

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 34 · Number 3 · July 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

Many churches now also participate in social networking sites such as Facebook and the current level of Internet technology provides many different tools for this.

## VI Conclusion

Although the Internet and virtual reality can feed the 'Gnostic dream' of indi-

vidual self-satisfaction, there are also many opportunities to expand healthy relationships and do evangelism in this new virtual world. The church would do well to take hold of this opportunity without forgetting that Internet and Virtual Reality are also part of the human urge to create alternative worlds which facilitate sin.

# *The separation of beliefs and religion in Europe*

Birger Nygaard (Denmark)

"My beliefs have nothing to do with what is happening in Church"

One of the amazing features of our time is the way in which religions themselves are undergoing transformation in our fast changing globalized cultures. We used to think that religion was a pretty static feature in society and that the beliefs of any specific religion were only marginally adjusted. Today we see massive changes taking place, both in the area of radicalization through religious fundamentalism and through secularization of religion in affluent (Western) societies, where religion seems to change contents, character and role in the minds of believers and societies. We are still in the middle of this transition, the outcome of which is not yet clear.

Christian mission has not been good at reaching people of high religious heritage (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, etc.), whereas we have been very successful in reaching peo-

ple of animistic/folk religious heritage. We still need to focus much more on reaching the high religions. Similarly, however, we need to pay keen attention to the change in the very perception of religion—including our own faith, Christianity—due to globalization/pluralism/secularization. These globalizing forces are likely to affect people from disparate religious backgrounds because they are characterized by the same *subjective turn* and individualization, which is such a strong feature of secular, often affluent societies.

The following case study focuses on how this change is influencing religious life in Denmark, a society that is in an advanced secularized state. It is based on a recent PhD study.<sup>1</sup> In this

1 Ina Rosen, 'I'm a Believer—but I'll be damned if I'm religious', *Lund Studies in Sociology of Religion* 2009: 8.

study the researcher did a number of focus group interviews with 'ordinary' Danes, undertaken in work-place situations, not in religious settings. The point of departure for the study was the general statistics from the European Value Studies: 70 percent of Danes claim to be 'believers', and 50 percent take moments of prayer and meditation. Church going in Denmark is low (less than two percent on a normal Sunday) and 67 percent will attend a religious service once per year or less.

Through the interviews with the twelve focus groups, representing a broad spectrum of vocations, it emerges that there seems to be a common, clear separation of on the one hand:

*belief*—what I feel deep down, on a highly personal level. Belief is not part of a religious system, but in forming my religious beliefs, I am making use of whatever is at hand for what feels right and meaningful in the given situation (= bricolage) and on the other hand:

*routinized religion*—religion as it is 'performed' in religious institutions (worship services, etc)

*religion-as-heritage*—religious practice as it is part of our culture (having babies baptized and teenagers confirmed, etc.)

*practice*—e.g. prayer

*tradition*—e.g. weddings and burials at church.

The respondents have clear distinctions between the two parts: belief is in one category while the institution of religion, religious practice and traditions are in another category, which is separated from what they understand

as belief and faith.

Faith/beliefs are constructed individually in line with the individualized bent, which is prevalent in Western society (from consumer choices, to pupil focused education, to patient focused hospitals, etc.). Individualism is the water in which we swim. Therefore it is alien to us that there should be a religious system that is not determined by an individualized approach and it seems only natural to separate beliefs from religion and religious practice.

Such practices are regarded more in the category of consumer products, which you can buy if they are helpful. Or it may be a given heritage, which you respect as the best way to uphold society and tradition in our given culture (baptism, weddings, burials, etc.)—without any faith connotations. In this particular study even the focus group respondents, who went to church regularly, claimed that their beliefs were not formed through the church activity, but were formed privately as a result of their ongoing life processes. Another study has expressed that to most Danes going to church is like going to the hospital: 'You only go if you are sick. Going to the hospital without being sick would indeed be a weird thing to do.'

This leads the researcher to develop the thesis of *packed* and *unpacked* religion. What we have before us is not a system of well-ordered religious systems (packed religion), but eclectic making use of religious and cultural elements in whatever meanings the individual look for or need in a given moment. Thus in order that beliefs can stay in sync with life, they are likely to change as life situations are changing.

In Britain sociologist Paul Heelas has termed this approach 'Spirituality of Life'.<sup>2</sup> The focus is on life management, not on ultimate concerns, and other similar matters.

