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Folk Church as Mission to Culture Christians

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The Danish religious situation is a typical missionary one. The religion of 350.000 inhabitants is unknown - maybe even to them selves. 250.000 belongs to other religions than Christianity (175.000 are Muslims), 250.000 are baptised, **former** members of The Folk Church. The great majority of the population, app. 4,5 million people, are Folk Church members with rather weak and diffuse religious belief, e.g. 150.000 of them have not been confirmed and thus most likely never had any teaching about baptism and Christianity.

In terms of religion the case of Denmark is unique in as far as The Evangelical Lutheran Church, normally called The Folk Church, has the honour of being **the weakest monopoly church in the world**. I have explored that peculiar situation and its historical background in different publications¹. In stead of covering this issue so once more, I will use the limited time available here discussing one specific question: How can a Folk Church be a church of mission and not only a church of maintenance in a situation where maybe 90 % of the citizens are Christians by Culture, but far from being confessing Christians, even though the great majority of them are members of the Folk Church? This question is, I think, equally important in all of the five Nordic Countries, where we have Folk Churches, with app. 85 % of the population as members.

How to label Folk Church people?

In major parts of the debate on mission to passive members of established churches in Europe (and North America), including the Folk Churches in the Nordic countries, are labelled **Nominal Christians**². It is fair to say that the membership of Folk Churches is rather formal,

¹ See e.g. Leaving the Distant Church. The Danish Experience. In: *Leaving Religion and Religious Life*, ed. by Mordechai Bar-Lev and William Shaffir, Jai Press Inc., London 1997, p. 139-158 and Kirkesociologi: religion, folk og kirke i Danmark, I Eberhard Harbsmeier and Hans Raun Iversen: *Praktisk Teologi*, Copenhagen 1995, p. 66-96.

² A neoclassic and representative book in this debate is Eddie Gibbs: *In Name Only. Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity*, A Bridge Point Book 1994. Gibbs also uses the term "Cultural Christians", but only in

when it only implies few things, e.g. the church members being baptised and paying a certain amount of church tax - and the church having to offer its service to these members whenever wanted at the time of birth, adolescence, wedding and death. From an ecclesiastical point of view this sort of church membership seems, indeed, rather nominal. What is wrong, however, is the hidden implication: If your church membership is formal or nominal, you are a nominal Christian, that is: a Christian only by name.

Folk Church members in the Nordic countries, e.g. in Denmark, do normally not attend Sunday services, their religious belief do not conform to the creed and teaching of the church and they generally do not expect much from their church. They, however, want the church to be there - in case it should be needed. The church is thus being treated as insurance for certain services, not as a community of believers. This pattern of relationship to the church is well known from everyday experience and from a great number of surveys in all Nordic countries.

If the membership of the Folk Church has become a formal matter, that, however, does not mean, that Christianity only has a formal place in the lives of Folk Church members. On the contrary: To Folk Church members Christianity is an important part of their culture. It is this sort of "Christianity" I suggest that we call **Culture Christianity**.

It must be underlined, that Culture Christianity is something different from **Christian Culture**. It is a question whether there ever was a Christian Culture, i.e. a culture "where the Gospel has penetrated into the personal and social subconsciousness of a people, so that it influences human behaviour instinctively"³. Culture Christians are people for whom a major part of their culture is Christian, but their entire culture is most certainly not, nor is their religious belief if they have any. Culture Christians in Western Christendom-context may resemble such people in Non-Western countries, e. g. China and Japan, who have adopted certain Christian values and thoughts as part of their lifestyle and worldview, even though they have no relation to the local Christian church. The difference is, however, that Culture Christianity in Europe and North America usually will be taken over from the upbringing,

passing as another label for "residual Christians" or second generation revival Christians, who have themselves not been "born again", p. 93.

³ Stephen Neill quoted by Wilbert R. Shenk: Encounters with "Culture" Christianity, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 18, No 1, January 1994, p. 8. Stephen Neill in *The Unfinished Task*, London 1957, only points to two examples, or rather visions, of a Christian culture, by Augustine in the fifth and Dante in the fifteenth century.

whereas, e.g. in China, it is a product of the adaptation by the individual to Western culture and philosophy.

For the sake of clarity it must be underlined that Culture Christianity is experienced by the individual as a positive and personal culture. Where **Christendom**⁴ signals a situation with imposed synthesis of Christianity and national culture, Culture Christianity is taken over voluntarily by the individual. Where **Civil Religion**⁵ is a common religious framework legitimating the state and society in which its citizens live, Culture Christianity is based on personal values and identity, even if it may, of course, have implications for the political views of the individual, e.g. it may make the individual support The United Nations' rules for Human Rights.

