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Responsive Mission

The Art of Chaplaincy in a Secular and Pluralistic Context

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1. For a long time it was thought to be self-evident that modernity was unavoidably characterized by secularization. It has been suggested recently that there is now a process of ‘de-secularization’ (P. Berger). But it is probably more adequate to say that we have to deal with the fact that modernity has both secularizing and religionizing tendencies.
2. Society in the Netherlands is thoroughly secularized and the population is de-churched; a growing portion is un-churched. Nevertheless, about 60% of the people call themselves religious or spiritual. Public and personal interest in religion has significantly increased — which does not mean that people commit themselves to religious traditions again.
3. Under these circumstances, the best pastoral approach is not trying to interest people in the Christian churches as they are. It is the task of chaplains and pastors to see where in the lives of people traces of God can be and are found, and traces of faith present themselves. This is true not just for practical and pastoral, but also for theological reasons.
4. Theologically, it is the task of churches to respond to Gods salvific presence *in the midst* of our confusing world, not to preach their own presence as salvation *from* the confusing world. The pastoral task to be and stay close to people in their experiences, is based on the firm believe that it is there that God is kenotically present, as the Biblical traditions preach.
5. Gods presence can be traced in the desire people have for good and abundant life, in the way this life is sometimes sacramentally realized, in signs and instruments, and in the way people commit themselves to these signs and instruments, and thus to the good and abundant life that is Gods promise-in-the-process-of-realization.
6. In modern societies, the praxes of good life are seen as secular. From a religious —Judeo-Christian-Muslim — point of view, political and personal issues are religiously significant. Therefore, religious traditions can contribute to the way people think about and deal with personal and collective questions and dilemmas. This is why contemporary people find religious traditions of interest again, and this is where religious traditions can show that they are of interest.
7. The implication is that we need to reframe our thinking about the Church. The Church should not be seen as the community of those firmly convinced of the truth of their tradition, but as the community of people seeking the support of the Christian tradition to discover Gods salvific presence in the world, and to walk — and to help others to walk - the path to true life Gods presence opens. In other words, there is no Christian message apart from the question of ‘how, then, should we live?’ The Christian tradition proves not just its contemporary relevance, but its theological and religious significance by showing that it helps to deal with this question.
8. This gives the Christian tradition - and the other religious traditions - a new public relevance. Contemporary societies have profound discussions about what a ‘good life’ really means: how should we live? what future should we pursue? how should we deal with tragedy? in what sense are we related and should we live in solidarity? Religious traditions have strong views on these issues. Their intellectual traditions defend these views. Therefore, religions and their traditions are and should be part of the public debate, also in a modern society.
9. In this debate, it is of utmost importance for the religious traditions to remember their relativity. Their value and truth is relative to Gods salvific truth in its fullness.