Looking back from the future

A critical evaluation of David Bosch’s ‘Believing in the Future’

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Introduction

Soon after publishing his magnus opum, Transforming Mission, Davis Bosch wrote, what later became known as, Believing in the Future. Bosch’s critique of the Enlightenment was already apparent in Transforming Mission (1991:262-274), but soon after, at the end of 1991, he turned his thoughts to Western society specifically, furthermore addressing the problems of modernity, the questions of postmodernism, and in this early time providing some missional road signs for Western society. He died a few months after writing this, but his thoughts continue to influence missiology and theology internationally.

Using the language usually accredited to Doug Pagitt (McKnight 2006:11-13), was Bosch writing missiology for mission to postmoderns, with postmoderns, or as a postmodern? This seem to be one of the key questions that need to be answered when looking back from this future, which is also Bosch’s future, and evaluate what Bosch believed about missiology and his future.

In order to do this I will take a close look at Believing in the Future, and although the 1991 context in which it was written need to be kept in mind, I will use literature from Bosch’s future for evaluating what he wrote.

Bosch on postmodernism

I will attempt not to fall into the trap of attempting to define postmodernism. “In the Zeitgeist of postmodernity, there can only be postmodernisms” (Ward 2005:323). This is a reality which is very seldom recognized, and in many cases the term “postmodernism” is used and some
characteristics given, but seldom do we find those willing to address the question of postmodernisms, recognizing that beside their own form of postmodernism others are available as well (see this lack for example in Niemandt 2007:9-34; Sweet 2007:22-23; Gibbs & Bolger 2005:34-46\(^1\) and for some alternatives attempting to address this diversity Wildman 2006:37-41 when discussing Van Huyssteem; Ward 2005:322-325; and when reading this, obviously Bosch 1995). There are certain problems with this, which I will try and address in what follows. The best we could probably do is, however, to acknowledge the different forms of postmodernism surrounding us, and then put our current understanding on the table and take part in the conversation. Rather than define postmodernism I will attempt to show what kind of postmodernist Bosch identified himself to be in this little book, and reflect on this from my own position in Bosch’s future.

It is important to note Bosch’s reservations with being anti-Enlightenment, we could say anti-modernism (1991:360; 1995:6-13). Recognizing his own indebtedness to the Enlightenment and the inescapable reality of history which could not other but end up in the modern worldview, but also the different forms of modernisms, he propose a more moderate take on postmodernism. Although rejecting Enlightenment rationalism, he also reject relativism, finding himself between classical modernism, even reinterpretations of the “modern project” such as Habermas (24), and the radical postmoderns such as Lyotard, he proposes what today can be called a soft-postmodernism or postfoundationalism.

Bosch’s rejection of rationalism, also in softer forms such as Habermas, is a key characteristic of postmodernism. Postmodernism has however, always had proponents which tended to move into different forms of relativism. Bosch (1991:360) noticed this in his earlier work, and rejected this again in the work under discussion, in his opinion actually part of a late modernist view (Bosch 1995:20-22). His rejection of Lyotard and other similar philosophies has proven to have grounds in them. Beukes (2005:1101-1119) portrays the extreme negative effect that came out of the Lyotard tradition, especially with regards to Baudrillard, where reality becomes mere image, and any concept of justice is lost in the process. Also Van Huyssteen, another South African theologian, currently at Princeton, take pains to show the problems with these forms of

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\(^1\) I recognize the impossibility of always defining this extremely difficult concept, but need to point out the lack of defining the diversity of postmodernisms, and also the lack of recognizing bad forms of postmodernism (Wildman 2006:37-41; Beukes 2005:1101-1119), two things which I will point out to be some of most important factors of Bosch’s work.
postmodernism (although he seems to reserve the term postmodernism only for more radical proponents) (Wildman 2006:37-41). Never in history has the move into a new worldview opened up the possibility of total rejection of previous worldviews. The best insights of previous worldviews will always be kept (Wildman 2006:37), and this seems to be the case with postmodernism as well, something Bosch recognized.

This being said, the wholly postmodern character of Bosch’s work need to be recognized. In this Bosch made a contribution to missiology. Although he wasn’t the first to recognize the problems with an Enlightenment worldview, in the field of missiology he did make a contribution. Although Newbigin (born 20 years before Bosch, but outliving him by a few years) was also critical of the Enlightenment, his work do not seem to carry this postmodern character. This is not the place to discuss the work of Newbigin, but, recognizing Newbigin’s important role in missiology (Bosch also recognized his own indebtedness to Newbigin), we can probably see the importance of Bosch’s work for missiology by a quick comparison. Price (2002:107-114) sketches Newbigin to in reality still be a modernist missiologist. Still echoing sounds of Christendom, and working from modernist ideas of truth which the church need to hand out to others are some of the things mentioned. Not that Newbigin (1996:3, 8-9) was not critical of modernity, but certainly what he calls “post-modernity” (Newbigin 1996:5-6) does not seem to be considered as a real alternative. He use the term to point to the more radical postmodernisms, referred to as relativism by Bosch. In effect Newbigin seem to fall back into a premodern critique (Price 2002:109-110), thus, critical of modernism, but certainly not writing missiology as a postmodern.

