

# **IS RELIGION UNDER THREAT OF BEING PUSHED ASIDE IN TODAY'S SOCIETIES\***

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## ***Introduction***

One wonders first of all: Who is threatening whom? Is religion under threat of being pushed aside or is the opposite the case: Is religion a threat to our contemporary society, as many will argue these days? Is religion, in particular the christian religion in Europe on the way out? And if so: so what? Is this something we should feel troubled about? What does that mean for the norms and values which are usually associated with those religions? Is that a threat or is this on the contrary a liberation? If religion is something good on the other hand: what could be done to keep it, to get it back again?

I would like to divide my presentation in the following way:

1. First of all I would like to deal briefly with the question "Is religion a threat to our societies?"

2. Secondly I will try to tackle the main question of my presentation: "Is there a threat that religion will be pushed aside?" This is the issue which is usually indicated with the term secularisation. I would like to deal with the possible causes: "Is it unwillingness, indifference, or ignorance?"

3. And in the third place – this of course suggests and already presupposes that my answer to the second question is in the affirmative – I would like to address the question what could be done about the devaluation of religion in our societies. In this context, I would like to consider to what extent is it possible to communicate the Gospel in relationship to or in connection with art, literature and music.

4. In the last section, I will draw my conclusion.

\*One of two lectures given by Dr Wessels at the University of Malta in 1998

## 1. *Fundamentalism(s)*

In Europe we live in what is usually called a secular society. Religious norms and values are receding, while on the other hand, in other parts of the globe religion, it seems, is undergoing a renaissance. In particular the rise of Islamic fundamentalism comes to mind, but there are also the fundamentalisms of other religions (Jewish, Christian and Hindu). Does not this kind of revival form a threat to our societies? It is remarkable that it is exactly the fundamentalists that claim that religion is pushed aside in their societies by the wicked secular forces of western societies.

Let me make clear right at the outset that I am not joining the fundamentalist camp when dealing with this topic. On the contrary, I do see fundamentalism of whatever kind as, may be, the threat to the authenticity of real and true religion.

One might wonder how to interpret what is happening today in many countries with this revival of religion. Is there a kind of 'revanche of the Sacred'? I am referring then in particular to the so-called Sacred Violence: the glorification of aggression.

Violence unfortunately has been a well known phenomenon in the history of religion, in all religions for that matter: religious violence is not something of past history alone. There are too many examples thereof in our own day.

- Violence can be preached in the name of Judaism. Baruch Goldstein, a Jew from the United States only recently in Israel, killed muslims in the mosque of the patriarchs in Hebron at the West Bank, in 1994. In the name of the God of Abraham he did not allow a place for those other children of Abraham, 'the friend of God' (as Abraham is called both in the Bible and the Qur'an), 'Friend', Khalil in Arabic, which actually is also the Arabic name for the town of Hebron.

- There are of course Muslim fundamentalists who hail violence. There are those who claim to be from God's party (Hizbollah), his front of Liberation and Armed group (FIS and GIA in Algeria), and think that they are waging His (ie. God's) war (*djihâd*).

- There is religious violence in the name of Hinduism. In the name of the god Rama, particular Hindu fundamentalistic groups killed Muslims and destroyed the mosque in Ayodhya (India) because the god Rama was supposed to be born there. Quite a Christmas celebration: war on earth and for other believers no place in the inn!

Already before our Common Age, the poet Euripides fulminated against this kind of speaking and acting in the name of God and of religion.

You know this story from Greek mythology about Tantalus - who gave his name to 'tantalization' and 'tantalising'.

He was the beloved of the gods. In his boldness he wanted to find out if the gods knew everything. He invited them for dinner and offered them his son (Pelops) as food. All of the gods saw through his wile (trick) except for one (Demeter).

This is what Euripides writes:

So I consider also untrue  
 the dinner of Tantalus, and that the gods there  
 were eating the flesh of his child.  
 No. But a people of murderers as one finds here  
 did ascribe *their* own cruelty to the gods.  
*For no god ever did something inhuman.*

This kind of religion, this fundamentalism, is and would be a threat for our societies. If this kind of religion is the religion we are talking about, then I'd rather it disappeared today than tomorrow.

## ***2. Is religion on the way out? What are the possible causes?***

If one does not have fundamentalism in mind, but it is understood and accepted that we want to deal with true authentic religion, we come to the question: what are the reasons/causes that religion(s) in our western and European societies are disappearing?

