

Research Programme

Centre for Church and Mission in the West (CCMW) 2018-2023

“But can the West be converted?” – Lesslie E. Newbigin

Part 1: Introduction and general information

Theological Preamble

The disciplines of Practical Theology and Missiology are closely joined at their roots. Traditionally, both disciplines focus on the individual and communal practice of Christians, both within and outside the church. While the traditional scope of Missiology has always been wide, ranging from historiography to systematics and from biblical studies to interreligious dialogue, Practical Theology has recently developed into a more comprehensive approach of religious practices in general and Christian practices in particular. In the Reformed tradition represented by Theological University Kampen both disciplines intersect in their interest in the church as the focal point of Christian practice. Furthermore, during the twentieth century it has been affirmed by every major confessional tradition among Christians that the church is “missionary by its very nature”, and that it thus participates in the *missio Dei*. Church practices are related to concrete contexts, as is nowadays a commonplace for Practical Theology, whereas this fundamental insight of the contextuality of theology has been leading in Missiology throughout. Based on this historical connection with church practices and the ecumenical rediscovery of the missional nature of the church, the Centre for Church and Mission in the West presents itself as a platform for the integral study of Christian practices with a view to the mission of God, located in and focussed on Western (European and Northern-American)¹ contexts.

Introduction

The CCMW brings together experts in the disciplines of practical theology and missiology who have a shared interest in the sustainable innovation of the church and its mission in the secularizing parts of the world. While drawing on a wide range of theological research traditions, the CCMW concentrates on the study and innovation of Christian practices, inside and outside the church. Working in an ecumenical spirit, the CCMW operates in the Reformed tradition with a view to renewing this tradition for the improvement of church practices and the mission of the Christian church in the West.

The Centre is based at and facilitated by the Theological University Kampen (Netherlands). Its members conform to the research-mission of the TUK in order to direct their research at “God in the reality of his revelation”. From this broad approach, the CCMW wants to direct theological research to enrich the understanding of and practice within church and society in the context of the West.

¹ There is no universally agreed definition of “the West”, but here it is taken as a reference to those areas of the world that are historically connected (by default, or by colonisation and immigration) to the ancient heartland of Christendom, i.e. Europe, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, and South-Africa.

Programme title:

Salvation in the 21st Century

Researchers*Senior researchers:*

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Partners

The CCMW aims at working with a wide range of national and international partners in the interest of the Centre's objectives. Partners can be individuals or organizations and institutions. Also, partnerships can be permanent or project-based. In general a partnership is somewhat less structured than a membership. Partners invest time and/or other means in shared projects, but they do not necessarily participate in all meetings. Partnerships are formalized in a written and signed agreement, stipulating the nature of the partnership and the investment.

Partner in the Netherlands:

- Praktijkcentrum (Centre for Practice, <https://www.praktijkcentrum.org/>) in Zwolle.

The *Praktijkcentrum* (PC) is partner of the CCMW in the following respects:

- research of the PC is under supervision of and in line with the CCMW-programme;
- services by the PC for local churches are both source for and output of research by the CCMW

Part 2: Description of the research programme

Salvation in the 21st Century

Background

Human practices, like governing, book-keeping, administration, sports, church-going or public speech, are underwritten by sense-making theories or narratives (McIntyre, Williams). Traditionally, such narratives offer ontologies that help us understand our practices and inhabit them with confidence. This sense-making depends to a large extent on explicit and (more often) implicit answers to questions about the origin and the future of human life and the planet, the nature of the good life, the way moral decisions are to be approached, and so forth.

Christian practices are similarly animated by narratives of origin and future, stories of meaning and morality. We might call such narratives “theories of salvation”, in that they re-narrate the world in terms of God and Christ, sin and forgiveness, division and reconciliation. In one way or another practices like evangelism, preaching, church-going, catechesis, serving the poor, seeking justice, or celebrating communion are made sense of by a larger framework of authoritative accounts (in the sense of meaning-giving stories) that help us understand the relationship between God and humankind, the past and the future, the life of Jesus Christ and our own lives. Christian practices are practices that can only be rendered intelligible by appealing to such narratives, while they simultaneously “perform” such stories in concrete enactments and embodiments.

