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World Christianity as Postcolonializing of Theology

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*Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology
and Biblical Studies*

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

SKILLS AND PRACTICES OF LIBERATING FAITH

Edited by
Sigurd Bergmann and
Mika Vähäkangas



The authors of this volume have taken contextual theologising to a new level. While each essay is rooted in its own particular context – South Africa, Costa Rica, northern Finland, India, parts of Europe – each is also rooted in a World Christianity, postcolonial, and postmodern context as well. They demonstrate that contextual theologising needs to be and is indeed an integral, guiding perspective of any theologising today.

–**Stephen Bevans, SVD, Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD** Professor
of Mission and Culture, Emeritus, Catholic Theological
Union, Chicago, United States

By focusing “on those modes of doing theology that place and celebrate the context at the centre of the praxis of theology”, this book dares to call everyone who is preoccupied by God-talk to be able to put into words their daily encounters with the divine. It acknowledges what people of faith from all walks of life, especially the indigenous people with their rich experiences of the Divine, have always known and lived as theologians of life – even when the so-called classical Christian dogmatic theologies ignored or undermined their existence. In this age of the Anthropocene, this book calls us once again to listen to the heartbeat of the Creator. This heartbeat is indeed experienced by humanity and creation as a whole in their situatedness. S/He calls us to live in respect of compassionate service to our interconnectedness and interdependence. The theologies contained in this book espouse the importance of our diverse identities living, reflecting, and engaging in praxis for justice, dignity and peace so that all the inhabited earth can live in a kinship of diverse species in a living cycle orchestrated by the communion of the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, Three in One. This book is a must and timely read, especially since 2020 has provided another level of situatedness in response to the Covid-19 [pandemic]. Wherever we find ourselves, we have an encounter with God that is contextual as well as universal as we fight for life and new normalcy.

–**Fulata L. Moyo**, Circle of Concerned African Women
Theologians, Executive Director, STREAM, United States

“Contextual Theology”, the editors hold, is “that theology which explicitly places the recognition of the contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process”. With this volume, they push the agenda of contextual theology beyond methodological considerations and offer a rich resource for exploring how such situated theologies take place in practice. Well-selected contributions from different geographical, cultural, and confessional contexts take a wide range of thematic approaches to demonstrate what it means to do theology in the face of contemporary challenges. Together, they allow for a deeper understanding of the significance of a contextual model for theology: what emerges is a theological practice that proceeds in collaborative, critical and engaged ways.

–**Judith Gruber**, Research Professor, Research Unit Systematic
Theology and the Study of Religions, Faculty of Theology
and Religious Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Apartheid theology understood itself as a return to the “old paths” of reformed orthodoxy – but was subsequently recognised as a deeply contextual theological legitimisation of settler colonialism. As this volume recognises, it is therefore important to place the recognition of the contextual nature of theology “at the forefront of the theological process”. Would this recognition suffice for a “liberating faith”? Not by itself, since doing theology requires the kind of skills, practices and virtues illustrated by the contributing authors. This does require imagination and a constructive approach – but also some vulnerability – perhaps to be deconstructed and reconstructed by a liberating God making this world a home for all.

–**Ernst Conradie**, Senior Professor, University of the
Western Cape, South Africa

Contextual Theology

The notion of “contextual theology” has a long and rich history, stretching back to the 1970s.

This book advances that history by exploring stories, images, and discourses across a worldwide range of geographical, cultural, and confessional contexts. Its 12 authors not only enrich our understanding of the significance of the contextual method, but also produce a new range of original ways of doing theology in contemporary situations.

The authors discuss some prioritised thematic perspectives with an emphasis on liberating paths, and expand the ongoing discussion on the methodology of theology into new areas. Themes such as interreligious plurality, global capitalism, ecumenical liberation theology, eco-anxiety and the Anthropocene, postcolonialism, gender, neo-Pentecostalism, world theology, and reconciliation are examined in situated depth. Additionally, voices from indigenous lands, Latin America, Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe and North America enter into a dialogue on what it means to contextualise theology in an increasingly globalised and ever-changing world.

Such a comprehensive discussion of new ways of thinking about and doing contextual theology will be of great use to scholars in theology, religious studies, cultural studies, political science, gender studies, environmental humanities, and global studies.

Sigurd Bergmann is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim; Visiting Researcher at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University; and Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center at Munich University. His research covers religion and the environment, and religion, arts, and architecture, and among his multiple books and articles are *Weather, Religion and Climate Change* (2020), *Religion, Space and the Environment* (2014), *In the Beginning Is the Icon* (2009), and *God in Context* (2003).

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com/index.php/en/publications.html), including *Vol 7: Interreligious Solidarity for Justice in Palestine-Israel – Transcending Luther’s Negation of the Other*, 2017 (www.reformation-radical.com/files/RR-vol-7-Eng.pdf).

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Foreword

Context has never been a completely absent consideration in the development of Christian theology. The fact that so many of the canonical writings of the New Testament were letters, addressed to specific early communities of believers, attests to that. Even theological works that claimed to rise above contexts nonetheless mirrored their contextual origins in their attempts to escape more limited frameworks and purposes. But it has been times when the Christian message seemed most disconnected from the situations in which it was being articulated that have brought attention to context most to the fore.

The years of the mid-20th century were such a time. The decolonialising of much of Africa and Asia prompted quests for a new sense of identity among newly independent nations. The Christianity that colonisation had brought to them was less than a good fit for moving into a different future. At the same time, events such as the Second Vatican Council for Roman Catholics, and the meetings of the World Council of Churches for Protestants and Orthodox, foregrounded that urgent local concerns were not being addressed in the given readings of the Gospel. For example, bishops from Latin America at the Second Vatican Council felt that the “universal” focus on atheism and secularisation that pervaded the agenda did not address the poverty and oppression that was foremost in their own experiences. The CELAM meeting in Medellín a few years later gave sharper contour to that – now understood as the birth of the theologies of liberation. In the early meetings of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in the mid-1970s, these two approaches were referred to as “ethnographic” (focused on identities) and “liberative” (focused on social change).

Fifty years on, what is meant by “context” has become increasingly complex to define. It has led to a deepened awareness of just how many voices need to be attended to in presenting and living out the Christian message. Those multiple voices – arising out of greater recognitions of distinctions of race, class, gender, and other dimensions of human difference – give a much more complex picture of what happens at the intersections of these alterities. The experience of globalisation in all of its positive and negative repercussions has heightened the sense of how the local configures itself

toward any proposal of a universal. Interreligious encounter puts the whole self-perception of the Christian in another, contextualising light. Climate change and health pandemics put the European Enlightenment narratives of progress and universal improvement severely to the test. An awareness of context in theology can no longer be one option among many for interpreting the Christian message at any given time or in any given place. Rather, it both unveils for us the immense complexity which must be addressed in doing theology today, and uncovers dramatically deep fault lines in human society of injustice, oppression, and other forms of violence that stalk and threaten human community.

This collection of chapters on contextual theologies today gives a good overview of these complexities, offering insightful studies of specific locales and the issues shaping them, as well as more general reflections on what might be learned from them for other settings. They open up new vistas on responding to crises, on partnering with other belief traditions, and on drawing us into new horizons which cannot be ignored, such as the ecological plight that all peoples now face. They remind us to attend to dimensions beyond the social and political to include the aesthetic and the artistic as giving voice to the human cries of suffering and hope. The whole collection is well framed by an opening chapter that provides an excellent overview of what is now an immensely complex interplay of factors that can all claim a place in the “contextual” and concludes with a chapter showing how concepts of “World Christianity” can offer a new framework for envisioning Christian theology beyond older ones such as missiology or intercultural theology. All in all, this book makes a good reference point to where Christian theologians have reached in understanding and articulating better how the Christian message is presented and enacted in our world today. At a time when prevailing narratives of where the world believes itself to be are facing a severe challenge from the fracturing of political, economic, and social orders that is now so evident, and when the growing ecological crisis along with health pandemics is upending all social arrangements to reveal profound social fractures, the message of the Reign of God needs to be heard in ways especially attentive to the current human plight. This collection on contextual theology will help all of us find the way forward.

Robert J. Schreiter

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We would like to thank our co-authors for a rich, intense and fruitful communication, in a process that unfortunately could not take place collaboratively face to face but was carried out in a constant flow of messages and texts back and forth. Nonetheless, we are happy that our exchange of experiences, considerations, and reflections could lead to a work to be handed over to the curious reader. Hopefully it will catalyse a dynamic development of the discourse on context and theology, and empower others to shape our common future and earth with the tools of *doing contextual theology*.

We would also like to thank Dr. Marilyn Burton in Edinburgh for her skilled and dedicated work of language editing. We are furthermore grateful for subsidies from the Faculty of Arts at the NTNU in Trondheim, the Lund Mission Society, and the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies of Lund University, who supported the edition, and to Joshua Wells and R. Yuga Harini for their professional and smooth assistance with and production of the work. Finally, we want to thank the Board of the Institute of Contextual Theology in Lund for encouraging and lively discussions throughout the process.

Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vähäkangas



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1 Doing situated theology

Introductory remarks about the history, method, and diversity of contextual theology

Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vähäkangas

The contextual nature of the theological process

The notion of “contextual theology” has a long history, beginning with its gradual introduction in the “Fund for Theological Education”.¹ The term gained prominence through both the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne Movement adopting it in the 1970s.² Theologians in Africa and Asia were already interested in how cultural contexts affected the interpretation of Christianity, and the term “contextuality” was deemed a fitting metaphor for that enterprise.³ The practice of contextualising theology has much older roots; for example, theologians in India in the early 20th century developed in their projects a specific awareness of the significance of culture. There has of course for a long time, one might say from the beginning, been an awareness that Christian faith must be expressed in ways intelligible to specific contexts, as Robert J. Schreiter states in his extensive historical mapping.⁴ In general, most of the history of mission is characterised by an intense awareness of how Christian beliefs, ethics, and practices interact with non-Christian cultures. In the past decades, contextual theology has developed significantly in both depth and scope, and the term is, as Angie Pears aptly states, “an evasive and fluid term to which a number of meanings, some contrasting, could and do attach themselves”.⁵

While some regard contextual theology as a paradigm for theology in general, others prefer to regard it as a more particular mode of contextualising God-talk with regard to different themes. While theologians nowadays seem to agree to an unproblematic consensus that “all theology is contextual”,⁶ at least to some degree, it seems to be highly controversial to discuss in what sense and to what extent this is the case. A clear definition of contextual theology is still lacking, while at the same time we can find several operational clarifications. Conceivably, this undetermined and open situation of a diversity of understandings might also play a central role in stimulating and developing further thinking about *doing situated theology*. One of Schreiter’s pioneering works creatively investigated how what he called “local theologies” are constructed,⁷ but as “local” has more and more turned into a contrasting term to “global”, it might be more obvious to talk

about different modes of situatedness. Our intention here is neither to strive for a crystal-clear definition on the one hand nor to defog the approach on the other. Pears' definition will serve in this work as a solid basis: she regards contextual theology as referring to "that theology which *explicitly* places the recognition of the contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process".⁸ The impact of the context on the understanding of and reflection on who God is, and how he/she acts, is a given in such an approach, even if one accepts that not all theologies explicitly signify this. Again following Pears, the editors and authors of this book do not simply regard all theology as contextual in an epistemological way, but focus on those modes of doing theology that place and celebrate the context at the centre of the praxis of theology.

Of course, the emergence of contextual theology also has its own historical context. It is closely interwoven with globalisation in general and Christian theology's globalisation in particular, and the geographical shift of Christians from the so-called West to the South that has taken place since the late 19th century and led to a majority of Christians being in the Global South since the 1980s. Contextual theology's own context of emergence is characterised by ecumenical, trans-confessional and translocal social and cultural processes, and in comparison with earlier approaches such as liberation theology and political theology – of course likewise contextually aware – explicit contextual theology is not only nurtured by an intense exchange with theories from philosophy and social sciences, but includes a constructive and self-critical awareness of theories of culture. The difference between political and liberation theologies on the one hand and contextual theology on the other is, of course, a matter of definition. While the former are characterised by a high level of awareness of the political contexts of doing theology, later processes of contextualising theology have developed a broader interaction with cultural studies and, to some degree, also with geography. In particular, a high degree of awareness of the significance of gender, postcolonial, and environmental dimensions deepens earlier approaches to political theology. Schreiter aptly describes two different types of contextual theology: a) that which is driven by the search for identity (such as Asian, African, Korean, and other approaches), and b) that which is related to demands for social change (such as Latin American liberation theology).⁹ Cultural contexts and interpretations of how God acts affect each other in a variety of ways that one can describe using the model of a reciprocal "circle of function".¹⁰ While contexts affect the theological process in one way, expressions of faith affect the context in another qualitative way. One of the intentions behind this book is to explore how the "tradition" of political liberation theology can meet and enrich younger approaches of contextual theology.

While classical Christian dogmatic thinking served as a rational system of order for separate, distinct "loci", contextual theology represents a shift in

which reflection on God and experience with him/her is directly and indissolubly linked with praxis. Theology takes place as *doing theology* within contexts. God acts in the Here and Now. Even if, as promised previously, we will not expend energy here on deepening the epistemological controversy about what theology “is”, the reader should keep in mind that the older classical paradigm for systematic theology is still at work and wields a rather dominant influence that should not be underestimated.

More recently, both the challenge to interact as a Christian believer with other religious traditions¹¹ and the challenge to respond to the inter- and transcultural processes of globalisation¹² have offered significant impulses towards deepening and developing contextual theologies further. Here we should especially emphasise the processes of increasing migration and global mobility,¹³ and the climate-and-environmental-change related transformation¹⁴ of both local and nomadic theologies from people on the move. Both appear as central driving forces that will accelerate the change of theology today and tomorrow. Contextual theology seems to be becoming more transcultural, transreligious, green, and mobile.

In spite of all the creative developments in the field of contextual theology, many still seem to limit it exclusively to the field of missiology. In this way, contextual theology is regarded only as a method of dialoguing with theories about culture. Thus, for example, the *Oxford Handbook in Systematic Theology* defines theology as Christian teaching and Christian claims about God and reality, and the explication of Christian doctrine.¹⁵ The editors of this influential work sadly examine the significance of cultural contexts only in their section on “Conversations”, wherein they consider important theoretical interlocutors for theology, such as, for example, natural science. Theology thus still remains primarily a kind of scholastic practice wherein enlightened theologians serve as interpreters of God’s revelation, which at best they can debate with others in different conversations. The explicit profession of the theologian appears as more important than the perception and interpretation of God him/herself in context. Dogmatic theology remains profoundly apologetic, while contextual theology operates in a less apologetic, more constructive manner.¹⁶ Contextual theology, by contrast, encounters the living God in the diversity of the Here and Now, and approaches experiences of him/her with open senses, minds, and bodies. All who are experiencing God at work are potential theologians. Tradition is, on this view, a tool that offers a large deposit of words, images, and practices, but it is not an end in itself.

Contextual, constructive, or world theology?

Recently, it has also been possible to follow the development of different interrelated approaches such as “constructive theology”, “global Christianity”, or “World Christianity”, and “lived theology”,¹⁷ which mainly emerge in the fields of missiology, systematic theology, and ecumenical theology.

Sometimes, these concepts overlap and converge with the approach of contextual theology; sometimes, they tend to drain its provocative power.

A significant criterion for differentiating between, for example, contextual and constructive theology seems to lie in the valuation of how suffering, violence, and the struggle for social and environmental justice affects the interpretation of God's work. While representatives of constructive theology underline the significance of both tradition and the context, they tend to lend an intrinsic value to tradition, such that the expression of faith is made dependent on the understanding of some kind of internal doctrinal nucleus of truth. The expression of this truth must take place in context, but it remains entirely unclear to what degree the context, wherein God acts, is affecting and also transforming tradition.

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, for example, characterises constructive theology as "an integrative discipline that continuously searches for a coherent, balanced understanding of Christian truth and faith in light of Christian tradition (biblical and historical) and in the context of historical and contemporary thought, cultures, and living faiths".¹⁸ It is hereby obvious how one gives tradition the superior position over the situation in which God acts. To regard the activity of deliberate constructive imagination as a significant human skill and a necessary element of doing theology, as Gordon Kaufman does,¹⁹ is a very different thing from accepting how deeply God's work might be entangled with the worldly, material and bodily dimensions of the Here and Now. If the context is only something wherein God appears as Creator and Liberator, one runs the risk of undervaluing the significance of the created world and thereby of the Creator him/herself. Constructive theology in this sense makes us aware of the necessary human condition in the process of doing theology. But it does not do justice to the significance of the cultural and material dimension of the Here and Now wherein God has chosen to act.

Constructive theologians are constantly afraid of becoming bound to the context in their God-talk. But continuing along the paths of incarnation, the human bodily, the politically, and the materially polluted is nothing to be afraid of. Especially if they follow Catherine Keller's ingeniously invented notion of "inter-carnation", constructive and contextual theology do not necessarily need to dwell on different sides of the mystery of God's incarnation, the Creator's diverse flesh-becoming in, within, and into a creation that since then has been inhabited by the Spirit at play in the inter-carnation of being-members-of-each-other.²⁰ On the contrary, it is deep in the material that the Spirit dwells. Still, one should not draw an all too sharp distinction between constructive and contextual theology, as they can complement each other and as the human ability of constructive imagination without doubt also needs to be an essential part of reflecting on God in Context.²¹

Another highly relevant recent development is the emergence of the field of so-called Global or World Christianity.²² These fields sprout primarily from the background of Mission Studies, but gain additional impetus

especially from Anthropology of Christianity, the rather recent branch of Cultural or Social Anthropology where Christianity is studied, mostly in the Global South.²³ This area of study tends to turn increasingly empirical, and while many of the analyses of the data are theologically informed, the emphasis tends to lie on lived religion. The approach has tended to become akin to Religious Studies in the sense that the analysis is carried out from outside the faith community studied, and the author is not involved in constructing theology in the sense of personal existential involvement. Systematic theological approaches are not common, even if in some of these studies there may be sections of analysing systematic theological topics in the studied communities.²⁴ There are, however, some studies that resemble the World Christianity approach in the sense of making use of empirical data from the Global South while clearly dealing with questions traditionally counted as systematic theological.²⁵

For the self-understanding of Christian faith communities in a changing globalised world, contextual theology offers a most valuable tool for interpreting the correlation between one's own traditions and the varied situations in which believers experience the God who acts. Following central tenets of liberation theology, the option for the poor is assigned a central role in the interaction between the liberating God and the suffering, and in the theological interpretation of the ongoing, culturally multifaceted history of salvation. One might, on an epistemological level, question whether the normative critical dimension of doing theology is a necessary, integral part of contextual theology. Without diving too deeply into such a discussion, we can observe in the still-young discipline of contextual theology that such a deep entanglement of the committed critical and the spiritual has been active throughout its short history.

