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Theology on the edge – Some reflections

FROM THE EDITOR

Theology on the edge. This was the theme of a conference held from 3-5 September 2014 at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, honouring the South African Reformed theologian and Bonhoeffer scholar John de Gruchy on his 75th birthday. De Gruchy is Emeritus Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Cape Town and an Extraordinary Professor in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. He is the author of fourteen books, including *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (1979, 1986, and 2005, with Steve de Gruchy), *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (1991), *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (2001), *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (2002), *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (2006), *John Calvin: Christian Humanist and Evangelical Reformer* (2009), and *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (2013). In addition, he has edited many books, including two volumes of the English edition of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE series). He has received several prizes, including the Karl Barth Prize in 2000, and the Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize (three times). In 2009 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Stellenbosch.

The theme of the conference, “Theology on the edge”, was chosen in light of a tension in doing theology. We reflect on Scripture but always in changing contexts and in response to new issues that challenge Christian faith and witness. In this way theology engages reality in transforming ways on the edge of the unfolding future as we enter unfamiliar territory. Therefore, to honour a theological legacy, is not to repeat what has already been said in the same way, but to make it possible for a new generation to do theology with integrity, passion and relevance. What is important is not simply the testimony of past years from which we may learn and which we may honour, but the testimony of today. This is lived theology, theology on the edge.

In this volume of *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif (NGTT)/ Dutch Reformed Theological Journal* we include seven articles that were initially read as plenary papers at this conference, as well as two articles that were presented at a three-day colloquium preceding the conference at the Volmoed retreat center near the coastal town of Hermanus – where de Gruchy lives and functions as the resident theologian. The life, work and legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a strong focus at this colloquium, which was attended by a group of about 45 theologians and pastors, including a contingent of doctoral students from Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape. This colloquium is an annual event that grew out of a Bonhoeffer circle (of doctoral students) started by De Gruchy already in the 1990s and has since then developed into a research group that meets regularly.

Three well-known Bonhoeffer scholars gave stimulating position papers at the colloquium. Clifford Green spoke on “Bonhoeffer’s contribution to a new Christian paradigm” (with a focus on what it means to read Bonhoeffer as theologian, and reading his corpus as a “whole”). Larry Rasmussen addressed the topic of “Bonhoeffer and the Anthropocene,” while Keith Clement’s paper focused on “Bonhoeffer and Ecumenism”. Each paper was followed by responses by South African theologians, with Robert Vosloo (Stellenbosch University), Ernst Conradie (University of Western Cape), and Janet Trisk (from Kwazulu-Natal, and the current editor of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*) responding to the papers of Green, Rasmussen and Clements respectively. Graham Ward (Oxford University) offered short responses to all three these papers. We are happy to include in this edition of *NGTT* the reworked papers by Clements and Rasmussen.

The “Theology on the Edge” conference at Stellenbosch that followed the colloquium consisted of five half-day sessions, all dealing with an aspect of De Gruchy’s work. Quite fittingly, the first session focused on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The German Bonhoeffer scholar and former bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg Wolfgang Huber gave the opening lecture. He spoke on “Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Christian existence on the edge of the future,” and his paper set the tone for the conference. In the same session Nico Koopman, the Dean of the faculty of theology at Stellenbosch, spoke on “Bonhoeffer and the task of public theology”. In the rest of the session the panellist (Clifford Green, Karola Radler, Michael Phiri, and Frits de Lange) made valuable inputs, addressing questions such as how to read Bonhoeffer as theologian, the relationship between the thought of Bonhoeffer and Carl Schmitt on decision, the promise of reading Bonhoeffer on humanism in Malawi, and the relationship between Bonhoeffer’s theology and an ethics of care.

The rest of the conference focused on the themes associated with the multifaceted work of De Gruchy. There were sessions on theological aesthetics (with Graham Ward and Frank Burch Brown as the main speakers), on Christian humanism (with papers by Denise Ackermann and Jim Cochrane), on theology and science (with presentations by Iain McGilchrist and Wentzel van Huyssteen), and a closing session on reconciliation and justice (with Serene Jones and Allan Boesak making strong inputs that – like in the other stimulating sessions – was followed by thought-provoking comments from the panellists and led to lively general discussions). The conference was brought to a close with John de Gruchy making some powerful concluding remarks about the future challenges for theology. In this *NGTT* Supplementum we offer peer-reviewed articles from Huber, Koopman, Ward, Burch Brown, Ackermann, Van Huyssteen, and Boesak. De Gruchy’s concluding reflections is included as an afterword.

The conference – which was attended by about 200 people – was also the occasion for the launch of two important new publications by South African theologians, namely Denise Ackermann's *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey: Ordinary Blessings* (published by Lux Verbi) and John de Gruchy's latest book *My Life in Writing: A Theological Odyssey* (published by Sun Press, Stellenbosch). We hope to offer reviews of these books in upcoming editions of the journal.

The Volmoed colloquium and the Stellenbosch conference in honour of John de Gruchy was experienced by many as a week of intense theological conversation and profound life together. The week showed something of the impact of De Gruchy's thought on theological discourse in South Africa and further afield, reminding us that theology on the edge, and at the edge, can open up surprising vistas.

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Bonhoeffer and the Anthropocene

NGTT DEEL 55, SUPPLEMENTUM 1, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Anew geologic epoch, the Anthropocene, seems to be emerging. It is the result of humanity becoming the single most powerful force of planetary nature itself. A re-reading of Bonhoeffer, from 1932 through the prison letters, uncovers his premonitions of Anthropocene reality, together with its human causes. 1) An aggressive Western war-and-industry identity alienated from nature and fuelled by mastery that knows no limits as undertaken by autonomous humans in the name of freedom without constraint has accompanied, even driven, and gravely expanded human knowledge and power. 2) The reach of this human knowledge and power upon all earthly life has strained our ethical concepts to the breaking point. This sets in motion the need to reconceive moral responsibility itself. 3) There is no dialling back of history to some previous age, including the age of a religious a priori and the God of religion. For Christians, this means the constructive work entails deep interrogation of faith's essential base points – Who is God? What do we really believe such that we would stake our lives on it? Who is Jesus Christ for us today when “today” is another epoch, even a non-analogous one? 4) In an epoch where “everything depends on humankind,” the constructive work of faith and the experience of Jesus Christ will be this-worldly and Earth-honouring. Transcendence, indeed God, is “the beyond in the midst of life,”¹ experienced in an ethic of human responsibility for “the whole of earthly life.”

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene, Holocene, Climate change, War-and-industry identity, World-come-of-age, Moral responsibility, Natural life, Human knowledge and power

1 DBWE 8:367.



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The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) is the official keeper of geological time. To map Earth's ages the ICS plants what it calls "golden spikes" where geological epochs begin and end.

The notion that Earth has discontinuous ages is quite recent. Typical instead is a biblical sense of Earth time: no fossils appear in the biblical record and even the beginning of beginnings finds God creating domestic animals for a settled existence of herders and farmers. This omits dinosaurs, mastodons, and ninety-five percent of human history (hunter-gatherer), to say nothing of Earth's long tenure well before any life forms, even single-celled creatures. Thus it was against the grain of both religion and science that Jean-Leopold-Nicholas-Frederic (Georges) Cuvier (1769 – 1832) argued from his Paris fossil collection that worlds previous to ours existed. "Life on earth has often been disturbed by terrible events," he wrote in the early 1800s, "Living organisms without number have been the victims of these catastrophes."² Nature had changed course, with devastating effect. Cuvier had exposed what no one expected – a history of mass extinction on an Earth given to periodic seizures.

The ICS will decide in 2016 about whether to plant a new golden spike. If it does, that will officially signal the end of the "Holocene" (Greek for "Wholly Recent"). Please note: for geologists, given as they are to a patient sense of time, this decision isn't casual or precipitous. It means they have already accumulated sufficient evidence to deem the emergence of a new epoch worthy of a decisive judgment soon.

Meanwhile many scientists are not waiting. Climatologist Paul Crutzen interrupted a meeting that kept mentioning the eleven and a half thousand year old Holocene as our habitat by exclaiming, "Let's stop [this]. "We are no longer in the Holocene; we are in the Anthropocene." "The Anthropocene" (from *anthropos*, Greek for human) became the coffee break buzz, and, after Crutzen's essay, "Geology of Mankind," was published in *Nature* in 2002, it became the popular topic of numerous scientific journals. That human impacts are now orders of magnitude beyond what they were prior to the Industrial Revolution are not doubted anywhere. The only question is, are these geological-scale events a dramatic turn of the late Holocene or the onset of a new epoch? Should the ICS hammer in a new golden spike or not?

The International Geosphere – Biosphere Programme has also rendered its verdict. "The planet is now dominated by human activities," they said in a 2004 volume that, like Crutzen and friends, announces the Anthropocene. "Evidence from several millennia shows that the magnitude and rates of human-driven changes to the

2 Elizabeth Kolbert, 2013. "The Lost World," Part Two. *The New Yorker*, December 23 & 30: 50.

global environment are in many cases unprecedented. There is no previous analogue for the current operation of the Earth system.”³

In this case, “there is no previous analogue” means that, for the very first time, human time has merged with geological time with sufficient impact to initiate a world unlike any previous one. The “thread of operations [of previous nature] has been broken” and nature has “changed course.” (Cuvier) (To see this in graph form, see pages 56-57 of Rasmussen, *Earth-Honouring Faith*.)

The point is that while Earth has seen wildly varied ages before, and will again before it becomes the cinder of an aging star, *Homo sapiens* civilization has occupied one age only. Our tenure is strictly Holocene. All recorded human history and all human civilizations to date, bar none and starting with neo-lithic settlements, have enjoyed the Holocene’s emblem of a warm period of sufficient climate stability to allow, even foster, the triumph of life amid nature’s on-going predilection for fluctuation, change, and an adventuresomeness that will try anything once, including big as well as little ice ages. ⁴

Presently, however, the climate stability of the Holocene is apparently giving way to the climate volatility of the Anthropocene. The specific cause was never intended and is quite startling; namely, humankind has taken to regulating solar radiation and re-engineering Earth’s surface processes. By burning dirty fuels on a massive scale, since 1950 especially but steadily from 1750 onward, we are resetting the planet’s thermostat and altering the core dynamics of the atmosphere, oceans and landmasses. One result is a dramatic carbon spike and climate volatility. Present CO2 levels in the atmosphere exceed those of the last 650,000 years.⁵

Of utmost import for theology and ethics is that climate change and mass extinction this time around is *anthropogenic* geophysical change that goes where human agency and responsibility have never before gone; namely, “cumulatively across generational time, aggregately through ecological systems, and non-intentionally over evolutionary futures.”⁶ We have no ethic on the books or in existing moral

3 WL Steffen et. al, *Global Change and the Earth System* (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2004), v.

4 “The Holocene,” University of California Museum of Paleontology, <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu>.

5 Nicholas Kristoff 2014. “Neglected Topic” Winner: Climate Change. *The New York Times* Sunday Review, January 19:11, reporting data from William Nordhaus’s new book, *The Climate Casino*.

6 Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), 1.

theory that assigns responsibility in keeping with such far-flung consequences of human action.

In this setting I turn to Bonhoeffer for two reasons. 1) His project was to craft an ethic of responsibility for what he came to regard as an emerging new age. 2) His thoughts about that age, and an ethic fitted for it, are uncanny premonitions of the Anthropocene.

His own question in the prison letters can guide us. “What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?”⁷ Or, in another letter, “The question is Christ and the world that has come of age.”⁸ But the narrative begins elsewhere.

A little-known address, “The Right to Self-Assertion,” was given at the College of Technology in Berlin in 1932. There Bonhoeffer argues that European-American civilization commands a war-and-industry identity. “The era of the machine” and wars, or “wars and factories,” are the West’s chief means of collective assertion and problem solving.⁹

The source of this aggressive identity is found, he says, in battles “to master nature, fight against it, to force it to [Western human] service.” This assertive human mastery over nature is no less than “the fundamental theme of European-American history.”¹⁰ It leaves Western civilization fragmented from the rest of nature in its core consciousness.

Ten years later Bonhoeffer continues, now in an effort to write an ethic for the post-war period. Here, in “Heritage and Decay,” a portion of the work-in-progress, *Ethics*, and dated 1941-42, he describes the kind of technology that emerged in the modern West. It is no longer essentially “a matter of handicraft” that, in other contexts, served “religion, royalty, culture, and people’s daily needs.” Modern technology has freed itself so that its “essence is not service but mastery, mastery over nature. A wholly new spirit has produced it, the spirit of violent subjugation of nature to thinking and experimenting human beings ... It has its own soul; its symbol is the machine, the embodiment of violation and exploitation of nature ... The benefits of technology pale beside its demonic powers.”¹¹

7 “Letter of 30 April, 1944,” *DBWE* 8:362.

8 “Letter of 8 June, 1944,” *DBWE* 8:428.

9 *DBWE* 11, 251.

10 *DBWE* 11, 252. The emphasis is mine.

11 *DBWE* 8:116.

Later, in prison, Bonhoeffer picks up the 1932 and 1941-42 theme again, this time for a new work. Excited about his insights on an emerging era, he abruptly pauses in his work on *Ethics* for an undertaking that must rethink everything, the fundamental base points of Christian faith included. Unfortunately only the outline survives. The remainder was apparently the victim of his own enthusiasm; the hand-written manuscript was one of the few possessions he took with him to the Gestapo prison where it was lost in the chaos of the final year of the war.

The new work's outline, while repeating the 1932 and 1941-42 theme, is now tied to prison insights on the "world come of age." (More on that shortly.) Bonhoeffer's summary is so compact that I cite it in full:

... [The West's] goal is to be independent of nature. Nature used to be conquered by the soul; with us it is conquered through technological organization of all kinds. What is unmediated for us, what is given, is no longer nature but organization. But with this protection from the menace of nature, a new threat to life is created in turn, namely, through organization itself. Now the power of the soul is lacking! The human being is thrown back on his own resources. He has learned to cope with everything except himself. He can insure himself against everything but other human beings. In the end it all comes down to the human being.¹²

With the West's aim to be independent of nature and substitute the built environment ("organization") as our own tailored cosmos and preferred habitat; and with everything now, in a world of greatly increased human knowledge and power, depending upon humankind; and with this new world lacking the "spiritual force" for responsibly handling this growing technological and organizational power affecting all nature, the theological-ethical question comes to this: how to "claim Christ for a world coming of age." That is, how do we forge a viable Christian faith and ethic of responsibility for an epoch of unprecedented power across the whole of earthly life? This becomes Bonhoeffer's prison preoccupation. It reaches beyond his analysis in *Ethics*,¹³ even though the goal there was also a viable ethic of responsible action (for the post-war world).

His new line of thought is a vivid intimation of Anthropocene moral reality: Everything turns on collective human power and responsibility, the very power that has effected an ocean-spanning, Euro-American civilization fundamentally

12 "Outline for a Book," *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:500.

13 There are numerous references in the letters. Here see the "Outline for a Book," in DBWE 8, 499-504.

fractured from nature in its consciousness, cosmology, and day-to-day life. Moreover, this war-and-industry civilization discovers that its own spiritual-moral resources for addressing its alienated powers are found wanting. If Bonhoeffer is to complete the *Ethics* – that is his desire, he writes in 1943 – it will not be for post-war peace and German Protestant reconstruction only; it will be for a new historical and civilizational epoch marked by expanded and unprecedented human powers.

In this setting, “world come of age,” or “coming of age,¹⁴ has descriptive power that Bonhoeffer latches on to and keeps. Yet it cannot be what, at first blush, it would seem to be – a reference to moral maturity. Bonhoeffer is sitting in prison because the very nation that was teacher to the world in all things from philosophy and theology to science, medicine, and literature has gone mad. “World come of age” refers instead to moral accountability and responsibility. The person who has come of age, typically at 18 or 21, is responsible for his or her actions, whether mature or not. Parents, or God, are no longer responsible for the child turned adult.

The phrase, however, is not “*person* come of age,” it is “*world* come of age.” Coming of age has gone global. It has done so in an epoch in which human beings collectively are accountable for heightened human knowledge and power that affects “the whole of earthly life” (a phrase from *Ethics*). For better and worse, nature is increasingly “organized” in accord with sovereign human design. Virtually all eco-systems are either already embedded as part of human systems or are profoundly impacted by them, whether in the atmosphere, the oceans, or across landmasses.

This greatly – and gravely – expanded knowledge and power is epistemological and theological as well as moral. It need not posit God as necessary to advancing either knowledge or power, and does not turn to a parental God for a bail-out when that knowledge and those powers fail, as they do and will. Here resides Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion. The God of this new moment will not be God as a working hypothesis, the God-of-the-gaps. Nor will this be the rescuer God, God as *deus ex machina*. Not only can responsible persons get along quite well without these “Gods,” but also turning to them is a moral cop-out. The God-of-the-gaps and the rescuer God belong to the dysfunctional religion of an earlier consciousness and era. In an epoch we now recognize as an era of planet-changing anthropogenic power, “claiming Christ” for “a world-come-of-age,” or answering the question, “Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today,” will need to take some other course. It will confront human power and knowledge so as to find God in what we do know, rather than in what we don’t, and in problems that are solved, rather than only when and where we are vexed. Moral accountability and confession of sins will address the sins of

14 See especially *LPP*, 8 June 1933, 324-329.

our strengths and powers, rather than our weaknesses only. If God and standing before God in the Anthropocene cannot be located at the heart of human power, accountability, accomplishment and failure, then God and morality are pushed to the far margins of what counts for the life of the world.

Can more be said about the fate of faith and God in the Anthropocene, given the direction of Bonhoeffer's thoughts?

The various approaches Bonhoeffer tries in *Ethics*, none of which was ever completed to his satisfaction, may register more than his abrupt pause seems to indicate. Of particular note is the late 1940 sketch of "Natural Life." The very first sentence is: "The concept of the natural has fallen into disrepute in Protestant ethics."¹⁵ A blistering critique of "the elimination of the category of the natural from Protestant thought"¹⁶ then follows before a turn to the natural as the substantive basis for essential elements of an ethic: a notion of justice, human rights and the freedom of bodily life, natural rights and the life of the spirit, etc.¹⁷ Given his thesis about the nature-alienated origins of the world-shaping powers that have brought a new epoch with them, and given his sense of the spiritual and moral ineptitude that attends these aggressive powers, where Bonhoeffer might have gone with "the natural" as the basis for reconstructed and extended responsibility is a provocative, if necessarily open and unanswered, question.¹⁸

One thing is certain. Whatever the course of human responsibility is, and whoever its God in a world-coming-of-age, that course and God will be Earth-oriented and Earth-honouring. Bonhoeffer will have nothing whatsoever to do with other-worldly faith, even in a time of deep human trouble, a time of "trembling hands," "clenched teeth,"¹⁹ and Earth's "distress,"²⁰ as well as a time when he must personally reckon with his family's distress and his own death. Whether in the depths of human-generated crises, or atop accomplishments, the prayer of those who rightly pray the first petition of the Lord's Prayer for the coming of God's kingdom on Earth is a prayer "of the most profound solidarity with the world" in which the church swears "oaths of fealty to the Earth."²¹ Fidelity to God is fidelity to Earth for

15 DBWE 6:171.

16 DBWE 6:172.

17 DBWE 6:178-218.

18 My thanks to Gary Simpson for suggesting this tie back into *Ethics* of Bonhoeffer's prison theology.

19 DBWE 10, 289.

20 DBWE 10, 378.

21 DBWE 10, 289.

Bonhoeffer. It is also a faith that was commensurate with science's story of evolution, as he understood that.

There is more. While as a Barthian Bonhoeffer was suspicious of natural theology, he, like Luther, is emphatic about our nature as earth creatures whose very essence is to be that and no more. In his exegesis of Genesis 1-3, he writes that "Even Darwin and Feuerbach could not use stronger language than is used here. Humankind is derived from a piece of earth. Its bond with the earth belongs to its essential being. The 'earth is its mother'; it comes out of her womb."²² This is a continuation of his earlier, equally emphatic, presentation on the foundations of Christian ethics (1929): "It is only through the depths of earth that the window of eternity opens itself up to us. ... An ancient and profound old legend tells us about the giant Antaeus, who was stronger than all the men of the world. No one could defeat him until during one battle his adversary lifted him up off the ground; whereupon the giant lost the power that had flowed into him only from his contact with the earth. Those who would abandon the earth, who would flee the crisis of the present, will lose all the power still sustaining them by means of eternal, mysterious powers. The earth remains our mother just as God remains our father, and only those who remain true to the mother are placed by her into the father's arms. Earth and its distress – that is the Christian's Song of Songs."²³ Evidently we will only save that which we recognize as our own being – Earth. Alienated from Earth, our powers turn destructive.

But back to the 1932 address. The battle is not only against nature, but also "against other human beings." "In the most essential sense his life means 'killing,'" Bonhoeffer says bluntly of the European.²⁴ Western civilization, fragmented from the rest of nature in its core consciousness, destroys natural and human communities together in an exercise of collective power with few spiritual and moral constraints. Needless to say, Bonhoeffer rejects this kind of collective assertion and identity. His fascination with Gandhi at this time will continue as he (Bonhoeffer) grows convinced of the exhaustion of a viable European-American spirituality, ethics, and politics for an age that, for us, has evolved as the Anthropocene.

22 *Creation and fall*, DBWE, 76. The "earth is its mother" is a reference to Sirach 40:1b. Elsewhere at this time, in the 1932 address entitled, "Thy Kingdom Come! The Prayer of the Church-community for God's Kingdom on Earth," Bonhoeffer cites the exact words of this verse: earth "is the mother of us all." "Thy Kingdom Come!" is available in DBWE 10, 285-97.

23 "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," DBWE 10, 377-78.

24 DBWE 11, 252-53.

This early analysis is deepened in *Ethics* where not only German fascism but also the Enlightenment tradition itself comes under critique. Bonhoeffer, ever the Prussian conservative, is deeply suspicious of the hubris exhibited “when big words are spoken about a new humanity, of a new world, a new society that will be created, and all this newness consists only in the annihilation of existing life.”²⁵ The lethal theme in this pretence is *mastery that knows no limits as undertaken by autonomous humans in the name of freedom without constraint*.²⁶ Thus do we experience “the twinning of freedom and terror,” “the upsurge of a terrible godlessness in human presumptions of god-likeness,”²⁷ the deification of humans who end up despising those who do not conform to their image. Ways of life that acknowledge no limits as they wield heightened human power are the backdrop for what happens next: the theologian working on *Ethics* as his *magnum opus* must undertake a new departure. Even the present war, and the Great War before it, is symptomatic of a deeper, broader civilizational crisis from which Christianity is not exempt. The new era requires, then, a deeper, more exacting, rethinking of faith and life than *Ethics* has thus far provided. In short, the theological-moral journey of “claiming Christ for a world-come-of-age” moves, as it were, from a stock taking of the modern world into no less than a “Taking Stock of Christianity” itself (the first chapter of the new work). “What is Christian Faith, really?” Bonhoeffer asks (the second chapter).

Tellingly, “Taking Stock” begins with the insight of a deeply altered human presence – the coming of age of the human being – while “What is Christian Faith, really?” moves in response to the very heart of faith, God.

The logic is clear. Bonhoeffer has concluded that world-come-of-age powers lack a viable faith and ethic to guide them (“the power of the soul is lacking”). He has also concluded that the God who is the working hypothesis, the “stopgap for our embarrassments,” in short, the God of “religion,”²⁸ has been rendered “superfluous” in a world-come-of-age. So after a sub-section that links the two subjects to one another, “Worldliness and God,” Bonhoeffer must ask straightforwardly, “Who is God?” In this new epoch, our experience of God will not be that of a “religious”

25 DBWE 6:91.

26 Here I am citing my own summary, from “The Ethics of Responsible Action,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, John W de Gruchy, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 213.

27 This is Jean Bethke Elshtain’s summary, interpreting Bonhoeffer. See *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition*, John W de Gruchy, ed. (Eerdmans, 1997), 225.

28 “Outline for a Book,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:500.

relationship to God as some “highest, most powerful, and best being imaginable.” Rather, our relationship to the transcendent is a life in “being-there-for-others,” which is participation in the very being of Jesus, “the [*Mensch*] for others.” “The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation. God in human form!”²⁹ “The human being living out of the transcendent.”³⁰ A this-worldly life, a life of “Earth and its distress” as the “Christian Song of Songs,” is life that experiences transcendent powers. The worldly finite bears the infinite.

For persons of Protestant faith, living out of the transcendent amid utterly this-worldly relationships in a new epoch next moves, again of logical necessity, to reinterpreting the biblical base points of theology – creation, fall, reconciliation, repentance, faith, *vita nova*, last things.³¹ Bonhoeffer, the systematic theologian, could not entertain matters more foundational than these.

How far he will go in reinterpreting the faith is signalled in a further sub-section that begins, “What do we really believe?” “I mean, believe in such a way that our lives depend on it?” He criticizes Barth and the Confessing Church for, in effect, hiding behind “the faith of the Church” and the question of what we *should* believe. That is not sufficiently radical for the new epoch. Don’t start with, say, the Apostles Creed, to ask what we “must” believe. Rather, what do we “really believe” such that we’d stake our existence on it. What way of life and meaning belong to the powers we wield in the world we have?

Put differently, as they are in the letter of 30 April, a “religious a priori” in human beings can no longer be assumed. While that a priori has been foundational to “nineteen hundred years of Christian preaching and theology,” it may only be “a historically conditioned and transitory form of human expression.” A different age and culture, possessed of a different epistemology, cosmology and consciousness [read: world-come-of-age], might well show that “the foundations are being pulled out from under all that ‘Christianity’ has previously been for us ...”³² The conclusion is that the task of *Ethics* – to construct a comprehensive ethic of responsible action – must, even for its own sake, now push reform beyond Bonhoeffer’s own forays in the *Ethics* manuscripts to date. He must revisit, and renew, the most essential creedal elements of the faith, together with its practices. (“What does a church, a

29 “Outline for a Book,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:501.

30 “Outline for a Book,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:501.

31 “Outline for a Book,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:502.

32 “Letter of 30 April, 1944,” DBWE 8:362-33.

congregation, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life, mean in a religionless world?“ Bonhoeffer asks in the same letter.)³³

These are not questions of despair or desperation for Bonhoeffer. His daily practice of devotion does not flag and he finds his new insights exhilarating. These questions simply belong to the relentless honesty that follows from insight into the profound changes and challenges posed by a new epoch.

Another Bonhoeffer essay, this one on the lessons learned in ten years of resisting The Third Reich, offers yet another premonition of Anthropocene reality. Here the attention is less the accurate description of the new era than it is the existential feel of living at a terrible moment of history. Here there are real overtones of loss and longing, if not despair.

In that Christmas gift to fellow resisters, one paragraph is entitled “Without Ground under One’s Feet.” Bonhoeffer first asks whether there has ever been a people in history who felt so little solid ground under their feet [as the resisters have], and to whom “every possible alternative open to them at the time” seemed “equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?”³⁴ But after registering the resisters’ experience of little ground and no good alternative, he asks whether this is their experience only, “Or rather, facing a great historical turning point, and precisely because something genuinely new was coming to be that did not fit with the existing alternatives, did the responsible thinkers of another generation ever feel differently than we do today?”³⁵

The very next paragraph is “Who Stands Firm?” There every respected ethical alternative is emptied of authority by its failure to meet the evil of German fascism. In a brilliant parsing of all the moral options – the ethics of reason, duty, conscience, freedom, and virtuousness, even fanaticism – Bonhoeffer exposes their flaws. None provided sufficient grounds for effective responsibility. While this failure of the moral options may dovetail with Bonhoeffer’s analysis of a world coming of age and a need to rethink Christian faith in every way, the emphasis lands on the experience of patriotic resisters who must live with the moral failure of their own German heritage and the demonstrated inadequacy of the respected moralities of their own culture.

33 “Letter of 30 April, 1944,” *DBWE* 8:364.

34 “An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *DBWE* 8:38.

35 “An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *DBWE* 8:38.

Small wonder, then, that a later paragraph asks, “Are We Still of Any Use?” It finishes with this question: “Will our inner strength to resist what has been forced on us have remained strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves blunt enough, to find our way back to simplicity and honesty?”³⁶ Small wonder, too, that the very last paragraph, “The View from Below,” finds Bonhoeffer in quest of a different angle of vision and starting point. While it is anchored in the experience of resistance, it takes the resisters beyond their own cherished, but deeply flawed, culture and heritage. In their quest for another Germany, Bonhoeffer finds it a matter of “incomparable value” that the resisters have “for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.” “Personal suffering is a more useful key” and “a more fruitful principle,” it turns out, “than personal happiness.” At least it is so “for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action.”³⁷

“More fruitful” may be a synonym for “more truthful.” The view “from below” gives a more truthful account of how the stories we live by and the systems that bind us together go dreadfully wrong. The unexpected gift of this perspective is to see the fault lines of the world in ways wilfully avoided in the ranks of the privileged. Truth available from below is truth obscured or resisted elsewhere. To gather it in is to make possible what is otherwise impossible; namely, “to do justice to life in all its dimensions.”³⁸ Building up responsibility at a “great turning point in history” will best proceed, will “more fruitfully” proceed, from the places where creation groans in travail.

In summary, we know what provoked Bonhoeffer to turn to ethics as his magnum opus, rather than systematic theology. It was his conviction that the moral grounds of modernity in the West were effectively spent. What seems to have happened in his prison insights on human power and a world come of age is that he sensed even his own efforts at a reconstructed ethic were inadequate. The goal – an ethic of responsible action – was correct. It remains. The emerging new epoch of human power was making clear, however, that a more fundamental theological and moral

36 “An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:52.

37 “An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:52.

38 “An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943,” *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:52.

reform was needed. *Ethics* could not proceed until the new “Taking Stock” was completed.

We must leave Bonhoeffer here. His premonitions of Anthropocene reality are these. 1) An aggressive Western war-and-industry identity alienated from nature and fuelled by *mastery that knows no limits as undertaken by autonomous humans in the name of freedom without constraint* (to repeat our earlier formulation) has accompanied, even driven, gravely expanded human knowledge and power. 2) The reach of this human knowledge and power and its impact upon all earthly life has strained our ethical concepts to the breaking point. This sets in motion the need to reconceive human responsibility itself, both its nature and its scope. 3) There is no dialling back of history to some previous age, including the age of a religious a priori and the God of religion. For Christians, this means the constructive work entails no less than deep interrogation of faith’s essential base points – Who is God? What do we really believe such that we would stake our lives on it? Who is Jesus Christ for us today when “today” is another epoch, even a non-analogous one? How to claim Christ for a world-come-of-age is the venture in front of us. 4) In an epoch where “everything depends on humankind,” the constructive work of faith and the experience of Jesus Christ will be this-worldly and Earth-honouring. In a world-come-of-age, transcendence, indeed God, is “the beyond in the midst of life.”³⁹

We belong to an epoch Bonhoeffer himself could not have seen. Namely, a new geological epoch and not simply a new historical one, itself effected by human powers he saw developing but with consequences he could not have imagined (e.g., climate change, mass extinction). Nonetheless, his sense for its causes and its trajectory was sound. So, too, was his sense for the fundamental theological and ethical task that the Anthropocene has placed in our hands.

39 DBWE 8:367.

The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for ecumenism today

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ABSTRACT

Bonhoeffer's deep commitment to the ecumenical movement from 1931 onwards was founded on his theology of the church as "Christ existing as community", the new humanity. He had no "ecumenical theology" apart from this, writ large. This undergirded both his devotion to the Confessing Church and his call for the churches to embody and proclaim peace in a world bent on war. Bonhoeffer's posthumous influence has been deeply creative in the ecumenical movement since 1945 but the challenge laid down in his prison writings for a Christianity that does not seek privileges but truly identifies with the world has still not been fully answered by the institutional churches and ecumenical bodies. A truly ecumenical church is one, which fully identifies with the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth, its religious and non-religious aspects, and is itself transformed in encountering with the world as much as it seeks to transform the world.