The almost universally observed “collapse of the grand narratives” (Lyotard) – often shorthanded as “post-modernism” – has brought many traditional human practices in a crisis. Currently, we are witnessing the fragmentation of politics, the undermining of political authority, the polarization of the public debate, and widespread pluralization as to questions what is the good life – or what is “good”, “true” and “beautiful” in general. From a theological (and somewhat Nietzschean) perspective it might be said that these “grand narratives” were to do with the grand narrative of Christendom that animated Western culture for more than thousand years. What began as a critique of the truths of religion and Christianity in particular has now resulted in a critique of metaphysics in general. Thus, the death of God could result in the death of the author and of authority in a wider sense, while the undermining of revealed truth has led to a society that is “post-truth” in many ways, revelling in “tribal truths” and conspiracy theories. There is, in other words, a correlation between the mutation of traditional Western practices (both private and public) and the crumbling away of metaphysical structures. A post-Christian society gives way to a post-secular society, not in the sense that our modern societies are any less “secular” but in the sense that the grand narrative of modern and secular optimism has shared the fate of the religious narratives that preceded it, and overlapped with it.

Practices, however, are not just surviving by the power of good stories, but also by their interlocking with other practices and their embedding in larger societal structures over time. Even if the specific narratives that underwrite them may have lost much of their plausibility, the practices can continue at least for a while by the sheer force of their own weight and by their symbolic power. Thus, for instance, even though late modern Christians may have taken distance from traditional theologies of Communion (such as trans- or consubstantiation) they may still be inspired and “strangely warmed” by participating in the sacrament, as an event in itself rather than an illustration of a doctrinal theory. The recently re-occurring interest in public

religious processions are another example. In earlier times this was a strictly Roman-Catholic phenomenon, whereas in the secularized West now protestants also officially participate in such rituals that (re-)invoke all kinds of meanings, both secular and religious. Sometimes people believe in the truths of such practices for the time of their participation in them; sometimes Christianity is true to people as long as they are joining its “performance” in profound practices. This finding of truth in performance and action, rather than in rational analysis or speculation seems a characteristic of our times. The same goes for many other practices, secular and religious and even secular-religious in combination. This may present us with the opportunity to explore existing practices in order to reconstruct ancient narratives by re-locating them in the pressures and questions of our time. It may lead us towards constructing a theology that helps people to become and remain involved in embodied Christian practices rather than in disengaged analysis. Those practices obviously have many aspects (liturgical, missional, psychological, diaconal etc.).

Christian practices (whether Christian by origin or in their appropriated actual performance by Christians), through their mutual interlocking and their strong embedding in both institutional and non-institutional communal patterns of life and faith, have been able to survive many attacks on Christian doctrine and traditional ontologies. Part of this had to do with the tenacity of Christendom structures, including the role Christianity still plays – albeit implicitly – in the make-up of our societies. For example, the traditional practices of Christian mission – rooted as they were in the Christendom division between “Christian” lands and their colonialized “mission fields” – could remain intact until deep into the twentieth century. And traditional patterns of church-going could persist in some circles as a result of different kinds of “pillarization”, thus continuing the Christendom experience on a micro-scale. Take, for example, the traditional salvation narrative in the West that revolves around heaven and hell. This surely gave a strong inspiration to Christian practices, including worldwide mission. Apart from the ontology this narrative presumes, and the theological truth thereof, the plausibility of the practices that embodied this narrative was positively affected by their embedding in a strongly hierarchical society, a world that was divided between “Christians” and “pagans” (who usually lived far away and were practically non-entities). This is not to say that these practices were a *function* of these cultural and socio-economic structures, nor the other way around. It is to say, however, that Christian (and other) practices are dialectically bound up with the wider context where they are enacted; they make sense and give meaning only in a space where some questions are more urgent than others, where some forms of life are more desired than others. This means that theological research into practices cannot be satisfied with a model in which “practices” are merely applications of “theories” (as in traditional practical theology and also in much missiology); practices embody theories (or Christian doctrine) by incarnating them into a specific cultural space. Doctrine, on this view, is never found in isolation, in a pure theoretical version. When looked at more closely every doctrine emerges from historical and cultural practices that render this doctrine plausible, while at the same time the doctrine (or narrative) animates the practice and gives it the vitality it needs to renew itself.

