APPENDIX 4.1

10

Finding Hope in Local Communities Mission within Postmodernity

In *Christianity Rediscovered* Vincent Donovan presents a now famous picture of the way he went to Masai villages in East Africa not to offer education in schools, or medical care, or any kind of political strategy to improve the material conditions of their lives. Nor did he go to evangelize the Masai in any sense in which that word is normally used, because he was never sure what he was going to say to them before he arrived. Instead he did something different and highly significant in the development of mission:

> Each day, in that brisk, early morning hour, still unheated by the equatorial sun, there in the Masai highlands, with the background of the lowing cattle, as I stood waiting for them to gather, I was conscious of the knot in my stomach, wondering if this were the day it would all blow up in my face, with Christianity being utterly rejected by these sons of the plains. Many is the time in that lonely, nomadic setting that I wished I were back in the comfortable company of familiar and acquiescent Christians.
>
> I had to tell them that very first day, when they had all gathered, that I had come to talk about, and deal only with, God. (Donovan 1982, p. 24)

The talk was not just his own talk. The Masai villagers had their own questions and answers. In his book Donovan presents an account of a genuine dialogue between two parties, a dialogue with surprising results:

> Going back and forth among these pagan communities week by week, I soon realized that not one week would go by without some surprising rejoinder or reaction or revelation from these Masai. My education was beginning in earnest.
>
> The process followed was simple. I would mention a religious theme or thought and ask to hear their opinion on it, and then I would tell them what I believed on the same subject, a belief I had come eight thousand miles to share with them. I have done pastoral and social work in America and Africa, and have taught in a major seminary. But I have never been so tested in my life as by these pagan sons and daughters of the plain. (ibid., p. 41)

This was not, then, a one-way street for mission: there was significant traffic in both directions. Donovan was bringing the gospel to share with the Masai, but the language and idioms open to him were those of the Masai, and these were forcing him to rethink and recast his understanding of that gospel.

Christianity Rediscovered propels us into a theological world strikingly and disturbingly different from those of the Reformation and Enlightenment. This chapter will explore the roots of this world, its classical expression in some mid-twentieth-century theologians, and some exciting contemporary expressions.

Background

Cultural trends: from modernity to postmodernity

The roots of this new theological world or paradigm partly lie in the collapse of Enlightenment aspirations. Historians describe how the rise of industrialization, first in the north of England and then across northern Europe, was followed in the nineteenth century by European commercial expansion around the world, carrying Western culture, philosophy and education to many points across the globe. The Age of Reason became the colonial age of empire in

which the European powers harnessed technology and industrialization for the scramble for global domination. The next step along this road was war between the competing European powers. Many commentators see the First World War as the outcome of the Enlightenment era, where the so-called enlightened European powers proceeded to kill a whole generation of their young men on the battlefields with their new-found technology. These desperate events were followed by the Versailles Treaty, the humiliation of Germany and the rise of Nazism, and then, of course, the Holocaust, the Second World War and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These unparalleled events have been seen by some as the dark conclusion of the Enlightenment's belief in the power of humanity to perfect itself. For many they undermined belief in the existence of human progress founded on reason and technology. And while technology has continued to develop with great speed in the twentieth century, it is now regarded with wariness by many in the West: since the Second World War there have arisen a number of anti-technology movements, such as opposition to the atomic bomb, to modernist civic developments and to genetic engineering.

A second key development in this period has been mass immigration into Western societies from the Indian sub-continent, Africa and central Asia. This has resulted in the rise of pluralist societies in Europe, with different religions, cultures, languages and customs rubbing shoulders with each other in most of the larger European cities. And this has included the arrival of not only non-Christian religions but Pentecostalist forms of Christianity from the southern hemisphere (see Jenkins 2002).

In the latter part of the twentieth century these two developments gave rise to a new way of relativistic thinking in Western culture, at least in the urban centres. This is often called 'postmodernism' and has led some commentators to describe the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries as the start of a new era, the postmodern era. According to Michael Gallagher in *Clashing Symbols* (Gallagher 2003) it can be seen as having two forms, a philosophical movement which is very critical of what it replaces, which he calls *postmodernism*, and a broader and more open cultural movement which he terms *postmodernity*.

Postmodernism was born in the poststructuralist philosophy of French literary critics such as Jacques Derrida (1930–2005), Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Jean François Lyotard (1924–98). A text which summed up the aim of the

movement was Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* of 1979. He described postmodernism as 'the deconstruction of the metanarratives of modernity'. A metanarrative was any attempt to provide an overarching account of reality, which included not only the traditional grand narratives of religion but, significantly, modernist metanarratives in the works of Adam Smith, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, and any others who claimed to provide systems of religious, political, economic or cultural ideas. Gallagher helpfully summarizes the key beliefs of *postmodernism*, which he terms its 10 Commandments, indicating its didactic nature. These show the way it was a deliberate attempt to reject Enlightenment values and aspirations: 'Thou shalt not worship reason'; 'Thou shalt not believe in history'; 'Thou shalt not hope in progress'; 'Thou shalt not tell meta-stories'; 'Thou shalt not focus on the self'; 'Thou shalt not agonise about values'; 'Thou shalt not trust institutions'; 'Thou shalt not bother about God'; 'Thou shalt not live for productivity alone'; 'Thou shalt not seek uniformity' (Gallagher 2003, pp. 100–3). Instead, in Lyotard's terms, it is necessary to accept the 'incommensurability' of various forms of discourse and the 'difference' between them, to be sensitive to the breakdowns in communications that take place between people, and to develop a better understanding of them.

