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Summary

*Profanum et Promissio*
*The concept of ‘world’ in the missionary ecclesiologies of Hans Hoekendijk, Hans Jochen Margull and Ernst Lange.*

This study deals with the concept of ‘world’ in the missionary ecclesiologies of Hans Hoekendijk (1912-1975), Hans Jochen Margull (1925-1982) and Ernst Lange (1927-1974).

The development of missionary ecclesiology is related to the integration of ‘church’ and ‘mission’ in the ecumenical movement of the first half of the twentieth century. This integration led to a concept of ‘church’ in which the idea of its ‘being sent into the world’ plays a crucial role: church and mission can only be understood in mutual correlation. The present study is based on the conviction that Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange have, each in his own way, contributed significantly to this type of ecclesiology. The distinctiveness of their approach, compared to that of other missiologists and theologians, lies in their determined focus on the ‘world’. In their view, mission is first of all the mission of God to the world, apart from the church. Their criticism of existing churches, their positive evaluation of the process of secularization, their preference for experimental church-forms - all this can and should be understood in this perspective. For a full understanding of the significance of their contribution, however, it is necessary that their use of the concept of ‘world’ is clarified. The problem at this point, according to the analysis presented in this study, is an unreflected combination of two different types of discourse: the ‘discourse of secularization’ and the ‘discourse of mission’. It is important for contemporary missionary ecclesiology to define and analyze this problem in connection with contemporary questions concerning the relation between unity and diversity, universality and contextuality.

The central part of the study is the second one (chapters 6, 7 and 8). Here the missionary ecclesiologies of Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange are described, analyzed and compared. The order in which they are treated is not meant to suggest an order of age and influence. The aim is rather to show a comparable systematic coherence in their respective ways of thinking. At the same time, the life and work of these three persons, taken together, can be seen as marking a boundary between two eras in the history of Protestant missions: the era of the universal concepts of mission and the era of postmodern and postmissionary thinking. The study seeks to clarify the transition between these two periods with the aid of the notions space and time.

Part one (chapters 1 through 5) investigates the place and function of the concept of ‘world’ in the ‘discourse of secularization’ and the ‘discourse of mission’, respectively.
After the introduction (chapter 1), chapter 2 deals with secularization. Originally this word suggested a territorial battle between ‘church’ and ‘world’. This metaphor of battle goes back to the original meaning of ‘secularization’ as the transfer of clerical goods to worldly possession. We suggest that this interpretation of secularization, which finds its final expression in the so-called secularization thesis, hides the more fundamental issues that are at stake in the ‘discourse of secularization’. These issues circle around the modern attempt to construct a world in accordance with the principles of modern rationality and with the search for social security. Secularization, understood in this way, is the elimination of the uncertainties implied in the idea of God. In the seventeenth century, this aim was achieved with a universal, timeless and static concept of ‘world’. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, there is a shift in the direction of historical thinking. The construction of the concept of ‘world’ is now sought in history itself. To illustrate this, we draw attention to Hegel, who ‘historicized’ the difference between secularity and religion. Hegel described history as a dialectical process, oriented towards the development of the Spirit. Implicitly, Hegel’s concept, too, maintains the tension between the two spheres, secular and religious. At the same time we notice that there is a shift in the meaning given to world history. ‘Time’ takes over the role and function previously held by ‘God’.

In a separate section we show how the ‘discourse of secularization’ also influenced twentieth century theology. The so-called secularization-theologians, taking their cue from thinkers such as Bonhoeffer and Gogarten, advocated a radical choice for the ‘world’ and suggested that traditional religiosity was bound to disappear together with the emancipation of humankind. However, even in the concept of these theologians, the tension between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ was maintained. The secularization thesis, in which the ongoing rationalization of society is proclaimed and the disappearance of religion is suggested, reappeared here, as it were, in a reversed and theoretically legitimized version.

In chapter 3 we examine the ‘discourse of mission’. The missionary movement is defined as a modern movement. With that definition we emphasize that from the beginning - that is: already in the missiological treatises of the eighteenth century - there is a quest for universal principles with which the world as a whole might be constructed. We illustrate this with a treaty on missions written at the end of the eighteenth century by William Carey. An important difference between the ‘discourse of secularization’ and the ‘discourse of mission’ lies in the greater attention given to the space of the ‘world’ in the latter. In this chapter we argue that this concentration on the ‘space aspects’ of reality is related to the missiological perspective of the eschaton - the ends of the earth and the end of time - but also to the missionary experience of encounter with other religions and cultures. We elaborate this original approach with the aid of a sketch of the life and work of Nicolaus Graf von Zinzendorf. We show that his concept of ‘world’ can be characterized as ‘dynamic spatiality’. Here, the expectation of the Kingdom leads to a permanent active move-
ment in and across the world; this movement proclaims as it were the coming era. ‘Time’ meets ‘world’ through judgement and promise, it opens the space of the world and places the work of the missionary into perspective. There is space for diversity and difference.