The options for those who are suffering from various injustices and the interpretation of the crucified God have been intimately interwoven in contextual theology. In that sense, one can trace the strength of central tenets in liberation theology. Lived faith has been experienced as liberative praxis, and doing theology has implied reflecting on how God is at work not simply in general but in particular with regard to the challenges and needs of the suffering. Victims have, however, not been regarded as objects for mercy, but as subjects of their own transformation in synergy with the God who liberates.

Contextual theology has thus continued along the older classical paths of reflecting Christ's incarnation, his suffering on the Cross, his resurrection from the dead, and the Son's and the Spirit's liberation of the living. It has furthermore also kept classical deep tenets of trinitarianism alive in interconnecting and integrating faith in God, as the Creator of everything in heaven and earth, and faith in the work of the Son and the Spirit for the liberation of all. Even if the history of contextual theology is young and embedded in the modern global world, it could without doubt also be regarded as striving for a deep continuity with central principles in classical

theology, as it tries to reconstruct and express substantial beliefs in new modes in interaction with new cultural situations and contexts. Contextual theology also appears in such a lens, in its “circle of function”²⁶ between context and theology, as an attempt at an essential correlation of tradition and situation. Contextual theology transforms selected substantial dimensions of theology’s classical tradition into a new world that demands new responses from Christian faith.

This book intends to catalyse the ongoing discussion about contextual theology with perspectives from different regions and contexts around the world. It will in this way offer an exciting mapping of the multifaceted *and* united state of liberating contextual theology today, and will thus offer significant stimulation and inspiration to the further discourse about methodology in systematic theology and mission studies in a new political key.

In the 12 following chapters, the book will develop the agenda of contextual theology further by offering insights into how this overarching approach makes sense in the wide range of geographical, cultural, and confessional contexts of the world today. In this way, it not only allows a deeper understanding of the significance and relevance of the contextual model for theology and how it works in practice, but also produces a new range of original ways of doing theology in the face of contemporary challenges. Contextual theology hereby represents a radicalisation and a breaking free from monistic cages of thinking and acting.²⁷ The range of tools for doing theology is significantly expanded and the agenda of themes to be addressed is elaborated in a constructive way.

The chapters

The book has its origin in the celebration of the 25-year anniversary of the Institute for Contextual Theology association in Lund, Sweden. A one-day conference on the theme of “Liberating Theology” took place at the Faculty of Theology on 24 November 2017, and four keynote addresses by Chun Hyung Kyung, Teresa Callewaert, Sigurd Bergmann, and Martha Fredriks were presented, of which two are rewritten and included in this volume. The association in Lund is just one of several bodies that have been inspired by the Johannesburg Institute for Contextual Theology in South Africa. Other communities and associations have been founded and developed at the intersection of academy, church, and society. Furthermore, the emergence of the Kairos Europe process has produced significant impetus towards the development of liberation theology in Europe, which will be analysed in one of the chapters.

In order to inspire this process further, we (the editors) decided, along with the board of the Institute for Contextual Theology, to invite theologians from other world regions to contribute to what Stephen B. Bevans has often described as “prophetic dialogue”²⁸ about the diversity and communality of contextual theology today. We are happy that so many have

responded positively and shared their interpretation of God in Context from within their own experiences, spheres, struggles, and visions.

In Chapter 2, Dion A. Forster takes as his point of departure the way in which public theology remains a deeply contested approach to theological engagement and reasoning among South African theologians. In his view, the nation remains deeply divided by the lingering legacy of apartheid theologies, apartheid ideologies, and the tangible consequences of apartheid laws. Has public theology any place, or validity, in this context? Some suggest that public theologies are too universal in nature, and so are both domesticated and domesticating. These critics suggest that we should remain firmly committed to black African liberation theologies as an alternative to public theologies. While the critiques are valid, the proposed solution is inadequate for the author since the theologies that are advocated can be exclusive and run the risk of curtailing the liberative and transformative intent of the Christian faith. Rather, what is required is a contextual public theology that can build a bridge between the universal claims of the Christian faith and the particular concerns of the South African context. This chapter presents an example of such a “contextual public theology in South Africa” by reflecting on the findings of a four-year-long qualitative empirical study on the “politics of forgiveness” among black and white South Africans. The intention is to illustrate how a contextual theology bridges the gap between the universal and the particular within the South African theological context.

African Pentecostalism is at the core of Chapter 3, where Chammah J. Kaunda approaches kenotic imagination as a decolonial analytical tool for unmasking the cultural and historical roots of contemporary manifestations of “authority” in African Pentecostalism in relation to sexual- and gender-based violence. The chapter argues that neo-Pentecostal notions of authority represent social, economic, political, and cultural contextual forces. Kenotic imagination framed within decolonial thinking can help to interrogate a religious paradox within neo-Pentecostalism, that is, the simultaneous rejection and uncritical perpetuation of core elements of traditional cultural forms of authority. The chapter highlights how African neo-Pentecostalism reinforces and legitimises authority by adopting sacred attributes that give unquestionable and unaccountable power to their clergy, creating an authoritarian atmosphere in which women and children are easily subjected to sexual abuse. By drawing examples from cases of sexual abuse of women and children by neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa and Nigeria, the chapter stresses that this contextualised form of authority is dangerous to the wellbeing of women and children. The author develops a life-giving kenotic theology of authority which is boundary-crossing from the centre to margins.

From Africa we move to northeast Scandinavia. Elina Vuola in the Chapter 4 analyses two groups of Eastern Orthodox women in Finland and their relationship to the Mother of God. The analysis is based on 62 ethnographic

interviews and 19 written narratives. The focus is on two groups in two marginal contexts within Orthodoxy: women converted from the Lutheran Church and the indigenous Skolt Sámi women in Northeastern Lapland (all cradle Orthodox). Both contexts reflect a broader ethno-cultural process of identity formation. The converted women tend to reflect on their image of the Mother of God in relation to their previous Lutheran identity, in which the Virgin Mary plays a marginal role. In Skolt Sámi Orthodoxy, the figure of the Mother of God is less accentuated than St. Tryphon, their patron saint. The Orthodox faith and tradition in general have been central for the Skolts in the course of their traumatic history.

Chapter 5 takes us to Germany, and reflects the history of ecumenical liberation theology. Ulrich Duchrow explores how it arrived in Germany and Europe after 1968. The author reflects on the early beginnings of liberation theology as they were presented by Ruben Alvez and Gustavo Gutiérrez in Europe in 1969. He traces the historical influence of liberation theology on ecumenical theology and ecumenical practices, and discusses its outstanding significance for faith communities and social movements. In this way, the chapter contributes highly relevant historical insights into the contemporary history of ecumenical, political, and contextual theology in Germany and Europe. As the author himself has acted as a prominent representative of ecumenical liberation theology and later as initiator of the European Kairos movement, the chapter offers exciting insights from a contemporary witness.

Atola Longkumer upholds the tradition of liberation theology and draws our eye in Chapter 6 to a border location in India. Her interpretation is premised on the persistence of debilitating poverty and powerlessness. Drawing from an indigenous/*adivasi* location in India, the author argues that contextual theology needs to critique the inherent social and cultural hierarchies in particular contexts in order to be truly liberative and conducive to flourishing for every member of the community. The difficulties faced by women – and other cultural boundaries that exclude and alienate the vulnerable – persist, maintaining an economic and cultural status quo. Inclusive justice continues to be elusive; the chapter argues that it is possible only when the alleged cultural norms within contexts are overcome and intentionally replaced with egalitarian practices.

In 2008, the three main banks of Iceland suffered an economic meltdown. Sigríður Guðmarsdóttir in Chapter 7 takes a closer look at the downward spiral of the Icelandic economy after the financial crash, which has deeply affected the living standards of Icelanders, and simultaneously opened up the potential for complex cultural identities. In the first years of the new millennium, the Icelandic banking system grew rapidly and was boosted by the risk-seeking confidence of financial tycoons who called themselves “Outvasion Vikings”. These new Vikings represented themselves as leading peaceful “outvasions” into the global market instead of the violent invasions of the Vikings of yore. What rhetoric of identity is operative in language in a melding of Viking mythologies and economics? What kind of political,

gendered, sexual, or religious transgressions take place in such a climate and its aftermath? The chapter uses the theories of political theorist Chantal Mouffe and the contextual theologies of Marion Grau and Joerg Rieger to probe theologically into the context of this postcolonial and economic Icelandic existential crisis.