Gallagher describes *postmodernity*, on the other hand, as more open and creative and something that

> is a new sensibility that aims at wholeness. It sees modernity as having caused an abyss between the rational and the subjective aspects of humanity – by developing both dimensions in isolation from one another. Postmodernity as sensibility is groping towards forms of life that bridge these divisions . . . there is . . . a different searching beyond the old certitudes, including a new willingness to revisit the despised zones of the spiritual and religious as roots of our healing. (2003, p. 108)

In this movement he sees therefore a 'humbler searching' with an openness to ecological and feminist concerns as well as to the spiritual. It draws on the imagination and on a social commitment to bring healing to old wounds and to liberate different zones of life (p. 107).

A theological revolution

In tandem with these traumatic social and cultural events there has been an unfolding theological revolution. It was foreshadowed at a gathering of theologians at Eisenach in Germany in 1896. Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), a newly appointed professor who would later help to institute the modern discipline of sociology of religion, sprang to the rostrum and uttered some disturbing words: 'Gentlemen, everything is tottering' (quoted in Stuart Hughes 1979, p. 230). This was a dramatic summary of an argument he presented in his article 'The Crisis of Historicism'. Up to that point he had been a scholar who, typical of his age (and influenced by the Hegelians), looked to the history of human development for the basis of values. He had been 'convinced that knowledge and values could only be won from history . . . history became the only way to gain true knowledge and the historical approach constituted the most significant advancement of the modern spirit'. And he believed that even though this knowledge and these values were 'relative to specific historical situations, [they] reflected an absolute truth' (Iggers 1968, p. 188). But now, at Eisenach and in his article, Troeltsch stated that historical study did *not* give us understanding. Rather, it had undermined 'all firm norms and ideals of human existence . . . Politics, law, morality, religion and art were all dissolved in the stream of history and became comprehensible only as parts of specific historical developments.' He now believed the modern study of history had 'shattered our ethical systems' and the belief in humanitarian progress (ibid., p. 189).

Karl Barth, already introduced on p. 10, began his theological reflection within this setting of crisis. He had also grown up within the liberal historicism which was predominant in Protestant theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His teachers Adolf von Harnack (Berlin) and Wilhelm Herrman (Marburg) were typical representatives and saw religion as concerned with the cultivation of people's spiritual faculties. They believed humanity might achieve union with the divine: it had the capacity to gradually lead itself to God. Barth led a revolt against this way of thinking. He may be called the first clear exponent of a new theological paradigm which broke radically with an Enlightenment approach to theology (see Küng 1995, pp. 165–6).

This began to happen when Karl Barth became the pastor of the industrial town of Safenwil from 1911. He saw the poverty of the victims of industrial capitalism and understood that the progress of civilization had not brought

them freedom but oppression. He realized that his training, premised on such progress, had given him nothing to say to these people: at the same time as he read and preached on the Scriptures he found in the Bible a 'strange new world', a reality to be understood only by inhabiting it, a world defined not by our quest for God but by God's coming to us (Jenson 1997, p. 21).

During the First World War Barth was aware of the slaughter on the battlefields and the 'suicide' of European liberal culture, and this strengthened his sense of alienation from contemporary theology. He heard his own teachers call for loyalty above all to the Kaiser and the Fatherland! Barth became a questioner, an outsider, a left-winger.

He lectured, wrote papers and made two attempts to write a commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. The second edition was published in 1922 and was written as a dialogue with the reader. It is 'a direct assault on the reader: it seeks not to inform but to transform' (Jenson 1997, p. 26): its point is to question and unnerve the reader so that he or she questions their liberal assumptions about religion and is thrown back *onto God* to receive from his grace, which it saw as eternity breaking into time, a reality with an 'infinite qualitative difference' (Kierkegaard, quoted by Barth, in Jenson 1997, p. 26).

The second edition of *Romans* achieved instant celebrity: it became the rallying point for a new generation of Protestant pastors and teachers and Barth's career as a professional theologian was now under way. He lectured at Göttingen, Münster and, from 1930, at Bonn, where he became the theological leader of the 'confessing' resistance to Hitler's attempt to take over control of the German evangelical church. He was the chief drafter of the Confessing Movement's 'Barmen Declaration' (see Bradstock and Rowland 2002, ch. 37). This resulted in his being banned from teaching in Germany in 1935. He returned to Switzerland and taught at Basel for the rest of his life, writing and publishing the *Church Dogmatics* between 1932 and 1967 and coming to play with relish the role of the Church's most famous and controversial theologian.

Barth builds his theology on the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), often called the father of modern theology, but he radically inverts it. Schleiermacher began his theology with an analysis of human existence, showing that religion is a necessary component of complete personal life. The direction in which he moved was from nature or natural theology as the basis for Christian theology, towards Christ and Christianity, letting the former define the question that the latter must answer.

