴⁹ Günther.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

context. The genuineness of Christianity must be lived out in the lives of those followers of Christ in the arena where men and women search for perspective and identity.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 1:10-11)

PART TWO

MISSIO DEI IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Post-Christian

Survey data gathered by the Emnid-Institute found that in 1999 only ten percent of all Germans felt that personal faith was of any significant value.⁵² In 2005, survey data indicated that only about one-half of Germans believe in the existence of God.⁵³ These statistics are quite remarkable, when one realizes that still two-thirds of all Germans are nominal members of either the Catholic or Lutheran church. The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* best summarized the present spiritual dilemma facing church leaders of all denominations: “A once Christian land has now become a pagan land with a few Christian remnants.”⁵⁴ It is worth noting that pagans also do believe in mystery type religions. New age and other forms of faith expression are to be found in Germany, as well as throughout all of Europe. A postmodern society does not see such religions as a contradiction. It is not uncommon to find many of these “newer” mystery religions being propagated by the established European Protestant churches themselves.

Samuel Escobar reminds us that during the early New Testament church, the gospel message of the risen Savior not only had to confront Greek philosophy and the politics of Rome,

⁵² “Umfrage: Ist Deutschland gottlos geworden?,” *Idea Spektrum*, 36 (1999): 6.

⁵³ “Umfrage: In Deutschland glaubt jeder Zweite an Gott,” *Austrian Braodcasting Network* Web site, available from http://religion.orf.at/projekt02/news/0507/ne050726_umfrage_fr.htm; accessed 24 August 2007.

⁵⁴ “Religion in Deutschland,” *Der Spiegel*, 25 (1992).

“but also the questions that came from the mystery religions that pervaded especially the ideas and practices of popular culture.”⁵⁵

Mystery religions in the first century claimed to help people with their daily problems, to give them immortality, and to enable them to share their lives with the gods. They promised cleansing to deal with guilt, security to face fear of evil, power over Fate, union with gods through orgiastic ecstasy and immortality.⁵⁶

The Early Apostles were able to present a clear and concise *missio Dei* message that touched the hearts of men and women where they lived. The apostle Paul, as one who was sent, speaks directly to the Greeks and their cultural context at Mars Hills.

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. . . . God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' (Acts 17: 23-25, 27-29)

Even though church buildings are still very prominent in Europe, the church has become ever more marginalized in society as a whole during the past fifty years. Church buildings and religious edifices are relics of the past that give a sightseer the feeling that he or she is in a museum. David Kettle has depicted the dilemma of Christianity in England, which is not unlike most of Europe. “The church is like the pattern on wallpaper. Religion is visible but meaning has faded, and no longer invites attention.”⁵⁷ According to Gailyn Van Rhee the average European has a variety of choices when it comes to religion.

⁵⁵ Samuel Escobar, “The Global Scenario at the turn of the Century,” in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 38.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ David Kettle, “The Haze of Christendom,” *The Gospel and Our Culture* 14 (March 2002): 1.

The church has become one of many options in an increasingly complex world in which world religions, new spiritualities, and secular therapies compete in a multicultural market place. The cathedrals and church buildings are considered by some, especially in Europe, to be relics of the past.⁵⁸

Postmodernism

For Van Rheezen, the post-Christendom world does not only call into question the church and its very reason for being, but also questions anything that smacks of modernity which in all actuality is the fulfillment of Enlightenment thinking. Today humans are no longer thought of as being the center of their own world. Mankind is no longer able to determine his own destiny by simply acquiring enough empirical knowledge or being able to trust his own ingenuity. For postmodernism there are no foundations that one can rest assuredly upon.⁵⁹

Left to their own devices, people are unable to make moral decisions based merely on human reasoning. Many scholars question the truth of metanarratives (grand theories or stories that make sense of everything) and assume that life can only be interpreted locally. Others assume that cultural perspectives result not from a searching for and a discovering of truth but from the use of power and persuasion. Trust is relative to the cultural situation. Old foundations—and even the belief that foundations exist—are called into question.⁶⁰

Stacy Johnson elaborates on Van Rheezen's thesis that postmodernism is no longer concerned with foundations but takes a rather pluralistic, contextual and open-ended approach in general in its efforts to discover true meaning.⁶¹

Rather than looking for a single "center" of meaning, postmodernity appreciates the "decentered" character of meaning and truth. The postmodern mindset decenters

⁵⁸ Gailyn Van Rheezen, "Changing Motivations for Missions," in *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends*, ed. Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheezen, and C. Douglas McConnell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 168.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 176.

