

Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe

R.Ruard Ganzevoort

In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT, p. 219-236.

The articles in this volume have offered a rich and ‘thick’ description of religious practices in some of the immigrant churches in Amsterdam. It was not intended to be exhaustive or even representative for all the immigrant churches in the Netherlands – on what grounds could a selection of churches qualify as such? In his article, Hijme Stoffels shows how large and diverse the group is. Instead, we set out to explore in some depth the religious and social processes at work in this type of religious community, accounting for the hybrid identities at stake and for the enormous diversity between these churches.

In this final contribution I will reflect on the theological challenges posed by the exposure to immigrant churches and the descriptions and interpretations offered in this volume. The religion that is espoused and lived in these congregations is in many ways different from that in traditional Dutch institutionalized churches. Thee ‘next Christendom’, as Jenkins (2002) has dubbed it, is knocking at our door – a type of Christianity rooted in the southern hemisphere, and with more focus on the spiritual and the emotional dimensions of life and religion than these receive in Western (most notably that in northwestern European) Christianity. What does this encounter mean and what are the theological challenges for both the immigrant churches and the churches that has existed in this context for a long time? I will not be able to avoid all generalizations in my descriptions and reflections. When I speak about immigrant churches, I am referring mostly to the kind of churches addressed in the contributions to this book in terms of a family resemblance. When I speak about the traditional Dutch churches, I have in mind the mainstream liberal Protestant churches and not, for example, the orthodox Reformed or the growing number of evangelical churches. I am aware of the limitations of this choice, but this simplification helps me to start unravelling some of the intrinsically connected theological themes that recur in the various research projects.

One central observation for me regards the experience of the differences in how the relationship with God is envisioned and enacted. As for myself, I

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, *Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe*
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

come from a more traditional and rationalistic Protestant background and have spent some time in the religiously much more pluralist context of Suriname. I sympathize with the desire for God's presence and impact that I encounter in evangelical Christianity and with the liturgical richness of Catholicism, but my own preferences in religious expression are of a simpler nature. What does it mean then, when the divine is staged so differently? In one setting the 'dramaturgy' of faith includes rich rituals in which God (or the divine, or the sacred, or the ghosts, etc.) is invoked to act and in which we can relate to this 'real presence' in a direct way through prayer, ecstatic dance, and so on. In another setting the divine is staged much more implicitly as the transcendent and therefore hidden God whose presence is disclosed only through ancient words, read and received in a context of serene worship. In their very different ways, these stagings facilitate the believer in experiencing an encounter with the sacred and in receiving divine revelation of one kind or another. The staging obviously carries a referential perspective to the question of who God 'is' according to the believers, but it may also be understood in terms of performances, creating the religious reality through enactment. I will return to that at the end of this contribution. Before developing that theoretical perspective, I will explore the issues of identity and diversity, thus interpreting the many different stagings of the divine theologically. I will take my starting point in discussions on the interaction of culture(s) and religion(s).

Culture and Religion

One of the clearest issues in research on immigrant churches is the relation between culture and religion. This is as obvious as it is problematic: we start to think about culture only when we are confronted with cultural difference. That means that we tend to see our own context as 'natural' or even normative, rather than as cultured. It is only the other person or context that is defined by a specific culture. Awareness of this is important if we are to avoid any bias towards the relation between culture and religion in immigrant churches. A similar analysis needs to be made on the religion-culture nexus in Western non-immigrant churches. That being said, we can and should address the cultural differences and the way religion functions in specific cultural contexts. Or, to put it more precisely, we should address how religion is organized and expressed in the specific constellation of cultural elements and influences of a particular group or person. Individuals and groups do not live in one single culture, but in a world full of dominant and subaltern cultural systems and elements. These cultures may be ethnic in origin or connected to specific geographical regions, but one can also speak of religious, economic, sexual, political, and musical cultures. Each individual then faces the constant challenge of negotiating his or her identity (or: identities) in the light of a particular (and constantly changing) constellation of cultural systems, defined by hierarchies, distances, and appropriations between the elements. In our research we have focussed on the religious cultures of immigrant churches as they interact with ethnic, national, and musical cultures. Each of these can be

seen as a web of socially constructed meanings that is constantly interacting with other webs. Religion is thus seen as one of the cultural systems (Geertz) that is constantly changing and exchanging with other cultural systems.

