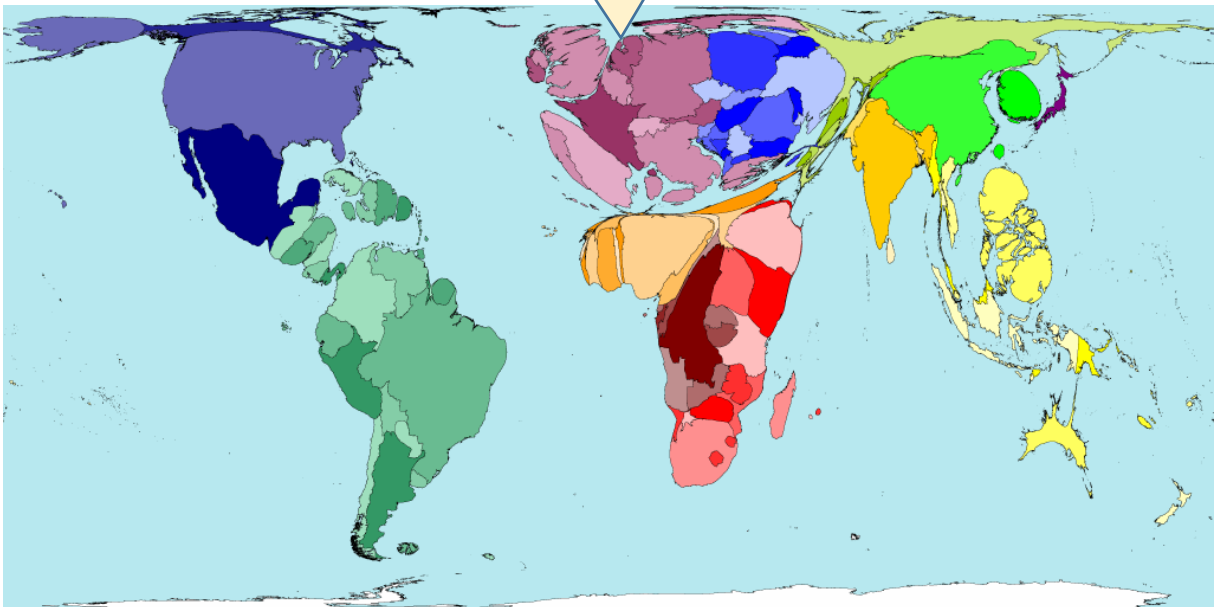**SECULARIZATION FOR THE SAKE OF RELIGION**
perspectives from a secularized corner of the globe

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no relevant academic credentials
Christian (Quaker)

territory size proportionate to estimated numbers of Christians in 2002, source: worldmapper.org

1. Summary

At the conference "Christianity and the future of our societies" we explore how Christianity can and should contribute to meeting humanity's challenges. With what 'Christian mind' can we equip Christian leaders, given our responsibility as the largest religion, from a global perspective?

The specific, but not unique, context of Dutch churches adds another challenge: how to regain trust of a secularized society around us. We have become a minority and are shunned by non-Christians. Organized religion has become a thing of the past, of the elderly, of somewhat weird people.

Christianity elsewhere may have to face secularization, too, in due course. What can global Christianity learn from the Dutch experience?

This paper argues the case of understanding secularization as an opportunity to renew Christianity, so it can contribute better to the future of our societies. A plea for framing secularization as choice.

The paper has 4 'layers' and speaks 4 'languages'. Beware, as I will not always clearly separate them.
1) sociology and scientific language
2) theology and homily
3) my Dutch & Quaker context and the language of my heart
4) philosophy and meta-language

2. a God-less country

"The Netherlands has lost God" observed the Evangelical Broadcasting Organization (EO) on the occasion of the publication of the latest sociological assessment of Dutch secularization[1] in March 2016. The Netherlands has become a post-Christian country according to sociologists.

Dutch religious affiliation (official membership) declined from 67% in 1966 to 32% in 2015[2]. Regular church attendance declined from 50% to 12% over that period.[3]. Advice in moral questions (outside the family) was sought from church officials by 35% of the population in 1966 and 6% in 2015[4].

The most relevant statistic for this paper comes from a study (without focus on religion) of social cohesion in the Netherlands by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) in November 2015[5]. Less than 30% of the Dutch population trusts churches, even less than for press and politicians. Of those *not* affiliating themselves with a religious organization 88.4% distrust churches. How do we contribute to the future of a society if the rest of society considers us as weird? Many even consider religion to be harmful!