While Guðmarsdóttir sought to wrap her head around the multifaceted transgressions in the aftermath of a national economic meltdown, and Longkumer portrayed the contemporary global situation of immense marginalisation that makes many vulnerable through an economic system beholden to wealth and profit, Teresa Callewaert investigates in Chapter 8 the question of theology's potential for developing critique of the hegemony of global capitalism. This is treated through an engagement with two writers from the beginnings of liberationism, i.e. theologically grounded critique of oppression and exploitation. The Peruvian Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Iranian Shiite thinker Ali Shariati both represent an understanding of religious tradition as a possible vehicle for conscientisation and the construction of awareness, self-reliance, and resistance, since not only is it uniquely positioned among the poor, but it also contains insights into poverty, God's will, and hope. The analysis points to the continuing ability of theology to offer particular insights and avenues for thinking about resistance. However, such strategies can position critiques both within and outside of traditions. It is suggested that a position that relates to the methods, justifications, and tools of tradition itself carries potential to uncover distinctly theological insights that can contribute to political critique without surrendering either its radicalness or its tradition.

While Chammah J. Kaunda earlier focused on African Pentecostalism's impact on women, David Emmanuel Singh offers in Chapter 9 insights into Pentecostal processes of doing theology, and relates these to Sufi-inspired faith. "The image of the Path or journey" has been used by charismatics across religions, in Christianity as well as in Islam. The Sufi-inspired millennial sect of Mahdawiyya offers a more detailed view of such a journey. Here, in a journey involving retreat and trust in God, remembrance-ritual, and speaking from experience, the disciples aspire to "vision/illumination", but not as an end in itself. The experience serves as a preparation in readiness for missionary outreach. The chapter explores similarities between the Mahdawi case and the charismatic Christian tradition in which the author was raised. Pentecostalism and Mahdawyya obviously belong to different religious spheres; what connects them is their affiliation with millennialism, and their marginality to their respective traditions. Using the method of "comparative juxtaposition", the author aims to search for theological meaning behind apparent similarities. Inspired by phenomenology, the chapter investigates how human effort in seeking nearness with God is not a one-sided exercise; God reciprocates human effort at seeking him. Phenomenology involves, for the author, comparative descriptions of the subjects' experiences as they appear or are presented to the researcher; theology

presupposes the reality of God, and God's initiatives and responses towards the creatures. Singh sets out on a search for meaning as both a student of Sufism and a Christian traveller on a Godward journey.

Environmental challenges have in recent years gained more and more importance. Sigurd Bergmann in Chapter 10 focuses on the notion of "Anthropocene", which implies a shift from the Holocene to a new epoch in the earth's history. At present, scientists in various disciplines are intensely and critically discussing from different angles what this means. Bergmann explores this through an ecotheological lens, and begins by discussing critical arguments against the triumphalist interpretation of the Anthropocene. In a second step, it formulates the central challenge within the discourse and searches for antidotes. Finally, theological skills are explored, to widen our vision from the past and present to a future beyond the Anthropocene. In this way, the chapter shows how contextual theopolitics might contribute to experiencing the earth as Ecocene.

Environmental challenges are also at the core of Chapter 11, as Panu Pihkala elaborates a theology of "eco-anxiety" as liberating contextual theology. Numerous people suffer nowadays from various psychological impacts of environmental problems. Sometimes the symptoms are severe and are called "eco-anxiety". The chapter explores theological contributions which have sought to channel eco-anxiety into hope and action. "Theology of eco-anxiety" is a new form of liberating contextual theology and, according to the author, it will probably gain new forms as the environmental crisis escalates.

The two final chapters address forward looking issues of subjects, objects and methods of liberative contextual theology.

Contextual theology has produced not only words and rhetorical expressions but also a vibrant sphere of images. Volker Küster in Chapter 12 does justice to this wide field and explores contextualisation through the arts. Christian Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has produced a contextual theology in its own right beyond words, offering an incredibly comprehensive, rich, and multifaceted area of material religion. The chapter introduces a theoretical framework for how to approach and understand this area, and demonstrates its feasibility by examining and interpreting in detail concrete works of art.

In the concluding Chapter 13, Mika Vähäkangas analyses the emergence of the discipline of World Christianity as a process of theology's post-colonialising. Theology as an academic Eurocentric discipline is challenged to renew itself. This challenge comes from academia, where traditional closed confessionalism is no longer acceptable in pluralistic and increasingly secularised societies. However, modernist projects aiming at scientific and objective theologies are not viable due to the realisation that all theology is contextual. Theological Eurocentrism is also challenged from the perspective of ethics. The renewed academic theology needs to be multireligious, confessionally open, and culturally inclusive. Many of these changes have recently taken place in mission studies, as it has transformed into World

Christianity. Undoubtedly, this process can contribute to the renewal of academic theology, and the chapter explores this potential with special emphasis on Northern Europe.

Doing theology – “making-oneself-at-home” on earth

While earlier works, often monographs,²⁹ mostly offer methodological reflections on and arguments for why theology should be contextual, this book provides in its 12 following chapters a wide range of examples of how this takes place in practice. The approach of contextual theology does not function here as a loose, lowest common denominator, but rather as a deep, central driving force for intensifying the interpretation of “God in Context” in the lens of both tradition and experiences in concrete local situations. Doing theology herein serves as what we might describe as a cultural skill of “making-oneself-at-home”³⁰ on earth in particular localities and of “being alive”³¹ in specific contexts. Through its arrangement of themes and contexts, the book furthermore catalyses the ongoing negotiation about what count as urgent, relevant, and prioritised challenges to Christian faith today. The geography of the chapters provides a worldwide survey of fruits grown in indigenous lands, as well as in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and North America, and Australia.

To sum up, this book explores the significance of contextual theology today. It does not offer a comprehensive map of all that is going on in the field, but allows insights into selected contexts and themes where the agenda and method of theology’s contextualisation are taken further. As such, it rather offers encouragement and constructive contributions from within, instead of a bird’s eye metatheological perspective. Discussing a range of prioritised thematic perspectives in a worldwide range of selected geographical, cultural, and confessional contexts, it intends to catalyse the ongoing discussion on the methodology of doing theology. Themes such as interreligious plurality, global capitalism, ecumenical liberation theology, eco-anxiety and environmentalism, postcolonialism, intersectional fluidity and gender, neo-Pentecostalism, contextual public theology, world theology and forgiveness and reconciliation are emphasised in depth. Voices from indigenous lands, Latin America, Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, and North America are entering a “prophetic dialogue” on what it means to contextualise theology in a globalised and changing world today.

In this way, the book not only allows a deeper understanding of the significance and relevance of the contextual model for theology and how it works in practice, but also produces a new range of original ways of doing theology in the face of contemporary challenges. Contextual theology thus represents a radicalisation of and a breaking free from monistic modes of thinking and acting. It offers new skills for practices of liberating faith. The range of tools for doing theology is significantly expanded and the agenda of themes to be addressed is elaborated in a constructive way.

Notes

- 1 The Fund for Theological Education was formed in 1958 in Accra, Ghana, and became in 1977 the (Ecumenical) Programme for Theological Education. Cf. Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, and Joshva Raja, eds., *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 114.
- 2 Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1990), 19.
- 3 Justin Ukpong, "Contextualization: Concept and History," *Revue Africaine de Théologie* 11, no. 22 (1987): 149–63. On using contextualisation as an umbrella term bridging inculturation and liberation theologies, see Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Stephen Munga, *Beyond the Controversy: A Study of African Theologies of Inculturation and Liberation* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1998).
- 4 Robert J. Schreiter, "Contexts and Theological Methods," in *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue: Essays in Honor of Stephen B. Bevans, SVD*, eds. Dale T. Irvin and Peter C. Phan (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018), 101–17, 102.
- 5 Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.
- 6 Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, *God in Context: A Survey of Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1–7 (1st ed. in Swedish, 1997); and Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*, 168.
- 7 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM, 1985).
- 8 Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*, 1, emphasis ours.
- 9 Schreiter, "Contexts and Theological Methods," 107–12.
- 10 Bergmann, *God in Context*, 3.
- 11 Cf. Paul Knitter, "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).
- 12 Cf. Volker Küster, *Einführung in die interkulturelle Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).
- 13 Cf. Susanna J. Snyder, "Displacing Theology: God-Talk in an 'Age of Migration,'" in *Home and Away: Contextual Theology and Local Practice*, eds. Stephen Burns and Clive Pearson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 104–23.
- 14 Dieter Gerten and Sigurd Bergmann, eds., *Religion in Global Environmental and Climate Change: Sufferings, Values, Lifestyles* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).
- 15 John Webster, "Introduction: Systematic Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook in Systematic Theology*, eds. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1, 6, www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199245765.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199245765-e-1?print=pdf.
- 16 A different view is held by Aruthuckal Varughese John, who locates modern apologetics within the framework of contextual theology. Aptly, he notes that apologetics represents a product of modernity, and suggests that we should strive for a "Spirit-shaped apologetic" (219) that can re-enchant the world, based on an understanding that the Holy Spirit's work changes everything. Aruthuckal Varughese John, "Third Article Theology and Apologetics," in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission in a Pluralistic Context*, ed. Roji T. George (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2017), 202–22.
- 17 The project on "Lived Theology" was established by theologians in the United States in 2000 in order to reflect on the interconnection of theology and lived

