
MISSION TO TECHNOPOLIS

Adventist Outreach in a Changing World

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We live in a rapidly changing world. The past 200 years, during which Protestant (and Seventh-day Adventist) missions were established, were characterized by global Western dominance, an agrarian economy, and religious faith. All this is changing. The very term *mission* is seen by many as a remnant of the colonial age.

In this article we will consider the challenges to Adventist mission that are posed by the change from a community-oriented way of life with its rural outlook, its religious values and traditions, to our present societal system: urban, secular, and dominated by science and technology.

What do these challenges mean for our church at large, and especially for Adventist professionals and university students?

Three Stages in the Development of Human Thought

The basic changes our society is experiencing are rooted in a radically new way of thinking that shapes our contemporary attitudes, values, and life-style. Understanding this new reality of thought is essential to effective evangelism in the modern technopolis. The Christian philosopher Cornelius Van Peursen, in a fascinating article, traces three his-

torical stages in the development of our present way of thinking.¹

The first stage Van Peursen calls the Period of Myth, in which humans see themselves as an integral part of their world. Everything in it—animals, people, the forces of nature—is integrated into one coherent system that derives its meaning and identity from a belief in a supernatural power or powers that are the source of all knowledge and being. This religious understanding of humans and their environment finds its most powerful expression in myths, which are reenacted in ritual.

The second stage Van Peursen calls the Ontological Period. Here, people gain greater control over their environment through a more rational understanding of it. This places them in a different relationship to their surroundings. A common view of the cosmic order in this era is that of a ladder. On top of the ladder is the world of heavenly beings characterized by a hierarchic order, with God at the top, the material things

of life at the bottom. In the middle is humanity, indicating its dependence on the world of heavenly beings above and its control of the material world beneath. While humans and their works are clearly differentiated from other realities—a key step in the process of secularization—yet humans are still a part of an integrated whole, which gives them a sense of security and identity and a clear perspective for the use of their reasoning power. All things have their assigned place under God.

All this disappears in the third stage into which we are now entering: the Functional Period. In this stage the whole scaffolding of an all-embracing understanding of life is being dismantled. Our world has been compartmentalized into a myriad parts according to their role and function. Religion, if it persists at all, is relegated to only one of those compartments and specialized functions. No longer is it the center of life, the cement that ties everything together, the basis of all human thought and behavior, as in the first period. Neither is it the overarching, controlling factor that gave human meaning in the second. People's increased ability to understand and control their environment without the aid of the supernatural has led them to believe that they are truly masters of their own habitat. They need no other

source of power. In fact, they seriously question the existence of realities other than the naturally perceptible ones.

Secularization, then, is that process by which humanity loses its sense of living in a coherent world that can be grasped by human reason embedded in and informed by religious ritual and belief. The steps in that process may be summarized as follows: in the Period of Myth, the main issue was *that* something existed which was the source and power of everything that is. In the Ontological Period, the issue was *what* that other reality consisted of, what it was like. In the Functional Period, the chief question is "Does it work?" or "How does it function?"

Take, for instance, the concept of truth which is so central to Adventist thought and mission. During the Ontological Period, when the Adventist Church was born, truth was what rationally fit within the accepted thought system. Adventists held roughly the same presuppositions about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Scriptures as people of other faiths. On that basis we could prove our distinctive truths such as the true Sabbath, the heavenly sanctuary, or the state of the dead. That approach still lies at the heart of many Adventist evangelistic endeavors.

To modern human beings, however, truth is an experience, not a rational abstraction. It is something we can rely on because it works. Getting people to accept, or even listen to, biblical truth in this Functional Period depends on our ability to show the difference those truths make in people's everyday lives, in the drudgery of their work and the meaninglessness of life in a secular society. The same applies to the notion of God, Jesus Christ, the church, and salvation. They should become functional words in Adventist

evangelism, embodied in the daily life of every believer. Evangelism in this Functional Period is not accomplished mainly by rational arguments through specialists called missionaries or ministers, but through the convincing lives and words of every believer in whom God and the gospel are functioning realities.

Is not this what the Bible has always taught? In Scripture the word *truth* refers to that which is dependable rather than to that which can be rationally understood. It is a relationship in which humans participate, not merely a proposition for their mind to grasp. In the Ontological Period, God was mainly seen in his attributes. The debates concerning these "truths" never ended. In the Functional Period, these rational propositions lose much of their impact. God is known to contemporary people through a personal encounter—not by what he is, but by what he does and how he acts.