One notices today in the western world that there is only a minimum of knowledge left among many people in our western societies of iconography and symbolism. Many people live in a kind of religious symbolic vacuum,<sup>1</sup> where a kind of illiteracy exists as far as symbols are concerned. Or maybe one has to say, a replacement of religious symbols by other secular symbols. From an interview

1. Jacques De Visscher, *Een te voltooin leven; over de rituelen van de moderne mens*, (Peckmans Kok Agora; Kampen 1996) 15.17.187.

given in the summer of 1995 with some 7000 people in six countries, it turned out that the most well known international symbol was: the five twisted stars of the Olympic movement. From the 7000 people questioned 92% recognized the Olympic symbol, 88% the shell of Shell and the logo of McDonalds. But the Christian cross was identified correctly only by 54% of those interviewed.

Is it purely ignorance that causes these questions about God not to be raised today? Or is it perhaps unwillingness or rather a certain lack of interest?

In one of his most famous drawings, Rembrandt painted all that one can read in a certain chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew (19). One sees people drawing nearer to Jesus, in particular the sick, the crippled and the injured; a rich young man (who had just asked Jesus: 'Teacher what good deed must I do to have eternal life', but is sitting now in a pensive mood since he does not want to give up all his wealth); one sees a group of scholars in heated discussion what they are to do with Jesus. All that you can see in that one drawing. But then one finds - which is typical for Rembrandt, I think, a person depicted whom one does not find in the Gospel story; he is standing there in front with his hands behind his back: he is a spectator, he is an observer. He is indifferent. He does not get involved.

These kinds of people are of all times and of all places. People who do not want to get involved in religion and religious questions.

Or is it unwillingness? Indeed it is perhaps a problem of all times. Jesus compares his own contemporaries to children.

It is like children shouting at each other as they sit in the market place: We played the pipes for you and you wouldn't dance; we sang dirges, and you wouldn't be mourners (Matthew 11,16-19).

Jesus is telling this parable to make clear to his hearers/listeners how they looked at him and at John the Baptist. Jesus was for them a spoil-sport, because he was sitting with publicans and sinners at one table, while they wanted to be rigid. John they found too much of a hermit and Jesus someone who did like food; he was according to them a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of taxcollectors and sinners (Luke 7,34).

In other words they did not get moved by one or the other.

Isn't something similar happening today, in our societies? Is religion disappearing because in a number of cases there are people in our modern agnostic and atheistic culture who just do not want to play.

In one of his books, a Dutch novelist (Henk van Teylingen) attacks the opinion of someone who wrote in a weekly: All people believe in a power, a force, or an entity outside man. Why not me? Why am I unable to believe? It is something that you feel, one sometimes hears being said? Where then? In your head, in your stomach, in your heart? What is that kind of feeling like? Why not me? Why do I not feel anything, even if I try so hard?

Then the novelist has the following suggestion for him: If you really want to get to know God as He really is, then He gives you all opportunities for that purpose. Just push the button in your brains, in order that you turn to a more pleasant program like the Sermon on the Mount or the Bhagavadgita.

But maybe the only reasons for religions to be on the way out are not just ignorance, indifference or unwillingness. Maybe it is sometimes sheer superficiality. Speaking as a Dutchman, we live in a very flat country indeed, one might ask, doesn't that also make us Dutch people superficial?

A story is told about a German professor in the 18th century who spent only one day in Leiden where he was nominated as a university professor. The next day this Romantic offered his resignation 'because he could not entertain any mythological notions (higher) in such a flat country.'

Whatever the reasons are, indifference, unwillingness or superficiality, what can be done about it? This is a question which any minister in the the church, synagoge or mosque can ask.

### ***3. What could be done about getting people in Europe in touch with true religion?***

**3.0** 'Religion disappears but God remains', the French writer Victor Hugo claimed last century. If this was true then is it true today? Very volumnuous books have been published lately about *The History of God* (Karen Armstong) or *The biography of God* (Jack Miles). The latter author called his book 'a topper'. Is one allowed in the today's secular world to speak again about Him or Her?

If one wants to speak today about this subject that one needs to clear out a lot of accretion in order to understand what really matters. Jack Miles, the author of *The Biography of God*, sees himself as someone who cleans the soiled stained-glass-windows of the cathedral, in order that the sun can shine through again to illuminate the treasures which are hidden in there.