- experience, and to offer academic resources to social justice and human flourishing. Cf. www.livedtheology.org/overview/, accessed May 8, 2019. A similar approach has also been developed in so-called “empirical theology”, where Heimbrock unfolds practical theology as “analysis of the culturally shaped forms and symbolic representations of life in order to describe religious experience as rooted in ‘lived experience’”. Hans-Günter Heimbrock, “Practical Theology as Empirical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 2 (2011): 153–70.
- 18 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013), 13.
- 19 Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), ix.
- 20 Catherine Keller, “Members of Each Other: Intercarnation, Gender and Political Theology,” workshop presentation at the Faculty of Theology in Lund, September 16, 2019. Cf. Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
- 21 For a more extensive discussion of constructive theology see Jason A. Wyman, Jr., *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).
- 22 Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).
- 23 Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell, and Emma Wild-Wood, eds., *Relocating World Christianity: Interdisciplinary Studies in Universal and Local Expressions of the Christian Faith* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). On anthropology of Christianity and theology, see Joel Robbins, “Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285–94; Joel Robbins, “Afterword: Let’s Keep It Awkward: Anthropology, Theology, and Otherness,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24 (2013): 329–37. See also Karen Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas, eds., *Faith in African Lived Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
- 24 See Elina Hankela, *Ubuntu, Migration and Ministry: Being Human in a Johannesburg Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas: Two Case Studies of Interreligious Hermeneutics and Identity in Global Christianity* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2008).
- 25 Mari-Anna Pöntinen, *African Theology as Liberating Wisdom: Celebrating Life and Harmony in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Martina Prosén, “Pentecostal Praise and Worship as a Mode of Theology,” in *Faith in African Lived Christianity*, eds. Karen Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 156–79; Mika Vähäkangas, “Negotiating Religious Traditions – Babu wa Loliondo’s Theology of Healing,” *Exchange* 45, no. 3 (2016): 269–97. For a proposal on methodology for such an endeavour, see Mika Vähäkangas, “How to Respect the Religious Quasi-Other? Methodological Considerations on Studying the Kimbanguist Doctrine of Incarnation,” in *Faith in African Lived Christianity*, eds. Karen Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 133–55.
- 26 Cf. Bergmann, *God in Context*, 3.
- 27 This was one of Chun Hyung Kyung’s central points in her keynote lecture, entitled “Breaking Free from the Monoreligious Cage”, at the event in Lund in 2017 which gave rise to this volume.
- 28 See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 284–85. Bevans aims at dialogue both within Christianity and between Christianity and other religions.

Cf. part III in Dale T. Irvin and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue: Essays in Honor of Stephen B. Bevans, SVD* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018).

- 29 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*; Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992); Bergmann, *God in Context*; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001) (1st ed. in German, 1999); Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*.
- 30 Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space and the Environment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 19–47.
- 31 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

2 Can contextual theology bridge the divide?

South Africa's politics of forgiveness as an example of a contextual public theology

Dion A. Forster

Introduction

How might contextual theology help to bridge the divide between Black African Liberationist theologies and public theologies in South Africa? Stephen Bevans, a Catholic contextual theologian, writes:

There is no such thing as “theology”; there is only contextual theology: feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American theology, African theology, and so forth.¹

Of course, this is true in at least two senses. First, all theologies emanate from particular contexts. The history, traditions, participants, sources, and concerns of particular theological traditions (and the theologians who operate within those theological traditions) are the contexts within which theological contributions are formulated and from which they are presented as contributions to the theological discourse. This is what Stephen Garner calls “inherently contextual” theology.² Second, it must be acknowledged that there is also a second sense in which theologies can be considered contextual in nature. Garner characterises the second type of contextual theology as “explicitly contextual” in nature and intent.³ Contextual theologies of the second kind place a particular emphasis upon the concerns, situations, experiences, sources, and approaches to theological reflection (and also theological contribution) that emanate from prescribed contexts.⁴

It is important to ask the question of what value each of the two types of contextual theology offers to the academic discourse, and to Christianity, in its various forms, expressions, and locations.

An outline of the argument for a “contextual public theology”

This chapter aims to consider this complex question. In doing so, it will argue for the relevance of a contextual public theology in the South African theological context by reflecting on the “politics of forgiveness” among

black and white South Africans. This task is predicated on numerous relevant critiques of public theologies within the South African context. Some South African theologians have questioned whether public theology has any place, or validity, in this context. The critics suggest that public theologies are too generic or universal in nature to address adequately the concerns of black African Christians. As we shall see, their critique is that public theologies tend not to be contextual enough. The claims of such generic public theologies are not particular in content and contribution, but rather universal in nature. In consequence, they are considered domesticated (by the standards, traditions, sources, and approaches of historically Western theological traditions), and perhaps even domesticating. These critics argue that South African theologians should remain firmly committed to contextual, African, and liberation theologies instead of the generic, universalised, domesticated, public theologies they critique.

We shall engage critiques that are presented by four primary conversation partners, Esther McIntosh, Tinyiko Maluleke, Rothney Tshaka, and Jakub Urbaniak. In doing so, we shall identify a common discontent among these critics of South African public theologies – namely, that contemporary South African public theologians have a tendency to collapse their theological tasks into vague universal approaches, and also to produce non-specific, universalised, theological content and claims. In response, they advocate a return from the universal to the particular – namely, liberationist, feminist, and de-colonial – approaches to the theological task and the resultant theological content. The challenge with this, as we shall see, is that the proposed approaches to the theological task could limit the universal applicability and claims of the Christian faith. This could serve to limit, or “privatise”, the possible transformative and redeeming potential of the Christian Gospel.⁵ For example, true forgiveness has been difficult to achieve among South Africans since the end of political apartheid. Within this context, can the universal claim for forgiveness in Christianity be disregarded because of the contextual challenges to this notion? Surely not. What is required is not the denial of the universal, but the creation of a meaningful tension between the requirements of the universal claims of Christianity and the particular realities of the context within which they ought to function.

Thus, having presented these critiques, and considered the common concern about a lack of contextual theological engagement, this chapter will consider how one example of Southern African public theology, which focuses on the politics of forgiveness, can serve as a form of “contextual public theology”. The illustrative project invites an engagement with the particular (ethnicity, gender, age, social and economic class, language, religious experience, and social identity complexity). It also invites a rethinking of theological sources and methods (a move from only engaging peer reviewed academic theological texts, towards a people’s theology that listens to the experiences and perspectives of “ordinary readers” of the Bible). Finally, it invites theologians to employ new epistemological approaches to

the theological task that take the needs of the “problem owners” seriously, balancing them with academic requirements. In short, it can be characterised as a “contextual public theology in South Africa” that maintains the integrity of the universal claims of Christianity, in relation to the contextual uniqueness of history and identity.

A critique of public theologies in South Africa

South Africa remains a deeply religious society, with 84.2 per cent of South Africans indicating that they are Christian in the last General Household Survey.⁶ Moreover, a 2010 Pew report found that 74 per cent of South Africans “indicated that religion plays an important role in their lives”.⁷ South Africans also place higher trust in religious institutions and leaders than in the state or the public sector.⁸

It can be said, with a measure of confidence, that religion is important to all spheres of South African life. Religious beliefs shape social identity,⁹ and religious institutions play a very important role in shaping society. However, the converse is also true. South Africa’s social, cultural, and political life also shapes Christianity, the Church, and theology. The South African theologian Nico Koopman writes about this mutual impact, saying that the “church exists in public, is a part of it and impacts upon it both knowingly and unknowingly”.¹⁰ Koopman’s definition of public theology is instructive in this regard. He asks three questions about the relationship between belief and public life:

- What is the inherent public nature of God’s love for the world?
- How can we understand and articulate the rationality of God’s love for the world?
- What are the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life?¹¹

As one can see, these questions aim at understanding the universal claims of the Christian faith in relation to specific issues of public concern. In this sense at least, one could conclude, as Jürgen Moltmann does, that:

[f]rom the perspective of its origins and its goal, Christian theology is public theology, for it is the theology of the kingdom of God. . . . As such it must engage with the political, cultural, educational, economic and ecological spheres of life, not just with the private and ecclesial spheres.¹²

That South African Christianity, and so South African theologies, are important for, and engaged in, public life is not significantly contested in the academy. There seems to be a general agreement that religion matters for South Africans. What is contested, however, is what approach to the task of

theology is best suited to a constructive engagement with the ongoing social, economic, political, and also theological challenges of the contemporary South African context.