The Content of Culture Christianity

In a recent interview the former socialdemocratic chairman of The Danish Parliament, professor Erling Olsen, labelled himself a Christian. Having a partly Jewish background he was never baptised and also he, as he puts it, never received "the gift of faith". In the background of his human and political values he does, however, call himself a Christian: "Christian Culture is an ingrown part of being Danish to the extent that you can't escape it... Christianity is woven into our very existence as the cross is into our national flag, Dannebrog", he argues⁶. The retort to Erling Olsen by the church can not be, that he is only a nominal Christian. Nominally he is not Christian at all as he is not even baptised! On the other hand: If we take away from Erling Olsen any sort of Christianity we find in him, there will not be much left of the Erling Olsen, we know. Thus I suggest we take Erling Olsen by his word: He is a Christian, that is a **Christian by Culture, or a Culture Christian**, as it is obviously the cultural part of Christianity to which he subscribes. And what must be said about Erling Olsen is true for the majority of Danes, members of the Folk Church as many non-members alike.

Three arguments support the claim that the great majority of the people of Denmark and the Nordic countries are Culture Christians:

⁴ Cf. Anton Wessel: *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?*, SCM 1994.

⁵ Cf. Belá Harmati (ed.): *The Church and Civil Religion in The Nordic Countries*, LWF Geneva 1984.

⁶ *Kristeligt Dagblad*, October 1 1996.

First of all there is no National culture in our countries without Christianity. Our Nations were built alongside - and partly by means of - the introduction of Christianity. This historical fact is being rediscovered not only in historical research⁷ but also in the political and cultural experience of these years, e. g. in Denmark where Danish cultural identity has been increasingly questioned since Denmark joined The European Community in 1972 - and in recent years also by the presence in Denmark of a growing number of immigrants from other cultures.

Facing the questions of national and cultural identity we try to dig down to our roots and what we find is - Christianity. This is true for Denmark - and partly for Europe in general. Geographically Europe is a not much more than a tail of Asia - and the same is partly true ethnically as many of our forefathers immigrated once upon a time from the East. We are, however, sure that there is something distinct called European culture. And the one major historical factor that made that distinction was - Christianity.

One of Erling Olsens colleagues in the Danish Parliament, Mimmi Jakobsen, chairman of the Centre Democratic Party, puts it this way: "My Faith is a faith in the basic values of Christianity. We read in The Sermon on the Mount: You shall treat other people as you want to be treated yourself. That is the reason why we must have tidy politics also concerning refugees and immigrants. This faith is a part of our inheritance; it is the basic values which we have from Christianity: You must behave yourself."⁸ The great majority of the Danish population tends to agree with Mimi Jakobsen and Erling Olsen. Their basic values are influenced by a Christian concept of man.

Secondly Danes, even those who are not aware of the links between their cultural and political values and Christianity, tend to claim that they are "Christians - in their own way", as the Nordic people use to put it. When asking the Danes what sort of religion they have, they may give many sorts of answers. The great majority - app. 70 percent - will, however, end up stating: "I am Christian, in my own way, of course". This is my second argument for calling the Danes Culture Christians. Thus if you don't accept that the Danes are Christians you have to argue that they are wrong about their own identity!

My third and final argument is the observation, that the language of the heart in Denmark is still the Christian language. In his doctoral thesis Troels Nørager argues that "the

⁷ Cf. for example: Øistein Wahlberg (ed.): *Før og efter Stiklestad 1030. Religionsskifte - Kulturforhold - Politisk magt*, Stiklestad Nationale Kulturcenter 1996.

⁸ Interview in *Copenhagen Christian Television, KKR*, Marh 16 1997.

basic human character of the individual heart-experiences and the community-creating meaningfulness of the language of the heart" is the very "place in a secularised society, where a connection between the culture of the people and Christian religiosity is still to be found"⁹. Plenty of examples of this may be seen in modern art, not least in literature, and in the practice of ordinary life, e.g. the secular bridegroom quoting Corinthians, Chapter 13, in order to express his love for his young bride.

Summing up we conclude that the positive content of Culture Christianity in Denmark is a Christian influenced world view, a Christian concept of man and some basic ethical and existential values and words deriving from the teaching of Christianity throughout the centuries, but still making up a basic part of Danish identity.

The approach of Christian Mission to Culture Christians.

Is there a need for Christian mission to Culture Christians? The obvious answer is Yes! First of all Christian mission is directed to all people (panta ta etné, Matt. 28,19). There is no reason why there should be no mission to people, who have inherited a Christian influenced culture, as the missionary calling is one for discipleship of Christ. To Culture Christians Christ is perhaps a good teacher, but not someone to believe in or to follow as the disciple follows his Master. Culture Christianity is not born by faith, nor does it live by faith, it comes to us as a part of our legacy. Culture Christianity has no confession of the Christian creed. Also prayers to Christ as Son of God are hardly known to Cultural Christians. From the point of view of the Biblical concept of Christian mission Culture Christianity is a cultural phenomenon, a special one obviously, and one close to Christianity, as are in their ways also Judaism and Islam.