When we approach cultures in this way, we can only begin to disentangle the interactions between religious cultures and other cultural dimensions. The descriptions in the previous contributions beg the question of whether religious culture can really be isolated from the other cultural systems, but such an objection holds for all cultural systems. No single dimension can be separated as if it were a detached phenomenon. When young immigrants talk about what music means to them, they describe connections to both ethnic and religious cultures (Alma Lanser). It is interesting that they discuss the ethnic background more in relation to the music, and the religious background more in relation to the lyrics and the content. In doing so, they escape the traditional Western critique of indigenous cultures, in which music was seen as religiously suspect. The negotiation of cultures for these young people neatly neutralizes the music by identifying it as ethnic and therefore (sic!) religiously neutral. This is somewhat at odds with the view of Uzukwu (1997, extensively quoted by Marcel Barnard) that rhythm especially represents the 'primordial Word' and is thus an extremely important element of religious culture.

It is immediately clear that this is a much more complicated picture than fits the classic Niebuhrian distinction of different conjunctions of Christ and culture (Niebuhr 1956). He worked with a rather unambiguous image of the two parts of the equation, resulting in the extreme ideal types of Christ against culture and Christ of culture and three further positions between these two. Although these positions can be distinguished conceptually, in the context of multiculturalism the empirical references are less clear. What exactly is meant by 'culture' in relation to which Christ is positioned? Is it simply all cultures, and therefore simply human existence, or is it particular cultures, and then usually the cultures of others? What is meant by 'Christ' in these formulas is equally unclear when we take into account that we have no culture-free understanding of Christ (Brinkman 2007). It is for such reasons that Niebuhr's model has lost most of its relevance, but we would do well to remember that discussions in and among religious groups, not least within immigrant churches, easily connect with the positions identified by Niebuhr. The believers themselves do not necessarily hold the sophisticated view of religions and cultures that academic researchers may advocate. In their view of the role of the church in society, members of immigrant churches in our research display a somewhat antagonistic view of the relation between Christ and (Dutch) culture, as is apparent in the sermon analysis by Ciska Stark. Some of them offer their young members a bridge between generations and between the religious culture and their place in society. Society as such is seen as distanced from God (Sjoukje Wartena, Gerdien Troost and Siebren Miedema). Exploring the missionary zeal of immigrant churches, Danielle Koning notes the shock of Christians from other parts of the world when they encounter the 'hedonistic

morality of a society that no longer reckons with God.' Although she stresses the issues of group identity in understanding immigrant church evangelism, the model championed by the believers is clearly one of Christ against Dutch culture, and probably a much more integrative view of the relation between Christ and their own cultural identity.

Cultural Stagings and the Polarization of the Divine

In considering this interference between the religious and cultural domains, we can draw further on the work of Robert Schreier (1997), who focusses on the intersection of the global and the local. Instead of speaking of inculturation, suggesting that some religious core takes on many specific cultural guises, we should consider how individuals and groups construct their religion and theology locally and how, in doing so, they are part of a global network. Coping with cultural differences is, according to Schreier, characteristic of the church and symbolized in the ecclesiological notion of catholicity. The immigrant churches of our research show both these local and global aspects. They locate themselves in the particular context of the faith and needs of the community in which they live, targeting their members and people outside their community in need of help or conversion (a need only from their point of view, of course). The cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the church members are a key factor in shaping the identity of the church in juxtaposition with the local Dutch culture in which the church members have to find their way. The global aspects are not only found in these diverse cultural backgrounds, bringing Ghanaian, Surinamese, Latin American, and many other cultures to Amsterdam. It is also not limited to the influence of globalization on Dutch culture and society. One of the most significant aspects, in line with Jenkins' observations of 'the next Christendom', is the fact that these churches are usually of an evangelical, charismatic, or Pentecostal nature. The type of Christianity they represent is itself a global phenomenon. It involves a critical stance toward a rationality that is based in the Western Enlightenment, more attention for the expressive and affective dimensions of the relation with God, and for the work of the Holy Spirit. Above all, the divine is staged in a much more polarized form. The harmonizing and universalizing approaches to religion that we can find among many Western believers are contested. What is at stake, according to this evangelical perspective, is the spiritual warfare between God and his enemies (see the contribution of Ciska Stark). In this polarized view, other religions and secular worldviews are seen as the rejection of God, Christ, and revelation. The society and culture in which we live need to be criticized for their overt and covert disobedience and sins.

