



The British and Irish Association for Practical Theology

Mission Studies Special Interest Group

In Association with The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education

DAY CONFERENCE

16<sup>th</sup> May 2017 10.30am for 10.45am until 4pm

## **CHRISTIAN MISSION IN POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURES**

Keynote Speaker: Prof Dr Stefan Paas

Keynote Lecture: "Christian mission in a (very) post-Christian culture"

Stefan will reflect on Amsterdam as a location where foreign mission organizations flood in, where many churches are planted, but where evangelistic returns are meagre. In short, a place where a missional spirituality is challenged and where we have to learn what it means to be missional in a culture that will never change or be conquered.



Prof. Dr Stefan Paas is Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Theology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Professor of Missiology at Theologische Universiteit Kampen (Netherlands). He researches and writes extensively in the fields of mission, evangelism, apologetics, biblical studies, and political theology. One of his latest books is *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2016.

### **PROGRAMME**

**10.30am Introductions via Dwelling in the Word**

**11.10am Stefan Paas: "Christian mission in a (very) post-Christian culture" followed by Q&A.**

**12.15pm Lunch**

**1.00pm – 2pm Series Paper Session – all together with Steve Hollinghurst and Simon Cross  
Break**

**2.10pm – 2.40pm Parallel Paper Session 1 Clive Marsh / Sally Rush**

**2.45 – 3.15pm Parallel Paper Session 2 Cate Williams / Aaron Edwards**

**3.30pm Final Plenary and Future Planning**

**4pm Finish – at the latest.**

**Series Paper Session 1.00-2.00pm**

**1. Rev Steve Hollinghurst: Post-Christian spirituality and mission**

One of the noticeable trends in British culture, indeed in most western nations, is the rise in those who profess no religion. However, the majority of these people are not atheists or even agnostics, but people who believe in something that might be called a god or life-force. Whilst many of these come from families that would have identified themselves as Christians, the move to a non-religious position is also not a sort of 'residual Christianity' either, but a distinct shift to a Post-Christian form of spirituality. Because this doesn't fit neatly into the religious landscape we are used to this rise in Post-Christian spirituality can be overlooked. However, as it becomes increasingly the norm for many people it is becoming a significant feature of contemporary culture. This means it is also increasingly an important area for inter-cultural mission. This paper seeks to explore this cultural trend, the issues it raises for inter-cultural mission and the mission responses that are and could be adopted.

**2. Simon Cross: The un-usual suspects**

It's a common mistake to characterise post-Christian society as 'secular'. In fact, as Habermas noted, much of society is now very much 'post secular', as religious thought continues to play an important role in social and cultural discourse, actively shaping what he describes as 'social life at different levels and in a variety of forms'. Societal attitudes are not after all resolutely secularist: in the UK, approximately 30% of those who belong to no religion claim to believe in life after death; 7% of self-professed atheists believe in angels; and approximately a quarter of the population believe in reincarnation, including one in seven atheists. At the same time however, it is true that the church in its gathered ecclesial form is changing beyond all recognition, with approximately half of those who claim their faith makes a difference to the way that they live, choosing not to attend church. This leads us to a number of important questions, in particular to dialogue with Bonhoeffer's concept of a 'religionless Christianity', and the idea of 'the Christian' as perhaps being intrinsically or most authentically without religion: "The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a human, as Jesus was human..." In such a context, assuming that the church is the means of God's earthly activity, how does 'the work of God' get done? In answering this I will explore the idea of 'gift' in interaction with the sociological language of 'capitals' to suggest that God remains very much at work in a post secular society, but by means of an unlikely set of co-conspirators, from political protestors to cancer survivors (among others), all of whom are profoundly engaged with a Tillichian sense of 'ultimate concern', and will suggest that this has direct implications for our sense of *Missio Dei*.

**Parallel Paper Session 1 2.10pm-2.40pm**

**3. Prof. Clive Marsh: Where 'Mission' Means 'Helping People Make Meaning': Entangled Christian beliefs in this '(very) post-Christian culture'**

This paper will argue, from the perspective of attention to discussions about 'meaning-making' in cultural, film, TV and media studies that theological reflection has to take very seriously indeed the ways in which consumption of popular culture and faith development interweave. In dialogue with Callaway and Batali's recent work on theology and TV (2016), and building on my own work on popular music (2013 and 2017), the paper will continue the debate about the importance of the 'affective space/s' within which all human meaning-making occurs, and show how and why this is important both for critical thinking in theology, and practical, local approaches to discovering belief and developing faith. The paper will conclude with simple, short, sharp observations and challenges about preaching, worship and local church life.

**4. Sally Rush: A Methodist Approach to Creating Apt Liturgy in the Chaplaincy Context using the Transgender Day of Remembrance as a case study.**

The paper uses an auto-ethnographical approach and brings together theoretical material from literature in chaplaincy studies, contextual theology and Methodist Studies with a case study from my work as a chaplain at Aston University.

The case study engages my experience of what this theoretical approach looks like in practice when working with the LGBT+ student society and a Pagan colleague over the last two years to curate a Transgender Day of Remembrance Event which involved mixing secular material with explicitly religious words from a range of faith traditions. Finally I touch upon how this model of creating apt liturgy with this secular student society enabled us to create a contextually appropriate memorial event when one of the LGBT+ students died.

**Parallel Paper Session 1            2.10pm-2.40pm**

**5. Rev Cate Williams: An evangel with holistic vision: evangelism and UK pioneer ministry**

When we speak of our faith with others, what are we inviting people into? Are we limiting our vision to an invitation to a belief system that incorporates a Trinitarian God or even to a personal relationship, or are we inviting people to dream with us a new vision of life for our communities and our planet, and to work with us as we work with God to bring in the new reality?

These things are not incompatible of course, but the premise of this paper is that the invitation we give in our evangelistic language is often too small and too narrow; also that by limiting our vision, our message is less attractive within post-Christendom society than the fullness of the Gospel has potential to be. In addition, some of our evangelistic language plays into the worst habits of our culture, those associated with individualism and consumerism.

The paper begins by outlining the nature of the problem of evangelism in our contemporary context. It explores the distinctive approach of pioneer ministry as an avenue for widening our evangelistic message and some suggestions are made about avenues to explore to take this conversation forwards. This forms a part of longer research project that is exploring 'earthed spirituality' within the practice of pioneer ministers and will take this question into ethnographic fieldwork.

**6. Dr. Aaron Edwards: Radical Inculturated Proclamation: Secular Apathy and the Public Paradox of the Gospel**

The last decade has seen a number of varied theological and missiological responses to the problem of UK secularisation. Leaning upon a broader recognition of secularisation theory as a creative spur to proactive proclamation, this paper considers a form of proclamation which retains the inherent 'radicality' and 'inculturation' in the Gospel message, drawing upon one particular – oft-controversial – example in practice: street preaching. Though street preaching is oft-maligned (often for very good reasons) this paper considers some ways in which it might well play a crucial part in the Church's demonstration of the public paradox of the Gospel in a partially secularised culture. To do so, however, would involve a radically different approach to how street preaching is imagined and undertaken, particularly accentuating the necessary self-awareness of the preacher of the perceived inappropriateness of their actions *in* such a culture. Such reflection opens up potentially imaginative ways – within and beyond preaching – in which radical inculturated proclamation could be uniquely effective in (re)communicating the paradoxical content of the Gospel in a complexly religious and secular society.