Ecclesial Futures
2025 – Volume 6 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/ef23521

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW

Herbst, Michael, Andreas C. Jansson, David Reißmann and Patrick Todjeras. 2024. *Evangelisation: Theologische Grundlagen, Zugänge, und Perspektiven*[1]

Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt
ISBN: 978-3-374-07514-0 (print)

Stoppels, Sake, Jan Marten Praamsma and Jan Martijn Abrahamse. 2023. *Zoeken naar de dingen die boven zijn: heil in een seculiere tijd*[2]

Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum Uitgevers
ISBN: 978-90-435-4036-0 (print)

Reviewed by Edwin Chr. van Driel

Among German theologians and religious studies scholars, evangelism is not a cool topic, so the writers of *Evangelisation: Theologische Grundlagen, Zugänge, und Perspektiven* assert. Therefore, as convinced students of the subject, they have launched a contextually appropriate mission to place evangelism back on the academic agenda. For the sake of German theological scholars, used to massive academic handbooks that with unparallelled *Pünktlichkeit* discuss every historical, systematic and practical aspect of a certain topic, the writers produce exactly that. In three parts, ten chapters, and five hundred thirty-five pages, they discuss the biblical grounding, historical expression, systematic-theological embeddedness, and practical theological implications of the Christian practice of evangelism.

The four authors of the book were or are all connected to the former Research Institute for Evangelism and Church Development at the University of Greifswald

1 Evangelization: Theological Foundations, Approaches, and Perspectives.
2 Seeking the Things Above: Salvation in a Secular Age.

or to its successor institutes at the Martin-Luther-Universität of Halle-Wittenberg University of Halle-Wittenberg (Missional Church Development at the Centre for Empowerment Studies) and in Austria (Institut zur Erforschung von Mission und Kirche). For twenty years, after its founding in 2004, the institute at Greifswald was a somewhat lonely, but also highly productive voice, engaging developments in missional thinking in other parts of the Western world and contributing to them from the perspective of the deeply secularized context of eastern and central Germany. That work is now continued at the other two institutes.

In the first part of the book, David Reißmann lays the foundations of the discussion by offering an extensive historical account of the concept "evangelism" from its roots in the New Testament up to contemporary usage both in international missional and German ecclesial and academic accounts. Andreas C. Jansson follows with two chapters on the history of the practice and theology of evangelism, the first focused on evangelism in German Protestantism since the eighteenth century, the second on the notion of evangelism in international missional theology since the twentieth century.

The second part turns in a theological direction, beginning with two essays by Patrick Todjeras. The first essay returns to the New Testament notion of gospel/to evangelize and then document the remarkable lack of systematic theological reflection on the idea of evangelism in German-language literature. This lack stands in contrast to the notion of "faith" (G*laube*) and the path to faith, which receives significant attention in literature rooted both in pietism and liberalism. Todjeras lists a number of reasons why evangelism is theologically ignored, ranging from a perceived notion that evangelism is a practical theological concern rather than a systematic theological one, to cultural and theological resistance against the very idea of proselytizing and conversion (136–7). In the rest of this wide-ranging chapter Todjeras attempts to remedy this situation by looking at evangelism from the full range of theological *loci*, from Trinity and creation to ecclesiology. Interestingly, he does not push it all the way to eschatology, even while significant praxes of evangelism are eschatologically motivated. In a subsequent chapter Todjeras zooms in on the appropriation of faith in conversion or rebirth. This chapter is also most explicit about the book's confessional commitments, which are best characterized as "generous Lutheranism". The *Book of Concord* and the following Lutheran theological tradition are the *cantus firmus* for Todjeras' reflections. In the next two chapters, Andreas Jansson follows up with parallel theological analyses of the place of and reflection on the idea of evangelism in temporary missiology and practical theology. Michael Herbst concludes this part of the book with an extensive constructive contribution offering a "practical theology of evangelism". Herbst registers a similarly silencing of or resistance against evangelism among German practical theology as Todjeras noted concerning systematic theology (270–86). In response, Herbst offers a wide-ranging

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discussion of both the theological motivation for evangelism as well as its practice as embedded in the holistic life of the Christian community. This chapter is particularly sensitive to the post-Christian context in which evangelism in western Europe takes place and engages the classics of a philosophical analysis of the secular (such as Charles Taylor) and the wider missional theological debate. In particular, Herbst takes up Lesslie Newbigin's suggestion that the congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel and develops an account of all the various ways in which the congregation gives public – and thereby evangelistic – witness to its faith. Herbst accounts for the goal of evangelism as conversion, but, based both on theological considerations and empirical research, wishes to conceive of conversion as a longer journey that itself leads to a continued life of *Nachfolge* ("discipleship"; Dietrich Bonhoeffer) rather than a particular moment in time. If there is such a moment, Herbst locates it, with Paul, in baptism, when one dies and is resurrected with Christ (392), rather than in a moment of human agency.