Barth turned this on its head:

> Instead of interpreting Christianity by the general character and function of religion, he interprets religion, including Christian religion, by Christianity's differentiating specificity. Instead of analyzing human existence, in order then to inquire after Christ's contribution to the religious aspect, he analyzes Christ's existence, in order then to inquire after our religion's place therein. (Jenson 1997, p. 25)

Christ's revelation is primary, for Barth: everything else must be seen in the light of that. So, in response to his fellow theologian Emil Brunner's 'yes' to the possibility of natural theology, he proclaimed a loud and famous 'no' to the very idea of doing it. Instead, the discipline of theology must have Christ's life, death and resurrection, or '*the Christ event*' as Barth called it, as its beginning, middle and end. Theology consists in tracing the significance of this event for every aspect of life. Christ the Word of God reveals the truth of all things. Hence Barth's theology, especially the 14 volumes (8,000 pages) of his *Church Dogmatics*, is a work of Christology. It begins with the doctrine of the Word of God, which sets out the basics of his position, concentrating on the priority of the revelation of the Word of God over everything else. Barth assumes God has decisively revealed himself in Christ, and his task as a theologian is to draw out the meaning of this for the Christian community. He does not begin his theology with general and abstract philosophical arguments about 'the ground of being' or 'the feeling of absolute dependence', as nineteenth-century theologians tended to do. He begins with God as revealed by Christ, in his birth, work, crucifixion and resurrection. Then in the second volume, when he addresses the doctrine of God, he brings the doctrine of the Trinity to centre stage, because he sees the nature of God *as defined by* the interrelations of the Son and Holy Spirit with the Father: 'It is from Barth that twentieth-century theology has relearned that this doctrine has and must have explanatory and regulatory use in the whole of theology, that it is not a separate puzzle to be solved but the framework within which all theology's puzzles are to be solved' (Jenson 1997, p. 31).

Even when Barth explores the doctrine of creation he relates it to Christ. He describes God's work in creating the world as being about setting in place the right conditions for the revelation of his Son. This is one of his most original contributions to theology. Then, when he comes to look at the person and

work of Christ, he does this over four massive volumes in his 'Doctrine of Reconciliation'.

Church Dogmatics is not a deductive piece of work, building a logical argument by moving on from one point to the next. Rather each volume stands in its own right as a meditation upon the way Christ defines and saves human life. It is possible to pick up and read any of the volumes without having read any of the others before.

Barth was first misunderstood and rejected, especially in Britain and North America: his theology was labelled as 'neo-orthodoxy' and dismissed as reactionary. But now he is recognized as the pioneer of an approach to theology which is no longer dependent on philosophy or the study of history and has found its authority in a transcendent revelation, the Word of God found in the Christ event. In different language, he has allowed the Church to see that the kingdom of God is not built through human effort and the progress of civilization (as Hegel and his successors argued) but comes from God, as his gracious gift, as a transcendent reality breaking into the corruption and failures of human life. In an age which has witnessed the collapse of Enlightenment hopes in humanity's ability to improve itself, Barth has provided alternative grounds for hope.

Mission within postmodernity

The traumas of the twentieth century and the rise of a pluralist and relativist culture cut the ground from Enlightenment mission, because they showed that the Church had no reason to think that its major educational and health care projects would usher in the kingdom of God. Despite all the progress in spreading the institutions of Christianity around the world in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century was arguably the most bloody and dehumanizing in history. While the work of church schools, hospitals and political involvement undoubtedly improved the physical well-being of many people, such work had not resolved or begun to resolve the ultimate issues and questions of the reign of God.

Barth had seen that these issues and questions could only be resolved by God himself: it was the divine revelation in Christ that provided the answer to the questions of humanity. This insight had radical consequences for the Church's understanding of mission. We have already seen Barth's impact at the

Brandenburg Missionary Conference of 1932 and the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952 (Chapter 2). Barth was the key figure behind the coining of the phrase *missio Dei* as a summary of mission's dependence on the initiative and sustenance of God himself. Mission was not to be seen as one of humanity's building projects, carried forward by its own strength and reason, but as a divine movement in which the Church was privileged to participate.

But what, in practical terms, was the response of the Christian community to be? What was the role of the Church within this bracing context?

It was one of Barth's students who began to map out the answer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), a German Lutheran theologian and pastor who resisted the Nazis and was put to death by them, has been described as 'the architect' of a new way of understanding the mission of the Church (Bosch 1991, p. 375). He did this in his writings and his life, especially from his prison cell before he was executed. He described some of the implications for Christians who take the *otherness* of God's grace and mission seriously. With Barth he saw that the foundation of faith, mission, the Church and theology is not human enquiry, reason or science but God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The only true allegiance was to Christ as Lord. This was why he joined Barth in the German Confessing Church in 1934 as it broke away from the German National Church over its allegiance to Hitler. But Bonhoeffer went beyond Barth in emphasizing the importance of living within the community of the Church as a way of receiving and living out this revelation. He believed that the Christian community was the concrete presence of Christ in the world and needed to be valued and nurtured as such (his first book was on these themes, *Sanctorum Communio*, published in 1930, as was his *Life Together* of 1937). He therefore introduced a Catholic emphasis on the corporate life of the Church into a Barthian outlook.

Bonhoeffer also saw that the Christian life if taken seriously is no easy matter. He opposed what he called the offering of cheap grace by the established churches to their members. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* he described the costly nature of following Christ, a way of service rather than domination.

Between 1934 and 1945 Bonhoeffer experienced the reality of this cost. He was banned from teaching, harassed by the authorities, left Germany and then bravely returned at the outbreak of the war to stand by his people. His defiant opposition, including his association with the group of people who tried to assassinate Hitler, led to his arrest and eventually his execution.

His writings and especially his *Letters and Papers from Prison* help to articulate a theology of mission implicit in the witness of his life. He moved away from seeing God as an almighty fixer, who controls his creation through the power and domination of the Church. He saw the modern era, which he called 'man's coming of age', as one in which humanity had discovered how to live life without reference to God and one which had therefore marginalized him. This, though, was not necessarily a bad thing: 'God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us' (Bonhoeffer 1959, p. 122). This has implications for discipleship:

> Man is challenged to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world. He must therefore plunge himself into the life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to transfigure it. He must live a 'Worldly' life and so participate in the suffering of God . . . It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world . . . (ibid., pp. 122–3)

In an outline for a book at the end of the *Letters and Papers* he describes what this means for the mission of the Church:

> The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. As a fresh start she should give away all her endowments to the poor and needy. The clergy should live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. She must take part in the social life of the world, not lording it over men, but helping and serving them. She must tell men, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. (p. 166)

Christian mission, then, is about the Church laying aside its own power and becoming open and vulnerable to the world, giving itself to serving the needs of others, locating itself where they live and only then, finally, seeking to communicate the meaning of the gospel: Christian mission is all about witness out of a prior vulnerability.

Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers* was published in German in 1951 and in

English in 1953. It would take another decade for its challenges to become widely known and accepted. But its influence spread in the 1960s and eventually Bonhoeffer, as already mentioned, would come to be described as 'the architect' of this way of viewing the mission of the Church (see further Dulles 1988, pp. 94–5).

Case study: Vincent Donovan and the Masai

The 1960s was also the decade in which Vincent Donovan, a Roman Catholic missionary priest, began his work among the Masai people of Tanzania. While he was not directly influenced by Bonhoeffer, the approach to mission that developed out of his work is one that vividly puts into practice the principles Bonhoeffer was describing.

His approach to mission, significantly, had as its premise the failure of the institutional Church through its educational, medical and ecclesial bodies to make any headway in converting the Masai people. The work of the mission station to which he was posted was entirely concerned with its school and hospital. The priests visited the homesteads where the people lived to recruit for the school but the subject of God was never mentioned. Donovan asked permission from his bishop to adopt a different approach. He wanted to cut himself off

> from the hospital and schools as well as the socializing with them – and just go and talk to them about God and the Christian message . . . I want to go to the Masai on daily safaris – unencumbered with the burden of selling them our school system, or begging for their children for our schools, or carrying their sick, or giving them medicine. Outside of this, I have no theory, no plan, no strategy, no gimmicks – no idea of what will come. I feel rather naked. I will begin as soon as possible. (Donovan 1982, pp. 15–16)

With great eloquence Donovan then describes the encounters he had with different Masai villagers, his own vulnerability and the specific nature of what he wanted to talk about. The quotation at the start of this chapter described the knot in his stomach that preceded each encounter and how he had come to talk about, and deal only with, God.

The correlation with Bonhoeffer's vision of the vulnerable Church is striking.

Donovan was coming among the Masai in a way in which he laid himself open to rejection: he was genuinely offering himself to this indigenous community. What is also important is the element of real dialogue in Donovan's approach to the Masai, which was also described in the quotation above on how his education began in earnest when he entered into dialogue with the Masai.

This was not, we noted, a one-way street for mission: there was significant traffic going in both directions. Donovan was bringing the gospel to share with the Masai, but the language and idioms open to him were those of the Masai, and these were forcing him to rethink and recast his understanding of that gospel. One good example of this comes from near the end of his time with the Masai when he asked them, 'by what name would you refer to me in the job or role that I perform in your Christian community, even in the temporary way I do it, until one of you is ready to take over that job?' He was asking them to find a word in their own language which would describe the missionary service he had provided. They discussed many words, rejecting the equivalent of doctor, chief, rich one, even shepherd (because there were good and bad shepherds in their community). They chose instead a role that had no connection with their pagan religious practices:

> He was a man present to every community who was interested in all the flocks of the community and essential to the life of the community and interested in all phases of that life. He was a man to whom anyone could turn for special difficulties and help. It was amazing to me that such a man, and others like him, were found in pagan communities like the Masai. They were called *ilaretok* and represented an extraordinary aspect of pagan life. The word literally means helpers, yet it carries with it all the overtones and connotations of servants. They were helpers or servants of the community. That is the concept these people chose to represent what they understood of the function of the Christian priest. I conducted this inquiry in other sections of the mission area among other Christian elders, geographically unrelated to the first elders, and in each case they made the same choice and came up with the very same word. (Donovan 1982, pp. 157–8)

This is important because it shows how the Masai were influencing and re-forming Donovan's own understanding of Christianity. He had set out with the assumption that his evangelism would bring the reality of the Christian

faith *to* them. This passage shows that something more complex and interesting had taken place, a two-way dialogue in which a new form of Christianity had been brought to life.

The West African scholar Lamin Sanneh has written an acclaimed study of this kind of dialogue. He traces what he calls the vernacular principle at work within it. Through many examples he shows that missionary preaching changed the missionaries as much as their audience:

> The central premise of missionary preaching is also a most acute source of irony. Many missionaries assumed that Africans had not heard of God and that it was the task of mission to remedy this defect. In practical terms, however, missionaries started by inquiring among the people what names and concepts for God existed, and having established such fundamental points of contact, they proceeded to adopt local vocabulary to preach the gospel.

Sanneh then observes,

> This field method of adopting the vernacular came to diverge sharply from the ideology of mission. After all, it turns out, Africans had heard of God, described God most eloquently, and maintained towards God proper attitudes of reverence, worship, and sacrifice . . . Consequently, however much mission tried to suppress local populations, the issue of the vernacular helped to undermine its foreign character. (Sanneh 1989, p. 159)

Sanneh goes on to illustrate this point with the example of living with pluralism. Western missionaries had arrived in Africa believing in a jealous God who forbade worship of other deities. But when he or she started to use the local vernacular name for God, the audience heard the missionary talking about the g/God they already knew.