Perhaps the most robust, and widely recognised, critique of public theology (in the South African context) has come from Black theologians and Liberation theologians, such as Tinyiko Maluleke and Rothney Tshaka. They question whether a public theological approach can ever be specific enough to engage the complexities and uniqueness of the black and African socio-religious context and experience.¹³ Maluleke and Tshaka both question whether an approach to theology that does not focus primarily on social analysis (as liberation theologies do)¹⁴ would have value in the broader (Southern) African social context. In particular, both Maluleke and Tshaka, as well as Jakub Urbaniak,¹⁵ have critiqued the approaches, and even methods, associated with the persons and places that are identified as offering a public theological contribution in South Africa. Maluleke's primary concern is that:

public theology is trapped in an attempt to universalize concepts, similar to earlier forms of [colonial] theology, and does not take developing world theologies seriously. It is post-coloniality, rather than postmodernity, that . . . is of importance to South African society.¹⁶

In particular, Maluleke is concerned that public theologians, and their theologies, are incapable of addressing the ongoing "anger in South African society".¹⁷ They tend to employ theological language and objectives, such as reconciliation and forgiveness, which are much more closely aligned to both universal theological ideals in general, and the intentions of Western theologies in particular. He contends that these choices directly, or inadvertently, contribute towards maintaining the status quo of black and African subjugation. For this reason, primarily, he contends that "a theory of resistance as found in liberation theologies" is crucial for addressing the concerns of South African life.¹⁸

Of course, there is merit in this critique. The particular must always be held in tension with the universal – in this case, the history, and current reality, of South Africans must surely be engaged in a careful and robust manner if a particular theology is to have value for the context. However, one could also ask whether this task is only to be achieved through a liberation theology – or perhaps, whether a liberative theological approach should not be prioritised in certain contexts and settings, while other theological approaches can be of value in different settings. Moreover, it is important to remember that Maluleke's critique had a specific context – the article in which he develops his critique emanates from a particular academic engagement between Maluleke and the Princeton theologian William Storrar, on 4 August 2008. A careful reading of Maluleke's argument shows that he is aware that his privileging of liberation theology in South Africa is meant to

be held in tension with other universal theological claims. This is evidenced in his discussion of some major definitions of public theology, and his own approaches to the theological task, in pages 80–82 of his critique.¹⁹ As such, it would be fair to conclude that he is not dismissing public theologies outright, but rather seeking to aggregate and critique particular approaches to faith and public life in South Africa that are inadequate to address specific concerns and needs. In this particular instance, he seems to be concerned that the universal claims of public theologies, and public theologians, may be inadequate to deal with the “anger” of black South African Christian experience.²⁰ This does not mean that a carefully constructed engagement between faith and contextual issues of public concern – perhaps a liberative, multi-disciplinary, South African engagement with faith, experience, economics, and politics – should deny the universal claims of Christianity. Rather, he makes a convincing point, asking “whether public theology” of the “universal”, historically Western, kind that he has described “is the most potent vehicle for dealing with the reality” of black South African pain.²¹ My reading of his critique is that certain approaches to faith and public life have tended to lack contextuality – “the reality” – and so they have decreased the contextual “potency” of the liberative and transformative claims of the Christian faith.

Tshaka’s critique follows a similar line of reasoning, but with an emphasis upon a different set of theological convictions that he feels should gain priority. Tshaka questions whether it is credible to engage in the task of theology in the African, and particularly the South African, context in a way that does not privilege the perspectives and contributions of black African theologians.²² In particular, Tshaka picks up on an aspect of Maluleke’s critique and deals with it more directly and extensively – namely that the specifically South African contributions to public theologies have tended to be primarily informed by, and in conversation with, European and North American theologians.²³ This results in both a methodological and a content shift in the task of South African public theologies. Methodologically, it means that public theologians tend to approach the task of theology in ways that are best suited to European and North American theological and public concerns.²⁴ Theology (as doctrine) and reason are privileged, as are published sources and the contributions of professional academic theologians. These tend to be dominated by the contributions of white men, and of course the concerns of such persons and their contexts.²⁵ Again, this is a valuable and important critique of South African public theologies, which have tended to approach both the task and the primary conversation partners in theology from a Western, academic theological, perspective. However, as with Maluleke’s critique, Tshaka’s does not dismiss public theology in its broader sense, but rather seeks to critique, and correct, a privileging of white, Western, sources and conversation partners.²⁶ Again, as with Maluleke’s concern, this critique advocates a privileging of the voices, experiences, and approaches to theology that are indicative of the black South

African Christian experience. What he proposes is sensitivity and choice in matters of faith and public life, and not a denial of the public role, and importance, of Christianity and Christian theologies in South Africa. Hence, here we see once more that a contextual approach to faith and matters of public concern could be the bridge across the divide.

Urbaniak's critiques, stemming from a sustained research project, are among the most specific, and most carefully developed, critiques of South African public theologies. Urbaniak built his critique of South African public theologies through an engagement with the work and person of Nico Koopman, the former chair of the Global Network for Public Theology, a former editor of the *International Journal for Public Theology*, and former director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch. Urbaniak develops the two critiques discussed earlier (from Maluleke and Tshaka) extensively to illustrate some of the challenges at the intersection of the particulars of the South African context and the universal claims of some public theologies. He writes that by

using [a] postmodern, rather than postcolonial framework, South African public theologians [have tended to] open themselves *in a more obvious way* to dialogue with their Western/Northern counterparts. This, however, comes at a price.²⁷

The price, as mentioned by Maluleke and Tshaka, is that the concerns and approaches of historical, colonial theologies and theologians inadvertently shape both the issues that are addressed and the manner in which they are addressed.²⁸ A further "price" that is paid is that the voices of South African Christians are also inadvertently not heard or engaged. Simply stated, Urbaniak advocates an engagement with more than just published academic sources. He encourages South African theologians to employ approaches to the task of theology that engage "ordinary" black South African Christian voices and perspectives.²⁹ Urbaniak rightly argues that it is a mistake for South African public theologians to give themselves over entirely to historically Western and Northern theological paradigms and traditions.³⁰ Again, it is worth taking Urbaniak's critique to heart – South African public theologies should take the postcolonial theological framework very seriously in their task. What he suggests is that African public theologians should seek to cultivate an "explicit and constructive link between [African] social analysis and [African] theological ideas".³¹ This is an important reminder to African public theologians to offer the richness and diversity of our contexts to both African and global theological research. Yet, as was argued previously, it can also be said in this instance that the central claim of Urbaniak's critique is related to the lack of contextual methodologies and contextual inputs in considering the relationships that exist between issues of faith and public life.

Of course, these challenges are valid within the local context of South Africa, and the larger contexts of the African continent. It would be a mistake to think that theologies of liberation, or other contextual theologies (such as African or Black theologies), can be ignored within these contexts. Africa has a predominantly black African population in which there is a crucial need for rigorous prophetic engagement with the historical social structures and oppressive systems (such as racism, colonialism, and entrenched social injustice). Moreover, we need to recognise that (South) Africans are not only consumers of theological knowledge; we are also producers thereof. The relative disregard for non-published materials does not mean that (South) Africans are not thinking theologically, or developing theological resources for significant engagement with issues of public concern. However, as has been argued, it would also be a mistake to create a binary between theologies of liberation and all other approaches to the complex socio-theological issues that we face in our context. Rather, it would be of greater value to hold liberationist approaches to theology in tension with the contributions of experts from other relevant fields (such as economics, political science, sociology, history, etc.). The approach of public theology, as outlined in the previous sections, aims to bring these voices into conversation with one another so that new insights might emerge. Yet, we must acknowledge the validity of Maluleke's, Tshaka's, and Urbaniak's critiques. It would be irresponsible to attempt to engage in credible theology in the African context without responsibly accentuating the richness of contextual African and Black theologies for this context and other contexts.³² It is in this sense that theologians, including African public theologians, have a great deal to offer African theologies, and indeed global theologies. Certainly, it is not the intention of those who engage in public theological reflection and engagement to downplay the value and importance of our context and its contribution, as can be seen for example in Koopman's article "In Search of a Transforming Public Theology: Drinking from the Wells of Black Theology".³³

A final significant critique that could be raised against South African public theologies is one that is brought by feminist public theologians. To date, the most constructive South African contribution has come from Julie Claassens in an article entitled "Towards a Feminist Public Theology: On Wounds, Scars and Healing in the Book of Jeremiah and Beyond".³⁴ However, given the historically patriarchal nature of South African academic theologies, the absence of extensively developed feminist public theologies in the South African context is a critique within itself.

Esther McIntosh, from York St John University, has been outspoken about the nature and character of public theologies around the world. A core element of her claim is that the contextual experiences, concerns, and input of women are silenced or disregarded in the formal academic circles of global public theologies.³⁵ In particular, she rightly shows that public theological research is dominated by male theologians, and by approaches to theology

that can function in ways that exclude women and women's perspectives.³⁶ This is certainly a critique that we are subject to in African theologies in general, and South African public theologies in particular. While there are a number of significant women public theologians on the continent (such as Musa Dube, Isabel Phiri, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Julie Claassens, Sarojini Nadar, and Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, to name just a few), the reality is that public theological research is largely occupied by men and men's worldviews and concerns. Moreover, if one were to look at the chosen conversation partners that are highlighted in published books and articles on public theologies around the world, they are largely dominated by men.³⁷ This critique is valid and is to be taken seriously – it is a call for contextuality that is intersectional in nature. It brings gender considerations to the fore alongside economic, geographic, cultural, and political concerns. It requires concerted attention and a choice for critical self-reflection. The only answer to this critique is to encourage (South) African public theologians to be intentional about how we do our theology, with whom we undertake the theological task, and what issues we choose to address in our public theological research. Again, this is a call for a contextual public theology for the South African context.

This section of the chapter has sought to highlight, and give attention to, the necessary critiques against South African public theologies. In particular, these major critiques all share one common concern – that South African public theologies must be deeply and consistently contextual in nature. Moreover, as we considered the corrections that these critics offered, it became clear that they were not negating the importance of a rigorous and credible engagement between faith and public issues. Rather, what they were calling for is the maintaining of a strong and significant tension between the universal claims of Christianity and the particular concerns, approaches, and demands of South Africans and the South African context.

A politics of forgiveness as a bridge to the context and concerns of South African public theologies: an example of a contextual public theology

In the previous section, we came to the conclusion that faith and public life are in a constant and necessary interchange in South African life. Theology matters in South African public life. Yet, there is a need for a contextual engagement (both in content and method) to adequately engage the complexities of the interchange between faith and public life in this context.

