

The Ancestors are Alive. Does
the Ch Know?
Interdependence = intercontextual

Kevin
Sense of the locus of Methodism
Where is our magisterium

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Western Individualism and Community in Congregational Life: A Trinitarian Perspective. Theology for middle-class Norway.

Sandy - in Jerusalem

by

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All that may not be consciously contextual, but it always emerges from a context

To do contextual theology from a Western perspective is not something new. Neither is it new to do theology for the middle-class of Norway. But what is not so common, is to think of the middle-class of Norway when doing contextual theology. Contextual theology has often been connected with different kinds of liberation theology. Even though a middle-class Norwegian in certain aspects may be looked upon as oppresses, the general understanding is that a middle-class Norwegian is well off.

The need for a contextual theology for middle-class urban citizens is obvious if we take into account the place religion play in their lives. At the most the great majority use the Church for baptism, confirmation, marriage and death. The gospel is often experienced as irrelevant to modern urban people. One of the main reasons for that is the old clothing the gospel is wearing.

Western theologians have a lesson to learn from their theological colleagues living in other parts of the world. They have to learn that all theology is contextual, that the different theologies have to live side by side as theological expressions enriching the God-language, and that theology has to deal with peoples everyday life.

An unhealthy mark of Western theology is its tendency to create a distance between theology and Church, so theology become irrelevant for the average churchgoer. While the Reformators fought to win theology back to the people and the Church, the theologians belonging to the Churches of Reformation once again made theology something for the professionals, only this time for the university theologians. And the pastors, educated at the universities, preached about everything else but the things relating to the churchgoers everyday life.

Theology is at it's best when it relates to the context in which the people live. That is why there is a rising interest among Western theologians for doing adequate contextual theology.

I am aware of the contextual liberation theology done in the West, but I am missing a theology for the average middle-class person. In order for the Church to communicate the Gospel to the great section of middle-class people and give them an opportunity to find an identity in Christendom and in the Church, I find it urgent to do theology that relate to their context. While the oppresses people of today receive the message of liberation theology, the choise for the middle-class is to partisipate in the religious rituals.

THE CONTEXT

One of the main ideas guiding twentieth century people, is Individualism. When politicians want to gather votes, they speak to your individual needs. When people questions their marriage, they ask what they really get out of it and if a divorce can be more profitable for themselves. And when someone is looking for a church to be a part of, they look for a congregation where their personal wishes can be best satisfied.

One of the most challenging differences between our societies and those from the biblical context, that also is a fundamental to the idea of individualism, is the urbanisation. The Bible is written in a rural context where human life and nature, individualism and collectivism were in balance. The church has to a great extent kept the rural understanding of religion, and not been able to reformulate the message or create meaningful religious communities relevant to an individual urban human being.

As an example of how the church in its communication with modern people lacks a sense of relevance, we can think about the trinity. While the Church has great discussions about whether the trinity is to be explained as three in one or one in three, or whether it is the Son or the Spirit that are causing so and so, the people ask whether the trinity has any meaning for their everyday life at all.

One of our aims in theology today is to move from something close to speculative theology, toward the theological climate of the reformatories like Wesley, where practical and contextual theology were the most important part of theology.

LIFE-CHALLENGES

What are the life-challenges for the average middle-class person in our Western societies, and particular in Norway?

In Norway we do not struggle to survive. The vast majority live in affluence, and the rest are supported by social security. Of course we have discussions about economic priorities and unworthy situations for elderly people, but if everybody is doing their job there should be economic security for all.

In Norway we do not have to fight against the forces of nature. Of course we have our winterstorms and some places they are afraid of avalanches but our lives are generally not threatened by the forces of nature.

In Norway we are not oppressed or in danger of being imprisoned for our political viewpoints. Of course our judicial system is not perfect, and people can testify about injustice, but the people in general feel secure in their daily life.

The question of power

Even though a Norwegian citizen is not oppressed, we are facing the question of power in our society, and many people are estranged from the decisionmaking process. We have a representative democracy, but our representatives are recruited from a group with limited life and work experience. The people who elect them have also limited access to politicians. And finally we find that the necessary delegation of power to the bureaucracy makes it difficult to find the responsible bureaucrat when decisions are taken for individual citizens.

