The Legacy of J. C. Hoekendijk

Bert Hoedemaker

Johannes Christiana Hoekendijk is often appreciated as an influential figure behind the so-called worldly theology that was popular in the ecumenical movement of the 1960s; many other observers, however, describe his position as untenable and absurd. These qualifications are attached particularly to his crusade against ecclesiocentrism, his desire to embrace the secular world as the arena of God’s action, and his insistence on a desacralized mission in which shalom rather than church is the keyword. Scherer speaks of a “quite new, unhistorical, and methodologically unclear model for Christian mission”; Bosch of “a view that leads to absurdity.” Some commentators focus on Hoekendijk’s presentation at the 1960 conference of the World Student Christian Federation in Strasbourg, in which he urged participants to desacralize the church and to recognize that Christianity is a secular movement; they called these ideas “extravagant nonsense.” Even the two dissertations written about Hoekendijk’s theology are decidedly negative in their final evaluation: Coffele, an Italian Roman Catholic, rejects Hoekendijk’s “ecclesioclasm” and his action-oriented Christology; van Gurp, a Dutch right-wing Protestant, suggests that Hoekendijk advocated the realization of shalom through revolution without atonement in Christ.

Given this reception, the attempt here to reassess the legacy of J. C. Hoekendijk may seem rather pointless. Yet, a certain curiosity remains. We may be intrigued by the power of his words during a past generation of missionary and ecumenical history. Even more, the isolation of his position calls for investigation. Hoekendijk stood alone against the postwar need to institutionalize the ecumenical movement, alone among his contemporaries and their theological preoccupations, and alone between the dominant ecumenical paradigms of Catholicism and evangelicism. No doubt there is a personal history that accounts for much of this loneliness. But there may also be a message in it that still deserves to be heard.

Formative Years

Hans Hoekendijk was born in 1912 in Indonesia and spent his childhood in western Java, where his father was a missionary. His attachment to the evangelical religiosity and missionary zeal of his parental home remained strong for the rest of his life, as did his disappointment over the failure of his own career as a missionary. At eighteen, he entered the missionary training school in Oegstgeest (the Netherlands), where after six years he was selected and enabled to pursue theological studies at the State University of Utrecht (1936–41). His plan to finish his dissertation and return to Indonesia as a missionary was upset by the outbreak of war. In 1940 Hoekendijk married Els Laman and was ordained as a missionary, but because of the war, he was temporarily employed as student pastor. In this function, he became involved in the Dutch resistance movement through caring for Jewish children and had to go into hiding. Trying to get to England at the request of the Dutch government, he got stuck in Geneva, where he assumed pastoral care for refugees. In 1945 he finally made it to Indonesia, the field of his original appointment, where he took over the missionary consulate. But because of serious health problems, the Hoekendijks had to return to the Netherlands in 1946, which was a fundamental and lasting disappointment. He served for a brief period as study director at the ecumenical center of Bossey and then as secretary of the Netherlands Missionary Council. During that time he rewrote his dissertation practically from memory (the first draft having been lost during the war). It was entitled “Church and Volk in German Missiology” (1948).

His dissertation is the only major academic work left by Hoekendijk. It contains a fundamental and critical analysis of the ethnopathos in German missionary thinking—namely, the transformation of the natural, romanticized, and sociologically mis-

leading concept of Volk (people) into a pseudotheological category. Hoekendijk’s devastating criticism of this development, his proposal to understand “the people of God” as an eschatological notion and his insistence that “church” can never be identified with any given natural form gained special significance against the background of the war experience and stirred up much debate in missionary circles. His 1952 essay “The Church in Missionary Thinking”—a preparatory paper for the World Missionary Conference in Wilgenburg—developed this early position in the context of the search for a mutual integration of the missionary and the ecumenical movements.

A Suspicion of “Church-ism”

Willingen 1952 generally counts as a disappointment; it’s weak theological statement certainly did not meet the high hopes for a new vision on the missionary obligation of the church. In hindsight, however, it was an important intersection of currents in twentieth-century missionary and ecumenical thinking; as such, it is an indispensable background for an understanding of Hoekendijk.

There was, first of all, the factor of the maturing of the missionary movement into a global network of churches, designed to bear the burden of Christian witness in a chaotic world.

Libertus A. Hoedemaker is Professor of Missions, Ecumenics, and Christian Ethics at the State University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He studied at Utrecht University and at the Yale University Divinity School, taught in Indonesia at the Theological School in Jakarta (1967–71), and was a local pastor in the Netherlands Reformed Church. His publications in English include The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970).
In this perspective, the traditional ecclesiological weakness of the missionary movement evidently needed a new foundation, especially after the upheaval of the world war and the traumatic fall of China to Communism. Over against this general tendency, Hoekendijk developed his basic suspicion of “churchism.” Can a development of mission into church really be considered a maturing? Is it not, rather, a betrayal of the fundamental missionary meaning of “church” (the church happens as the Gospel of the kingdom is brought to the world)? There may be traces of an original evangelical spirituality in this suspicion, akin to the revivalistic mistrust of all ecclesial establishment. The dominant note, however, was the conviction that a preoccupation with church would blind the ecumenical movement to what is really going on in the world—the vast field of humanity in need of shalom.