KEYWORDS

Ecumenical, oikoumene, Church, World, Community

TREFWOORDE

Ekumeniese, oikoumene, Kerk, Wêreld, Samelewing

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COMMUNITY

In this paper I will highlight briefly some key features of Bonhoeffer's own ecumenical engagement and then offer some reflections on their significance for the ecumenical movement today. But even before that, a brief remark on what I take the word "ecumenical" to be about. As is well known, the word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, "the whole inhabited world". The great councils of the early church such as those at Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century were "ecumenical councils" because they brought together bishops from the churches throughout the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth as known at that time to the people of the Roman Empire. They saw it as an *oikoumene*, which was being embraced by the purpose of God in Christ. But we should notice that "the inhabited earth" refers in a holistic fashion not just to the inhabitants of the earth, but to the earth they inhabit as well. The root word of *oikoumene* is *oikos*, "house", or "household", denoting a family or community living together under one roof. Furthermore, from the root *oikos* come words, like "economy" and "ecology": the household of humankind and the whole environment. The ecumenical movement, in broadest terms, means being caught up into what St Paul according to the Letter to the Ephesians describes as God's purpose in Christ, "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph 1:10). It certainly begins with the church, but it does not end there.

What is distinctive about Dietrich Bonhoeffer is that for him the ecumenical vision as far as it concerned the churches should have most concrete and immediate consequences possible. Looking back in later life to the time when he became actively involved in the ecumenical movement, at about the time of his return to Germany from a year's study as an exchange student in the USA, he said that this was the time when he moved "from the phraseological to the real"; from ideas to concrete action.¹

Bonhoeffer entered into ecumenical engagement in 1931, when at the conference in Cambridge, England, of the World Alliance for Friendship through the Churches he was appointed an honorary Youth Secretary for Europe. The main purpose of the World Alliance, as its name implies, was to work for peace, and it was this, which was the prime attraction of the organisation for Bonhoeffer. For him ecumenism and peace were two sides of the same coin.² The church, being the community of Jesus

1 *DBWE* 8, 358.

2 See K Clements, "Ecumenical Witness for Peace", in JW de Gruchy (Ed.). *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 154-172.

Christ, was the sign and instrument of God's peace in the world. This was one of the two main foci of Bonhoeffer's ecumenical commitment, which reached its highest point at the ecumenical conference at Fanø, Denmark, in 1934 when he made his most outspoken declaration: "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture",³ and called on that meeting to take on the role of a great ecumenical council and challenge to the churches to forbid war. The other focus arose out of the German Church Struggle. Bonhoeffer was not only totally committed to the cause of the Confessing Church within Germany, but pressed the case of the Confessing Church in the international ecumenical movement, insisting that since the Confessing Church was the church which had rejected the heresies of Nazified Christianity in Germany, it and it alone had a right to represent German Protestantism at the international ecumenical table. That posed a mighty challenge to the ecumenical movement itself. Was the ecumenical fellowship just a talking shop for dialogue and cooperation on certain issues, or was it more than that: a body, which could pronounce authoritatively on the issue of truth, and on the concrete course of right action? In fact, as Bonhoeffer asked at least twice during 1934-35, "Is the ecumenical movement church?"⁴ Closely associated with this question was Bonhoeffer's repeated complaint that "There is no theology of the ecumenical movement."⁵ By this he did not mean that there were no theologians attending ecumenical meetings (there were plenty); nor that theological issues were never discussed at meetings either of the World Alliance, or of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, or of the Faith and Order movement. Of course they were. But what Bonhoeffer was looking for was a theological understanding of the ecumenical movement itself, its status in relation to the nature and purpose of the church.⁶ Were the ecumenical bodies just functional organisations for promoting theological dialogue and cooperation, or were they a manifestation of the church itself, the church which is the one body of Christ in all nations, and as such a sign and embodiment of the new humanity in Christ? This for him was a choice between phraseology and reality.

In asking whether the ecumenical movement had itself a theological basis, Bonhoeffer was not offering to supply what is often termed an "ecumenical theology" or a

3 *DBWE* 13, 308f.

4 In paper given at Fanø conference 1934 (*DBWE* 13, 304), and 1935 essay "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement" (*DBWE* 14, 399).

5 See Bonhoeffer's lecture "On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance" given to ecumenical youth conference at Ciernohorské Kúpele, 1932 (*DBWE* 11, 355-369).

6 *Ibid*, 356

“theology of ecumenism”. This was for the simple reason that he himself did not have a “theology of ecumenism” apart from his own distinctive theology of the church. His ecumenical theology was just his ecclesiology writ large. In his earliest work, his doctoral thesis of 1927, *Sanctorum Communio*, he had spelled out his understanding of the church as “Christ existing as church-community”⁷, a community of persons in the relationship of being-with and being-for one another under the word of Christ. It is a community manifesting the work of Christ expressed in the term *Stellvertretung*, a peculiar word formerly translated as “deputyship” but which Clifford Green and his colleagues have now rendered us, in *Sanctorum Communio* (and later works of Bonhoeffer where the term occurs as) “vicarious representative action”. We must be grateful to them for both illuminating the meaning of the term, if at the same time grossly violating the elegance of the English language! It means that the church is identified as a community, which, under the word of Christ, comprises relationships of the quality of vicarious representative action and mutual service, stemming from Jesus Christ himself, and therefore at its most profound is found in the forgiveness of sins.⁸ This was of immense ecumenical significance for Bonhoeffer. It means he was prepared to find the authentic church wherever this quality of relational community is found, be it in his own Lutheran parish, in a Roman Catholic confessional, or in the Black Baptist Abyssinian church in Harlem. It is a concept of church, which relativized for him so many of the confessional distinctions of Christendom. It also meant that when the Church Struggle burst in Germany in 1933, he was ready armed with tools to combat the so-called German Christian heresy of a purely German church, a non-Jewish church, a church conforming to the Nazi ideals of authoritarian leadership, the *Führerprinzip*, all of which ran clean counter to his concept of church as a community solely under the word of Christ and formed according to Christ’s pattern of vicarious servanthood. A church, which for example introduced a racial criterion of membership, was no longer the church of Jesus Christ.

But it also meant that he took with him into ecumenical activity a definite concept of what the ecumenical movement should be and how it should behave. A gathering of people from the churches of the world, gathered in service under the word of its common Lord and in solidarity with one another, should regard itself as church in nature, precisely and above all because it was a manifestation of the universality, the catholicity of the church existing in and beyond all national and racial differences. So at the ecumenical meeting of Life and Work and the World Alliance at Fanø in 1934 he could even dare to claim: “The Ecumenical Council is in session; it can

7 *DBWE* 1, 190 etc.

8 *Ibid*, 180-182.

send out to all believers this radical call to peace. The nations are waiting for it in the East and in the West.”⁹ Why is this so? It is because “The World Alliance is a Church so long as its fundamental principles lie in obediently listening to and preaching the Word of God.”¹⁰ If Bonhoeffer was ever challenged as to how he could dare to claim this on behalf of such a motley collection of people, not all of whom had been officially mandated by their churches to act in the way he was calling for, I suspect he might have said something like: “Well, you tell me: where else is anything resembling the Ecumenical Council meeting just now? If we remain silent, and the world is destroyed by war tomorrow, what are we going to say before the judgment seat of God? Are we going to say, ‘Sorry, Lord, but we hadn’t had time to get the truly great Ecumenical Council organised? Won’t the Lord say something like, ‘All right, if you hadn’t got the ideal shouldn’t you have at least tried the next, or second or third best thing however unsatisfactory- just as the servant given only one talent shouldn’t have left it in the ground but done *something* with it in the market?’” Bonhoeffer was always critical of the ecumenical movement for its slowness and hesitancy. But he never gave up on it. In 1935, writing on how the ecumenical movement and the Confessing Church needed each other, he speaks about the hopes for an Ecumenical Council: “It is not an ideal that has been set up but a commandment and a promise – it is not high-handed implementation of one’s own goals that is required but obedience.”¹¹ The promise therefore remains on the ecumenical movement, despite all its often-disappointing outcomes, its ambiguities and seeming failures.

This vision of ecumenism as the manifestation of the new humanity in Christ in the catholicity of the church remained with Bonhoeffer right to the end. His last recorded words, the day before he was executed at Flossenbürg, were a message to his closest and most trusted ecumenical friend, George Bell, bishop of Chichester: “Tell him, that with him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain.”¹²

Between those earlier statements of 1934-35 and that last statement on the eve of his death, however, certain developments had taken place in Bonhoeffer’s thinking, which do not contradict or replace his earlier thought but reorientate them in significant ways. Particularly in mind here are his prison writings and his call for a “non-religious” interpretation of Christianity with which to address a “world come

9 DBWE 13, 309.

10 Ibid, 304.

11 DBWE 14, 412.

12 See E Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 926f.

of age”. Central to this orientation towards a worldly understanding of Christian faith was a new emphasis in his understanding of the church, summed up in his sentence: “The church is church only when it is there for others.”¹³ I see this as an extension of his earlier ecclesiological understanding of “Christ existing as community”; a community structured by vicarious representative action, *Stellvertretung*, towards a corporate vicarious representative action of the church community for the world in which it is set. I believe that Bonhoeffer, if he had survived Hitler’s revenge, would also want the same extension to be applied to the ecumenical movement – as indeed he had already in effect done so at Fanø in 1934. In relation to this extension, I want to bring in another citation from Bonhoeffer’s prison letters, as when he writes to Eberhard Bethge: “How do we go about being ‘religionless-worldly’ Christians, how can we be εκ-κληία, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world?”¹⁴ Note that Bonhoeffer connects here religion with “privilege”, targeting the assumed role of churches as guardians of the entrance to another, superior world beyond this one - and therefore claiming privileges in relation to each other also, bearing in mind their competing claims to have identified the heavenly portals of truth. But if the faith they profess to proclaim is not about the correct exit to another world, but the entrance into this world of the kingdom of God in righteousness and peace, then it is not privilege towards which they should be aspiring but authentic discipleship of the crucified and risen anointed one in this very world, the way to authentic humanity.

Bonhoeffer’s posthumous influence on the ecumenical movement has been immense but his rejection of what he calls “privilege” and his advocacy of “belonging wholly to the world” constitute a challenging element of Bonhoeffer’s legacy still to be fully claimed, or perhaps rather faced, by the ecumenical movement today. I would like to point up three issues of current ecumenical concern.

The *first* is the long running debate, virtually as old as the modern ecumenical movement itself, on the relationship between the institutional churches and the movement towards visible Christian unity, and in particular the organisations created to further the movement. This might seem to be a very mundane matter of churchly bureaucracy but in fact has very wide theological ramifications. At root it is about how we theologically evaluate what is happening beyond the boundaries of official church structures. So for a moment the reader is asked to excuse what may seem a somewhat drab piece of ecumenical story-telling.

13 DBWE 8, 503.

14 Ibid, 364.

The WCC was formally constituted at its first assembly in 1948, in Amsterdam. Almost immediately fears were being expressed among some of its member churches that what was coming into being was some kind of “super church” claiming an authority over the churches. In 1950 at its meeting in Toronto, Canada, the WCC Central Committee after lengthy and often heated debate agreed on a statement which allayed such fears and ever since has been regarded almost as the holy writ of ecumenism.¹⁵ According to the Toronto Statement, not only does the WCC claim no authority over its constituent churches, but also membership of the WCC does not commit any church to agree with the ecclesiology of any other member church, and does not imply any ecclesiological preference by the WCC. This certainly met the fears about the imposition of any one theological understanding of the church. But this was at the price of leaving other questions unanswered. For the Toronto Statement can be interpreted in a very minimalist way, to mean that the WCC itself, or indeed any other ecumenical body, is itself devoid of any ecclesial significance whatever: that it is a purely functional mechanism by which churches enter into dialogue with one another and into certain inter-church cooperative projects. This issue underlay the recent discussions in the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, following the WCC 1998 Harare Assembly. The problem is, if ecclesial reality resides only in the institutional churches and their governing bodies, what actually is happening when their representatives meet together and share common prayer for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and enter into any kind of joint decision-making? If there is no *ecclesiological* significance here, is there not at least a *pneumatological* reality? Further, how do we come to terms with the fact that vital to the ecumenical movement has been the witness and activity of what might be called para-church movements, especially among the youth and laity? Indeed, that it was largely out of the Christian youth and student movements of the late 19th century that the modern ecumenical movement was born? Bonhoeffer’s point remains: we need a theology which recognises as *significantly church* any place wherever and however the catholicity, the universality, of community in Christ is emerging and being confessed, as a sign of the new humanity in the midst of the old order of division and death, and wherever and whenever a decisive word is spoken to the world for justice, peace and reconciliation. Much is spoken of in various quarters today of the need for the institutional churches to “own” the ecumenical movement. But by “owning” they often mean, “controlling”. This I believe is bound up with

15 See “The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches, WCC Central Committee, Toronto, 1950, in M Kinnamon and BE Cope (Eds). *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC, 1977; and Grand Rapids, WB Eerdmans 1977), 463-468.

a wrongly conceived contemporary obsession with “identity”. So long as churches are unwilling to be pulled out of their isolation and self-sufficiency into a wider movement of belonging, they can never be manifestations of the new humanity in Christ.¹⁶ For this they do not, here and now, need to be in total theological agreement nor structurally or organically one (though it would be better if they were), but at least they need to be counter-signs to the divisions and disintegrating forces running amok in the *oikoumene* at large. To repeat again Bonhoeffer’s view, the ecumenical fellowship is not an ideal but - under God - a commandment and a promise.

Secondly, we are surely all aware that today the ecumenical task has to be negotiated in a multi-faith world, a world moreover which is not only one of religious plurality but of social and political conflicts in which religion is often a factor. Hence the frequent contemporary question: Is inter-religious dialogue the new ecumenism? This is one expression of the basic question, of how any one particular religious tradition can claim a universal significance for the whole human community – and indeed (as Larry Rasmussen has reminded us at this colloquium) for the whole created order on our planet. In fact, awareness of other faiths within the *oikoumene*, and – increasingly – actual dialogue with other faiths - has long been part of the “old” ecumenism. That this has been so, however, is due to the ecumenical movement always taking seriously the *oikoumene* as a whole, of which other faiths are a part. Unfortunately, one thing, which the ecumenical movement, like other human projects, suffers from, is fairly short-term amnesia. Over thirty years ago, the WCC Faith and Order Commission ran a study programme, “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community”; a study, which appears to be largely forgotten but still, bears on our concerns today.¹⁷ It is about how we maintain the specificity of the church as the body of Christ with the universality of the hope given to the whole *oikoumene*, without playing off one against the other but maintaining the necessary and creative tension between them. A firm consensus emerged in the programme that the church is not itself the kingdom of God but a prophetic sign and instrument of the kingdom. It does not itself realise the kingdom in its fullness, but surrenders itself to God in the power of the Spirit to be a kind of first fruits of that kingdom, a sign of it upon the earth. As such it must manifest in its own life what it means to be a community of mutual acceptance, forgiven and forgiving, free in its

16 Cf the discussions in N Sagovsky, *Ecumenism, Christian Origins and the Practice of Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 194-208; K Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic: living in more than one place at once* (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 194-213.

17 See especially G Limouris (Ed.), *Church Kingdom World. The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign*, Faith and Order Paper No 120 (Geneva: WCC, 1986).

diversity and one in all its differentiations. But equally it identifies with the whole of the *oikoumene* without reservation. From my own time on the Faith and Order Commission I especially remember a presentation made to its plenary meeting in Stavanger, Norway, in 1985 by Frieda Haddad, a Lebanese lay theologian of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. I say “presentation” but in fact she was not herself able to be present in Stavanger - Lebanon was still enmeshed in its terrible civil war, the road to Beirut airport was one of the most dangerous in the world, and so her paper was read on her behalf. It was entitled “The Christian community as sign and instrument for the renewal of human community: a Lebanese perspective.” She described how Lebanon had inherited from both Ottoman and French rule a system of government which preserved the *millet* system, whereby limitations and rights of each religious community were carefully set out, including the proportions to which they were entitled in representative government. This sought to provide checks and balances against any one community becoming either too dominant or too marginalised and oppressed – a precarious balance, as Lebanon’s history shows all too well. But Haddad argued that from her faith perspective this was inadequate for an understanding either of how she understood her church, or what it meant to be a member of Lebanese society. It reduced human “community” to legally defined association. So she asked what does it mean to be “church” in Lebanon, and what does it mean to be Christian in Lebanon. In a powerful and moving way, given the fearful nature of her context there and then, she protests against all thinking in primarily legal and institutional terms, whether of church, society or nation. She goes on:

... [H]e who takes his citizenship seriously works earnestly for the advent of a renewed human community where the “other” lives, for he cannot legitimately share in the communal reality of the body politic without sharing in the reality of the other, he cannot conceive of himself as answerable to state laws without answering at the same time for the other. In simple and direct terms this means, for instance, that the unbearable living conditions of the displaced, no matter what their religious affiliations are, are unbearable to me personally. Their uprooting from their villages and towns is my personal uprooting. This involvement with the other rules out any theological formulations what would consider the other as “unholy”, or as incapable of being hallowed? I cannot look at him as being part of the human community whereas I am part of the “Christian” community. My

life and his life are interwoven in the body politic. My hope of salvation, my way to the infinite passes through the other, through our fulfilled finitude.¹⁸

For Frieda Haddad, then, being church in the awful context of Lebanon meant an unconditional identification with the *whole* of her society as a human community and its crying needs, a commitment transcending all demarcations and assumed tribal loyalties. She wants to speak not so much about “Christian witness and mission” in a majority Muslim society but about social education for the elimination of authoritarian legal structures, a revolution in the understanding of what it means to be human in community. So her conclusion is: “The Christian community is not a minority group seeking to elaborate for itself a defensive standpoint over and against the yearnings of the human community in which it is called to live. It rather seeks to nurture in its bosom a genuine openness to the common heritage that binds Christians and Muslims together.”¹⁹ It takes as its point of reference the whole life of the *polis*, the body politic, the human community, and seeks to discern the signs of hope for its future. She recognises the danger that this might drift just into ethical pragmatism, but she maintains the Godward dimension to the Christian’s responsibility, a responsibility that may include suffering, perhaps a suffering with the body politic but not abandoning him- or herself blindly to any of its movements or ideologies

While Haddad nowhere mentions Bonhoeffer, this I think is a good example of what Bonhoeffer was striving for: a view of church which, without privilege, vicariously exists for the sake of the *oikoumene* before God. Those who stand under and receive the word of Christ, the church-community, are not some separate species from the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world. Says Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics*: “It means that there are human beings who allow themselves to receive what, from God’s perspective, all human beings should actually receive: it means that there are human beings who stand vicariously in the place [*stellvertretend dastehen*] of all other human beings, of the whole world.”²⁰ There is thus an ultimate solidarity here with the whole human family. Our approach to other faiths can only be on this basis: they too are part with us of the *oikoumene* – as too are the people of no faith, no religion. In this respect

18 Frieda Haddad, “The Christian Community as sign and instrument for the renewal of human community: a Lebanese perspective”, in TF best (ed.). *Faith and Renewal. Reports and Documents of the Commission on Faith and Order Stavanger 1985, Norway* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 187.

19 Ibid, p190.

20 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 403.

we do well to heed the words of Lesslie Newbigin, speaking of rejoicing in the light wherever we find it:

Here I am thinking ... Not only of the evidences of light in the religious life of non-Christians, the steadfastness and costliness of the devotion which so often puts Christians to shame; I am thinking also of the no less manifest evidences of the shining of the light in the lives of atheists, humanists, Marxists and others who have explicitly rejected the message of the fellowship of the church. "The light" is not to be identified with the religious life of men; religion is in fact too often the sphere of darkness, Christian religion not excluded. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a sharp and constantly needed reminder to the godly of all faiths that the boundary between religion and its absence is by no means to be construed as the boundary between light and darkness.²¹

The *oikoumene* includes, because it is bigger than, other faiths. It would be ironic if our concern for inter-religious dialogue in fact led to a narrowing of our understanding of the *oikoumene*. Inter-religious dialogue must not create another band of privilege, a religious federation over against the non-religious world. But also, as I said at the beginning, the *oikos*, the household of which the *oikoumene* is part, also embraces the whole created order.

This leads to the *third point* where I believe current ecumenism is facing a real challenge, which I would summarise as the need to provide not just calls for action, but a spirituality of action in the world. Recalling what was learnt in the struggle against apartheid, the South African theologian Nico Koopman believes that "Bonhoeffer challenges us to a spirituality and a life of prayer that enhance the dawning of a life of human dignity and human rights",²² and sums up all that Bonhoeffer offers us in inspiration and guidance for responsible living in society: "He shows the way to a threefold action of firstly prayer, which includes spiritual and moral formation, secondly concrete obedience, and lastly active hoping and waiting upon God."²³ Here is where I think the modern ecumenical movement, which rightly claims to be inspired by prayer and spirituality, needs to take a

21 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret. Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p198.

22 Nico Koopman, "How Do We Live Responsibly? Bonhoeffer and the Fulfilment of Dignity in Democratic South Africa", in Kirsten Busch Nielsen et al (eds). *A Spoke in the Wheel. The Political in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2013), 429.

23 Ibid, 431.

fresh look at whether it really is resourcing people to engage with the *oikoumene* as the prime object and goal of God's own engagement. In other words, providing a spirituality for true worldliness.

I return to Bonhoeffer's question from prison: "... how can we be ekklesia, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world?"²⁴ His question has not in fact been adequately answered thus far even in the ecumenical community. There can be much talk about a "worldly" or "world-oriented" or "secular" understanding of mission but Bonhoeffer was asking first not about what Christians and churches should do but what, or who, they are, and to what or where they belong, a sense of self out which their action arises. The most recent ecumenical statement on the church *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*²⁵, building on earlier studies, states well in its final chapter "The Church: In and for the World" the biblical vision of the inclusive purpose of God's love for all people and all creation: "The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world."²⁶ Moreover "The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote ..."²⁷ Christian communities cannot "stand idly by" in face of human suffering and the plight of creation: "The world that 'God so loved' is scarred with problems and tragedies which cry out for the compassionate engagement of Christians."²⁸ Prophetic engagement with the abuse of power, if necessary to the point of persecution and even martyrdom, is called for.

All this is well and very clearly stated as the conclusion to the whole document, which is set in the perspective of God's purpose being to establish *koinonia* between him and all that he has made. Perhaps however it is the very fact of this being the final chapter of the document, which lends a sense that such statements just have to be made, if not as an afterthought then attached for the sake of completeness and theological correctness. The presupposition of the document seems to be not just that church and world are distinct entities (which of course they are) but that they are related only from one side, that of the church. It is a one-way bridge from church

24 *DBWE* 8, 364.

25 *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

26 *Ibid*, 33.

27 *Ibid*, 35.

28 *Ibid*, 36.

to world. The world is the object of the church's action, it is the world that has to be actively transformed by the church's witness, and it is the world's plight that calls for Christian compassion. In all this still lurks the tendency to what Bonhoeffer calls "privilege" on the part of Christians. It is the church that rides to the rescue of the imperilled world. One recalls the popular ecumenical slogan of the 1960s, "Let the world write the agenda!" which sounds very world-oriented but in fact implies that once the agenda is set out, it will be the church that graciously deals with it and, moreover, always knows in advance what is to be done.²⁹ It is the perspective of the colonial administrators.

Allied to this is the tendency of the statements of churches and ecumenical bodies to paint the plight of the world in ever more luridly apocalyptic colours, inducing a state of utter helplessness and despair unrelieved save for the "hope of the gospel" of which the church is privileged bearer. This is apt to be not so much an exercise in responsible realism about the state of the world as a ploy by the church to secure for itself a superior vantage point over against the world. It is an assault on the world born (as aggression often is) out of insecurity, a prime example of what Bonhoeffer calls an attack on the adulthood of the world.³⁰ It is a simplistic view of the world that ignores the genuine ability of individuals and communities to make a positive difference – in other words under certain conditions to be justifiably optimistic. Writing in the winter of 1942-43, shortly before his arrest, Bonhoeffer defends optimism (all optimism, not just "Christian") as "a power of life, a power of hope when others resign", never to be despised however often it is mistaken:

It is the health of life that the ill dare not infect. There are people who think it frivolous and Christians who think it impious to hope for a better future on earth and to prepare for it. They believe in chaos, disorder, and catastrophe, perceiving it in what is happening now. They withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world, from the responsibility for on-going life, for building anew, for the coming generations. It may be that the Day of Judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then, and no earlier, will we readily lay down our work for a better future.³¹

Bonhoeffer's question, about how followers of Christ can see themselves not only as "called out" but "belonging wholly to the world" is not really answered simply by

29 See DL Edwards, "Signs of Radicalism in the Ecumenical Movement", in HE Fey (ed.). *The Ecumenical Advance. A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 2. 1948-1968* (Geneva: WCC, 197), 373-409, especially 406-409.

30 *DBWE* 8, 427.

31 *DBWE* 8, 51.

constant reiteration of calls for Christians and churches to witness prophetically for justice and peace, to respond compassionately to human need and the plight of the creation. These are right and just so far as they go but left to themselves they do not reach to that point of “belonging wholly” to the world which Bonhoeffer is searching for. They do not reach to that point of profound identification with the world in its strengths as well as weaknesses, its hopes as well as its fears, which Bonhoeffer sees as the logic demanded by discipleship of the incarnate one and which alone enables effective and sustained engagement of the world. On the pastoral level it ignores the need for the spiritual resources required to energise and guide such witness and engagement, and to deal with the consequences for those who undertake them, and so they tend to lapse into cheap statements and fruitless gestures. The result of all authentic witness and engagement is not – one hopes – just the transformation of the world but the transformation of the church and believers too. At the end of *Discipleship*³² and again in *Ethics*³³ Bonhoeffer teaches that it is not as though Christians and the church somehow bear the image of God and then take it into the world and bring it to bear on the lives of others. In Christ, God and world are united and neither God nor the world can be met without the other. It is in that engagement of faith with the world that the image of God in Christ is created in us. It is in sharing the sufferings of God in the world that one *becomes* “a human being, a Christian”³⁴. This is an invitation to be transformed, as much as to transform.

“Belonging wholly to the world” requires a much deeper identification than is usually sought with the human world of which one is a part yet which often one wishes one were not so. It is an identification with the world before God, in all its light and darkness, heights and depths. This is as much a spiritual exercise as one of political and social analysis (which is certainly required). It means that deep, daring and patient solidarity that makes its own the sighs of hope and fear, faith and doubt, of that part of the *oikoumene* whose life it shares. It means allowing people of faith to see *themselves* as part of the world in need of transformation, Rather than rather than trying to make people pretend that they are the ones who can put the world right - a way that leads either to fantasy or disappointment - it is first of all a truly *intercessory* identification of the kind Bonhoeffer himself had exemplified in his

32 DBWE 4, 284f.

33 DBWE 6, 82-87.

34 DBWE 8, 486.

prison poem “Night Voices”³⁵ out of which true witness and engagement is born. Prayer and righteous action, together, are the form of faith in the world come of age. For such spiritual and moral formation we need to be truly ecumenical and to look for resources if necessary well beyond our own traditions. We need to learn from strangers (who may be angels in disguise!) more of what it means to live in Christ, to be a community of the new humanity. How interesting, that it was precisely in the period (1931-35) when he was so very Barthian, so heavily Christocentric in his theology, that Bonhoeffer was so anxious to travel to the East, to India, to visit Gandhi in order to learn about non-violent resistance. In May 1934, on the eve of the Barmen Synod, which effectively founded the Confessing Church, he writes to his grandmother:

... I’m thinking again of going to India. I’ve given a great deal of thought lately to the issues there and believe that there could be important things to be learned. In any case it sometimes seems to me that there’s more Christianity in their “heathenism” than in the whole of the Reich Church. Christianity did in fact come from the East originally, but it has become so westernized and so permeated with civilized thought that, as we can

35 *DBWE* 8, 462-470. Extract

Wide open my ear:

“We, the old, we the young,
 we the sons of every tongue, we the strong, we the weak,
 we the watchful, we who sleep,
 we the rich and we them poor,
 all alike in calamity’s hour,
 we the bad, we the good,
 wheresoever we have stood,
 we whose blood was often shed,
 we witnesses of the dead;
 we the defiant and we the resigned,
 we the innocent and we the maligned,
 tormented by long loneliness in heart and mind.
 Brother, searching and calling are we!
 Brother, can you hear me?”

The poem “The Death of Moses” (*DBWE* 8, 531-541) likewise powerfully exemplifies this intercessory identification with his country’s fate before God.

now see, it is almost lost to us. Unfortunately I have little confidence in the church opposition ...³⁶

Being ecumenical means being willing to travel, in every sense. It means, if I may quote the subtitle of my book *Ecumenical Dynamic*, “living in more than one place at once”.³⁷ But we also need to travel in time as well as in space, looking for the surprising insights, which reach far beyond the times in which they were first voiced. I have for example become more and more impressed by the resonances between Bonhoeffer’s “worldly” theology and the writings of the seventeenth century English priest and poet Thomas Traherne who could write:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars; and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world; and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs, as well as you.³⁸

Never was anything in this world loved too much, but many things have been loved in a false way: and all in too short a measure.³⁹

Here is a kindred spirit to Bonhoeffer, who can help us extend Bonhoeffer’s concern for a proper worldliness into a worldliness that sees itself as belonging not just to the human world but to the earth itself and all creatures with which we share a common home, a common *oikos*. I am sure that in your context here you will know of avenues of exploration into African traditional religion and its understandings of belonging wholly to the created order.

In summary, Bonhoeffer, we have seen, repeatedly challenged the ecumenical movement to act as the church. When in international session he called it to recognize itself as the universal church of the nations obeying the word of God. From the standpoint of his prison theology we may imagine him now calling for the churches, as before, under the word of Christ to act vicariously towards each other but also, now, to identify with their world in the deepest possible way; to confess that they do not have special privileges but themselves belong to the world in its longing for justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace and that they are simply the first hearers of the gospel. That means a fundamental reorientation away from

36 *DBWE* 13, 152.

37 Geneva: WCC, 2013.

38 Version taken from Thomas Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, edited by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 29. Spelling and orthography modernised by KC.

39 66th of Second Century, from Ridler version (see n32), 244.

themselves to belong the world, the *oikoumene* and through vicarious representative action in the *oikoumene* finding themselves more truly as the body of Christ, and thereby finding their unity. This is truly worldly Christianity and is the ultimate logic of ecumenism.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Christian existence on the edge of the future

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with reflections on the relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy for Christian existence in our present world. To do so, the author first concentrates on a specific aspect of Bonhoeffer's life, the continuous movement of return and new beginning, which is displayed by three stations of his life. Following, the author describes a single characteristic of Bonhoeffer's theology, the priority of questions over answers, shown likewise by three of his central questions. As in present times Christians are confronted with innumerable challenges that ask for an answer, this paper concludes by taking Bonhoeffer's three just interpreted questions as indicators for three case studies *en miniature* on Christian responsibility with regard to the future. In this way, the author wishes to present suggestions for an ethics of responsibility as part of public theology, inspired by the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

KEYWORDS

Christian Ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Plurality, Public Theology, Responsibility

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It is evidently appropriate to begin a conference in John de Gruchy's honour with reflections on the relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy for Christian existence in our present world. John de Gruchy is a reader of Bonhoeffer's theology since 1958, when he first encountered "The Cost of Discipleship". He presented Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church in comparison with Karl Barth in his doctoral dissertation which led to a "life long dialogue" (De Gruchy 2006:18) not only with Bonhoeffer himself (s. especially De Gruchy 1984) and his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge (De Gruchy 2005; cf. Hüneke/Bedford-Strohm 2011), but also with the worldwide network of scholars and friends in the International Bonhoeffer Society.