Also the Norwegian society is facing challenges concerning the economic freedom. As a part of the Western economic system, the economy in Norway has moved towards a liberalistic understanding. What is good for me, is good for society. Individualism in the economy seems to threaten the system and create insecurity for those who do not belong to the «fittest».

People ask: Will I have a job and an income tomorrow? Am I still useful for my employer when I have passed my 50th anniversary? Will the multinational company care for individuals and society when the profit is lesser than they expect? I have a lot of strength, energy and knowledge, but will anyone use me?

The question of meaning

Who am I? Where do I come from? What is the meaning of my life? Where is my future? The modern person is left alone, not only in the urban human setting, but also in the universe. There is no God who is the bearer of life, there is no one up there to keep me company and protect me in the dark, there is no divinity that can give my life a direction, and there is no ultimate concern that makes me a part of everything and gives me everlasting life.

To day human beings are deprived from contact with nature and are not able to experience how life comes into being, grows and has its place in the ecological system. This makes them blind to the interdependence of everything that lives, and makes it difficult to find one's own place in the great system of community.

The mystical aspect of life is also invisible because modern people can just go into a shop and buy all the food they want. The power of nature do not challenge the hungry individual, there is no dependence on God or the other forces of nature for survival. If you have enough money, you are you own Lord and create your own destiny.

Closely connected to the question of meaning, is the search for something of value to use one's strength for. In Norway the dominant Christian anthropology stresses the sinfulness of human beings, and the necessity of humility, and not think of oneself as a resourceful person. Even if we as Methodists have another theological foundation for our anthropology, in practice we are omitting the same message. The modern anthropology clinch with this way of thinking. Secular society is willing to give the individual credit for what he/she is, and teaches people that they as individuals have value, power and strenght.

Finally I will mention the rational mentality as something that deprives human beings of today from relating meaningfully to the religious worldview. Because God can not be explained in an adequate rational way, modern thought has erased God from it's consciousness.

The scientists of the superpowers struggle to find life on other planets in the universe. Is that a sign of the unnatural condition of human beings, the feeling of loneliness in the universe because they will not accept Gods presence?

The question of relationship

Urbanisation is for too many the same as isolation. People don't know their neighbour next door, and children are taught to not have contact with strangers. You do not greet or speak to people you do not know, and with an increasing number of one-person households this leads to isolation.

A story from the University of Oslo, tells how just before Christmas a student asked another about what time it was. The only answer she got was a weeping student. When she asked why the other was crying, she got the answer that she was the first person to talk to her since she first came to the university at the end of August.

Belonging to a nuclear family, you are in relationship with somebody. But urbanisation and the readiness to move from place to place makes the nuclear family vulnerable. If it is true, and I believe it is, that human beings are created for fellowship, then a person needs more people than a modern nuclear family to relate to, they need an extended family. People who can be a bridge over troubled water in times of unrest, people that loves you even though you are not perfect and people that can step in for family members when the need arises.

Even those who belong to a nuclear family do not have relational security. A women in her forties may be left alone because her husband finds a younger companion. A man may start looking for a new partner because he never learned to relate adequately to the women he married so she left him. Children may be left rootless because the parents gives priority to the realisation of their individual egos. And even if the family does not split, the activity level may be so high that the members of the family have no time for fellowshipbuilding.

The end of the 20th century is a time when the freedom of each individual is great, but at the same time we see that individualism is a prison where each person is left to him/herself and the struggle for belonging.

THE CHURCH TOWARDS TRINITARIAN COMMUNITY LIFE

The Church has to take the context of the middle-class Western person seriously. And I believe that a relevant theology of the Trinity is the best way to communicate the Gospel to human beings of the twentieth century. Further on I will stress that to do a theology of something includes living it out in the Church. Theology is not relevant for people unless it is put into practice.

To move from speculative theol.

How does a Trinitarian theology relate to people's question about power, meaning and relationship?

The best way to start is by asking what relevance does the Trinity have for average churchgoers? For most of them, I believe, Trinity is something they confess, but don't understand. And who does? So rather than trying to find a good way to make people understand the Trinity, we must work with what the Trinity means to the churchgoer and to other people.