The topic of spirit possession and prayers for deliverance, addressed by Mechteld Jansen, can be seen as a particular expression of this polarized view. The realm of the sacred is organized in the same antagonistic terms as the realm of human culture. The divine is staged in a bipolar way with different roles and positions for God (good) and devil (evil). The performance of deliverance in prayers and/or rituals enacts the spiritual warfare between these

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

two and the victory of the former over the latter. This is, of course, only one possible constellation in staging the divine. If we take the example of the Surinamese context, we can compare views prominent in Pentecostal churches with those from the Winti religion, one of the African-oriented spiritual religions found in Latin and South America. Both would assume that human problems originate in the spiritual realm, the middle zone of spirits and ancestors. In Pentecostal circles, these are interpreted as demons and angels, whereas in Winti they are seen as members of an entire pantheon of ancestors and spirits of the earth, the forest, water and air. Spirits can be invoked through prayer or rituals and act on behalf of the believer. Although Winti assumes that the lower spirits especially can be malicious, the overall understanding is that when honoured and treated appropriately, the spirits will not harm humans. The main task for humans, therefore, is to live with proper attention being paid to the spiritual order and to honour the spirits, as they deserve. Disease and misfortune indicate a disruption of this spiritual order and the need to make ritual amends. In the much more polarized view of Pentecostalism, the spiritual world itself is constructed as dichotomous and the believer is called to participate in the battle against evil by obediently staying on God's side through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Disease and misfortune may indicate that one is on the wrong track (especially in the so-called Prosperity Gospel movement), but it may also be interpreted as an attack from the evil forces that should be resisted by means of faith. Both these perspectives conflict with modern medical and psychiatric rationality. It is interesting that, for both groups, the adherents living in the rainforest of the interior of Suriname give more prominence to spiritual explanations than those living in the city of Paramaribo, and their fellow believers in The Netherlands leave much more room for naturalistic interpretations (Ganzevoort 2006). This is another example of the need for a detailed analysis of the particular constructions of cultural and religious systems. The divine is staged differently in every context.

What does this polarized staging of the divine symbolize? Two levels of interpretation demand our attention. The first regards the ambiguity of the sacred as such. This level is related to Rudolph Otto's understanding of the *numinous*, the mystery that attracts and fills us with dread at the same time. In this interpretation, religious traditions offer a system of meaning that reflects and organizes interactions with the sacred. The polarizing religious traditions organize the ambiguity of the divine into two separate realms that conflict with one another; the integrated traditions see them as aspects of one divine realm. In comparison with both, however, the liberal Western European forms of Christianity leave little room for the *tremendum*, the dark side of the sacred. That reduces the scope of evil in these traditions. There is ample attention for questions of contingency and suffering and also for an ethical perspective on evil as in personal and structural violence, but diseases, psychiatric disorders, and misfortunes are interpreted in a non-spiritual and sometimes reductionistic way, and experiences of demons are downplayed or viewed as pathological.

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

Evil functions only on an abstract and symbolic level. On this level of interpretation, the encounter with Pentecostal types of Christianity challenges this liberal and reductionistic staging of the divine. What is missing in the latter is the awareness that the spiritual realm is as dangerous as it is appealing. The liberal Christian traditions have moved away from such an understanding and have developed a staging of the divine that is unambiguously positive: an all-loving God with no real demonic counterpart. Contrary to expectations perhaps, this positive, domesticated staging is proving to be not that convincing and attractive. As the staging of God's power (or omnipotence) waned in the same process, it is not too far-fetched to say that the way the divine is staged in contemporary liberal Christianity is harmless but also close to being irrelevant for many. The question posed by Pentecostalism is whether spiritual meaning and inspiration might indeed require a more ambiguous staging of the divine than is usually found in Western Christianity. To say the least, it critiques the cognitive rationality so prominent in Western liberal Christianity. The Pentecostal tradition offers a new global unity that transcends the local boundaries apparent to the migration experience.