> The God of the ancestors was accordingly assimilated into the Yahweh of ancient Israel and 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' . . . The exclusive notion of Western Christianity was replaced with the inclusive rule of African religions, an inclusiveness that helped deepen the pluralist ethos of the gospel. By embarking on translation, missionaries stimulated this ethos, thus helping to lay the foundation for a remarkable stage in the religious evolution of African communities. (ibid., pp. 159–60)

In all of this something new was being formed, neither traditional African religion nor classical Western Christianity, but an original expression of the faith for that local context. The difference between Vincent Donovan and the missionaries that Sanneh describes is that Donovan became aware of this process as it was happening and welcomed it. His costly embracing of the vernacular principle shows his adoption of a different understanding of mission, one that could be called post-missionary or postmodern. It is one that has radical implications for the transformation of Christianity in new contexts. But, on the other hand, Donovan's account of the Masai's faith, such as their identification of ministry with servanthood seen above, shows deep continuities as well.

One further theme should be highlighted from Donovan's great book, the rediscovery of God's agency at work through the whole process, the rediscovery of the *missio Dei* that can make the same thing happen elsewhere and thereby inspires hope. Donovan describes how one of the Masai elders had not been very happy with the word that Donovan had used to translate the word 'faith': the Masai word meant literally 'to agree to'. The elder said that

> 'to believe' like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act. We should find another word. He said that for a man really to believe is like a lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms (Africans refer to the front legs of an animal as its arms), pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.

Donovan looked at the elder in silence and amazement. But his wise old teacher was not finished yet:

> 'We did not search you out, Padri,' he said to me. 'We did not even want you to come to us. You searched us out. You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are, into the hills where we take our cattle for water, into our villages, into our homes. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land

> and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched *us* out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God.' (Donovan 1982, p. 63)

Donovan adds that his own role as a herald of the gospel was only 'a small part of the mission of God to the world . . . [which is] the immeasurably greater plan of the relentless, pursuing God whose will on the world would not be thwarted. The lion is God' (p. 64).

Other recent expressions

The common theme found in Bonhoeffer and Donovan is of the Church laying aside its power and wealth and becoming vulnerable to the local community, listening before witnessing, changing and being changed by the encounter. Both describe the humility that is needed in the missionary, and the risk that their mission could fail to hand on the gospel. Donovan also conveys the creativity and hopefulness of this type of mission in the way that his audience not only heard the gospel but created a new and dynamic embodiment of it. Lamin Sanneh has identified the vernacular principle as responsible for this creativity. (Andrew Walls has described this kind of process as the translation principle in Christian history: see Walls 1996, ch. 3.)

This open-ended approach to mission has been expressed in an increasing number of places in the latter part of the twentieth century, especially as migration has resulted in people of different faiths increasingly living side by side with each other, and the churches have had to enter into dialogue with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists (among others). This has taken place at every level, though not usually under the heading of 'mission' (see, for example, Wingate 2005). However, official church documents have recognized the place of dialogue within Christian mission. Bevans and Schroeder provide the following example from the Secretariat for Non-Christians of the Roman Catholic Church:

> Dialogue is . . . the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence

> and witness, service or direct proclamation. Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel. (In Bevans and Schroeder 2004, p. 378)

There is also widespread recognition that the concept of dialogue does not rule out witness to the gospel (keeping in play the revealed theology of Karl Barth and others). This was dramatically affirmed by the World Council of Churches at its assembly in Nairobi in 1975. The subsequent *Guidelines on Dialogue* express the point eloquently:

> we do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another. Indeed, as Christians enter dialogue with their commitment to Jesus Christ, time and again the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. Thus to member churches of the WCC we feel able with integrity to commend the way of dialogue as one in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today; at the same time we feel able with integrity to assure our partners in dialogue that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow-pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue. (World Council of Churches 1979)

This dialogue and witness/proclamation properly enter into a dialectic with each other, as Bosch affirms:

> we do not have all the answers and are prepared to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge, that we regard our involvement in dialogue and mission as an adventure, are prepared to take risks, and are anticipating surprises as the Spirit guides us into fuller understanding. This is not opting for agnosticism, but for humility. It is, however, a bold humility – or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. (Bosch 1991, p. 489)

Emerging churches

A clear and contemporary example of this dialectic of dialogue and witness is the 'emerging church' movement, which is made up of a diverse but increasing number of recently founded church communities in North America and Britain that share a number of practices. The term 'emerging church' was coined by Karen Ward in 2000 to describe 'what is coming to the surface. It is new, unformed, still happening, emerging' (Ward, in Gibbs and Bolger 2006, p. 321). Most of these churches are small, consisting of independent groups of fewer than thirty people, or clusters of house groups with up to one hundred (see Healey and Hinton 2005 for descriptions of other similar small Christian communities around the world). Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger provide the following introductory definition: 'emerging churches are missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time' (Gibbs and Bolger 2006, p. 28). This definition immediately shows that these churches have much in common with Bonhoeffer and Donovan: they are firmly located within the culture that they serve, rather than within some other ecclesial culture, seeking to live faithfully the way of Jesus out of that context. They creatively relate to what Gallagher termed *postmodernity* as opposed to *postmodernism*, which rejected religion (see above p. 163).

Gibbs and Bolger have conducted extensive research into the movement, spending five years collecting data in both the US and the UK and interviewing 50 church leaders, mostly under the age of 40. They 'identified patterns most prevalent in churches that take culture, specifically postmodern culture, seriously. Nine practices are common to each emerging church. Each emerging church, however, does possess three core practices. The other six practices are derivative of these three core practices' (Gibbs and Bolger 2006, p. 43). The three core practices are (1) identifying with the life of Jesus (understood as the life he lived before he was put to death, involving welcoming the outcast, hosting the stranger, challenging the political authorities by creating an alternative community); (2) transforming secular space, in the same way that postmodernity calls into question the separation of sacred and secular: emerging churches work within the secular for its sacralization, making all life sacred; (3) living as community within all realms of the life of their members, not just within a Sunday morning meeting: they function more as extended families than as affinity groups.