The pragmatic, functional nature of 20th century thought squares rather well with biblical revelation. Believers whose attitudes are still part of the Ontological Period are confronted with the arduous task of learning to read the Bible without the rational spectacles that in the past provided the framework of their understanding. Our response must lie in the discovery of the everlasting gospel as a relationship, a functional reality that contemporary humans can see and accept.

From Tribe to Town to Technopolis

Van Peursen's article and subsequent writings have stimulated many Christian theologians, historians, and social scientists to reflect on the meaning of the changes in our time and their challenge to mission. One of these is Harvard theologian Harvey Cox. In his powerful book *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*,² Cox replaced Van Peursen's Mythical, Ontological, and Functional categories with sociological ones: Tribe, Town and City.

During the Period of the Tribe (Van Peursen's Mythical Period), life centers in the group, such as family or village community, where people live in a constant face-to-face relationship. Because of their primitive technology, people in this period depend heavily on natural resources for their existence. As a result they live very close to their environment. Tradition is strong, relationships are personal, and religion is the core and focus of their whole life. It is the basis of thought and behavior, inextricably woven into everything the community does. At present about 5 percent of the world's population (roughly 250 million people) still live exclusively in this Period of the Tribe.

Cox sees the Period of the Town (Van Peursen's Ontological Period) as one of the decisive breakthroughs of history. In this period, people broke out of the boundaries of kinship to develop a less isolated and more open community, with greater individual freedoms, specialization and differentiation, and a more rational view of the world. This kind of society first emerged in the lowlands of Mesopotamia. It was also typical of the ancient civiliza-

tions of India, China, Greece and Rome, Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru, and was characteristic of life in Europe and North America until the late 19th century. Even today, some 35 to 40 percent of the world's population (some two billion people) belong to these peasant societies, mainly in areas of Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Among the hallmarks of societies in the Town Period are their dependence on agriculture and their closeness to nature. Their towns are mainly centers of administration and trade (market towns), inextricably linked to the agrarian economy. Most of these economies are rather static, tied to tradition, and based on kinship and other closed forms of social organization.

Unlike the Tribe, where religion is the core of life and permeates all thinking and behavior, religion in the Era of the Town becomes organized and institutionalized. It is dissociated from other spheres of life. Churches and theologies develop, and classes of religious specialists (priests, ministers) emerge. Yet, in these preindustrial, community-oriented, peasant societies, religion is still the overarching factor that gives meaning to life.

All of this changed radically with the arrival of the modern City (Van Peursen's Functional Period), which we will call Technopolis. Stimulated by new discoveries and by developments in science and technology, this era first emerged in Europe and North America. The changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization came slowly at first, then exploded, throwing modern society into rapid change. In just a few years this new civilization of Technopolis has spread around the world. Today some 55 to 60 percent of the world's population (about 3 billion

people) have been strongly affected by it. With the intensifying contact between nations, and with the Third World's rapidly increasing industrialization and urbanization, we may expect that by the year 2000 some 75 percent of the world's population will be part of this new civilization of Technopolis. It is the most powerful force moving history towards the development of one global culture, with people sharing the same world view.

What are some of the characteristics of this new culture of Technopolis? In his book *Naming the Whirlwind*,³ Langdon Gilkey captures the prevailing mood of Technopolis in these four traits: Contingency, autonomy, temporality, and relativity. Contingency refers to the notion that everything that exists was caused by some natural phenomenon that preceded it, leaving no place for God or a religious explanation of origins. The world is actually man-made, with humans as the center of all life, the creators of their own destiny, and the only norm of what is right. Humankind is accountable to no one but itself. There are no absolutes. All life is temporary. There is no afterlife, no future world, and hence no lasting significance to human's thoughts and actions. Death is the end of everything, and everything must die.