Since 1972 this association convenes International Bonhoeffer Conferences every four years. Since 1976 there was no International Bonhoeffer Conference without a substantial contribution from John's side. He hosted the International Bonhoeffer Conference 1996 in Cape Town (De Gruchy 1997) and will hopefully contribute one day – with the grace of God – to another International Bonhoeffer Conference on South African soil, hopefully in 2020 in Stellenbosch. De Gruchy's central place in Bonhoeffer scholarship was demonstrated by the fact that he was chosen as editor for the new presentation of "Letters and Papers from Prison" in the English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, published in 2010 (*DBWE* 8 [2010]). In this moment I feel like a messenger of the worldwide network bound together by the name and the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – like a messenger with the task to express our gratitude for John's outstanding contribution to transform Bonhoeffer's legacy into a lived experience. It was De Gruchy who interpreted Bonhoeffer's theology in a way that made his relevance for the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa evident (De Gruchy 2005). The witness of Beyers Naudé, the contribution of Eberhard Bethge, but even more the contributions of John de Gruchy brought Bonhoeffer's theology so close to the South African context that some people even asked: When did Bonhoeffer visit South Africa? You all know the answer: De Gruchy brought him to South Africa.

However, it is not my task today to describe John's merits in Bonhoeffer research or to evaluate his contributions to public ethics in the spirit of Bonhoeffer. Nor is it my task to characterize the life and the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself. I moreover concentrate on a single aspect of his life, and I describe a single characteristic of his theology. The aspect of his life that I will illustrate is the continuous movement of return and new beginning. And the characteristic of his theology that I want to propose consists in a priority of questions over answers. I will end my presentation with a reflection on some challenges for Christian existence on the edge of the future.

In this way, I wish to present some suggestions for an ethics of responsibility as part of public theology, inspired by the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

1 RETURN AND NEW BEGINNING

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose short life of only 39 years lasted from 1906 to 1945, is all over the world remembered as a martyr of the German resistance against the crimes of Hitler and the Nazi-Regime. It is often described – lastly in Charles Marsh’s new book “Strange Glory” (Marsh 2014) – how he used his ecumenical contacts in order to facilitate the international recognition of the resistance movement. But this role was the result of a continuous return and new beginning. Let me mention three important stations for that.

There is first a return to the bible and a new beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer himself describes the existential experience of turning back to the Bible, in 1931/2, that means before the beginning of the Nazi Regime. The Sermon on the Mount gave him clarity in being a Christian and gave a clear direction for his responsibility in church and society. He summarizes this experience in 1935 towards his elder brother Karl-Friedrich, a scientist, with the words: “I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously ... Things do exist that are worth standing up for without compromise. To me it seems that peace and social justice are such things, as is Christ himself” (*DBWE* 13 [2007]:284 f.). These were the years when Bonhoeffer tried to mobilize his fellow Christians in the ecumenical movement of those days for a clear witness against the starting processes of rearmament and preparation for war and even called – in 1934, exactly eighty years ago – for an ecumenical convocation or council for peace.

There is a second return that I call a return to the church and a new beginning with a “life together”. Bonhoeffer was well prepared for an academic career. He presented his doctoral dissertation already at the age of 21, his second dissertation followed only three years later. In the beginning church struggle he felt obliged to serve his church, but already in 1933 he decided to leave Germany for a pastorate in London. However, Bonhoeffer returned two years later in order to be really a part of this struggle and to prepare young theologians for the ministry. “Life together” in listening to the Biblical word was expected to prepare best for the ministry in church and society. “The most intensive concentration for ministry to the world” was his concept (*DBWE* 14 [2013]:96).

The third return was a return to politics; the new beginning was a conspiracy. In 1939 Bonhoeffer had once again the chance to leave Germany, in this second case in order to evade military conscription in Hitler’s army. But again he returned. He could not

stay in New York in a seemingly safe situation whereas Germany was on its way to aggression and war. Bonhoeffer anticipated with clarity the catastrophic character of this development. He was existentially overwhelmed by the insight that in such a situation his place was with his people because only then he could participate in the effort to hinder the evil and to work for the rule of law and for peace.

What follows seems in retrospective to be inevitable; in looking back we see the way to martyrdom as a necessity. Under the guise of a post in the Military Intelligence Bonhoeffer was in fact involved in the conspiracy, he became imprisoned in April 1943 and during his time in jail he had to acknowledge the failure of the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. That destroyed all hopes to get liberated, to live, as he expected so ardently, together with his fiancée Maria, to see the dictatorship coming to an end and a new kind of political order emerging.

I have to add a last return and a new beginning of quite different character, transcending the three stations just mentioned. We know it from a report of Payne Best, an officer of the British Secret Service, who was among the last persons to see Dietrich Bonhoeffer living. At this occasion Bonhoeffer asked him to greet his friend George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, with the words: „Tell him that this is for me the end, but also the beginning – with him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national hatreds and that our victory is certain“ (*DBWE* 16 [2006]:468-69). In view of his death he returned to the confidence in God's grace, his last new beginning was a transcendent one.

2. PRIORITY OF QUESTIONS OVER ANSWERS

The three returns and new beginnings just described were embedded in Bonhoeffer's life story. But they were at the same time of an extraordinary theological significance. It is the deep and strong connection between biography and theology that makes Bonhoeffer unique. His involvement in the church struggle as well as his role in the resistance movement is intertwined with an extraordinary theological productivity. The innovative character of his theology was promoted by his ability to ask new and unexpected questions. The fact that he did not grow up in a "churchy" environment enabled him to enter theological pathways far beyond the broad roads of the theological mainstream. His most remarkable works developed in times of struggle and even more: in times of crisis. The book on "Discipleship" reflected the formation of young pastors for the church struggle, "the most intensive concentration for ministry to the world". Even in the extremely dense times of political conspiracy, in the midst of all its challenges and disappointments, personal risks and political catastrophes Bonhoeffer found the concentration to work theologically. "Ethics" emerged from this situation, and Bonhoeffer regretted deeply that he could not

finish this book what he expected to be his central work, because he became arrested (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:181). But even this time turned out to be of a quite astonishing theological productivity. His “Letters and Papers from Prison” are written down in his Tegel cell. The innovative character of his theology did not diminish in the times of political involvement and even of custody. In the contrary: His theological reflection seemed to intensify under the pressure of conspiracy and imprisonment. His singularity has its roots in the close interrelation between his life and his thinking, his practice and his theological reflection. That makes his legacy a source of inspiration for today and tomorrow.

However, he is not a theological role model. The ways in which we others try to combine the praxis of the Gospel with theological reflection in our Christian life are different from his. Most of us would not dare to become members of a conspiracy and to work on a book on Ethics at the same time. Not many people have the strength to develop new theological ideas in prison. Everyone has to find his or her own way. But in the different ways in which we try to hold Christian life and theological reflection together we can be inspired by his example.

Bonhoeffer’s challenging power has to do with an interesting treat in his way of doing theology. He represents a kind of thinking in which questions are even stronger than answers. He is enormously creative in the way to ask questions and remarkably experimental in his answers. He often acknowledges that his answers are of a provisional character, and that his theology is in its fragmentary character comparable with his personal life (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:306). But in this way he presents important or even decisive questions and opens a space for our own answers. His early reflections on the church are as good examples for this characteristic treat as his late reflections on religion.

The reflections on the church in his doctoral dissertation on the community of the saints (*Sanctorum Communio*) are driven by the question how we approach theologically the social reality of the church. He calls that “A Theological Study of the Sociology of the church” (*DBWE* 1 [1998]) – the original German title sounds even stronger and could also be translated as “a dogmatic investigation on the sociology of the church”. You will not easily find in Protestant theology before Bonhoeffer an author who addresses the visibility of the church as theological problem so urgently. Also after him only very few theologians confronted theology and sociology as directly as he did. His question continues to be challenging even if we hesitate to accept his solution, namely to understand the church as a “collective person” and to identify Christology and Ecclesiology in the formula that the church is “Christ existing as congregation”, or, as the English translation says, “Christ existing as church-community” (Cf. *DBWE* 1 [1998]:14 f.).

His late reflections on religion put unforgettably into question an attitude that takes religion as framework for Christian existence for granted. Bonhoeffer's question may be summarized as follows: Is it possible to understand the Gospel without the framework of religion as a specific sphere of life, of God as "deus ex machina" (the God who appears on the stage of the theatre by a sudden from the machine), of spirituality as a specific activity separated from the practices of daily life? Bonhoeffer asks, as Robert Vosloo says, in this context a sequence of "serious and penetrating questions" like the following: "How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Is there such a thing as a religionless Christian? If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed – and this garb has looked very different in different ages – what than is religionless Christianity?" (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:363. Vosloo 2012:48). Since Bonhoeffer asked those "serious and penetrating questions", not many theologians addressed the relation of religion and faith as radically as he did. We may hesitate with regard to his diagnosis, namely that modernity leads to a religionless era. But this kind of hesitation does not diminish the importance of his questions.

Observations of this kind lead me to the assumption, that the questions of this theologian are even more interesting than his answers for us. But his answers help us to understand the questions better than we would do without them. However, if that is true we have to ask: What are Bonhoeffer's most important questions or even more: what is his decisive question? I restrict myself to three possible answers.

a) "Letters and Papers from Prison" starts with a "Prologue" that was formulated by the author still in freedom. He presented this text as a Christmas gift for his friends in the conspiracy. It contains some reflections "after ten years", namely ten years after the beginning of the Nazi Regime early in 1933. In this "Prologue" of Christmas 1942 we find a reflection on "success". Bonhoeffer accepts that the success never can justify an evil deed or reprehensible means, but he denies the idea that the results of our deeds are irrelevant and only our good motives count. Such an attitude does not dare to look into the future. Therefore a seemingly heroic posture in the face of an unavoidable defeat is not at all "heroic". Moreover, Bonhoeffer summarizes: "The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living." He proposes to look on a situation not on the basis of principle but in concrete responsibility. And he adds: "The younger generation will always have the surest sense whether an action is done merely in terms of principle or from living responsibly, for it is their future that is at stake" (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:42).

b) Having Bonhoeffer's inclination to the young generation in mind it may be interesting to see, how he develops this "ultimately responsible question" when he

enters into dialogue with young people. We find a good example in a letter from prison to his nephew Hans-Walter Schleicher, who was a young soldier in the German army. The uncle is interested to know the topics discussed by these young soldiers, and he asks whether they address only daily questions or the important ones. The writer of that letter cannot resist to explain himself what he sees as the “most important question for the future”, namely “how we are going to find a basis for living together with other people, with spiritual realities and rules we honour as the foundations for a meaningful human life” (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:409).

c) Finally, I add a third example for the insistence with which Bonhoeffer tries to find the “most important” or the “ultimately responsible” question. On April 1944 he starts his series of theological letters to his friend Eberhard Bethge with the question that keeps gnawing at him. And this one question is: “What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” (*DBWD* 8 [2010]:362).

What a contrast, you may argue. On the one hand the question, how a coming generation is to go on living or how we find the foundations for living together, and on the other hand this question of a quite different sound: “What is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” But you remember his statement to his brother that “peace and social justice ... as Christ himself are things worth standing up for without compromise”. Christ and living together or fighting for the life of future generations have their place not in separated spheres, because Christ is God incarnated. The question of Christ is therefore not simply a pious or purely a theological question. In Bonhoeffer’s view the times are over in which this question could be answered only in religious words. And even more: this question can by no means be answered by words alone. It has to be answered by the witness of people, “who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time” (*DBW* 8 [2010]:390). Bonhoeffer’s answer to the question what Christianity or who Christ is for us today, is often quoted in the shorter form: “to pray and to do justice” (This formula is also used by Bonhoeffer: *DBW* 8 [2010]:389). But by good reasons Bonhoeffer adds a third element and speaks about those “who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time”. He posits human activity in the horizon of the divine action and sees the future as the space of human responsibility in the light of God’s future. He sees human persons not only as acting, but also as waiting and hoping. Doing justice is embedded in prayer and hope. That relates the human role as responsible actor to the comparably fundamental role as recipient. We receive before we act; we are gifted before we use what is given to us. Even the “ultimate responsible question” is penultimate. Then the ultimate horizon for all our fragmentary activities is God’s creative activity and his coming into our world, his incarnation in Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's three formulations for *the* central question are closely connected. But they include also a process of translation, described so often as crucial for today's public theology. As Heinrich Bedford-Strohm and others argue, public theology has to be bilingual in translating the language of faith into the language of public discourse (s. for Bonhoeffer's relevance for public theology Bedford-Strohm 2008). In the case of Bonhoeffer that would mean that the question on the meaning of Christianity and of Christ for us today is translated into the question, how a coming generation is to go on living or what the foundations for a living together may be. But it seems that for him there exists also a process of translation in the other direction: He expects a time in which Christians may grasp anew und express publicly "what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ". He waits for a church born anew out of prayer, action and hope and therefore capable to bring "the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world" (*DBWE* 8 [2010]:389). Using his example for our efforts in public theology both directions are comparably important: responsibility for the living together on the earth that is given to us; and openness for a new understanding of the giver who entrusts to us the earth on which we live.

3. CHALLENGES FOR A CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE ON THE EDGE OF THE FUTURE

In present times Christians are confronted with innumerable challenges that ask for an answer. In order to select some of them I take Bonhoeffer's three questions, just interpreted in their inner connection, more separately as indicators for three case studies en *miniature* on Christian responsibility with regard to the future. What follows has nothing of a catalogue but is rather an experimental approach.

a) The responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living. This statement came recently again to my mind when we discussed in Germany on the political answer to the terror and even genocidal actions of the "Islamic State" militia against Christians and Yezidi in the North of Iraq. The tension is obvious. Christian Ethics favours non-violence instead of violence, creative love for your enemy instead of confrontation, reconciliation instead of division. But what is the answer if men are decapitated brutally or women are raped and children misused before they are killed. A decade ago, the international community stated the "Responsibility to Protect" for endangered groups of people as a principle of international morals and law. That includes humanitarian assistance, asylum for refugees, diplomatic activities, economic boycott and the like. But what about stopping on-going massacres? Is there still a military option as last resort? In the German discussion, some argued with another statement of Bonhoeffer: There are situations, he says, in which it is not enough "to bind up the wounds of the

victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself” (DBWE 12 [2009]:365). In the concrete case the German government decided and the parliament accepted the decision to send weapons into the North of Iraq in order to allow the Kurdish Peshmerga troops to stop the deadly aggression of the “Islamic State”. I personally would have preferred an intervention authorized by the United Nations following the rules of the “Responsibility to Protect”. Nevertheless, nothing of this kind happened in time. In my conviction, pure passivity with regard to crimes against humanity is not among the principles of Christian peace ethics. The preparedness of radical pacifists to suffer violence without resistance can neither be transferred to others nor transformed into a right or even a duty of the political community to let crimes happen without any effort to stop them. Asked about the relevance of the fifth commandment for that debate I found myself in a position to answer that the commandment not to kill includes a responsibility to protect people from being killed and therefore to withhold people from killing. That is not a justification of violence or a return to the doctrine of just war, to which we said farewell in wide parts of Christianity, adopting instead a doctrine of just peace. But in our not yet redeemed world there are situations in which we cannot avoid to turn to violence as a last resort in order to save human lives. We are confronted with a challenge that was decisive for Bonhoeffer’s way into resistance.

b) The most important question is how we can find foundations and rules for living together. In today’s Germany you will seldom witness a discussion on the future of society without an extended debate on the coexistence between Christians, Muslims and people of other conviction. Bonhoeffer could not have in mind the radical form of plurality that characterizes societies in our days. In a globalising world we become all strangers and live together with people who are alien for us – and we for them. Plurality reaches into the depth of convictions and values.

In South Africa the colours of the rainbow are used as symbols for the peaceful coexistence of the different. But the hint to the harmony of different colours in the rainbow does not substitute the search for common rules and for practicable forms of tolerance. Under the conditions of radical plurality the lack of an overlapping moral consensus shatters the social fabric of societies, and that promotes hostility against aliens and exclusion of minorities. Of course this phenomenon is linked to the problems of injustice and social discrepancy. When inequality mounts to a measure that disregards the equal access to freedom in society, the responsible use of freedom itself is endangered. Exploitation and exclusion are therefore poison for common life, whereas social justice, that means equal access to freedom, is essential for mutual recognition and respect.

But the edge on which we stay today, includes even more challenges not yet included in Bonhoeffer's way to speak about "living together": We share life not only with the members of our own country or our own generation. All humans are created into the image of God. Intergenerational justice and respect for coming generations in the use of resources belong therefore to the preconditions of living together.

And even more: Living together does not include only humanity but also other creatures. That goes also beyond Bonhoeffer's perspective. However, he offered an orientation even for this new task. Larry Rasmussen rightly summarizes a principle of Bonhoeffer's life and theology just from the beginning until the end in the sentence: "Fidelity to God is lived as fidelity to Earth" (Rasmussen 2013:85). Earthly love in all its sensuality is for Bonhoeffer one of the concrete forms of this fidelity to Earth. Rasmussen takes this togetherness of fidelity to God and fidelity to Earth as *Leitmotif* for what he calls *Earth-honouring faith* as the new key for religious ethics in our times. It transcends Bonhoeffer's thinking. But it is an answer to a question posed by him as "the most important question".

c) There is finally *the gnawing question, what Christianity, or who Christ is actually for us today*. In the troubles of our time, why should we refer to the insights of Christian faith and to Christ as person? John de Gruchy, Jens Zimmermann and others answer, that this is necessary for a renewal of humanism (De Gruchy 2006; Zimmermann 2012). To mobilise the universal egalitarianism of the Jewish-Christian tradition as source for a humanism of today does not exclude other traditions and their contributions. To remember unconditional love as empowering our empathy for the vulnerable and suffering other does not justify an exclusive Christian claim for such empathy. And whoever wants to strengthen this stance in Christian religion and ethics has to have in mind those traits in Christian history that promoted just the opposite. In Europe, we remember in these days the outbreak of World War I hundred years ago and of World War II seventy-five years ago. In these wartimes the gospel was misused, especially in Germany, to suggest the superiority of the own nation over others and to reclaim God's blessing for the success of the own arms. Or let us address the South African experience: You remember with excitement and gratitude the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the beginning of his presidency twenty years ago. But these events stood at the end of a period in which Christian faith was misused to justify racial discrimination on seemingly biblical grounds.

In remembering such examples, we have to acknowledge that Christianity and Christ himself mean for us today the task to humanise faith and religion. Our answers to Bonhoeffer's question have to include that we make the respect for the equal dignity of every human being a lived reality. By doing so, our answer may and must also include all possible efforts to make the humanisation of religion a common

effort of all religions on our globe. In this way, the inter-religious dialogue may at certain points be less comfortable as some people tend to expect. However, that is inevitable. Whenever religion is used again to mobilize hatred, to justify a feeling of superiority or to confirm the legitimacy of killing violence, open criticism and clear resistance are unavoidable. With regard to actual plans for an “Islamic Caliphate” in the Middle East a clear opposition in Islam itself is urgently needed. Such an Islamic protest against the misuse of the divine name deserves all possible solidarity from Christians and Christian churches all over the world.

The religious contribution to the renewal of humanism includes therefore the humanisation of religions themselves. This task needs courage, to which the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer contributes a lot.

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Bonhoeffer and the future of Public Theology in South Africa. The on-going quest for life together.

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the meaning of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for Public Theology in South Africa. It specifically discusses the meaning of Bonhoeffer for the public quest for life together in churches and a society that hunger for a joint journey towards a life of dignity for all, justice for all, freedom for all. Bonhoeffer's own emphasis on life together is discussed with reference to his emphasis on life together as a Trinitarian gift, and his Christological and ecclesiological understanding of human beings and life together. Directives for the concrete practice of life together are inferred from Bonhoeffer's work by specifically discussing his own commitment to a life of interpathy, and his thinking about morally acceptable compromises in our quest to advance life together.

KEYWORDS

Bonhoeffer, Public Theology, Life Together, Anthropology, Christology, Interpathy

TREFWOORDE

Bonhoeffer, Publieke Teologie, Lewe saam, Antropologie, Christologie, Interpatie

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1. INTRODUCTION

This contribution reflects upon the contribution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the future of Public Theology in South Africa. This essay is structured as follows. In a first round the on-going plea for life together in South Africa and in other parts of the world is discussed. In a second round the light that the theology of Bonhoeffer sheds on the central task of Public Theology, namely to advance life together in unity, justice and reconciliation, is discussed. This is done by attending to Bonhoeffer's portrayal of life together as a trinitarian creation and gift, and to his Christological and ecclesiological anthropology of relationality. In a last round some directives for life together are distilled from the discussion of Bonhoeffer's work, specifically his perspectives on the themes of interpathy and moral compromise, and communion for dignity, justice and freedom.

2. A PLEA FOR LIFE TOGETHER – NEAR AND FAR

a. Steve De Gruchy¹ wrote an important chapter in the commemoration edition of the book of his father John, *The church struggle in South Africa*. He argued that the church struggle had been replaced by various struggles. He then identified various struggles, amongst others poverty, human sexuality and gender justice, plurality in a secular state, and the promise and peril of globalisation. The first one which he mentioned, and which he viewed as the central one that would be crucial to address the other struggles, is the struggle for national reconciliation, for life together, for joint attention to the various challenges. Steve De Gruchy pleaded for life together in South Africa.

Russel Botman, former rector and vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University, dedicated his life to this quest for life together. He spoke about this life together in terms of the dignity of all humans and all creatures. On basis of the Confession of Belhar he identified three dignity discourses in South Africa, namely the discourses about unity, reconciliation and justice. Together we search for a life together of dignity, i.e. for a life together of unity, justice and reconciliation.

Dirkie Smit, decades ago described this life together as indispensable for achieving reconciliation and justice. Life together, life in unity, paves the way for a communal quest for reconciliation and justice. According to Smit² article 1 of Belhar about

1 S De Gruchy, From church struggle to church struggles, in J de Gruchy. *The church struggle in South Africa, 25th Anniversary Edition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 223-260.

2 See DJ Smit "... op 'n besondere wyse die God van die noodlydende, die arme en die veronregte ...", in GD Cloete en DJ Smit (eds), *'n Oomblik van Waarheid*

the unity of the church helps churches to discover and confess that their continued disunity presents a stumbling block to the quest for reconciliation and justice. This disunity implies the separation of people from different socio-economic groups, with different levels of privilege, training, skills, participation and influence in society. Disunity constitutes the perpetuation of classism and the refusal to be involved with less privileged brothers and sisters. Smit is of opinion that these socio-economic factors were the real cause of the original church divisions within the so-called Dutch Reformed Church family. The theological rationale for separate churches was developed only later. He writes remarkably about the way in which the situation of separate churches and disunity prevents Christians from showing justice and compassion towards each other. "Christians are denied the opportunity to get to know each other and to love and serve each other. Consequently it becomes more difficult – and mostly almost impossible – to know and to carry each other's burdens."³

Life together, life in, what I like to call, constructive proximity, is indispensable for building a society of reconciliation, justice, dignity and freedom.

The quest for life together did not diminish in South Africa after twenty years of democracy. On the contrary, we nowadays hear more pleas for the dawning of this life together. The levels of polarization in our country are still very high. Public trust remains a big challenge. We still hunger for higher levels of inclusive social solidarity, liberating social cohesion, and that dignifying social capital, which include relationships of trust, dialogue and cooperation across various boundaries.

Churches and theologians are called upon to take-up this challenge, and to give servant-leadership in the quest to awaken and materialise the dream in the hearts of South Africans to become a country of unity, justice and reconciliation. Rectors of universities, like Jonathan Jansen of Free state University and Russel Botman of Stellenbosch University wrestled with the reality that on weekdays they prepare and equip their students on university campuses for life together, but on Sundays churches to a high degree still nurture them in mono-ethnic and mono-cultural, separatist churches and congregations.

The on-going vibrancy of Ubuntu discourses in South Africa also reveals the hunger among South Africans for this life together. Ubuntu as African anthropology and worldview that seeks a life of humaneness, of communion, of togetherness, of

(Kaaipstad:Tafelberg Uitgewers, 1982), 60-62.

3 See DJ Smit, "... in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, in GD Cloete en DJ Smit (eds). *Moment of Truth: The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1984), p. 62.

inclusive solidarity, of social cohesion and compassion, remains a hunger in the hearts of millions of South Africans.

b. The hunger for life together is expressed with renewed energy and urgency all over the globe. In a magisterial work Larry Rasmussen⁴ decades ago unmasked the fragmentation of life together and its impact on our moral living together. He argues that the state and the market cannot adequately serve as moral proxies, and pleads for the rebuilding of communities of life together, of moral living together in churches and the rest of civil society.

In two very helpful, more recent, publications chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks and sociologist Richard Sennett, plead for life together. In his *The home we build together* Sacks pleads for new covenants that would facilitate life together in contexts of diversity and plurality, conflict and needs. Sacks⁵ argues as follows:

Covenants – because they are relational, not ontological – are inherently pluralistic. I have one kind of relationship with my parents, another with my spouse, others with my children, yet others with friends, neighbours, members of my faith, fellow citizens of my country, and with human beings wherever they suffer and need my help. None of these is exclusive. It is of the nature of real life, as opposed to philosophical abstraction, that we have many commitments and that they may, at times, conflict. But that is not inherently tragic, though it may give rise to regret, even grief. Pluralism is a form of hope, because it is founded in the understanding that precisely because we are different, each of us has something unique to contribute to the shared project of which we are a part. In the short term our desires and needs may clash; but the very realization that difference is a source of blessing leads us to seek mediation, conflict resolution, conciliation and peace – the peace that is predicated on diversity, not on uniformity.

This plea for covenant is also reflected in the social covenant discourse that the World Economic Forum has recently embarked upon.

Sennett serves us with a helpful publication with the simple and striking title, *Together*. In this book he identifies the ills and skills for life together. He identifies three sets of ills. He⁶ firstly identifies socio-economic inequality as a major threat

4 L Rasmussen, *Moral fragments and moral community. A proposal for church in society* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1993).

5 J Sacks, *The dignity of difference. How to avoid the clash of civilizations* (London/New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002 – repr. 2011), 203.

6 R Sennett, *Together. The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation* (London: Penguin Books, 2012/repr.2013), 133-147, especially 144-147.

to life together, to inclusion, to the building of healthy social relationships and cooperation. He argues that although this was not the original intention of social media, like Facebook, it is currently employed to reflect and advance structural inequality, exclusion, comparison and competition, instead of equilibrium and cooperation. He argues that societies in the USA with higher levels of inequality than European societies, is less capable of providing institutions that would enable children to relate and cooperate more deeply.

Sennett⁷ secondly refers to the fragmentation and destruction of the so-called social triangle in the modern workplace in the context of the development of new forms of labour, especially after the financial crash of 2008. The triangle refers firstly to the mutual earned authority and respect of employees and employers, secondly to the loyal cooperation and sacrifice on behalf of colleagues and the company, and thirdly the extra efforts of workers when the company experiences crises. This life together in the workplace has deteriorated and has made place for bitter distrust, comparison, competition and disloyalty.

Sennett⁸ explains that the breakdown of life together reaches its lowest point in the psychological outcome of both structural inequality and new forms of labour, namely the creation of the uncooperative self who is a character type that cannot manage demanding, complex forms of social engagement, and who consequently withdraws from involvement and cooperation, and who functions with anxiety, narcissism and complacency.

In the South African context Fanie du Toit⁹, Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, identifies the following stumbling blocks to this life together: past and present estrangement, socio-economic inequality, racial prejudice, and a culture of violence. One could add factors like prejudices related to class, gender, sexual orientation, age, levels of disability and nationality. Ecocide can also be added to this list of prejudices.

3. BONHOEFFER AND LIFE TOGETHER

Bonhoeffer offers various directives for Public Theology in South Africa. What Allan Boesak wrote about him decades ago, still rings true today. He described the role of

7 R Sennett, *Together*, 148-178.

8 R Sennett, *Together*, 179-190.

9 F du Toit, *Learning to live together. Practices of social reconciliation* (Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2003), 49-137.

this so-called white upper class European male for fulfilling our personal and public responsibilities as follows:

From Bonhoeffer I learned that it is not so much the freedom of religion that matters and that should be fought for, but what really counts is the freedom of the Word of God, that freedom to speak and to act as the Gospel compels us to do. I learned from him that we must not recoil from doing what has to be done and what should be done for others. I learned from him that we should not excuse ourselves by saying nothing can be done without doing our analysis first. And, at the same time, learning from him that what we are called to do is precisely proper and right analysis so that we will not be dreaming and romanticize about the realities of this world, or the ethical relevance of success, or failure. From him we learn that we should know not to deny our broken past, but to accept it and, in so doing, to respond to the demands of the present. We learn from him that we should take the risk of doing and that we should not wait until we have the certainties of complete analysis, which may never come. We must make the decision and we must take upon ourselves the consequences of that decision.”¹⁰

Bonhoeffer is one of the much-read theologians in South Africa. This was the case during apartheid as well as in democratic South Africa. No one has strived to spell out the meaning of Bonhoeffer for South Africa more than John de Gruchy. Decades ago he referred with affirmation to Paul Lehmann’s view in reflecting upon Bonhoeffer’s experience with black people in the USA, that Bonhoeffer could have become a bridge builder between black and white theologies, a credible interpreter of black theology.¹¹ De Gruchy describes how Bonhoeffer’s theology that developed in the context of a *status confessionis* was relevant for the *status confessionis* in apartheid South Africa.¹² Various other South Africans like Dirkie Smit, Russel Botman, Johan Botha, Carl Anthonissen, Robert Vosloo and an increasing number of younger theologians continue drinking from the wells of Bonhoeffer. Recently I attempted to demonstrate how Bonhoeffer could assist us in developing a Public Theology of responsibility.¹³

10 A Boesak, What Dietrich Bonhoeffer has meant to me, in G Carter et al. (eds). *Bonhoeffer’s ethics. Old Europe and new frontiers* (Kampen: Kok, 1991), 21-29.

11 J De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer in South Africa. Theology in dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 75.

12 J De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer in South Africa*, 123-143.

13 N Koopman, How Do We Live Responsibly? Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Fulfillment of Dignity in democratic South Africa, in H Zimmerman et al. (eds.), *A Spoke in the Wheel: The Political in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 415-431.

In this essay I discuss Bonhoeffer's significance for the future of Public Theology in South Africa by attempting to investigate the potential in Bonhoeffer's theology for building an ethos of life together. I investigate his Christological thinking, and especially so his Christological and ecclesiological anthropology, in an attempt to find directives for an ethos of life together.

(In celebrating John De Gruchy I also attempt to show how De Gruchy drinks from the wells of Bonhoeffer in developing his own constructive theological parameters for life together, as expressed especially in his famous book, *Reconciling. Justice.*)

3.1 Life together as Trinitarian gift

Bonhoeffer explains that Jesus Christ Himself is our peace, our unity and the foundation of our life together. "We have access to one another, joy in one another, community with one another through Christ alone."¹⁴ The life together of Christians is created by God in and through Jesus Christ. The community is not an ideal that we have to realize, but it is a reality created by God in which we may participate. It is not a psychic and emotional, but a spiritual reality, i.e. it is created by the Spirit.¹⁵ The communion of Christians is not a communion of immediacy that is dependent upon sinful human beings, but it is a communion that is always mediated by Christ.¹⁶ Full communion with the other is only found in Christ who binds us together.¹⁷ Where the most vulnerable is excluded from the communion of Christians, Christ Himself is excluded.¹⁸ We should guard against our own idealized views of the Christian community, which might be in conflict with these features of Christian community. "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial."¹⁹ Our participation in life together is based in the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ. Those who participate in life together had been chosen in Christ from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.²⁰ Life together is a physical sign of the presence of the triune God. In the presence of other Christians we experience the

14 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE), Vol 5. Life Together. Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 47.

