

THEME THREE

MISSION AND POSTMODERNITIES

Preface

The Nordic Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (NIME) agreed to take responsibility for the work on the theme of 'Mission and Postmodernities' for the Edinburgh 2010 study process. The purpose of this theme is to consider issues raised by the new phenomena of postmodernity in its various forms in North and South and its significance for mission. This was to involve an investigation of twenty-first century thought structures, religious beliefs and practices as well as ethical principles in a world of information technology. It also required consideration of the influence of postcolonialism, economic structures, internationalism and engagement (or disengagement) with institutions and particularly with institutional religion. And in addition the group was expected to discern commonalities and particularities in postmodern developments in different regions of the world. As a first stage of this study process, NIME devoted their Study Days in 2007 to the topic. The lectures and responses from the Study Days were published in *Swedish Missionary Themes*.¹ The Egede Institute, Oslo, Norway, was given the administrative responsibility for the further process, with its director Rolv Olsen (Lutheran) appointed coordinator.

Originally, it was intended to follow up the NIME Conference by organising a global consultation on the theme with 15-20 specialists taking part, and with a 'Core Group' editing the results. Due to limited economy and time restraints, this scheme was abandoned, and it was resolved rather to invite missiological scholars and practitioners worldwide to contribute academic articles, case studies, liturgies *et al* to an 'Edinburgh 2010 *Festschrift*', and give the Core Group the task of exploring the theme further on the basis of the received material. Revd Andrew Kirk (Anglican, UK), formerly Dean of the School of Mission, Selly Oak, Birmingham, accepted an invitation to be the group's convenor, together with Dr Kajsa Ahlstrand (Lutheran, Sweden), professor at the University of Uppsala, Sweden and chairperson of NIME, as co-convenor. In addition, the Core Group consisted of (in alphabetical order) Tania Petrova (Pentecostal, Bulgaria), Teresa Francesca Rossi (Roman Catholic, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome), J. Jayakiran Sebastian (Church of South India, Professor of Mission and Cultures, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia), with the coordinator as secretary of the group.

The core group sent an invitation to a good number of people across the globe to contribute a written piece of work on any aspect of the theme of mission and postmodernities relevant to their particular context. Out of the articles submitted, all of which are published, with the author's permission, on the Edinburgh 2010 website, a representative number will be selected for

publishing as a kind of *Festschrift* in honour of Edinburgh 2010. The group looked for contributions from people who share different perspectives on the subject: those attracted by postmodernity, those critical of it and those who may not believe that it exists at all; those who believe that it is relevant to mission, and those who do not; those who think it offers a positive environment for mission and those who believe it undermines mission. Participants to the process were at liberty to interpret the theme as they wish, on the grounds that there is no one way of understanding it. The group is interested in postmodernity's putative effect on mission spirituality, mission action and church life in all its dimensions and on how it may shape an understanding of mission and the nature of the Christian community. There is a particular interest in how postmodernities may influence the interpretation and application of the Bible as the normative story of God's mission in the world.

The group sought to solicit contributions that reflected different styles of writing: reflective essays that seek to grapple with theoretical constructs from an historical, philosophical, theological or human sciences perspective; presentations in the form of case-studies, reports of action groups, conversations about contemporary modes of liturgical life, and others that will emphasise the place and influence of the arts in relation to the theme. The emphasis desired was that of creative engagement, after the analysis and critique of postmodernities had been achieved. Hence, the letter of invitation asked the recipients to bear in mind that the intended outcome of all the study-groups was to provide rich material for thought and action, not so much for the academy as for 'grass-roots' Christian communities in their mission calling. For this reason the language and structure of the essays should reflect the need to communicate with non-specialised audiences. The overall objective was to call for a renewed understanding of mission and renewed ways of being in mission that address in concrete ways the urgent issues of concrete situations.

The core group met for initial deliberations during the 2008 International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) Conference in Balatonfüred, Hungary, and convened in Prague from 22-26 June 2009 to assess the contributions received so far and to prepare the statement of the group. Kirk Sandvig (Lutheran, USA, and doctoral student at the University of Edinburgh), the Edinburgh 2010 Youth Coordinator, also participated in the Prague conference. Sadly, due to visa problems, Sebastian was prevented from attending.

The core group was intended to be as representative as possible of the worldwide church, in gender, age, ethnic background, denominational affiliation and geographical spread. In this, we did not entirely succeed. European nations are heavily over-represented. We acknowledge this as a serious shortcoming. Two things, however, may be said to mitigate this unwanted bias. Firstly, the problem is not so much the presence of Scandinavians and other Westerners, but rather the relative paucity of voices from the global South. Secondly, it may be that the challenge of postmodernities is felt more strongly and perceived as more urgent in the

Western world than in societies where the impact of modernity has been less thorough. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the imbalance in core group membership as well as in the sample of contributions received constitutes a weakness. It is to be hoped that the bias will be counterbalanced by other voices taking part in the continued conversation.

1 Introduction: The Process

What is meant by postmodernities, and where is the relevance for Christian mission? Isn't postmodernity rather a matter of architecture and philosophy; a game with words in academic circles, having little or no relation to the actual life of the Christian church? Also, are not the concepts and tenets of postmodernities inevitably at odds with the church, negating the validity of its mission – or of any mission at all – leaving Christians with the option of caving in to its demands or of firmly rejecting its tenets? Or does a possibility remain for constructive interaction between mission and postmodernities? Does postmodernity perhaps offer some new and valuable insights, viewpoints and lessons; might its approaches even enhance the understanding and practice of Christian mission?

The study theme with the title 'Mission and Postmodernities' deals with issues raised by the new phenomenon of postmodernity and their significance for mission. This involves an investigation of twenty-first century thought structures and institutions, the impact of information technology, religious and ideological beliefs and practices and ethical values. It requires consideration of the influence of postcolonial realities, economic structures, globalization and engagement (or disengagement) with institutions, and particularly with institutional religion; it should also try to discern commonalities and particularities in postmodern developments in different regions of the world. Eight so-called 'key issues and questions' were defined at the outset (see Appendix I). While the received contributions can be seen to directly address these questions only to a very limited degree, they still formed a framework for the discussion. The purpose of this survey is to try to point towards some tentative answers to these issues and to the specific questions suggested for the study.

In the following, we will first try to delineate how we understand the term 'postmodernities' and give an indication of important features and challenges. From there, we will give a brief survey of salient points in the historical development since Edinburgh 1910. From the solicited material we will describe different ways of engaging with the subject, including case studies, and show examples of attempts at creative translations of the gospel in the contexts in question. Finally, we will try to indicate some implications for contemporary mission and suggest some key priorities. In general, but not in every particular, the report commands the assent of the group.