⁶¹ William Stacy Johnson. "The Gospel in Postmodernity: Finding a Center," available from <http://www.gocn.org/articles/article.cfm?id=13>; accessed 7 September 2007.

"reason"; it decenters "experience"; and it suspects that claims to speak from the "center" all too often are but a subterfuge for yielding power over others.⁶²

For George Hunsberger, individuals captivated by postmodern belief are quick to sense that all knowing "is from some particular perspective further relativized all claims to truth and questioned such claims as exertions of the will to power."⁶³

Secularization

Greg Mundis has asserted that we have "a postmodern European heart and a secular mind."⁶⁴ Jean-Daniel Pluss attempts to describe secularization as the impact of modernity on religious institutions and human conscious. In the 1960s and 1970s, secularization was mainly a phenomenon associated with societal and religious developments in the Western world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, elements of secularization can be found in all parts of the world.⁶⁵

People have become very selective as to what they want to appropriate from their religious sentiments into their view of the world. They distance themselves from traditions and hand-pick the norms and values by which they decide to live. This practice has fostered an emphasis on both personal experiences and on individual interpretation of experiences.⁶⁶

Van Rheenen perspective on secularization is very much in line with Pluss when he states:

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ George R. Hunsberger, "Cultivating Ways of Christ in the Postmodern Transition: Ways of Belief," available from <http://www.gocn.org/articles/article.cfm?id=1>; accessed 8 September 2007.

⁶⁴ Greg Mundis, *Toward a Pentecostal European Urban Church-Planting Missiology* (Self published Dissertation, 2006), 34.

⁶⁵ Jean-Daniel Pluss, "Globalization of Pentecostalism or Globalization of Individualism? A European Perspective," in *Globalization of Pentecostalism: a Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Doug Petersen (Carlisle, U.K.: Regnum Books International, 1999), 177-178.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Nevertheless, even in this secular context, many younger people are borrowing from religious beliefs and customs from Eastern and animistic sources to form various types of religions. Second, an international elite has been culturally shaped by Western education to serve as “carriers” of Enlightenment beliefs and practices through the world. Many of these carriers of secularism teach in the areas of religion, the humanities and the social sciences.⁶⁷

Even though reference has been made in this paper to secularization it must be pointed out that sociologist Rodney Stark, as well as others, has attempted to dispel the notion of secularization all together. Stark refers to the assertion made by sociologist Peter Berger in a Time interview in 1968, where Berger boldly proclaimed “by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.”⁶⁸ Berger very gracefully retracts that assertion, as he and other sociologists including Stark had readily accepted in the 1960s.

I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It's very religious.⁶⁹

Due to the factor of time and the intent of this paper I will not go into the various myths that Stark mentions concerning the secularization theory. Suffice to say, some proponents of secularization have asserted that Christianity, due to the influence of scientific and social scientific developments, have made it theologically implausible. To such claims and others Stark heartily disagrees:

⁶⁷ Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Religionquake: From World Religions to Multiple Spiritualities,” in *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends*, ed. Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and C. Douglas McConnell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 82.

⁶⁸ Rodney Stark. “Secularization, R.I.P - rest in peace,” *Find Articles Web site*, available from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_3_60/ai_57533381/; accessed 7 September 2007.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

If this is so, then scientists ought to be expected to be a relatively irreligious lot. But, as will be seen, scientists are about as religious as anyone else, and the presumed incompatibility between religion and science seems mythical.⁷⁰

Stark goes on to conclude his article by stating that after three centuries of utterly failed prophecies about the demise of religion, it is time to carry the secularization doctrine „to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper "requiescat in pace."⁷¹

When reflecting on the state of the church in Europe today, it would be more realistic to speak about the present time era as post-Christian or postmodern as opposed to utilizing the term secularization. Even though the influence of the established churches in Europe has waned, many people are still interested in spiritual matters that more often than not lay well outside the church's realm of spirituality. We live in a time of transition between modernity and postmodernity where there is much overlapping between the two and the effects of the post-Christian era are felt as church attendance and church membership decreases in most of Europe each year.

The book of Acts is significant for our study of *missio Dei* in a secularized Europe. The teachings of Jesus and the witness of the kingdom is propagated by the Apostles who are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In a major paradigm shift from a centripetal movement to a centrifugal one, the Twelve are to function as "witnesses" to Israel (in place of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, Acts 1:6), and subsequently Paul acts as "witness" to the Gentiles... Nothing can hinder the irresistible progress of the gospel, and the church, by the Spirit, overcomes all obstacles. Paul and the apostolic church are now the "light to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:47).⁷²

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Köstenberger, 666.

