

'More than just de-Christianisation : Christian Mission in the face of religious indifference in Eastern Germany' – a presentation by Eberhard Tiefensee

Professor Tiefensee's presentation will form a chapter in a book to be published in 2017.

[Eberhard Tiefensee, "More Than Just De-Christianisation: Christian Mission in Face of Religious Indifference in East Germany," translated by P. S. Peterson, in *The Decline of Established Christianity in the Western World: Interpretations and Responses*, ed. Paul Silas Peterson, London: Routledge, 2017, forthcoming]

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Professor Tiefensee began with the assertion that Eastern German Protestantism is 'imploding'. In 1946 81% of the population was reckoned to be Protestant. Today around 80% of the population claims to have no church affiliation. This trend towards secularization has come about firstly because of the atheistic propaganda levelled against the churches by German Social Democracy during the 19th century and secondly because of the political secularization imposed by the Soviet Union from 1945 until 1989. 'Western Europe has been described by Peter Berger as a "disaster area for the churches," Prof Tiefensee told us, 'and Eastern Germany is at the epi-centre.'

Getting an accurate picture of any confessional landscape is difficult. Sociological studies can help, but examining several of them reveals that they all create their own categories ranging from people who believe in particular manifestations of God (including Christians) via deism and theism, through humanism and naturalism to agnosticism and atheism. The permutations are almost endless! And Professor Tiefensee warned that such studies generally lack philosophical and theological interpretation.

He went on to identify a particular category among people who describe themselves as having no religious affiliation which he labelled 'the religiously indifferent'(RI). These are not atheists, because atheists have a belief, namely that God does not exist. They are not agnostics, because agnostics do not know whether or not there is a God and often have no opinion to offer. What marks the RI out as a particular group is that, whilst atheists and agnostics are prepared to discuss matters concerning God and the World, the RI are just not interested. Any discussion about God is to them meaningless, irrelevant and incomprehensible. Professor Tiefensee described them as 'religiously non-musical.'

In the area of the former GDR, he told us, the RI are untouched by the churches, and for several generations they have been distanced from religion. They are strongly influenced both by the natural sciences and by the propaganda of the communist era. They consider religion of any kind as unscientific and premodern. It is family associations and other social networks that provide the foundation for their lives, not a faith. They mark the key moments in life by secular rituals - birth, enrolment at school, *Jugendweihe* (a secular alternative to confirmation), civil marriage and secular funerals. No church or religion is necessary. Ask them whether they are

Christian or Atheistic and they simply do not understand the question. 'They simply refer to themselves as "normal",' Professor Tiefensee told us.

That the RI have only become recognized in academic circles during the 1990s is largely due to the fact that human beings have always been thought of as "incurably religious", as Auguste Sabatier described them in 1898. The clear inference from that was that the RI could not actually exist because if they did they would contradict this most basic assumption of philosophical and theological anthropology. Karl Rahner, for example, considered the existence of non-religious people unimaginable. Such a person, Rahner said, "would cease to be a human being. He would have crossed back to being a resourceful animal."

The belief that people are essentially religious is espoused by people anxious about the evident decline of Christianity in the Western world. But the situation in Eastern Germany shows both a decline of religion *per se* and a loss of interest in religious matters altogether. This has led some people to look for "equivalents of religion" among the RI but, Professor Tiefensee warned, this is a very dangerous approach. There are anthropologists who think they find human-like behaviour in animals. But the animals in question are indifferent to such anthropological hermeneutics. In a similar way, the RI are unconcerned if others describe them as actually somehow religious, he said.

It is logically impossible to make general statements such as "human beings are incurably religious" because in reality all human beings differ from one another. 'If you assert that the human being is a rational being,' Professor Tiefensee reminded us, 'you only have to consider embryos, Alzheimer patients, people with severe learning difficulties, and people living for years in a comatose state and you become aware of the problem.' Simply stating that human beings are naturally religious does not mean that there cannot be human beings actually able to live without a God or any religious equivalent. Such people can and do exist, and among them are found the RI in Eastern Germany.

Professor Tiefensee made the following important observations. First, it is necessary to distinguish between 'a replacement-religion' and 'a replacement of religion'. The latter is not religion. Second, it is wrong to assume that someone exhibits some kind of religious attribute or religiosity when that assumption contradicts that person's own self-understanding.

An interesting line of approach is to ask how the RI might approach those areas of living that are common to all people, though outside an individual's control. Professor Tiefensee offered this example. Everyone has been born. No-one has initiated his or her own existence. But the existence a person experiences is fragile. At some point everyone dies. Individuals recognize this through experience. They encounter instances of birth and death. But whilst these are things that all human beings have in common, they do not all interpret them in the same ways.

Some people, on thinking that they do not know to whom they owe their existence, might experience what Schleiermacher described as "a feeling of absolute dependency". But while some might manage this feeling by expressing gratitude, to their parents perhaps or, if they are

religious, to a God who is the source of all being, others, including the RI, might simply say, "I am the product of evolution" or even, "I am the product of chance." Karl Marx offered a humanistic variant of this non-religious consciousness suggesting that the human being is a network of social relationships, part of humanity, and that every human being should work to serve humanity. This relationship to the whole of humanity, of being part of a greater whole, can be expressed in an entirely non-religious way.

Professor Tiefensee concluded that every human being is not 'incurably religious', as was previously thought, because in reality there are many people who are 'religiously unmusical.' Such a conclusion raises questions for committed Christians: Are the RI lost for every kind of Christian mission? Do they constitute the modern version of the *massa damnata*?