15 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 38-39.

16 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 41.

17 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 44.

18 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 45-46.

19 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 36

20 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 31-32.

presence of the Creator, the Reconciler and the Redeemer, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.²¹

These Trinitarian foundations of Christian community and of the plausibility and possibility of life together is crucial in a country coming from an apartheid past, where the pseudo-gospel was proclaimed that the rich diversity of South Africans were by nature not reconcilable, and that even the person and work of Christ was not good enough to actualize the life together in unity, reconciliation and justice, of this diversity of people. It is crucial to be reminded of these theological convictions in a country where we struggle to actualize life together in the context of diversity, plurality and complexity. It is crucial to hear the gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ in a time where the disturbing voices are heard ever more frequently that the apartheid theologians might have been right all the time, that it is perhaps not possible to bring the diversity of South Africans to the party for life together in the quest for dignity, justice and freedom for all – and that it might after all be better to go separate ways. It even disturbs one if you hear these same voices in some European countries that were renowned for their high levels of tolerance, but who seem to lose those noble values now that they are becoming more diverse and pluralistic, especially pluralistic with regard to a variety of religious worldviews.

3.2 A Christological and ecclesiological anthropology for life together

Bonhoeffer's Christological and ecclesiological understanding of human beings provide directives for life together.

Bonhoeffer emphasises the communal character of humanity. His anthropology can indeed be described as a relational anthropology. Bonhoeffer scholar, Clifford Green, argues that the notion of sociality is central to not only Bonhoeffer's anthropology, but in fact to his whole theological thinking: '...we have to regard it (sociality – NK) as formative for his whole theology'.²²

Bonhoeffer outlines his anthropological thinking in various works. In his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, he develops his relational anthropology by way of theological, sociological and philosophical analyses. Bonhoeffer²³ states

21 *DBWE*, Vol 5, 29.

22 C Green, Human sociality and Christian community, in J De Gruchy (ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 113-133. See also C Green, *Bonhoeffer. A theology of sociality* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), where Green gives an extensive outline of this thesis of sociality.

23 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE), Vol.1, Sanctorum Communio. A theological study of the sociology of the church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 54-57.

that the individual exists only through others. The individual is not solitary. For the individual to exist, others must also exist. The other is not an unreachable, far-off being, but one that is met in ethical encounter. In these ethical encounters the identity of people is formed.

Bonhoeffer's anthropology is theologically, more specifically Christocentrically, based.

He firstly bases his relational anthropology in the image of God. On basis of Genesis 1:26 and also Genesis 5:1-2 he explains that image of God does not refer to an attribute that an individual possesses. It rather refers to the freedom of people. This freedom is not something that we possess, that we receive or that we can give to others. Freedom is a relationship. "Being free means 'being-free-for-the-other', because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relationship with the other am I free".²⁴ This freedom of humans for the other, according to Bonhoeffer,²⁵ corresponds with God's freedom for humanity in Jesus Christ. In fact, our analogy with our Creator is an analogy of relationship, i.e. *analogia relationis*. God's freedom is not a freedom from humans, but for humans. He gives Himself to us. He is with us and for us. He shows solidarity to us. Bonhoeffer states that community with God is not an exclusive individualistic possibility, but it includes community with other humans.²⁶

Bonhoeffer mainly provides a Christological foundation for his anthropology. The freedom of God for us is a freedom in love and more specifically it is a freedom that is manifested in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.²⁷ The freedom for the other implies sacrifice. As Christ was willing to sacrifice, so do we sacrifice for the sake of the other, especially the subjugated other. This notion of sacrifice in Bonhoeffer's thinking is well articulated in his understanding of discipleship. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that following Christ implies understanding grace as costly grace. In his days the Protestant principles of faith alone, Scripture alone and glory to God alone have merely become religious formalism and legalism. He therefore rejects cheap grace and pleads for costly grace.

His Christological anthropology implies that we live with discipleship, which makes no room for cheap grace, but which knows that true grace is costly grace. Cheap

24 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 3, *Creation and Fall. A theological exposition of Genesis 1-3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62-63.

25 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 2, *Act and being. Transcendental philosophy and ontology in systematic theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 90.

26 D Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 139.

27 D Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 63-65.

grace is that grace which implies that I can be comforted and secured without having to follow Christ. Costly grace calls us to be disciples, to follow Christ.

Bonhoeffer does not only describe image of God in terms of Christ, but the development of his anthropology in terms of community, specifically in terms of the church, as well as in terms of sin, also has a Christocentric focus. Last-mentioned statement is verified in the following paragraphs.

It can be argued that he motivates his anthropology ecclesialogically. He argues that to be human is to be part of a community.²⁸ Communities range from small circles like marriages, families and friendships to larger circles like peoples, nations and the whole church. The whole humankind constitutes a community. By using Ferdinand Tonnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* he states that these communities, unlike societies, are ends in themselves. They give meaning to our lives. Specifically in the church the true nature of humans is manifested. This ecclesial understanding of humanity, i.e. that in the community of Christians, in the church we discover who we are to be, has a Christocentric focus. Bonhoeffer describes this focus in the formulation that the church is Christ existing as community, *Christus als Gemeinde existierend*.²⁹ Revelation, Christ's person, exists in social form, in the church.

This Christological and ecclesiological understanding of humans and of human communities prevent any idea of exclusivism and discrimination in terms of categories like ethnicity, nationality, gender and socio-economic class.

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on communality does not imply that he does not make room for individuality. He articulates it like this.

We recognize, then, that only as we stand within the community can we be alone, and only those who are alone can live in the community. Both belong together. Only in the community do we learn to be properly alone (*allein*); and only in being alone (*Alleinsein*) do we learn to live properly in the community. It is not as if the one preceded the other; rather both begin at the same time, namely with the call of Jesus Christ.³⁰

It is also important to note that Bonhoeffer identifies sin as a crucial category in trying to understand what humanity entails.³¹ He describes sin in terms of his

28 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 80-96.

29 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 141.

30 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 5, 83.

31 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 107-121.

relational anthropology. Sin is the opposite of appropriate self-assertion. It entails a form of self-assertion that denies the other. Sin implies the distortion and end of community. Sin is witnessed in modernity's notion of the autonomy of the self that is actually pride, i.e. an endeavour to become like God. According to Bonhoeffer sin constitutes the distortion of both personal relationships and social and institutional relationships. Not only does sin imply distortion of micro communities like marriages, friendships and families, but also macro communities like ethnic groups, nations and communities in the spheres of the economy, military and academy. Sin also has an alienating and selfish nature.

Awareness and recognition of our sin is not the only word. Through our unity in Christ we become the *sanctorum communio*.³² Our redemption, according to Bonhoeffer, is the work of the Triune God. The *sanctorum communio* is established by God's action. These new relationships are established in Christ, not ideally, but in reality. The Holy Spirit actualizes the church that is not only potentially real in Christ, but that is completely established in Christ as a reality. Bonhoeffer views humans, therefore, not only in terms of sin, but more so in terms of salvation by the triune God.

Drawing upon Bonhoeffer John de Gruchy³³ emphasizes this point. He argues that life together, specifically life together in the space of the church, exists for the sake of restoring justice, reconciliation and peace. He refers to Bonhoeffer's idea that Christ is Christ for others, and that the church is church for others. The essence of life together in the church resides in the practice to embrace the other and the outsider.

4. DIRECTIVES FOR LIFE TOGETHER

This brief and cursory analysis of the Christological and ecclesial anthropology of relationality and communion of Bonhoeffer teaches some lessons for life together. We learn that life together can be contaminated and hindered by sin. We learn that the work of Jesus Christ is sufficient for life together. We learn that life together is a gift of the triune God. We learn about the indispensable role of the church, as the place where Christ is manifested today, in this quest for life together. We learn that life together is a life in search of the actualization of dignity and unity, reconciliation and justice, freedom and peace. One important skill for life together would, therefore, be to remember and drink from these Trinitarian, Christological, soteriological and ecclesiological wells for life together.

32 D Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 122-134.

33 J de Gruchy, *Reconciliation. Restoring justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 94.

Three more specific “skills” for life together, perhaps, also need to be emphasized. Bonhoeffer practiced an ethos of interpathy himself. This means he could think with, feel with and eventually identify with people from other cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as with people with whom the groups that he belonged to, were in conflict. That ethos of interpathy impacted upon his theological reflections, and his theological reflections informed and enriched this ethos. He, one might say, embodied the classic Christian motto about the interdependence of the *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and *lex (con-) vivendi*. This living with interpathy was witnessed to in his identification with black people in Harlem in New York, and with oppressed and persecuted Jewish people in Germany. For building life together we need theologians and pastors and church people who engage in practices of communal sympathy, empathy and interpathy.³⁴

Bonhoeffer’s thinking also equips us with the skill to deal faithfully with unavoidable compromises in the context of plurality and ambiguity, duality and paradoxality, tragedy and *aporia*. He opposes compromises. In the area of concrete decision-making the tension between the ultimate, the last things, and the penultimate, the things before the last things, surface. He rejects two responses to this tension, namely radicalism and compromise.

The radical solution sees only the ultimate and rejects the penultimate. For the radical the choice is simply between two categories, for Christ or against Christ. The penultimate is viewed in negative terms as sinful and in denial of Christ. This world is of no consequence. It should perish. No responsibility should be taken for it.³⁵

The compromiser overvalues the penultimate and the human responsibility for its completion. The ultimate is limited to the far side of the everyday. In a compromise the ultimate is reduced to an eternal justification of things as they are, and a metaphysical purification for the wrongful in things as they are. Bonhoeffer³⁶ even says compromises spring from a hatred of the ultimate, of justification by faith alone.

Radicalism hates time. Compromise hates eternity. Radicalism hates patience. Compromise hates decision. Radicalism hates wisdom. Compromise hates simplicity.

34 For a discussion of the notions of sympathy, empathy and interpathy, and for a portrayal of the late Steve de Gruchy as a theologian of interpathy, see my “A Theology of interpathy and dignity”, in JR Cochrane, E Bongmba & I Phiri (eds.), *Essays in honour of Steve de Gruchy. Activist & Theologian* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2013), 128-138.

35 D Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE)*, Vol. 6, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 145-151.

36 D Bonhoeffer, *DBWE*, vol.6, 158.

Radicalism hates measure. Compromise hates the immeasurable. Radicalism hates the real. Compromise hates the word.³⁷

I reckon churches need to make compromises sometimes. I find some support for this approach in, amongst others, the Christian realism approach of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, and even in the middle axiom approach of J.H. Oldham.³⁸ These compromises should, however reckon with the imaginative visionary possibilities of the ultimate, with eternity and the immeasurable, and they should not inhibit responsible decisions.

South Africa's peaceful political transition of almost two decades ago is attributed to a compromise between groups who lived in enmity before. This compromise is today questioned by a growing number of people. This compromise seems to entail that political power has shifted to the black majority, but that economic power and privilege has remained in the hands of mainly the white minority, and a small rich black elite. The market-economy that was opted for also does not deliver the so-called trickle-down effect that is supposed to bring economic wellbeing for all.

In this context we need to draw afresh upon Bonhoeffer and revisit the compromise that had been made more than two decades ago during our negotiation process, and the on-going compromises that we have to make to survive in a global context where global market processes exercise almost imperial power. The danger of our South African compromises is perhaps that we are taken captive by the idea that there is no alternative to current economic approaches and arrangements, which ask for as much as possible freedom, and for minimalistic and consequently inadequate state involvement.

Bonhoeffer's opposition to compromises does not mean that he is not open to choices and actions that are morally and theologically dubious. He acknowledges that we cannot keep ourselves pure from the contamination arising from responsible action in exclusive allegiance to God and in answering to the question and call of God.³⁹

Maybe there is room for morally acceptable compromises if it entails that we accept that we sometimes need to make a choice for less than the ideal in order to move closer to the ideal. John De Gruchy mentions that a compromise was indeed unavoidable in order to get the transition process going in South Africa. But we

37 D Bonhoeffer, *DBWE*, vol.6, 156.

38 For a discussion of compromise, middle axioms and Christian realism, see my "Churches and public policy discourses in South Africa", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 136, March 2010, 41-56.

39 D Bonhoeffer, *DBWE*, Vol.8, 40.

need to go beyond that step. We need “a process in which there is a mutual attempt to heal and overcome enmities, build trust and relationships, and develop a shared commitment to the common good.”⁴⁰ Life together in complex contexts, and in contexts where people who were once alienated from each other, seek new ways of being together, often require morally acceptable compromises that do not reject the ultimate and absolutise the penultimate, that do not overestimate human capacities and underestimate the triune God.

5. CONCLUSION

Bonhoeffer has so much to offer for Public Theology in South Africa. This contribution merely attempted to demonstrate what potential his work might have for our quest for life together, life together in search of dignity, justice and freedom. For the sake of the future, for the sake of coming generations, we need to accept the triune gift of life together, and live as humans who are disciples of Christ, and as humans who, as individuals and communal beings, constitute his church in which He reveals Himself. The work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer might encourage and assist us to be agents of life together by being recipients of the triune gift of life together.

40 J de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 15.

Salvation: The pedagogy of affect

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ABSTRACT

Taking the model of salvation from the Latin *salus*, this essay explores the emotional physiology of grace. Drawing upon contemporary work on emotion by affect theorists, cognitive- and neuro-scientists, the essay proceeds through a detailed analysis of the paradigmatic accounts of salvation and its effects in the Annunciation and *Magnificat* scenes from the Gospel of Luke. It concludes that salvation is a deep emotional concern and that, while there is no emotion that can be described as non-Christian, there are certain affects that are divine before they are human.

KEYWORDS

Affect, annunciation, emotion, healing, magnificat, salvation.

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Let me explore how Christians are redeemed, taking a cue from the Latin word for salvation, *salus*, which is health or, more fashionably, well-being. A caveat to this exploration: the Christian tradition holds that we are saved by and through and in Christ. The redemptive work is His. It is a labour of God by God. We enter into the effects of that labour through Him, that is by grace. There is, then, a theological quest for understanding the “how” of redemption that has focussed on various doctrines of the atonement. I am not gainsaying that divine labour in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ in what follows. And the New Testament provides a number of models for that redemption – like sacrifice (which is associated with Christ as the Passover lamb), like justification (a legal metaphor in which Christ pleads for us before in the courts of heaven, justifying us by his innocence which we participate in by faith), like expiation (where our guilt is laid on Him, and he takes also the punishment that should follow from such guilt and bears it away), or propitiation (where the anger of God at our sin is changed through Christ being prepared to die for us and we are restored to fellowship and a right relation to the divine), or the purchase of a slave’s freedom. In the exploration that follows I am not denying that some intratrinitarian exchange took place on and through the Cross whereby we are atoned – though the nature of that transaction is hidden from us because we just do not know what took place between God the Father and God the Son on that Thursday or Friday and in that tomb. Between the two historical events is a great silence; the silence of the Word itself, what Church Fathers like Cyril of Jerusalem calls the “great Sabbath” on Holy Saturday. Neither, in the exploration that follows, am I denying the work of the Spirit in leading us into the truth of that redemption; the work of the Spirit operating within lives submitted to Christ, a life lived now in and through that new relation forged by Christ in God. In fact, my exploration can be viewed as more of an enquiry into the material operation of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God.

So what am I doing then? There are two models describing salvation that I have not listed. The first is of washing and cleansing. This differs from the others insofar as the operation of salvation is inextricably linked to an actual physical use of water by other human beings. I will not be following through this model of salvation in what follows. I will be concentrating on the second model: healing. Though this model too cannot be disassociated from what physically, corporeally, takes place in the human beings concerned. On the edge of tautology, salvation concerns being saved. And so, since one of the roots of the need for our salvation is sin, guilt, and law breaking such that the relationship with God is severed, I will need to consider the nature of sin. But salvation in the Hebrew Bible is not always directly associated with law breaking. Hannah’s song on her prayer being answered for a child speaks of being

saved (1 Sam 2:1). She is saved from the shame of being barren; from the taunts of other people, from their boasting and arrogance which deepened her shame. And shame, as those who have explored the operation of affect (from Silvan Tomkins, 1993, to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003) is profoundly somatic and emotional. Even if it is characterised as a second-order emotion; that is, an emotion evaluated in a specific context and a reaction to a more primary appraisal like anger. Shame also happens to be one of the first effects of sin, as presented in that aetiology of human sinfulness in the story of the Fall.

Salvation is also associated, particularly in the New Testament, with fear because fear is viewed as bondage. There is fear of one's enemies; the fear of not being able to speak openly (because of the Jews in John's Gospel); fear of certain destabilizing circumstances (like the woman at the tomb in the shorter ending of Mark's Gospel and the "fearful sights" spoken of in Luke 21:11). In both the Gospel of Mark (4:40) and the Gospel of Matthew (8:26) Jesus pointedly asked the disciples "Why are you so fearful?" and the *Letter to the Hebrews* (2:15) speaks more existentially of deliverance for those "who, through fear of death, had all their lifetime been in servitude." There is also a string of references to fear of God and fear of the Lord and another line that goes back to what is thought to be a formulaic Hebrew response to encountering a stranger: "Fear not." Fear is usually listed as one of the primary emotions, with autonomic affect prior to evaluation. It is also the most thoroughly researched emotions neurologically, its registration and control centring on the amygdala and the limbic sphere of the brain (LeDoux 1998:138-178). Fear has strong somatic effects like freezing or running. It too finds its place in the aetiology of sin. In fact, it is the first effect of sin (prior to shame) when Adam encounters God in Eden having eaten of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Feelings have three physiological components: they impact upon behaviour, the autonomic systems of the body and hormonal balances. With respect to behaviour, both affect theorists and neuroscientists have pointed out, that emotions are fundamentally "social" – they are important responses to our environment and social practices – but both fear and shame are negative with respect to others: they affect withdrawals, disjunctions in relation, even (viewed politically) disenfranchisement. I am using the word "feeling" as an inclusive term covering both emotion and affect. Some have tried to tightly define a difference between emotion and affect in terms of degree of judgement. So affect is more inchoate and primordial and emotion more a consideration of affect, and interpretation of affect. I am using feeling to mark an ambivalence that adheres to the categorisation of "this is an affect" and "this is an emotion". To take up Sianne Ngai, in her book *Ugly Feelings*, "the difference between affect and emotion is... a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a

formal difference of quality or kind ... [A]ffects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; less “sociologically fixed,” but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* “organized in response to our interpretations of situation,” but by no mean entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic power” (Ngai 2005:27). Feeling is a cover term for a continuum that pertains to affect and emotion. All are somatic, psychologically determining and determined and experienced individually and collectively. Shame and fear as experienced slough-off the hierarchical fixity of second and first order appraisal. Both, as negative affects (along with many others from anger, envy, jealousy and anxiety to sadness and disgust) shrink our involvement with the world that is as corporeal (head looking down in shame and paralysis in fear) as it is visceral and psychologically self-absorbing. We are inhibited – and this is the source of the bondage related to shame and fear. The bondage is as much social and political as individual. At this point all I wish to show is the intimate association between negative affect and sin; that sin effects us not simply morally – it effects all our relations to the world, ourselves, our bodies, our cultures, our politics and socialities. Which is maybe why Paul, in talking about a world in bondage to sin, a world groaning for its *salus*, writes of one of our fundamental human desires: “the redemption of the body” (Rom 8:23). He writes this having already used this word “body” in relation to both sin (6:6) and to death (7:24) and in association with deliverance through the body of Christ (7:4). We will say more about this in a moment.

Recently, attention has been drawn to the way feelings cannot be separated from cognition; thought is affect laden and affect-effected (Damasio’s work in neuroscience and McGilchrist’s work on the left and right hemisphere operations of the brain and the cultures expressed by that lateralisation, for example; see Damasio 1994 & McGilchrist 2009). Emotion is not then non-cognitive. Cognition, because it is always embodied, is emotionally charged. Emotion is also relational – in fact the basis for the formation of emotional communities (like a church). It is not subjective; our emotionally experience is context dependent and highly responsive/adaptive. In religious experience, these relations aspects include objects – symbolic objects like a crucifix or an icon, quasi-symbolic objects like a chalice or a pulpit or more material objects like pew-seat or an order of service. I have used examples from a Christian liturgical setting because the objects are not static. To be involved in the production of religious emotion they circulate within relational and ritualised practices. Emotion like shame or fear cannot occur in a vacuum. Though experienced subjectively the feelings cannot occur outside of encountering others (whether those others are human, animal, inanimate objects whose taste and texture disgusts us, or, in the case of the Scriptures, angelic or divine). In this sense, as I noted above, feelings are

“social”. In being social they are therefore also political, moral and cultural. Books have been written recently that document the development and institutionalisation of cultures of shame (Andrew P Morrison 1989, for example) and cultures of fear (Frank Furedi 2002, and Barry Glassner 1999, for example).

Negative affect, as I said, impacts the totality of our human condition. There may be positive aspects of fear (as “fear of God” is viewed positively in the Bible) or anger (as “righteous anger” is recognised in the Bible), but, on the whole, negative feelings act to diminish us and diminish our capacity for positive emotions and positive affect (like wonder, happiness and tranquillity). I am relating the operation of redemption, the work of salvation as *salus*, with emotional regimes that transform our sensory and cognitive responses to the world. In the Book of Ezekiel (36:26-27), we are told: “A new heart also I will give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them.” This is the great promise of God’s redemption. The spirit is *ruach* – breath, life – and it animates the heart in ways that lead from feelings and thoughts to acts: walking in God’s statutes, keeping God’s judgements. The promise here is the acknowledgement of a divine desire understood in Psalm 51.5: “thou desirest truth in the inward parts; and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.” But even in this acknowledgement there lies recognition that what God desires so God will perform: “thou shalt make me to know.” How are we made to know? And how are we given a new heart of flesh? It is not, I contend, by divine fiat; rather it is by a divine working within, inaugurated through discipleship and that effects a transformation or even transubstantiation of the heart of stone through both divine and human action. Negative affect that is implicated in the nature and operations of sin, in other words, creates the heart of stone in its diminishment and the withdrawal it affects. Positive affect, on the other hand, works to create a heart of flesh – this is the redemption of the body Paul alludes to.

It is interesting and significant that the announcement by the angel to Mary, “Hail, o favoured one, the Lord is with you [*chaire, kecharitōmenē, o Kurios meta sou*]” (Lk 1:28) begins with the basic positive affect of joy and the proclamation that grace has come: the verbal mood of *chaire* (“be ye joyful”) is present, active and continuous. It is not just an exhortation and command, but a performative utterance in the sense JL Austin described in the opening pages of *How to Do Things with Words*: “to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing (a thing) ... or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (Austin 1975:6). And Mary is defined as *kecharitōmenē*, a perfect passive form of the verb *charidzomai* which is “to favour” but is also the verb correlating with the noun “grace” (*charis*):

“the one who has been given grace, or given the gift (of God) freely”. If we have so far concerned ourselves most with negative affect and two of the most basic forms of human emotion, shame and fear, then here is the announcement that the offer of grace comes with the highly emotional condition of joy. The neuroscientist, Paul Ekman, in his list of Big Six emotions (see Ekman 2003) terms this “enjoyment”. But his account is more of “happiness” because it misses something of the exuberance, ecstasy and self-transcendence that can be found in other accounts of the basic human emotions, from Descartes and Spinoza, to Silvan Tomkins and Antonio Damasio. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identifies this with being in the “flow”, and although he relates this to “happiness” his own account differs from Ekman’s insofar as it is a transformative state related to freedom (Csikszentmihalyi 1998). Enjoyment as happiness in Ekman’s sense lacks the ecstasy of joy. Spinoza recognised joy (*laetitia* – elation) as a transition in the organism towards a greater state of perfection (see Spinoza 1994:311). Joy, like all affects, is both emotional and corporeal; it has physiological effects – visceral, nervous, endocrine, and muscular. We might then, after the theologian Catherine Keller (2003:81-2), speak of this joy as “carnal grace”. Keller views such an understanding of grace as uniquely (among the Church Fathers) Augustine’s. Jean-François Lyotard’s own reading of Augustine’s *Confessions* expands this notion in a manner consonant with the processes of sanctification sketched here: “grace does not demand a humiliated, mortified body; rather, it increases the faculties of the flesh beyond their limits, and without end. The ability to feel and to take pleasure unencumbered, pushed to an unknown power – this is saintly joy” (Lyotard 2000:12).

But, despite this production of the positive and transformative affect of grace, the reception is fundamental. And a hiatus is evident in the Greek, focussing upon the conjunction *de* (“but on the other hand”): “But at this word she was greatly troubled [*ē de epi tō logō dietarachthē*]” (Lk 1:29). Mary’s immediate, gut-response is agitation and confusion, *dietarachthē*. The verb is a compound of the conjunction *dia* (“through”) and *tarassō* (to be agitated and disturbed). The conjunction amplifies the emotional effect: she was totally confounded. But *tarassō* is also related to a family of words around the verb *tarbeō* (“to be afraid”, “to be alarmed”), such as *tarbaleos* (“frightened”) and *tarbos* (“fright”). The angel immediately recognises this because he begins the salutation a second time with another present, active, continuous imperative: “Fear not [*mē phobon*], Mary”. The Greek verb is the etymological origin of our own “phobia” and it perhaps better translated “don’t be terrified.” The formula “Fear not” is Jewish and frequently associated with theophanies; it is used 75 times in the Hebrew bible. As has been noted by one New Testament scholar, “Luke shows a certain liking for the OT-Jewish formula “to fear God” (see Balz 1985:1276).

The addition of her name is to further reassure this young woman. The surprise of the angel's visitation is registered immediately as terror. It awakens the deepest of our negative affects; an affect of terror that silences and freezes its recipient. But, in the Greek, the sounding of the external word (*logos*) in 1:28 is then internalised by Mary in terms of how she then "considered in her mind [*dielogizeto*] what sort of greeting this should be" (1:29). Once more a compound verb is employed using the conjunction *dia* – this also suggests emotional and cognitive movement – and *logizomai* ("to reason, reflect, judge"), the result is *dialogizomai* which bears the notion of "to examine together" because *dialogos* is "conversation". The sense that the "conversation" here is internal to Mary but suggestive of a dialogue between the Word and Mary's reasoning is, perhaps, pushing the Greek too far. But that's what I like to do, and it is what the suggestiveness of the language is doing in its careful employment and placing of words. Such an interpretation does fit, because what begins as a strict divide between the affects of joy and terror, grace and its reception, all focussed on the grammatical barrier of *de* ("but on the other hand"), is overcome. Grace is received, the Word is entertained by Mary, and, following the angel's prophesy of the incarnation which is to come, she is able to speak to this uncanny visitor – asking bluntly about the technicalities and finally acquiescing: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). The terrifying surprise by joy has transformed the primal stirring of human fear into a new disposition. And this is not just the lowliness of a new social standing with respect to God, "handmaiden" [*doulē* – female servant]. That "let it be to me [*genoito moi*]" evokes all the connotations of a new genesis, the creation of a new receptivity and the birthing of a new state of being. To recognise the suggestiveness of this statement we have to go back to the use of the verb *ginomai* in Genesis 1:3 when God created all things out of nothing. The Septuagint translates God's "Let there be" as *genēthētō* – this is the third person singular aorist imperative of *ginomai*, and the aorist marks a unique action that takes place at a certain time. Mary's *genoito* is the third person singular aorist optative of *ginomai*. The close association of the words is as important as the difference: only God can say "Let there be" and it is; human beings can only reiterate God's *fiat* as a wish, a hope, an act of faith (hence the optative mood). Nevertheless, it is as if, in the space of Mary's womb - the space that has been opened within her for the reception of God's gift - there is about to be another *creatio ex nihilo*.

If the annunciation scene offers an example of God's in-breaking surprise, its affective transformativity, and the cultivation of a humble disposition, then, before her cousin Elizabeth, Mary's *Magnificat* offers us an example of the surprise that comes from an inner recognition and revelation. The surprise is proclaimed magnificently in Mary's

response to the angel's declaration. At first she expresses her affective state – “My soul doth magnify the Lord [*megalunei hē psuchē ton Kurion*]; and my spirit hath rejoiced [*kai hēgalliasev to pneuma mou*] in God my Saviour” – then comes the expression of Tomkins' interruptive and “resetting” surprise – “for he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaid [*tapeinōsin tēs doulēs autou*]” – and finally there is a realisation of consequences that follow from this surprise, beginning with “Behold [*idou*] from henceforth ...” But to whom does she address this second person singular “behold” or “see” or even “know”? The scene takes place on her visitation to Elizabeth, but there is a sense in which, in her surprise, she is addressing herself, what is going on in and through her soul and spirit; she is also addressing the Church-to-come. Mary is astonished at the words being spoken by her, through her. The whole song is an ecstatic rejoicing. The word of joy spoken to her in the Annunciation swells within her body, stretching her outwards in what Paul describes as “our hope of sharing in the glory of God” (Rom 5:2). Hope is a significant word here, and I shall return to this.

The Greek vocabulary and syntax is important because it emphasises the affective. Note the way the verb comes before the subject is named in “My soul doth magnify the Lord [*megalunei hē psuchē ton Kurion*]”. It is the Lord who is being exalted or made great. A height and a distance between the soul and the Lord are announced, and yet the soul is right there in the middle of the phrasing. This suggests that in enlarging the space within which the Lord is conceived the soul itself is enlarged. This enlargement is an actual physical affect of the emotion felt; for when the soul is humiliated then the muscle tone tenses and there is an inner physiological shrivelling. The heart becomes a rock. Shame, as Tomkins points out (1995:134), is an inhibitor of interest and enjoyment. As an affect it contracts one's experience of the world. Contrary to this, positive affects expand one's experience of the world. And this expansion is concomitant with our increasing sense of freedom and liberation from constraint; and muscles tone is relaxed. The heart becomes flesh. This is exactly what we witness with Mary's *Magnificat*. There is a new freedom experienced by the soul, which exalts in receiving/perceiving the glory of the Lord. A similar rhetorical effect is observable in the second part of that ejaculation: “and my spirit hath rejoiced [*kai hēgalliasen to pneuma mou*]”. The separation here of the verb from the identification of the subject, the spirit, emphasises the emotion; and the emotion is, once more, dynamic in opening up a new felt spatiality, for the verb *hēgalliasen* is the aorist of *agalliaō* which is to greatly rejoice, even shout out and it is closely related to the verb *agallō* to exalt, to lift high. The shift in the sentence from soul to spirit is also interesting and may reflect that which is deeper or deepest within the soul receiving God's grace. Luke is particular in defining the Spirit of God as Holy, but

throughout the Gospel and in Acts the Spirit of God inspires people, it breathes within their breathing and takes that breathing and the utterance that arises from it to another level; a level that is disclosive and revelatory. Speech, and Mary's speech in particular, is a somatic event, resonating the affectivity of the event of reception throughout the body.

Now this rhetorical separation of the verb from the identification of its subject is far from unusual in Greek syntax. And I would not wish to claim any poetic originality in composition. Nevertheless, a common syntax is used for rhetorical effect and emphasis.