Out of these three core practices six other practices have arisen: (4) they are glad to welcome the stranger into the community; (5) they serve the needy with generosity, wanting to know the poor and be known by them; (6) they want everyone to participate in worship and other activities as producers rather than just as recipients; (7) they seek to be creative in worship and life together, reflecting the creativity of God; (8) they exercise decentralized leadership through the body as a whole, rather than having individual leaders set over the community; (9) they merge ancient and contemporary spiritualities, both corporate and personal.

Gibbs and Bolger also present the stories of many of these churches and of the people who help lead them. These stories bring the analysis to life and highlight some of the key features. One of the threads running through many of the stories is the element of exploration, risk and vulnerability in the emergence of these churches. Dwight Friesen of 'Quest' in Seattle shows the same kind of vulnerability and creativity found in Donovan's missionary work. He recounts how his own ambition to be the pastor of a large and thriving 'mega-church' had to give way to a more modest vocation of helping to lead a church community in which genuine relationships between people were valued above all else: 'I felt like I was dying, dying to the idea of the megachurch pastor, which seemed to me now as though it would be abusive to those who came. This was a time of serious soul searching. "If I am not that, then who am I?" I asked myself, for now I was faced with an invitation to labor in obscurity. I felt devastated.' He then reports that he 'felt a loss of security in who I was in relationship to Christ. I felt adrift. Speaking at our gatherings, I spoke more of doubt than of certainty. But opening up with my doubts and concerns freed others to do the same.' And out of this insecurity came a new vocation for his church: 'Our biggest ministry gives hope to those who have given up on church. We experience divine hope in our community by "being present in one another." We have a value that says, "We don't know for sure, but we sense God is calling us"' (ibid., pp. 271–2).

Another of the stories demonstrates the way emerging churches are embedded in postmodern culture (in much the same way that Donovan's Masai churches were part and parcel of Masai culture):

> Visions (York, UK) worked for clubs on Friday nights, providing visuals for local promoters, and had worship on Sunday nights. From an integrity standpoint, they would not do anything at the club on Friday that they would

> not do in church on Sunday. Their life in the world must remain consistent with their faith commitment. Correspondingly, they would not do anything on Sunday that they would not do at the club on Friday – their faith had to be expressed in ways that was native to the culture around them. Living in the culture as a local, and yet pointing to One beyond the local, helps keep the emerging churches' worlds intact. (Sue Wallace, in ibid., p. 75)

Gibbs and Bolger comment that

> When worship and witness are in sync, as with Visions, it creates a 24–7 spiritual life for their participants, overcoming the 'secular' aspects of their lives with reminders of God. Sue Wallace . . . explains, 'The reason we embrace culture in worship is not only to make the place feel like "home" to those coming into it from the outside world, but also to make us take our worship from our church space into our world. When you are in a shop or a pub, and you hear a track that has been used in church, it forges connections and makes you think about God.' When we bring our own culture to God in worship, then that experience extends to our daily lives when we are away from the community. These 'secular' worship expressions become reminders and clues of God everywhere. (pp. 75–6)

This shows that behind emerging churches is a strong sense of the prior mission of God in the world, the *missio Dei* highlighted by Karl Barth. Steve Collins expresses the same idea in different language: 'It's funny how we talk of "bringing things to God" – like he wasn't there all the time. What we're really doing is bringing our attention to bear on the relation between things and God that already exists, and maybe making a few conscious adjustments to our own place in it' (ibid., p. 217).

This strong sense of the *missio Dei* has even led some of the leaders to renounce traditional evangelism altogether:

> I no longer believe in evangelism. To be postevangelism is to live our lives in Christ without a strategy but with the compassion and the servant posture of Jesus Christ. We do not do evangelism or have a mission. The Holy Spirit is the evangelist, and the mission belongs to God. What we do is simply live our lives publicly as a community in the way of Jesus Christ, and when people

> inquire as to why we live this way, we share with them an account of the hope within us. We are to love one another, and that creates its own attraction. Taking care of the sick and the needy creates all the evangelism we need. (Karen Ward, in ibid., p. 135)

This demonstrates the distinctiveness of the postmodern approach to mission: it is not centred, as in the Enlightenment modern type, on human projects for educational, medical and political progress; nor is it centred, as in the Protestant Reformation type, on seeking the inward conversion of individual people to an affective faith. Rather, it is expressed through Christian people offering themselves to the local indigenous community, whatever that happens to be, so that they may give and receive hospitality and care and so that genuine dialogue and witness may take place. In this way they believe and hope that the healing, forgiving and transforming love of Christ, a sign of the kingdom which unites the sacred and the secular, will be known in that place. Mission, then, is all about finding this kind of hope in local communities (see Figure 8). (See Morisy 2004 for exploration of this kind of mission through church community projects.)

