

**A Sign for All Peoples
Internationalization of O/C's inspiring New Evangelization**

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1. Introduction

Lineamenta refers to areas like culture and civic life as sectors calling for New Evangelization. From this perspective I would like to reflect on opportunities for New Evangelization in the Netherlands offered by the internationalization of orders and congregations (o/cs). The aim of my paper is:

- to afford insight into a society that is becoming more and more culturally and religiously diverse;
- to analyse opportunities for international religious communities to be a mirror for and of a diverse society such as the Netherlands;
- to explore internationalization as spiritual enrichment that enables us to achieve the missionary goal of New Evangelization.

2. Secularization and super-diversity

In 1999 Peter Berger gave his book *The desecularization of the world* the meaningful subtitle, *Resurgent religion and world politics*. Berger (1999:2) – a pioneer of the de-secularization theory – writes:

My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken.

One reason Berger mentions for the worldwide resurgence of religion is that religion gives people something to hang on to in uncertain times. In addition this sociologist of religion maintains that secularization theory is fashionable mainly in the culture of the elite, whereas the masses have always been committed to some sort of religion. In reality, says Berger, secularization is far more eye-catching than the resurgence of religion. In that sense, as Grace Davie points out in her book *Europe: the exceptional case* (2002), Europe is remarkable. While religions are flourishing and growing worldwide, secularized Western Europe is an exception. In a sense Peter Berger's (1999:2) statement about the 'de-secularization of the world' was ground breaking, but the claim that Europe is an exception to the rule (Davie, 2002) needs specification.

A decisive factor is the definition of the terms 'religious' and 'secular'. There is a persistent trend to regard sociology of religion as a sociology of the church(es) and to define

secularization as abandoning the church. That is a fallacy. As Grace Davie (1994) puts it, there are phenomena like ‘believing without belonging’ and ‘belonging without believing’. In response to secularization theory it is commonly assumed in religious studies that we should speak of a transformation rather than a decline of religiosity.

Accordingly Joep de Hart (2011) concludes that secularization in the Netherlands does not mean that people no longer believe. Europeans are less secular than is usually assumed. They may not go to church, but they attach great importance to religion. Respondents in France score as high as in Vietnam on the question, ‘Is religion part of your daily life?’. Scores in Japan and Hong Kong are as low as those in Great Britain, and in the United States they are as high as in Argentina (Crabtree, 2010).

In the Netherlands, commonly regarded as one of the most secularized countries in the world, 61% of respondents express some or great interest in the sacred or the supernatural (Bernts, Dekker & Hart, 2007). This percentage is just as high as that found in countries that are commonly regarded as typically Catholic – Italy (61%) and Ireland (61%) – and higher than those in neighbouring countries like Germany (43%), Belgium (49%) and the United Kingdom (51%) (European Values Studies, 2008).

These statistics show that there is a trend afoot in Europe and in Dutch society in which religion plays a major role. Because of globalization it seems that worldwide lifestyles are homogenizing, but beneath the surface there is a lot of diversity. In this context the anthropologist Steven Vertovec, director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, speaks of super-diversity and a super-diverse society. People no longer have just one identity but several, among which religious identity features prominently. The diversity of identities as a result of education, gender, religion, ethnicity and the like is considerable. In the Netherlands there are secular academics, African Catholic businesspeople, Dutch-Turkish Muslim government officials and so forth. At work, in urban neighbourhoods and in the public arena people increasingly have contact with others who have different ethnic and religious identities. In a super-diverse society people deal with one another on the basis of one of their many identities that extend beyond cultural background. There are religiously and culturally diverse communities in which no particular religion or culture dominates.

In such a super-diverse society Catholics will communicate with co-religionists from various ethnic backgrounds, as well as inter-religiously with adherents of other faiths. In this communication context Christians will not be a majority. In such a context missiological expertise in communication about belief between Western and non-Western Christians (intra-religious) and Christians and non-Christians (interreligious) can be meaningful for both church and society.

3. Internationalization of orders and congregations

How does internationalization of o/c’s relate to a super-diverse society? In their concern about working for a better world and spreading or proclaiming the Christian faith international o/c’s

are confronted with a diversity of cultures. Missionary o/c's are accustomed to an international situation. However, as a result of globalization and the centre of gravity of Christianity shifting southwards and eastwards religious communities are increasingly composed of religious of various nationalities. This phenomenon of international religious communities is also evident in missionary movement in the Netherlands. The communities in the Netherlands have acquired a culturally diverse character. The number of religious may have decreased, but they have become more international. Nowadays it is religious from the South and the East who are coming to the West. There are almost 300 'foreign' religious living and working in the Netherlands. Many of them, especially those from Asia, come from environments that are culturally and religiously highly diverse.

