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A Laboratory for Christianity's Destruction

A church that lacks the doctrinal conviction and courage necessary to prosecute an atheist pastor for heresy is a church that lost its Christian identity — a long time ago.



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As the BBC reports, some church leaders in the Netherlands want to transform their small nation into a laboratory for rethinking Christianity — “experimenting with radical new ways of understanding the faith.”

Religious Affairs Correspondent Robert Pigott tells of Rev. Klaas Hendrikse, a minister of the PKN, the mainstream Protestant denomination in the Netherlands. Pastor Hendrikse doesn't believe in life after death, nor even in God as a supernatural being. He told the BBC that he has “no talent” for believing historic and orthodox doctrines. “God is not a being at all,” he says, but just an experience.



Furthermore, as Pigott reports, “Mr. Hendrikse describes the Bible's account of Jesus's life as a mythological story about a man who may never have existed, even if it is a valuable source of wisdom about how to lead a good life.”

By any normative definition of Christian belief, Klass Hendrikse is an unbeliever, but in the largest Dutch denomination, he is considered a minister in good standing. As a matter of fact, he is not even unusual. A study undertaken by the Free University of Amsterdam

determined that about one of every six Protestant ministers is either agnostic or atheist.

Hendrikse is very open about his views. In fact, he published a book in recent years entitled, *Believing in a Non-Existent God*. Conservative church leaders demanded a heresy trial for the pastor, but the denomination decided that Hendrikse's views are too commonly held to be considered out of bounds.

In other words, the church has embraced a straightforward form of atheism within its own ranks — and among its own ministers.

The BBC report also introduces Rev. Kirsten Slettenaar, another minister of the church, who openly rejects the divinity of Christ. She refers to “Son of God” as a mere title. “I don't think he was a god or a half god,” she says. “I think he was a man, but he was a special man because he was very good in living from out of love, from out of the spirit of God he found within himself.”

The Dutch ministers featured in this report dismiss the doctrines of biblical Christianity as “outside of people” and “rigid things you can't touch any more.” Like the liberal theologians of the last two centuries, they insist that the “real meaning” of Christianity can survive, even if its central truth claims are denied.

One layperson cited in the report celebrated the liberation of Christianity from truth claims, allowing her to recreate the faith “to my own way of thinking, my own way of doing.”

Professor Hijme Stoffels of the Free University of Amsterdam called the new approach to Christianity in the Netherlands “somethingism.” The majority of Dutch citizens, he explains, desire some form of spirituality, but not the God of the Bible. “There must be something between heaven and earth, but to call it ‘God’ and even ‘a personal God’, for the majority of Dutch is a bridge too far.”

Professor Stoffels went on to argue that Christian churches in the Netherlands are “in a market situation.” As he explained, “They can offer their ideas to a majority of the population which is interested in spirituality or some other kind of religion.”

Another pastor argued for using the words of traditional Christianity, but meaning “something totally different.”

All this is familiar, at least in general terms, to anyone who has been observing mainline Protestantism — in either the United States or Europe — for the last half-century or more. The central doctrines of Christianity are first sidelined and hardly mentioned, then revised, and finally rejected.

Behind that process is the argument that the world has changed, and that Christianity must change with it. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most influential leaders in American Protestant liberalism, argued that the modern world has simply rendered traditional Christian doctrines unintelligible to the modern man and woman. John Shelby Spong, the retired Episcopal bishop of Newark, New Jersey, put the issue bluntly: “Christianity must change or die.”

Well, as even some conservatives left in the Dutch church recognize, if the church changes in the way the Dutch liberals are changing it, it is spiritually and theologically dead already. There is a new religion of “somethingism” in the Netherlands, and it is not a new form of Christianity. It is a new religion meeting in historic Christian church structures.

All this in a country that was once pervasively Christian. Theologian and conservative church leader Abraham Kuyper was the nation’s Prime Minister from 1901 to 1905. The Dutch once claimed to model a Christian culture. All that is now in ruins.

The radical experimentation of the Dutch churches may well be a response to market pressure, as Professor Stoffels explains, but it is the substitution of a new religion in place of Christianity. Christianity stands or falls on its central truth claims. Without the knowledge of the full deity and humanity of Christ, there is no Gospel and no salvation of sinners.

Of course, if you no longer believe in a personal God, or any existent deity of any sort, then you will not be worried about salvation from sin.

A church that lacks the doctrinal conviction and courage necessary to prosecute an atheist pastor for heresy is a church that lost its Christian identity — a long time ago. The doctrinal experimentation embraced by these Dutch churches is hardly limited to the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the Dutch situation makes one point transparently clear — this is a laboratory for the destruction of Christianity.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

Robert Pigott, “[Dutch Rethink Christianity for a Doubtful World](#),” The British Broadcasting Corporation/BBC, Friday, August 5, 2011.

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