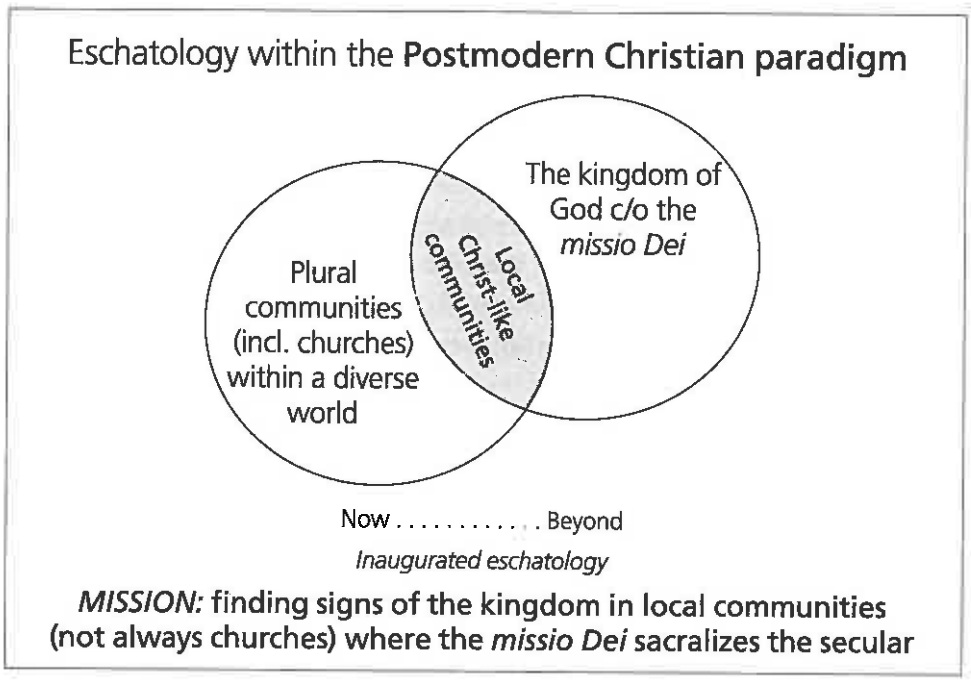

Figure 8

(Note: Robert Schreiter has recently argued that the Christian work of seeking reconciliation and healing in the trouble-spots of the world provides a contemporary postmodern paradigm of mission. This is because of the way many churches and agencies have sponsored this work in many parts of the world in the last fifty years (see Schreiter 2005; see also Mellor and Yates 2004). This is an important argument and reflects widespread ecumenical thinking. However, it does not necessarily reflect church life at local level, which is only occasionally involved in social and political peacemaking. Local mission today in many places seems much less focused and more open to a range of issues and concerns, which is why this *Studyguide* uses a more generalized typological description for postmodern mission.)

Summary of the postmodern Christian paradigm

Context

The Holocaust, atomic bomb, poverty, oppression, pluralism, postmodernism, ecological crisis (i.e. the failure of the Enlightenment project).

Authority

Contextual 'particular' experience and tradition/scripture.

Methodology

Action-reflection: the pastoral cycle of experience, exploration, reflection, and action.

Eschatology

God is bringing liberation for all the world at the end (the missio Dei) – first fruits of this kingdom can be experienced here and now by those who seek it.

Christology

Christ's mission is found through Scripture and identification with the culture of the place, whether traditional or postmodern: incarnational.

Discipleship
Reflection – listening to God through particular experience, Scripture and tradition.
Action – conforming daily living to the kingdom of God here and now.

Mission of the Church
To be a locally rooted community of hospitality and care, prophetically pointing to the coming of the kingdom.

Ministry
To nurture this community in theological, personal and practical ways, i.e. to be a practical community theologian.

Some examples
Barth, Bonhoeffer, Vincent Donovan, emerging churches.

Debate

Galilean principles of the *missio Christi* (from p. 33)

1. Contemplative listening, which frames all ministry: listening to God, to other people, to oneself, especially in times of prayer and retreat.
2. Addressing society as a whole, at points where people live and work, including and especially the marginalized. This results in being received and accepted by some but rejected and opposed by others.
3. Pointing to the inaugurated yet still awaited kingdom, in word and in surprising saving deed (symbolic actions) which address the actual needs of people (both individual and structural); but without publicizing the wonders.
4. Calling for a personal response by all to the coming of this kingdom.
5. Doing all this through a collaborative team, who themselves are powerless and vulnerable and must suffer the consequences.

One response

1. It has been clear throughout this chapter that *listening* has been central to the development of this type of mission. It was present at the beginning when Barth listened to the fact that the theology he inherited had nothing to say to the workers in Safenwil and that, at the same time, the Bible was speaking to him out of a strange and different world. It was present in Bonhoeffer when, in his prison cell, he faced up to the way the modern world no longer had need of traditional religion ('man's coming of age') and that Christian mission and ministry should now be all about the vulnerability of service rather than the strength of domination. It was clearly apparent in Donovan's method of evangelism, which involved asking questions and listening to the Masai before beginning to speak of the gospel. And in the emerging church movement, as we have just seen, a deep openness to postmodern culture is a foundation of all that happens.

2. This type of mission is clearly located within contemporary urban culture. It seeks to make contact with anyone and everyone who lives within it. It therefore fulfils the second Galilean principle: it is fundamentally an attempt to serve God's mission at the point where people live and work. However, there is a limitation, in that the plural nature of contemporary society, with its 'incommensurability' and 'difference', means that identification with one group prevents identification with another. Older generations who live in the suburbs or country areas, for example, do not seem to figure very prominently in the life of emerging churches.

There are attempts to overcome this. The Fresh Expressions initiative within the UK, an officially sponsored attempt to gather information and promote new forms of the Church, uses a much wider definition of a church: it is seeking to promote forms of church 'established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church' (*Fresh Expressions* 2006, p. 2). These include new types of services within existing churches, church community projects, forms of chaplaincy within educational institutions, and worship activities for children. But by the same token, the wider definition loses the distinctiveness of the postmodern mission type, which as we have just seen emphasizes vulnerability, dialogue with witness, and uniting the sacred and secular. In its understandable desire to be inclusive the Fresh Expressions initiative loses its focus on what is new and distinctive about emerging churches.