A second current was the theological redefinition of mission, away from the Warneck approach of gradual pedagogy and away from the Mott approach of energetic global evangelism. Growing insight into the confusion of missions with Western cultural interests, together with the experience of war and profound change in world relations, demanded a new biblically based orientation. The names of Hartenstein, Cullmann, and Freytag come to mind here. These men sought, in different ways, to place church and mission in an eschatological perspective and to define both, as it were, from the point of view of what is coming rather than what is. This approach stimulated Hoekendijk to form his own, more radical position, namely, that mission is something that takes place not between world and church but between world and God’s kingdom, between time and the end of time. This position had apocalyptic overtones. The basic melody, however, was not denial of the world but affirmation of its everlasting diversity. We see, in other words, a curious correlation between radical eschatology and discovery of “world.” Hoekendijk’s suspicion of churchism can also be understood in this connection. The suspicion was not essential but functional, it meant to express the view that the church is instrument rather than center and that, in the ongoing missionary dynamic, it can never become settled in any social, cultural, or religious establishment.

At Willingen, Hoekendijk’s views were a novelty; they collided with the approach of those who could conceive of divine action in the world only in and through the church, but they diverged just as widely from the North American report Why Missions? which was also influential at the conference. The American report emphasized the responsibility of the church to be aware of the “signs of the times,” of what God is saying through the events of the day (especially in China). In a sense, this position was also eschatology, but it was an eschatology geared toward interpreting contemporary history (traces perhaps of the strong millennial tradition in American missionary thinking?) and toward political responsibility of the church (in ecumenical history a classic issue distinguishing between American and continental European eschatology). Willingen tried to combine all these divergent motives and interests in an effort to formulate a Trinitarian foundation of mission; in so doing, it saved both the church interest and the eschatological interest, but it did not solve anything. The concept of missio Dei (the Mission of God), widely used in later years to summarize Willingen and to define the post-Warneck and post-Mott missionary thinking, retained the same ambiguity. It could be used to defend a traditional approach to missions but also, as in the case of Hoekendijk, to develop an eschatological position. In a sense, Willingen came too early, both for this position and for the North American report. It was not until the 1960s that these two contributions in the background of Willingen bore fruit.

Hoekendijk went to Willingen in his capacity as secretary of the Department of Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. He had been called to this post in Geneva in 1949, after having served for two years at the Netherlands Missionary Council. Both functions had enabled him to travel extensively (including in Eastern Europe and South Africa) and to deepen his knowledge of the postwar world as mission field, as is evident in his study “The Evangelisation of Man in Modern Mass Society” (1950). After Willingen, in 1953, he returned to the State University of Utrecht, first as church professor in practical theology, apostolate, and biblical theology, then, from 1959, as state professor in church history of the twentieth century.

The Shift to God-World-Church

Hoekendijk’s Utrecht years were, generally speaking, not very happy. Because of serious illnesses, he was not able to travel as widely as he wanted or to participate in academic life as intensely as he was expected. He related better to students than to colleagues. He stimulated various ecumenical experiments but felt estranged from the church. His aphoristic style of writing was hailed by some but suspected by others, as it kept causing misunderstanding and controversy. He was a great source of inspiration and encouragement for younger theologians who looked for new directions, but the theological establishment never really accepted him. In the early 1960s, which were years of new ecumenical openings and high hopes for renewal, his advice was widely sought and his influence widely felt. In the eyes of many, however, he remained an irresponsible radical. His presentation at Strasbourg 1960 is an obvious example.

Nevertheless, his appointment in Utrecht was not illogical. In the early 1950s, the Netherlands Reformed Church had more or less committed itself to a “theology of the apostolate”—pioneered by Kraemer and van Ruler—which attempted to take seriously the fundamentally missionary character of the church and the outward-directed position of the church in society. Hoekendijk was expected to play a constructive role in this program. In some respects, however, he turned out to be a kind of Trojan horse. He rejected, for instance, the widely accepted notion that the apostolate (the term is meant to weld together the ideas of mission and evangelism) is a function of the church, insisting instead that the church is a function of the apostolate. He did not accept the theocratic presuppositions, typical for much reformed thinking in the Netherlands (and strongly defended by van Ruler), according to which the Christianization of culture is an essential aspect of the history of salvation. He vigorously exposed all signs of self-sufficiency in the institu-
tional church and kept looking for new experimental forms of *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. In brief, Hoekendijk’s interpretation of the apostolate, although it did take some tendencies seriously that were present in the postwar renewal of the Netherlands Reformed Church, was not generally accepted as a constructive contribution.