But if one is able to take all those barriers of lack of knowledge, indifference, unwillingness towards the religious message, what contribution one can give in order to make the religious message more understandable and imagineable in our contemporary world?

What can be done about it? Is there anything to do to overcome these threats?

A Dutch poet and scholar, the late Jan Willem Schulte Northolt, tells in his (last) lecture entitled: 'About God and me', that when he wanted to know who God was, he did not take refuge in theology. He did not penetrate in the secrets of existence with the help of philosophy but through poetry.<sup>2</sup> In theology he did not find room for further imagination.

In order to answer the question what can be done about that threat my next concern is now how can one relate to our contemporary culture? In line with which I would now like to speak in particular about this in relation to literature, art and music.

In what way did the church make the connection/link with literature and how could we relate the (Biblical) Story to the today's myths and stories?

### **3.1. Religion and the role of literature**

Every mythology, however traditional it may be, is changed by the alchemy of a writer. The true writer is always somebody who changes myths or invents them.<sup>3</sup> 'A

2. J.W. Schulte Nordholt, *Verzamelande gedichten* (Baarn 1989) quoted by E. L.H.M. Van de Loo and others, *Kunst van geloven*, (Ambo; Baarn 1996) 148.
3. G. Steiner, *Tolstoj of Dostojevski. Een oefening in de oude kritiek*, (Bert Bakker; Amsterdam 1992) 237.
4. Cf. Sölle, *Opwellingen van mode; aanzet tot een andere manier van denken*, (Ten Have; Baarn 1994) 138.

book must be like an axe to break the ice of the soul', Franz Kafka said.<sup>4</sup> What Georges Steiner said about Sophocles in his essay about 'Antigones' is true for any important great piece of art, namely that this ancient tragedian explains the eternal themes of conflicts between the divine and human law, between the individual conscience and public demands, between old and young, between woman and man ....<sup>5</sup>

Literature is very important for the church in many ways. 'One can learn more theology from how many biblical stories are or could be mirrored in contemporary world creative writers than from the study of religion'<sup>6</sup> literature.<sup>7</sup> Different examples could be given to illustrate how the connection between Gospel and Literature could be made. Not as two opposing entities, not Gospel or Literature, but Gospel and Literature, and maybe sometimes Literature as Gospel.

Some examples: the most important myths in the work and personal life of the Russian writers Tolstoi and Dostojevski were (according to Georges Steiner) religious. Both writers were during their whole life wrestling like Jacob with the angel and demanded that this angel would reveal the coherent myth about God and a verifiable story about God's role in the fate of man. Tolstoj and Dostoiewski were *religious* artists in the sense of the builders of the cathedrals or like Michelangelo when he made the image of the eternal in the Sixtine Chapel. They were possessed by the idea of God and travelled their life like St. Paul on the way to Damascus.<sup>8</sup> While in Dostojevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, one brother (the atheist) Iwan mainly talks, (the Christian) Aljosja acts. Dostojevski was convinced, that in the last analysis in theological questions rational arguments are powerless: 'Therefore, Aljosja does not reason with Iwan, nor does Zosima with the old Karamazov, or Christ with the great inquisitor, but they answer again and again with an act of love. No arguments are put over against each other, but manners of existence.'<sup>9</sup> An important part of Dostojevski fiction was an explanation of the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

5. Quoted by Jacques De Visscher, in George Steiner, *Heeft de waarheid toekomst? Essays*, (Ambo. Baarn 1991) 16. Cf. George Steiner, *Antigones, The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, art and Thought*, (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1984).

6. Brockway, 100.

7. Cf. for instance T.M. Gilhuis, *Nu dan, luister. Bijbelse verhalen nieuw gehoord*, (Well listen: Biblical stories heard in a new way); (J.H. Kok; Kampen 1990).

8. Steiner, *Tolstoi*, 243.

9. Hans, Küng, and Walter, Jens, *Wereldliteratuur en religie; Pascal, Gryphius, Lessing, Hölderlin, Novalis, Kierkegaard, Dostojewski, Kafka*, (Gooi en Sticht; Hilversum 1986) 225. 229.