The second level interprets the polarization as a symbolization of living in a polarized world. More specifically, it symbolizes the experiences, desires, and struggles of marginalized people in such a polarized world (Augsburger 1986). The language of possession by evil spirits may be more adequate to describe their predicament than that of sociological, economic, or psychological analysis. What happens to them can only be understood as their being overpowered by evil to such a degree that, even when the factual oppression is in the past, the oppressive powers still remain present in their lives, like the demons in biblical stories such as the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20). They may have 'entered' the person during the original oppression, but they stay there unless they are 'exorcized'. This is symbolical, mythological language that describes the survivors of oppression as victims of evil powers. The risk of this language is that it may unwillingly identify them as evil themselves. It is therefore crucial to ground this symbolical language in a critical analysis of the oppression and in an explicit 'naming of the powers' (Wink 1984). Equally important and fitting in this polarizing view is a focus on the liberating image of God, drawing on a range of images extending from the Exodus to exorcism and stressing the healing ministry of Jesus and his followers. This may even tap into liberation theologies where a critical analysis of oppressive structures and situations leads to a theological reflection that aims at the dissolution of oppression. Perhaps oppression is too strong a word to describe the situation of members of immigrant churches in the Netherlands, but the activities of these churches are targeted primarily at disadvantaged and marginalized groups, as is clear from Marten van der Meulen's article on African churches and illegal immigration. Sake Stoppels shows that much of the contribution of immigrant churches to civil society takes the form of psycho-social care and assistance and welfare work focussed on these groups. These findings take on even more theological significance if we connect the socio-economic

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

marginalization of the believers with the polarized religious symbolization. This interpretation could be challenged by looking at evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches and groups within the traditional Dutch churches. These groups stage the divine in many ways similar to what immigrant churches offer. Sometimes they target marginalized groups just as the immigrant churches do, but they often cater primarily to the spiritual needs of white middle-class Dutch people. Here the spiritual polarization serves not to address the socio-economic position of its believers symbolically, but it is still fuelled perhaps by experiences of polarization on a political and cultural scale. We would need further research and comparisons to interpret this properly.

Hybrid Identities

The close connection between specific, culturally defined constructions of the divine and the specific contexts of marginalization and oppression blends into the questions of identity that can be found in several contributions to this volume. In Mechteld Jansen's article on the life stories of Filipina domestic workers, this level of identity is central. The stories they tell about their lives involve the responsibility they bear for their families and children. Their role as supporters is a central element of their identity, and one that brings them into the position of negotiating not only their identity as a mother in a situation where they can support them only from a distance, they also have to develop their identity on the fringes of both Dutch and Philippine culture. The identity constructions are those of strong women able to endure hardship and to provide support to others through sacrifice. Religion functions in these stories as support and comfort in these circumstances and to strengthen their caring identity. A central aspect of these stories is that religion integrates the person into a more universal family that connects their present situation with the Philippine context. In these stories, God is cast in the role of supporter, rather closely connected to their own roles.

More tension is found in the stories about religion and youth presented in the contributions by Sjoukje Wartena, Gerdien Troost and Siebren Miedema and Alma Lanser. As mentioned earlier, these young people experience a discrepancy between the culture of their parents and the culture of the surrounding society. Whereas the former is central to their life by virtue of the family context, the latter cannot be discarded either. They are inextricably connected through school, work, sports, music, and the like. They have to navigate the demands of both cultures, and religion may – among other things – support them in this task. That is especially the case when it is mediated through music, education, and youth work. It is also the self-stated objective of some of these churches, as Marcel Barnard's sources point out. At the same time, these mediating fields themselves demand that the adolescents negotiate these different aspects. The mediators form a bridge between two cultures, but they also represent the gap and one more demanding audience to satisfy. They present themselves to the individual as the place where identity has to be constructed and enacted before two more or less incompatible audiences. The

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

values of these different audiences are not easily reconciled, and the young person has to find a way to deal with both.