Finally, all the spatial emphasis upon opening horizons, establishing distance in height is reinforced by the sense of Mary's own personhood: her lowliness (*tapeinōsin*) and her status as servant, slave or servile (*doulos*). The noun *tapeinos* returns to where we began, with shame and its effects and the way sanctification reverses the effects and affects of shame. For the word does mean insignificant and poor and as such is just a term descriptive of class and social status. It is also a moral term: "humble" as the counter-effect to Adamic pride. It names the new disposition received in recognising and confessing the greatness of God's glory. But it can also mean "humiliation". In which case we have here an understanding that salvation begins with God's regard to human shame; the incarnation promises redemption from the affects of humiliation but through humiliation. And these were real affects for Mary, who was found pregnant as a betrothed virgin.

Between the in-breaking surprise of the Annunciation and the inner-revelation surprise of the *Magnificat* a process of sanctification is made visible: the external is internalised; the receptive response to the external announcement, in faith, has deepened within developing a capacity for further announcements issuing from within. What is evident is a participation in the operations of God's grace; a letting-go that enables a letting-be (*genōito*) – with all the resonances of new creation ringing in its wake. What is evident in both these narratives – the Annunciation and the Visitation is that the hallmark of grace is surprise. And surprise is one of the Big Six basic emotions, only one of two (the other being enjoyment) positive affects. If, like von Balthasar echoing a long line of Catholic teaching on Mary, we recognise in Mary's response the response of the Church yet to be (see von Balthasar 1991:161), then the process of sanctification in her is the process of sanctification that is intrinsic to discipleship itself.

Discipleship inaugurates then a pedagogy of affect; an operation upon the emotions which is, in turn, an operation upon the senses – how we sense, what we sense and how we process and evaluate the ways in which the world impacts on us and we

impact on the world. There's a rhythmic oscillation here that takes place in specific practices. As Susan Ashbrook Harvey has pointed out in her wonderful exploration of the sense of smell in early Christianity: "Liturgy, like ascetic practice, was a means by which the body was reformed and remade. The sense no less than bodily desires were disciplined and refashioned in the process of the liturgy's movement and over the course of the liturgical cycle" (Harvey 2006:5). Sensing is not passive, in other words, and this has been known since the mid 1960s and the pioneering work of the environmental psychologist James J. Gibson. In his book, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966) he demonstrates the aggressive, searching mechanisms of our sensing. The pedagogy of affect works then through a more primary pedagogy of the senses. This pedagogical work is traditionally understood by the Church Fathers in terms of sanctification or formation through the development of the spiritual senses. It is a work that embeds any teaching about the atonement in the practices of everyday life. Justification deals with the issue at a Christological level, but the level at which it affects us is the anthropological, the existential, the ensouled body.

To Church Fathers from Clement of Rome to Gregory of Nyssa, there is a translation of the Greek understanding of *paideia* into a Christian understanding of redemption. Clement will speak of the "paideia of Christ" or the *paideia tou kyriou*. *Paideia* concerned a cultivation that was simultaneously aesthetic, moral and political. It was an education, but not simply by instruction. Clement extolls God and the Christ "through whom you have educated and sanctified and honoured us" (see Hodgson 1999:21). The honouring concerns a raising up, an *anagoge*, from sick and damaged human living to participation in the divinity of the Godhead. As such education and sanctification are tied into a doctrine of divine providence. It might often seem this was purely an intellectual matter – a "renewing of the mind" as Paul would put it. But the soul is not to be separated from the body. It informs the body and the body informs the soul. There is a translation from the physiology of the senses to a spiritual sensing and back again. The Cappadocians like Basil and Gregory bring to their own examinations of this material and spiritual operation an understanding of fourth century medicine. The *paideia* is a process of healing with Christ as the physician and the Spirit is his recuperative *dunamis*. A *morphosis*, one of Gregory's favourite words, of sensing generates a *morphosis* of emotions, *pathos*, which in turn generates both a *morphosis* of the mind and behaviour. The human subject opens himself or herself up to this healing through contemplation of God or *theoria*, and what is meditated upon is the Bible. The search for the pneumatic meaning of Scripture, that which inspired the writing of the Scriptures and continues to breathe in and through the church in its reading of them, is a submission of the whole body to a divine movement. And this submission was not necessarily in the privacy of a

study. Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of Christians needing to come together to read the Scriptures and hear an exposition of them. In this way the contemplation is enfolded with the liturgy. This reading and healing is an ecclesial praxis. The body discovers the immanence of the divine within itself that it might transcend the physical not by leaving it behind but by orientating it to the one who is above and in all things. Athanasius explains that human beings were made as sentient creatures that they might “turn their senses” to Christ (see Athanasius 1971:173). This is then that pedagogy of affect that I spoke of earlier, and all notions of repentance, *metanoia*. It dictates a number of key terms explored by Augustine, such as *creatio*, *formatio*, *conversio* and *imitatio*. It affects our wellbeing, our *salus* – turning negative affect into positive, joy oriented, and peace oriented, worship.

At this point an important theological question arises about the one’s experience of the world and salvation. If, as I am advocating, we can understand salvation as the move towards a life expressive of positive rather than negative affect; of sin as engendering a bondage to negative affect, a bondage that damages and a damage that is passed on in endless cycles of sinning and being sinned against, from which redemption delivers us; then, am I also advocating a lifestyle of enduring “happy-clappy” charismatic effervescence? In other words, are Christians, even in the process of being formed by positive affect, still not subject to suffering? And the answer must be, because anything else would be counter-factual to Christian experience, yes – Christians still do suffer. The life of unending doxology is an eschatological life. That is the goal towards which sanctification proceeds, but the pedagogy of affect still works with that groaning of all creation and that yearning for the redemption of the body. Suffering remains, because the emotional damage of sin remains. While Christians are in the process of being released from the dominion of sin’s bondage, that bondage is practiced and recycled: by both Christians who are “on the way” and those who are floundering without God. But we need to make one terse but final comment about the suffering that perdures with respect to the pedagogy of affect. And that is, the continuing impact of negative affect and the inner shrinking of the heart, its petrification, cannot have the final word. Otherwise salvation is of no effect. It would take more space than I have at present to explore theologically and psycho-biologically the claim I am about to make, but I would argue that there are certain affirmative emotions (like joy, peace, love, forgiveness, mercy, for example) which are more primordial than any experienced affect negative (fear) or positive (happiness) by the Christian. There can be both a suffering and a deeper sense of peace, for example, in a Christian’s experience. The reason for this is that these primordial positive affects are divine before they are human. These are, if you will, Trinitarian “affects”; “affects” circulating within the nature of the

Godhead in which, en Christo, Christians participate. If “affects” here, with the impassibility of God, are within inverted commas, that is because we know them only by analogy. They are in themselves ineffable and we only have intimation of what “joy”, “peace”, “love” etc. mean with respect to the divine. I take this situation as parallel to what Philip Melancthon describes when he states in *Loci communes*: “Since these affections are not in our power, there can be no understanding of what trust, fear, or the love of God is except in a very spiritual sense” (see Melancthon 1969:52). I employ the term “analogy” to convey that “spiritual sense”. There is then the continuing play of negative affect in the lives of Christians as they undergo the *paideia* of these affections throughout an unceasing sanctification. This does not “undo” the operation of positive affect that is grounded in the work of the Spirit. Theologically, both of these labourings have to work within an examination of the doctrine of Providence, given Scriptural warrant in Paul’s statement that all things work together for the love of God.

Now let me add an important addendum that I will organise according to three points. First point: my analysis of the affects of “salvation” must not be construed as the endorsement of a “happy-clappy” Christianity. The shift from negative affect to positive does not do away with grief, suffering and pain. It does not do away with what the mystics identified as “dark nights of the soul”. It does not understand boredom or “feeling flat” or apathetic as unchristian emotions. As two sociologists of religion have written, and my own experience of attendance at Morning Prayer testifies: “a monk saying the offices every day is unlikely to be overcome with emotion each time. But such regular practice may nevertheless have a significant effect in shaping the structure of feeling and laying down affective dispositions” (Riis & Woodhead 2010:76).

Second point: there are no unchristian emotions as such, just as religion does not find its essential and defining emotion in experiencing “the numinous” (Otto), or “effervescence” (Durkheim) or the “charismatic” (Weber). Philip Melancthon, in his *Loci communes* (one of the most dramatic calls for Christians to embark upon what some sociologists have called an “emotional regime”), makes a distinction between “fear” and “holy fear”. A feeling becomes Christian because of the context in which it is experienced, the liturgical and disciplinary practices, the theological meanings and the way they have shaped understandings of divine operations, and its orientation towards *salus*. Look at the way eros is figured for the Christian religion by theologians like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, and, as I have said, the Bible is full of emotional, negative affect language with respect to God – His jealousy, His hatred, His anger, etc.

Thirdly: the orientation of *salus* is participation in the Godhead. For the Christian living en Christo positive affect can co-exist with negative affect: there can be pain but hope, there can be suffering but peace, there can be grief yet joy. Understood theologically, this co-existence of negative and positive affect does not create cognitive or emotional dissonance. It can be explained by recognizing that positive affect is fundamentally that which is enjoyed by God Himself, God intratrinitarian communion with Godself. In Christ, in that participation vouchsafed by the work of salvation, we engage with levels of affect that are divine; even when experience levels of negative affect that issues from our human situations. Put most simply, Mary's joy and surprise, registered in the *Magnificat*, is an entering into God's own delight in Christ and our redemption. We might call such experiences transcendent or transcending affects. They assist in identifying and clarifying the presence of the divine with respect to the quotidian. They incarnate and embody structures of sensibility. They can affect us because the desire for redemption, the redemption of the body, is written deep within our fragile corporeality.

There is a rather unusual clause in *Acts of the Apostles* and it is found within the speech Paul makes to the Athenians with respect to their shrine for an unknown God. Prior to the famous quotation from the poet Lucan, Paul speaks about God creating from one human being every nation of human beings in such a way "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find" (Acts 17:27). Now I am not concerned here with entering the field of subtle debates around Pauline teaching in the authentic letters and the presentation of Paul in *Acts of the Apostles*. And so I am not concerned with whether this phrase fits with Pauline theology found in those letters. I am interested in the use of one word, one verb. That Christians should seek God is written into the presentation of Christ as the repristination in perfect form of the primordial Adam, based on human beings having been made in the image and likeness of God. That Christians hope in and through such seeking to find God is a familiar understanding of the work of faith as Christ Himself describes it. But the verb "to feel after" God is unusual and opens a level of enquiry into the relationship between the body and its affective life and a theology of experience that I am pursuing throughout this study. The Greek verb is *psēlaphaō* which means "to grope one's way" and hence the translation in the RSV "to feel after".

Furthermore, these experiences of transcending or transcend affect play a fundamental role in the orientation or pedagogy of affect I have been sketching: they are intimations of the telos of sanctification and as such they point towards the integration of the polyphony of our emotion lives, individually and corporately. They also establish affective benchmarks for that integration which has wider social and political effects; for they offer models of *communio* and therefore *societas* in

which church life situates itself with respect to civic life and other forms of corporate activity (one's place of work) more generally.

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Aesthetics of Forgiveness: Representing Forgiveness Artistically

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ABSTRACT

Although one major form of theological aesthetics today is aesthetics of divine revelation, there is an important role for a theological aesthetics focused more on art and culture, with attention to ethics as well. This paper explores the potentially transformative power of the art of fiction, in its ethical and theological dimension, partly through an analysis of the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The discussion attends to the novel's ways of showing the limitations of human judgment, the difficulty of forgiveness, and yet the way in which even imperfect forms of forgiveness can be graced, becoming a blessing.

KEYWORDS

Theological Aesthetics, Marilynne Robinson, Gilead, Forgiveness, John de Gruchy

TREFWOORDE

Teologiese estetika, Marilynne Robinson, Gilead, Vergiffenis, John de Gruchy

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to be invited to participate in this conference honouring John de Gruchy. I first met John in the year 2000, at a conference on Theology Through the Arts in Cambridge, England, directed by Jeremy Begbie. I have repeatedly consulted John's invaluable book-length study *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice*.¹ John was later generous enough to contribute a crucial chapter on Art, Morality, and Justice to the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, which I edited and which was just published by Oxford University Press this past January.²

The topic of the present session is theological aesthetics, which has emerged in recent decades as an increasingly important area of exploration for theology. While aesthetics overall has to do with beauty, art, expression, and imagination, a major component of theological aesthetics can be described as the aesthetics of divine revelation. That aspect of theological aesthetics is represented pre-eminently by Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Balthasar specialist Aidan Nichols, as well as by such theologians as Patrick Sherry, Edward Farley, David Bentley Hart, Richard Viladesau, Oleg Bychkov, and the late Alejandro García-Rivera. Much of this recent resurgence of interest in aesthetics in a theological mode has roots in retrieving and reshaping ancient and medieval ideas of beauty, including spiritual, moral, or intellectual beauty – but transformative of ugliness as well.

Many Protestant writers in religious or theological aesthetics, going back to the remarkable Dutch historian of religions and theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw, have focused more closely on the arts as such, and on cultural embodiment or imaginative expression, as central to the flourishing of life and the praise of God, and as revelatory of human existence, with all its questions, and of glimpses of divine reality and blessing. Representatives of variations on the latter approach to Christian aesthetics include, for instance, Nick Wolterstorff, Jeremy Begbie, Gesa Thiessen, David Brown, and Graham Ward. As for ethically grounded reflection in theological aesthetics that treats the arts in a central way, I can think of no one more important to exploring that edge or frontier of theology than John de Gruchy himself.

Given the character of de Gruchy's work in aesthetics, it will come as no surprise that art, and the connections between art and ethics, will occupy a significant part of

1 John W de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).

2 John W de Gruchy, Art, Morality, and Justice, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

what I have to say today. In the latter part of my presentation, I will be reflecting on one example from literature of our day – the novel *Gilead* by the American novelist Marilynne Robinson. I will want to suggest how the strategies of that novel relate to what we might call the aesthetics of forgiveness. But first I want to comment on some of the issues and questions that I believe take theology today into the territory of aesthetics, as it engages both art and ethics.

2. RECONSIDERING THE POWERS AND LIMITATIONS OF ART

It has become something of a truism, but one easily forgotten, that art that has vitality is never merely illustrational of ideas and truths available in some other form. And even in its ways of working that have ethical import and impact, art's creativity is rarely if ever applied simply in service of rules and principles and external norms. As John de Gruchy writes, "Good art is more about the shaping of consciousness and the formation of perception rather than didactic prescription."³

Another way of making this point is to say, also, that art can lead us into mystery. In his book *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death*, De Gruchy writes: "Mystery finds expression above all in art which imaginatively points to or even carries us beyond ourselves towards that which is ultimate."

This is not to deny that works of art differ greatly in *how* they work and in their effects – something easily disguised when thinkers too-freely categorize all art as beautiful, and all beauty as religious, or when they treat all art as somehow inevitably good and life enhancing. Still, we're left with the question, in view of aesthetic theories that have drawn attention to the distinctive and even unique features of aesthetic creativity and artistic expression: How can we give art its due, theologically and ethically, without making it into something it is not – something simply superior to theology and morality, for instance – or without falsely assuming that theology and ethics can simply raid or rephrase the good parts of art for their own purposes, as though art were, after all, nothing but another tool in the box of theological and ethical resources?

Instead of diving into the thicket of modern and postmodern aesthetics, I want in the present context to reintroduce some ideas found in the little book *The Use and Abuse of Art* by the late and highly regarded cultural historian Jacques Barzun. To begin with, I recall a relative simple assertion he makes in that book, based on his A. W. Mellon Lectures in the fine arts, delivered in 1973. There he asserts: "It is clear that if art has importance, it is because it can shape [our] minds and emotions. ...

3 De Gruchy, *Art, Morality, and Justice*, 418.

[Art] can enlarge or trivialize the imagination. If it can do so much, it affects the social fabric as well as individual lives for good or evil.”⁴

Although most of us might be inclined to agree with that assertion, Barzun seems to undercut or take it back, elsewhere. And it is worthwhile, both theologically and ethically, to pursue this matter in terms Barzun himself sets forth, which exhibit exceptional insights even while sharing some of the difficulties and inconsistencies that are common in modern theories of art. Those difficulties are hard to avoid, as it turns out, and likewise merit our attention.

In *The Uses and Abuses of Art*, Barzun goes to great lengths to caution against the Romantic tendency to view art itself as inherently religious or to turn art into religion. Barzun says that this tendency, which in many circles continues as a legacy even today, is misguided because art can't really provide a way of life in itself [p 90]. In Barzun's words, art in its richness and variety “cannot do the simplest things that religion, philosophy, and the state can do by *their* nature.” Art “lacks a theology or even a popular mythology of its own; it has no bible, no ritual, and no sanctions for behaviour. We are called to enjoy but we are not enjoined” [p 90]. So Barzun rejects art as a religion and is disdainful of those who, for example, call art their religion and attend church only for the music. Moreover, when it comes to morality and ethics, Barzun goes so far as to say that, in good art, rules of conduct are not even implied; indeed, in such art, he declares, “the esthetic emotion is cut off from the moral” [p 90].

What is so striking is not this rejection of art as a new religion or as a new morality, which seems sane and sound so far as it goes – even though it fails to acknowledge how much of the best art has legitimate and powerful ways of being religiously and morally engaging. What is striking is that, even without acknowledging explicitly what he's doing, Barzun goes on to write almost in awe of the powers of art, and in terms that seem to suggest or even to endorse the very proximity to religion and morality that he seems to resist at other points. Great art, Barzun can be found saying “has the power of transfiguring the aspect of the world, while also mysteriously recasting in new shapes the substance of the self” [p 74]. Again, in his words: “The experience of great art . . . is a massive blow from which one recovers slowly and which leaves one changed in ways that only gradually come to light.” It is like a “near-escape from death” [p74]. Barzun testifies: “After undergoing a masterpiece, we believe we know more about ourselves and others, about this world or the next” [p 75].

I don't believe one needs to think only of artworks that are widely regarded as great to know that one can be greatly affected by a wide variety of art, and that such aesthetic

4 Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974). 90.

powers can be transformative of spirit and bodily feeling, and can provide a sense of life in and beyond the ordinary. But this means that, while we can join Barzun in resisting the temptation to make art per se into a kind of religion unto itself, we have no reason to follow him when he tries to deny art's often intimate connection with human conduct or ethics, with what he calls "moral emotion," or with religion itself. It is hard to see how Barzun can say, on the one hand, that art can affect lives for good and, possibly, for evil and yet deny, on the other, that art can sometimes have moral and religious implications as part of its own nature, and not simply as a *faux* religion or as a servant of religion. Perhaps there is a part of Barzun that, despite his worries about an inflated view of art, shares the fear of many modern thinkers since the Enlightenment that to link art too closely with morality and religion would be to make art somehow less aesthetic and would compromise the freedom necessary for creative imagination.

Whatever the explanation, I propose that, in response to Barzun's eloquent inconsistencies, we continue to take seriously the question of how art can sometimes have religious and moral modes of imagination *as art* – for reasons at once ethical and aesthetic – without simply becoming some sort of alternative to religion or substitute for morality. To that end, in the latter part of this presentation I'm embarking on an exploration of what we might call the aesthetics of forgiveness. I'll do that here by examining certain features of Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* and its way of suggesting or evoking the conditions of forgiveness and the obstacles to forgiveness, and the relation of forgiveness both to judgment and to grace, and to what she calls blessing. Robinson's work, in its openness to Christian ways of thinking and questioning, cannot be taken to typify modern fiction. But what one can see as representative of fiction are the novel's ways of unsettling anything doctrinaire about doctrines and of imagining life experience germane to moral reflection but not contained or absorbed in moral formulas, even if a kind of wisdom seems to emerge.

3. FICTION AND THE AESTHETICS OF FORGIVENESS

Set in the 1950s, Robinson's novel *Gilead* has a companion but independent work called *Home*,⁵ and just recently acquired a prequel called *Lila*.⁶ *Gilead* has as its geographical centre the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa. That's in the middle of the Midwest United States (roughly 8 000 miles from Cape Town). I've tried to make it so that my discussion does not assume familiarity with this fiction, nor with that place,

5 Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

6 Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014).

although I'm aware a number of you attending this conference have read *Gilead*. And I know some would appreciate that Marilynne Robinson is an ardent admirer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not to mention John Calvin. She is very much of our own time, however, having been born in 1943 and is presently living and teaching in Iowa. Her fiction has won various awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2005 for the novel *Gilead* and the 2012 National Humanities Medal. It's worth noting that the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has praised Marilynne Robinson as "one of the world's most compelling English-speaking novelists."⁷ No one at the conference would miss the fact that her *Gilead* includes many allusions and references both to the Bible and to church, and even to Calvin and Feuerbach.

The fictional character said to be writing the pages of *Gilead* is a preacher we can guess is Congregationalist, though that's never said directly. He is nearing the end of his life – a descendent of a long line of preachers, one of whom was an abolitionist during the era of the Civil War but, but also prone to being both rather violent and harshly judgmental of others, including his son, Ames's father. Now Ames himself is 76 (turning 77 in the course of the novel). Rapidly failing in his health, he knows he hasn't long to live. With this in mind, Ames is writing down thoughts, memories, and advice to his 6-year-old son, whom he expects to leave in the care of Ames's much younger wife – the boy's mother, only 41 years old. Ames had married her when he was 67.

Without making any attempt to summarize the novel as a whole, I want to call attention to several features of the story and its characteristic or key moments. First, I would note that there is a tremendous amount in the novel about perceiving, appreciating, judging, and forgiving, often humorous or whimsical, sometimes quietly beautiful, but also sometimes poignant or disturbing.

Early in the novel, the conventional ways of seeing and judging are already set before us as readers, and then shifted. Ames writes to his son about overhearing his young wife sing the little boy to sleep, lulling him in a low voice. Ames notes that it sounds beautiful to him, although he remarks that his wife laughs when he says that. Ames adds that he can't really tell what's beautiful anymore – which we as readers see is a way of saying that things that are not usually thought to be beautiful *can* be. Ames follows this by recalling how he saw some rascally but harmless boys in their teens, joking together while propped against a garage wall. He watched them light up cigarettes, laughing "wickedly," but then it seemed somehow beautiful to him. "It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over." It seems he's using an unconventional category for the beautiful: rascally beauty.

7 Rowan Williams, "Mighty Please for Reasonableness," *Church Times*, 12 August 2012.

Another scene very early in the novel sets up the theme of perception and aesthetic feeling, and of judgment, but allied with compassion. Inclined to describe baptism as primarily a kind of blessing, Ames takes evident delight in recounting to his young boy how, when he was little himself, he and some other children raised in pious households decided that they would do well to baptize a litter of cats. Luckily for the kittens, he says, the baptism was by sprinkling rather than by immersion. But there was a problem. The mother cat started taking away her kittens even before the baptisms were done. Consequently, the children couldn't be entirely sure, Ames says, which kittens were baptized and which were borne away, as he puts it: "still in the darkness of paganism" (p 22). While Ames, as an adult pastor doesn't condone those baptisms, he emphasizes that the children weren't being disrespectful of the Sacraments. It's just that they thought the whole world of those cats (p 22).

The fact that religious doubts had lodged in the playful but pious hearts of the children regarding the eternal destiny of some of those cats makes it even more poignant that the cats were beloved even in their allegedly pagan state. With a very light touch, the novel thus introduces us to problems with condemnation and judgment – and how that is to be carried out – while giving greater emphasis on the need to bless and to forgive. Those issues had come up in Ames's own family of origin, since his late brother Edward was an atheist who was marginalized by his preacher father for that very reason. And it comes up again in the younger generation, with the sceptical and prodigal son of Ames's best friend and fellow pastor, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Robert Boughton. We'll come back to that son, Jack. He was named after Ames, having been christened John Ames Boughton – much to the distress of his namesake.

It can't be accidental that the question of forgiveness comes up again in the context of another baptism. Ames's first wife had died in childbirth, as did the baby daughter, almost at the same time. When the Reverend John Ames baptizes his future second wife, Lila, whom he has already met and grown to love, he experiences a strangeness about that, and some distance from the mystery of the act even as her eyes are filled with tears (p 21). He isn't sure he has done something that really did mean something. Is it that, somewhere in his heart, he doubts his future wife's motives and her genuine Christian conviction, because he's aware of her feelings for him, and his feelings for her? As we learn later, it's true that doubtful feelings were in his mind, much taken, as he was, about how wonderful she looked to him as he baptized her. In his eyes, she was beyond beautiful. Whatever Ames's own doubts, the author presents them so tenderly, so aesthetically, that the reader cannot throw stones of condemnation – not even a pebble.

The pivotal element of the story, when it comes to judgment and forgiveness, circles around Jack Boughton, son of the Rev. Robert Boughton. With Jack, and not least with Ames's discomfort with him, the question of one's capacity to discern and judge, to bless or forgive, and how to know when to do so, comes to focus. As does the question of whether it is within the power of some people to avail them of forgiveness in the fullest sense, which often also means confession and repentance. This child of Ames's dearest friend and fellow pastor cannot find it within himself to believe or to live responsibly, even though he claims he wishes it might be possible. The parallels with the Prodigal Son are explicit in the novel.

In his youth, Jack had gotten a young girl pregnant, had abandoned her and her little child in poverty. In that condition, and badly neglected, the child had died after a few years. Jack, as he later struggled with alcohol and a sense of almost total incapacity to receive the love his family insists on giving him, wandered into deep troubles. Yet, living mostly at a distance from his father, sister, and other family members, he had kept himself hidden from the family's view.

Ironically, what he also hides, however, are experiences that indicate a kind of integrity about Jack. Late in the novel, that aspect of Jack's life surfaces when Ames learns of Jack's attempt to care for his common law wife, an African American woman, a common law wife with whom Jack has had a son. Faithful to one another, they would have been married if laws in the South had not prevented it where she lived, in the state of Tennessee, and if her own minister father hadn't rejected Jack – and if Jack's family in Iowa, where the marriage would have been legal, had not also been likely to take offense. Whatever Jack's weaknesses, those are compounded by injustice in society and in existing moral codes, and religious biases. And his strengths go largely unknown. If we're looking for a clear map to sin and forgiveness, the novel isn't much help but clarity of that sort can be confusing, one might feel.

Ames, like almost everyone else in novel, is unaware of all this until Jack discloses it to him late in the story. Ames has always been suspicious of Jack, and seemingly for good reason. Ames had worried in particular that Jack might have been all too aware that Ames would not live much longer and had his eye on Ames's wife, and, for all Ames could tell, was much too friendly with their boy.

Even though Jack attempts briefly to return home, he is like an abortive version of the Prodigal Son, as Ames sees him, who would have been received with gladness, if the father had only known the story. Meanwhile, Ames sees himself as like the elder son, begrudging signs of uncritical welcome that he believes Jack's father might be thought to offer, if given a chance.

Near the end of the novel, Jack decides he cannot stay at home even after receiving a sincere if confused and imperfect sort of welcome. Forgiveness is never offered to Jack by anyone in a way that to him is quite acceptable, since it is of course attached to guilt, as forgiveness is bound to be. And Jack can neither fully acknowledge his guilt nor the good of his ways of living beyond the narrow morality of his society. He cannot fully accept his acceptance, however sincere though never just right.

As Jack prepares to leave home yet again, at the end of the novel, Ames tells him: “The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you.” And with Jack’s consent, he does. “Jack took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it again my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeated the benediction from Numbers, of course – ‘The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace.’” (p 241).

For Ames himself, nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more sufficient. But Jack doesn’t move or say anything; so Ames keeps going: “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Ames realizes at once that his words have the opposite effect of what he’d desired. Jack doesn’t believe any of those things about himself. Although Jack says, “Thank you, Reverend,” Ames hears something different: “His tone made me think that to him it might have seemed I had named everything I thought he no longer was, when that was absolutely the furthest thing from my meaning, the exact opposite of my meaning.” That same day Ames goes on to write, even so: “I do wish Boughton [Jack’s father] could have seen how his boy received his benediction, how he bowed his head.” But since Jack’s father Boughton has passed away by now, Ames composes an alternative image, “I can imagine him beyond the world, looking back at me with an amazement of realization – ‘This is why we have lived this life!’ Ames adds: There are a thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient.”

We might start to wonder: Could it be that it is more blessed to forgive than to be forgiven? But which is harder? Ames tells us he preached a sermon his wife must have heard back in June 1947, which was on forgiveness and the Prodigal Son. He notes that the grace encountered in the parable of Jesus comes despite how the son neither asks to be restored as son, nor necessarily repents of the grief he has caused his father (p 161). In preaching that parable years ago, Ames had stressed: “Jesus puts His hearer in the role of the father, of the one who forgives. Because if we are, so to speak, the debtor (and of course we are that, too), that suggests no graciousness in us. And grace is the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that we also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of

God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves.” So he had preached, long in the past.

Ames says that the words of that sermon still seem right to him, and we as readers have no doubt that he speaks partly for the author of this novel as well. We could rest there, as at the end of many a sermon. But the novel is more than sermon. It is fiction and imagination. We see acted out in the fiction of the novel, in intricate and otherwise indescribable ways, how both forgiving and being forgiven are difficult for flawed human beings, and ever in need of grace. The most earnest attempts to discern and judge – without which forgiveness doesn’t even come up as a question – are often accompanied by confusion and mixed feelings. And situations that might call for forgiveness are often accompanied by disagreements over what went wrong, exactly, or by mismatched perceptions of how serious the problem is, and who is more responsible, if anyone. Sometimes that’s true even in situations of undeniable wrongdoing and terrible social injustice – times when, the more obvious and terrible the crime, the stronger and more insistent the denial, as we can witness even today in the atrocities of war.

Gilead is not a story with a moral. But neither is it simply beyond morality, since it requires moral engagement even to be an interesting story. It is neither theology nor simply beyond theology. Theologically, one is continually aware of what Ames points to when he informs his son that doctrine is not belief, and that salvation can mean healing (p 239) – something that goes beyond charges and counter-charges. One does not come away from reading *Gilead* with one’s mind focused on doctrine or on moral laws, but with a sense of processes of slow and imperfect healing. Insofar as forgiveness is a recurrent and fundamental theme, it is linked with blessing: a sense of life as graced and beautiful in its very imperfection. This sense of the beauty of forgiveness is both aesthetic and ethical: the sense of the right timing and rhythm and meaning of forgiveness is wrapped up in the mystery of how the duty of forgiveness, so to speak, is also an art of grace: requiring judgment and a sense of justice and accountability, but never exhausted by that alone.

Our brief study in the aesthetics of forgiveness suggests an alternative to either merging art with morality or isolating them in separate spheres. While never capable of being reduced to moral codes or religious doctrines as such, art can be one of the major ways in which both theology and ethics discover new life, and enter into life, and potentially return to theological reflection itself. Ethically considered, this is not theology replaced by art, but newly awakened to aesthetic perception, judgment, feeling, and imagination whereby forgiveness itself participates not only in judging and then reconciling, but also in blessing.

The Mystery of Hope: A Response to the Tragic

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ABSTRACT

The tragic is undeniable and pervasive in our world. Our responses to it differ, ranging from despair, anger and disillusionment to hope that arises in the human spirit, despite tragic circumstances. This paper begins by looking briefly at the tragic, followed by a discussion of the elusive nature of hope that emerges in situations of suffering and adversity. The last section suggests that attempting to understand the mystery of hope in such circumstances entails embracing mystery as integral to religious experience. Finally, consideration is given to prayers of lament that name the suffering, followed by the willingness to wait in silence upon a possible encounter with the Holy One that will speak into situations otherwise inexplicable.

KEYWORDS

Tragic, Hope, Experience, Prayer

TREFWOORDE

Tragies, Hoop, Ervaring, Gebed

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1. INTRODUCTION

The shadow of the tragic hangs over our world. The litany of human suffering and need seems endless and barely a single life is left untouched. Thousands of Palestinians have died over the last two months, killed by bombs and collapsing buildings while at the same time young Israel soldiers and some civilians die in a cause that appears to have no end. Fundamentalist sects are perpetrating obscene brutality on civilians in Middle Eastern countries; Christians are killing Muslims and vice versa in the Central African Republic while war rages in the southern Ukraine. Our citizens are plagued by poverty, violence and unmet basic needs. The wounds of our history and their ever-present consequences are deeply laced with tragedy.