10. Steiner, *Tolstoi*, 292.

Novels like Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Thomas Mann's *Mountain of Purification* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* are often quoted as modern literary examples of the *quest*.<sup>11</sup>

James Joyce carried the visions of his home and the emotion of his earlier faith (educated by the Jesuits) of his native Dublin everywhere with him. He called his short stories and sketches Dubliner 'epiphanies', using this religious phrase of a divine being as a manifestation of a sudden insight in the life given to an artist. He continuously looks for myths which transcend time and are part of the life of people everywhere.<sup>12</sup>

### ***3.2. The role of religion and art: the example of Vincent van Gogh comes to mind.***

My second example is taken from plastic art. I will deal briefly with the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Often Van Gogh is seen as someone who was just for a short while an evangelist and a pastor, but who gave up his religion. An early example of what happened to so many christians in the twentieth century.

Was there a break with his christian faith, as is often suggested? Is there discontinuity between the first part of his life (1870–1880) and the second (1880–1890)? Did he start to hate and despise the God of Scripture and of the pastors (including his own father) and did he turn to the God of nature? <sup>13</sup> Did the 'sun' take the place of Christ? Did father Millet (the painter) and father Michelet (the writer) come in stead of his own father the pastor? Does Literature (French literature for example) replace the Bible? Does art replace religion or did art even become his religion?

I would like to defend the thesis that Vincent van Gogh who started off as an evangelist in his youth remained an evangelist as an artist and a painter. He did not given up his Christian faith although it changed.<sup>14</sup>

11. Some find this motive in John Updike's *Rabbit Run* and William Burrough's *The Naked Lunch* (Brockway, 105)
12. Cf. *The Reader's Companion to World Literature* (A Mentor Book) *sub voce*.
13. Tsokasa Kodera, *Vincent van Gogh, Christinanity versus Nature* (Dissertation; University Amsterdam 1988) 163.
14. For a more extensive treatment of this theme cf. my *Een soort bijbel. Vincent van Gogh als evangelist* (Ten Have; Baarn 1990).

In my conviction these questions are false dilemmas. As an evangelist and as a painter Van Gogh wanted to bring consolation to people. Like Jesus he was moved with the worn out, the poor, the bended people of the 'Hard Times', as Charles Dickens called the situation of people in nineteenth century England.

One of the examples with which I want to 'prove' my point is his painting: 'Still life with Open Bible'. One sees a large 'dark' copy of the Bible. A candle extinguished and in the foreground a yellow shining copy of Emile Zola's book (with the title legible:) *La Joy de Vivre*, the Joy of Life. Here you are, some people say: the dark written off Bible, the light extinguished and instead the yellow light bringing joy of life that Literature provides. Not the Bible but Literature.

I would like to argue with this kind of interpretation of the work of Van Gogh. This Bible which we see painted is the copy of his father's Bible who had just passed away a few weeks before. The extinguished candle refers to the extinguished life of his father and does not refer to the Bible at all.

We know that Van Gogh knew the content of the Bible very well. He was in his early youth an ardent Bible-reader, but also in his later life as a painter he continues to speak with appreciation about it. In this painting, the Bible lies open at chapter 53 from the Prophet Isaiah. One of the so-called 'Hymns of the suffering servant of the Lord'. It is completely impossible and unthinkable that Van Gogh would intend to play down the significance of this passage. Several times in his letters to his brother Theo he refers to this passage. It is striking that while in the Hague - where he has taken care of Sien, as she is called, a prostitute with her child - drawing her literally in her naked misery. He gives a title to this etching in English: 'Sorrow'. Can't we say that he intends to show her as 'a Woman of Sorrows'?

Then next to the Bible you have this book of Zola. To suggest that *Joie de vivre* of Zola replaces the Bible is incorrect. On the contrary. It is more so that he uses this book to interpret the Bible.

In one of his letters (161) speaking about different authors he writes that the Bible eternally remains, but that those authors show how it can be applied in our time.<sup>15</sup> This painting 'Still life with Open Bible' affirms that significant novels

15. Cliff Edwards, *Van Gogh and God; A Creative Spiritual Quest*, (Loyola University Press; Chicago 1989) 51.

express the truths of the Bible to a contemporary audience.<sup>16</sup> Vincent saw in one of the figures in Zola's novel (Pauline Quenu), like the Servant in Isaiah, incarnations of renunciation, sacrifice, and charity. 'But it was fitting that Zola expressed the Servant mission for a new age in the form of a new age.'<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3 *The role of Music in religion.*

My third and final example after literature and plastic art is taken from music.

The ancient Greeks ascribed to music magic and therapeutic powers. It could heal wounds and it could move blocks of stone: the singing of Amphion, son of Zeus, was said to have enchanted stones to build of their own accord the walls of Thebes.<sup>18</sup>

In what way did the Church relate to music in the past and how could it be done today? Music is a means in order to express feelings, more accurately than the word (F. Mendelsohn).

The revelation of God on mount Sinai was related to music: 'On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountains, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled' (Exodus 19,16). The walls of Jericho fell through a liturgical, musical conquest (Joshua 6). The prophet Elisha was prophetically inspired also with the help of music (cf. 2 Kings 3;15). King Saul's bad spirits were exorcised by the music of the young shepherd David on the cither (1 Samuel 16,23).

Early christian gatherings were sober, but very early on, also inspired by the example of the psalmody of the synagoge, it was introduced in the church. Ambrose (339-397), the christian bishop of Milan, introduced hymns.<sup>19</sup> St. Augustin (354-430) was in favour of music.<sup>20</sup> In the West you have the development of Gregorian music.<sup>21</sup>

16. Cliff Edwards, *Van Gogh*, 49.

17. Cliff Edwards, *Van Gogh*, 50.

18. Mircea Eliade, Ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion, Volume X* (London; New York 1987) 205.

19. Jan Koenot, *Voorbij de woorden. Essays over rock, cultuur en religie* (Averbode, Ten Have; Baarn 1996) 195.

20. Koenot, *Voorbij* 196.

21. Compare W. Muddle, "Muziek" in F.W. Grosheide/G.P. van Iterzon (eds), *Christelijke Encyclopedie*, (J. Kok; Kampen 1960) 110-111.

Hildegard van Bingen (1098-1179) (born exactly 900 years ago this year) who founded religious communities, composed music and wrote liturgical songs. She saw herself as an instrument of the divine Spirit.<sup>22</sup> She drew much inspiration from 'The Song of Songs'. For her there was a connection between word and the humanity of Jesus, what music related was to the spiritual and harmonic unity of the divine Trinity.<sup>23</sup>

### *The role of Popmusic.*<sup>24</sup>

Pop-music is very important in our societies for young and even for not so young people. Somebody who does not feel completely at home on this earth, not settling anywhere but makes a pilgrimage, he is the one who finds solace in a song. Music brings life in a mortal existence. Many talk about the wholesome work of music. Penetration, participation and transcendence happen in music through the miracle of hearing. The ear makes another reality possible, the other reality of music 'enters, penetrates in my inner being ...'. Pop artists are in the middle of the mystery of life, wrestle with it, seek to confront the dark deadly forces in their search for real life. The rock fan does not sit down in laziness, the music makes him get up, rise and go out into the adventure of life. Such music invites us to confront our feelings, our own love for life (or weariness of life). Our own disappointments, our pain. In the best music you have both demolition and building up. The story of Joshua from the Bible and Amphion from Greek mythology can illustrate this function. We are familiar with the story of Joshua and the conquest of Jericho. The walls are tumbling down at the sound of ram's horn trumpets (Joshua 6). Amphion, a figure from Greek mythology, only needed to play the magic flute to get the stones moving in order that they got together for the sake of wall around. Rockmusic unites these two forces: Joshua and Amphion at the same time. This is what happens in any concert: with the passion of the blowers of Jericho, the old environment is pulverized, and with the magic of Amphion the new enclosure is created in which you are taken up. Musicians do with sound what painters are doing with images.<sup>25</sup>

22. Ctr Marjolein de Vos' column in *Nieuwe rotterdamse Courant* 11/10/1996.

23. Koenot, *Voorbij* 198.

24. I am using insights from Jan Koenot.

25. Thus Koenot, *Voorbij*, 18. 19. 21. 23. 24. 27. 28.

#### 4. Conclusion.

**4.0** Is it possible in this attempt to relate Gospel and Culture (through literature, art, music) to single out criteria for what is or what is not acceptable when overcoming the threats of losing religion or when trying to recover it?<sup>26</sup>

Where do you get your criteria from in order to decide if something is authentic, true religion? When are myths true when are they false? How to relate the myths or the stories from the Bible to the stories of human kind today?

One has to be conscious of the ambivalence of each culture, also the European and western culture. Myths, stories can become just empty, shallow stories, they can become dangerous ideologies. Do you understand what you read, do you understand what you see? In both cases you need an interpreter.

How to deal with and to think about Religion and Culture? In the examples I mentioned respectively: literature, art and music.

**4.1 (Literature)** The church-father Jerome (d.420) can be quoted as an example of how the Church wrestled with the question how to relate Gospel to culture, in his case to classical profane culture. He was a pupil of a famous Roman grammarian (Donatus), who was the author of extensive commentary on literature, especially the writer of comedies of Terentius and Vergil. Jerome in turn became the interpreter of the Bible. According to him it was possible to build a bridge between profane erudition and the Gospel. Not everything should be rejected, and elements of the Graeco-Roman culture can be used and be taken in the service of the spreading and the deepening of the Christian faith. Did not, according to Jerome, also St. Paul make use of classical authors? Jerome does contrast though the *eloquentia* (eloquence of pagan literature) and *veritas* (the truth of the Christian faith). 'We are pupils of the piscatores (fisherman) not of the oratores'<sup>27</sup>

26. Eugen L. Stockwell, 1988, quoted by Bert Hoedemaker, in *Roldanus, Evangelie en beschaving. Studies bij het afscheid van Hans Roldanus* (Boekecentrum; Zoetermeer 1995) 172: 'If we take seriously the theological assumption of the Gospel transforming cultures from within, and if the Gospel cannot be considered independent from its various cultural expressions, how can we single out universally applicable Gospel criteria?'

27. G. Bartelink, "Evangelie en profane literatuur in de brieven van Hiëronymus," in *Roldanus*, 95. 97. 100. 101. 102. 104. 105. 106.

Characteristic of Jerome's life was the tension he felt. His life became dominated by a dream. He saw himself standing before the throne of Christ where he received the reproach of having been more Ciceronian than Christian: *Ciceronianus es, non Christianus*. He then took an oath not to read any profane authors any more. He stuck to his oath for the rest of his life.<sup>28</sup> Should Jerome have been so severe to himself?

#### 4.2. *The example of art. Image culture and the religious message.*

In the West we have constructed a wall between word and image whereby a painter like Van Gogh is disqualified as a theological source. "The Western prejudice in favour of 'God as Word' has probably led to the avoidance of one that took seriously 'God as Image.'"<sup>29</sup>

In art, literature but also in ordinary life again and again, like Jesus in the parables, one can find the imaginative stories, images which are telling. I will tell you such a story:

On Friday 26th of April 1996 we commemorated the tenth anniversary of the explosion of the nuclear reactor in Tschernobil. I saw and heard a programme on Dutch television with an impressive interview with one of the survivors. He was brought into the picture with his wounds which he had to care for daily. Only with the help of a drive in Germany to raise funds for exorbitant expensive medicine was he kept alive. It was most moving what he told about what had happened that particular day of the explosion. When it took place he was off duty. He could have stayed away but without any protective clothing he had entered the plant in order to save friends. He found a wounded and dying friend and carried him on his shoulders out of the nuclear reactor. On the spots where the body of his friend rested the deadly radiation entered his body.

One can ask is this not a modern, new and authentic story, an icon - a modern myth - in which you hear/see, what real service of God which is always at the same time service of man means? 'No one has greater love than he who gives his life for his friends?' (John 15,13)?

28. Bartelink, *Evangelie*, 100.

29. Cliff Edwards, *Van Gogh*, XV. 189.

### 4.3. Music

We mentioned positive ways in which the Church in the past related to music and could do so today. I would like to mention a popsong. It deals with the indestructable hope that is expressed. In one of the songs of the group Oasis one hears the protest against the inner and outside powers which make young people let the dreams they had be washed away by the gods of this century in particular love of money.

As a child, according to this song, you wanted to become a spaceman, but it was taken from you and you were appeased with money in order to give up on your dreams. But the pop-song ends with making clear that it is yet not too late to become a spaceman.

*It's funny how your dreams change as you'r growing old  
You don't wanna be no spaceman, you just wanted gold,  
All the dream-stealers are lying awake.*

*But if you wanna be a spaceman  
It' still not too late.*

The world becomes a hell when there is no hope anymore. According to Dante in his *Divine Comedy* there are people in hell who cannot use verbs in the future tense anymore: 'One can speak of eternal damnation when we are not able to use the grammar of the future anymore, that is the grammar of hope'.<sup>30</sup> But why should we not be able in case we have forgotten that grammar to learn that grammar of hope anew and so overcome the threat that God, that is, true humanity is leaving our societies?

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30. Quoted via G. Steiner, *Heeft waarheid een toekomst. Essays*, (Baarn 1991) 46.