

Paas, Stefan. 2019.

*Pilgrims and Priests: Christian
Mission in a Post-Christian Society.*

London: SCM Press.

ISBN: 978-0-3340-05877-9

REVIEWED BY PATRICK TODJERAS

University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany

patrick.todjeras@uni-greifswald.de

STEFAN PAAS IS PROFESSOR of Missiology and Intercultural Theology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Professor of Missiology at Theologische Universiteit Kampen (the Netherlands) and Research Associate of the Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria (South Africa). He has worked as a church planter in Amsterdam, where he remains involved in church life.

In his latest book, *Pilgrims and Priests* Paas writes about what it means to be a small missional community in a deeply secularized society in which “there is no longer a ‘sense of inevitability’ about Christianity” (124). The original version was published in Dutch 2015 and the book is Paas’s proposal for a missional ecclesiology which is basically a missional spirituality, “especially in a context where ‘mission’ is difficult and often without much

visible results” (xvii). As a protestant with reformed background he works inductively, meaning starting from concrete missional and practical challenges—having Amsterdam and his ministry in mind—and then thinking more systematically of what church and mission are about (xii).

In seven chapters Paas claims that most of the evangelistic and church growth efforts in Western Europe failed and nowadays there are more self-confessed atheists than Christians in large parts of the region. He points to the fact of how completely self-evident it is for the vast majority to live without God or church. This form of “deep secularization means that mission work is not just a matter of a renewed or refreshed supply” (xiv). His “nagging realization” (xiv) led Paas to rethink what it means to “sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land” (Ps 137:4). He asks how to keep a Christian identity, while knowing that the majority of people around him does not share this identity, nor ever will.

Paas proposes that Western thinking about mission and evangelism is shaped by a certain understanding of Christian faith and cultural power. Missional enterprises raise many theological and organizational questions bearing promises for the renewal of Christianity in the Old World. When mission returns to Europe, it comes with all sorts of historical baggage, including the totalizing dreams of recreating a Christian culture and a Christian society.

The author asks if Christian mission can avoid Christendom? Or is some form of Christendom (that is, a Christianized social order) the logical and desired outcome of mission? To put it succinctly: Paas thinks there is a way to avoid it.

Paas refers to biblical narratives of exile and diaspora but also from the experience of Christians who have lived as minorities for centuries. What kind of missional spirituality is needed in order not to talk about new missional structures or models but to have a missional vision, while knowing that you will not be able to convince the majority around you?

In the first chapter (1–21), Paas describes the missional foundational structure of the Christian faith and recent developments in missiology under the influence of non-Western Christianity.

In the second and third chapters (22–43; 44–123) Paas looks at the complexities of secularized culture and critiques the existing missionary models such as Church growth, countercultural community, revival, transformation. He accuses these models of being far too indebted to the dream of Christendom, to reconvert the West. Paas calls the idea of Christendom as a missionary ideal “an always elusive majority.” He says, “For the first time in its long history Western Christianity has to learn what it means to do mission without in almost every respect being ‘stronger’ than the receiving culture” (38).

Paas then looks at biblical narratives which can be helpful amid secularization. The narratives of exile and diaspora seem to be helpful, especially the accounts of the prophets who lived as a contested minority in their times. The exile traditions shed new light on “the ‘disembedding’ of Christianity from our societies” (149), as exile is a time of confusion, exile is a time without power, exile requires looking after one’s identity and exile looks for a renewed spirituality. This can be read in chapter 4 (124–64) and five (165–186). Paas points to the New Testament, especially to the first letter of Peter and the vision of Christians being both “exiles” and “a royal priesthood.”

Finally Paas describes in chapter 6 (187–207) and chapter 7 (208–31) what it looks like to be a small Christian community in a largely secular context. He proposes a doxological approach to mission. When mission is described as doxological it is doing what is good and beautiful in love for a God who loves us freely. Rather than using militaristic or business metaphors, we might think of mission as creating art. Paas attends to the word “priesthood” which may be a key metaphor to understand Christian existence as a missional minority in a secular culture. Priests are mediators, in-between people. They are called out of the world to mediate between the world and God. They represent God before their cities and neighborhoods, and they represent their cities and neighborhoods before God.

Small Christian communities in secular societies can find a joyful minority mission by abandoning instrumentalizing

approaches to mission and by reconnecting with the narratives of exile and diaspora. By accepting their role as the priesthood of their nations, cities, neighborhoods, workplaces and families they follow God's mission in this world.

Drawing on a wide range of practical insight in mission based in one of the most secular contexts of the West, *Pilgrims and Priests* blends this experience with a thorough analysis of relevant biblical, historical, sociological, theological, and spiritual sources that bear relevance to missional identity in the challenging circumstances presented by the secular West. It presents a hopeful perspective, rooted in a realistic appraisal of reality and rich theological reflections.