The third part of the book explores the idea of evangelism in two different directions. In his chapter, Patrick Todjeras takes on the question of what evangelization might look like in the unexplored realm of digital space. He maps the various digital religious practices and explores if and how they are conducive to evangelism. In the last chapter, David Reißmann ventures in another direction. His is the most constructive theological discussion, taking the topic right to the gates of German academic theology. When theological reflection is focused on religion rather than revelation, with the particularities and contextualities of people's experiences and convictions suppressed for the sake of the modernist construct of *religio*, evangelism is nothing more than another human religious expression, and an intolerant one at that. The heart of Reißmann's counterargument is the urging for the Christian community not to understand "evangelism" as an expression of Matthew 28, but of Luke 4. That is, evangelism is less about a commissioned activity of humans than it is about revelation; it is less about an obedient witnessing on our part than that it is about an inbreaking in all our lives – church people and academics alike – by the living God, a pouring out of the Spirit, a lifegiving work of Christ that demands not analysis, but a response.

Evangelisation can thus be read as an act of evangelism itself, a contextual witness to the gospel in an (academic) European culture that is increasingly post-Christian. But the book can also be read for the sake of determining what new thinking is demanded of us as we reflect on the gospel and its proclamation in a post-Christian world, and where our theological conceptualization is still thin, and our footing unsure. *Evangelisation* can help us to identify at least three.

First, what is the hoped-for outcome of evangelism? When congregations and churches give witness to the gospel, what vision drives them? In a Christendom

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context, where the Christian faith was woven into the fabric of society, evangelism was meant to deepen that Christian conviction, to let is shape not only public but also individual lives and to draw back those who might have wandered away from the faith of their youth. As Christendom unravelled, evangelism for many became a means to attempt dechristianization, revival and finding new and fresh ways to counter the powers of secularism. But as in post-Christian Europe the immanent frame thickens (Charles Taylor), and not just the Christian faith, but any form of religiosity becomes to be seen as implausible or irrelevant, such dreams of revival seem increasingly improbable. What then shall we hope for? Moreover, in the background of such considerations are also deep questions that touch directly on the perceived identity of the church and its role in society, questions about the relationship between Christ and culture. Christendom is built on the idea that Christ is transforming culture, and that the church is a critical instrument or expression of this. Post-Christian realities seem to deal such vision a deadly wound. But then what should the church hope for when it preaches the good news? Such questions come particularly to the fore in Michael Herbst's essay. At several places he refers to contemporary Dutch missiologist Stefan Paas, who argues that we are to accept that the world will never be Christian, and that until the last day church and world will be different entities (e.g., 305–7). On such a view, mission in the post-Christian West needs a radically differently vision from anything akin to post-Christianization. Paas finds such vision in the idea that the church, on pilgrimage in exile, is to be a priestly community that prays and worships for and on behalf of the world. As such, it gives witness to the gospel, it welcomes and rejoices about those who wish to join her, but its witness is not driven by the expectation that the nations will (re)turn to the church. Paas is an increasingly influential voice in the European missional conversation. Herbst acknowledges the appeal of Paas' vision but is not ready to sign up. Is the biblical witness not more hopeful than that of an essential and enduring differentiation between church and world? If that is so, what does this mean for evangelism in the reality of a post-Christian society?

Second, but closely related to the first dilemma, is that of divine speech. *Evangelisation* can be read as a contextualization of the international missional reorientation on the *missio Dei.* That idea is now applied to the European and, in particular, German theory and praxis of evangelism. This is particularly expressed in the final essay by David Reißmann. Evangelism is not our speaking in response to the gospel we have received, but it is God's transformative speaking and working of goodness and healing. This is indeed the implication of the idea of the *missio Dei.* Notice, however, the unreflected assumption of these arguments: that God continues to speak. But is God still speaking? If God is, where is our post-Christian reality coming from? Why is Western culture caught in what seems to be an increasingly immanent framemin which the transcendent seems to have no place or voice? Is this simply the result

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of human mishearing, or unwillingness to listen? But that would suggest that God's speaking is not as transformative as we hope it might be; that it very easily can be drowned out and ignored, that far more than we might be theologically comfortable with, creatures are the masters of their own universe. Therefore: might post-Christian realities not be the result of something else – that is, that sometimes God does *not* speak? The Scriptures speak of times when "the word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread" (I Sam. 3.1). Might we not live in a similar time?