In this section, we shall consider one illustrative example of a contextual public theology in South Africa. It takes the critiques mentioned previously seriously, and seeks to find a credible way to bridge the divide between the universal claims of Christianity (in the call for deep, liberative, and transforming forgiveness) and the particular (namely, South Africa's social, political, and economic history).

A politics of forgiveness

In his book *The Politics of Peace*, the South African theologian Brian Frost suggests that to the popular imagination, linking politics and forgiveness may seem unusual. Forgiveness would seem to be a deeply theological “universal” concept, while politics comes from a much more particular and contextual framing of reality. However, as he notes,

“Politics” is surely the way human beings organize themselves in groups, either locally, nationally or internationally, to determine and distribute the use of resources, often in short supply, and how they handle the institutions they create for doing this. “Forgiveness” is a word used to indicate that a wrong has been committed which needs redressing. It is also a word which implies both accepting a wrong and dealing with it in a constructive way.³⁸

In this regard, it would seem that a coupling of politics and forgiveness finds their logical link in time – how we deal with our present reality, in the light of our experiences of the past and our hopes for the future. William Faulkner succinctly stated that the “past is not dead and gone; it isn’t even the past”.³⁹ Indeed, in South Africa, we are facing a present contextual reality that shows that we have not adequately dealt with our past in a manner that is politically sufficient (i.e., in structural, economic, and social terms). As such, we want forgiveness of our past sins (which is one of Christianity’s universal claims),⁴⁰ but nonetheless, forgiveness is deeply contested in the present, and a shared future lived in peace seems to elude us. This is precisely what Tinyiko Maluleke critiques: a universal call for forgiveness, which does not pay adequate attention to the “anger in South African society”.⁴¹

Thus, we can safely assert that the link between a politics of forgiveness and a peaceable future among South Africa’s predominantly Christian population is also not a given. However, as Donald Shriver points out,

A political form of forgiveness may not guarantee that we humans can survive our sins against each other. But without it, we might not have survived this long; and we need it, as our capacity to harm or hurt each other grows, more than ever.⁴²

Understood in this way, we can see the tension that is necessary, and should exist, between the universal call for forgiveness in the Christian faith and the particular contextual experience and reality of South Africans.

Forgiveness, as a theological and social discourse in South Africa, is deeply contested. Numerous South African scholars and activists have raised concerns about the transactional nature of the concept of forgiveness in this context.⁴³ Moreover, interpersonal socio-political factors – such as

the nature of the historical offences of apartheid, whether reparation has been made (or attempted) for these offences, the political identities of the parties involved, and expectations and conditions for the self and for the other – also play a role in understandings of forgiveness. One significant problem that has been identified, and is evidenced in the findings of this research, is that unreconciled persons in South Africa seldom have contact with each other because of the legacy of the apartheid system, which separated persons racially, according to economic class, and geographically.⁴⁴ In at least one sense, this makes forgiveness impossible – not only is it impossible for persons to forgive one another since they have no proximate or authentic social engagement, but forgiveness is also a theological impossibility because of deeply held and entrenched religious convictions about the nature and processes of forgiveness. The universal and the particular must be held in tension for either to find fuller and truer meaning.

A people's theology: empirical intercultural Bible study

In 2018, I published a discussion of the findings of a four-year project on the politics of forgiveness, entitled “Translation and a Politics of Forgiveness in South Africa? What Black Christians Believe, and White Christians do not Seem to Understand”.⁴⁵ The title for this paper originates from the findings of a project on forgiveness that was conducted among black and white Christians in Cape Town, South Africa.⁴⁶ The research aimed to ascertain, by means of a qualitative empirical study, how a sampling of black and white South African Christians understand forgiveness. What does forgiveness mean? What does each group understand as the expectations, processes, and requirements for forgiveness to be realised?

It could be said that forgiveness in its universal and vague sense is a deeply contested notion for South African Christians – it is not understood, and particular understandings of forgiveness are not broadly accepted or shared. Because of the debts of the past, and unhealed history, discourses of forgiveness frequently contribute towards the ongoing suffering of South Africans. We simply have not done enough “sensemaking” with one another, as black and white Christians, to plumb the depths of an authentic “difficult forgiveness”.⁴⁷ The South African poet Nathan Trantraal, in his poem “Fiction en Estrangement”, tells of how after the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, the Christian religion called upon black South Africans to be “Christlike”, to give up the violent struggle for liberation, and to forgive the white perpetrators for the sins of apartheid. This can be likened to the critique that Maluleke gives of “universal” approaches to public theologies.⁴⁸ Trantraal says that it resulted in a “cheap” forgiveness – forgiveness without justice. He writes:

*Ammel het hystoe gegaan
Hulle na hulle hyse langsie sea*

*ós na ós shacks
langs poeletjies stagnant wate
waa die gif in vergifnis
ós ammel
siek gemaak et*

*Everyone went home
They to their homes along the sea
And we to our shacks
Next to pools of stagnant water
Where the poison [gif] in forgiveness [vergifnis]
Made us all
Sick⁴⁹*

Trantraal says this cheap forgiveness made everyone sick. He employs a subtle play on the Afrikaans words for forgiveness and poison to do so, pointing to the “gif [poison] in vergifnis [forgiveness]”.⁵⁰ This sentiment is evidenced in the 2015 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) report on reconciliation, which notes that

While most South Africans agree that the creation of a united, reconciled nation remains a worthy objective to pursue, the country remains afflicted by its historical divisions. The majority feels that race relations have either stayed the same or deteriorated since the country’s political transition in 1994 and the bulk of respondents have noted income inequality as a major source of social division. Most believe that it is impossible to achieve a reconciled society for as long as those who were disadvantaged under apartheid remain poor within the “new South Africa”.⁵¹

What the research on forgiveness among black and white South Africans found was that social identity, of which political identity is a part,⁵² played a very important role in the construction of beliefs concerning the expectations, processes, and content of forgiveness.

We cannot go into great detail on the findings of the research at this stage. However, the general findings were as follows.

- Among the predominantly black and so-called coloured⁵³ participants, forgiveness was largely understood in a collective and social manner.⁵⁴ In other words, forgiveness was not only an individual concern, but had social consequences and social expectations within the community. Moreover, this group understood that forgiveness was not only a matter of spiritual restoration between the individual (or community) and God. Rather, it should be evidenced in the restoration of relationships and structures in the community. For this group, forgiveness can only

be authentic if the conditions for forgiveness are evidenced in the community. In other words, forgiveness in South Africa would be contingent upon economic transformation, transfer of land ownership, a transformation of social power dynamics, and visible and tangible expressions of remorse on the part of the beneficiaries and initiators of apartheid in South Africa. A social understanding of community harmony is largely in keeping with notions of intersubjective identity that are more common in black and coloured South African communities.⁵⁵

- The white participants largely understood forgiveness in an individual and spiritual manner.⁵⁶ For the majority of participants in this group, the data showed that they viewed forgiveness as being primarily a matter of restoring their spiritual relationship with God. They did not initially consider that forgiveness may need to engage the party against whom the sin was committed. Forgiveness is theological (spiritual); it has to do with spiritual sin. As such, God is the offended party, and forgiveness would have been enacted when God had set them free from the guilt and spiritual culpability of their actions. Such a view of forgiveness would not necessarily entail the restoration of relational harmony among members of the community or the restitution of social, political, or economic structures in the community. Common expressions of this view would be statements such as “apartheid was wrong, but it is over. I confessed my part [sin] in it and I believe God has forgiven me. Now we need to move on and stop living in the past. We must stop talking about apartheid”.

This research project offers an example of a “contextual public theology” that can bridge the divide between a universal claim of Christianity (forgiveness) and the particular contextual concerns and lived experiences of South Africans.

First, the project, and its methodological approach, illustrate that faith and public life operate in a mutual interchange with one another. This project is not only contextual in the general, or universal, sense in which “all theology is contextual”. Rather, it is “explicitly contextual”, both in its methodological approach and in its findings. Methodologically, the project sought to prioritise the lived experiences, theological perspectives, and insights of “ordinary readers” of the texts of forgiveness.⁵⁷ It was specifically designed so that not only published, formal, academic sources would inform the understandings of “political forgiveness” in South Africa. The voices of the “ordinary readers” predominate in the theological discussion and form the primary conversation partners, alongside which the perspectives of other theologians are brought into the conversation. In consequence, this contextual public theological engagement with the politics of forgiveness gave priority to black South African women’s and men’s perspectives. These voices shaped our understanding of the complex interplay between faith and public life, and also brought these perspectives into the wider academic public discourse.