3. secularization is a choice

Secularization is a choice of people to quit faith and to cut or weaken their ties with churches.
Secularization is a choice of people who still identify with a church; taking, however, with a pinch of salt what they are told 'from on high' to do or to believe.
Secularization is a choice of politicians, when they choose to take less seriously what they are told on behalf of churches, because of that salt intake by their constituencies.
Secularization can be a choice of churches to bow to the informalization of wider society (which has gone relatively far in the Netherlands) and to take seriously 'whoever would be great among you must serve[6]' (not tell others what to do or what to believe).
Secularization can be a choice of Christians to use secular language, in order to be understood.
Secularization can be a choice to be one, to be one network that includes all who want a better future.

4. understanding distrust

Distrust of Dutch churches can be explained from various factors:
a) Social organization employs status difference between individuals. Status difference can be abused and at times it will be abused in any organization. Some people understand that better than others. What is even less understood and accepted, is that hierarchical organizations use the power inherent in hierarchy to prevent such abuse from becoming public and being remedied. What is least understood and accepted is that church leaders do so, church leaders who pretend moral rectitude and claim a role in supporting morals in wider society.
b) History teaches many instances of practices that -now- abhor us that have been justified as Christian. In societies where Christianity was the dominant religion and long even the dominant ideology supporting social and political institutions, seeking such Christian justification was understandable and unavoidable. People who are less versed in such context sensitive reasoning blame present churches for that past and expect more moral modesty from them.
c) Christianity pretends to follow one Christ. Yet churches show a variety of moral authorities and teachings and fail to act as one in society. They can be suspected to follow individuals, serve group interests and put denominational identities above the one Christianity they profess.

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[1] "Geloven binnen en buiten verband" (SCP, 2014), "Sociale samenhang, wat ons bindt en verdeelt" (CBS, 2015) and "God in Nederland" (March 2016)
[2] "God in Nederland" table 1.2
[3] "God in Nederland" table 1.5
[4] "God in Nederland" table 1.10
[5] "Sociale samenhang, wat ons bindt en verdeelt" p. 92 & 180
[6] Mark 10:43

d) Christian denominations compete for members, fight each other with words (and on occasion even with arms) and tear apart some communities and even families in that way. Nevertheless most of them profess faith in one Church[7].

5. biased science

Social science cannot be impartial, because it is part of society. The 'truth' it uncovers has social status, so social science changes the society it studies. Individuals claiming scientific credentials and claiming science's social status have personal interests as well as serving public ones.

Trust in science in the Netherlands is higher than that in any other institution with which it is compared (73% in 2015[8]), more than in many other countries, but not beyond doubt. However, economists, philosophers, sociologists and theologians are not the first who come to a Dutch mind when we positively assess 'science'[9].

In this case especially, I myself cannot pretend to be impartial. Identifying myself as a Christian, the existing distrust of Christianity, of churches, even of ecumenical efforts, cuts me to the bone. My closest family and my colleagues at work belong to the 88.4% of the Dutch that distrusts churches. My most frequent contacts and most intense discourse on faith are through the internet, especially in the discussions about faith in the internet forum www.geloofsgesprek.nl. Militant atheists are just as active there as orthodox and liberal Christians. Most participants use pseudonyms; mutual distrust among Christians is apparently at least as widespread as that between Christians and non-Christians.

6. secularization a welcome phenomenon?

"God in Nederland", the latest sociological assessment of Dutch secularization, observes[10] a double secularization: decline in church membership as well as decreasing commitment to representations of faith and to religious practices among church members. Klaas van der Kamp[11], executive secretary of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, distinguishes 4 dimensions of secularization: personal life, church life, other non-governmental organizations and public life. In each dimension he points out positive or at least logical developments that are closely associated with secularization: maturation, growing respect for individual persons, participation in an increasing number of networks rather than in only one denominationally defined one. People are increasingly seeking answers depending on their life phase rather than for their whole life. Roles previously performed by religious organizations are professionalized. People increasingly expect service rather than dominance from public institutions. Religion is transforming itself in the interaction with society.

Secularization can be misunderstood as 'loss of faith in God' or even as 'loss of God', as quoted in paragraph 2. However, faith is not just content, not just 'believing in x, y or z', but includes experience and practice. Faith can change focus from truth to trust[12] without being lost. A religion can change from an inward looking, bounded organization into an outward looking, centred networking effort without fading out. Secularization can be a sign of the times, of changing needs, of humanity changing focus and switching tools, of necessary social transformation. Fear of losing our identity as Christians can prevent us from seeing the potential inherent in secularization. Fear of secularization can prevent us from grasping the faith that is needed in our time and place.