The idea of explaining the Trinity in terms of community and relationship is not new, but our task is to put that theology into practice in our Churches.

In the New Testament particularly, but if we read it with Trinitarian eyes also in the Old Testament, that the triune God intercommunicate, is interdependent and interrelated. Gen. 1:26. «Let us make man in our image». John. 5:19. «...the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing». John 14:23: «...and we will come to him and make our home with him».

However we explain the Trinity, it is obvious that the three in one does not lead our thoughts in the direction of loneliness, individualism and division. Even if we want to point to the value of each person, that person is not understood as a singularis. When we speak about the Son, he must have a Father, and when we speak about the Spirit, we remember that the Spirit was sent by someone. Each person in the Trinity take part in what the others are doing, and is to be understood only in relation to the others.

A short conclusion in this respect is that the Gospel, the good news for modern human beings, is that the natural and God given state of humanity is to live in community.

A gospel like that is a counterforce to the spirit of our times but for people imprisoned by the evils of individualism, it may be the gospel of freedom. But the only means to convey a gospel like that, is to live it out. If the Church only preaches, it is like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Our Wesleyan heritage, confirms this when we bravely state that there is no religion without social religion. *AG who can be sensed, experienced*

The Church and the question of power

An old slogan among the working-class was: «Unity gives strength». Looking at the theology of the Trinity, the Church can adopt the slogan. The Son did not work for or by himself. His aim was to save the creation and glorify the Father. And in the desert, the Spirit led him. In order to fulfil his mission as a human being, he needed the fellowship and the strength of others. In order to fight the forces opposed to his mission, he was in need of unity with those who loved him and had the same goals as himself. The question of power, was a question of community.

Concerning the question of power in the modern society, there are some ad hoc organizations challenging decisions taken by those in power. But there are few, if any, that attempt to give direction to society on the foundation of another valuesystem. There are few organizations brave enough to say: «Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden».

In it's practice the Church has invited people who are heavy laden to Jesus, and help them by praying for them. That seems spiritual, but truly, it is very unspiritual and far from the methods the incarnate Christ used. If the Church is the body of Jesus on earth today, the Church needs to focus on the needs of the one they invite to Jesus with his or her problems, and do something about it. And if the burden is powerlessness, the Church should be the organization that empowers the individuals with the strength of the fellowship.

One of the reasons the Church came into being, was to build the kingdom of God. And one of the things necessary for doing that, is to help people to live the good life. Whether it is elected politicians, bureaucrats, multinational companies or fundamental ideas of society that hinder people from living the good life, living as upright human beings, the Church is to offer companionship in order for people to reach that goal.

The Church will have to take risks towards both sides. As a counter balance to the absolute right of an individual, the Church has emphasized the value of society. But to counteract the communal oppression and society making individuals powerless, the Church should also preach the value of each individual. And for people suppressed by those in power, the Church should take prophetic action to build the kingdom of God.

This will give the Church a new role to play, and in order to fulfil that role, the Church has to organise its activity differently and accept itself as a participant in the political entity. But the role of the Church is not to get as much power to the Church as possible, and neither to secure its own interests. The role of the Church should be prophetic. This means being the voice of the politically voiceless and of giving priority to people rather than profit.

Such a role for the Church will not easily be accepted in the society, least by those in power. Donning such a prophetic garment, the Church has to accept the suffering that will occur, and be united in the struggle for taking actions that opposes the dominant ideas.

The Church and the question of meaning

It is hard for people to find meaning in the struggle for their individual selves. In the end most people will only find emptiness. The only way to help urbanised people to find meaning, is to connect them to a God who also is urban.

Of course we can still stick to the rural God and take people out into the countryside in order to introduce them to God, but I am afraid most of them will think the Church and its God does not belong the urban person.

How can a Trinitarian perspective help us to communicate an urban God? Besides repeating the theology of community, I will suggest the following. While the idea of individual views community as a threat to individual growth, the Trinitarian theology sees community as a means to both individual and communal growth.

One way could be to look up the passages in the Bible that refer to God being present in the cities, and in that way give us a clearer perspective of an urban God. «And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities» (mt. 11:1).