2 Mission and Postmodernities: Our Understanding

What is meant by ‘mission’ and by ‘postmodernity/ies’? The terms are complex in nature and might be understood in different ways. The core group did not seek to impose a uniform understanding of the terms on the contributors or writers. Nevertheless, it found it necessary to try to reach some common ground on how to understand the concepts, in order to avoid misunderstandings. The following is not intended to be read as if it represented an exhaustive definition or the final word on the subject; it is a summary of how the group understood and approached the matters at hand in this particular context.²

2.1 Postmodernism and postmodernity/ies

The term ‘postmodernities’ is an ambiguous and elusive concept, in this perhaps mirroring the nature of what it is used to describe. The ambiguity is underscored by the lack of consensus on which term it is proper to use: should we talk of ‘postmodernity’, or does the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon demand the use of the plural, ‘postmodernities’, or perhaps it is better simply to use ‘postmodernism’? Admittedly such linguistic questions have their value, and may sometimes be crucial, but this is not the place for entering into the matter in depth. For our purposes here, a brief survey of the background of the term, together with the rationale for our choice of usage, should suffice.

By using the prefix ‘post-’, it is understood that postmodernity relates to and follows in the wake of modernity, either as a further development of or as a reaction against it. Contrary to what one might expect, the origin of the concept is to be found, not within the realm of philosophy, but rather in the field of architecture. Postmodernism is the revolt against the constraints of modernism with its focus on functionalism and stylisticism, signalling the return of wit, ornamentation and the combination of elements that seemingly do not fit together, in a way that could often be described as provocative, and at times even perceived as outrageous.³ Later, the term was adopted by philosophers and other academics, and used to characterize a broader cultural trend, a paradigm shift caused by the apparent loss of trust in, in some instances perhaps even the collapse of, modernity in terms of an overrated confidence in the power of reason and grand, objective narratives, purporting to be all-inclusive explanations of reality.

As to the terms ‘postmodernism’, ‘postmodernity’ and ‘postmodernities’, they basically refer to the same general trend and could thus be used interchangeably. However, in order to obtain more precision, we recommend that two different main aspects of the trend be distinguished. Thus, we suggest ‘postmodernism’ be used to signify the original sphere of architecture, and by extension, the different fields of art, and reserve ‘postmodernity’ for use within areas such as philosophy, the political/social sphere and ethical matters, such as human rights, denoting a way of thought, practice and existential orientation.

Further, facing the multifaceted nature of postmodernity as it appears in its manifold contexts, and realising that it might be difficult to determine whether it is advisable to speak of postmodernities or perhaps rather merely of different degrees of postmodernity, we suggest differentiating between speaking of 'postmodernity' as a general cultural trend and 'postmodernities' as the various expressions of that trend. In this, we believe that we also reflect the deep scepticism towards single entities and single answers inherent in the whole idea of postmodern existence.

2.2 *Modernity and postmodernity*

Postmodernism in the arts and postmodernity as a philosophical and cultural term signify a reaction against, and alternative to, modernity and its tenets. The term 'modernity' is used to denote the period of history beginning, roughly speaking, with 'the Enlightenment', the industrial revolution and European colonialism, and is characterized by belief in the power of reason, progress and the potential of the scientific method to solve hitherto intractable human dilemmas. Typical for modernity is the grand narrative, a project designed to convince everyone of the truth of a particular vision or theory about historical development, as for example the cases of the Social Darwinist belief in the superiority of the white race, the nation state as the sole legitimate foundation for a political framework, Liberalism, Communism or Nazism as superior political ideologies, Deism or Atheism as the most rational worldview, or perhaps even the assumptions of some variations of Christian mission that the Christian faith is the most advanced creed and has produced the highest civilisation so it needs to be spread throughout the whole world. The catastrophic political events of the twentieth century, predominately the two World Wars, shattered Western optimism and self-confidence, and thus the pillars of modernity were shaken. The abuse of science and reason, not to mention the destructive force of the predominant ideologies, left in their wake a profound distrust towards grand, universal solutions.

Together with this, we witness a crisis of authority, a profound suspicion of all *a priori* claims to truth and knowledge, a disillusionment towards the grand narratives of modernity. In postmodernity, everybody has a voice; there is not necessarily any 'right' or 'wrong' voice; it all depends on the point of view. Thus everybody contributes, and everybody is free to pick what is preferred from the patchwork of many voices; eclecticism is fundamental to postmodernities. Power and the wielders of power are likewise viewed with suspicion, as are any authoritarian and hierarchical structures. In view of this inherent suspicion towards power and wielders of power, postmodernity may be described as a subaltern approach. In many ways, although limited to affluent society, postmodernity represents the voice of marginalized people insisting on equal treatment, on their angle of approach and point of view being as valid as those traditionally favoured.

Briefly, modernity is characterized by belief in the power of rationality and scientific ingenuity to solve human problems. Therefore it engenders optimism about the future. Admittedly, there might be occasional setbacks, but eventually, they will be overcome. A new day is always dawning; the best is yet to come. In contrast, postmodernities conceive of change without any necessary progress, having no belief that the future will be better than the present. Unlike modernist optimists, somebody who has imbibed postmodernity does not regard change as good or bad in itself – it is just the way it is.

While authority is taken for granted in pre-modern societies, and supported by the grand narratives of modernity, in postmodernity authority is fragmented, should be debated and probably be challenged. As a result of the manifold abuses of power, the whole concept of power and obedience is made problematical. Thus, postmodernity in the West appears on the one hand to be a revolt against modernity. On the other hand, it may appear to form a kind of symbiosis with that which it critiques, as its premises do not allow it to posit a clear alternative. Thus, a number of observers characterize the change of mood as ‘late modernity’.

Two previous movements, romanticism and existentialism, both highly critical towards modernity, have had a profound influence on postmodernity. The first in relativizing the excessive emphasis on the rational part of human nature, and by exploring the deep currents of the emotions and the feelings; the second, in stressing the priority of becoming over being, and therefore the inevitability of rejecting the patterns of life that others have chosen for us and choosing only those which are completely authentic for us. Likewise, postmodernity relies more on personal experience than on external authority, on emotional instincts than on doctrine. It does not believe in a static given-ness to life, and is therefore always exploring and experimenting with new forms of living.

2.3 Salient characteristics of postmodernity

Postmodernity is a fluid, impressionistic concept; it is not ‘cut and dried’. What is characteristic for one brand of postmodernity may be of less relevance for others. This notwithstanding, we find certain core themes and values common to the various impressions. For example, plurality, construction and change are pivotal. A multitude of cultural, linguistic, political, religious and other options exist simultaneously, and the individual may choose the understanding of things and the way of life as preferred at the moment. The world is constantly changing; reality is not so much given as constantly being (re)negotiated. Hence, identity is liquid, not static. Postmodernity is a subjective, relational and dialectical approach to life; rather than seeking objective truth outside of ourselves, emphasis is given to relationships with ‘the other’.