However, we find in Bosch (1995:1) the acknowledgement of a totally new epoch, while pointing out ways of undertaking this journey, road signs set up within this epoch, for those dwelling on the inside. I will now turn to the challenges associated within a postmodern era. I see this as challenges not presented by postmodernism to Christians, as if they are on the outside, but as the realities of the challenge for those within this epoch.

**The challenge within postmodernism**

When I first started contemplating the challenges Christians have in a postmodern era, I found it difficult. Thinking about Pagitt’s three forms of ministry in relation to postmodernism
(McKnight 2006:11-13), I kept thinking that asking those from a postmodern worldview to identify challenges within their era would be like asking a Darwinian to identify the challenges a modernist world pose. However, I think we could see two groups of challenges, different, but interwoven as well, unique to a postmodern worldview at some points, but also shared with all the people on this earth, some touching on worldview in a more direct way, others just the challenge of living in the 21st century, seen from a postmodern perspective.

**Contextualization**

“...from the very beginning, the missionary message of the Christian church incarnated itself in the life and world of those who had embraced it. It is, however, only fairly recently that this essentially contextual nature of the faith has been recognized” (Bosch 1991:421).

We only find some glimpses from Bosch (1995:58-59) on contextualization in the west. In conclusion to Believing in the Future, he points out that maybe the gospel never has been properly contextualized in western society, maybe overcontextualized (see also Bosch 1991:455). He do not attempt to point out that contextualization in the West will look like, but pointed to the necessity of reflecting on this.

In this day and age contextualization within the West has also been proposed by others (Hirsch & Frost 2003:84). In order to properly understand the radical position Bosch took in, let’s take a quick look at the definition of contextualization used by Hirsch & Frost (2003:83-84). When they use the term it points to a communication of the gospel to a culture in ways that make sense to them, thus a translation of the gospel. “Daring” and “dangerous” in their view would be to go beyond a reworking of church symbols and language, and also look at method and approach, especially concerning evangelism. Although their approach is of much value, we need to recognize the different understandings of contextualization, and understand what Bosch meant with this.

Bosch (1991:421) deliberately limits his definition of contextualization to include only the liberation theologies and inculturation, not making translation part of this. The significance of this is the fact that after this he still ask for a contextualization in the West (1995:58), which would imply even more than mere translation into new language. Although believing that the gospel should always remain countercultural, Bosch (1991:452) propose a *theological* rethinking
when it comes to inculturation. The problem of the domesticated gospel of current Western society (:455) ask for a rethinking which should lead also to intercultural (:455-457), since no one culture has a final say on theology. For Bosch, inculturation thus implies a theological rethinking within culture, but also the gospel becoming liberator of the culture.

Maybe a few notes on what this might look like before we continue to point to specific challenges. In his own approach of interculturalization, Bosch (1995:27-28, 35-36) also learn from African and Asian theology and missiology. Important is the practice of a missiological theology in these cultures (also Bosch 1991:489-497; Bosch 1995:32), and the bridging of the orthodoxy/orthopraxy divide so prevalent in Western theology. Furthermore the fact that they are theologies of the people, not the intellectual elite. It would seem like, if ever we could guess what a contextualized theology in postmodern Western society would have looked like for Bosch, this would most probably have been part of it. Another would have been Christians that play a more public role, religion not being withdrawn to the private (1995:33-35). In this process of contextualization, it is not, however, the postmodern philosophers which should stand central, but the reality of the world we live in.

**The world we live in**

Looking at the world in which we live might not bring us to specifically postmodern challenges, if postmodern challenges is understood in only philosophical challenges. But this reality becomes our challenge:

> “The issue is not to talk more about God in a culture that has become irreligious, but how to express, ethically, the coming of God’s reign, how to help people respond to the real questions of their context, how to break with the paradigm according to which religion has to do only with the private sphere” (Bosch 1995:35)

Space would not allow us to go into detailed discussion of this topic, and in a day and age when many are discovering exactly what Bosch said in this quote, much is written on these topics.