This attention for spatiality is lost, so we argue, especially in the Anglo-American missionary movement, because of the dominance of the perspective of time in nineteenth century thinking. To the extent that the world is interpreted as space, it is a space that has to be conquered; mission has become a geopolitical issue, ‘time’ is associated with ‘haste’. It is no longer God, but the human being who makes use of time to attain certain goals. The critical function of eschatology disappears. The space of the world has become a strategic field, a territory to be conquered for Christ.

In this chapter we also pay attention to modern German missionary thinking. There is more continuity with Zinzendorf here, as far as the attention given to the spatiality of the world is concerned. The merging of church and ‘Volk’ should, apart from its unfortunate association with Hitler’s Third Reich, be understood as an attempt to conceive of the world as a unity in its diversity. However, the construction of the Volk-idea, too, ultimately leads to the eclipse of the spatiality of the world, because ‘space’ is now defined with the aid of ethnic categories.

In chapter 4 we show how the discourse of secularization and the discourse of mission became allied, in a sense, through the use of the concept Missio Dei. The critical function of the eschatological perspective was rediscovered in this concept, although it was integrated in an encompassing structure of salvation history. In the concept of Missio Dei, typically nineteenth century historical thinking was legitimated theologically. In other words, ‘modern’ thinking was both criticized and maintained. An alternative christian ‘salvation history’ construct was combined with the modern historical construct of world. The fact that ‘modern’ thinking is both criticized and ‘baptized’ by the term Missio Dei makes this notion ambiguous from the beginning. We illustrate this by drawing attention to the discussions at the World Mission Conference of Willingen (1952). The ideas and proposals that dominated this meeting differed in terms of the importance of eschatology and its relation to profane history. At the same time there was a remarkable convergence on precisely these points. The discussion was about history and eschatology as the fundamental structure of ‘world’, and about the relation between church and mission. Willingen attempted to combine the new experience of the world with a reinterpretation of the ecumenical importance of church and mission. As a theological construct, ‘Missio Dei’ was a significant invention: a new ‘grand narrative’ about the unity of mankind and the unity of the world emerged. We argue, however, that it was also an expression of embarrassment in the discourse of mission. The spatial dynamics and the critical eschatological perspective, characteristic of the original discourse of mission (Zinzendorf), were subjected, almost to the point of disappearance, to nineteenth century historicism. The complexity of the world, the diversity of contexts, cultures and religions were defined as problems that had to be solved.
In chapter 5 we evaluate the first part of the study and make an effort to define the main problems and questions. We place the analysis of part one in the context of a larger discussion about the identity of Christianity in a world characterized by globalization and pluralization. We focus on the alliance between modernity and missions as expressed in the notion of Missio Dei, and on the disappearance of spatiality that resulted from this alliance. Against this background we introduce the question in what way the discourse of secularization and the discourse of mission became interwoven in the missionary ecclesiology of Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange, and to what extent this led, and still may lead, to lack of clarity of even confusion.

The central, second part of the book opens with a chapter (6) on Hans Hoekendijk. After a short biography and a review of his main writings we attempt to formulate the significance of Hoekendijk’s work in a provisional way. Because the notion of the Kingdom, the ‘shalom’ of God, dominates Hoekendijk’s thinking, this notion is the core of the chapter. The sections on ‘world’ and ‘church’ are placed around this centre. The concept of ‘world’ is discussed both at the beginning and at the end of the chapter, as ‘secularized world’ and as ‘world in the light of God’s shalom’ respectively. These subsections constitute the outer layer of the chapter. In Hoekendijk’s thinking there is an important difference between the church as perceived empirically - in its ‘morphological fundamentalism’ - and the church as a part of the Missio Dei. Accordingly, we discuss Hoekendijk’s concept of ‘church’ in two separate subsections which, together, constitute the inner layer of the chapter. New in Hoekendijk’s approach, we argue, is the way in which he (like Zinzendorf) describes the world as ‘horizon of action’. This implies a shift in the traditional triad ‘God-church-world’: it becomes ‘God-world-church’. Behind Hoekendijk’s definition of the world as the arena of God’s action we notice a combination of the discourse of secularization and the discourse of mission. The secularization thesis is turned around and theologially legitimized: the developments of world society inevitably imply the disappearance of religion, and traditional church forms will turn out to be obsolete. All this is, in Hoekendijk’s view, initiated by the movement of God in and through history: secularization is His mission. This historical universalism implies a narrow view of the world, as the ongoing interaction between christian tradition and ‘world’ is pressed into the scheme of an all-encompassing Missio Dei.

