

## **The Changing Face of Global Catholicism: Implications for Theology and Theological Education**

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Regional reports: Europe

*Some notes from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany*

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A major event since our last Network Council Meeting in 2008, which is sadly not unfamiliar to some of you present here, is the revelation of sexual abuse by clergy and its cover-up by church authorities. At about the same time, stories came into the open in Germany (the Jesuit college in Berlin), the Netherlands (among others the abuse by members of the Salesians) and Belgium (the resignation of the bishop of Bruges). For an assessment, see [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/attachments/files/1294135171\\_Report%20from%20Child%20Abuse%20in%20the%20Catholic%20Church%20Workshop%2004%2011%2010.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/attachments/files/1294135171_Report%20from%20Child%20Abuse%20in%20the%20Catholic%20Church%20Workshop%2004%2011%2010.pdf) - the telling report a one day conference which was first planned during the meeting of catholic moral theologians from around the world in Trento, Italy, at the end of July 2010 in partial response to the lack of critical enquiry with regard to ‘ecclesiastical elephants in the room’. A particular public moment in the Netherlands was the way in which the former archbishop of Utrecht, cardinal Adrianus Simonis, in a live television programme tried to explain the lack of action from the episcopate by claiming: “Wir haben es nicht gewusst” (said in German, March 23, 2010) – an expression for which he, pushed by some of his fellow bishops, later apologised. Less than a year later – February 4, 2011, and sparked by the same problems, German speaking professors of catholic theology published their Memorandum “Church 2011: a necessary sea-change” ([http://www.memorandum-freiheit.de/?page\\_id=435](http://www.memorandum-freiheit.de/?page_id=435)) - today signed by 240 German speaking theologians from all sides of the spectrum and 71 colleagues from abroad. But if I have to rely on personal communications and also on the assessment published soon after by Publik-Forum, the necessary dialogue between academic theology and the bishops has not materialised. Next to this, the number of catholics who are leaving the catholic church by de-registration at the tax office to make sure their money is no longer going to the catholic church has once again about doubled in 2010, reaching well over 180.000 (a similar pattern can be seen in Austria, a country with a similar system of *Kirchensteuer*). And it surely doesn’t help that in matters of liturgy, not just the English speaking word is now supposed to accept texts in Sacred Latin, but such kinds of restoration are also imposed or at least ‘encouraged’ in the Low Countries.

However, next to this gloomy picture which for the near future probably means more trouble for the official institutional church [to be sure: the reformed churches have by and large the same problems –

and we should maybe reflect on the theme of our meeting to at least be aware of the changes in global Christianity], there are also changes – maybe: developments? – which connect to the theme of our meeting. Of course, against the background of ‘global catholicism’, the Low Countries or even Western-Europe rather pale with insignificance. But still, even if the official institutional catholic / Christian faith continues to evaporate, religion and spirituality seem to be very alive and flourishing. While this angers ‘professional atheists’ such as Richard Dawkins *et. al.*, let me list a couple of these signs.

When in 2006, the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy published its report “Faith in the Public Domain. Exploration of a Double Transformation”

(<http://www.wrr.nl/content.jsp?objectid=3840> - most of the text is in Dutch, some chapters are in English), there was still a large degree of scepticism voiced by the die-hards of the full secularisation thesis. Meanwhile, various other studies, but also the commercial success of books such as “De bijbel cultureel” (2009 – 800 pages) or the introductory volume “Handboek Religie in Nederland” (2008 – 500 pages), have given credibility to this thesis. According to well established researcher Joep de Hart, in his study “Zwevende gelovigen. Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit” (Floating believers. Old religion and new spirituality) published just two weeks ago, the core of religiosity today becomes the inner experience, largely disconnected from classical institutions but not at all individualistic in the sense of socially disconnected. And, ignored, but important: the various Christian migrant churches in the Netherlands are growing. For our theme, there may be connection here between ‘the Rest’ and ‘the West’? And I would venture that a major connection might be found by exploring in a much more systematic way the role of ‘religious emotion’ – for the better or for something else... - see Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, “A Sociology of Religious Emotion” (Oxford 2010).

But also, and just last week..., the latest issue of the Research Magazine of Tilburg University, entitled “Giving life meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” focused on the various new connections explored by research between ‘religion and values’:

The renewal of Christian identity and the contemporary dynamic of religions and rituals are top of the agenda for our theologians, religious scientists and cultural scientists. But sociologists, psychologists, economists and legal academics are also asking questions about existential meaning and new values to inform their profession. How can we usher in a sustainable economy? How should we ensure that healthcare retains a human dimension? How do we arrive at meaningful and democratic means of management in a network community? [soon at: <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/research/tilburgresearch/>]

Finally, and maybe more than just for your information: from next year on, the Faculty of Theology, established in 1432 at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), will change its name into Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. Sounds like the times are a-changing... all over the globe!