Should we make lists of challenges, arranging them, trying to find the most important challenges? I don’t know, but where human lives are involved, we surely cannot but admit the importance.
Ecology was already mentioned by Bosch (1995:3, 55-56) as a missiological challenge of the world. Today, *Global Warming* is becoming a buzz word. Dismissed by some as just another natural cycle of the earth, while on the other extreme, the well-known scientist John Lovelock warm that this might be the worst event in human history, with possibly as little as 500 million people left on earth by 2100 (Goodell 2007). In a recent South African publication Leonard Sweet (2007:34-35) point to the fact that already 25000 people are dying daily because of lack of clean water, and predictions are made of up to 7 billion people having water shortage in 2050. This is assuming that Lovelock is wrong and rising heat haven’t killed them yet. South Africa has never been a country with a lot of water, and this is definitely a challenge for our context. This challenge is enormous, and we could well just proceed defining this one challenge, and tackling it, but more remains.

Bosch point to AIDS looming in the background. This has become one of the biggest challenges of sub-Sahara Africa. Finding statistics remain difficult, but by the end of 2005, there were 5,5 million people living with HIV in South Africa, and almost 1000 AIDS deaths a day. And with every death there is people surrounding this that are affected as well (Pembrey 2007). Orphans are becoming more and more common, and without the capacity to deal with them, they end up on the streets.

As a last problem, and although many others could be mentioned, I believe this is some of the most important for those of us living in South Africa, I would like to mention poverty. Although different ways of measuring poverty exist, and the complexity of the issue need to be recognized, there is no way of getting away that a large percentage of South Africans live in poverty, somewhere between 40% and 50%, depending on the way in which it is measured. Poverty is not only a lack of money and resources, but, although theoretically human dignity does not exist in not being poor, also deprive people of the dignity (Le Bruyns & Pauw 2004:203-204, 207). We cannot however, look at poverty without looking at the different ideologies which cause them, in the West, especially capitalism and a consumerist culture. Although this is not the place to focus on this relation, the question of worldview and postmodernism now need some of our attention.

**Finding worldview and theology**
The realities which we observe form the first challenges which need to be faced. Although not caused by a postmodern epoch, they are wholly part of this day. The postmodern worldview pose
some of its own challenges, or rather, those living within this epoch, with this worldview, has some challenges relating directly to these challenges. Again, we could say that they are not the only ones facing these challenges, but rather that they would look at them through a specific lense.

We live in a world where worldviews and ideologies run rampant. Already in 1991 Bosch (1995:20) was skeptical of the postmodern idea of a post-ideological era. This skepticism I believe was proven to be grounded. Already we have pointed out to negative outflows of relativism, where justice has lost its meaning. But also fundamentalism keeps on rising. And capitalism and consumerism should more and more be seen as ideologies.

We need to find some balance here. The value of a postmodern worldview is on the one hand that the one supposedly objective rational worldview is taken from it’s throne, probing not to have been the great king it was claimed, and thus other worldviews become possible. Some forms of postmodernism has ended, however, with an approach where all worldviews and ideologies are put on the same level. This is good for conversation between worldviews, but in my opinion cannot lead to a view where worldview and ideology doesn’t matter. In the end, looking at the world around us, at poverty and ecology, we need to recognize: sometimes your worldview matter!

For Bosch (1995:48-53) this seem to be important as well. When it comes to communicating to the Western world, the role of worldviews is what he put on the table. At this point, Bosch’s argument, however, seem to get either rather difficult, or not yet worked out that well, the latter I believe to be the case. Communicating worldview would be a very difficult task, especially since, in Bosch’s language “a worldview in its basic tenets is not argued to, but argued from” (49). It seems that Bosch attempts to address two worldviews in this few pages, that of relativism (a topic he points to over and over in the book), and atheism, closely linked with rationalism. He also point to materialism. How exactly we are supposed to do this, Bosch do not point out, maybe, have he had a longer life, we would have seen this worked out, but alas, we have only this: that he believe that theology should also help point out the flimsy foundations of reigning worldviews. This would, however, need to be a well contextualized theology, also a interculturated theology. It will sometimes doubt itself, but will communicate that which is held most dear.
Conclusion

Is the challenge faced by postmodern Christians really new? Maybe it’s just the age old challenge of contextualization. Of being very much in this world, but not of this world. Of being undeniably postmodern, not because we chose to, but simply because this is who we are, but to live in the way of Jesus. To address the questions of today, but doing it in a way worthy of the age old tradition of the God of Israel, of Jesus the Christ, and of the church through the ages. To be honestly postmodern, and honestly Christian. To be very much in this culture, but to be countercultural. To argue undeniably from our worldview, because we cannot work in any other way, but to challenge our worldview with the gospel. The challenge may be new, but it’s also similar to what every generation before us have face. But, as McGrath (2004:217-219) pointed out, similar to evolution happening in short bursts, rather than continual change, change in our worldviews also happen in short bursts, and we are living one of these bursts.

The challenge is immense. But the price for not facing up, might this time literally be death. This is exciting times, but surely challenging times.

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