This phenomenon can be understood from social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This approach to intergroup conflict takes as its starting point the view that individuals are not defined by one core 'personal self' that we can term identity but by the many social groups they belong to. On the micro, meso, and macro levels, we carry social selves based on the connection to social groups of which we perceive ourselves to be members. Social identity is then the person's self-concept based on the categorization of self and others as belonging to the same or different groups. In contrast, personal identity is the self-concept based on self-perception of unique individual characteristics. In many cases, this complex social identity develops and functions relatively without problem because the different groups (or audiences) are relatively close. My own social identity for example includes self-categorization as white, male, educated, Dutch, Protestant. Although membership in none of these groups implies membership in one of the others, they easily amalgamate to support an identity of belonging to dominant groups. There are of course also aspects of my experience that would lead to self-categorization as a member of a subordinate group, but I tend not to see those as part of my social identity (belonging to a subaltern group), but as unique, almost coincidental aspects of my personal identity, thereby downplaying their impact on my social status.

Individuals living in two or more distinct *and* more or less conflicting cultures face the challenge of developing a hybrid identity. The term usually refers to a situation of migration in which a person has to negotiate the larger, dominant culture and the original ancestral culture. Sometimes it is also called a hyphenated identity, as in Moroccan-Dutch, Ghanaian-Dutch, and so on. Their being Dutch is then qualified by being Moroccan, African, or Indonesian. The hyphen helped to articulate the fact that immigrants did not simply enter the melting pot to leave their original culture behind, although this was regarded as negative originally. The melting pot ideology in the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century led to a fierce rejection of hyphenated identities. A hyphenated identity would signify a lack of integration and therefore to a lack of loyalty to the society in which they were finding their place. This same objection is found in the contemporary discussion in The Netherlands about limiting the possibility of double citizenship. There is, however, another objection to the term hyphenated. It is often used as an outsider's interpretation with marginalizing effects. Even if this person may not feel specifically connected to his or her ancestral culture, speak Dutch as his or her first language, and never have visited his or her country of origin, others may still see him or her as being only half Dutch. This happens sometimes only with respect to one or two generations, but especially when racial differences are visibly involved, the attribution of a hyphenated identity may last much

longer. We would probably see someone from a family that migrated from Germany four generations ago as a Dutch person with a (possibly) German name, but we would still see a person whose family immigrated from China four generations ago as Chinese. The hybrid identity focusses less on this outsider's perspective and more on the identity tasks of the individual insofar as he or she experiences them. It suggests that we can construe an identity that is not just of dual origin, but is also related to dual or even multiple sources for positive functioning (Ghorashi 2006). Cultural hybridity proffers a widened repertoire of interpretations and actions.

I will not deny the complex task developing such a hybrid identity, as testified in several of the articles in this book. Sometimes the different aspects are highlighted (performed) in different areas of life. A person may identify with his or her ancestral culture when meeting his or her family and with Dutch culture when working or clubbing. Time, place, and language may serve as delineators for non-integrated identity parts being played out in different contexts. Hybridization is a difficult task, especially when the groups to which a person seeks to belong are not easily combined (as is the case in the example of a person from an Arab Muslim background who converts to Christianity when staying in The Netherlands). Several alternatives seem less difficult to develop. One might prioritize one culture over the other or even completely discard one of them. Some may choose to connect to Dutch culture as little as possible, thereby developing a kind of ghetto. Others choose to leave their original culture completely behind, even to the point of discriminating against members of the ancestral culture. As regards religious cultures, this is often precisely what apostates (or converts) do. Conversion narratives describe the pre-conversion situation, affiliations, and identity in negative terms, and a radical move away from that toward a new social group and religious culture (Ulmer 1990). On the societal level, ethnocentric or even racist movements show a similar strategy. These alternatives should not be called hybridity, but they are alternative responses to multiculturalism. They are much more clear-cut and offer a more delineated and articulated identity, but they are also more limited in scope and function.

Diversity, and Staging the Divine

My reflections thus lead to a more positive stance to diversity within the person and between persons and groups. That is not difficult to integrate into the Christian tradition, even when we should acknowledge that Christianity has its own examples of ethnocentrism and xenophobia. The stories about God are and have always been variegated and often discordant (Ganzevoort 2006). The Bible itself is a complex of different genres and voices, fragments and conflicts. The Christian tradition is similarly diverse, adapting to different times and circumstances in ever new forms, and allowing for different and sometimes contradictory responses to the dilemmas facing them. Every effort to find a core to this multicoloured religious tradition proves to be problematic, also when it is only a general notion like compassion, liberation, or sin. Even the

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

Christian story about Jesus has been written in four versions that cannot be reconciled on all points. That does not mean that anything goes, but it does show that diversity is part of the 'essence' of Christianity.