In global perspective secularized and secularizing countries may be the exception rather than the rule. Analysis of demographic trends by the Pew Research Center "Future of World Religions" project (2015) shows an increase in adherence to theism until at least 2050. Secularization is not taken into account, however, because it is too difficult to predict. Pew refers to modern secularisation theory in defence of that position: "*Seminal nineteenth-century thinkers predicted that religion would gradually fade in importance with the emergence of industrial society. The belief that religion was dying became*

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[7] "I believe in … the holy catholic and apostolic Church"
[8] "Trust in Science in the Netherlands 2015" (Rathenau Institute, 2015) figure 1
[9] "Trust in Science in the Netherlands 2015" page 3
[10] "God in Nederland" concluding remarks
[11] "Raven" (2014) chapter 4
[12] one of the shifts from traditional Christian faith to new spirituality identified at the World Council of Churches Consultation on mission in secularized and postmodern contexts held in 2002

the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century. The traditional secularization thesis needs updating, however, religion has not disappeared and is unlikely to do so. Nevertheless, the concept of secularization captures an important part of what is going on. This book develops a theory of existential security. It demonstrates that the publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past half century, but also that the world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before. […] This confirms that religiosity persists most strongly among vulnerable populations, especially in poorer nations and in failed states. Conversely, a systematic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs has occurred among the more prosperous strata in rich nations."[13]

So secularization is closely related to growing prosperity and to other solutions of challenges facing humanity, but also to global inequality. A prosperous minority has lifted itself from existential insecurity and left behind both religion and a less fortunate majority that *is* in need of religion.

A Christianity that chooses to contribute to a better future of the societies of which it is a part may have to welcome secularization or at least some of its aspects and some of the developments that are closely related to it. It may continue to serve those in need of religion only if it does not shackle them to their situation of deprivation. "*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.*"[14] A Christianity that chooses to contribute to a better future must lift people from oppression by transforming their religion from escapist to empowering, by doing away with its own escapist aspects and focussing on its aspects that support human autonomy.

A Christianity that chooses to contribute to a better future of global society has to address global inequality. It has to meet the needs of both the prosperous and the less fortunate and re-connect (*re-ligare*) their secular and religious worldviews.

7. challenging Christianity

Secularization implies a challenge and an opportunity to transform Christianity to contribute better to meeting humanity's challenges as identified by the conference organizers.[15] The policy document for 2017-2021 that the Council of Churches in the Netherlands expects to agree on later this year will contain an intention to feed our lessons from secularization in the Netherlands into global ecumenical discussions. The main lesson is that secularization is not a threat, but an opportunity.

Given the reasons for distrust as identified Christianity had better 'own' secularization and bridge the divide between organized religion and secular society by 'stepping out' on that bridge:

1) Christians can step out from denominations and **identify primarily as Christian**. Denominations continue to have a role in the *internal* task division of the Church as a whole, just as monastic orders within the Roman Catholic church differ. For that to be credible churches could present them publicly as *branch of* the Church instead of as *the best* or even *only* Church. If churches cannot speak out in unity on moral issues, they could consider to be silent. They *can* allow each other to speak out in and about specific local situations, however, and mutually support each other in doing so. Churches can also leave it to individual Christians to find the right actions and words in their specific situations and support them in doing so.

2) Christianity originates in a society in which leaders ruled subjects. It championed servant-leadership, but retained hierarchical organization and -in many churches- centralized authority and uniform rules and teachings, at least as ideal. Meanwhile society has changed, has adopted democracy and subsidiarity as ideals even if not always and everywhere as practice. **Church**

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[13] "Sacred and secular" (2011)
[14] "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" Karl Marx, 1844
[15] 1) the fragility of democracies
2) newly emerging geopolitical constellations
3) the financial crisis and ongoing corruption
4) poverty and deprivation
5) depletion of natural resources and massive ecological problems
6) the moral and social implications of new technologies (including communication technology)
7) religious radicalism and fundamentalism

leaders can step out from hierarchy, drop their ambition to lead people, offer to serve society and only offer to lead when leadership is really asked for. Appeals to authority have a contrary effect in contacts with non-believers whom wider society has empowered to think autonomously. They also lead to 'dissociation' between churches and church members:

- to 'belonging without believing',
- to Sunday behaviour that differs from behaviour during the rest of the week,
- to pretending to bow to authority inside the church while participating in what increasingly is a network society with peer-to-peer relations outside.