Revolutionary as these attitudes are (and understanding them is a sine qua non of helping people to hear the gospel and leading them to Christ), most people in Technopolis are hardly conscious of them. They experience their cul-

ture more than they think about it. And what they experience is a mass society where people are bound together by functional ties and impersonal contracts rather than by kinship or community bonds. Life in Technopolis is enormously complex, highly mobile, specialized, and constantly changing. It is manipulative, materialistic, and very much self- and success oriented. To make it in this world a person cannot be bound by tradition or absolute religious values. One must be pragmatic and individualistic. In this civilization, religion and church as we know them cease to be influential. Theology becomes obsolete, and the traditional roles of the minister and priest are taken over by specialists: marriage counselors, health educators, social workers and psychotherapists. This change seems irreversible. As a result, institutional religion as a factor shaping human life continues to decline. Human values lose their sacredness, faith erodes, and religious institutions lose their function and authority.

Church and Mission in Technopolis

How should we, as Adventists, respond to this secularization process? We must recognize that it is in God's hand. He is leading human history to its intended end. These changes are part of the great controversy between Satan and Christ. In spite of its demonic aspects, the process has also some positive elements. It liberates people from the control of systems of thought that have prevented them from hearing the gospel. Moreover, the functional way of thinking of people in Technopolis is in many ways much closer to biblical revelation concerning life and truth than the rationalistic approach of the Ontological Period.

All this opens up new possibilities for mission and effective evangelism. Signs of that abound, including the renewed interest in Bible reading in secularized Europe, the people movements toward Christ in a large number of peasant societies, and the rise of scores of messianic movements.

However, we must not deny the difficulty that Technopolis presents to religion. From biblical times to the present, religion and faith have been intimately tied to the agrarian economy, the rural way of life and thought, and especially to the close knit, small-scale community with its face-to-face relationships, its group orientation, and moral order. The fundamental change in our day from a communal way of life to a societal orientation has robbed religion of its basic context and functions. The threat to religion in Technopolis, therefore, does not come primarily from aggressive atheism, but from society itself with its underlying attitudes and assumptions. Recent developments within the Adventist Church in Technopolis attest to that as well. But God has not left this world to its own devices. Technopolis is very much God's world. And it is his will that all people there be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (see 1 Timothy 2:4).

How should we respond then? By recognizing the reality of this secularization process, its consequences for human life and thought, and by reflecting on its meaning in light of the Word of God. The process has both negative and positive dimensions, demonic and divine. It is part of the great controversy through which God is leading history to its end. Christ enlists his church to restore his kingdom in this generation. This demands a wholehearted response on our part through a renewal of our faith and commitment, and a new mode

of mission that takes these recent developments and their consequences seriously.

This new mission to Technopolis has the following characteristics: first, the church has to learn to identify with the culture of Technopolis as much as it did with past cultures in its worldwide missionary thrust. Our great model is Jesus Christ himself, who in everything became one with the people to whom he had been sent. So also did the apostle Paul, whose counsel was to become urban with the urbanites so as to win as many as possible (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). This is probably the most difficult part of our mission to Technopolis, given the fact that many Adventists have considered the city a symbol of evil and have been urged to separate from it.

Second, the church must identify with the needs of people in Technopolis and proclaim the gospel in a way that relates to those needs. Among those needs are a sense of fellowship and community, a feeling of certainty and security, basic values that can shape human conduct, a sense of dignity, the experience of salvation, hope for the future, the assurance of peace, justice and freedom, social acceptance, and meaningful work.

Third, the church must recognize that Technopolis is not a monolithic whole, but a colorful mosaic of people. No standard form of evangelism will ever be able to reach all of them. In our

highly differentiated and pluralistic society, mission also must be multidimensional and diverse. Evangelism, then, will be both public and personal, and addressed to those human needs. For Adventist professionals and university students this opens many possibilities for personal outreach to their colleagues who operate in the culture of Technopolis.

Finally, the church—all of us—must implement consistently the idea that mission is the work of the laity, accomplished through the particular gifts that God has given to every believer, and in the particular setting of the believer's everyday life.

It may take some time for this new mission to Technopolis to come to full fruition. Fortunately, several church leaders in various parts of the world are developing strategies in response to this new challenge in Adventist mission. Faithful stewardship of the special message entrusted to us demands that we show a new openness toward the guidance of the Spirit and dare to follow as he leads in this crucial phase of God's mission on earth.

NOTES

1. Cornelius Van Peursen, "Man and Reality: The History of Human Thought," *The Student World*, No. 1 (1963).

2. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

3. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 71.

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