Contextuality is pivotal to postmodernities. Notions of objectivity and universality are frowned upon; the subjectivity and conditioned-ness of all experiences and opinions are emphasised: ‘Where you stand depends on where

you sit'. The answers to questions of correct or false, right or wrong depend on the perspective, the context, and therefore will always be partial and biased. Although it might be logical to talk of postmodernity as a general cultural trend, in view of the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon and in accordance with postmodern scepticism towards singular entities, we find it equally natural to speak of postmodernities. If it is possible to speak of the existence of multiple, or multifaceted, modernities, there should be no insurmountable obstacle to the concept of multiple postmodernities. In a postmodern environment, it is natural to use both the singular and the plural. There will be differences of opinion, however, as to whether postmodernity really is a new phenomenon, and just how countercultural it is. Is it not, in reality, just another part of the tradition of revolt against the excessive pretensions of those who have put so much emphasis on reason as a neutral tool for understanding existence that they have ignored other, more fundamental aspects of human experience?

The postmodern trend is no marginal phenomenon, not something happening on the fringe of society. Rather, it is penetrating whole cultures, a paradigm shift consciously and subconsciously transforming commonly accepted habits, notions and patterns of thought in its wake. Thus, one need not consciously consider oneself postmodern to be deeply influenced by its views and values. Even the concept of time and history has been vastly altered in postmodernity, perhaps as fundamentally as with the outset of modernity. In pre-modern societies, time was viewed primarily in the context of the religious belief in the far more important horizon of eternity and in the context of the seasons, so vital to an agrarian society, thus emphasising its circular or repetitive nature. This perspective tended to stress a golden age in the past, so that any change needed to be the restoration of the same. Modernity, on the other hand, instituted a shift against tradition, a profound transformation in the way people were regarding time and space. It is said that modernity and the Enlightenment, as its intellectual expression, invented the concept of history, so that from then on people conceived of the past as actually being fundamentally different from the present and the future. To the modern mind, time moves in a unilateral direction, inexorably and gloriously moving from past to the present and further on towards the future. This march of time frequently is perceived as moving dialectically through historical epochs. Hegel and Marx were two notable examples of those who built systems around the notion of epochs negating each other in a process of ever higher (or more progressive) syntheses, until an ultimate synthesis was achieved, when history marked by contradictions would end.

While pre-modern humans believed in authority and tradition, and modern people put their trust in reason and objective, scientific truth, the postmodern tendency is to rely on the subjective emotions and experiences. Thus, simplified, when being asked how they know the truth, pre-moderns would answer 'I've been told'; moderns reply 'I think'; while postmoderns would say

‘I feel’. From this comes postmodernity’s reluctance towards any notion of preferred views or angles of approach: What makes your point of view more valid than mine? Rather than listening to and relying on specialists, humbly taking notes, it allows many voices to speak, challenging hierarchical truths. Similarly, the postmodern approach to tradition is eclectic. Of the many options available, one chooses what best suits the situation. Faithfulness towards tradition is of less importance. So is inner consistency; even apparently contradictory positions may be reconciled and combined, as with Christians believing in the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation. Even within aesthetics, there is the same revolt against elitism. With postmodernity comes a breakdown of the barrier between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art; what is valuable is entirely up to the subject. Thus, postmodernity may be said to have truly taken the slogan ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ to heart.

Postmodernity also marks a shift in how we view the determining factors of our existence, such as the notions of ultimate authority and the question of who is ‘the author of life’. In pre-modern society, God, the gods or the spirits, were the author of life, and religion and religious authorities were crucial in transmitting the divine will and the response of the faithful. In modernity the pride of place was taken over by universal truths, which were deducible from reasoning about the forces of nature or the flow of history. Religion was required by society to conform to the demands of established truth or else be relegated to the private sphere, as revelation was perceived to be inferior to reason. In postmodernity, however, the individual is the author of his or her own life. Authority rests no longer outside of one’s reach, with God or with the forces of nature, but inside, and woe to those who presume to override an individual’s right to authorship. But the individual’s ‘I’ is not immediately given. The ‘I’ is constructed; the author of the subject is re-authored all the time by the same subject. Contrary to modernity, such an authorship may easily embrace the tenets of revelation and/or tradition. However, unlike an unquestioning acceptance of these sources of knowledge in pre-modernity, in postmodernity this is entirely dependent on the will of the author.

2.4 Limitations of postmodernity

Some will question, however, not only whether we have truly entered a postmodern society, but whether our current state is postmodern or maybe even post-postmodern. Perhaps, postmodernity ended on 11 September 2001 (9/11)? The signs pointing towards religious awakening might also be taken to imply that what we now witness is a post-postmodern return to traditional views and values. Even if such an analysis is correct, however, it only captures part of the overall picture. The return to traditional values, even to what often is labelled as ‘fundamentalist’ opinions and practices, is a matter of choice, a conscious – or subconscious – rejection of dominant notions and habits, and as such in itself a postmodern reaction. Other external factors, notably the effects of climate change and the ongoing, periodic crises in the world economic system

influence the way we think of the world and ourselves. The acceptance of the concept of having moved into a post-postmodern era largely depends on our understanding of postmodernity, whether the postmodern is seen as opposite to, or at least a reaction to, the modern, or basically as a continuation of the same.

As far as we can see, postmodernities are hardly resonating with people living in poverty. Their appeal seems largely limited to the more affluent and urbanized segments of affluent societies. The reason behind this may be that postmodernity is connected with a shift in capitalist production, from an emphasis on the industrial output of goods designed to meet real needs to the production of services for those who can afford to pay for them. Having this in mind, it is hardly surprising to find neo-Marxists such as Habermas and Eagleton among the strongest critics of postmodernity. So, there are serious limits to the postmodern account of reality. Most people accept the view of meteorologists regarding climate change, regardless of how they *feel* about it, economic crises cannot just be *negotiated* away, and authoritarian fundamentalist religious beliefs have not disappeared because some declare that we are now living after modernity. Postmodern, modern and pre-modern realities are not just shackles to be cast off at leisure. To cite Richard Dawkins' memorable aphorism, 'show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I'll show you a hypocrite.'⁴

3 Case Studies

Here, eight of the contributions received by the study group are given a brief survey, indicating possible answers to at least some of the initially stated 'key issues and questions'. It should be kept in mind, however, that each of the articles in question may address more than one of the given topics, and that the submitted reviews give a far from exhaustive indication of the contents of the papers.⁵

Several authors explore ways in which postmodernity affects understandings of the basis of Christian faith, and hence of Christian mission, addressing these particularly in and from Europe.

Jan-Olav Henriksen⁶ reflects on challenges to churches in the northern hemisphere, advising an accommodationist rather than a confrontational approach. Although he writes with a special view to the Scandinavian context, his analysis and reasoning is readily translatable to other contexts. On the other hand, **Andrew Kirk**⁷ advises that it is part of the study of mission to take note in any and every situation of the counter-cultural force of the gospel. The latter has its own criteria for deciding the nature and extent of its contextual relevance; passing cultural trends or fashions should never determine its ultimate validity and cogency.

Jayakiran Sebastian⁸ follows up Henriksen's essay by reflecting on challenges to churches on the Indian subcontinent. Sebastian points out that the concept of *missio Dei* has been a dominant missiological paradigm for several

decades and has come to govern missiological thinking and theological self-understanding. In this sense it has functioned as an underlying motif over against which all discussion of missiology has had to contend. His contribution questions this way of thinking and posits an understanding of mission as mission ‘to’ God which opens up new and fresh ways of thinking, belief, and praxis.

Postmodern patterns of community, including virtual communities on the internet, are discussed in a manner fitting to the subject. Unlike the more academic character of the majority of the contributions, **Andrew Jones**⁹ submitted a blog on the constructive aspects of the virtual church, arguing that the vital question is not whether virtual communities are true churches, but how the church may utilise the possibilities of the internet to fulfil its mission. Jones emphasises that virtual is not unreal, that the virtual merely has not yet actualized its potential, that the church by its very nature is a virtual community, awaiting its consummation in the New Jerusalem. He refers to how, in the letter to the Hebrews, the visible is portrayed as being preceded and legitimized by the invisible, not the other way around.

The effects of postmodernity on Christian mission and the implications for Christian mission are discussed by two German scholars with respect to the Central European situation, and are amplified with reflections from a Russian and a Chinese perspective.

Michael Herbst¹⁰ reflects on the ultra-secular condition of the ‘post-Volkskirche’ situation¹¹ in the Eastern German province of Pomerania, in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). His findings are relevant for large parts of Central and Eastern Europe, for example Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. Although the context might be described as post-socialist or ultra-secular rather than postmodern, his description and analysis of people who ‘have forgotten that they have forgotten God’ sounds familiar at least to Scandinavians, almost as an eerie prophecy of a not-too-distant future. Even in such ultra-secular, or perhaps post-secular, contexts, people may be looking for wider reality; though, as a rising interest in the paranormal shows, a re-enchantment of the world may indeed be taking place. Although people do not trust the institutions, some connection with the past is still sought for; church buildings are still needed, their connection with the transcendent cherished. A postmodern society, in so far as it exists, is a fragmented society. Perhaps, we are witnessing simultaneously a search for the transcendent and a memory loss, a society that is definitely not at ease with itself.

The realisation that Europe can no more be regarded as Christian territory forms the starting point of the investigation of **Friedemann Walldorf**¹² into missiological models for postmodern Europe. He maintains that churches need to overcome their Eurocentric perspective, viewing their task through the lens of *missio Dei* and their sister churches in the global South, exploring the missiological quest for understanding and Christian revival in contemporary Europe. Three possible missiological models are introduced: the inculturational

model, regarding the church as the soul of Europe; the dialogical model, endeavouring to discover God in Europe; and the translation model, searching for ways to share the gospel with today's Europeans. Considering the claims of reconciled diversity, regionalization and critical postmodernism, and acknowledging the need to appreciate perspectivity and the creativity of human knowledge, while admitting the existence of universally valid expressions of empirical reality and theological truth, Walldorf concludes that from an Evangelical perspective due concern must be taken both to context, text and community. Finally, he claims that Europeans have not abandoned the search for truth for the experience of relationships, but that they seek relationships *and* a truth to carry those.

Speaking from a Chinese perspective, **Jieren Li**¹³ points out that, although postmodernity is rooted in Western post-industrial society, it might still be relevant for the Third World. He starts from a description of the contemporary Chinese church landscape with three main currents: First, institutional Christianity – a post-denominational body in a situation that might be seen as pre-denominational. Second, autonomous Christianity, frowned upon by the authorities but no real threat to society. And third, intellectual Christianity – scholars fascinated by Christian thinking, but with virtually no contact with organised church. He goes on to discuss the implications for mission in postmodern China, analysing the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches.

Olga Zaprometova,¹⁴ writing from a Russian perspective, gives a creative response to the question of emotions and their potential as a way towards seeking union between Christians. While centuries of different doctrines and practices constitute formidable obstacles on the way towards communion, through mutual recognition of the traditions and the imperatives imposed on Christians from the contemporary world, she suggests ways by which some degree of understanding and cooperation can be achieved. No Christian tradition is sufficient by itself; encounters between the 'enthusiasm' of Pentecostals and the struggle for *theosis* and salvation of the Orthodox may prove fruitful for both parts, as well as the other Christian denominations.

Challenges related to telling the biblical story to those who embrace postmodern relativism and are suspicious of all metanarratives are addressed from two widely different perspectives.

David Kettle¹⁵ gives an original, interdisciplinary approach to the question of hope, giving much food for thought, although it might be argued that the context of his analysis is as much modern as postmodern. Kettle maintains that one major shortcoming of postmodernity is its lack of hope. Hope is not the same as optimism; one of the main differences being that it is open to the grounds of despair, while, unlike pessimism, facing them without despairing. Western culture, though, is heavily infested by narcissism, turning away from the world in despair, constructing a 'self' to become the focus of life. For the church to meaningfully communicate the gospel of hope in a narcissistic

culture, it needs to be characterized by authentic spirituality, hospitality, participation, and prophecy.

Speaking in a sub-Saharan African context, **Jim Harries**¹⁶ discusses challenges to Bible translation, creatively using mathematical language to that purpose. His essay points to the crucial topic of the role of language within postmodernity, as well as suggesting that witchcraft and magic are issues well worthy of further consideration, even in a postmodern European context.

4 Key Questions

The following issues and questions relating to mission in postmodernity have been raised by these papers and in group consultations.

4.1 Hope

Is hope a key category for Christians in mission? If so, how do Christians live out hope, in communities as well as individuals? Facing poverty, the environmental crisis and similar, how may hope become more than an empty sounding slogan? How is hope in the Christian sense inserted into cultural contexts? Is it valid to claim that hope is absent from postmodern worldviews, as it emphasises change without progress? If not, where is the element of hope in postmodernities?

4.2 Otherness

Postmodernity may have contributed to contemporary awareness of otherness. There is a danger, however, that the encounter with the other leads to fear of the otherness of the other, rather than to enhanced understanding. Actually, this otherness may be experienced even concerning oneself. When relations with the other often fail, how should we respond to the other and overcome the fear of the other? Through recent communication developments, such as Facebook, virtual communities are created, simultaneously providing closeness and distance. There is a certain ambiguity in such relations, mirroring the mobility of current society, relations becoming virtual, but still real. May this provide means to overcome obstacles in facing the other? Virtual churches appear, even to the point of virtual eucharist, as for instance at 'Post the Host'.¹⁷ Are virtual communities a viable alternative to traditional congregations, or should bodily presence still be regarded as indispensable for worship?

4.3 Believing and belonging

In recent years a good deal of sociological research has been done, most notably by Grace Davie, on the relationship of the general populace of post-Christian countries to the churches.¹⁸ Some have proposed that the position of the majority is that they still believe in the essentials of the faith, but do not find it necessary to belong to the institutional structures of religion. Others, particularly in those parts of Europe where the majority are still baptised in

infancy and, perhaps, contribute to taxes that go to the churches, suggest that the majority still belong to the institution in a sense, but do not really believe in the fundamental claims of the gospel as proclaimed by the churches. In the first case, it can be said that they believe without belonging; in the second case, that they belong without believing. In both cases, perhaps, underlying postmodern attitudes are being displayed in relation to religion.