According to Andreas Köstenberger, it is God who takes the ultimate initiative in mission, for the bringing about of Salvation through Christ.⁷³ In spite of rampant postmodernism in Europe, this ultimate “initiative” is relevant for ministry today.

The European Dream

Jeremy Rifkin in his book *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, argues that while the great American Dream is fading, a powerful new European Dream is beginning to capture the attention and imagination of the world. The nascent European Dream, says Rifkin is, in many respects, the mirror opposite of the American Dream, but far better suited to meet the challenges of a globalizing society in the twenty-first century. According to Rifkin, Americans tend to have a negative perspective of freedom that highly values the individual, who is autonomous and not dependent on the other, and is not vulnerable to the circumstances outside of his control.⁷⁴

One is free by becoming self-reliant and an island unto oneself. Wealth brings exclusivity and exclusivity brings security.⁷⁵

For Rifkin, Europeans find freedom not in autonomy but in embeddedness.

To be free is to have access to a myriad of independent relationships with others. The more community one has access to, the more options and choices one has for living a full and meaningful life.⁷⁶

The genuine church has the opportunity, as it lives out *missio Dei*, of bringing men and women into the community of God as best exemplified by Paul’s description of the body of Christ in

⁷³ Ibid, 668.

⁷⁴ Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 13.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

1 Corinthians 12. *Missio Dei* is a community endeavor, where together with God others, who are outside of his presence, are called to enter into a life-giving relationship, filled with hope and perspective.

Rifkin sees Europeans as being much more ready to critique modernism and embrace postmodernism in comparison to their American counterparts. This is no doubt the case due to the devastation of two world wars during the last century and the horrible ruins that followed those wars. As a result of such catastrophic events, ideologies and visions of grandeur which were madly adhered to proved in the end to be empty and void of all meaningful reality.⁷⁷

The post-modernists engaged in an all-out assault on the ideological foundations of modernity, even denying the idea of history as a redemptive saga. What we end up with at the end of the post-modern deconstruction process are modernity reduced to intellectual rubble and anarchic world where everyone's story is equally compelling and valid and worthy of recognition.⁷⁸

Rifkin goes one step further and believes that the European Dream takes over when postmodernity gradually disappears over the existential horizon.

Stripped to its bare essentials, the European Dream is an effort at creating a new historical frame that can both free the individual from the old yoke of Western ideology and, at the same time, connect the human race to a new shared story, clothed in the garb of universal human rights and the intrinsic rights of nature—what we call a global consciousness. It is a dream that takes us beyond modernity and post-modernity and into a global age. The European Dream, in short, creates a new history.⁷⁹

Johnson rightfully reminds us that major cultural transitions can provide pivotal occasions for the gospel to be heard afresh.

This was clearly the case in the world of late antiquity; it was also the case during the reformations of the sixteenth century; and, by God's grace, it may once again be so in the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.

cyber world of the rapidly approaching twenty-first century.⁸⁰

For Pluss, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement offers opportunities for those of the twenty-first century European mind-set in that Biblical teaching represents tradition on the one hand and the Holy Spirit's leading on the other, which is significant for personal experience. From this perspective, the modern European is better equipped through Pentecostalism to deal with secularization, in that one can integrate tradition and experience in the necessary balance.⁸¹ For Pluss, globalization is one possible expression of secularization that reaches to all ends of the world. Since Pentecostalism has become in the last fifty years a global phenomenon, its form of religious expression is able to better adapt to the major societal and cross-cultural transitions that are taking place. In this sense, globalization presents more of an opportunity than a hindrance for the spread of the gospel through Pentecostal movements. The *missio Dei* concept has become global indeed, and in its use and application as committed proponents of mission. We know we are sent of the living God and for the living God to reach a world crying for meaning and genuine identity.