Clearly there are issues here concerning Christian mission and how it is to be understood and undertaken. So Professor Tiefensee moved on to suggest that instead of traditional models of mission Christians should engage in an 'ecumenism of the third kind'.

As he had already explained, religious issues seem to lie so far outside of the horizon of the RI that a mutual point of reference can hardly be found. While Christians and other religious people can engage in discussion with atheists and agnostics, it is very difficult to find a point of contact with the 'religiously unmusical'. The RI simply do not understand the arrogant aggressiveness of an atheist like Richard Dawkins or the faith-based certainty of people who celebrate church services and pray.

The RI provide a real challenge to Christians because they seem to manage perfectly well without God. Professor Tiefensee said that we are living in a historically unique situation. This is the first time Christians have encountered 'religionlessness'. Up to now Christian missionaries have always been able to engage in some kind of inter-religious dialogue with the people they seek to evangelize. Their approach has been either to try to show that the other person's beliefs are lacking something important, or to explore the different ways in which the Christians and the others are approaching ultimate truths.

The underlying idea, he explained, is that there is 'a path to a target, one which the others have either not found or, if they have found it, are comparatively not far along the way.' However, this approach only works if both parties are on an equal footing. Professor Tiefensee thought that whilst the RI make this kind of discussion very difficult, it should not be impossible.

Mission has to be about exploring the other person's position and understanding it better. When this is done it becomes apparent that the RI do not understand themselves as lacking religion but rather see themselves as being free of religion. To them it is people who need religion – people like us – that are deficient, not themselves!

Professor Tiefensee then turned to a series of Biblical images.

First, ***We know in part*** (1 Corinthians 13.9). To accept this means that truth possibly lies in points of irreconcilable difference rather than points of agreement. Both sides in the discussion recognize that the truth is always greater (*veritas semper maior*). So in ecumenism or in mission, absolute truth, however it may be expressed by one side or the other, does not have the final word. For St Paul the final word is love.

Second, ***Salt of the earth*** (Matthew 5.13). It was under this title that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave an interview in 1996 in which he said, "Maybe we need to take leave of the idea of a church of the people." Just as salt is not a staple food in itself, as anyone who has ever taken a mouthful of it will testify, salt can be very effective in flavouring or preserving another medium. It follows that if the Church is to be the *salt of the earth* Christian mission will be better practiced in a non-religious milieu rather than the 'church of the people milieu'. When Christian missionaries are ready to be challenged by the otherness of the other they gain a new and better understanding of their own faith. 'Only then,' said Professor Tiefensee, 'can an offer of faith be made.' What emerges from the encounter will no longer be the concern of this particular mission or missionary, but will be the work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, ***One body and many members*** (1 Corinthians 12.12-30). Think of our globally networked world society as being an organism. Then consider the Pauline image of the Church as an organism, the one body of Christ with many interrelated members. It very quickly becomes apparent that the global organism encompassing time and space is today, more than ever before, differentiated and specialized to a very high degree. Clearly not everyone can do everything. 'So there are believers who believe and pray with and for the others,' Professor Tiefensee suggested, 'while the "religiously unmusical" have other skills and other tasks.' St Paul says as much when asserting that "the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband." (1 Corinthians 7.14)

Professor Tiefensee then quoted Grace Davie, who had proposed the concept of "vicarious religion". This would have the following tasks: Churches and church leaders would perform ritual on behalf of others; Church leaders and churchgoers would believe on behalf of others and incur criticism if they did not do this properly; Church leaders and churchgoers would be expected to embody moral codes on behalf of others; Churches, finally, would offer space for debating unresolved issues in modern societies.

Davie was describing the Anglican Church in England. In the East German context, Professor Tiefensee suggested, the reciprocal effect should be emphasised – the RI represent the loss of the experience of God, with all its negative yet also purifying consequences for a deeper life of faith.

Professor Tiefensee said that, had he more time, he would like to expand and deepen Davie's "vicarious" concept theologically. The "vertical" dimension is already well known: Christ died in our place for our sins (see, for example, 2 Corinthians 5.14). But the "horizontal" elements seem to him to be theologically under-developed. 'The idea of "vicarious religion" would go against the strong individualization of today's understanding of religion,' he said, 'which is,

above all, a consequence of the Reformation.’ The concept of the priesthood of all believers, something valued by Protestant Christians but seldom properly worked out in practice, is not only about participating in decision making in the Church but is about *being a priest* and *doing the work of a priest*, he said. That would clearly result in all Christians having the task of going before God on behalf of others (interceding), as Moses did for the people on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32.10-14). The Church would become an advocate or a representative before God of all humanity, including the RI. Those who are being represented do not, and do not have to, necessarily agree with this, but such an approach might ensure that a place is being kept open for them, in this case, for the RI, so that they can come and take it at any time.

Ecumenism begins in the home (*oikos*), as the provocative Pauline example of the sanctification of the unbelieving spouse shows. Just as there are increasing numbers of inter-confessional and inter-religious marriages and families, there are also marriages between Christians, atheists and the RI. This is recognized in new rituals for the Roman Catholic wedding ceremony. The resulting confessional patchwork-families, whether they represent ecumenism of a first, second or third kind, all face similar challenges: Which religious festivals shall be celebrated, and how? Which biographical rites of passage shall be adopted? How shall the child learn to pray? How shall all of this be communicated to the extended family?

‘Maybe the domestic microcosm and actions at ground-level can motivate the world and the world-church to greater “ecumenical” efforts,’ Professor Tiefensee concluded.

This is a personal summary produced by Canon Dick Lewis. You will be able to read Professor Tiefensee’s complete presentation next year in

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