4.4 Conversion in a postmodern context

Although the possibility, and even legitimacy, of converting others is being questioned and even denied, it remains entirely possible to convert, perhaps even to make more radical conversions in a postmodern climate than previously. One of our group members had encountered and related one such conversion story: a journey from white, male Baptist pastor to veiled Muslim woman. Conversions are not necessarily regarded as conclusive, for it is quite possible to convert several times.

4.5 Ethical values and rights in a relativistic culture

Current secular Western cultures are a curious mixture of the absolute and the relative. On the one hand, some people go beyond the valid, if sometimes ambiguous, notion of human rights, by seeking to impose through legislation certain 'correct' views, currently held by strong lobbying groups, of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable human behaviour. Thus, there is pending in some societies legislation that would make the criticism of different lifestyles and beliefs into the offence of harassment. At the same time, the right of religious believers to dissent from certain practices on the grounds of conscience is being denied. In this way, both freedom of religion and freedom of speech, two fundamental rights upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are in danger of being taken away. The notion of being abused or oppressed is prevalent in postmodernity. The question remains, though, who determines whether abuse has taken place or not, and by which criteria? The fact that something is perceived by someone or some group as abusive does not make it abusive. The claim of being abused might itself be the cause for abuse. Accusations of oppression can be made into a tool for oppression. So, the suspicion of an abuse of power or privilege ought not to lead to uncritical acceptance of any protest. On the other hand, discrimination on the grounds of belief, as well as ethnic identity, gender and so on, is considered a grave assault on individual liberty; whilst tolerance of others' beliefs and practices is exalted into one of the supreme virtues of a liberal society. It is almost inevitable that in societies that have lost any solid grounds for asserting particular ethical values there should be so much ambiguity and confusion. At one and the same time, absolute ethical norms are being both affirmed and denied. Christians are called to witness to truth, as revealed in Jesus Christ, within the turmoil and muddle of inconsistent ethical stances and contradictory interpretations of human rights.

5 Mission in Relation to Postmodernity

To claim that the concept and practice of mission has changed dramatically in the last decades is hardly controversial. More arguable is whether this has taken place as a result of postmodernity, or just happens to have occurred in parallel with its emergence, due to other reasons, to be found in the broader context of recent history. The familiar stereotypical image of Western Christian mission as an imperialistic, colonial enterprise, although still embarrassingly accurate at times, is less typical than often alleged. With some few, if notorious, current exceptions, the image fits poorly with the actual reality of mission, which is marked by a far more humble and egalitarian approach. Today, Western mission may actually be accused of having gone so far in the opposite direction, in its shift from proclamation to dialogue and from evangelism to witness, that the message has been diluted and mission become mute.

Christian mission is no longer predominantly Western. The churches of the global South, now representing the overwhelming majority among the world's Christians, have to a large extent taken over the missionary mantle. Korean, Brazilian and Nigerian missions, for example, reveal a confidence the West may have lost, although it might be argued that their mission practice exhibits some of the alleged imperialistic traits shown by Westerners in history. One major difference, though, is that their mission is less likely to be backed or accompanied by overt political motivations or influence. Thus, although sentiments, vocabulary and methods may be similar, one of the key characteristics of imperialistic mission is largely absent.

In this context, the group discussed the following points regarding mission in postmodernity.¹⁹

5.1 Truth and evangelism

Mission in the New Testament may be summarised as movement and mandate. In the words of Remi Emiel Hoeckman, O.P.:

Basically, Christian mission is a movement – not wild and uncontrolled but, paradoxical as it may sound, a movement anchored in love, originated in love, originating love. Christian mission is love... seeking. It is movement anchored in the mystery of God creating and in the mystery of God redeeming, God reaching out to send (Wisdom 11:12; 1 Tim 2:4).

Christian movement is movement anchored indeed in the mission of Jesus, who totally transcends the Old Testament missionary horizon. Jesus did not sit at the gate of the temple like the prophet, waiting for the people to come to hear his message. Nor did he stay in the thinly-populated regions of the river Jordan like the Baptist. No, he moved across the length and breadth of Palestine – always on his way. 'Let us move on to the neighbouring villages so that I may proclaim the good news there also. That is what I have come to do' (Mark 1:38). This purposeful movement is particularly clear in Luke's gospel, where through ten chapters Jesus is quite ostensibly on his way to Jerusalem (9:51 – 19:41).

Geographically, Jesus was moving towards Jerusalem, but missiologically speaking he was on his way to all men, for it was on the cross that his blood would be poured out for salvation of many, i.e. of all.²⁰

Such an understanding of mission may be said to show a basic commonality with postmodernities in their emphasis on flexibility and movement. Still, Christian mission is also concerned with passing on the Christian tradition, something less appreciated in postmodernities. Several influential theological trends reveal close affinities with postmodernity. Whereas historical Christianity, not least in its Lutheran version, has put much emphasis on doctrinal questions, newer theological thinking and practice tends towards focus on practice and downplays the importance of doctrinal differences. Even when contemplating the multifaceted nature of Christianity, the tendency often is to leave doctrine aside and focus on event and experience.

During the last decades, the church in the West has undergone a significant shift towards what might be termed a 'softer' Christianity, emphasising life and ethics rather than faith and doctrine. Although far from being a uniform trend, one may easily spot, especially in traditional Protestant churches, a tendency towards downplaying, ignoring or even outrightly rejecting the traditional concept of eternal damnation in hell, focusing less on proclamation than on co-existence and dialogue, moving from traditional exclusivist positions towards more inclusivity or even pluralist notions of the relation between Christianity and other religions and worldviews. Such a shift is clearly in tune with postmodern subjectivity and scepticism towards established truth.

Is it possible, though, to continue affirming belief in the existence of absolute truth, pivotal not only to historical Christianity, but possibly to most religions, and simultaneously to acknowledge the postmodern claim that it is inherently impossible in all human striving to obtain this truth? One biblical icon that may prove helpful, indeed to have a special affinity with a postmodern setting, is Paul's assertion that now we can only see in a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:9-13). The face when seen reflected in a hammered copper plate (the nature of the mirrors of that time) is real, but the reflection is distorted and at times almost unrecognisable. Reality is real, but our perceptions are always limited, fragmented and often even misleading. In a similar vein, the Buddha is credited with having said that his teaching is like a finger pointing towards the moon; it is not the moon itself.