For a positive interpretation of diversity, we can find inspiration in the story of the tower of Babel (Sacks 2003, Van Wolde 2004). The story can be read as the story of God's punishment of human pride (*hybris*). By distorting human communication, God blocked their attempt to reach heaven. In this interpretation, diversity is seen as intrinsically problematic. Other interpretations, however, are also possible. They may even be more plausible as the biblical narrative is not cast in terms of punishment at all. One interpretation is that the story is ultimately about diversity. The language of the story is not primarily vertically oriented (climbing up to heaven – at the end of the story there is no further mention of the tower), but about horizontal movements from the centre to the margins. When humans were created, they were to be fruitful and to multiply over the whole earth. After they left the garden of Eden (and in fact after the flood) they find a plain in Sinear and decide to stay there together. Since that would thwart God's intention, God intervenes. God 'confused their language and scattered them all over the earth'. This intervention saves humankind from its tendency to withdraw from otherness and to seek the isolation of the small circle of uniformity. The outward movement to difference and diversity is re-established with the aim of building an inhabitable world. Liberation theologians have also read the story as resisting the uniformizing power of globalization and Western neo-liberal capitalism. The confusion of languages is here also interpreted positively as divine acknowledgment of diversity contrary to the dominant language of money. These readings of the story support a positive appreciation of diversity. That interpretation becomes even more convincing when we consider the classical connection between the story of the tower of Babel and the story of Pentecost. The latter has been read regularly as the resolution of Babel's confusion of languages through the miracle of Pentecost where everybody understands one single message. The confusion of languages is then seen as punishment and the miracle of Pentecost as a token of grace that removes the punishment. From the reinterpretation of the story of Babel however, it becomes all the more meaningful that the miracle of Pentecost is not that the languages are uniformized. On the contrary: the miracle is that everybody hears the Gospel in his or her own language. Pentecost then is the celebration of diversity.

According to Lee (1995), the key notion for dealing with diversity is marginality. The starting point for that is the experience of people living in a culture different from the one from which they come. Their marginality is then defined by the centrality of the dominant culture. It is important to note that between people there are always different layers of centrality and marginality. In Dutch society for example, white Dutch citizens are central, but within that group there are again ever-changing centres and margins. The traditional

Dutch churches have moved from the centre of society to the margins, but within the churches women have become more central than they were, at least in the more liberal churches. Marginality is thus a relative concept. A person's or group's marginality can be defined by ethnicity, gender, economic status, age, sexual orientation, language, health, and so on. Lee suggests that we should see marginality not only as an attribute of persons belonging to two cultures and thus to none (in-between). He adds that it is also the special quality of people at home in both worlds without being claimed by either (in-both). In the terms used above, it is not only a matter of hyphenation but also of hybridity. Lee calls the combination of these two 'in-beyond', and he interprets that as having a transcendent meaning. It is our being aware of belonging to multiple cultures and of being strangers to each that opens up our identity for experiences of transcendence. Fixed and rigid identities prevent this possibility of experiencing the transcending of our cultural limits.

The theological implication of this approach to diversity is that centrality is seen as fundamentally hazardous because it represses the voices of people in the margins. This challenges the traditional churches more at the centre of society to reconsider the privileges of their own – relative – centrality and their stance toward immigrant churches. The voices from the margins, for example those of immigrant churches, are given prophetic meaning because they call on the more central churches to account for their power of centrality. This is not only a matter of politics or ethics. It is above all a matter of theology and transcendence. The 'presence' of a transcendent God is possible only in the kind of interaction that creates room for difference. That room cannot remain in the centre and that means that the power of the centre leaves no room for God. For that reason, Lee states that the church is the community of marginality. It should abstain from claims to authority and power and use its inevitable power to create room for the voices on the margins. That is the prophetic task of the church: to support difference and create room for the voices of the margins. In doing so, the church may be (or become) a symbolic reference to the ultimate difference, transcendence. The church is not in any way the kingdom of God, but it can be so attuned to difference that the kingdom of God becomes apparent. In that sense, marginality is a sign of grace for the church.

