

Response to 'the Idea of a Religion. Prospects of a liberal Christianity today'

*Esther de Paauw*

A friend of mine grew up in the same kind of Christian family as I did. However, where I was drawn to faith from an early age, as a six year old he knew himself to be an atheist. One Sunday morning, as his family drove home from church, he told his parents that he'd just attended his last service. He was 15 then and kept that promise for many years. He's not a spiritual person at all, but about three years ago he texted me that he had experienced 'God'. During a workshop 'Deep Breathing' he reached a state of ecstasy and had a transcendental experience. For weeks he was deeply moved, thinking about where to go from that experience, but as time went by and the experience faded, nothing really came of it...

So, when I hear you talk about the prospects of liberal Christianity there's a lot that resonates with me. The idea that liberal Christianity should contribute to the public debate, that the Christian faith has symbols, texts and resources that can bring people comfort and meaning, and the idea that church communal life and Christian values might be of significance in strengthening the communal challenges of our individualistic societies, I strongly agree with. I also agree that we should practice openness, that we should try to make connections with people who experience the 'transcendent' in other religious forms or cultural expressions. But when you say 'those who are not against us, are for us, I wonder; but do they really want to hang out with us? In the Netherlands many churches are experimenting with new forms, trying to make these connections and find new ways of communal life. But we're struggling, finding it's really hard to build lasting relationships and new ways of commitment and community. People may not be against us, but are they really for us? Is it not that we need them way more, than they need us, especially, since as you say, we can find transcendental experience in so many other places.

For how fundamental is Christianity in communicating the transcendent? In 'Die Verzauberung der Welt', you write a a Kulturgeschichte of Christianity . A decade ago I read another 'Kulturgeschichte' 'Der Untergang des Abendlandes', and what I mostly remember is Spenglers thesis that religions and cultures are like organisms that emerge, flourish and decay and that according to him our Christian western culture has run its course. So, when you speak about modernity as a great transformation of Christianity in which the Christian ideals of equality and human rights got firmly integrated in our culture and in the modern state, I question, do you think there is something fundamentally left that Christianity, liberal Christianity can still add to our modern society? Or has it for the most part fulfilled its destiny, has the Spirit maybe reached most of it's potential in our culture where it may still have a way to go as a liberating and emancipating force in other parts of the world, like Latin, and South-

America, Africa and Asia? Is our future role still a fundamental one, or maybe just a more marginal one, which may not be a problem, maybe liberal Christianity should just be the salt, but can you tell us more about your ideas of what our role in society should be? What should be our contribution to the public debate and to the questions of modern life experience? And what could be our new language and how can we develop that language in our personal religion, but also in liturgy and church communal life?

For looking at my own congregation, one of the obstacles I see in making that connection with modern life experience is that quite a few of my liberal Christian church members are really struggling themselves to express their religious experience. For most of them liberal Christianity seems to be quite a reactionary attitude. It's more about what they don't believe, and distinguishing themselves from the orthodox, evangelical, literal way of believing, than that they can positively communicate their experience of the 'transcendental'. And maybe that's the biggest concern we have: how strong is the experience of the transcendental within liberal Christianity? Might our loss for words and struggle for connection not point to a lack of transcendental experience within liberal Christianity itself? And may finding a new language for connecting with modern life experience not only be about connecting with modern culture, but also about strengthening our own religious stance in the world? About being open ourselves to new experiences of the transcendental in our lives and communities?

However, despite all these questions, I still mostly agree with you and want to thank you for your inspiring lecture and hopeful prospects for a liberal Christianity today. I may be a little less optimistic as you are, that our efforts will prove fruitful, but I strongly believe in the attempt, and I'm not without hope. For we never know, in which way the transcendental will create something new and who knows the best may still be to come.