On the other hand, while the narratives (or “scripts”) that are performed by practices usually stand in the background, their role may become more important when practices lose their embedding in societal support and plausibility structures. Increasing globalization and individualization have decisively undermined most human practices of public and private life in the West – long after their sense-making narratives were severely criticized. The same is true, to some extent, for Christian practices, now that “micro-Christendoms” and protected denominational milieus are giving way to a more individualized and voluntaristic pattern of belief. In such a context Christian practices are easily framed as nothing but commodities, used

for arousing individual religious sentiment, and their value is assessed accordingly. Regardless of whether we consider the crisis of our culture as essentially a crisis of Christianity, or vice versa, this raises profound questions for the future of Christian practices in a post-Christian and post-secular age. What will happen if these practices become nothing more than vehicles of individualized religious emotion, without the power to transform this emotion by joining it with a larger narrative? What, in other words, will happen if Christian practices lose their power to “tell” an authoritative story about the world and human beings, rather than being a mirror in which religious consumers see their own sentiments being reflected? It is to be expected, therefore, that a thorough examination of the “stories” that Christian practices “tell”, with a view to the construction and reconstruction of such practices, is highly relevant for concurrent developments in secular fields such as politics, science, or the public debate. As such, this research project aims at emphasizing and restoring the “performance” character of Christian practices by exploring the sense-making narratives that they embody.

Research Programme

Against this background, the CCMW’s research programme in 2018-2023 is titled “Salvation in the 21st Century”. Its focus is on the narratives of salvation that inform Christian practices of church and mission and that are embodied by them. Our general hypothesis is that these practices need convincing and plausible narratives of salvation (ontologies of God, world, and humankind) in order to remain vital, and that precisely these traditional narratives of salvation have become less plausible. This easily results in participating in practices without being able to explain why on the one hand, or abandoning certain practices on the other. It may also result in the invention of new (or newly rediscovered) practices that convey their own re-narrated more or less traditionally Christian ontologies. For example, while many mission-minded Christians are involved in evangelism, it has at the same time become difficult to make sense of evangelism by referring to traditional narratives of heaven and (especially) hell. The thought of eternal judgement and damnation may have inspired many Christians in previous generations to go at great lengths to save as many as possible, but the same thought seems to be less sense-making today in our highly pluralistic post-modern societies. Such societies, on the other hand, entail all kinds of religious groups that come from other backgrounds in which narrowly distinctive narratives that constitute group-identities are still very present and alive. This immediately raises the question why one should evangelize in the first place, or how evangelism can be a meaningful practice after all. Another example is the occurrence of rediscovered liturgical rituals in church practices such as pilgrimages by groups of adolescents in preparation for an explicit commitment to God and a Christian community. Or the ongoing discussions and debates on and re-invention of liturgy in local churches, being both implicitly and explicitly a consequence of taking seriously the changed context and loss of self-evidence of those liturgical practices.

Questions about salvation have to do with the question why people are Christians in the first place, and why they would invite others (including their own children) to become or to remain Christians. How are narratives to be constructed and reconstructed that make sense of being or becoming a Christian? What is salvation, according to practitioners? How are we saved? And what do saved lives, bodies, communities, and societies look like? Questions like these have driven theological reflection and renewal throughout the centuries. They relate to the profound theological issue of how God and creation can be reconciled. Visions of salvation have always been crucial in the fields studied by missiology and practical theology. Directly or indirectly our missiologies and ecclesiologies reflect how we conceptualize and experience salvation.

We believe that the question of salvation as this is assumed by and embedded in Christian practices is under-researched and highly urgent at the same time. To the wider society it will offer an example of how practices can be renewed and revitalized by reflecting on the stories that they depend on and embody. To academic theologians it will provide an example of how different disciplinary fields should work together to do justice to the complex field of Christian practice. And to practitioners it will give guidance how to deal with nagging questions and doubts in a theologically responsible way.

As said, the programme will focus on *practices* of salvation, more specifically: on salvation as it is embodied/performed in missional and liturgical-ecclesiological actions, words, lives, structures, communities, institutions, and routines. By adopting a bottom-up, or inductive, approach the programme does justice to the particular research traditions in the disciplines of practical theology and missiology such as theological ethnography (Ward, Scharen), “ecclesiology from below” (Haight, Healy), “ordinary theology” (Astley) and “lived theology” (Marsh). Also, its focus on (lived or espoused) theories builds bridges to the disciplines of systematic and historical theology, where research into theories of salvation is more common – although often isolated from concrete practices. The programme’s aim is to offer adequate theological responses – that is, narratives and practices – to the challenges of crumbling worldviews and rapidly shifting societal and ecclesial structures.