And yet, through the shadow of the tragic hope casts rays of light. How is this possible and how can hope be revived and maintained in the human spirit in adverse circumstances? This paper seeks to reflect on the mystery of hope as a response to the tragic in life. It is unashamedly a theological perspective on aspects of Christian spirituality, as a contribution to the celebration of John de Gruchy's 75th birthday. John, writing on the subject of the spirituality of Christian humanism, says: "While costly, such spirituality is not dehumanizing but liberating, a spirituality of grace that sets us free to be more fully human as persons on a journey to greater wholeness".¹ The goal of becoming more fully human is one I share with John.

2. NAMING THE TRAGIC

In naming the tragic three rather brief and obvious facts require mentioning. Firstly, the tragic is an unavoidable reality in human history. Our circumstances differ; our gender, race, contexts and history are not of our choosing. Tragic events can be caused by inappropriate even wicked human choices, while the tragic can also be thrust upon the innocent. Whatever the reasons, the tragic is real.

Secondly, deep distress and human suffering always accompany the tragic. Loss and deprivation, and events beyond our control dog human lives. On this subject, noted French philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil writing about suffering, says: "In the realm of suffering, affliction is something apart, specific and irreducible". She continues to explain:

The great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction. It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured even driven from their country, and made destitute or reduced to slavery... It is not surprising that

1 John W.de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006), p. 162.

disease is the cause of long-sufferings, which paralyse life into an image of death. But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and take possession of them as their sovereign lord.²

Surprising indeed! Weil here raises the enigmatic paradox of the suffering of the innocent. She analyses suffering in terms of three components: psychological, physical, and social. Affliction, she concludes, involves all three.

Weil's view leads me to a third aspect of the tragic. The tragic demands a response. The futility of the question: "Why suffering?" must rather give way to: "How do we deal with the tragic in life?" and "How can we stand in solidarity with those who are afflicted?"³ Despair is one response. Anger and feelings of retribution are others. But there is an alternative response to the tragic that says "yes" to life, that affirms the presence of God in times of suffering and places trust in God's love and compassion to sustain us.

This response can only be described as a mysterious gift that silently sneaks up on the human heart pulsing gently yet constantly until a tender song of hope is heard. This cannot be explained rationally, or laid hold of at will. It can only be waited for trustingly, prayerfully and faithfully as a way of choosing life over despair and death.

3. BRIEF STORIES OF HOPE

Hope occurs in human beings in very different ways. The following brief stories illustrate this point. Sister Marie, a sixty year old, diminutive, quietly spoken Irish nun spends five mornings a week at Pollsmoor prison with men serving maximum sentences. When asked what she did there she replied: "I listen to them because you see nobody does." She tells of a thirty-five year old man, convicted for armed robbery and murder, who attends her discussion group. One day, quite unexpectedly, he says: "My name is no longer *persona non grata*. My name is Hope". A woman standing in the ruins of her shack in an informal settlement says: "I hope for my children's future". The mother at the graveside of her raped and murdered four-year-old daughter cries out, "*Here waar was jy? Ek hoop jy is by haar.*"⁴

2 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1974), 76, 78-79.

3 Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*. tr. ER Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 19.

4 "Lord, where were you? I hope you are with her".

4. HOPE IN THE NOW

These brief stories illustrate the bewilderingly inexplicable and mysterious nature of hope in very different circumstances. I know that the word “mystery” is often used as an escape hatch for theologians when we encounter what we cannot understand. Thank goodness! Too ready answers about the nature of God or God’s ways are in danger of edging towards fundamentalism. We dare not shy away from mystery when speaking about the Transcendent. As Albert Einstein said: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious”.⁵

The following passage, written by early church historian Francine Cardman, describes the baffling and contradictory nature of hope.

Hope is an elusive virtue, whether theological or practical. It calls us; draw[s] us on, fades into shadows, dies. It bears us up and lets us down. It disappoints and it emboldens. It can be hard to find, harder still to grasp. Theologically, it is, after all, hope *in things not seen* and yet to come. Practically, it is hope that things seen to be awry, unjust, life threatening can be transformed through a vision of what could be possible now.⁶

If in the face of the tragic bearing down on us if we do not give in to despair, we are compelled to speak of hope. We do after all believe that having faith is synonymous with having hope. What might hope in the life of faith look like?⁷

First, our theological understanding of hope in what is unseen and yet to come is fundamental to our faith. We hope for salvation and for a future that is lived with God. This we affirm in our creeds.

Our hope in a future with God cannot, however, be separated from how we live in the here and now. We are called to live hope in the present in a manner that affirms our faith in God. Refuge in the apocalyptic, or once-and-for-all thinking and wish fulfilment, is a travesty of our faith. As Brazilian theologian and philosopher Ruben Alves says: “Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance it”.⁸ The dance is now.

5 From Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the 4 Mystics See* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 16.

6 Francine Cardman, “Practicing hope” in *Healing God’s People: Theological and Pastoral Approaches. A Reconciliation Reader*, Thomas A Kane CSP (ed.) (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 215.

7 For a more detailed look at hope see, Denise M Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey: Ordinary Blessings* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2014), 132-136.

8 <http://www.imagequotes/authors/ruben-alves>

Second, our theological understanding of hope as a lived practical reality includes the profound pain of personal suffering as well as the suffering caused by unjust structures and practices that perpetuate tragic circumstances in people's lives. There is no way of escaping the truth that the way we hope should be the way we live. To live hope is to try to make that which we hope for come about.

Third, to live hope is to risk disappointment. Hope is risky because hope is fragile, disappointment is ever present and there are no guarantees. Jürgen Moltmann speaks of 'the experiment of hope' because it can lead to disappointment, as well as surprise.⁹ Our history of opposing apartheid has taught us just how risky hope can be. Practising hope means to be in solidarity with those who suffer, and to have the courage to resist injustice.

Fourth, hope requires patience and endurance. As Paul reminds the Romans (8:36): "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience". Endurance requires patience and resistance to the void of hopelessness, not resignation. We wait, hoping to be surprised and sustained by a "passion for the possible". Waiting expectantly is resistance to a world that wants instant answers.

Fifth, prayer is our greatest tool for holding on to hope. I have written elsewhere:

Conversing with God about our hopes, lamenting before God about those that are shattered, confessing impatience and moments of hopelessness, petitioning for what seems impossible, and meditating on God's faithfulness, are Spirit-led moments that nurture hope.¹⁰

Prayers are both communal and personal and are nurtured by the prayers of others in the community faith. This is so because God is the common ground of our hope. We trust in God who is not an abstract figurehead pulling strings in some random manner, but ever present in human history and most arrestingly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

5. EXPERIENCING THE MYSTERY OF HOPE IN THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

How can hope, that "elusive virtue", be born in hearts that are rent by affliction when the tragic threatens to overwhelm us? American poet Emily Dickinson, wrote:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches on the soul,

9 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1975).

10 Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man*, 36.

And sings the tune without the word,
And never stops at all.¹¹

How does hope perch upon the soul and give rise to a song that “never stops at all”? My contention is that this happens in the practice of prayer. To give flesh to this statement, first some thoughts on acknowledging mystery are followed by looking at the phenomenon of religious experience. I conclude with a few brief comments on the nature of prayer and the mysterious nature of hope in prayer.

a) Experiencing mystery

The word “mystery” conjures up different responses. I hold as a theological truth that God is mystery, that life itself is laced with mystery, and that we human beings are even a mystery unto ourselves. Karl Rahner acknowledges the presence of mystery in the life of faith. He writes: “First of all, being constituted as transcendental subject, he [i.e. the human being] is in the presence of being as mystery, a mystery which constantly reveals itself and at the same time conceals itself”.¹² Being in relationship with God is permeated by mystery. It can be described as a *living encounter with the Holy One*, an experience of subjectivity which Rahner describes as follows: “By its very nature subjectivity is always a transcendence which listens, which does not control, which is overwhelmed by mystery and opened up by mystery”.¹³

Mystery is *experienced*.¹⁴ It is subjective knowledge, given by God in Christ. So Paul can write to the Colossians (2:2) how he desires that they may have “all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”.

b) Religious experience¹⁵

As I said, mystery is experienced. Christian faith grounded in experience has a long history. In the beginning the disciples came to believe in Jesus and to trust him

11 Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. TH Johnson (New York: Backbay Books, 1961), 116.

12 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, tr. WV Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 42.

13 Rahner, *Foundations*, 58.

14 See also Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000), 256 who refers to the language of mystery in Ephesians.

15 I prefer the phrase “the experience of faith”, however this is the description used in the literature.

through their experience of him, not through knowledge of preconceived doctrines or prepositions. In the early church and through the Middle Ages, religious experience was accepted as foundational for theology and spirituality. Subsequently theology evolved into a discipline that shied away from religious experience as too subjective and unscriptural. However, today there is a radical shift towards the recognition of religious interiority; hence the recognition of spirituality as a descriptive-critical discipline in the academy.¹⁶ This shift is important when arguing for the practice of prayer as the way to *experiencing* the mystery of hope. Religious experience cannot be discounted because every aspect of our humanness is involved in the venture of faith – our minds, hearts, spirits and souls.

Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan in his work *Method in Theology*¹⁷ explains that our experience of the transcendental is material for the theological methods we employ. Our theological methods require the experience of believing that God actually responds to and communicates with us in love and knowledge. This truth cannot be reduced to shallow arguments for objectivity versus subjectivity. Lonergan points out that subjective reality does not deny rational thought that he labels as attentive, intelligent, and reasonable. However, he argues, the blending of all aspects of our reality is not easily achieved without an authentic conversion first. For Lonergan we are changed through that mysterious encounter with mercy, joy and forgiveness we name conversion.

Lonergan qualifies experience. According to him, it is the experience of being in love with God. He writes: “Religious experience is at its roots the experience of unconditional and unrestricted being in love. But what we are in love with we have to find out”.¹⁸ Thus Lonergan’s theological method is not grounded in the first instance in theological deductions from some set of first propositions, but rather on the religious experience of conversion understood as “being in love with God”.¹⁹ Lonergan makes clear that the foundations for systematic and pastoral theology are not premises, but converted people, including converted theologians.

Lonergan’s definition of religious experience leads to two important conclusions. First, religious experience is not something esoteric, or outside ordinary human

16 See Sandra M Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy” in Kenneth J Collins (ed.). *Exploring Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 249-270.

17 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

18 William Johnston, *Being in Love: The Practice of Christian Prayer* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1988), 12.

19 See William A. Barry & William J Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1972), 21.

experience. We are made for experiencing the transcendent. It is not utterly exceptional or a holy luxury. Second, it is also not concerned with fidelity to laws, rules or regulations or formulas of doctrine. It is an inner movement of the human soul for which the Holy Spirit is responsible.

c) The Practice of Prayer

Being in love is about relationship. We pray because we are in relationship with God, a relationship of reciprocal love. Our relationship with God is primal as it is established in the creation of the human person. Whether we respond to this truth about our humanity or not, is our choice. But God nonetheless continues to care and communicate with us – we are free to listen or not to, to respond or not to. Prayer is the expression of mutual relationship with God. It is holy conversation. We speak and we listen to the Beloved.

Speaking about prayer is a minefield. It is a subject that has no fixed rules or recipes; it is deeply personal and communal, ritualised and spontaneous.²⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to appropriate the Word, and what is more, to accept in one’s personal situation, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations”.²¹ John de Gruchy describes the journey towards becoming fully human as “participating in the Christian story through prayer, reading and reflection on the Scriptures, sharing together in the Eucharistic meal, and embodying the story in our daily lives”.²²

Trappist monk Thomas Merton describes prayer as a “simple yearning for the presence of God, for a personal understanding of his word, for knowledge of his will and for the capacity to hear and obey him”.²³ Key here is the word “yearning”. Prayers should express our deepest longing for an encounter with the Holy - being heard and responded to. We pray because we long for an encounter with God. We long for God because it is in our divine DNA. Our longing for God is planted in us in us through the Spirit of God who, as Paul tells us, “dwells “ in us (Rom. 8:9b). Our longing is ground for our hope.

20 There are as many different understandings and ways of praying as there are people of faith: Discursive prayer, meditative prayer, silent prayer, communal prayer, personal prayer, and contemplative prayer.

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. JW Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1949), 64.

22 de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p.163.

23 Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton. Longman and Todd, 1969), 82.

However, when prayers arise from circumstances that are deeply painful, when the tragic threatens to hold the soul to ransom, we long for relief, for change, and ultimately for hope. While we cannot deny our fundamental longing for God, the tragic can overwhelm us and understandably translate our prayer into a longing for answers, for solutions, and for comfort. We hear only our pain. Tears and cries, often incoherent, accompany such prayers. This prayer is lament. We have a long and rich tradition of lament, particularly in the psalms that speaks truth to God in a forthright and often accusing manner when fear, distress and suffering invade us.

I have described lament as:

... a coil of suffering and hope, awareness and memory, anger and relief, a desire for vengeance, for forgiveness and healing that beats against the heart of God ... Lament should be generous not grudging, explicit not general, unafraid to contain petitions and confident that they will be heard.²⁴

Lamenting in prayer is a response to the tragic. We seek to encounter God in all things – in the tragic, in the joyful, the ordinary and the extraordinary. Surely this is what it means to “live, and move and have our being in Christ” (Acts 17:28)?

We lament and then we move to waiting silently on God. From the earliest Christian times the practice of prayerful listening to God has been an accepted way of seeking to encounter God. Syrian theologian Isaac of Nineveh (d.c.700) said: “If you love truth, be a lover of silence ...”²⁵ This silent listening is an expression of trust because we believe that God is present, and God cares.²⁶ In this quiet waiting on God we are awakened to wonder at the all-embracing Presence that includes not only our own experience but also responds to the needs of the world around us. We adopt a contemplative attitude that grounds our presence in the world before our God. Our cries of lament make way for a wordless waiting, an open inner space of quiet where we may just hear that mysterious tune of hope that perches on the soul and sings “a tune without a word and never stops at all”.

I want to end the topic of silence with a story recounted to me by Michael Welker. On the opening evening of a conference in Heidelberg, Germany, to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of renowned biblical scholar Gerhard von

24 Denise M Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2003), 111.

25 B Kadloubovsky and GEH Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia, 6th impression* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 86.

26 The symbiotic relationship between faith, hope and love is fundamental to the Christian faith (1 Cor 13:12).

Rad (1901-1971), philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (then aged 101) stood up and said of von Rad: “There was a silence in him that came out of a deep listening”.²⁷ Everyone who knew von Rad attested to the truth of this statement.

d) The mystery of hope that perches on the soul

In conclusion, my attempts to look at hope as a response to the tragic, leaves me with one certainty: it defies rational understanding. It is a mystery. Mystery does not mean something unintelligible, incoherent or jumbled. The mystery of hope does not provide “solutions”; rather it draws us ever deeper into the Paschal journey, a journey that will inevitably be accompanied by suffering. This mysterious elusive virtue, this thing with feathers that perches upon the soul, is a godly gift. When and how God enables us to hope cannot be managed by us. The willingness to pray truth in the agony of the tragic and then to be prepared to wait, trusting God, can enable us to sing that song “that never stops at all”.

Hoping despite tragic circumstances needs discernment (*diakrisis*) that intentional and self-reflective process that probes our inmost longing. When the going is tough it is sustained by persistence, patience and passion. We long to hear the Holy One because we long for healing – the healing of ourselves and the world in which we live. We rely on and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit who accompanies us on our journey to the cross and beyond. Throughout we are sustained by prayer that is unafraid to confess, lament, petition and intercede, while being willing to listen in silence for that song that never ends at all.

The mystery of hope breaks open our inner being and leaves us with an experience that is deeper than language, deeper than our religious symbols and rites. This longing that gives rise to hope is not quietism but rather a critical theory of hope.

Hope is the infinity of love, writes Kevin Hughes who continues:

Hope is the longing itself for the deeper reality of a love that is beyond all loves, for the beauty that lays beneath, before, behind, above, and within those symbolic, evocative visions, for the time when “God will be all in all”.²⁸

²⁷ Ackermann, *Surprised*, 186. See also Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 59.

²⁸ Kevin L Hughes, The crossing of hope, or apocalyptic eschatology, in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, Miroslav Volf & William Katenberg (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 124.

The emergence of personhood – why the evolution of the moral sense and symbolic behaviour defines the human self

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I want to ask whether contemporary theories of human evolution might provide us with important bridge theories to theological anthropology and thus to a positive and constructive way of appropriating Darwinian thought for Christian theology. From a more philosophical point of view I am asking whether Darwin's perspective on human evolution can help us move forward to more constructive, holistic notions of self and personhood. In John de Gruchy's remarkable new book, *Led into Mystery*, we not only see this kind of "archaeology of personhood" strongly implied, but de Gruchy lifts up issues that are of great importance for evolutionary anthropology, and goes into a direct dialogue with neuropsychology and the neurosciences. In so doing he reveals the crucial impact of these sciences for central theological themes like the question of God, the perennial *theodicee* problem, the *imago Dei*, human consciousness, free will, life after death, and brain, mind, body and soul. In this way De Gruchy touches directly on some of the greatest controversies in current science and theology discussions. I would like to show that John de Gruchy places these crucial interdisciplinary issues in the centre of discussions on the human self, and in so doing opens up exciting trajectories that even go beyond the focused scope of his own project – notably challenging implications for the evolution of morality and of religion.

KEYWORDS

Personhood, Evolutionary anthropology, Symbolic behaviour, Niche construction, The evolution of religion and morality

TREFWOORDE

Menswees, Evolusionêre antropologie, Simboliese gedrag, Niche konstruksie, Die evolusie van godsdiens en moraliteit



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1. INTRODUCTION

For a theologian deeply committed to public theology and the interdisciplinary dialogue with the sciences, the privilege of being so directly involved with anthropological issues concerning *human nature*, and specifically *human origins* over the past few years has indeed been both enriching as well as an extraordinary challenge. Most importantly, I have learned that evolutionary anthropology, including palaeoanthropology, presents us with a very unusual problem of semantic innovation: in looking back to the distant prehistoric past, how does new meaning come to be, and when this happens, how does interpretation and explanation enable us to reconfigure often long-forgotten meanings about our own origins and nature in this distant past? For French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, this kind of hermeneutical/epistemological venture always involved a radically interdisciplinary journey through the lengthy route of multiple detours in direct dialogue with the human sciences, the natural sciences, philosophy, and theology (cf Ricoeur in Kearney 2004:124). In these necessary boundary crossings between different reasoning strategies, we indeed come to learn that various disciplines often transversally connect around shared problems.

One such problem is the problem of human nature and human identity. In this essay I want to ask whether fact of human evolution as such might provide us with important bridge theories to theological anthropology and thus to a positive and constructive way of appropriating Darwinian thought for Christian theology. From a more philosophical point of view I am asking whether Darwin's perspective on human evolution can help us move forward to more constructive, holistic notions of self and personhood, and to what Chris Fowler has provocatively called "the production of personhood" (cf Fowler, 2004). I will presuppose in this paper what I have argued elsewhere, which is that in the history of hominid evolution we find surprising answers to the enduring question of what it means to be a *self*, a human person¹. In fact, what we now know about key aspects of hominid evolution affirms

1 cf J. Wentzel van Huyssteen: *Alone in the World: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans 2006); "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Human Origins and Religious Awareness," in Colin Renfrew and Iain Morley (Eds.), *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); "What Makes us Human? The Interdisciplinary Challenge to Theological Anthropology and Christology" in *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26/2, 2010, 143-160; "When Were We Persons? Why Hominid Evolution holds the Key to Embodied Personhood", in *Neue Zeitschrift for Systematische Theologie* 52, 329-349, 2010; "Post-Foundationalism and Human Uniqueness: A Reply to Responses" in *Toronto Journal of Theology* 27/1, 2011, 73-86; "Coding the Nonvisible: Epistemic Limitations

what Darwin argued for as crucial aspects of humanness. To this end I would have wanted, ideally, to consider the problem of human evolution, or the archaeology of personhood (cf Fowler 2004), and its broader impact on theological anthropology, by tracking a number of challenging contemporary proposals for the evolution of crucially important aspects of human personhood that were all of great significance for Darwin: the evolution of sexuality, the evolution of cognition, imagination, music and language, the evolution of morality, and the religious disposition. However, because of time constraints I will presuppose here that the evolution of these crucial aspects of human personhood ultimately converges on the complex but exciting issue of the evolution of the human self.

In John de Gruchy's remarkable new book, *Led into Mystery*², we not only see this kind of "archeology of personhood" implied, but also clearly stated, as I will try to show. In this work de Gruchy not only lifts up issues that are of great importance for evolutionary anthropology, but in fact goes into a direct dialogue with neuropsychology and the neurosciences, and in so doing reveals the crucial impact of these sciences for central themes like the question of God, the perennial theodicee problem, the *imago Dei*, human consciousness, free will, life after death, and brain, mind, body and soul. To this rich discussion could also be added moral issues like good and evil, and even more exotic themes like heaven and hell. In this way de Gruchy touches directly on some of the greatest controversies in current science and theology discussions. I would like to show that John de Gruchy places these crucial interdisciplinary issues in the centre of discussions on the human self, and in so doing opens up exciting trajectories that go beyond the focused scope of his own project – notably implications for the evolution of morality and of religion.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN SELF

Before returning to a few specific aspects of the current discussion on the evolution of morality and religion, and plotting an interdisciplinary trajectory back to John de Gruchy's work, I want to briefly mention a number of intriguing contemporary proposals for some of the most defining traits of what makes us human, and that should, therefore, be included in any embodied definition of human nature and

and Understanding Symbolic Behavior at Çatalhöyük", in Ian Hodder (Ed.), *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). 99-121; "The Historical Self: Memory and Religion at Çatalhöyük," in Ian Hodder (ed.), *Vital Matters: Religion and Change at Çatalhöyük* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

2 John de Gruchy, *Led Into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (SCM Press, 2013).

human species specificity. In her fascinating studies, especially her acclaimed *Roots* series, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone goes to the evolutionary roots of human cognition, language, and communication, and morality by developing a very pronounced “hermeneutics of the human body” (1990; 1994; 2008). Throughout all her work the emphasis is on the role of the human body in understanding meaning and mind.

In her classic 1990, *The Roots of Thinking*, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in a remarkable way, anticipates some of the contemporary discussions on *self* and *embodiment*. Ultimately she argues that the biological disposition to use one’s own body as a semantic template to communicate with others in the most fundamental sense of the word is about symbolic behaviour and conceptual origins (1990:3), or what Steven Mithen later would call the emergence of cognitive fluidity in the embodied human mind (cf Mithen 1996:70,136). Her fascinating thesis is that human thinking is modelled on the body, and it is precisely the sensorily felt and sensorily feeling body that serves as the cognitive source of those human concepts that continuously shaped human thinking and evolution, thus functioning as a semantic template (1990:5,6). It is against this background that Sheets-Johnstone argues that many contemporary answers to the origins of language fall short as they continue to ignore the reality that “no language can be spoken for which the body is unprepared” (1990:135). To this I would add, that exactly the same is true for the evolutionary origins of the moral and the religious sense: many contemporary answers to the origins of the moral and the religious sense fall short if they continue to ignore the reality that no moral or religious disposition could have emerged for which the human body was unprepared.

And it is, of course, this path from embodiment that leads directly to the evolution of empathy and the moral sense. The fundamental embodied roots of morality have indeed been of utmost importance in Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s most recent work (*The Roots of Morality*) and, I believe, will also get us to the central thesis of John de Gruchy’s book. For Sheets-Johnstone empathy goes to the evolutionary heart of human personhood. Our ability to care, to trust, to empathize and have deep feelings for others is essential to the development of moral awareness and the realization of a fully resonant human being (cf Sheets-Johnstone 2008:193f). As such it gives us access to the mental acts and processes of others, and through empathy we discover the feelings and values of others, what their convictions are, and precisely through this capacity for empathy we ultimately share what Husserl already described as an intersubjective world, that is, a *communally intelligible world* (cf Sheets-Johnstone 2008:194).

Here now clearly emerges a deeply embodied sense of empathy: in completing this argument, Sheets-Johnstone calls for philosophical and evolutionary ways to

understand how empathy is indeed a spontaneous outgrowth of affect attunement (cf Sheets-Johnstone 2008:211.), and as such empathy also has direct links to *Theory of Mind*, i.e., our intuitive knowing of the minds of others. For Sheets-Johnstone this is now enriched by redefining Theory of Mind as getting to know not just other minds, but *getting to know other moving bodies* (cf Sheets-Johnstone 2008:213ff). In principle Sheets-Johnstone thus offers us a fascinating program for how to engage any project in anthropology or ethics that opens up an understanding for a particular form of interanimate meaning, or as I would phrase it, *the evolution of empathy into moral awareness, and a rationality of care* (cf Sheets-Johnstone 2008:215). And moving beyond Sheets-Johnstone to more theological themes, it is this rich revisioning of a profoundly embodied notion of empathy, I believe, that will eventually become a crucial building block for understanding the evolution of morality and of religion.

3. EMBODIMENT IN NEUROSCIENCE

The focus of John de Gruchy's most recent work has been a direct conversation with the neurosciences. In view of that I would like to broaden the argument by showing how the work of two other neuroscientists could in principle function to support de Gruchy's central argument, at least up to a point. The current work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone on embodiment finds significant support in German neuroscientist Thomas Fuchs' recent development of an *embodied cognitive neuroscience* (cf Fuchs 2009). On this view, the embodied cognition perspective sees mind and brain as a biological system that is rooted in body experience and interaction with other individuals. Embodiment here refers to both the embedding of cognitive processes in brain circuitry and to the origin of these processes in an organism's sensory-motor experience. What emerges here too is a human body that is connected to its environment and to other embodied human beings. Fuchs thus strongly opposes any view that would see the human mind as somehow localized in, or caused by, or identifiable with, the human brain: this kind of short-circuit between mind and brain leads to a conceptual and methodological impasse, for it misses the essentially embodied, relational, and biographical character of the human mind.

Most importantly, and in direct support of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's phenomenological take on embodied empathy, Fuchs talks about our bodies as *transparent to the world*: human subjectivity is embedded in the world, with the body acting as its mediator. And consciousness as the luminosity, which reveals the world to a subject, is the direct result of this mediation. Miraculously, our bodies, as solid and material objects, are capable of a transformation that turns matter into mind and lets the world appear. In this way the body becomes transparent to the world and allows us to act in it (cf Fuchs 2005b:95f). For Fuchs this goes to the heart

of emotional contagion, attunement and empathy, for we understand the gestures and facial expressions of others immediately: there is an implicit resonance with the expressions of others, while our own bodily and emotional reactions through emotional contagion show how the body works as a tacitly “felt mirror” of the other. And, the discovery of “mirror neurons” in the premotor cortex seems to provide the core neural mechanism of this sensorimotor integration. But observing the other’s movements and gestures implies a transmission of intentions as well: we use the operative intentionality of our own bodies as instruments for understanding the other’s intentions (cf Fuchs 2005b:98).

4. EMPATHY AND ATTACHMENT

The important work on human personhood, and specifically embodied empathy by scholars as diverse as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Thomas Fuchs, finds a particularly exciting enhancement in the work of psychologist of religion, Lee A. Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick broadens notions of empathy now to include attachment theory, and this now extends not only to the embeddedness of empathy in evolutionary history (as already became very clear in the work of Frans de Waal; cf de Waal 2006), but also to direct implications for religious belief, and particularly for the evolution of religion. In his book Lee A. Kirkpatrick (2005) addresses seminal questions such as, why has religion played such a strong and enduring role in all human cultures throughout history? Rejecting the notion that humans universally possess religion-specific instincts or adaptations, Kirkpatrick argues that religion instead should be seen as a by-product of numerous psychological mechanisms and systems that evolved for other functions. Among these systems are exactly empathy and attachment. Applying attachment theory to religion, Kirkpatrick identifies key parallels between early attachment relationships and adult romantic relationships, on the one hand, and an individual’s perceived relationship with God, on the other hand. Seeing God as an attachment figure offers new ways of thinking about such core religious phenomena/conceptions such as the image of God, prayer, religious development, and conversion. On this view evolutionary perspectives are now greatly influencing the ever-increasing popularity of attachment theory. In fact, for Kirkpatrick the emerging evolutionary perspective attempts something really new: *the tying together of attachment, empathy, love, caregiving, and mating into a larger, coherent framework* (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:51), a framework that now includes a very distinct religious dimension. In fact, Kirkpatrick wants to argue how attachment processes are involved in many aspects of religious belief, and also directly in the evolution of religion itself.

Furthermore, and important for any discussion of the evolution of religious belief, this approach serves as a reminder that the attachment system, and also empathy, is only one of numerous evolved systems for regulating cognition, emotion, and behaviour (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:74). This will invariably lead to the question of how the attachment system maps onto other neurological patterns, for instance, altered states of consciousness, ecstatic experiences, and HADD (Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device), in the brain. Kirkpatrick is, therefore, suggesting that the cognitive-emotional machinery of the embodied attachment system provides a kind of deep structure or universal grammar for thinking about gods or other deities. This cognitive machinery is then employed readily for manipulating these ideas and drawing further inferences from them. Because the attachment-system is species-universal, the influence of this same deep structure is evident in the beliefs about gods in many cultures. At the same time, however, the parameters of the attachment system are set differently in different people by virtue of actual experience, giving rise to individual differences in some of the details of religious belief (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:126). There is also increasing evidence that attachment, with a clear adaptive function in infancy and childhood, functions differently, for evolutionary reasons, in adulthood. In adulthood attachment is “the tie that binds” certain relationships, especially romantic relationships and deep friendships together (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:201f).³

When Kirkpatrick finally turns to the evolution of religion he can now make explicit a general perspective that has been implicit throughout his work: religion is not itself an adaptation; humans do not possess, as part of our species-universal evolved psychological architecture, mechanisms designed by natural selection specific for the purpose of generating religious belief or behaviour as a solution to any particular adaptive problem (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:238). The attachment theory and its embodied empathetic disposition as outlined here should be seen as simply one part of a much broader model in which the attachment system represents just one of many domain-specific psychological mechanisms that have been co-opted in the service of religion and religious belief. Religion activates attachment processes but

3 In this sense the attachment system – already in place for infancy and childhood – was adopted by natural selection as a suite of evolved mechanisms already well designed for the purpose of producing powerful emotional bonds, motivating commitment to a relationship, maintaining proximity between two individuals, and natural selection then reassigned the system the new function in adulthood. Kirkpatrick sees this process of *exaptation* (Gould 1991), in which an adaptation for one function is later co-opted and further evolved for use in solving a different adaptive problem, as indeed a common evolutionary process (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:201).

also many other psychological processes as well, and it is probably this *combination* that is responsible for its widespread success and staying power (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:239). The path from genes to religious belief is, therefore, clearly a very long and circuitous one (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:327).

What is interesting for an interdisciplinary theologian like myself, is that Kirkpatrick leaves open the possibility for positively interpreting the value and integrity of religious belief as he warns against the so-called *veridicality trap*: the common but patently false assumption that if certain beliefs can be understood and explained *scientifically*, then the beliefs themselves are by implication false. On the contrary, there is no reason why any scientific approach to understanding religion need assume that the beliefs under study are either ontologically true or false. To believe that the origins, neuro-psychological or otherwise, of a belief necessarily imply that it is not true (because it has been “explained”) is a classic example of the *genetic fallacy* (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:353).