Nevertheless, these –from a Dutch perspective – 'foreign' religious are unpleasantly surprised by secularization and the inferior status of religious. Moreover, many congregations interpret mission as presence: their presence should demonstrate the Catholic way of life and the gospel. By viewing mission as presence Southern and Eastern religious neglect the concrete activities, as education, that give them a distinct identity. They have to reorient themselves to Dutch society and the local missionary situation. They experience what it is like to be a foreigner, to live in a foreign country, to work with people from a foreign culture and to speak a foreign language.

Here religious are following in the footsteps of Jesus, who not only showed solidarity with strangers but was a stranger himself (Mt. 25:28) and was regarded as such (Lk. 24:18). Social foreignness refers to theological foreignness inasmuch as Christians' encounter with adherents of other faiths confronts them with the totally Other, the absolute Mystery of life, as the Swiss missiologist Richard Friedli put it in his *Fremdheit als Heimat* many years ago. Mission studies arose from the praxis and theoretical reflection of missionary workers and thinkers, who have often had to deal with strange and foreign contexts themselves.

As director of the Nijmegen Institute for Mission Studies I frequently collaborate with communities on the process of internationalization. My analysis of these experiences leads me to conclude that religious meet with a strange and foreign context both within their own international community and in society. In this process international religious communities can be a mirror for and of a diverse society, in which religion features prominently.

That is to say, the mission of a congregation is to open itself up, heart and soul, to its spiritual riches. And so, cultural diversity in international communities often leads to a spiritual learning process in which religious encounter disillusionment, doubt, misunderstanding and resistance. This raises the following questions:

- Why does a religious from a different culture behave or believe differently?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to get close to each other?
- How do I deal with my brother's or sister's cultural foreignness?
- Do I obey my culture or the spirituality of my community?

These are spiritually intriguing questions that should form part of a learning process leading to insight, breakthroughs, recognition, solidarity and communication with brothers and sisters and with God. Contact with foreignness puts brothers and sister in contact with the Other and with the absolute Mystery of life. They discover that the shared spirituality of the congregation offers an opportunity to transcend cultural foreignness and diversity. Internationalization deepens the spirituality of religious and their communities.

My assumption is that, despite and thanks to the challenges of internationalization, religious communities have an opportunity to manifest in Dutch civic life that Catholic spirituality is a universal way of transcending the dimensions of diversity. International religious communities offer a platform to manifest their spirituality – as a sign for all peoples.

4. New Evangelization and Missio Inter-Gentes

Now, New Evangelization is often interpreted as evangelizing countries that have been Christian through the ages but are now experiencing secularization. In a super-diverse society, which is what the Netherlands is becoming, New Evangelization entails maintaining relationships across the borders of one's own religious community. It means building bridges, on the basis of one's Catholic spirituality, to people of other faiths or former fellow Catholics. Bridge building is an essential part of the mission of the Catholic Church. This shows also the word '*pontifex*' which literally means bridge builder and which is applied to bishops and to the pope, the *pontifex maximus*.

Since its inception the Roman Catholic Church has encountered diverse cultures and religions and we have labelled this in the following ways. In the first place the label of *missio ecclesiae* meaning that spreading the gospel was regarded as the church's task. Secondly, *missio Christi* stressing a personal relationship with Jesus, the sole source of salvation, and the need to bring the gospel to Christians worldwide in preparation for Christ's return. And third, *Missio Dei* which is God's 'missionary' involvement with the world and humankind: salvation can be found outside the church, but not outside the person of Jesus Christ. From this perspective it is in mission studies acknowledged that Christ is already present and at work among non-Christians. Pope Francis recently even proclaimed that Christ died for everybody – even for non-Christians. In speaking these words pope Francis, as a true *pontifex maximus*, appears to be reaching out to non-Catholics.

A typical feature of the current super-diverse context in the Netherlands is that since the 1970s the Roman Catholic Church has no longer occupied a dominant position. It also has less experience of bridge building to non-Christians than, for instance, the Catholic Church in Asia. In this regard Jonathan Tan (2004:70) writes:

While others may consider the diversity and plurality of postmodern Europe and North America as challenges that the church has to confront and overcome, for the Asian

bishops, the question is rather how the Asian local churches could find themselves at home with such diversity and plurality.

This question increasingly applies to the Catholic Church in the Netherlands as well. Super-diversity is becoming a fact of life. How will the Catholic Church in the Netherlands relate to adherents of other faiths, to diversity, super- or not? The answer to this question implies a role for non-Dutch religious, coming as they do from diversified societies and living in international communities. In their communal life, communal work and communal faith they transcend strangeness and diversity. Through their international communities, in the contacts with their brothers and sisters from various nations they manifest *missio inter gentes*: as a sign for all peoples.

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