If Christianity wants to contribute to society, the internal rules of conduct of churches had better match those of the wider society in order to equip Christians for their role of contributing to it.

3) Christians can step out from the language of theology and **express themselves in secular language**. In societies in which the basic beliefs of Christianity are hardly understood any more by non-believers and Christian language becomes less and less common, they will have to, in order to be able to contribute to society and not be shunned..

These are daunting challenges. They require relinquishing ways of *expressing* Christianity that have become the *focus* of identity. They require relinquishing denominational identities and identifying with following Christ only. They require relinquishing roles and repositories of authority and identifying with their Source only. They require accepting that that Source may express itself in different ways in present societies than it did in previous ones. Not because it changed, but because we have changed and organize ourselves differently than when Jesus walked the earth. They require relinquishing habits of speech and writing that feel safe, 'true' and acceptable to fellow Christians. They require willingness to channel language that wider society needs to hear to connect itself with that Source of inspiration.

8. what about 'God'?

It requires theology to meet challenges that are -from a sociological perspective- beyond humans to meet. It requires the fundamental Christian understanding that we do not need to do it alone. We can express that as God having sacrificed his son for our sins, so we do not need to feel weighed down by them. We can express that as Christ being there for us, right now, to enter into a personal relation with, to accompany us through life. We can also express that -as Quakers like me prefer to do- as divine guidance being available to everyone, always, if and when we open ourselves up to it. Theology can and should convert, inspire and empower us to act. That is what identifying Christ with 'the Word of God' means for me. All things are made through the Word; well, all things relevant in this context.

It is a pitfall to elaborate these expressions into dogmas and to lay undue stress on differences between them. Less elaboration means less need for 'translation' into secular language to communicate with non-believers, less need for different denominations and less need for academically educated theologians who inevitably enter into hierarchical relationships with lay people.

The usefulness of a focus on something 'divine' beyond 'self' can be explained to unchurched spiritual people, humanists, agnostics and even atheists with whom Christians need to cooperate on behalf of the future of our societies. These may not accept that believing in God, relating with Christ and trusting divine guidance make any difference, even though sociological statistics prove that it does.[16] They will understand, however, and may be willing to give it the benefit of the doubt, if we do not bother with appeals that they should convert too. 'If Christians need it, ok, let's accept that *they* do and cooperate.'

Dogmas about what that 'the divine' 'is', 'wants' and 'does' stand in the way of such cooperation. Expressed in poetic language, they may still work, even in communication with non-believers, but not as 'truths'. Christians need to wean off ontological holds. The 'reality' of 'God' is not essential for Christianity even if it needs to *assume* it. *Experiencing* something divine suffices to empower, inspire and at times convert people, God willing, and enables cooperation for the sake of our common future.

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[16] "Geloven binnen en buiten verband" page 37, 43 and note 7

9. sources and the Source

The Truth cannot be expressed except in paradoxes, if at all. Any piece of Truth we pin down in words shatters the Whole to pieces. Paradoxes like: We have to let go of our images of God in order to walk with God. We must be willing to sacrifice our 'life', our 'self', our 'identity', to find it.[17]

Don Cupitt moved via "Taking Leave of God" (1980) to "Creative Faith" (2014) and some other Christians may be able to do so, too. For those for whom that is too radical Dietrich Bonhoeffer's useful misuse of Hugo de Groot's "Etsi Deus non daretur" may help: 'acting before God as if God does not exist'. In other words: fully taking our own responsibility as humans given to us by God. His words acquire additional meaning because they were written 16 July 1944, just before the attempt to assassinate Hitler for the complicity in which Bonhoeffer would be executed.

My boss expressed the strongest criticism of Christianity I encountered when preparing this paper: 'God' is a placebo that makes you feel better in a harsh reality. Its side effect is that people do not take responsibility to improve that reality. They project their responsibility on a 'God' outside themselves. Bonhoeffer provides an orthodox Protestant answer: Whether 'God' is real or not, people need God to answer to for their choices, to take their responsibility. Everyone else can be deluded.

Bonhoeffer's interpretation of human responsibility to God was taken further by John Robinson in "Honest to God" (1963). Robinson took 'God' from 'up there' and 'out there' (other than human) to make it into the 'ground of our being'. However controversial, that bridges the divide with humanism and 'self-spirituality'. He also championed the situational ethics that I applied in challenge 1) above.