We would, however, misunderstand the theological importance of marginality if we were to limit it to a prophetic challenge for the traditional Dutch churches in their dealing with immigrant churches. There is a challenge for immigrant churches as well. Although they are less central to Dutch society, they can become central powers in their own right. In the different contributions to this book, the message of immigrant churches seems to be rather fixated and leaves little room for difference. The antagonism described earlier implies that they leave little room for voices that deviate from their specific point of view. That means that in the lives of the people with whom they work, they represent not only a bridge but yet another dominant cultural

system that the individual has to negotiate. The notion of marginality should be seen as a challenge for immigrant churches to allow for difference in their own midst, not only in terms of cultural differences, but also when it comes to issues of the Western society they easily reject for being sinful (especially in the area of sexuality). The redefinition of Pentecost would mean that the rigid dogmatism that can also be found in spiritual churches cannot go unchallenged.

In terms of staging the divine, this reflection leads to the understanding that a rigid presentation of God and God's will is probably more a projection of the powers of the centre than a representation of transcendence. The more the staging of the divine is done explicitly, the more it tends to become fixated and authoritarian – and the more it becomes problematic as a symbolic reference to the difference of transcendence. This is, of course, a highly paradoxical issue. It is necessary to stage the divine in such a way that believers are given the opportunity to experience an encounter with God or even a direct message from God. In that sense, explicit staging is required. At the same time, this explicit staging then becomes an obstacle for experiences of transcendence. This paradox needs to be preserved to find a viable alternative to fundamentalism and relativism.

Staging: Religion as Performance

To conclude these reflections, I want to address briefly the notion of staging or performance. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the idea of staging implies that the 'truth' of our religious communication rests not so much on the question of whether God 'really exists' but on the religious experience that becomes real through the communication. This is not necessarily the perspective of non-realism, in which God is seen as the projection or symbolization of the highest ideals of humanity. Non-realism (or: Contemporary Christian Humanism) implies a negative statement about God's existence as a separate being, different from and usually seen as having priority over human faith. It is in that sense related to atheism, but differs in valuing God-talk as a meaningful dimension of human life. In this article I do not take this position. Instead, I advocate the perspective of social constructionism (Ganzevoort 2005). In social constructionism, we refrain from statements concerning the ontological status of what we say and focus instead on their significance of our constructions in our relations and experiences. In a social-constructionist inquiry, we do not claim that God does or does not exist, but ask how particular versions of God-talk have impact on our lives. In other words, this is not about the referential truth that relates our discourse to the 'objects' behind the text but concerns 'performative truth' that relates our discourse to the 'objects' it brings into presence or the relational aims it serves (Viau 1999). Through religious performances, the believer places himself/herself in a relationship with God that in turn can be experienced through the performance. In the religious performance, it is as if Godself is presents and acts. Mirella Klomp explicitly uses the notion of performance to

R.Ruard Ganzevoort, Staging the Divine. A theological challenge for the churches in Europe
In: Stoffels, H.C. & Jansen, M.M. (Ed.) *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Münster: LIT,
p. 219-236.

© R.Ruard Ganzevoort

describe the liturgy in immigrant churches, and Marcel Barnard also refers to the performative notions in liturgy. He draws attention to the higher levels of the liturgical order, including cosmological axioms and ensuing behaviours. Liturgy is not only the response to God's revelation – it is also the performance that upholds our views of the world of the divine and that facilitates revelation. In that sense we can speak of the 'social construction of revelation'.