In fact, the human brain/mind was designed according to the sole criterion of inclusive fitness, and is thus designed to be *adaptive*. It is decidedly *not* designed to be “accurate” or “correct” as judged by logical or other empirical standards. Often this leads to correct intuitions and inferences, and being “correct” is indeed often adaptive. Once this is acknowledged, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that any particular kind of belief, whether religious or not, should be expected to be correct or incorrect. The mind is designed in such a way that, depending on any number of factors, it sometimes draws correct inferences and sometimes incorrect ones. In this sense an evolutionary psychology of religion should address the question of why and how people come to hold (or, come to reject) particular beliefs in which we are interested, irrespective of the question of whether or not they are true or false (cf Kirkpatrick 2005:354).

5. NEUROSCIENCE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A radically different view from Lee Kirkpatrick’s non-adaptive views on our very human propensity for empathy, attunement, and religious awareness, but one equally focused on human embodiment, is found in the work of neuroscientist Patrick McNamara. For McNamara it is exactly the deep religious propensities of the human mind that cannot be explained by naturalistic evolutionary accounts of human nature and behaviour only. An interesting and rather bold move in this direction was recently presented in his book *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience* (2009). As a neuroscientist McNamara wants to develop his own central conviction that religion is a defining mark of what it means to be human, as emblematic of its bearer as the web for the spider (cf McNamara 2009:ix). The special focus of McNamara’s work,

however, is to examine the phenomenon of religion through the eyes of the human self. Strikingly, in spite of the self's great dignity and worth, it is still treated by religions as divided, conflicted, and in need of salvation. Most importantly, McNamara argues that there is a considerable anatomical overlap between the brain sites implicated in religious experience and the brain sites implicated in the sense of "self" and self-consciousness, echoing some of d'Aquili and Newberg's work. This accounts for the crucial conclusion that religious practices often operate to support a transformation of self such that the self becomes more like an "ideal self" whom the individual hopes to become (cf McNamara 2009:xi). In this sense religious practices directly contribute to the creation of a unified self-consciousness and to what McNamara calls an ideal "executive self". So, when religions are operating normally they tend to create a healthy, unified, and integrated sense of self. Religions accomplish this feat by promoting a cognitive process that McNamara calls *decentring* (2009:44f.), where religious practices help to build up a centralized executive self.

McNamara's bold claim, then, is that religion is irrevocably a central part of the evolution of symbolic and religious behaviour and of the construction of a centralized, "executive" self. As for the evolutionary status of religion, this implies that religion is not, as is often argued, an unfortunate by-product of more useful cognitive capacities of the human mind. On the contrary, this implies that religion is indeed an adaptation, which is confirmed by the fact that the practice of religious rituals and belief in supernatural agents occur in virtually all human cultures (cf McNamara 2009:249). And it is precisely religion's impact on the problems associated with the self and consciousness that could be seen as adaptive. The self and its default position, the divided self, should thus be taken into account when discussing the evolutionary history of religion (cf McNamara 2009:253).

6. HUMAN DISTINCTIVENESS AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

I have argued elsewhere that in the interdisciplinary conversation between theology and the sciences the boundaries between our disciplines and reasoning strategies are indeed shifting and porous, and deep theological convictions cannot be easily transferred to philosophy, or to science, to function as "data" in foreign disciplinary systems (cf van Huyssteen 1999; 2006). In the same manner, transversal reasoning does not imply that scientific data, paradigms, or worldviews, can be transported into theology to there set the agenda for theological reasoning. Transversal reasoning does mean that theology and science can share concerns and converge on commonly identified conceptual problems such as the problem of human uniqueness. These mutually critical tasks presuppose, however, the richness of the transversal moment in which theology and the sciences may indeed find amazing connections

and overlapping intersections on issues of human nature and identity. This not only opens up the possibility for converging arguments, from both theology and evolutionary anthropology, for the presence of imagination and religious awareness in our earliest Cro-Magon ancestors, but also for the plausibility of the larger argument: since the very beginning of the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the evolution of those characteristics that made humans uniquely different from even their closest sister species, i.e., characteristics like consciousness, language, imagination, moral awareness, symbolic minds and symbolic behaviour, have always included religious awareness and religious behaviour (cf van Huyssteen 2006)⁴.

The idea that religious imagination might not be an isolated faculty of human rationality, and that mystical or religious inclinations can indeed be regarded as an essentially universal attribute of the human mind, has recently also been taken up in interdisciplinary discussion by some theologians (cf Shantz 2009). Also Niels Henrik Gregersen has argued that imagination, and therefore also religious

4 Paleanthropologist Ian Tattersall has argued exactly this point: because every human society, at one stage or another possessed religion of some sort, complete with origin myths that purportedly explain the relationship of humans to the world around them, religion cannot be discounted from any discussion of typically human behaviors (1998:201). There is indeed a naturalness to religious imagination that challenges any viewpoint that would want to see religion or religious imagination as an arbitrary or esoteric faculty of the human mind. What has emerged from the work of scientists like Steven Mithen, William Noble and Iain Davidson, Merlin Donald, Ian Tattersall and Terrence Deacon, and should be of primary interest to theologians working on anthropology, is that human mental life includes biologically unprecedented ways of experiencing and understanding the world, from aesthetic experiences to spiritual contemplation – exactly the point now being made by Águstin Fuentes about niche construction. Also Terrence Deacon has made the important point that the spectacular Upper-Paleolithic imagery and the burial of the dead, though not final guarantees of shamanistic or religious activities, do suggest strongly the existence of sophisticated symbolic reasoning, imagination, and a religious disposition of the human mind (cf Deacon 2003:504ff). The symbolic nature of *Homo sapiens* also explains why mystical or religious inclinations can even be regarded as an essentially universal attribute of human culture (cf Deacon 1997:436), and opens up an interesting space for Jean Clottes and David Lewis-William's argument for a shamanistic interpretation of some of the most famous of the paleolithic imagery (cf Lewis-Williams 2002; Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1996). There is in fact no culture that lacks a rich mythical, mystical, and religious tradition. The co-evolution of language and brain not only implies, however, that human brains could have been reorganized in response to language and the environment in a dynamic process of niche construction, but also alerts us to the fact that the consequences of this unprecedented evolutionary transition from *becoming human* to *being human* must be understood on many levels as well.

imagination, is not an isolated faculty of human rationality, but can be found at the very heart of human rationality. On this view, then, the same “naturalness” of imagination also applies to religious imagination, and religious imagination should not be seen as something extra or esoteric that can be added, or subtracted, from other mental states (cf Gregersen 2003:1f, 23). More importantly, though, a theory about the emergence of religious imagination and of religious concepts, of course, does not at all answer the philosophical question about the validity of religion, or the even more complex theological question whether, and in what form, religious imagination might refer to some form of reality or not. As an *interdisciplinary* problem, however, the reasons that may undergird the unreasonable effectiveness of religious belief and thought may transcend the scope of any one discipline when it comes to evaluating the integrity of religious belief. In this specific conversation we can hopefully reach an interdisciplinary agreement that religious imagination and religious concepts should be treated equally with all other sorts of human reflection. Religious imagination should, therefore, be treated as an integral part of human cognition, not separable from our other cognitive endeavours. Clearly early human behaviour is not understood if we do not take this religious dimension into account.

I suggest that a theological appropriation of these rich and complex results of science at the very least should inspire the theologian carefully to trace and rethink the complex evolution of the notion of human distinctiveness, or the *imago Dei*, in theology. Interpretations of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* have indeed varied dramatically throughout the long history of Christianity (cf van Huyssteen 2006:111-162). Theologians are now challenged to rethink what human uniqueness might mean for the human person, a being that has emerged biologically as a centre of self-awareness, identity, and moral responsibility. Personhood, when reconceived in terms of embodied imagination, symbolic propensities, and cognitive fluidity, may enable theology to revision its notion of the *imago Dei* as an idea that does not imply superiority or a greater moral value for humans over animals or earlier hominids, but which might express a specific task and purpose to set forth the presence of God in this world (cf Hefner 1998:88). In theology I would, therefore, call for a revisioning of the notion of the *imago Dei* in ways that would not be disembodied or overly abstract, but that instead acknowledges our embodied existence, our close ties to the animal world and its uniqueness, and to those hominid ancestors that came before us, while at the same time focusing on what our symbolic and cognitively fluid minds might tell us about the emergence of an embodied human distinctiveness, consciousness, and personhood, and the propensity for religious awareness and experience.

7. JOHN DE GRUCHY ON PERSONHOOD

How do we now map these rich interdisciplinary conversations on to John de Gruchy's most recent work? De Gruchy (2013:14) has argued correctly, I believe, that the uniquely human capacity for self-reflection in search of an explanation of "the mysteries of life" should be crucial for any understanding of what it means to be. This ability naturally dovetails closely with our unique capacity for self-deception and hypocrisy, but de Gruchy is correct: this does not mean that there is no truth, wisdom, or genuine insight into the mystery of life and death in the vast reservoir of human reflection over millennia, in the myths we construct and the beliefs we confess (cf de Gruchy 2013:14). And it is also true when death is understood as an inevitable part of the biological cycle of life it does not mean that that this is a "tragic mystery". The mystery does not lie in the naturalness of life or death, but as de Gruchy states, lies in the fact that nobody really understands what it means, if anything at all (cf de Gruchy 2013:14). Which raises the question of the naming of this conference on de Gruchy's work: what is in fact implied by the designation of this important conference as "theology on the edge?" Does it refer to:

- The dangers of interdisciplinary work?
- The danger of losing the integrity of theological reflection in interdisciplinary work?
- Or, the fact that theology, if done responsibly, will take us to the edge of our meaning making abilities, where more than science and scientific methodology needs to take into account what it means to be human?

This is a special challenge for Christian theology, because advances in neuroscience and molecular biology have also led to the claim that we have little if any freedom to choose, and that notions such as "soul", "image of God", personal freedom, purpose, or responsibility should be seen as fictional constructions of the brain. However, as de Gruchy rightly argues, acknowledging the contemporary debate between theology and the neurosciences is indeed critical for understanding who we are, how we should live, and what happens to us in death. Scientific research and discovery are not the only resources at our disposal for understanding the enigma for who we are. In fact, to explore the whole of human reality we also need to step outside the empirical world of the laboratory and be willing to enter the world of the artist, dramatist, musician, poet, of myth-makers, prophets and biblical writers (cf de Gruchy 2013:139f *moi*: science still provides the only "points of no return!").

We do not have to be reductionists, however, to realize that there are no exclusive means of achieving knowledge, morality, meaning, purpose, and faith outside of the

brain. Even our capacity for hope, which is essential for human survival, is hardwired into the brain. Finding these quint-essential human capacities in our embodied existence is, moreover, directly in line with what evolutionary anthropologists are teaching us today. These scientists, including Thomas Fuchs and McNamara, are acknowledging that “faith” (or, rather “imagination”), is central to the way our brains function in making sense of the world and responding to its challenges. So, de Gruchy is right, the brain takes creative leaps of faith whether in science or religion, enabling us to believe the things we cannot prove (cf De Gruchy 2013:147). In fact, some would want to go further and argue that our brains have evolved to respond to God’s self-disclosure (although, for an interdisciplinary conversation I would rather tone that down to a neural propensity, if one wants to keep the conversation scientific and interdisciplinary). In the long process of evolution our minds have evolved from matter, and precisely as scholars as diverse as Paul Ricoeur and Thomas Fuchs have argued, as embodied consciousness, the mind of the human self takes on a dynamic life shaped by memory and imagination.

Precisely in this kind of embodied personhood we can recognize “the emergence of an embodied moral awareness as a holistic, new way of knowing” (cf de Gruchy 2013:162). This is also very close to what I have argued for (cf van Huyssteen 2006) in the understanding of the “knowing of good and evil” as situated within the myth of the so called “Fall”, but then as a unique falling “upwards”: we can indeed distinguish between good and evil, and by being free to decide, we are prone also to make irresponsible, self-destructive and therefore “sinful” choices (cf de Gruchy 2013:153). So, are we morally responsible and accountable for what we do, or are we determined by our genes, or by God, in specific ways? Rising above these reductionist “either/or” answers, de Gruchy embeds this question of free will into the broader discussion of “body and soul” and how a conception of personhood is clarified in making this argument. Biblically and theologically speaking body and “soul” belong together, or as de Gruchy puts it: a human being is body and soul (cf de Gruchy 2013:159). De Gruchy then asks: would it not be better to lose, or let go of the idea of “soul” altogether and simply refer to the human person, and as such implying both our physical connection to all other animals while at the same to implying our imaginative distinctiveness within the animal world?

Where de Gruchy would answer “no” to this question, I, however, would argue “yes”. For John de Gruchy an affirmation of the concept “soul” helps us to see the value of such a term as representing something more complex and significant, that is, the ability to talk about the soul of being a human, as that which makes us distinct, and so convey better the mystery and complexity, the dynamic and dignity of being human (cf De Gruchy 2013:160). De Gruchy does acknowledge that neuroscience rightly

presents a radical challenge to traditional views of the soul as a “discrete element” in the body, whether identified with rationality, the self or consciousness, or as an immortal entity. I suggest that we may plausibly drop the term “soul,” which as a more religious or poetic term does not transversally integrate easily with the scientific and philosophical issue of our embodiment and embodied consciousness. We might then rather follow neuroscientists like McNamara and Fuchs, and neuropsychologists like Kirkpatrick, in radically rethinking consciousness and empathetic awareness as the embodied definition of what it means to be fully human. On my view, then, this notion of “person” works well for everything de Gruchy would want the concept of “soul” to achieve.

8. CONCLUSION

Now it finally becomes possible to tentatively ask questions about how these perspectives from evolutionary anthropology and neuroscience might inform our contemporary notions of human personhood, how it enlightens our views of human evolution, and also, finally, what its implications might be for theological anthropology, and quite specifically for the iconic notion of the *imago Dei*? As possible answers to these complex questions I propose the following theses:

i) The strong interdisciplinary convergence between theology and the sciences on the question, “what it means to be human,” presupposes arguments from both evolutionary anthropology and palaeoanthropology, not only for the presence of religious awareness in our earliest prehistoric ancestors, but also for the plausibility of the larger argument: since the very beginning of the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the evolution of those characteristics that made humans distinctively different from even their closest sister species, i.e., characteristics like consciousness, language, imagination, and symbolic minds and behaviour, most probably always included some form of religious awareness and religious behaviour. Presupposed in this argument, however, is the remarkable degree of adaptability and the versatility of our species. *Homo sapiens* indeed emerged as a result of its ancestral lineage having persisted and changed in the face of dramatic environmental variability, and having coped so successfully with interactive niche construction. It is this versatility that also gives new depth to the kind of human symbolic capacities that Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb (2005), and also Agustin Fuentes have highlighted in their recent work (cf Fuentes 2009, 2010, 2014), and that archaeologist Rick Potts has called the “astonishing hallmark of modern humanity” (cf Potts 2004).

ii) Within the dynamic context of this wider interdisciplinary conversation, theologians are now challenged to rethink what “human distinctiveness” might mean for thinking about the human person, a being that has emerged biologically

as a centre of self-awareness, identity, moral responsibility, and imagination. Personhood, when reconceived in terms of embodied imagination, symbolic propensities, and cognitive fluidity, may enable theologians to revision their notion of the *imago Dei* as an idea that does not imply any superiority over, or a greater moral value than animals or earlier hominins, but which might, theologically speaking, interactively embed theological notions of human distinctiveness in current evolutionary thinking. I would, therefore, call for a revisioning of the notion of the *imago Dei* in ways that would not be overly static or abstract, but which would instead acknowledge our embodied existence, our close ties to the animal world and *its* uniqueness. Such a notion of the *imago Dei* will deeply respect those hominin ancestors that came before us, while at the same time focusing on what our symbolic and cognitively fluid minds might tell us about the evolutionary emergence of a distinctly human embodied consciousness, and personhood, and the propensity for religious awareness and experience.

iii) In this paper I have argued that the question of the emergence of the historical self in prehistory can never be disentangled from the broader issue of the evolution of embodied human personhood, and, therefore, from evolution of religion and of religious behaviour. This implies that the evolution of distinctive traits and aspects of personhood like morality, sexuality, language, empathy, and the evolution of the religious disposition, played a defining role in the evolution of human communication and interpersonal attachment, and along with the evolution of complex symbolic and religious behaviour, combine to give us important insights into human evolution.

iv) I believe that various scholars (cf as cited in van Huyssteen 2006; 2009; 2010; 2014), have made good arguments for the fact that religion in itself is not adaptive. We humans do not possess, as part of our evolved neurological and psychological architecture, intuitive mechanisms designed by natural selection specifically for the purpose of generating religious beliefs or behaviour as a solution to particular adaptive problems. However, distinctive neurological traits like empathy, Theory of Mind, attachment, altered states of consciousness, HADD, and the evolution of the moral sense/intuitive morality, should all be seen as part of a much broader niche in which many domain-specific mechanisms have been co-opted in the service of religion and religious belief. Religion thus activates attachment processes, but also many other processes like altered states of consciousness and HADD, and it is most probably this combination that is responsible for the widespread success and staying power of religious belief (cf Wildman 2009).

v) Religion and religious faith, in other words, is evolutionarily conditioned, possibly in a few special respects by virtue of the adaptiveness of specifically religious traits,

but in most respects by virtue of side-effects of traits adapted for some other, primarily non-religious purpose (cf Wildman 2009; van Huyssteen 2014:1311f). Understanding human evolution, as well as specifically religious awareness, in evolutionary terms, reveal religion and religious experience predominantly as a combination of side-effects of both adapted and non-adapted features of the embodied human, and might be the most plausible hypothesis for beginning to understand the evolution of religion and religious behaviour. Thus religious and spiritual experiences arise from a suite of bodily capacities with neurological and sensory roots and with vast existential and social impacts (cf Wildman 2009:56,141). For my own interdisciplinary research it is, therefore, significant to think through further the theological implications of this debate where we come to understand imagination, and religion, as of primary importance for understanding the evolution of the human self. This takes us back exactly to the kind of questions that John de Gruchy has so poignantly raised: God's presence and mysterious action in the world, the perennial (and I believe insoluble) *theodicee* problem, human consciousness, the problem of free will, life after death, and the question of mind, body and soul.

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“A hope unprepared to accept things as they are”: Engaging John de Gruchy’s challenges for “Theology at the edge”

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ABSTRACT

This article argues, in conversation with the work of John de Gruchy, for the continuation of the struggle for the integrity of the prophetic witness of the church in the world. Prophetic theology is, as all true prophetic theology always is, indeed a theology “on the edge” – always on the edge of challenge and risk, of confrontation with the powers and principalities of our present age. The article also challenges the waves of Christian neo-fundamentalism washing over Africa and much of the global South with its toxic neo-colonialist package deal of scriptural selectivity, violent homophobia, patriarchal power, and anti-justice agenda. Prophetic theology should be much better prepared to take on the challenges posed by it. Prophetic theology, furthermore, is not rooted in the hope of acceptance by those who rule the world, but grounded in the hope that is unprepared to accept the world as it is and as the powerful have made it; a hope in the reign of God that will overcome the reign of terror that rules our world.

KEYWORDS

Prophetic theology, Justice, The church struggle, De Gruchy, Hope

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1. A THEOLOGY AT THE EDGE

The invitation to contribute to this conversation on theology, the church and continuing struggles is double-edged: it invites reflections on “a theology at the edge” and on the fact that the struggle for justice, peace and the restoration of human dignity in the world, as well as the struggle for the integrity of the prophetic witness of the church in the world “continues.” In and of itself this is an extremely important understanding and point of departure. It determines whether our theology, in the words of the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as it speaks of the church, is ready to “stand where God stands: namely with the wronged and the destitute.”¹

The conclusion I draw from this is that, for the purposes of this discussion at least, theologians recognize that there is a struggle and that it is continuing in its multi-faceted realities across the globe. Second, that the struggle we are speaking of is not the struggle within the halls and the politics of academia: for example whether theology, as a discipline, a science if you will, even the “queen of sciences”, actually belongs in a public university, and has come under renewed attack from the so-called New Atheists.² “The struggle” is the life-and-death struggles of people, oppressed and marginalized and driven to despair by fear, intimidation and the sheer exhaustion of constantly living on the edge of survival against forces too brutal to adequately describe. This is true whether we speak of children pulverized by drones in Pakistan or Afghanistan, women subjected to rape as weapon of war as is the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; men and women beheaded in Iraq because they are considered “infidels” or young African American men murdered by police while walking down the street in Ferguson, Missouri simply because they happen to be black.

Third, we are speaking of a theology deliberately conscious of the fact that it is “a theology at the edge”. So we are not speaking of theology in general. We are speaking of a certain expression of theology, a prophetic theology, the theology that

1 For the full text of the Belhar Confession, see *World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Semper Reformanda*. Accessible: <http://wrcr.ch/belhar-confession/>

2 See e.g. Tara Isabella Burton, “Study Theology, Even If You Don’t Believe in God”, *The Atlantic*. Accessible: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/print/2013/10-study-theology-even-if-you-dont-believe-in-god>. Burton points out that in the United States thirty-seven states have laws limiting the spending of public funds on religious training. She quotes New Atheist Richard Dawkins who argues that “a positive case now needs to be made that [theology] has any real content at all, or that it has any place whatsoever in today’s university culture.”

responded to the struggle in South Africa with prophetic truth and faithfulness, standing with the oppressed in *their* struggles against oppression in colonial times and during the reign of apartheid, and now in global struggles against imperial powers. The expectation is for theology not just to be “relevant”, whatever that may mean, although one hopes that at the very least it means reflecting intellectually and with integrity on the people’s struggles. But it means more; we are informed. It means, in the words of S’bu Zikode of *Abalhali baseMjondolo*, (the Shack-Dwellers movement in KwaZulu-Natal), the ability and willingness “to be inside the struggles of the people and to be inside the discussions inside the struggles of the people” recognizing the people as equals and the primary agents in their own struggles for justice and dignity.³

In the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his classic, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, renowned South African theologian John De Gruchy suggests four “significant and interlocking challenges that have emerged for the church in South Africa at the start of the 21st century.” The first is the livelihoods of the poor. The second: human sexuality and gender justice. Third is the impact of pluralism; and fourth, the effects of globalization.⁴

De Gruchy knows that although the struggle against formalized, legalized apartheid has come to an end, the struggle for justice is not over, and that that struggle has evolved into global struggles, against new forms of global apartheid, new and renewed struggles for justice, all struggles that challenge prophetic theology at its deepest core. There is nothing romantic or sentimental about it. What has kept the struggle against apartheid alive, De Gruchy asserts,

was not any romantic optimism that all would eventually work out for the good, but a ‘hope against hope’ that engendered action. Such hope is unprepared to accept things as they are because it is founded on the conviction that this is not how things are meant to be, and that good will triumph over evil. Keeping such hope alive is the heart of Christian political witness, a hope that celebrates every achievement of justice, no matter how small, en route to the kingdom of God.⁵

3 See Gerald West, “Peoples’ Theology, Prophetic Theology and Public Theology in Post-liberation South Africa”. Accessible: <http://www.academia.edu/7263452>, 13,14.

4 John W. De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th anniversary edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), xiv.

5 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, xiv.

De Gruchy is absolutely right of course. The important point he makes here, in my view, is not just that we struggle in hope, but that both the struggle and the hope that drives it are rooted in hope against hope, which means at its essence that despite the “realities” we are facing, political, economic and otherwise, threatening hopelessness and deadly retaliation from the powers that be and their collaborators even in the church, it is unprepared to accept the world as it is, that it is driven toward justice, grounded in the expectation of the kingdom of a God who is all in all justice. A God, who, we are promised, shall not rest until justice is established in all the earth. (Is 42:1-4)

During the past two decades, both at the start of our democratic era and as events have unfolded in South Africa, some of us have engaged, and continue to engage those challenges for the church and for theology. The struggle for justice and peace, for dignity and equality, for a genuinely transformed society reflecting, nurturing, and promoting true, reconciled diversity; for a better, ecologically responsible, justice-responsive, more humane, inclusive world continues, and it is waged on many more fronts than we foresaw twenty years ago.

There were those, theologians still standing in the tradition of critical, prophetic theology, who insisted early on amidst the euphoria of, and following 1994 that in South Africa we are nowhere near a “post-apartheid” society, that political liberation must be followed by socio-economic liberation and that this liberation is not to be found by plunging blindly into the abyss of neoliberal capitalism in unthinking imitation of the rich North. We argued that the shift of power into black hands is not *ipso facto* a shift toward the kind of justice that defines freedom, and that the people having the vote is not the same as the people finding their voice. That the struggle to understand the power of power and its ways with human beings did not end with the struggle against apartheid. We pointed out that our reconciliation process would remain incomplete, unfulfilled, unsustainable, and cheap if it is de-linked from the costly demands of the systemic *undoing* of injustice and the equally systemic *doing* of justice, from personal and political repentance, restitution and the restoration of human dignity. We warned that an incomplete revolution is the same as a postponed revolution, and that if we could not find the courage to squarely and honestly face the sins of our past, we would not gain the integrity to face the challenges of our future. We were largely ignored, marginalized, and in some ways attacked and targeted because our expression of a liberation theology within the context of post-

1994 South Africa did not fall in line with the demands of the new, national, official narrative of a post-apartheid, de-racialised, reconciled rainbow nation.⁶

In that sense, prophetic theology is, as all true prophetic theology always is, indeed a theology “on the edge” – always on the edge of challenge and risk, of confrontation with the powers and principalities of our present age. In South Africa, we are called to do our theology within the context of a constant awareness of a post-1994 government who, in perfect imitation of the pre-1994 government, is a government, as John Calvin admonishes King Francis I of France in his letter to that king included in his *Institutes*, “whose heart is presently turned away and estranged from us – even inflamed against us.”⁷ Calvin ends his letter to the king with the prayer, in my view not incidentally but quite consciously reminding the king of the One who has ultimate authority and to whom *all* authority is subject, “that the Lord, the King of kings, establish your throne in justice and your seat in equity.” This is not wishing-well politics, pious sophistry or sycophantic babble. It is prophetic admonition. First, the king may be king, but the Lord is “King of kings”. The king serves a higher authority.

6 For a sermon from early 2001 (on Psalm 126), critical of South Africa’s socio-economic and political choices in the negotiations and since 1994 and the resultant processes of impoverishment of the poor, see Allan Boesak, “The Tears of the Sower”, in: *The Fire Within, Sermons from the Edge of Exile* (Cape Town: New World Foundation 2004, and Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2007); for more sustained critique see Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience, African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2005); Allan Boesak, *Running with Horses, Reflections of an Accidental Politician* (Cape Town: Joho! Publishers, 2009), especially chapters 11, 13, and 18; Allan Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope, Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014); Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012); Tinyiko Sam Moluleke, “May the Black God Stand Up, Please!: Biko’s Challenge to Religion”, in Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson, (eds.), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 115-126.; *The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics*, papers from a consultation hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) in partnership with the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Spirituality, published by IAM, (Stellenbosch: 2009); For a secular prophetic critique raising the same concerns see e.g. Richard Calland, *Anatomy of South Africa, Who Holds the Power?* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006); Christi van der Westhuizen, *White Power: The Rise and Fall of the National Party* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007); Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy* (Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 2002). See also my forthcoming *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid, The Challenge for Prophetic Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

7 *Institutes*, Vol. I, Preface.

Second, the “throne” and the “seat” that is, the way earthly authorities should rule, should be in justice and equity. These are the criteria God has laid down, by which the king’s rule will be judged, these are the expectations of the people. These are the criteria that will determine whether any rule is legitimate.

Thus it is also a theology *with* an edge: a prophetic, political edge which comes from the edge Jesus himself gave to his ministry in the proclamation of the kingdom of God, and in his embrace of the struggles of the poor and the powerless, in such stark contrast *with* and in opposition *to* the reign of Caesar and the Temple elites in Jerusalem. That struggle, reminding earthly powers and authorities of the limits of their power and the criteria for judging their rule, continues.

It is a theology at the edge in another sense as well, I think. It is one which De Gruchy only fleetingly refers to, but then it is one that none of us discerned adequately in the final years of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties. I am speaking of the waves of Christian neo-fundamentalism washing over Africa and much of the global South with its toxic neo-colonialist package deal of scriptural selectivity, (otherwise known as biblical inerrancy), violent homophobia, patriarchal power, and anti-justice agenda. Its justification of war and violence in the name of Jesus, its religious exclusivism coupled with unbridled political ambition in its so-called dominion theology, and its prosperity gospel grounded in the embrace of and enslavement to capitalist consumerist ideology. In its alliances with capitalist power and the global media, it represents an edge, perhaps in the sense of a precipice, and prophetic theology should be much more aware and much better prepared to take on the challenges posed here. It certainly is dragging Africa, its churches and its societies, to the edge of a disaster every bit as devastating as colonialism.⁸

However, John De Gruchy also points out that we have misconstrued that hope, and ended up with the “hope for a time after apartheid, articulated by many in the churches as an anticipation of the kingdom of God.”⁹ While it provided the energy for perseverance in the dark night of despair he says, it also showed us as “somewhat naïve”: De Gruchy explains: “The end of apartheid did not mean the end of colonial

8 The highly negative impact of this religious force on the questions of justice, equality, and dignity as embraced by the South African Constitution for the life of women, especially with regard to gender-based violence for example is only just beginning to be scrutinized in any systematic, academic fashion. See Elna Boesak’s Master studies research in progress at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, “Channelling Justice? A Feminist Exploration of North American Televangelism in a South African Constitutional Democracy.” The impact on the rights and dignity on the lives of LGBTI persons is another example of what exactly we are facing here.

9 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 230.

power relations, or more precisely, the power relationships that had been established in the colonial era along racially discriminative lines.”¹⁰

In our discussions on the meaning of a theology at the edge while the struggles for justice, freedom, and human dignity continue, some socio-historical, theological reflections on De Gruchy’s thoughts may not be out of place, keeping in mind my suggestion that a “theology at the edge” is as much a theology “*on* the edge” and a theology *with* an edge.

2. A RESTLESS PRESENCE

Throughout the history of struggle in South Africa, prophetic Christian leadership had always had a strong presence.¹¹ For all intents and purposes this leadership came to an end with the exile of the liberation movements in 1960, and probably definitely with the deaths of Chief Albert Luthuli in 1969 (for the ANC) and Robert Sobukwe (1978) for the Pan Africanist Congress. One can, of course, certainly argue that as far as the ANC is concerned it did find some expression in the leadership of Oliver Tambo, albeit in drastically changed circumstances in exile that made its recognisability, let alone its acknowledgement and practical application, much harder. I suspect that Tambo had to have held his Christian convictions as much more personal than political and public, except where it was expected of him as leader of the ANC in their efforts to build relationships with churches in the struggle.¹² This leadership represented the presence of a prophetic church, never fully reflected in the institutional church, but in the prophetic witness and faithful resistance of the multitude of Christians whose faith led them to political activism, the church as “a restless presence that disturbed the church and the world”¹³ as Charles Villa-Vicencio describes it, who understood the call to costly discipleship, righteous choices, and sacrificial witness. It is, in the words of Martin Luther King,

10 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 230.

11 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, 47ff.

12 For example, in 1988 Oliver Tambo and I shared a platform in New York City’s Riverside Church in the context of that church’s decision to honour the legacy of assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme. Tambo’s speech was about the struggle but clearly written for a Christian audience, and one I felt, he was not uncomfortable with at all.

13 See Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid, A Socio-Theological History of the English-speaking Churches*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 5.

Jr., “the church within the church, a true ecclesia and the hope of the world.”¹⁴ It is a church driven by a radical gospel of compassionate justice, hope and liberation.

That is why throughout the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s for example, the struggle was so much characterized by a spirituality of politics, so inspired by prophetic faithfulness, so infused with sacrificial commitment. It is a spirituality that would not be so explicitly reclaimed until the final phase of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s.