In an interview 17 March 1963 Robinson went on record as suggesting that *all* our images of God must go. Some of the traditional images of God may indeed well be obstacles for the credibility and survival of Christianity. Many can still be valuable if we take them for what they are, however: images, not their Source itself; fingers pointing to the moon, not the moon itself. Like all outward forms of religion, all organized religion, we need them, but the less we need of them, the better.[18]

10. narratives and perspectives

In addition to the perspective of my boss, I want to pay homage to that of my father, a retired minister in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Faced with my atheist son's ridicule of his belief in God, he answered: "Tell me what 'God' you do not believe in. I probably do not believe in that 'God' either." According to his secular theology Christianity influenced Western society to such an extent that organized religion is less needed. Major Christian values have become enshrined in culture and laws. Humanity can stand on its own feet and choose its own road now, guided by the Spirit sent to guide Jesus' Friends. On his bookshelf were both "Honest to God" and "Secular city" (1965) by Harvex Cox.

Just like images of God, theologies can be understood as pointers to the moon, as narratives inviting us to see additional meanings and as perspectives that entice us to step in someone else's shoes. At best they help us to leave well-trodden paths and to find our own road.

In "Religion for Atheists" (2012) Alain de Botton shows that Christianity can be useful for our societies beyond its theology. His main lesson is that books (let alone academic papers) have a meagre reach compared to churches, even if regular church-going drops as far as in Western Europe. He challenges readers to learn from religions how to create secular institutions that serve the central needs for which humanity invented religions and which secular society has not shown itself able to solve:
1) The need to live in harmony together and with nature despite selfish and violent impulses.
2) The need to cope with the pain which arises from individual vulnerability.[19]

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[17] See Micha 6:8, Matthew 10:39, Eckhart von Hochheim's sermon "Qui audit me" and Don Cupitt
[18] "*The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. This world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit; for the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit.*" (William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, the 'Holy experiment', in 1693)
[19] "Religion for Atheists" page 280 & 12

It is essentially the first need, at the scale of societies as a whole, that concerns us at this conference. Because of the shortcomings of secular society, Christianity and other world religions will continue to be needed for quite some time to come. They can improve themselves and they have a huge responsibility to do so, given their institutional potential and the huge challenges faced by humanity.

11. improving the performance of Christianity

Social reality is created largely by language. "*I pronounce you husband and wife*" creates families. Statements of identity and commitment create and maintain relations and society. That is the 'performative' function of language, as it is called. Spiritual reality is created likewise. "*If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences*" according to the Thomas theorem. Christianity has the power to change society, the power of the Word. How to improve its performance?

I have presented a programme to transform Christianity for the sake of society in 4 points:
1) secularization of Christian language,
2) informalization of church organization,
3) radical ecumenism that embraces spiritual, humanist, agnostic and atheist perspectives and
4) letting go of concepts of 'God' to find divine experience and guidance

Daunting challenges, but doable. They require refocusing part of Christianity's power of the Word from building theology and creating spiritual reality to creating a better social reality, to empowering people, to denouncing oppression and to giving society a heart and a soul. They require refocusing institutional and organizational capacity from building denominations, from shielding them from each other and from maintaining distinctive liturgical traditions, to faith in action, to serving society.

That power and that institutional and organizational capacity is huge. Even in China, the country with the largest percentage of atheists, the membership of Christian churches is overtaking that of the Communist Party. Even in the Netherlands the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands are the second and third largest autonomous membership organizations, overtaken recently only by the ANWB, the 'car drivers association'. Political parties come nowhere near. If only churches would take responsibility for the future of society rather than for competing with each other…

12. Dutch lessons

The Dutch nation was founded in the 16th century on a conflict about taxes between the Spanish Crown (bankrupted 4 times in the second half of that century) and wealthy Dutch traders who valued their relative political autonomy. The rebels used the still small minority of Calvinist Protestants and the issue of religious freedom to rally others behind their cause. The declaration of independence of 1581, the first in modern times, championed the novel idea that rulers in the name of God can be deposed by their subjects when not serving them well. Political conflicts in the new Dutch republic also caused a major split within Calvinism. The Arminians pleaded for universalism ('Christ came for all humanity') and for a larger human share in the implementing of God's intentions towards man. They were expelled from the -until then united- Protestant Church in 1619 (united except for the Anabaptists).