The programme consists roughly consists of two overlapping stages: data gathering and reflection. In both stages ample attention will be paid to valorisation. Part of the programme will be conducted in an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional sub-programme “Christianity in Amsterdam”.

Part 3: Description of the projects

Data Gathering

The programme will concentrate on data gathering especially in the first years (2018-2020). The following (foreseen) projects are currently (September, 2018) projected or planned. A final definition of this programme and its projects will be ready by the end of 2019, depending on funding.

1. Visions of Salvation: pilot study of biblical theological and systematic theological views of salvation (postdoc project, ca. 1 year; current status: *not yet funded*). Output: (a) 1 peer-reviewed article, (b) 1 valorisation article.
2. Espoused theories of salvation: interviews with mission workers, pastors, and converts (field study). Output: (a) 1-2 MA theses, (b) 1 peer-reviewed article, (c) 1 valorisation study.
3. Operant and espoused theologies of salvation: interviews with church members (field study). Output: (a) 1-2 MA theses, (b) 1 peer-reviewed article, (c) 1 valorisation study.
4. Building a data-base of Christian communities in Amsterdam, including a questionnaire on their cultures, spiritualities and mission practices. Output: (a) data-base of Christian communities in Amsterdam, (b) 1-2 peer-reviewed articles on spiritual and missional trends in late modern urban Christianity.
5. Soteriological narratives in the work of evangelical and ecumenical mission organizations, and their influence on the policy and practice of these organizations. Output: 6-8 peer-reviewed articles.
6. Ethnographic research into a selected number of Amsterdam Christian communities with a view to their mission, culture and spirituality, aimed at offering ‘thick descriptions’ of types and paradigms. Output: (a) 2 peer-reviewed articles, (b) 1 conference, (c) 1 book.
7. Salvation as experienced in eucharistic practice in Reformed congregations (ethnographical study by Bosman). Output: PhD dissertation (2019).
8. Local practices of missional community formation (3DM and Urban Expression) with a view to community and soteriology (ethnographical study by De Jonge). Output: PhD dissertation (2020).
9. Salvation and inclusion – a description of a case-study on current church practices in the context of the so-called ‘participation society’ (ethnographical study by Tamminga). Output: PhD dissertation (2020).
10. Contextual appearances of ‘preaching’ as church practice of salvation in the Hungarian-Romanian context (Attila Csongor Kelemen). Output: PhD dissertation (2021).

Reflection

Partly overlapping with the first and the third stage, this stage will concentrate on developing coherent views of salvation that have the potential to inform and improve existing practices. The following projects are part of this stage:

1. Pilgrims and Priests: Missional congregations in a (very) secular context (Paas, translation and editing project, partly funded). Output: English book (2019).
2. Soteriology for the Western City: A Contextual Approach of Christology (postdoc project by Roest, partly funded). Output: Dutch valorisation book (2019)

3. The Path of Salvation: Mystagogy in the post-secular spiritual context (valorisation project by Roest, partly funded). Output: course material for the Dutch missional context (2019).
4. Visions of Salvation in Dutch Missionary Organizations (Noort). Output: 2 books (2021-2023).
5. Salvation in Evangelistic Practice: How do concepts of salvation inform evangelism? (Paas, Roest). Output: (1) peer-reviewed article, (2) book in English, (3) book in Dutch (2020-2021).
6. Salvation and organization: How missional practice challenges traditional forms of church governance (Van den Broeke). Output: edited volume on church polity and mission (2021).
7. Salvation, Liturgy and the Church. On the Importance of the Embodiment of Christian Narratives (Schaeffer). Output: English book (2019) and Dutch articles (2019-2020).
8. The renewal of Reformed missional ecclesiology against the background of 20th century developments in mission thinking (Van 't Spijker). Output: PhD dissertation (2020).

Valorisation: “Het geloofsgesprek bevorderen” (promoting the conversation about faith)

By separate studies, conferences, summer schools, etc. the societal impact of the programme will be realized. Valorisation in this project will be aimed at improving existing practices of liturgy, mission, and catechesis in the church. The core interest is the promotion of conversations about faith, especially the “why” of it. There is a wide field of applications here, such as: church development, equipping the offices, catechesis (for public confession), spiritual direction, training of mission workers, and shaping liturgy.

A programme on ‘Training of practioners in the field’ is part of the CCMW’s mission (in co-operation with AKZ+ and Praktijkcentrum).