To speak of the social construction of revelation is to focus on the human side of the interpretive process of understanding our sensations or experiences as divine disclosure. This is not to be understood as a form of reductionism, and it explicitly includes the important language of revelation and transcendence. When transcending phenomena, we encounter revelatory moments and, I would state, the social constructions inherent to our religious practices are necessary for revelation to occur. I do not use the term transcendence in a static way as if we were describing how different God is from us: beyond our knowledge, language, moral standards, and finally beyond our mode of existence. Instead, I use the term to describe the dynamics of human life, constantly surpassing the boundaries of our existing worlds. This focus on boundaries tallies with my previous remarks about the migration experience, hybridity, and marginality. It is at the boundaries that we can experience what it is to transcend them. Sometimes these boundaries are crossed from the outside inward. This is what we usually call revelation, but it is not limited to the realm of religion. Every time we are addressed, our boundaries are crossed or transcended. This can sometimes be the source of life, but it can also be devastating when the boundaries are crossed with bad intentions. A movement also takes place from the inside outward. In this movement, too, we actively transcend ourselves. We surpass our boundaries socially, existentially, and religiously. In transcending ourselves as individuals and as communities, we direct ourselves to another reality. This other reality thereby becomes present in our world. In our discourse, we act performatively toward humans and the divine and bring transcending elements to our communications. Through performative acts, we set the stage for divine actions. For example, our rituals are staged in such a way that we can perceive God acting through them. It is not just water with which we are baptized, but the Holy Spirit. It is not just bread and wine, but the body of Christ. It is *in, with, and under* these signs that the real presence of the divine is encountered. In fact, the entire service is staged so that the sermon can be received as a word of God. The songs and music invoke a receptive mood and the texts and prayers place this mood under the rubric of openness for God's presence. The performance of the entire worship contributes to the socially constructed experience of revelation.

The reflections of this contribution revolved around culturedness, identities, hybridity, diversity, and marginality in relation to staging the divine. The notion

of performance can be applied to all these concepts. Culture and identity are as much performative, staged, as religion. We constantly face the challenge of constructing and performing our lives before the multiple audiences that constitute our life settings. We try to meet the demands of these audiences, and their sometimes incompatible values necessitate us to create multiple stories, multiple performances, and multiple selves. We have to negotiate these demands and stories carefully to avoid pathological fragmentation. In this complex of performances, our relation with God takes shape. As in other relations, we cannot reduce the staging to mere projection. We respond to what is experienced by the believer as divine disclosure, an encounter with the real and living God. What we try to understand through the notion of performance is not the 'ontological reality' of this God, but the processes through which this encounter becomes possible.

The research in this book and my ensuing reflections led to our questioning the liberal rationality of mainstream Western Christianity as well as the polarization of the divine in Pentecostalism. The first has almost cleared the stage and seems rather reluctant to engage in more explicit staging. The second unabashedly offers an explicit and antagonistic performance with radical claims to authority. This religious difference is embedded in different shapes of marginality. The more powerful white churches offer a less powerful staging and the more marginal immigrant churches perform with more authority. The believers face the challenge of relating to the divine as staged in these churches. That challenge is not limited to immigrant churches: traditional Dutch churches find their young members leaving, probably because they find no meaningful connection between the ecclesial staging of the divine and their own stories and desires. In this way, immigrant and traditional Dutch churches could benefit from learning together how to avoid the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of fundamentalism. The aim should not be some kind of harmonizing uniformity but respect for diversity and honouring the transcendence of the divine in our world by accepting both presence and absence. What these reflections bring us then is the question how the divine can be staged in such a way that it helps people to experience an encounter with God and to negotiate the different identities they have to construe in the diverse and multiply cultured world they inhabit.

References

- Augsburger, D.W. (1986) *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Brinkman, M.E. (2007) *De niet-westerse Jezus. Jezus als bodhisattva, avatara, goeroe, profeet, voorouder en genezer*. Zoetermeer: Meinema.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. (2005) 'The Social Construction of Revelation', *International Journal of Practical Theology*. 8/2, 1-14.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. (2006) *De hand van God en andere verhalen. Over veelkleurige vroomheid en botsende beelden*. Zoetermeer: Meinema.

- Ghorashi, H. (2006) *Paradoxen van culturele erkenning. Management van diversiteit in Nieuw-Nederland*. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit.
- Jenkins, P. (2002) *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, J.Y. (1995) *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Niebuhr, H.R. (1956) *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper.
- Sacks, J. (2003) *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London: Continuum.
- Schreier, R.J. (1997) *The new catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*. Maryknoll (NY): Orbis.
- Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1979) 'An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict'. In: S. Worchel and W.G. Austin (eds). *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Monterey: Brooks and Cole.
- Ulmer, B. (1990) 'Die autobiographische Plausibilität von Konversionserzählungen'. In: W. Sparr (ed.) *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte?* Gütersloh: Mohn,
- Viau, M. (1999) *Practical Theology: A New Approach*. Leiden: Brill.
- Wink, W. (1984) *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Van Wolde, E. (2004 ed.) *De toren van Babel*. Zoetermeer: Meinema.