Church history and political history are linked. Churches are vehicles for the Spirit, but also for national and other group interests. Contributing to the future of societies is an inevitably political project.

Protestantism was a starting point of secularization. "Protestant thought legitimized the autonomy of the secular world"[20] and Protestantism eroded hierarchical church models by its endless branching. By now there are some 650 Christian denominations in the Netherlands, quite a bit more than the 200 - 300 in the average country.[21] In that context secularization has a -positive- meaning of religious freedom, cultural pluralism, individual autonomy and authenticity. As noted 68% of the Dutch population has chosen not to be in church membership anymore, a choice that has to be respected.

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[20] Frank Lechner, 2003
[21] Pew Research Center quotes an CSGC estimate of 41.000 (national) denominations globally. There are some 193 countries. With a population of some 17 million The Netherlands is less than half the size of the average country given a world population of some 7,4 billion. The average size of a Christian denomination (per country) is about 50.000 globally and 12.000 in the Netherlands.

13. ecumenism: building the Church to build society

In 1948 the World Council of Churches was -very appropriately, given Dutch history- founded in Amsterdam. The Council of Churches in the Netherlands now represents approximately 80% of those registered as members of a Christian church. In the vision of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands ecumenism has 3 aspects: visible unity (acting as one), sharing spirituality ('ecumenism of the heart') and serving society (improving the home/oikos that we share). The third aspect is most relevant in the context of our conference, but it cannot be separated from the other two aspects.

"*There is no such thing as society*" pronounced Margareth Thatcher in 1987. Well-intentioned, but it became an epitaph for neoliberalism, for leaving as much as possible to individuals, families and entrepreneurs and for accepting inequality and degradation of the environment as the price of prosperity. The power of such words has 'performed' an erosion of society and solidarity, nationally and globally. Without that erosion the challenges facing humanity today would be far less daunting, if present at all. Christianity must take co-responsibility in proportion to its size (31.4% of the global population) and strength for rebuilding global society so that it can meet these challenges. Building global society requires building one Church that can take that responsibility first.

Despite its creed that there is no salvation outside the Church (meaning themselves) Roman Catholics since the 2nd Vatican Council have an inclusive ecclesiology. It can be depicted as a set of concentric circles that includes all people of good will, even atheists. 'Christ came for all humanity', if only they choose to do good. 'Rejoining the mother church' and accepting the authority of one Pope by all Christians is unfeasible given the informalization of church organization that is necessary in the modern world (or at least increasingly so in the Western world) and the positive developments towards individual autonomy and authenticity that are inherent in secularization. Christianity can, however, adopt a model of multi-centric unity. Churches and individual Christians can accept and respect from each other different emphases on apostolic succession, biblical accuracy, an authentic personal relationship with Christ, direct divine guidance etc. as sources of authority and nevertheless experience and present themselves as one multi-centric whole. In the face of the challenges humanity has to meet together, that unity can embrace other religions, humanists and secular groups as well.

14. funeral or rebirth?

In 1891 Amsterdam the Dutch Christian Social Movement was also founded in Amsterdam. Its '4th Congress', commemorating its 125 years existence, will be held 31 August to 2 September. The jubilee publication "The force of connectedness" describes its history. It reminds us that the decision to organize this congress was introduced in 2011 as a choice between a 'funeral' where historians tell stories about how important organizations inspired by Christianity were in the 20th century and a festivity where they prove their relevance "in a new time and in a new world with huge challenges". That relevance will have to be based (in the words of Abraham Kuyper to the 1st Congress in 1891) "on an insight that the present situation is untenable and on an explanation of this untenability not from secondary causes, but from a defect in the foundation of society itself". [22]

In 2018 Amsterdam may well see also a commemoration of 70 years World Council of Churches. It will not be a funeral, because Christianity is growing fast in the global South. Whether it will be a festive occasion remains to be seen, however. That will depend in large part on the success of transforming Christianity from offering only an escape from an unjust society and an ecologically degraded globe into a movement that empowers people to build a better future, globally and together. It will depend on finding the explanation for the correlation between existential security and secularization and on acting accordingly by embracing secularization and by cooperating with secular efforts to improve society.

If Christianity aligns itself with the impoverished, unfortunate and vulnerable parts of humanity only, turning its back on secularization and on the prosperous of the world, it will become irrelevant and be untenable. It will become the opium of the losers of globalisation. It has to embrace secularization and secular allies, if only for the sake of the connectedness of humanity, for the future of global society.

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[22] pages 194, 301 and 303