The World Council of Churches study project “The Missionary Structures of the Congregation” (1962–66) gave Hoekendijk a chance to develop his views. He played a major role in this project, especially in the European working group; although the two group reports were not written by him personally, they are generally considered to bear his stamp. Several basic elements of the study are indeed characteristic of the Hoekendijk of the 1960s: the positive evaluation of secularization as a fruit of the Gospel; the interpretation of “world” as “history”; the reordering of the familiar sequence God-church-world into God-world-church, with the church occupying a noncentral position; the emphasis on *shalom* as the substance of God’s action in the world; the appeal to the church to join and follow this action and to forsake its “heretical structures” to this end; the effort to solicit cooperation with sociologists in the reflection on adequate structures for mission. Most of these elements appeared again in the report of the second section of the Uppsala Assembly (1968), “Renewal in Mission.”

By the time the study project was completed, Hoekendijk had moved to the United States, accepting a call to the chair of world Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in 1965.

Hoekendijk’s American years have been described elsewhere. Any general characterization of these years reveals the ambivalence of this time. His personal life was marked by a divorce from Els Laman and a second marriage in 1970 to Letty M. Russell, one of his former students at Union. In his work he experienced, on the one hand, expansion: contact with students from all over the world, guest lectures in many other American theological institutions, extensive travel as visiting professor in Mexico, India, and Indonesia. On the other hand, he experienced decline: disappointment because of financial cutbacks at Union, loss of communication with students, and (again) serious health problems. One notices in these years a sobering of style, a paucity of words, a concentration on essential definition rather than flamboyant exposition, and a return to Bible study as a method of teaching. In his teaching and writing, Hoekendijk manifested, on the one hand, a stubborn original evangelicalism, in which he sought to develop the concept of mission into the idea of a “messianic pattern of life,” and the theology of missions into a “missionary theology.” On the other hand, his unwillingness and inability to identify with the new currents of black and liberation theologies seriously impaired the range of this evangelicalism; he could not move backward to a theology of the establishment, and he could not move forward to what he considered to be ideologizing (*me-*ology instead of *the-*ology). Besides practicing and advocating a “humble agnosticism” as the adequate missionary attitude, he fell silent for loss of communication.
One element in these years may be particularly significant for the interpretation of Hoekendijk's legacy: his repeated reference to a theology of revolution as the legitimate form of a missionary theology. Next to his choice of position in the Willingen discussion, this is perhaps the most important clue for the understanding of his persistent theological concerns.

In the appendix to the German edition of his dissertation, Hoekendijk suggested that a future revision of the book might focus on the theme of revolution as the major problem of modern history. The church—Volk problem might then be dealt with in the perspective of the revolution-tradition polarity. The church, usually preferring tradition over revolution and thereby misjudging the character of history, chooses Volk rather than Gesellschaft (society) as its sociological point of reference; in other words, it clings to the primary system while the world around is developing the secondary system of industrial organization. Precisely in and through this secondary system, revolution has become a characteristic feature of life. In Hoekendijk's view, there are two aspects to the modern phenomenon of revolution: the world has become history, and the post-colonial division of the world into rich and poor demands transfer of power. Theologically speaking, God historicizes the world, opening it up toward his future of shalom, and the movement of the Gospel toward the poor invites the destruction of the age-old crusade syndrome. In sum, the worldwide revolutionary ferment provides the opportunity for a missionary church to develop kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia in an eschatological perspective.

In these emphases, Hoekendijk closely associated himself with theologians like Alves, Lehmann, Metz, Moltmann, and Shaull, who in various ways aimed at a theological interpretation of the obviously revolutionary character of contemporary history. These men tried to weld together involvement in revolution and witness to the humanizing activity of God, in which the determinism of power and violence is broken by true liberation and reconciliation. In this connection, Hoekendijk repeatedly emphasized the necessity to distinguish between revolution and rebellion (the latter being merely a confirmation of the status quo) and to oppose the short-term identification of the missio Dei revolution with limited causes like black power. His definition of liberation, in all this, tended to be quite radical in a theological sense but rather unspecific in terms of social and political change.

“Mission” came to mean for Hoekendijk the vicarious existence of the whole people of God for the whole world, presence and service wherever the divine initiative with regard to the world manifests itself in history, and witness as a postscript to the “self-evident” movement of the message toward the poor. On this basis he dreamed of a missionary existence and a missionary theology in which all compartmentalization and mutual suspicion between a traditional missionary establishment and a traditional church establishment would disappear.