It remains an open question, then, as to whether this type of mission can address society as a whole. Its concern for the marginalized, however, is clear: they are central to its being: 'On one occasion our community was getting kicked out of a park because of our interaction with the homeless. "You can't feed the homeless here; you need a permit," the policeman said. I replied, "We are not feeding the homeless. We are having a picnic. We're eating with them"' (Spencer Burke in Gibbs and Bolger 2006, p. 135).

3. Does this mission type point to the kingdom of God? There was no doubt in the mind of the Masai Christian who described what God had done through Donovan as being like a lion embracing its prey. The proleptic relationship of church life to the kingdom of God is also a strong theme within the emerging church movement. Gibbs and Bolger report that in emerging churches the 'direction' of church life changed from being a centripetal dynamic (flowing in) to a centrifugal dynamic. 'This in turn led to a shift in emphasis from attracting crowds to equipping, dispersing, and multiplying Christ followers as a central function of the church.' They then quote Andrew Jones, who provides a theological explanation of what they mean:

> Emerging churches should be missional. And by missional, I understand that the emerging church will take shape inside the new culture as a redeeming prophetic influence. The church follows the kingdom, the church happens in *their* house rather than *our* house, just as it did in Matthew's house, and in Lydia's house, or the home of Priscilla and Aquila. The motion is always centrifugal, flowing outward to bring reconciliation and blessing to where it is needed. (Gibbs and Bolger 2006, p. 51)

Furthermore, emerging churches do not just use words to bear witness to what they believe. Another feature of their life is eating together, an action which demonstrates the hospitality and care that is so important to them. This can be seen in Spencer Burke's quotation above. For some of the churches this dimension has led to a restoration of the centrality of the Eucharist to their life (ibid., pp. 228–9).

4. Do emerging churches call for a personal response by all to the coming of the kingdom? Karen Ward's rejection of overt evangelism, quoted on p. 179 above,

would suggest that they do not. There is no direct challenge to people to make a decision for or against what is presented. However, her words also make clear that an evangelistic call does takes place implicitly, through the quality of the life of the Christian community: 'We are to love one another, and that creates its own attraction. Taking care of the sick and the needy creates all the evangelism we need.' For some this will be enough. But will it be enough for everyone? The suspicion here is that postmodern mission might be too reticent about engaging in the kind of evangelism which impels people to make a definite choice and commit themselves one way or the other. On occasion the fourth Galilean principle will struggle to find expression in this mission type.

5. A collaborative approach to leadership is a key part of the emerging church culture, as the eighth common practice shows. Of all the types of mission this is one that embodies this most clearly and impressively. It is always possible that at a future point certain key leaders or gurus will come to the fore and direct the future course of the movement. At the moment, thankfully, none seem to have done so and Gibbs and Bolger's book shows there are many different people involved in 'the conversation' which is taking this movement forward in innovative and exciting ways (see especially chapter 10).

Discussion questions

Are there local contexts where this type of mission may *not* be what is needed?
Why do you think this?
What might the strengths and weaknesses of this type of mission be within your own local context?

Further reading

Barth, Karl (1933), *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford University Press
Barth, Karl (1956), *Church Dogmatics, vol. I: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, T & T Clark
Bauman, Zygmunt (2005) *Liquid Life*, Polity Press

Bevans, Stephen B., and Roger P. Schroeder (2004), *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (1959), *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Fontana

Bosch, David J. (1992), *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis

Bradstock, Andrew, and Christopher Rowland, eds (2002), *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader*, Blackwell

Donovan, Vincent (1982), *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, SCM Press

Dulles, Avery, SJ (1988), *Models of the Church*, 2nd edn, Gill & Macmillan

Fresh Expressions: Prospectus Phase 2 (2006), Fresh Expressions Ltd

Gallagher, Michael (2003), *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, rev. edn, DLT

Gibbs, Eddie, and Ryan K. Bolger (2006), *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture*, SPCK

Harvey, David (1991), *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell

Healey, Joseph G., and Jeanne Hinton, eds (2005), *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*, Orbis

Iggers, George G. (1968), *The German Conception of History*, Wesleyan University Press

Jenkins, Philip (2002), *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford University Press

Jenson, Robert W. (1997), in David Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd edn, Blackwell

Küng, Hans (1995), *Christianity: Its Essence and History*, SCM Press

Mellor, Howard, and Timothy Yates, eds (2004), *Mission, Violence and Reconciliation*, Cliff College Publishing

Middleton, J. Richard, and Brian J. Walsh (1995), *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, Part One, 'The Postmodern Condition', SPCK

Morisy, Ann (2004), *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission*, Continuum

Sanneh, Lamin (1989), *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Orbis

Schreiter, Robert J. (2005), 'Reconciliation and Healing as a Paradigm for Mission', *International Review of Mission* vol. 94 (January)

Smith, David (2003), *Mission after Christendom*, DLT

Stuart Hughes, H. (1979), *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890–1930*, Harvester Press

Vanier, Jean (1988), 'The Basis of Dialogue', from *The Broken Body: Journey to Wholeness*, DLT

Walls, Andrew F. (1996), *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Orbis

Ward, Pete (2002) *Liquid Church*, Paternoster Press

Wingate, Andrew (2005), *Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful: How to Live in a Multi-faith World*, DLT

World Council of Churches (1979), *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, WCC