80 Johnson.

81 Pluss, 178.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the World Missions Conference held in Willingen took place in a time of great political and social uncertainty in the world. This uncertainty forced missiologists and theologians alike to search for new ways and approaches to present the gospel in a relevant fashion. The genesis and development of the *missio Dei* concept was a direct outgrowth of Willingen, and *missio Dei's* theological point of reference has had positive influence as it has enriched the ecumenical missiological discourse for over fifty years. Today, our world too is filled with much uncertainty and *Zukunftsangst*. Global terrorism, global warning, global poverty, and economic globalization are just a few of the challenges that must be faced by our generation and the next to follow. In Germany, as well as all of Europe, there are nasty head winds that the missional church is sailing directly into in its attempts to proclaim the good news of the gospel. These head winds, as already discussed, are to be found in a post-Christian and postmodern *Weltanschauung*. Today, many European Christians are frustrated and disappointed, after having tried so many different methods to reach men and women with the claims of Christ. Again, it does us good to reflect upon the events surrounding Willingen.

The church and all Christians are predestined as full-participants in God's saving mission. That is why we do not need to hide or excuse his or our task that is to be accomplished. In humble brokenness and in the knowledge of our own guilt and failure, we still have something to say to the world about its salvation as well as without hesitation proclaim that the kingdom of God is truly near.⁸²

It is quite striking how Rifkin accurately lays his finger on the dilemma that many Europeans presently find themselves to be in.

⁸² Günther.

If the post-modernists razed the ideological walls of modernity and freed the prisoners, they left them with no particular place to go. We became existential nomads, wandering through a boundaryless world full of inchoate longings in a desperate search for something to be attached to and believe in.⁸³

German Lutheran pastor Peter Aschoff is a proponent of the emerging church and in his own parish has developed an incarnational approach to ministry, which attempts to give answers to the existential questions that Rifkin has raised.

I do not expect that you come into my world and become one of us, rather I desire to come into your world and become one of you so that God can change and heal this world.⁸⁴

The Gospel of John clearly indicates that which underline the incarnational approach to ministry. In Chapter one Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us and we were able to see who he is with our own human understanding and physical eyes. (John 1:14) At the end of Jesus' high priestly prayer, he asks the father to send the disciples into the world, just as Jesus was sent to proclaim liberty for the captives. (John 17:18 and Luke 4:18) After his resurrection Jesus comes to the room where the disciples are gathered, speaks peace to them and sends them out as the father had sent him to this earth. (John 20:21) David Hesselgrave defines incarnational ministry as an integral aspect of *missio Dei*.

The incarnational model focus is on continuity between Christ's incarnate earthly ministry and the contemporary ministry of the church today. Incarnationalism holds that the church's ministry today is, in a very real sense, a continuation of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ on earth.⁸⁵

⁸³ Rifkin, 5.

⁸⁴ Peter Aschoff, "missioninkarwiebitte?," available from <http://www.elia-gemeinschaft.de/wordpress/2006/05/02/peters-gedanken/theologie/missionalinkarnawiebitte>; accessed 11 September 2007.

⁸⁵ Hesselgrave, 144-145.

It is imperative for the church in Europe to understand the mission of Jesus, so we can adequately grasp what our actual mission is. Craig Van Gelder elaborates on the incarnational paradigm in the context of postmodernism, as he believes the church must grasp and understand that it is the hermeneutic of the Gospel.⁸⁶

It is the embodied character of the Gospel within the living faith community that provides compelling evidence of the truth claims that the Gospel makes. Taking this approach requires a careful rethinking of our ecclesiology at the same time we work to rehear the truths of the Gospel. But it is probably at this point that the established church within Christendom is most hampered, in being paralyzed by its legacy and cultural assumptions.⁸⁷

John York has aptly pointed out, “Since God has always had a mission, the Bible should be read missiologically. That is, all of the scripture should be read with a view toward its development of the theme of God’s promise to bless the nations through the promised seed.”⁸⁸ In a post-Christian European context, our foremost task remains to grasp, as well as proclaim, that the main message of the scriptures is to save all peoples, and that is central to the *missio Dei* framework. We are a driven people with the notion of *missio Dei*, and this notion must permeate every theological concept that we apply, becoming the very basis for every aspect of church ministry. The church cannot decide whether it wants to be missional or not, it must only decide whether it wants to be the true church.⁸⁹ The head of the church calls us as partners in his

⁸⁶ Craig Van Gelder, “Response to the Haze of Christendom,” *The Gospel and Our Culture* 14 (March 2002): 5.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ John V. York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit* (Springfield, MO: Logion, 2000), 20.

⁸⁹ Ana Varela Palmeiro, “Biografie Georg Friedrich Vicedom,” *Biographisch-Bibliographisch Kirchenlexikon* Web site, available from http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/v/vicedom_g_f.shtml; accessed 29 August 2007.

mission, and when we obey, we are assured that the Kingdom will be extended to the villages and cities of modern Europe.

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