

Mission Today in the face of the challenges of the 21st century

- a European perspective

In Europe, Christian mission continues to be viewed ambivalently. But at the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany in 1999 on the theme of "Mission and Evangelisation", Eberhard Jüngel warned in his keynote speech against a spiritual egoism of the German churches. According to Jüngel, the church "must go beyond itself if it wants to continue to be the Church of Jesus Christ. It cannot exist as the church moved by His Spirit, if it is not also, or does not want to be, a missionary and evangelising church."¹

Eberhard Jüngel did not see the lack of interest in mission as being due to a lack of faith on the part of Christians, but rather to the classical Protestant doctrine of the church. It still reflects the fact that the Protestant churches in Europe had to maintain their existence against many opposing forces from the time of the Reformation onwards. In doing so, they often overlooked the fact that the Gospel is addressed to all people, to the human world in its entirety, and that a Christian congregation must always go beyond itself in order to win people for Jesus Christ and invite them into its community.

Seen in this way, the lack of mission and evangelisation is an indicator that a Christian community is too satisfied with itself and not willing to change itself. Such an egocentric church then has no interest at all in welcoming other – socio-culturally and in general culturally foreign – people "into its fold" and thereby also changing itself. In Europe, which is becoming an ethnically and culturally more diverse and colourful continent from year to year, this is one of the great challenges for the Protestant churches and their mission today: to open themselves to the cultural diversity in their societies and thus to the people who were not religiously socialised in them. On the one hand, this applies with regard to the many people who immigrate to Europe or migrate within Europe. On the other hand, this also applies with regard to the many people from diverse milieus and with diverse ways of life in Europe, to whom the Protestant churches have little connection.

2. Further challenges for mission today are indicated by key words that reach from the 20th century into the 21st century. The main keyword here is "secularisation", which then includes characteristics such as "modernisation", "functional differentiation", "individualisation", "pluralisation" and "globalisation". These are all terms that come from sociology and the sociology of religion. If we were to add one more keyword that indicates a specific challenge of the 21st century for mission today, it could be "digitalisation". This keyword indicates a current media revolution similar in importance to that in the Reformation era.

Secularisation does not only mean that religions "lose their once dominant position in society", the number of their members decreases and the attachment of people to the churches weakens, but also that the "process of modernisation does not pass by the stocks of religious traditions and institutions

¹ E. Jüngel, Mission und Evangelisation, in: E. Jüngel, Ganz werden. Theologische Erörterungen V, Tübingen 2003, 115-136, 116.

without consequences".² Accordingly, the challenge for mission in Europe today is to accurately perceive and adapt to these transformations of faith.

In modern societies with a high level of prosperity, continuing technological and medical progress as well as good social security, there is a reorientation of faith away from the numerous threats to bodily, mental and social life towards the very fundamental life events (birth and death) and towards post-materialistic values and questions of meaning.

As modern societies are differentiated into functional areas such as economy, politics, law, science, medicine, education and also religion, the influence of the social areas on each other decreases. Thus, the influence of faith and church on economy, politics, science and culture is decreasing. A uniform Christian way of life in all areas of society is also hardly possible any more. A Christian life then concentrates mainly on the family and the church, the religious area of life.

At the same time, in modern societies, individuals also follow the traditions of their families or even ethnic groups less in their faith. Their religious ideas and actions are less traditional, also less intense and at the same time interreligious and interdenominationally mixed. However, individualisation also makes possible, for example, religious virtuosity – individual gifted religious virtuosos who inspire other people with their individual religiosity and form new faith communities with them.

All this happens in a context of religious and cultural plurality locally and in society as a whole. One challenge for mission today is to offer religiously seeking people an informed orientation in the plural religious field, in which the profile of Protestant faith then also becomes clear.

The keyword "globalisation" is of relevance for mission today, because it is connected with a broadening of the horizons of people today. This applies geographically, but above all with regard to people's available horizon of knowledge and experience. This also puts one's own standards and values and world views into perspective. Traditional certainties of faith are also called into question in this way. They can then liquefy, but also solidify in a fundamentalist way.

Secularisation in modern societies is therefore not necessarily associated with a general loss of faith and attachment to a church. However, there are transformations of faith. The modern world brings with it new fundamental problems and concerns for people and, in general, new perspectives to which the Gospel is to be related. Accordingly, mission cannot be about connecting the Gospel with an old world and a largely past worldview. The challenge of mission in Europe is to see the triune God as Creator and Lord especially also of the secular modern world and to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a relevant message for modern man in his secular world.

This also includes cheerfully embracing the current media shift to digitalisation. For mission today, this concerns above all new ways of communicating the Gospel. The Areopagus, where Paul once preached the Gospel to the Athenians, is today the "social media". The challenge for mission is to make the bodily presence of Jesus Christ real also in the digital world, which then also includes the formation of binding human faith communities in which believers realise together what it means to be the body of Christ together.

² D. Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und in Europa II* (Return of the Religious? Studies on Religious Change in Germany and Europe II), Tübingen 2009, 19f.

In the positive view of the modern secular world continues to lie one of the great challenges for Christian mission in Europe. What particular message does the Gospel offer for a secular modern world that is fundamentally affirmed and considered okay? I already hinted at a few answers earlier.

In this context, it could also be considered what contribution a Christian mission today could have for the great project of reconciliation and shaping Europe itself. As is well known, Europe is "a humanist word", so to speak "a polemical alternative to the 'Christian Occident'. ... 'Europe' stands for the modern, post-Christian humanism of human dignity, human rights, tolerance, the secular, religion-neutral state, just as the 'Occident' stood for the Christian values of life, charity, compassion and mercy".³ This is how Jürgen Moltmann put it. However, according to him, humanist Europe is also a "historical form of Christian hope for the future".⁴ The basic values of freedom, justice and solidarity are important for modern humanist Europe. Charity, compassion and mercy have become secondary to them. In modern European societies, and especially in the European Union, people's relations with each other often appear only formalised. This is how concrete cohesion in society suffers. It would be part of an evangelical mission today to make the old Christian values of love of neighbour, compassion and mercy strong and plausible in modern European societies - not as an antithesis to freedom, justice and solidarity, but as a necessary complement to these, in order to enable truly human coexistence in modern societies and to keep the ideal of a concrete human humanity present in Europe. This would then also be a missionary contribution to hope for the future in Europe as a whole. In the ever-present weariness with Europe, a hopelessness and lack of future is then also articulated. The a-religious side of the secularisation of Europe would then be responsible for such spiritual fatigue and the associated lack of future. The challenge for a mission in today's Europe would then be to revive the European spirit through the Christian spirit of hope.

³ *J. Moltmann, Göttliches Geheimnis. Die Wiedergeburt Europas aus dem Geist der Hoffnung und der weite Raum der Zukunft (Divine Mystery. The rebirth of Europe out of the spirit of hope and the wide space of the future), Zeitzeichen, 6. Jg., 7/2005, 20-22, 20f.*

⁴ *op. cit.*, 21.