A second idea could be to communicate a God who cares and who is willing to pay a price for making that visible. God the Father sending his Son into the cities in order to set them free to build the kingdom of God, and God sending the Spirit into the world in order to empower people to build this kingdom.

A third way of helping people relate to God, is to allow mysticism and religious experience to develop within the Church. Urban people have found their own way in the new age movements, and in some Churches a new way of gathering has developed, giving more room to worship God. But the majority of churches seem reluctant to include and encourage mysticism. The urban mind is in great need for experience, sensing, feeling and atmosphere.

The most difficult part for theologians in creating a theology of a God who is caring, mystical and who can be experienced in the urban society, is to let rational theology go. A God who cares, can never be a God who has nothing to do with daily life. A God who is mystical must be sensed by other parts of the person than the intellect. A God who is to be experienced, must be a living and acting God.

Since the urban person does not grow crops, God has to care about the income, the job situation, the examination at school, the football season. Formerly in the rural society, the Church asked God for a good harvest, for useful weather and for fish in the nets.

Why does not the Church as a community have interest in what its members are doing? Yes, when somebody is sick they might be prayed for. But do the churchleaders lay hands on an unemployed person and ask God for a job for him/her? Do the churchleaders gather the youngsters before the football season and remind them about Gods presence at the football ground and ask Gods strength for them to do their best and behave as responsible human beings?

Do the church leaders bless those starting in a new job or moving into a new neighbourhood?
 And does the pastor give thanks when the young people of the Church who prayed for a job for summer vacation actually got jobs?

The Church has often seen life as a threat to true religion. It is imperative that the Church convert from that kind of thinking, and looks upon itself as a life supporting community, ready to confess Gods presence in the city, and in all the different activities going on. God should be preached as being the glue of urban society, not as one opposing it.

The Church and the question of relationship.

Isolation is the worst punishment a prisoner can endure in countries where torture is forbidden. For most prisoners, contact with other people is a way to get through the punishment minimising mental disturbance. Isolation is also one of the worst evils an individual can experience outside prison.

If the Church is to fight evil in all it's shapes, the Church also has to fight this evil, through prayer, preaching and practice.

Here, a Trinitarian theology is most applicable. The Trinity is characterised by relationship. All we can read points to the joy of togetherness, fellowship and unity within the Trinity. In Luke 10:21 we can read about Jesus: «In the same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, «I thank thee Father»,....» Being together seems to be the clue to the Trinity. Jesus prayed to the Father confirming his origin from the Father, his completion of his task on earth, and his return to the Father. And we may look at the final goal for the mission of Jesus Christ, being to «unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth» (Eph. 1:10). The goal for salvation is togetherness, relationship and unity.

The Church that is to reflect the kingdom of God as it is meant to be, must understand this goal. More than merely a Church of spectators, the Church should be comprised of people who seek to fulfil the theology of relationship.

For many years the Church has told itself and the world that it is not a social club, it is not there for people to come together, it is for worship and mission. I know it is possible to do a theology where the conclusion is that worship and mission are the two main goals for the Church, but if human relationship and social fellowship are not an important part also in that theology, it has failed.

A Trinitarian perspective forces us to give priority to fellowship. The new understanding of the mission of the Church is therefore relational. The Church is also there in order to build good social communities where individuals and families can feel belonging and unity.

How can the Church put such a theology into practice? First of all the Church has to accept its role a social body, accept that God has created us for fellowship, and that the need for community is a true spiritual expression.

The Church must have arrangements where the main issue is for people to meet and become friends. Another idea is to encourage people above fifty to make themselves available as spare grandparents. For families moving from town to town, leaving their extended family behind, contact and the possibility of having someone there may be of great value.

The Church must also dare to articulate all the relational problems and insecurities the urban person is facing. What about arranging gatherings where people can talk about:

- How do I cope with my new situation as a divorced 45 year old man or woman?
- How do I act in order to get a healthy family economy?
- How do I combine my own desire for selfrealisation with my responsibility as a husband/wife?

If the Church is to be relevant for urban people in the 20th century, the Church has to enhance the value of the individual, and at the same time help the individual relate to others, and realise that it is only in community with other human beings and with God, that at person can become a true human being. The only way for the Church to get the message through, is to teach by example and give relational activities priority.