Many contemporary societies witness to the proliferation of different messages, propaganda and publicity within the media; and then there is the ubiquitous presence of the worldwide web. This diversity reflects in part a deep distrust in the hegemonic aspiration of any one message that claims exclusivity or superior knowledge. There is a real problem with truth claims as a starting-point for conversation and a much greater preference for a mutual dialogue in which the participants start out to search together for truth. This climate of opinion has undoubtedly affected Christian mission, with a number of leading

Christians in the West, and elsewhere, saying that evangelism in the sense of proclamation is no longer a legitimate activity, only dialogue in which each side, as an equal partner, listens to the beliefs and values of the other, with the hope of resolving misunderstandings and conflict and working together for commonly shared social goals.

Nevertheless, the judgements we make on others' beliefs are made on the basis of our beliefs. This is as much the case within postmodernity as anywhere else. Christian postmoderns, however, have shifted the emphasis away from belief and propositional truths towards the aesthetic and empirical dimensions of Christianity. The truth claims of Christianity may be perceived as less important, and consequently given less concern, than beauty of thought in an open theological process, and the visceral impact that may be made by high quality music and other art forms. Accordingly, the presence of other religions is not perceived as a theological problem. The postmodern attitude is that others have the same right to choose their way as I have to choose to mine, and their choice may be as honest and relevant for them as mine is to me.

It is important to point out that a critique and rejection of others' beliefs need not be disrespectful. On the contrary, provided that the critique is done in a sensitive and considerate way, not deteriorating into personal attacks, by disagreeing with someone and taking the trouble to point out why something should be considered mistaken, the other is acknowledged as an equal, responsible like me for his or her acts and opinions and their consequences. One corollary to this is that Christian mission must be performed in humility, equality and mutuality, values that are highly appreciated in postmodernity.

5.2 *Salvation and the church*

Is it possible still to adhere to the traditional notion of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('outside the church there is no salvation') – a concept diametrically opposite to current attitudes and a postmodern worldview, because it is seen as unfair and illogical? The fear of being unpopular should not prevent the church from adhering to its beliefs. It is highly questionable, though, whether common perceptions of the slogan really are in tune with biblical understandings. It is arguable that the relation between church membership and salvation is hardly an issue in the New Testament. As is natural with emerging movements, the organisational structure of the church in New Testament times is still fluid; there is not even yet a clearly defined borderline between Jews and Christians. Perhaps postmodernity, with its emphasis on life and experience rather than on structures and membership, is in many ways closer to New Testament ecclesiology than what can be said of some of the more traditional Christian positions?

What definitely is an issue in the New Testament, however, is the relation between baptism, faith and salvation. The normal way of being a Christian is in and through the church; the prescribed way to salvation is through faith and baptism. That does not necessarily imply, however, that no other options exist.

Admittedly, the church is frequently described as the body of Christ. Still, it is not necessary to equate Christ with the earthly church; the weeds are to be allowed to grow alongside the wheat. The church is not only a gathering of likeminded people, but the communion of saints who are also sinners. Thus, being a Christian is not a solitary venture, involving me and my God only. To belong to the church is a necessary part of being a Christian. From a theological point of view, I did not choose to be a member of the church. Rather, by choosing Christ, I accept that Christ chose me to be part of his body. The church is a family, comprising all who belong to Christ, not a club.

The parish church, all its limitations and contradictions notwithstanding, at its best still reflects the nature of church, as a family, a community; a fellowship I do not choose myself, but nevertheless belong to, regardless of my feelings at any given moment, not depending on my ability to conceive of its being the case, welcoming me with all my shortcomings and providing a haven, a training ground and a lifelong partnership. The church originated in pre-modern times, and most churches have had problems in coming to terms with modernity. Pentecostalism, on the contrary, although having strong pre-modern characteristics, might be said to be in part a postmodern phenomenon, insofar as it has existed on the fringe of modernity, frowned upon by the established church as well as secular society. Nevertheless, it proved adaptable, not the least due to its fluid or plastic nature, antedating the whole discussion around postmodernities. It may, therefore, be more successful than most churches in addressing postmodern concerns.

One of the most pressing challenges of a postmodern culture is to respond to the privatization of faith. Should the tendency be combated, and if so, how, when the notion of religion as a strictly private matter seems to have become the 'default' position in Western society? What is an alternative? Perhaps the larger openness for spiritual matters shown in postmodernities even allows for a greater understanding for religion and spirituality in the public arena.

Although God has limited our options, he has not limited himself. Though the church may speak with confidence on what God has revealed through Christ, it can never claim to have complete, exhaustive knowledge of the thoughts and ways of its Lord. The final word on who belongs to the kingdom of God has not been revealed to the church; God has reserved for himself the final judgement of who is inside and outside the boundaries of his realm. Thus, we can never conclude with certainty whether those not acknowledging Christ as saviour still may be saved by his grace. Nevertheless, whether our positions on final salvation are exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, or any other, all Christians should, like God, earnestly desire all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4).

5.3 Evangelism and witness

Postmodernity harbours a deep felt scepticism towards mission of any kind, but it appears that the suspicion of Christian mission runs especially deep. Attempts

at trying to *persuade* others to accept the implications of the story of Jesus may be confused with the notion that Christians are trying to impose their viewpoints on others. For postmodernity, after all, one view may be as good as another; there are no fixed criteria by which to measure validity. One may wonder why mission attempts are felt to be so disturbing in postmodernity. Are they perceived as an invasion of an inviolate privacy? Is the message viewed as propaganda? Or are there other reasons? For the Christian church, some reflection on Scripture passages such as Acts 10 and 15, where conversion followed experiences rather than argument, may be helpful.

We need to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate proclamation, between the respectful sharing of the received and experienced while pointing towards what has merely been glimpsed, and the condescending imposition of doctrines and practices without regard to the wishes of the recipients. While the latter should be condemned, and no less when practised by fellow Christians – or even oneself, the former should be applauded and encouraged, even though the message might be contrary to one's own convictions.

Although being a Christian is to be a believer in and a witness for the word of God, actual witness need not always be verbal. The witness of a life inspired by love and charity may not only be more authentic, but more effective proclamation as well. The old adage: 'Witness! If necessary use words' needs pondering by all who want to share their faith. Christian service and issues of justice are integral to the gospel. A church that forgets its prophetic role, struggling for peace and the integrity of creation and combating injustice, is not only losing its credibility, but betraying its calling. In postmodernity, an essential aspect of mission has become that of physical, emotional and spiritual healing. New Age teachings, with their appeal to physical wellbeing, psychic healing, therapy and holism may be a useful reminder that humans recognise deep down that they do not live by bread alone.

The Chinese character '*sheng*', signifying 'holy', consists of three parts: there is a large ear and a small mouth, posing above the character for 'responsibility'. Could this be a fruitful metaphor for Christian mission in a postmodern environment, the large ear and small mouth signifying responsible, respectful proclamation and intellectually honest dialogue, combined with earnest efforts to listen and to understand? Witness is bold because it is about sharing amazing good news; it is to be undertaken in humility, for the witness is not to oneself, one's church or 'superior' way of life, but to the risen Lord of all. There is nothing to be ashamed of in confessing one's faith in the crucified and risen Christ as the saviour for all humanity. Everything is to be gained in communication by listening attentively to the questions, doubts and criticisms of those whom we wish to introduce to Jesus.