As Christ respected and appreciated the cultures into which he was sent, so the mission of the church must respect and appreciate the culture in which it is to work. Thus Christian mission can not begin by defining a culture by what it is not. Therefore Folk Church members can not be defined as nominal Christians. On the contrary mission to Culture Christians must begin by appreciating the values of Culture Christianity. Furthermore the dialogue with Culture Christians must begin by taking Culture Christians by their own words when they say, that they are Christians.

⁹ Troels Nørager: *Hjerte og psyke*, Copenhagen 1996, p. 323.

Mission to a people can never begin by denying the identity of that people, claiming that they are not at all what they think they are. Christian mission should never attempt to cast out the old culture and thus run the risk of having seven bad spirits taking its place. Christian mission in Nordic countries will submit itself to cultural imperialism well known from colonial times if it is not willing to begin by affirming the values of Culture Christianity and after that move to the dialogue on what Biblical Christianity means. This is even more important since Culture Christianity is a child of the church, which makes the negative attitude on the side of the church a destructive experience for Culture Christians, who may feel that they are despised by their own mother, if the church is not serious about their identity.

Folk Church as Maintenance of Culture Christianity

Culture Christianity historically is the child of the teaching of the Folk Church for many centuries in Nordic countries. Culture Christianity most certainly does not come alive by itself, nor is it being kept alive by itself. On the contrary: Culture Christians have no ways and ritual forms of their own for the transmission of their Culture Christianity to their children. Probably we can only begin talking about Culture Christianity after the introduction of compulsory confirmations classes, in Denmark in 1736. Even today confirmation classes at their best seem to leave young people with a sense of basic Culture Christianity. Also what is heard by those attending the rituals of the church (at baptism, confirmation, wedding and funeral) may contribute to the upholding of Culture Christianity in our people – even more than to the building of Christian faith.

Culture Christians often respect sincere confessing Christians, e.g. if those Christians care for their children inviting them to Sunday schools etc.¹⁰ Culture Christians are also often open to serious dialogue with Biblical founded Christian mission. They may even see that what is being introduced to them is the foundation on which the Christian values of Culture Christianity have been built. Opposition to Christian mission to Culture Christians may come from the conservative leaders of the Folk Church more often than from the Culture Christians themselves

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¹⁰ Cf. Harald Hegstad: *Folkekirke og trosfelleskap*, Trondheim 1996.

Can the Folk Church work as mission in Nordic countries? Is it possible that the Folk Church may function as the proper mean of mission to Culture Christians? In the Danish situation the answer is that so far we have seen no working alternative to the Folk Church as the missionary church to the Danish people!

120 years ago one percent of the population had left the old Folk Church (until the freedom of religion in the democratic constitution of 1849: The State Church of Denmark) to join "free churches" (Baptists, Catholics, Methodist etc.). Today when only 84 % of the population are members of the Folk Church, the number of members of the "free churches" still only amounts to app. one percent only. One major reason for the lack of growth of the "free churches", except for the growth caused by immigration, seems to be the fact, that the majority of the Danes are Culture Christians - and the church for Culture Christianity is supposed to be the Folk Church. Being converted and joining one of the "free churches" thus seems to mean leaving not only your old religion (or lack of religion), but also leaving your culture, or at least the way your culture has been perceived so far, by leaving its mother institution, the Folk Church. According to church law membership of the Folk Church can not be combined with membership of one of the "free churches", even though this law is normally not practically enforced by the Folk Church administration!

The Folk Church has many resources (money, personnel and buildings, monopoly of rituals and goodwill of tradition), that it can be used for a great many things. An instrument of mission the Folk Church can only be when in its very way of work it dares to reflect and signify the message that it is to preach. In a situation of Culture Christianity it is the Folk Church that must be **signum et instrumentum for the Gospel**. The Folk Church as the church of which the Culture Christians are members and the church in which they trust - must make it clear that its message is not foremost "Come to Us" but "Let us follow Him". Thus the Folk Church must be a go-church and not only a come-church. And even more: the Folk Church must be a church of mission within its own borders. The Folk Church must be a missionary church by being an open church where the forecourt of the church is within the church¹¹.

¹¹ Some Danish folk church congregations in mission along these lines I have given account of in Incarnation, Congregation and Mission, in *Identity in Conflict. Classical Christian Faith and Religio Occulta*, ed. By Moti Lal Pandit et al., New Dehli 1998, p. 203-218. My general points in this lecture has been elebarated in Hans Raun Iversen: Kulturkristendom, kirkekristendom og karismatisk kristendom. Kristendomsformernes baggrund og samspil i folkekirken, In: *Kulturkristendom og kirke, Ny Mission 1*, København 1999, p. 6-39.

The message of the missionary Folk Church to its Cultural Christian members is this: This church is the Church of Christ. As it is my church it is yours! And as it is yours it is mine. Let us be church together, i.e. let us belong to and serve the Lord together. In the Nordic countries it is the main task of mission - and of theology as well - to develop the Folk Church as a means of mission to the great majority of Cultural Christians in our people.