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Book Review: Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society, by Stefan Paas. London: SCM Press, 2019. 257 pages, \$31.57.

Reviewer: Nathan Pickard

Scholars and Christian faith practitioners have been engaging the work of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, for over a decade. In *A Secular Age* Taylor helpfully constructs a narrative whereby we realize our cultural context no longer cares about the “God question.” Society can offer meaning without transcendence. As a result, there are implications for missions, evangelism, and ecclesiology. Stefan Paas, professor of Missiology in Amsterdam and practitioner of a Christian faith community, builds upon the work of Taylor and begins to articulate a missional ecclesiology in a post-Christian society. Paas helpfully leads the reader to understand the post-Christian context of North America and offers, not just a metaphor, but a way forward for those Christian faith communities that understand the shifting context and subsequently, its implications.

Chapter one sets the groundwork for the coming chapters. The reader begins to see what Paas desires us to see: the church in a post-Christian society needs a theology that does justice to the secularization of our context, while at the same time, recognizing the missional nature of Christianity. Mission, as Paas will help us understand, must move away from the colonial understanding of mission as power and instead be a witness to what God has done in Christ with a view to his coming kingdom (pg. 13).

In chapter two the reader is introduced to the idea that there was “*always an elusive majority*.” Meaning, even in Western and European societies where the framework for society was “Christian”, there was always a committed minority and a large majority of society that was distant (passive) to the Christian faith. In such a case, “revivalism” and “restoration” are the means whereby the elusive majority can become part of the committed minority. But what happens when Christianity no longer

has the cultural winds in its sails? What happens when the Christian cultural framework of society crumbles? No longer do “revivals” and “restorations” become the means of evangelism. Instead, the committed minority must learn what it means to be “weak and foolish” (pg. 40).

Chapter three surveys the wide responses churches have undertaken as we recognize the secularization of our societies. Examples include the *Church Growth Movement* and *Neo-Pentecostalism*. Each of the six responses, as Paas points out, are rooted within a Christendom experience. Paas wants us to move away from models of church rooted in a Christendom experience towards a model that will take seriously the following: (1) the difference between church and world must be respected, (2) understand the difference between “sign and foretaste” and “instrument” of God’s kingdom (Paas is cautious of using the word “instrument” as this might lead us to think we are once again creating “Christian cultures”). The third element of a new model will help us develop a Christian spirituality of mission for a deeply secular society.

With chapters one through three setting the context, chapters 4-7 begin to flesh out the missional ecclesiology Paas wants to propose. The helpful historical work and the discussion surrounding models of ecclesiology rooted in a Christian cultural framework pave a way forward. Chapter four helps make sense of the disembodiment of Christianity by crafting a narrative that roots our experiences with the history of God’s people. The narrative Paas wants us to use to name our current experiences is *exile*. If *exile* becomes the narrative by which we can describe our current situation, healthy questions arise. What do we learn about God while living in exile? How do we keep our identity in exile? How do we “witness” while living in exile?

If the exile traditions from the Old Testament are able to shed light on our current situation (the disembedding of Christianity from our societies), four helpful learnings can be presented. First, exile is a time of confusion. Second, exile is characterized by a loss of power. Third, exile requires looking after one’s own identity, and finally, exile asks for a renewed spirituality. These four learnings are expounded upon (pp. 149-160).

Chapter five moves us from a theological narrative of exile to the metaphors of *pilgrims* and *priests*, both metaphors derived from the first letter of Peter. The metaphors adequately capture the experience of the Western church which is now disembedded from the culture (pilgrim), while at the same time helps us stay rooted in our witness (priests). The

church receives its identity of priests through Christ, while we travel through the world as pilgrims.

Chapters six and seven build upon the priestly metaphor by helping us see the church as community. In a growing religious consumer context, this chapter offers a challenging critique to our individualized view of salvation and evangelism (chapter six). Chapter seven leads the reader to imagine the church as a “priestly church.” To quote Paas,

This vision is realistic, it has ample biblical support and it is ecumenically sensitive. Furthermore, it provides many leads for practical action. This is particularly about the significance of small communities, a way of church development that revolves around listening to God and establishing meaningful relationships with the neighbourhood, and a realistic and theologically responsible approach of evangelism and service. All this is bound together and receives its meaning from the worship of God (pg. 229).

This book is for those who recognize the shifting cultural winds and who understand the implications for Christian faith communities. This book will not leave the reader with any concrete steps to help the church regain the voice of dominance in society. In fact, the opposite will occur. The book will help us find our voice as we live further and further from the center of society. The two metaphors (pilgrim and priests) are extremely helpful in creating a missional ecclesiology in a post-Christian society. Paas has done the work of naming our context and offers a way forward. Now the reader must build upon the work of Paas and begin the work of forming Christian faith communities in a post-Christian society.

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