5.4 Theology of mission

We suggest a *via media* between what are probably two caricatures of mission: on the one hand, the traditional notions of winning souls and establishing the

church, and on the other the radical version, which identifies the work of the Spirit in current world events. We confess our belief in the church as the work of the Holy Spirit and the communion of saints. Nevertheless, that does not imply that the kingdom of God is limited to the church. Traditional mission has been eager to fulfil God's calling. While the zeal should be applauded, the methods are not necessarily to be recommended. It is more important that mission is done with – rather than for – God.

The tension between differing views on church and mission is evident within the articles and our group. We will not here presume to give an answer to whether different parts of the church are over-emphasising some aspects of mission to the detriment of others. We would like to point out, however, that Christian mission needs to be holistic to be perceived as valid and relevant. It is always proclamation, dialogue and action in service and for justice; it is always word and deed.

As to the biblical basis for mission, naturally we find not only differences of opinion between the more evangelically and ecumenically minded, but a tendency to root the understanding in different Scripture passages and to use the texts in different ways, pointing at different lessons. The relative prominence of John 3:16, let us say among those who adhere to the Lausanne movement, compared to the fondness for Luke 14:18-19 in circles allied to the World Council of Churches may serve as an example of this trend. Whatever our positions, we need to acknowledge the limitations of our understanding and the inherent danger of abusing Scripture in our arguments.

6 Key Priorities and Suggestions for Further Consideration

Postmodernity appears to be a facet of current life; it will not simply vanish if ignored or completely denied. Hence, it is imperative that the church moves beyond pure denunciation and reflects on how constructively to relate to postmodernity, welcoming its contributions, assessing its impact on individuals and society, and discerning its less constructive elements, in order to reach a deeper understanding of both the gospel and contemporary human beings. Such a task will enable Christians to be valid and relevant witnesses to Christ. In a time when modernity is given much of the blame for the current state of affairs, Christians ought to give modernity due credit for its accomplishments, not only scientific and technical, but even in the social realm. The main problem of modernity for Christians is not the emphasis on rationality and the achievements of the scientific method, but the claims made by some that these by themselves, in a universe closed in on itself, are sufficient to explain human life and nurture human flourishing.

6.1 The exercise of leadership

Within postmodern culture, one may spot a reluctance to take on power, with its responsibilities. It is arguable whether this is the result of a worthy suspicion

of power and those who wield it, or merely reveals an immature fear of obligations. Nevertheless, this reluctance is not easily harmonized with images of leadership and power apparently favoured in many church traditions. Neither the formally authorized mono-pastor of the traditional parish congregation nor the allegedly divinely appointed charismatic leader of faith fellowships seem sufficiently attuned to the postmodern distrust of power. In a world where established authority is challenged and distrusted, claims of unique revelation will naturally be perceived as unfair. The prevailing attitude towards notions of uniqueness may be expressed as: ‘What makes your god so special; aren’t all gods alike?’ Perhaps, through postmodernity, the church may rediscover what it means to emulate the Servant King. Churches and theological institutions need to encourage and enable servant leadership, which is so beautiful when transformed from a slogan into a reality.

6.2 Theological education

Probably tensions in the church between academic theology and practised church life will always be there. Whereas in the Western theological tradition, the former has tended to have had more influence, the latter becomes more important for the postmodern conscience. Credibility comes not so much from well thought out and reasoned opinions, but from a life consistent with one’s convictions and the ability to encourage, enrich and guide others.

Many postmodern-style churches do not emphasise strong formal theological training. They prefer to stress more informal, practical training. At a time when people are searching for authentic models for living rather than for disconnected propositional truths, it is crucial that theological training is not limited to a theoretical exercise, but that theory and practice interact with each other. This does not invalidate theology as an academic discipline, but academic proficiency is not, and never has been, the sole requirement for pastoral service.

The radical change in the way of thinking and of looking at life represented by postmodernity cannot but influence theological reflection and education. The key question for churches to answer may not be so much ‘where can I find a graceful God’, but rather ‘where do I find an authentic spirituality’? To address this need, it appears that theological education should be conversational rather than authoritarian, focusing more on encouraging students to reflect on their own experiences, form their own opinions and discern spiritual insight than to transmit propositional truth. Although the latter will remain pivotal, to train spiritually mature leaders is likely to be even more crucial.

6.3 Postmodernity and hope for the future

Postmodernity, arguably lacking a real belief in the possibility of progress, does not have any good stories for the future in relation to the alarming facts of global economic mismanagement, the ecological crisis, proper human dignity and rights, nor as a counterbalance to totalitarian religions and worldviews. We

find much validity, therefore, in the claim that hope is absent within postmodernities. Admittedly, the contrary claim that hope is a delusion is perhaps not sufficiently explored. We suggest, though, that hope is necessary for transformation. By not settling for the world as it is, keeping hope as a permanent motivating force over against the paralysis that fatalism induces, the possibility of radical and substantial change remains. To us, it appears that this perceived lack of a vision for transformation in the future is a weakness or deficiency in postmodernism and a danger for mission in postmodernity.

It is true, however, that totalitarian systems may come up with appealing – but false – stories of the future. The more simplified the answers that they give the more chance they have of making a broad appeal. This is partly why it is valuable to listen attentively to some of the most valuable contributions of postmodernity; for example, its egalitarian idealism, awareness of the contingencies of life, suspicion of the corrupting influence of power and over-emphasis on the value of rational organisation to the exclusion of the non-negotiable value of the other person.

6.4 The Bible

Postmodern use of biblical texts may differ from the previously established. The primary use of the traditionally privileged biblical texts may be less evident than before, the freedom to choose is stressed, and the patchwork technique is gaining more credence than previously.

The postmodern suspicion of power is clearly shown in postcolonial as well as in feminist hermeneutics. As opposed to liberation theology, whose proponents were inherently trusting the biblical texts to be on side of the poor, feminist and postcolonial readers, such as Musa Dube, Tinyiko Maluleke and Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, not only realise that these texts have been used to oppress people. Rather, they suspect that such oppression is not only due to abuse of the biblical texts, but is inherent in the texts themselves. Thus, the Bible is no longer seen as an infallible guide, even Christians do not necessarily presuppose that biblical texts are always good for the reader; to postmodern and postcolonial minds, their validity as spiritual guidance remains a question of hermeneutics.

6.5 Environmental crisis and ecology

The ecological movement might be described as a postmodern challenge to modernity. As the grim consequences of the exploitation of the earth's resources become ever more visible, the realisation that these resources are not unlimited, ours to exploit with impunity, slowly begins to sink in. The rather instrumental and utilitarian view of nature in modernity is commonly viewed as part of the problem, needing to be replaced by more holistic approaches, seeing everything as part of the whole and thus being more sympathetic to the natural order. Thus, it appears that postmodernity is more in tune with environmental concerns than is the case with modernity.