However, individualized beliefs do not emerge from nowhere. They are formed by what you hear and learn in 'social spaces'. As Danes do not normally not go to church, traditional church activities have only little influence on the beliefs of the masses. Work place conversations, family and friends, not to forget *the media*, are playing major roles as social spaces, where you adopt eclectically whatever you can use in your personal and ongoing meaning building project.

Based on this research, the researcher concludes that in our given situation, it would be fair to regard religion as a 'zombie category'—a living dead because religion as we used to know it has gone. But we still talk about religion as if it existed in its systematized forms. Religion in its 'unpacked' forms is of such a dissimilar nature that it is not meaningful to categorize it as religion.

It is important to note that secular people do not stop 'believing'. That has often been the notion when we see that people stop going to church. In fact the 70 per cent figures has been stable to growing in Denmark over the last thirty years. The reason may be that more than before people today need to work on their belief and meaning systems in a society which does not provide these automatically.

The very big question is how we as church in mission and mission organizations can relate the gospel in this environment? We are used to thinking of the Christian faith as 'packed religion'. It is indeed possible to 'sell' packed religion even today, where 83 percent of Danes are members of the national church. However, is our mission to have church members? Or is our mission to see believers become true followers of Christ?

It is important to note that the features described above do not apply only to 'un-churched' and 'non-Christians'. We are also talking about new generations of Christians, who are highly influenced by the subjective turn. A recent American study<sup>3</sup> demonstrates that the de facto religion of American teenagers of all religious traditions—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu etc. heritage—is a 'moralistic therapeutic deism', i.e.: 'be good to one another—and we don't expect God to be part of our lives except when we need him for some personal therapeutic needs.' This resonates well with the Danish study.

This case study raises a number of questions. How are we to respond to such a new reality? Are we talking about a passing phenomenon? Or is this a permanent, vast and ever-growing secular world, which has 'come of age' (Bonhoeffer) and in which the gospel will find new ways to incarnate?

In conclusion a couple of reflections:

1) It is not that secular people are

2 Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

3 Christian Smith, *Soul Searching—The Religious and Spiritual Life of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

opposed to the gospel—the gospel is indeed good news—and consumers are likely to buy good news, but only if it provides meaning in the given situation. That means that the gospel mostly needs to be expressed in non-dogmatic ways that are a real challenge to our traditional theological perceptions and schooling. How can the gospel with its holistic nature be contextualised in such a setting where individuals ask only for one piece of the puzzle that will fit their search at this given moment?

- 2) Is it possible to operate meaningfully with a distinction between faith/beliefs and religion as the 20th century dialectic theologians attempted? Do we need to revisit and discover their reflections for our time?
- 3) What will Christian faith communities look like, where seekers can ruminate over a long period of time as they gradually come to an understanding and reception of a Christian worldview? And what will it take for our normal either-or Evangelical church and mission cultures and systems to adapt to such new reality?
- 4) Traditional religious settings are not the primary social spaces, where beliefs are likely to be adopted. Thus neither church Sunday morning, nor evangelistic stadium campaigns seem to be the way forward for these people. Yet, this is often where we put our efforts and resources in church and mission. What are the alternatives?
  - The market-place/work-place is of huge importance to the identity and meaning building for

individuals in secular societies. A well-developed theology and missiology for the market-place is a must. If the gospel does not deal with the 'real world' it is less than a gospel.

- 'Mediatized religion' is gaining importance. For example, movies touching on religious themes have a huge impact at a popular level. Christian influence in this area is crucial (like Walden Media with their focus on Christian worldview movies like Narnia, etc.). Is the next generation of 'missionaries' to train for jobs in the entertainment industry?
  - The Internet with the steady flow of new features on the net is increasingly becoming an important social space for belief exchange and formation. Danish Facebook users (half the population) now spend more than eight hours per month on this social medium site alone, and it has for them become a ordinary space for interactivity of all kinds.
- 5) To a systematic theologian the challenges from 'unpacked' religion in secular societies cannot be adequately addressed without a strong theology of and faith in the work of the Holy Spirit. It seems unlikely that the churches in secular societies will regain the privileged positions, where they provide significant input to formation of proper, well-ordered theologically based beliefs in the life of secular people. We need to trust the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals.