Pastoral Work: Search for a Common Language

ERIK BORGMAN, HANS VAN DRONGELEN AND TON MEIJKNECHT
Delft University of Technology, Voorstraat 60, 2611 JS Delft, The Netherlands
t.meijknecht@motiv.tudelft.nl

Expanding on the concept of implicit religion, when explicit religion is becoming ever more marginal, this article explores rather than investigates an intuition of two campus chaplains. It is their first attempt to reveal in a non-proclaiming way the spirituality of many members of their generation. It tells the experience of young people who discover they have a thing like a self or even a soul. It tells the pastoral experience of these chaplains who have to redefine their job after this discovery. Often this discovery is a shocking experience to all concerned. Currently, methods are lacking to describe it in an appropriate way. This article can be considered a first attempt to look for an acceptable method of description as well: a search for a common language.

Sociologists call it ‘de-traditionalization’.¹ It means that many have parted, willingly or unwillingly, with what was a spiritual haven to their ancestors. In this haven, their ancestors felt free and safe to ask the fundamental questions of life; the same questions that also occupy the minds of people today. But whereas their ancestors mastered the language in which to express these questions, people from our generation have lost both the spiritual haven as well as the language. What is left is a sense of something lacking. Because this is not shared with others and because it cannot be tested critically, we can speak of a sense of lacking, but hardly of a conscious sense of lacking.

Yet this consciousness shows itself regularly. For instance, it showed with a young woman in a good restaurant. She is well-educated, has a job with responsibilities, and has a stable and lasting relationship with her partner. She is good looking, wears smart clothes and has a good
sense of humour. Our dinner conversation is enjoyable, except for five minutes; and these five minutes are significant. The woman talks about her job as a manager in a research institute for pedagogy and at a certain moment she says openly: ‘What I find discouraging about my job is that I cannot realize the things I set out to do when I chose Education as my subject of study and career. I am unable to realize my potential’. Her courage, to ‘look in the mirror’ and to admit what she sees, the acknowledgement of the contrast between her ideals and the reality in which she lives, gives her the temporary position of spokesperson for her generation. Indeed a temporary spokesperson, because, like many others, she is also stuck in the position which has been described so clearly by the philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor signals that today’s moral philosophy ‘has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life’. People from our generation suffer from the contrast between appropriate behaviour, which they are trained to apply, and a deep longing for a good life, of which they keep dreaming. However, although they are part of today’s society, each lacks the common language which might enable them to talk about these dreams.

Chaplains often have to face this situation. They observe people who yearn for the things that are of real value and that make life worth living, but who do not master the words that can express and justify this yearning. In an individualized, post-traditional society we find a dominant tendency to understand fear and yearning as something personal and subjective. Fear and yearning are locked away in a private environment and are regarded as things that are only of relevance to the person involved. Because of that, religion, as far as it is relevant to people today, is mainly regarded as something that is of personal relevance. However, in the past, common traditions created a framework in which it was possible to ask, share and interpret the fundamental questions of life. Specifically religious traditions cultivated a vision of the truth in which facts, values and existential dilemmas were connected, and in which personal choices could be integrated in ontological and cosmic structures, and to link them to set values which cannot but be respected. Now that this is definitely behind us, we must find new ways to define values, to communicate and to justify them, in our irreversibly post-traditional era.

For chaplains this implies that, among other things, it is impossible
to pose the Christian tradition simply as a prescriptive framework for people today. In the first place, their lives must be unlocked and interpreted as a religious situation; their current longing must be made comprehensible and turned into words close to those used in religious traditions, especially the Christian tradition. In the words of Edward Schillebeeckx, the growth of religious awareness should be allowed to surface in the world.

Two of the authors, Ton Meijknecht and Hans van Drongelen, have been chaplains for the students of the Delft University of Technology for more than ten years. During that time they have paid a great deal of attention to the spiritual poverty of our society and the people who live in it. They gained experience in this field through interaction with a specific group of people: the students of the University of Technology, or in other words, future engineers. This essay presents the approach of these people and the efforts of the student chaplains to deal with the issue fruitfully within the chaplaincy. Projects involving students are conducted under the chaplaincy’s name ‘MoTiv’.³

Part of the ‘Delft approach’ is that the chaplains take a participating stance when it comes to dealing with their target group. This means that they do not pretend to have a solution for the problems with which the people in their target group deal, but that they gain trust and help to make the students understand and focus on the authenticity of the reality that proves to be religiously and theologically relevant. They do this by showing them that they themselves are part of the same situation, by trying to understand them and by searching for the reasons behind our post-traditional, overly structured daily life, together with the students. The method the chaplains developed for this approach is called The mental dinner party, which will be presented and commented on in the rest of this essay.

The third author, Erik Borgman, is a theologian and director of the Heijendaal Instituut of Radboud University, Nijmegen. Several times he has explained and defended the significance of Schillebeeckx’ principle that we need words to really understand today’s religious development, and has linked it to the tasks contained within systematic theology.⁴

The mental dinner party method
Part of the chaplain’s job is to talk with people, with many people.
Throughout the years, Hans van Drongelen and Ton Meijknecht have talked with a variety of students from all levels of the Delft University: from freshers to post-graduates. One of the chaplains’ most frequently asked questions is: Why? Why did you choose such a difficult technical subject? There’s so much mathematics in it and you have to work really hard. Why didn’t you choose an easier course, such as business science? Freshers who have just arrived at the University often answer these questions frankly by saying that they would like to do something for society, that they want to help solve problems. Though they say this with a slight undertone of embarrassment because they fear being laughed at for their naïveté, they still give their trust and dare to say what they think and feel.

But besides being very good at teaching the necessary technical skills and attitudes, Delft University also proves to be very good at suppressing freshers’ naïveté. Soon enough, students know the correct answer to the question of why they chose a subject at the University of Technology. They say that they were very good at mathematics at school and that they want to earn a lot of money, later in life. Nothing is left of their original spontaneity—they adapt successfully. The answer that students give is the same as the answer a 40-year-old engineer gives who is planning his career, who is concerned about mortgage repayment and who tries to solve problems to which he must apply all his creativity. Students, then, learn their lesson of life. The student chaplains had almost done the same. But when they had nearly given up asking that silly ‘why’ question, they realized that retired engineers ask themselves that same question. Obviously, they look at it from a different angle: they wonder what happened to their resolution to become a helpful citizen and to serve society. They think about the past rather than the future, but in the end they ask the same question as budding students: Why did I become an engineer?

This question occupies the minds of engineers at the beginning and at the end of their professional lives, but apparently not when they are halfway through. This might imply that it is a question of the weaker in society, the young and the old. However, it may also imply that the group in the middle suppresses the question. The chaplaincy begins out from the latter hypothesis.

‘The mental dinner parties’ are organized around that so often suppressed question. The parties are conducted as follows. In a room of the MoTiv building, a table with fourteen chairs is laid for dinner. The
students, two of whom have prepared a meal, enter the room, usually late. They pray and start dinner. Then, the chaplain asks the crucial question: ‘Could you tell us why you have chosen to come to Delft to study, why you have chosen a career in technology?’ Gradually, a conversation starts. A fortnight after that first meeting, the group gathers again. Two others have prepared a meal and the evening begins in the same way and with the same question. This is repeated quite a few times, sometimes up to a year. We start with a group of four or five people. Some of them doubt the usefulness of the project and think they have something better to do with their time. They quit, but others join. In the end the group consists of some fourteen people who turn out to have learnt a lot. They learn to trust their own feelings, and they learn to trust others. They develop a common language with which they can understand and express their own feelings, and with which they can understand each other’s feelings.

At the end of the year the background changes. The room is no longer the enclosed room in the building of MoTiv but a large hall somewhere at the University. The students have invited their friends, their fellow students and flat-mates, their sports friends. In the middle of the hall there’s a table with five chairs. Two of them are occupied by students from the group, one by an experienced engineer who is halfway in his career, the fourth by a philosopher who’s not afraid of engineering; the last chair is for the panel’s anchor person. The only thing left of the primary set-up is the question, ‘Why do I want to become an engineer?’ First the people around the table discuss the question, and later the audience is invited to join the discussion. What first was only private, now becomes public. The common language that helps to express vulnerable feelings and motives, which was developed behind closed doors, is now used out in the open and is thus tested.

**Common language**

Today, discussions about fundamental values are often being avoided. The starting point of the ‘mental dinner party’ is, however, that this does not mean that these values are non-existent or that they could not take shape more clearly. The ‘mental dinner party’ brings to light something that does exist, even though one does not talk about it. Underneath the surface of ingrained habits and set skills is a wealth of visions that only have to be addressed in order for their power to be
Superficially, the skills of technology only relate to logic. Looking at it as such, engineering is an easy subject because it consists of logic and everything is logical. The emotionally poor character of our society is emphasized for students of technology because during their studies they hear little other than the formal language of mathematics. Many of them realize that and suffer from it. However, beneath the stubborn crust of well-known rejection and the obvious doubts among engineers, there is a lively tradition of compassion and the provision of services. At least, that is what the Delft student chaplaincy concludes after ten years of experience.

At one of the ‘mental dinner parties’ a student of architecture says that he wants to renovate the ugly ’sixties flats in Utrecht. There’s little money available and it is not really an honourable job. Why does he want to do it? Working on his graduation project he discovered that Muslim families, who had arrived recently and often live in cheap flats built in the 1960s, have other needs and wishes than Dutch families in the ’sixties. For example, in Muslim culture it is important that women have a separate room, which they are free to enter. By making an effort to cater to their needs the student has joined a long and powerful tradition in which architects have focused on the needs of people. Even to his own surprise, he now concentrates on the various aspects of the underdeveloped neighbourhoods, rather than focusing on his own concepts of beauty. He has found a link with the tradition to which he has always wanted to belong, even though he did not know that himself.

Young, intelligent people study at Delft University of Technology. The university attracts people who were among the best at school. Dutch students get a lot of freedom. This amount of freedom does not make their lives easier—which Stephen Toulmin noticed when he visited us—but freedom that is used correctly provides the opportunity to develop abilities and to use them. This brings about people that society is waiting for, because these people can give trustworthy and in-depth answers to questions that relate to the future of the world. On the basis of what they learn, students from Delft appear to have a more than average feeling of responsibility for the future and the lives of future generations. Perhaps the student from the example above has learnt to work within a broad frame of reference because of the cultural and religious diversity of the student community, his teachers and future colleagues. Perhaps he developed his communicative skills while
he was searching for direction, for a guiding principle during his technical and scientific efforts. Undoubtedly, he has used his creativity to find a balance between the indispensable and targeted technical language on the one hand, and the meaningful language that draws from rich cultural and religious sources, on the other. He uses all his knowledge and skills to start a brave conversation with the society in which he lives.  

This shows that the common language of ideals and dreams, which this society needs, has many layers and ways of expression. For example, the student could show a simple model of his ideas for renovation of the flat in Utrecht to the future inhabitant. The future inhabitant would not have to do more than nod as a way of expressing approval, even before she really spoke. The student and the inhabitant would have used a different language: his language being the one of the pencil, hers the nod of the head. They both live in different worlds of thought: he lives in the sometimes pronounced, sometimes silent practice of his profession in which his teachers show him the way with the sign of a pencil or encourage him with a pat on the back; whereas she lives in her traditionally religious practice. However, he tries to understand her needs, and she feels his respect for her way of life. As a result of understanding each other on a certain level, they have a perfect way of asking questions and giving answers.

Provisional community

The method of the Delft ‘mental dinner parties’ is one of participatory observation. Indeed, the main task of the chaplain is not to keep alive the small Christian community in the margins of the academic community, nor to spread a clearly outlined Christian vision of our society. Without judging other methods of student chaplaincies, the Delft chaplaincy particularly cultivates a presence within the academic culture and community; to be linked up with the questions with which students are faced in their lives. Of course, questions can be raised concerning this method. The people involved indeed ask themselves these questions. But they also see that there are signs that their method suits the people of today who are going towards a future which they cannot yet overview and because of which they feel insecure. How can one orientate oneself to that future, now that the views and ways of thinking that were known to former generations are lost to today’s
people, which makes them feel vulnerable and insecure? For today’s individualized people it is evident that no one can answer the questions with which they are faced. Those who do not want to repress them with a pragmatic type of conformism must come to terms with these questions and share them with others who feel the same.\(^9\) Anything that can be said in our present situation about meaning, goal and direction in life, whether or not it is within a specific religious tradition, must be regarded in this way.

**A holy place**

People need each other. This idea is the starting point of the search for a common language that is organized by the Delft student chaplaincy. With regard to that language they created a haven where young people feel safe to share their thoughts, doubts and dreams. The space in which the ‘mental dinner parties’ take place is a holy place, in a present-day form, as a result of the devotion to the search for the common language. In this place, precise and probing rituals of dialogue are being created. In this ‘holy place’ a rudimentary form of community originates. This is not a community in the traditional sense of the word: the community that finds a common language together is one that is connected with the modern, latent, virtual communities that exist thanks to the fact that people log on to it whenever the fancy takes them.

The Delft chaplains are strongly convinced that we are the participants of an essential cultural change in which spiritual life finds new directions and new shapes. They are concerned with a constantly changing student population for whom they create a short or longer period of time to reflect on their own lives. Just as, according to the story of the evangelists, Jesus did, when he wandered through the country; he met men and women, taught with generosity, gave guidance and sent them back to the places from which they came, expecting that the seeds that he had sown were growing in fertile soil. The Delft student chaplains are convinced that they are doing something similar, based on faith and trust that are basically of a religious nature. Even people today are searching for an image of God, which represents the good and fulfilled life. And in the history which Judeo-Christian tradition believes God to have committed himself too, the questions of ‘ultimate concern’ occur which carry within them a
religious tradition and which suggests a relationship with this tradition.\textsuperscript{10}

After the discussions during the ‘mental dinner party’ the students return to their faculties; they will start their careers and they will blend in with life. Hopefully, they do that with a feeling of being supported and a feeling of inspiration which they gained during the short or longer periods of time at MoTiv, where they shared fragments of the common language they were looking for; the language that enables them to communicate about choices, orientations, hopes and wishes. Hopefully, they will retain part of that language so that they can add to the reflections on views and goals within today’s society from their professional point of view as engineers.\textsuperscript{11}

**Traces of God**

In order to come to the desired common language, it is important, according to the Delft student chaplains, to create an open, stimulating context in which the chaplains consciously avoid defending any form of theology, belief, ideology or philosophy. Stressing their own convictions is seen as breaking into the process with ideas that may be regarded as paternalistic and intolerant. If they did emphasize their own ideas, it would only acknowledge existing prejudices and it would lead to miscommunication. Instead of that, they search and find forms of deep religious inspiration. Looking at it from a religious point of view, the language that they try to develop together with students and professional engineers brings them to an inspiration that may be called ‘traces of God’. This inspiration is often hidden, put away, understood wrongly, neglected and even despised, but it undoubtedly exists.\textsuperscript{12}

Engineers feel called upon to add to the well-being of people, to protect and finish creation, and to add value to a society in which life and living is ‘good’. The chaplains try to discover and unveil this inspiration. With the help of the common language they try to shape it into insights that can add to shaping the future. They get people to break through their self-inflicted silence and to trust the power of their own insights and opportunities. Thus, engineering shows itself as a source of revelation, which should be regarded with awe and respect.

**Fruitful exchange of experiences**

The common language can only be found in dialogue and can only exist
as a dialogue. In this dialogue, there is no room for negotiation, or for confrontation. It is about a rational exchange of points of view in which a modus vivendi is sought. We do not take our departure from the idea that there are set personal convictions with which one party tries to reach the other and expects respect and understanding. In a positive way there is a search for common aspects: questions, fears, and experiences of living in a world that is ever changing. So, the starting point is the search for similarities rather than differences. People are being challenged to pass their limits and to touch the deeper layers of their being: the hidden treasures of cultural and religious notions of their background, which they carry with them. When this happens, the dialogue changes. From a discussion that led to the exchange of professional experiences and knowledge, it changes into a dialogue in which a broader vision on life in general develops. Professional identity and social status disappear and participants meet each other in an area where differences of age, sex and position are less important. At that point is created what the anthropologist Victor W. Turner calls 'communitas'.13 Professional skills and experiences undoubtedly remain, but at a different level and they are consciously brought into play if there is a reason to do so.

It is clear, therefore, that the common language we are trying to achieve, is not a tool, not a communication tool in the strictest sense of the word. Nor is this language a product, a result of profound analysis and planning. It is far more to do with a dynamic process of dialogue, which invites many parties to participate. For this reason there is no manual for this Delft approach which guarantees success. The only thing that is required of the participants in these ‘mental dinner parties’, is that they can be seduced into letting go of their certainties. That is why the method of the ‘mental dinner party’ is so elaborate and time-consuming, and demands such patience: students should acquire self-confidence, the professionals should be carefully selected and should be equipped to use the common language which they are to discover in the dialogue with others. It will take several meetings to learn to understand the specific character of the required language.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, creating an image of a language means creating an image of a life form or culture.14 In this sense the common language sought by the Delft student chaplaincy is more than a language. It is a special form of being there, of openness and of a desire to understand oneself and each other, of sincerity and respect,
and of a desire to get acquainted with various ways of living and working. The common language, which is sought in speaking, does not aim to focus on rational truths, but it is one way of composing a life in which spiritual elements and attitudes are the most important building blocks.\textsuperscript{15}

The emphasis laid on the spiritual character of the common language does not indicate a lack of vitality. The language seems to be weak and vulnerable, but it can be unforgiving and callous, and very demanding. The Austrian scholar, Allan Janik, demonstrated this when he intervened during a meeting about creativity.\textsuperscript{16} He grabbed the unattached microphone and walked up and down the conference hall, gesticulating wildly and passionately inviting the five participants around the table to show him creativity, fully aware that they simply could not do this. In doing this, he brought to the surface a fundamental aspect of creativity and made a provocative and fundamental contribution to the development of the desired common language.

\textbf{Poetry}

The Delft student chaplains try to meet the needs of people by developing with them a language through which they can link their experiences in everyday life with questions of ultimate concern. Their starting point is that they do not possess the words to do this and that their partners in the quest for a common language do not either. This language has to be born and is created through its use, as in poetry. According to the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, we are capable of falling back on \textit{poiesis} in the true sense, faced with the ruins and fears of modernity. He takes this to be the strength within us, which is able to create and reveal new forms of life. To him this is an alternative to metaphysics, which assumes a static pose \textit{vis à vis} flexibility and thus ignores the constant processes of change we are part of.\textsuperscript{17}

The Delft student chaplains try to meet the needs of many people in our time who have begun to move. Their response is the devoted search for a common language, or better, perhaps, the poetry of the ‘mental dinner parties’. What motivates them is essentially what the American sociologist Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot\textsuperscript{18} described during a conference organized by MoTiv at the Delft Technical University in November 2002, entitled ‘Engineering is Magic’. In an attempt to define the
characteristic features of her profession she said: ‘I am someone who sort of combines both social sciences with humanities. I’m very interested in good empiricism but also very interested in literary narratives and all kinds of artistic impressions. So, symbols and metaphors and evocative experiences are very, very important to me in my work.’

Conclusion

The Delft student chaplains feel that there is a world to be won if people can break their silence and will start looking for each other, learn to express their hidden motives, thereby giving them space to exist and, in the process, learn to see them for what they are. In going through this process, they learn to speak a common language, which may give them courage, faith and a sense of direction for the future. This brings them to what might be called the ‘zero phase of religion’. They try to create a situation at the Delft Technical University in which religion may be ‘reinvented’ as the result of combining society with a vision of reality shared within this society and people’s own lives. The sociologist, novelist and Roman Catholic priest Andrew Greeley believes that religion can best be understood as a form of poetry which lends a specific colour to life and reality through its symbols and stories. For him this implies that it is not the doctrines and confessions which are the core elements in religious traditions, but the images and rituals and the narrative texture into which they turn the lives of believers and their world. Whereas Greeley points out the unexpected persistence of the religious traditions interpreted in this way, the Delft student chaplains are first of all confronted with the fact that they cannot simply be approached. And together with their target group they go in quest of a new language in which this poetry is given another chance to reveal itself, or to be created anew.

It stands to reason that this should be seen as the preparatory work which present-day student chaplains have to perform before being able to progress to their core task, building a religious Christian community which acquires the specifically Christian poetry, thus positioning its own poetic imagination within the Christian tradition. However, the tone of this essay is that this is a false representation of the facts. Searching for a common and community-creating language is the core activity of chaplains and one of the shapes which belief in God’s lasting
and beneficial presence can take in the present-day context. It is, in the terminology of Schillebeeckx, quoted before, a response to the growth of religious awareness in the world. Following Greeley, one may even go a step further and say that the Delft ‘mental dinner party’ is a shape of the progressing Christian imagination. The Roman Catholic traditions in Christianity, in particular, preserve the conviction that God is actively working in this world and remains present in the lives of people. Cosmos and history possess sacramental qualities and refer to the concealed presence of God; a God who has, in the Christian view, bound himself in the most radical manner possible, to the fate of the earth and its inhabitants. It is this sense of realism that nourishes and supports the approach taken by the Delft MoTiv.

This conclusion leads to the following questions. What gain would there be in emphatically making this basis of the Delft approach a subject of discussion? Would it be possible and useful to enter into a dialogue about this with Delft students and those others involved with this project? What would this change in the common language and in the fragments of this language that have been discovered; how should these changes be valued? These are questions which bring to light the theological level of what the Delft student chaplains are trying to do and which can lead theology along new paths through these activities.

(Translation: F. van der Deijl)

Notes


4. For more information go to www.motiv.tudelft.nl. The goal described there is: ‘By concentrating on the profession and biography of future engineers (m/f), MoTiv tries to discover the deeper motives and underlying reasons that form the basis of the engineering profession. This results in a true and worthwhile relationship between the engineer and society. In this way, MoTiv tries to bridge the gap between technology and society’. © Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.
5. A mental dinner party is a name for a pneumatologically oriented conversation. The interpretation, common and necessary in any mediation of religious language, happens here along the lines of a pneumatological approach, see diagram below.

The difference is that the christological mediation consists of a clear and distinct verbal stream connecting the target group with the sources of faith and vice versa, whereas in the pneumatological mediation the verbal stream is embedded in a multitude of ever changing and flowing circles of understanding and encounter. Our approach valuates context rather than text. It is primarily based on implicit religion.


7. In Stephen Toulmin’s words of that moment: ‘with the advance of technological and controlling rationality, on which the curriculum of engineering education focuses explicitly, engineering students are apparently imbued as well with a kind of rationality that is open to circumstances and seeks to realize their optimization.’ Comp. Lash, S. (1988) Another Modernity, a Different Rationality, Oxford.


12. For the historic roots of civil engineering in religious world-view, see White L.,


© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006.