Environmental theology follows up this concern, castigating churches for having done little or nothing to prevent this poor management of what has been entrusted us, solely focusing on individual salvation to the detriment of concern for those coming after us. Other Christians seem to regard the environmental crisis as being of less consequence for the church, though. Because they believe that this earth and all within it eventually will perish, they advocate concentrating on the unique tasks of the church rather than being involved in everyday political struggles.

To let the eschatological vision of a new heaven and a new earth obscure the gravity of the crisis would not only be counterfactual, however, it would also be a rejection of the biblical message of stewardship for the earth and its resources. The postmodern emphasis on ecological concern is a highly due reminder for the church as well as for society as a whole, and a necessary corrective to the seemingly more prevalent thinking of nature as a menace to be subdued or a machine to be mastered.

6.6 Reconciliation and healing

What does reconciliation and healing mean in a situation with opposing and irreconcilable views? During the core group discussion, the matter was discussed through a case study on a (fictional) destruction of a Bosnian mosque. What would be the proper Christian response? The consensus clearly was that Christians ought to help the victims of assault, and thus to help rebuilding the mosque would be a true expression of Christian love for the neighbour. However, it was readily admitted that such an act might be perceived as naive from the point of view of Christians suffering under similar measures from Muslim communities, and that it might be difficult to explain to oppressed Christians that their fellow Christians take up such a collection for Muslims. Admittedly, it may be easy for, for example, comfortable Christians in Scandinavia to be generous, and it might easily be perceived as just another instance of apologetic penitence for past misdeeds, real or imagined. On the other hand, by helping oppressed Muslims, it may be demonstrated to those willing to see that not all Christians are crusaders.

7 Postscript

Reflecting on the topic of postmodernities, we have realised how complex a subject it is and how different, even among among a few people, our approaches can be. This fact shows the variety and diversity of positions of different Christian traditions, and even the different theological trends within the same tradition. Postmodernity is a kind of ‘boundaries topic’, which means not only that churches look at it in a different ways, and with divergent theologies, but also that postmodern thinking addresses the churches, Christianity and religion in a wide range of diverse ways. Our topic can be considered as an *ad extra* topic, calling the churches to interact with various

geo-political-cultural contexts, religious milieus and different theological standpoints and ecumenical approaches. Other themes in the Edinburgh 2010 study project are *ad intra* topics, in the sense that they may be dealt with and shaped within a common and shared Christian standpoint: the Bible, the mission of the church, the Christian call and the ecumenical imperative. The theme of postmodernities, in contrast, if we want to be faithful to its very nature, has no ‘Christian-oriented counterpart’.

In hindsight it would seem we decided – though we did not make it explicit – that in such a situation we would not attempt to produce an exhaustive presentation, or even a structured presentation; rather we would aim to give flashes and glimpses of the issues, whose aim was simply to point out some of their problematic aspects. In retrospect, one real weakness of our study overall is the relative lack of voices from different cultural contexts and diverse groups (e.g. the global South, women and young people). We were aware of this, and tried to deal with the problem by inviting both women and contacts outside the Western world to contribute, but with only limited success.

Beside practical difficulties, there is also a delicate methodological aspect, which is that the topic of postmodernities, while pointing out a reality of a globalized world, is still basically a Western category. It is used by theologians, philosophers, sociologists and others from countries which have experienced modernity and secularization and, in some sense, bear the marks of a post-Christian environment. To have included voices from the global South would have meant opening the way to very different understandings, which, in turn, might have given contrasting meanings to the concept, and even, perhaps, called into it into question. Although this would have been an extraordinary enrichment, it would probably have broadened the discussion too far to be dealt with in just one chapter.

Endnotes

¹ *Swedish Missionary Themes*, Vol. 95, No. 4, 2007. Papers are also available online at www.missionsresearch.org.

² Some sources for the study of postmodernity include: Z. Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995); Lawrence Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); J. Andrew Kirk & Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds), *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994); François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³ See, Stuart Sim (ed.), *Postmodern Thought* (Duxford: Icon Books, 1998), 86-88.

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 32.

⁵ The papers submitted to the study group are available on the Edinburgh 2010 website, www.edinburgh2010.org.

⁶ Jan-Olav Henriksen, ‘Multifaceted Christianity and the Postmodern Religious Condition: Reflections on its Challenges to Churches in the Northern Hemisphere’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

⁷ J. Andrew Kirk, ‘The Post-Modern Condition and the Churches’ (Co)Mission’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

⁸ J. Jayakiran Sebastian, ‘Interrogating *Missio Dei*: From the Mission of God Towards Appreciating Our Mission to God in India Today’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

⁹ Andrew Jones, ‘The Virtual Church – Keeping It Real’ (2009), <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/07/the-virtual-church-keeping-it-real.html>.

¹⁰ Michael Herbst, ‘Plural Mission and Missionary Plural in a Post-Socialist Context: The Example of a Post-*Volkskirche*, East German Region’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

¹¹ *Volkskirche*, literal translation ‘folk church’, is a German and Scandinavian equivalent of the English term ‘Christendom’, in the sense that the boundaries of church and nation coincide.

¹² Friedemann Walldorf, ‘Searching for the Soul(s) of Europe: Missiological Models in the Ecumenical Debate on Mission in Postmodern Europe’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

¹³ Jieren Li, ‘Multi-identity of the Chinese Christianity in Post-Olympic China: From Pre-modernity towards Postmodernity’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

¹⁴ Olga Zaprometova, ‘Bitter and Sweet Tears: Exploring the Spirituality of the Eastern Church Fathers in the Light of Post-modern Pentecostalism in Russia’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

¹⁵ David Kettle, ‘The Gospel of Hope in a Postmodern Setting’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

¹⁶ Jim Harries, ‘An ‘Impact Model’ of Language, and Mission and Development in East Africa’ (2009), paper presented to Edinburgh 2010 Study Group 3 and available at www.edinburgh2010.org.

¹⁷ www.postthehost.net/index2.html.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Grace Davie, ‘Religion in Europe in the 21st Century: The Factors to Take into Account’, in *Religion in Late Modernity: Essays in Honour of Pål Repstad* (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2007), 37-53; *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

¹⁹ For further reading on mission and postmodernities, see, Grace Davie, *Europe the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002); John Drane, *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age: Communicating Christ in Today’s Spiritual Supermarket* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2001); George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000); J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999); Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God’s Heart: The Passion and*

Practices of Missional Churches (San Francisco: John Wiley, 2004); David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003); Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2002); J. Andrew Kirk, *Mission under Scrutiny: Confronting Current Challenges* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006); J. Andrew Kirk, *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith: Following Modernity and Postmodernity* (Basingstoke: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

²⁰ Remi Emiel Hoeckman, O.P., 'Christian Mission. God Moving to All Men, Transcending All Boundaries', in *Angelicum* 58/3 (1981), 312-322, at 313, 316.