At the time of his death, in 1975, the theology of revolution, in the sense in which Hoekendijk had meant to develop it, had become largely obsolete. But he had been able to pass on his dream to many others.
In reviewing the facts and emotions of Hoekendijk’s life and work, one is struck by a certain stubbornness with which his central theological affirmations were repeated over and over in an aphoristic way, and by the absence of any self-critical dialogue with theological critics. In hindsight, one can easily see how a certain sarcasm and pedantry in his style, together with his display of vast knowledge, could have blocked communication. Close reading, however, also reveals how these negative elements served to protect a spirituality of longing. This spirituality was for him the only way to preserve the vision of world and eschatology “in one glance.” The “one glance” implied, above all, that the twentieth-century experience of the world, and—more widely—the experience of modernity, secularity, and revolution, could no longer be kept at arm's length by mission and church but had to be integrated into an encompassing view of God-world-church. This was Hoekendijk’s program for a renewed mission, a renewed church, and a renewed theology.

Hoekendijk’s version of the program contained much criticism and suspicion, and sometimes massive generalizations (“Secularization is the liberating work of Christ”; “all religions are anachronisms”) that were not always fair. These features might be better understood when they are seen as products of a curious alliance between a secular Christology (“Christ as the man for others”) and a Christ-centered either-or thinking reminiscent of the Barmen theses of the German church struggle in the 1930s. When such an alliance is fed by a spirituality of longing, it creates a nearly impossible situation for church and theology: profound and radical changes are necessary, but nothing in fact meets the standard. Hoekendijk seemed to want to say that ecclesiology can begin only after the recognition of this impossible (eschatological) position.

The deeply disturbing question of how to deal with the tension implied in this position may well be the most important part of Hoekendijk’s legacy. Although it is difficult to develop a missionary strategy or a strategy of church development that starts from this question, it cannot easily be dismissed. In the case of Hoekendijk, the question forcefully presented itself during the years of the war. It was in the war that he truly saw the world, as well as the inadequacy of traditional missionary thinking. The quandary arising from that experience—the naked confrontation of eschaton and world—was a point of no return. Although, in Hoekendijk’s case, it was channeled through his personal history and reworked with the aid of his specific theological equipment (which gave his theology that particular combination of powerful appeal and inaccessibility, and which brought him so much loneliness), it is difficult to overhear the message that the quandary itself is fundamental and characteristic of any mission that seeks to live out of the concurrence of God’s initiative and chaotic contemporary history.11

Our assessment has suggested two clues for the interpretation of Hoekendijk. One was the Willingen debate. Here we found the curious correlation between radical eschatology and discovery of world. Because of that correlation, we might add, the notion of judgment—always a part of traditional definitions of the relation between kingdom and world—was translated, as it were, into a permanent suspicion of all tendencies to institutionalize mission and church definitively. The second clue was the revolution debate. Here we drew attention to the effort to hold together the ferment of modern history and the shalom action of God, with both penetrating to the far corners of the whole earth. We might add here that the profoundly problematic nature of global society and the radical nature of God’s action forced Hoekendijk to refer the missionary to the vulnerable position of “humble agnosticism.”

It is only partly adequate, then, to interpret Hoekendijk as a pioneer of a truly pluriform church.12 To be sure, he was that too; he even pleads the cause of coexistence of contradictory forms of community, for only then can the church truly be with the world. But this pluriformity is no easy thing: it is not the comfortable pluriformity of a consumer society. It makes sense only in combination with the incisive eschatological question of shalom, in which final judgment and final promise are held together.

Notes


5. Hoekendijk, Kerken volk in de Duitse zendingswetenschap (Amsterdam: Kampert & Helm, 1948), published in German (edited, with appendix added) as Kirche und Volk in der deutschen Missionswissenschaft (Munich: Kaiser, 1967).

6. This essay ultimately appeared in several languages.


11. There are striking parallels here with the life and work of the German missiologist H. J. Margull (1925–82), who worked closely with Hoekendijk in the Missionary Structures Project.


Selected Publications of J. C. Hoekendijk


Study with Fuller while continuing in ministry! Explore the expanded and revised School of World Mission’s field-based, integrated In-Service Program.

Mission courses in:
- Anthropology
- Church Growth
- Biblical Foundations
- Folk Religion
- Historical Development
- Leadership
- Islam
- Pauline Theology

New courses in:
- Planting Churches
- Spiritual Issues
- Creative Access Mission
- Introduction to Missiology
- Research Design
  (Computer Format)

For more information, complete this form and mail to:

In-Service Program  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
135 N. Oakland Avenue  
Pasadena, CA 91182

☐ Yes! I am interested in Fuller’s In-Service Program

Name ________________________
Address ______________________

Or call: 1-800-235-2222, Ext. 5400

FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
School of World Mission