Contemplating the idea that we might experience divine silence rather than divine speech and mission is not comfortable. It also raises deep theological questions about God's relationship to history and divine intentionality within history. At the same time: *if* this is indeed what we are experiencing, we ignore these kinds of questions at our peril.

Third, we seem to be living in a time when history has sped upon considerably. I was particularly aware of this in reading Patrick Todjeras' essay on evangelism in digital space. While he does an excellent job naming and reflecting on the various questions that come up as we are trying to understand what digital reality is, and how community and communication happen there, Todjeras could not have realized how in recent months the owners of digital space – the technology gurus that own, shape and manipulate the social media on which most digital community life takes place – would prostrate themselves for the new American president and make common cause with what can only be characterized as a new authoritarian, illiberal, post-Christian regime. In fact, through the engineering of algorithms and other means, social media have become instruments that actively manipulate the electorate to usher in illiberal democracies, which in turn will serve the expansion of wealth and power for those who own those very same digital spaces. This invites renewed (theological) reflection on the realities we are dealing with here. Is digital space a neutral expansion of the space already familiar to us, to be used for good or bad; and are the social media platforms, on which most forms of evangelism take place, simply the cities and houses that allow us to inhabit this space and reach out to our digital neighbours with blessing or curse? Or do the developments of the last months reveal that digital space and social media are intrinsic instruments of wealth and power, designed to manipulate free citizens into commodities, and not just supporting, but actively furthering a project to colonize our hearts and minds in the service of venture capitalism? If so, is there any sense for Christian communities to inhabit those spaces, thereby contributing to the ways they make money for their owners and furthering the ways our identities are shaped by digital space, or are Christian communities called to counter-culturally resist the role digital realities play in our lives and unmask social media networks for what they are?

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A fourth place where our theological thinking is thin, and our footing is unsure, is voiced by the other book up for review. Its editors have worked together on a research project sponsored by the Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, the country neighbuoring Germany to the west. Since the Netherlands is just as secularized as eastern Germany, Dutch theologians are wrestling with many of the same questions as their German colleagues. The question raised in the Ede research project is: when it comes to missional work, the forming of new worshipping communities and missional outreach to a post-Christian society, what is the nature of the good news we believe we inhabit and share? What do we take to be the nature of salvation of which the Christian faith speaks?

Their research and that of others revealed that many contemporary church planters in the secular West are highly motivated to working on forming new relationships and creating new places of community. They have a much harder time, though, in locating this work theologically in some account of salvation. Research shows that both pastors of existing congregations and leaders on church plants find it challenging to formulate an account of Christian salvation. Soteriological models that turn around individual accounts of sin and grace are considered outdated and, in fact, somewhat embarrassing. Church planters feel uncomfortable telling people that they are "bad". They are much more interested in the practical work of countering loneliness and engaging questions of meaning making, but are unclear on how to understand this kind of work in terms of Christian soteriology. Following British researcher Philip Wall, the editors of the book speak of "soteriological agnosticism". As they characterize it also, this is the immanentization of Christian soteriology. But salvation has to turn around more than building of community or making the world a better place. Without a transcendent dimension, salvation loses its hopeful character.

The twenty-two essays in this book offer avenues to explore new ways of speaking about salvation in a secular time. In character, this book is very different from *Evangelisation.* Whereas the German book is more determinate in its conclusions, the essays in the Dutch book are exploratory, open-ended, a first inquiry into a subject that demands significantly more attention. The essays take us in many different directions: explorations about soul and positive psychology; disability and soteriology; an intercultural dialogue about soteriology in African and Dutch contexts; contextualization of Israel's liberating understanding of its God for a contemporary city like Amsterdam; the relationship between salvation and Christian practices. (Given the fact that these essays are in Dutch, few readers of this journal will be able to access them. I understand an English-language collection of similar essays, product of the same research project, is forthcoming soon from Brill.)

For the sake of this review the observation to make is this, though: the fourth challenge for our thinking about the missional challenge in a post-Christian world is

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that post-Christianity is not something that happens outside the church; it plagues also us within the church. If secularity is characterized by a loss of the sense of the transcendent, by living in the immanent frame, then, as the project that produced this book illustrates, those who lead the church do not escape it. Thus, we are called to missionally and theologically examine our own practices of proclamation and theologizing, of prayer and ministry, as much as we consider what it means to faithfully reach out to those outside the church.

About the Reviewer

Edwin Chr. van Driel, Directors' Bicentennial Professor of Theology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (USA). Contact: evandriel@pts.edu