But then came the 1960s, the decade of the Sharpeville massacre, the Rivonia trial, exile and Robben Island, bans and persecutions on a scale not experienced before, and the unprecedented suppression of all political activities. In that period the voice of that prophetic church fell silent. We – I am speaking of those of us in the black churches who followed our prophetic calling in our participation in the campaigns for freedom – allowed our fear of the apartheid regime to overcome our fear of the Lord and our prophetic faithfulness. We acted as if the exile of the liberation movements was also the exile of the prophetic church, and as if the imprisonment of our leaders was also the captivity of the prophetic church.

There were of course voices that made them heard throughout that difficult decade, mainly through documents and declarations, and not for one moment do I underestimate their value and the expressions of protest they represented at the time. But in truth they were by and large the voice of white Christian leadership, moderate voices who could not authentically reclaim the radical, nonviolent, Christian militancy of an Albert Luthuli for example. Nor could they speak with any credibility for the black masses or for the black church.¹⁵

At best, these voices may have represented a theology of protest, while what we actually needed was a theology of resistance. We did not understand well enough that protest, without the framework of resistance, without the proper understanding of the realities of power and powerlessness, and without the vision of enduring liberation, was doomed to remain a form of begging.¹⁶ We would beg to be listened

14 See Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”, in James M. Washington, *A Testimony of Hope, The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 300.

15 I refer especially to the Cottesloe Declaration (1960) and the Message to the People of South Africa (1968). I pursue this argument in more detail in another context in a forthcoming publication, Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis and Global Apartheid, The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan), chapter 3.

16 It was philosopher and literary scholar Adam Small who in 1973, at the beginning of the waves of protest of that era against apartheid through the Black Consciousness

to; beg to be responded to; beg for crumbs from the oppressor's table because we did not vigorously enough claimed our seat at the table. Neither did we make clear enough that the table set by the oppressor is not acceptable to a people bent on defining their freedom for themselves. So we protested against the *consequences* of the decisions made for us by others while we should have been the ones making the decisions regarding our own future for ourselves.

As far as the black church is concerned, however, while we may have turned silent on the issues that mattered, we did not stop preaching. We did not understand that in a very real sense, we had come, to use the phrase of American homiletician Richard Lischer, to "the end of words",¹⁷ or more specifically, to the end of those particular kinds of words. If words were to be spoken, other words were called for. However, we preached not a liberating Jesus. We preached a colonized, domesticated, de-justicized,¹⁸ depoliticized, spiritualized Jesus, as if the Jesus speaking in Luke 4: 16-20 did not exist, or did not speak of us. We preached a Jesus that knew nothing of justice or of judgment on injustice. The black church preached a Jesus that would not be offensive to the apartheid regime, not cause discomfort for those whose approval we sought, nor constitute a danger to ourselves. Prophetic faithfulness, for the most part, was alien to the life and testimony of the black church.

3. BIKO AND THE CHILDREN OF SOWETO

Then, in the 1970s, two major events occurred: Steve Biko and the coming of Black Consciousness, and Soweto and the revolution of the children. We were at first stunned, then shamed, then converted by Biko's critique on Christianity and more specifically, on the black church. "If in the past," Biko told us, "Christianity was the perfect instrument for the subjugation of the people, now the interpretation of Christianity and the Bible are the tools for the maintenance of subjugation."¹⁹

Movement, first raised the question of protest as a form of begging, providing valuable food for thought as we entered the final stages of the onslaught against apartheid through the United Democratic Front, see Adam Small, "Blackness versus Nihilism", in: M. Mothlabi (ed.), *Essays on Black Theology* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972), 14-15, cited in Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed, Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 7.

17 See Richard Lischer, *The End of Words, The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

18 I borrow the term from Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: rights and wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 96ff.

19 See Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like, Selections from his Writings* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996), 58-59.

In the first instance Biko was criticizing the white missionaries and the white church for their use of our faith and the Scriptures to justify oppression. But in the second instance Biko was challenging the black church. *We* were the ones whose interpretation of the Bible became what he called a “poisoned well” from which our people were forced to drink. There was, he seemed to say, nothing redemptive, liberating or hopeful we had to say to the people.

The children of Soweto did not so much critique us with words as with their courage, their sacrifices and their blood. They showed us not only the emptiness of our words, but called for the end of those – to be replaced by deeds of courage and commitment. That was the beginning of what African American theologian Gayraud Wilmore, in regard to the situation of black America, called the “radicalization of Black Christianity.”²⁰ It was then that we were able to move from a theology of acquiescence to a theology of refusal, from a theology of resignation to a theology of hope, from a theology of protest to a theology of resistance. Then we began to ask the fundamental questions about power and powerlessness; when we understood that the issue was not simply one of equality in society but really the question: what *kind* of equality in what *kind* of society? We then began to inquire not just about justice and injustice, but also about the nature of structural, systemic injustice. We talked not just about poverty. We began to debate the socio-historical processes of generational wealth and generational *impoverishment*.

In the process we began to understand the struggle better and in different terms. It became clear to us not only that there *was* a struggle, but that the struggle was *ours*, not somebody else’s, not even another generation’s but *ours*; that in that struggle one had to take sides and that neutrality was no longer possible. We understood that the struggle, in a very real sense, was not simply black and white, that in other words, there were black people and white people, for different political and personal reasons, on either side of that struggle. Seeking the enemies of liberation and justice based on skin colour and racialised sentiment was both delusional and futile.

We understood as well that it was not just about the prophetic voice of the church but also about the prophetic *participation* of the church in the resistance to evil. It became clearer to us that the church was fundamentally divided: there was the church that benefited from our oppression and therefore acquiesced in it, and there was the church that suffered under oppression and felt called to rise up in resistance to it. Both could not be the church of Jesus Christ. That was the understanding that

20 See Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism, An Interpretation of the History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1973], 2006).

would become so fundamental in the theological discourse and call to repentance, conversion, commitment and action of the *Kairos Document*.

Our thinking became more systemic and we discerned that the struggle was not just against the consequences of an evil system but should be aimed at the pillars that upheld that system. And as we better understood apartheid both as a system of capitalist, racial domination, and an evil, based on a deliberate distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we defined the pillars on which it was built:

- Colonialism and its vile legacy, which included slavery, subjugation, dehumanization, dispossession and generational trauma;
- Social Darwinism, expressed in customs, laws, and attitudes enshrining white superiority and black inferiority which provided the basis for South Africa's peculiar racist, pigmentocratic societal structures;
- Socio-economic exploitation inextricable from, but not exclusively based on race, but also for example on gender injustice;
- Cultural domination resting on cultural annihilation on the one hand and cultural assimilation on the other, the key being that the culture of the subjugated peoples and groups are always deemed worthless compared to the culture of the dominant groups, and therefore unworthy of consideration and contribution;
- Power in its different forms: psychological, ideological, political, and economic power; as well as the power derived from international (white) solidarity and global systems of domination;
- A belief in white innocence based on a powerful ideology of white, and in many ways particularly Afrikaner, victimhood;
- Violence in all its forms: systemic, structural, and pervasive; ideological and physical violence, guaranteeing and solidifying control;
- And finally, and in South Africa absolutely crucial, ideologized religion, (sometimes called civil religion) its belief systems, central to which was the belief in white exceptionalism in general and Afrikaner chosenness in particular with its unique and exclusive covenant with God, and its power in the justification of domination and subjugation.

Once we understood this and found the words to express it both politically and theologically, the church could reclaim its prophetic role in the struggle for justice and freedom. Pertaining to this last point, for those of us in the black churches of the Reformed tradition, it was of course, of utmost importance to reclaim that tradition

as a tradition of freedom and liberation, and the Bible, as Richard Horsley *et al* speak of it, as “a faithful history of resistance against empire”²¹ and imperial power.

4. OUTMANEUVERED BY DEMOCRACY?

Then, in 1994, for the second time, that prophetic church lost its voice. In an analysis over several pages in my *The Tenderness of Conscience, African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*, I explore some of the reasons for this,²² and Gerald West explains how successful the ANC leadership, from Mandela to Mbeki, had become in appropriating biblical language, stealing that language from the church so to speak, crafting it into not just the language of government but the language of the ANC itself²³. This, coupled with expectations which De Gruchy, correctly, calls “somewhat naïve”, not only outmanoeuvred the church, it made us feel redundant.

He especially identifies our “confusion” in the “anticipation of the kingdom of God” with the coming of democracy under ANC rule. Again, De Gruchy is right. We did identify the victory of the ANC with the victory of justice. We went further:

- We forgot the lessons we have learnt from our earlier understanding of the workings of power. We forgot that it is never just *who* is in power, but *how* they use their power when in power;
- More importantly perhaps, we have not reckoned with the fatal, seductive power of power and that, in its inverse imitation of God, it is not a respecter of persons;
- We forgot what John Calvin had taught us: that the true measurement of a just government is how justice is done to the poor, the wronged, and the oppressed.
- We confused access to political power with closeness to the throne of God.
- We exchanged our prophetic faithfulness for what we called “critical solidarity”, except that our solidarity was more expedient than critical. More tragically, but unavoidably, our solidarity with those in power all too soon replaced our

21 See Richard A. Horsley, (ed.), *In the Shadow of Empire, Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville, KY: WJKP, 2008).

22 See pp. 154-159.

23 Gerald West, “People’s Theology”, pp. 2-5: “Not only was Mandela the one who seems to have called for the return of religion to a national public role, he is also the one who has set the parameters of religion’s public role.” Mandela made clear that that role should focus on matters spiritual, working toward what the ANC called “the RDP of the soul”, leaving the matters of politics, social and economic reconstruction and development (RDP) to the state.

solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, because, in the new situation of (black) power politics in South Africa, there was so little *benefit* in it.

- We surrendered the terrain of prophetic faithfulness and allowed it to become the playground of political expediency and propaganda. So before we knew it, Thabo Mbeki and Trevor Manuel, (and presently Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa) were more at ease with using the Bible to expound their particular brand of state theology than we were able to offer prophetic witness to the nation standing on the truth of that very same Bible.²⁴
- We confused Nelson Mandela's South Africa, "a nation at peace with itself and the world" with the shalom of the kingdom of God. And we did that because as a church we no longer stood where Christ stands, and is always to be found. Instead, we found our place and took the elevated and lofty view from the hill where the Union Buildings stand, and no longer looked from the depths of the flooded valleys of misery and poverty where the neglected and the destitute still cry for freedom and justice.
- Finally, and perhaps more important than we dare to admit: in a much more intimate, but simultaneously spiritual and political way, as we became more and more mesmerized by Mr Mandela, we became more and more embarrassed by Jesus.

Unless we understand what that fiery nineteenth century black Presbyterian preacher, Henry Highland Garnet, understood about the situation of black people in the United States when he warned that "there are pharaohs on both sides of those blood-red waters",²⁵ we might not understand that we have not only lost our edge, but that we are standing on the edge of what might be a precipice rather than at the edge of a rediscovery of our prophetic calling and of the things that make for peace in the world today.

But there is a matter equally as grave. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission started its work, it created a terrain where the prophetic voice of the church could,

24 See Gerald O. West, "Thabo Mbeki's Bible: The Role of Religion in the South African Public Realm after Liberation", in: Duncan Brown, (ed.), *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa, New Perspectives* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 87-106; on Zuma and Ramaphosa and their use of the Bible, see Gerald West, "People's Theology, Prophetic Theology, and Public Theology in Post-liberation South Africa".

25 See Henry Highland Garnet, "Call to Rebellion", in *Crossing the Danger Water, Three Hundred years of African-American Writing*, edited and with an introduction by Deirdre Mullane, (New York: Doubleday, 1993, 11-121). The citation is on p. 119. Also accessible at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2937t>

and should have been vitally decisive. I am not speaking of the willingness or unwillingness of churches to testify before the Commission. I am, rather, speaking of bold intervention in the processes of reconciliation itself; of taking the initiative to define reconciliation, not to protect the “purity” of its Christian nature, but in order to prevent it from becoming no more than a form of political pietism.²⁶ To ensure that a term so intrinsically biblical should not become too easily estranged from its radical character; too easily reduced to an excuse for the domestication of justice and consequently of the continuation of injustice.

We never publicly, consistently, and prophetically proclaimed reconciliation as not a handy tool for, and relatively harmless result of, politically negotiated settlements, but as a radical biblical demand even though we were aware of how reconciliation as a recognizably Christian concept became the hallmark of South Africa’s reconciliation process. We did not remind the nation that if reconciliation is to be real, durable and sustainable, it has to be radical and revolutionary, and that reconciliation, in order to be real, has to be effectively and attentively translated into political and socio-economic reality with the restoration of justice at the heart of it.

We did not insist, publicly, prophetically, and consistently, what we have known from the beginning and actually preached during the struggle, that reconciliation is not possible without confrontation of evil – both the evil from the past, the evil of on-going injustice, and the evil of acquiescing to that injustice because it is to our benefit. That reconciliation is not possible without equality, which means profound and fundamental shifts in power relations. Neither is reconciliation possible without the restoration of justice, human dignity and hope. We forgot to remind the nation that reconciliation is not possible without restitution. I do not mean reparation that has resurfaced in the debates around reconciliation in South Africa – I mean *restitution* that is hardly ever mentioned. Most importantly we did not proclaim as loudly as we could, that reconciliation is costly, that it is never cheap, and that a “miracle” such as we claim our transition to be becomes valueless if it is divorced from the costliness of remorse, repentance, restitution, and the restoration of justice, and the consequences of these for politics.

Forgiveness, John De Gruchy reminds us in his important work on reconciliation as “restoring justice”, is a word that easily “trips off our tongue.”²⁷ I agree. Christians

26 For the way I use this term see Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation, Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012).

27 John De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 171.

use it effortlessly, ceaselessly and thoughtlessly. We did not, consistently, publicly, and prophetically remind the nation that forgiveness is indispensable, but never sentimental; that forgiveness has personal, communal, and political dimensions; that forgiveness includes respectful room for righteous anger. We did not insist that forgiveness is always the prerogative of the victim, never the right of the perpetrator; that it is a gift, never earned but always freely given, and that forgiveness is a soul-restoring, life-giving act, but without the reciprocity of justice it becomes, in the words of an old, wise pastor of an African independent Church in Mangaung²⁸, “a forgiveness that kills.” We did not prophesy to the nation that there are things that while they might be forgivable, are never excusable,²⁹ and that only through the grace of God does the inexcusable become forgivable. And we did not spell out, never even asked, what the political implications of such an understanding might be.

We did not publicly, consistently and prophetically insist that whichever way one describes it, and despite its appropriation by politics or even its *necessity* for politics, forgiveness is not naturally a word from the political lexicon. One expects it rather at the end of a process of remorse, contrition, repentance, confession and conversion, as perhaps a comma or a question mark, not simply as triumphalist exclamation mark at the end of negotiations. Forgiveness, by its very nature, belongs in the realm of the impossible, and the impossible is only possible through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And again, we did not ask what the political implications of *that* understanding might be.

Frank Chikane has made a point that is relevant here. The process of equating reconciliation with negotiations and political settlements, (as we have done in South Africa) he writes, is a “simplistic understanding that robs the word reconciliation of its deeper meaning. Negotiations can result from political pressures or from a mutual decision by parties to avoid a war because the costs are too great. This does not mean that the parties have had a change of heart – they are simply relocating the battleground to the negotiating table or to parliament.”³⁰

28 A participant in my “Conversations on Reconciled Diversity” held during 2011 in Mangaung, Bloemfontein under auspices of the University of the Free State.

29 I borrowed this thought from journalist Elna Boesak in her response to FW De Klerk’s May 2012 public attempt to defend and justify apartheid in an interview on CNN: “Apartheid can be forgiven but not excused,” see Elna Boesak, “Time for apartheid’s truth to be spoken,” *Sunday Independent*, May 21, 2012. Accessible: <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/time-for-apartheid-s-truth-to-be-spoken-1.1301002>. [Online 9/20/2014].

30 Cited by Mahmood Mamdani, “Reconciliation without Justice”, *Southern African Review of Books*, 46, (November/December 1996), 4-6.

Chikane is not wrong, of course. In truth though, I have argued elsewhere,³¹ the battleground is not relocated to parliament or the negotiating table, or even the board room table where so many of our political aristocracy find themselves these days. Negotiations and political settlements have relocated the battleground to the townships and the streets, to the shacks and the hovels and the refugee camps, where people do daily battle with poverty and hunger and rats, and with the consequences of decisions made by political and economic elites who cannot adequately represent the interests of the poor.

It is relocated to poorly equipped schools in areas where children do battle with inferior education and the consequences of inadequately trained teachers. The battleground is shifted to the hearts of children who struggle with trampled dreams, fragmented hopes, and piecemeal joys; to the lives of young people bewildered by disappointments and disillusionments who face heavily armed soldiers in tanks with stones and who get shot to death from Israeli gun boats on the beaches of Palestine. It is relocated to the violent streets where generationally induced violence of colonialism and apartheid, slavery and genocide still makes its victims by the millions. It is relocated to the Wall in occupied Palestine where Israeli apartheid strips Palestinians of their rights, their ownership of the land and their dignity through relentless checkpoints where hope is surrendered to the merciless tyranny of irrational fear and nationalistic egotism. The battle is relocated to the bodies and souls of women, terrified at home through gender-based violence and betrayed in church through the pernicious heresies of female subjugation and male domination and through a denial of the law of Christ.

The battle is relocated to hospitals and clinics in poor communities where there are never enough doctors or nurses, where medical equipment does not work properly, where clean bed sheets are an unbelievable luxury, where the infant mortality rates are frighteningly high, and where HIV infected patients cannot take their medicine even if it is free, because they do not have any food to eat.

It is relocated to the lives of the unemployed who do battle with political promises, government statistics, and the grim realities of their own lives; to the lives of the barely employed who battle with waves of despair, remnants of hope, and elusive dignity. It is relocated to the rain forests of South America and the plains of Canada where indigenous communities do battle with the carelessness of governments and the untrammelled greed of international corporations. It is through those eyes and

31 See Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 156-157. Much of the following paragraphs are taken for that argument.

on these battlegrounds where the struggles, disdained and ignored in the elite pacts made by the powerful and privileged continue.

This is the edge of our theological reflection and action, and of our prophetic witness.

5. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

So where do we go from here, now that South Africa's democracy is twenty years old but the foundational tenets of our Constitution have already come under threat and even sustained attack? Now that, as journalist Elna Boesak once remarked, we have buried the ghosts of racism, ethnocentricity and narrow, tribal nationalisms in a grave so shallow they rise to haunt us at the slightest provocation? Where do we go from here, now that our foolish embrace of neo-liberal capitalism has immeasurably deepened the misery of millions while immeasurably enriching the few, and the gap between rich and poor has made us one of the most unequal societies on earth?

Economist Sampie Terreblanche, in his aptly titled book, *Divided Land*, after painstaking and sober analysis in six preceding chapters, speaks the prophetic language the church should speak when he exposes the facts and statistics to the light of prophetic truth:

When the ostentatious consumerism, the waste, the greed, and the arrogance of the very rich are compared to the misery and deprivation of so many impoverished people, we have no choice but to be shocked at the vulgarity and offensiveness of the lifestyles of the rich. Are the rich and the poor really citizens of the same South Africa? Has the time not arrived for a new Codesa [Convention for a Democratic South Africa] on the question as to why so many persons are so inordinately rich and so many more persons so hopelessly poor? Why do the churches not engage in open war on behalf of those undeservedly poor and against those so undeservedly wealthy? How are we ever going to bridge the gap between rich and poor in this divided land?³²

That is indeed the question.

32 Sampie Terreblanche, *Verdeelde Land, Hoe die oorgang Suid-Afrika faal* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014), 148, my translation. Terreblanche makes the point that according to Swiss bank Credit Suisse there are, amidst the shocking poverty, some 71,000 dollar-millionaires in South Africa, citing Die Burger, 15 March 2012. Elsewhere in the book Terreblanche speaks of the need for a new "Justice and Reconciliation Commission" p 141, and again on p 147.

Our gains in gender justice are seriously threatened and in many ways already overcome by the grim statistics that make South Africa the “rape capital of the world.” Where do we go from here, now that our dedication to the protection and promotion of human rights, equality, and dignity for all, including those from the LGBTI community are threatened, attacked and flouted by Christian fundamentalists, ignored by judges and magistrates who pay obeisance to patriarchy but show little allegiance to equal justice; by gangs of Christian thugs who have taught us the meaning of “corrective rape” in the name of Jesus? Where do we go from here, now that carelessness, corruption, and incompetence are paralyzing services to the people and laying waste to the hopes of our elders and the dreams of our children? Where do we go from here?

As a very first priority, I should think, we must not abandon the correctness of our decision to forsake revenge, retribution and punishment and to pursue reconciliation. In fact we must publicly, consistently and prophetically reclaim its foundational righteousness. But we must work hard to make reconciliation real, radical and revolutionary. We must step away from the temptations of what I have elsewhere called political pietism and Christian quietism and the lure of cheap reconciliation, and embrace justice, dignity and costly discipleship. We must take the restoration of justice and human dignity to its full, public, vivid and concrete conclusions.

We must disavow the illusionary, deliberately created perception that the South African transition was a smooth, consensual, happy process, fair and just because we left the wealth and privileges of historically advantaged South Africans untouched, in exchange for the swift creation of a new, privileged elite of black South Africans. We must critically engage the idea that these arrangements are not only realistic political necessity but in fact the key to political and social harmony, and a model for other nations and societies. A theology at the edge will seriously and thoughtfully question why we are required to believe that “sunset clauses” and “the realities of the balance of power” are more expressive of reconciliation than “justice”, “equity” and “restitution”. We must ask much more critical questions about the secret talks and hidden negotiations that preceded the public negotiations, the so-called “end game” that dictated the rules for and content of what was to be called “reconciliation.” Indeed, we must seriously challenge the very notion that the “end game” was played by a selected few in the dark, privileged exclusivity of pre-negotiations, rather than by the people, out in the open, on the streets of battle and blood, sacrifice and death.

We must resist the temptation to turn what is a history of struggle into a single biography. I mean this: We must combat and correct the version that claims that the miracle of our transition was the work of Mr Mandela all on his own. Highly-respected American historian Taylor Branch, writing about Nelson Mandela’s

release from prison and his speech on that day in Cape Town, writes, “On that day in February 1990, Nelson Mandela, with one speech from the city hall balcony, demolished apartheid by calling for a united, democratic South Africa, free of revenge and retribution.”³³ Thus in one single sentence Taylor Branch eliminates centuries of struggle, denies all the sacrifices the people of South Africa have made, all the blood spilt by men, women and children in the course of three centuries of resistance against oppression. In the process he completely isolates Mandela from his people and their struggle, making him the ideological captive of the very forces who supported the apartheid regime for decades, who drunk the blood of our children in their lust for profits and who rejoiced when Mandela was branded a terrorist and left to languish in jail, robbing his people of his leadership and inspirational presence.

Such a distortion of history, such denial of the people’s ownership of their struggle and of their leader does not elevate or honour Mr Mandela. It imprisons him all over again, leaving him at the mercy of new ideologies of domination, manipulation, and dispossession. It trivializes the struggle and diminishes the sacrifices of the people who prayed for him, fought for him and kept our hopes and the dream of freedom alive with their blood all those twenty-seven years he was in prison.

A theology on the edge of rediscovering prophetic faithfulness demands that we be honest enough to step away from the naiveté John De Gruchy has warned us against; mature enough, wise enough, and true to our prophetic calling enough to see that the result of an incomplete revolution may very well be the realization of a postponed revolution. We must insist that a revolution - by whatever name it is called in the grand narrative of post-1994 South Africa - that simply re-baptizes the existing order instead of challenging and transforming it is not revolution. And we must realize that our revolution will remain incomplete until the people’s sacrifices, dreams and hopes are honoured with systemic and sustainable justice. A theology on the edge can do no less than this.

To end aggression and war; to seek a better, more just, more humane world in the undoing of injustice and the doing of justice; to save the earth from the calamities of our greed and rapaciousness; to restore human dignity as we protect and enhance human rights; to become the embodiment of hope for young and old; to believe that it is not wrong to dream and hope and work for justice; to reclaim the Bible from the

33 See Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 771. See my more detailed critique in “Deification, Demonization and Dispossession: Reconciliation and the Hopeful Sizwe”, in the Fall issue of *The International Journal of Public Theology*, 2014.

distortions of those who wish to use it as justification for injustice, inhumanity and ideologies of domination and violence: this is the edge our theology is facing.

It is also a theology on the edge of a sense of hopelessness. As things stand, prophetic theology is not on the edge of celebrated acceptance by the political aristocracy and privileged classes of the world. Greed and power continue to feed on poverty, powerlessness, fear, and hopelessness. All over the world, people's struggles for justice are responded to with mindless, desperate brutality. As things stand, president Zuma is far less likely to seek wisdom from John De Gruchy and Desmond Tutu than he is to ask advice from Ray McCauley and the court prophets of Victory Chapel International.

But the hope in which prophetic theology is rooted is not the hope of acceptance by those who rule the world and exult in the way things are. It is rather the hope that is unprepared to accept the world as it is and as the powerful have made it; a hope in the reign of God that will overcome the reign of terror that rules our world, knowing that, as De Gruchy affirms, "God's reign is always on behalf of those who suffer and are oppressed". So, De Gruchy writes, "we celebrate every achievement of justice no matter how small, knowing that it is a step towards the coming of God's kingdom."³⁴

As such it is a theology immersed in the struggles of the people, given its edge by the hopes of the people and the revolutionary message of Jesus. A theology on the edge of hopeful, real, durable anticipation: prepared for derision, persecution and suffering, for revilement and struggle, but unprepared, totally and resolutely, to accept the world as it is and things as they are.

34 De Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, xiv.

Theology on the edge – Some reflections

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Needless to say I was delighted and deeply honoured when the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University decided to hold a conference in celebration of my 75th birthday in 2014. I am grateful to all those who made it possible, to all who presented papers, and to all who participated, and I am now delighted that most of the papers presented, together with some given at the Volmoed Colloquium which preceded the Stellenbosch Conference, have been brought together and published in this volume. Those at the Colloquium were all related to doing theology in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as were the opening two lectures at the Conference. The rest of the lectures related to other major themes that have emerged in the course of my theological journey, though they appeared on the programme roughly in reverse order. We began with Bonhoeffer because of his influence on my theology from virtually the beginning, but ended with the church struggle in South Africa to signal that though this, too, was dominant from very early, it is a task and a struggle that continues. Other themes, namely theology and the aesthetics, Christianity and art, Christian humanism and theological engagement with science, made up the substance in the middle.

The question may justly be raised as to whether my choice of themes over the years was simply a matter of changing taste on my part, or responding to the theological developments elsewhere or, worse, a bad case of dilettantism. My response to such criticism would be threefold. The first is that throughout my theological development and work there has been what Bonhoeffer, following Bach, referred to as a strong Christological *cantus firmus* influenced chiefly by Bonhoeffer himself. This has held my theological polyphony together and given it coherence. The second is that the themes were all, and remain, situated in the South African context even though I have increasingly addressed these in global perspectives. The third is, as a matter of fact, the themes suggested themselves as I reflected theologically on Christian faith, and usually arose both out of previous work or were prompted by others with whom I was in discussion. So there was continuity as well as new directions.

The title of the Conference was “Theology on the Edge.” In some ways it is a presumptuous title as it brings to mind the phrase “cutting edge research,” that is, research that is well in advance of the more mundane work done by some others. But that was not the intention behind the choice of the theme. We had in mind, rather, the kind of theology we wanted to celebrate and at the same time encourage the new

generation of South African theologians to engage in. The title was prompted by a *Festschrift* in honour and memory of my son, Steve's life and legacy, *Living on the Edge*. Steve was, I think and many would agree, one of a new breed of South African theologians who was showing the way forward, in some way building on what I had managed to do, but taking it further. It was always my hope to fade into the background as he led the way. Sadly, his contribution was cut short.

Doing theology on the edge means theological engaging reality in all its dimensions, whether politics or aesthetics, science or spirituality, in ways that are transformative. This is not to deny that theology exists in the service of the life and mission of the church, but to affirm that it does so precisely because the church is called to live on the edge in its engagement with the world, not in a closet busy with its own affairs. As such, theology is not a safe or comfortable enterprise designed to give us a ticket to ordination, but a way of participation in the life of the world from the perspective of faith. As such, in doing theology we find that we are taken personally to the boundaries of our existence. And we soon discover that it is impossible possibility, something we engage in knowing full well that it will always remain beyond us because of the subject who addresses us.

Theology has to do, then, with matters of life and death; it is cosmic in its scope and yet touches us at the centre of our personal lives and relationships. It does so because theology, as I have learnt over the years, is all about being led into mystery -- the mystery of the "living God" who meets, confronts and embraces us in the midst of life, especially when we are come face to face with personal suffering and seek to be in solidarity with others who suffer through injustice. When the Bible speaks of the "living God" it is not simply saying that "our God," unlike the idols of others is alive, but rather that God is not a cultural entity we control and in whose name we justify ourselves. The "living God" of the Bible confronts us in surprising ways that always disturb the status quo and us. It is, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" Only then do we begin to understand that it is precisely these hands that embrace us in grace and love on the boundaries of our own existence.

It has taken me a lifetime to discover that theology is an attempt to understand this mystery within and beyond ourselves, that it is an impossible possibility. I certainly had little understanding that this was the real task ahead of me when I became a student of theology. But even so I cannot remember a time since those first steps into theology when I did not feel passionate about doing so, and a certain delight and joy in doing theology. And the more I did the more I discovered that that studying theology was not just a necessary step towards ordination, an academic exercise for the spiritual dilettante, but a life-long odyssey or quest, a way of being human in

the world. In fact anyone who thinks or acts, prays or worships, as if there is some ultimate mystery is a theologian, however rudimentary or sophisticated. But not everyone who does such things or believes in God discovers that doing theology can become a lifelong adventure, a personal odyssey driven by a passion that can become all consuming.¹ That is why I cannot understand those who felt called to the ministry who are not passionate about doing theology. It does not add up.

So passionate did I become about doing theology that I also became passionate about the need to share my passion with others, whether with students in my class or a worshipping congregation, or with people outside the church in academic or public life. I became passionate about the need to help develop theology specifically within South Africa whether within the church, the academy or public life. This is why I was so encouraged and excited by the participation of so many equally passionate theologians at the Colloquium and the Conference, by the way in which doing theology is flourishing at this time in South Africa in so many places despite obstacles, and by the work of graduate students and a growing number of younger colleagues. We cannot take all this for granted. We have to keep working at it. But at least there seems to be a fresh enthusiasm for doing so and even an excitement in doing so.

But I have one regret in all this. In the heyday of doing theology in the struggle against apartheid, the way forward, especially after the rise of Black Theology and the Soweto Uprising, was often led by black theologians. How dynamic that was, and what a challenge for me as a “white theologian.” Some of the most significant moments in my theological reflection came as a result of listening to the voices of Manas Buthelezi and many others of that and the next generation, including Tinyiko Maluleke and Allan Boesak who gave the final paper at the Stellenbosch Conference. So what is my regret? My regret is that so many of the black theologians of the past are no longer with us, or else have not been theologically as active as they were, and that there are some but too few who are standing on their shoulders.

If the Conference and this volume of papers contributes to the on-going rebirth of theology in South Africa, then all I had hoped for will be taken forward. For my passion now as I pass my sell-by-date is that the next generation of South African theologians will be equally passionate about doing theology on the edge as some of us have tried to be in the past. Doing theology may be an “impossible possibility,” but it is a possibility, a demanding yet joyous one.

1 From my book *A Theological Odyssey*, (Stellenbosch: SUN, 2014)