In chapter 7 we discuss the theological design of Hans Jochen Margull. It turns out that Margull’s life and work can be divided in two phases. The chapter, accordingly, includes two parts. After the introduction we describe Margull’s search for a theological framework and his effort to understand and interpret the changing world experience in a positive way. We argue that the central notions in his thinking in this first period are ‘Missio Dei’ and eschatology. As was the case with Hoekendijk, these notions led to sharp criticism on the empirical church, but Margull added to this a strong emphasis on the missionary function of the church. Towards the end of the 1960’s certain changes occur in the life and work of Margull, related to the expe-
riences he gained in the encounter with non-western cultures and religions. These changes in the second phase of his life are summarized in the keyword ‘vulnerability’. At the end of the chapter we present an overview of the argument and an evaluation of the significance of Margull’s ideas in relation to the overall theme of the study. In the second phase of his work, in particular, we notice that the universalism in his concept of ‘world’ becomes problematic. We argue that Margull had an instinctive awareness of the tensions between the spatial reality of the world and generalizing historical constructs. At the same time we establish that the discourse of secularization remained the determining structure, even in this second phase. This is evident from the way in which he places the world religions into perspective. He does this on the basis of a presupposed unity of world history, in a way analogous to various forms of internationalism. In other words: contextuality never becomes a point of departure in his thinking.

In chapter 8 we examine and describe the person and life of Ernst Lange. After the introductory paragraph we sketch Lange’s analysis of world and church against the background of secularization. In his description of ‘world’, sociology and antropology play an important role. Secularization is not only valued positively. Lange draws attention to the widely present ‘culture of silence’. As in the case of Hoekendijk and Margull, in Lange’s work, too, there is criticism of the premodern parochial symbiosis in which the institutional church is caught. Further analysis of this criticism makes clear that Lange’s search for unity and integrity is basically a quest for accountability for the future of humankind, in view of the uncertainty and the ‘silence’ that surround this future. With the aid of the concept of the ‘accountability of Jesus Christ’, Lange tries to conceive of a fundamental unity behind the manifold diversity. In this way a hermeneutic becomes possible through which situations can be interpreted in the light of promise. After a discussion of this basic structure in Lange’s thinking, we draw attention to the way he elaborates the notion of accountability in a strategy for ecumenical action. We argue that Lange recognized the usefulness of religion and morality for a ‘synchronization’ the church with modernity. The missionary ecclesiology that results from this insight takes plurality as a point of departure in the search for unity. Universality and particularity, continuity and change, unity and diversity are held together in a model of conciliarity that ultimately refers to a universal world peace. In our evaluation of Lange we establish, however, that the secularization thesis remains a basic ingredient of his thinking. This conclusion is corroborated by an analysis of his notion of accountability. Accountability, for Lange, means mainly: creating the possibility for a future in a godless world, a world without religion, in accordance with the rational and economic patterns of secularized society. At the end of the chapter we formulate two objections to Lange’s thinking related to this unreflected adaptation of the secularization thesis. In the first place, the idea that all accountability must be understood on the basis of the accountability of Jesus Christ is problematic. Secondly, Lange’s concept of ‘world’ is based on the examination of structures of western culture an civilization only.
In the third part of the book we continue our conversation with Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange. In chapter 9 we describe the similarities and differences between them. As a framework for this comparison we use a preparatory study written in the context of the ecumenical project ‘Missionary Structures of the Congregation’ - Mission als Strukturprinzip - to which all three contributed. Our review of the similarities makes clear that Hoekendijk, Margull en Lange adopted and theologically legitimized the secularization thesis in the same way. In examining the differences between Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange, we conclude that these are related to what we have termed the ‘spatiality’ of the world. The basic aim of the discourse of secularization to construct a universal concept of ‘world’ becomes problematic when applied in missionary practice. Precisely what was meant to happen through the introduction of the concept of missionary structure went astray: the contact with the empirical reality of the world was lost.

In chapter 10, we stage a virtual discussion between Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange on the one hand and several postmodern authors on the other. Points of discussion are: religion in a globalized world, and contextuality vis-à-vis interreligious and intercultural communication. Gradually it becomes clear that the three main figures of our study adopted the presuppositions of modernity - that also determined the discourse of secularization - too quickly and too uncritically. In our time these presuppositions are more and more under fire. Cultural and religious communication cannot be achieved by the ‘translation’ or ‘adaptation’ of an already existing interpretation, but only through the development of structures by which the different contextual transformations of faith challenge each other to (re)interpret what is given. ‘Truth’ is not an a priori meta-perspective, it is argued, but it is successful intercultural and interreligious communication. Truth is a ‘spatial’ process in which the ‘slow questions’ concerning peace, justice and the integrity of creation are raised and answered. At the end of this chapter we conclude nonetheless that certain elements in the designs of Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange remain important for contemporary missionary ecclesiology. We refer here especially to the importance of a specific universalism through which the different contexts can be connected, and to a christocentrism through which the world can be addressed as the horizon of hope.

In chapter 11, finally, these notions are briefly elaborated. We go back to Zinzendorf and to the significance of dynamic spatiality. In the line of this approach we draw attention to the universalism of Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange as an approach to ‘world’ that can become an alternative to the globalization and pluralization of postmodern world society. We also emphasize the significance of christology in the work of Hoekendijk, Margull and Lange as a permanent demand for justice and reconciliation.