Second, this “contextual public theological” project illustrates how contextual factors, such as social identity, can be brought into conversation with theological concerns, in an interdisciplinary manner that has scholarly rigour and academic credibility. What is critical in this regard is that the universal claim of forgiveness in the Christian faith is taken very seriously in this project. Rather than merely rejecting it because of contextual concerns and critiques over its misuse in the past, this “contextual public theological” engagement with the politics of forgiveness illustrates how one can hold a creative and necessary tension between the universal and the particular. This project shows that social identity and lived, contextual reality play significant roles in the shaping of religious and theological convictions. This relates to a number of important factors such as ethnicity, gender, and social and economic class. In answering a central question of the public theologian, “what are the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life?”⁵⁸ this project shows that one can only provide an adequate answer when the universal is actualised within the context, experience, and history of particular persons. This requires not only theological insight, but also a credible engagement with insights from other disciplines (such as psychology, sociology, economics, politics, gender studies, etc.). This goes some way towards addressing Maluleke’s concern about the adequacy of a contextual public theology for South Africa that can truly engage black “public anger”.⁵⁹ Moreover, it takes McIntosh’s concern seriously not only by facilitating critical conversation with (black African) women, but also by considering the uniqueness of (black African) women’s lived experiences and expectations of a politics of forgiveness.

Third, this illustrative example of a “contextual public theology” shows that inadequate, jaundiced, and un-contextual applications of “universal” theological concepts (such as forgiveness), if not coupled with lived experience, political expectation, and social engagement, can be counterproductive to the theological beliefs themselves. The results of the research project show that because of a lack of contextual engagement with forgiveness as a contextual political issue, black South Africans have come to experience it as painful, and white South Africans have tended to disregard it.⁶⁰ It is important for academic theologians, well-intentioned faith leaders, and persons of faith to take the importance of careful and rigorous contextual engagement into consideration when seeking to adequately understand and address issues of faith and public concern. A contextual public theology has the potential to make a constructive contribution to the understanding of, and adequate engagement with, issues of faith and public concern. On the other hand, a non-contextual, universalised approach to contested issues of faith and public concern (such as the politics of forgiveness in South Africa) could lead to greater disconnection and disharmony among Christians and within society at large.⁶¹

Finally, what this illustrative example of a contextual public theology, related to the politics of forgiveness in South Africa, shows is that theological

convictions have a significant impact upon daily life and political life. This returns us to the claim with which we began – in some senses, all theologies, whether liberative, feminist, or public, are contextual theologies.⁶² In this instance, we focused deliberately on the deeply contextual nature of the “public” within which faith operates and is formed. The “universal” claims of Christianity (whether they are shaped by a liberationist, Black, African, or feminist approach) ultimately function within public life. As such, we cannot escape the need for rigorous, intentional, and sustained contextual public theologies that consider the interchange between faith and life. To opt for an approach to engaging the complexities of faith that seeks to “privatise” such engagement within a particular sphere will only serve to limit the intended liberating and transformative aims of Christian theology and the Christian faith.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that a contextual theology can help to address some of the most significant critiques of South African public theologies. We saw that we cannot dismiss the universal claims of Christianity (such as forgiveness) because of specific, important, contextual concerns. However, what is needed is to facilitate a creative and credible tension between the universal claims of Christianity and the particular contextual concerns of those who engage in issues of faith and public concern. A number of important critiques of South African public theologies were presented and considered. In doing so, it was argued that the central issue at stake is that greater attention has to be paid to contextual voices, contextual approaches, and contextual priorities in public theologies. The chapter concluded by presenting an illustrative example of a “contextual public theological” research project that focused on the “politics of forgiveness” among black and white South African Christians. This project showed that “contextual South African public theology” can hold great value for academic theologies, as well as for public life in South Africa.

Notes

- 1 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.
- 2 Stephen Garner, “Contextual and Public Theology: Passing Fads or Theological Imperatives?” *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 22, no. 1 (2015): 20–28, 21.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 4 Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2009), 7–9.
- 5 See the discussion of the loss of confidence in some liberation theological traditions, and the fracturing of others in the contemporary academy, in Ward’s consideration of the rise of Radical Orthodoxy in relation to the contemporary debates on ecumenical Christianity, in Graham Ward, “Radical Orthodoxy:

- Its Ecumenical Vision," *Acta Theologica* 25 (2017): 29–45, 36–37, <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v37i1S.1>.
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- 52 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (London: Macmillan, 2018), 3–5.
- 53 The notion of ethnic identity is not to be understood in an essentialist manner in this study. Hammett points out that ethnic identity, which in South Africa is related to race identity (as is the case in Hammett's discussion of the notion), remains fluid, with the "reification or erasure of racial identities" continuing to take place among population groups and within social and political structures in South Africa; see Daniel Hammett, "Ongoing Contestations: The Use of Racial Signifiers in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Social Identities* 16, no. 2 (2010): 247–60, 247–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504631003691090>. The notion of ethnic identity and race identification remains contested and complex

in South Africa. See Allan Boesak et al., *Contesting Post-Racialism: Conflicted Churches in the United States and South Africa*, eds. R. Drew Smith et al. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); Cobus Van Wyngaard, "Whiteness and Public Theology: An Exploration of Listening," *Missionalia* 43, no. 3 (2015): 478–92, <https://doi.org/10.7832/43-3-132>; Cobus van Wyngaard, "The Language of 'Diversity' in Reconstructing Whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church," in *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism: Europe, Africa and North America*, eds. R. D. Smith, William Ackah, and Anthony G. Reddie (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 157–70. In reality there is no ethnic or race category that could adequately contain the complexity of human identities. The terms that are used in this study are informed by the literature, and are terms used by the participants in identifying their own race identities. The three dominant self-descriptors are so-called coloured (brown, Khoi), black and white. Some of the participants described themselves as white. Some participants described themselves as either black or coloured (or "so-called coloured"). Others described themselves as black and coloured. The research shows that black and coloured identity is based on an understanding that is relational in some contexts and political in others. At times ethnicity, or race, is identified and described in relation to a community of reference. For example, in relation to family and friends, a person may self-identify as coloured, while in a political setting the same person may self-identify as black so as not to be excluded from the political solidarity of redressing the ethnic and racial legacies of apartheid. See Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 98–130; Ian Goldin, "The Reconstitution of Coloured Identity in the Western Cape," in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*, eds. S. Marks and Stanley Trapido (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 156–81. The Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003 as Amended by Act No. 46 of 2013 in South Africa uses the term "Black people" as a generic term to refer to "Africans, Coloureds and Indians". The Black Consciousness movement in South Africa employed the term Black inclusively in order to raise awareness around black experience and black identity, but also to subvert the essentialist and divisive intentions of Apartheid-era race classifications.

54 Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 178–84.

55 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough*; Augustine Shutte, "Ubuntu as the African Ethical Vision," in *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, ed. Munyaradzi Felix Murove (Scottsville, South Africa: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2009), 85–99; Dion A. Forster, "A Generous Ontology: Identity as a Process of Intersubjective Discovery – An African Theological Contribution," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (2010): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.731>; Huseyin Cakal et al., "An Investigation of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action and the 'Sedative' Effect of Intergroup Contact among Black and White Students in South Africa," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2011): 606–27.

56 Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 184–89.

57 Dion A. Forster, "A Social Imagination of Forgiveness," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 1, no. 32 (2019): 70–88, 70–72, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1163/15709256-12341387>; Forster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness?* 211; Gerald West, "Liberation Hermeneutics after Liberation in South Africa," in *Trajectories of Religion in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Pobee*, Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 341–81, 341; Gerald O. West, "Locating 'Contextual Bible Study' within Biblical Liberation

Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics,” *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2641>.

58 Koopman, “Some Contours for Public Theology in South Africa,” 124.

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62 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

3 Contextual theology on trial?

African neo-Pentecostalism, sacred authority, gendered constructions, and violent enactions

Chammah J. Kaunda

Introduction

This chapter interrogates how some African neo-Pentecostalism¹ reinforces and legitimises authority² by adopting loosely reinterpreted sacred attributes of traditional African notions of authority that give unquestionable and unaccountable power to their clergy. The chapter argues that this resourcing of power creates an authoritarian atmosphere in which women and girls are rendered vulnerable to sexualised treatment. This is demonstrated by employing two cases of sexual abuse of women and girls by some neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa to stress that inculturation informed by subconscious affirmation of the “Christ of culture”³ that has taken place in some of these churches promotes dangerous forms of authority which have both ignored values of *Ubuntu* and failed to adequately interact with the kenotic authority of Jesus Christ.

The chapter is informed by decolonial⁴ thinking shaped by *Ubuntu*, and refers to a way of being and exercising power informed by recognising the intrinsic relationality and belonging of all creation to each other. Human beings and all creation participate in each other’s existence – “we are because you are, and since you are, therefore, I am”.⁵ The “I am” generates power to be and authority to act from others. This makes “I am” a way of exercising power and a way of acting through radical relationality. *Ubuntu* speaks of a way of generating and exercising power as a relational resource embedded within the community of life (including the living, non-human creation, yet-to-be-born, ancestors, divinities and God) for the wellbeing of the community. Authority/power is not a possession of an individual; it is rather a community resource which originates from God. Only God has authority/power, and all creation only participates in God’s authority/power. Vital participation⁶ in God’s life/power is a gift of God to the community of life. Thus, decoloniality seeks to liberate and redesign existing foundational systems of people’s imaginations of power, which have been manipulated and used as religious apparatus of oppression and exploitation, by subjecting them to kenotic imaginations. It also seeks to transform indigenous ideals and aspirations inherent in cultural heritage by reclaiming

life-giving elements and rejecting elements that do not promote the fullness of life for all. Traditionally, power has been viewed as the possession of the powerful and privileged. In contrast, this chapter seeks to rearticulate power from the experiences of those on the margins, in order to kenotise and decolonise principles on which reigning neo-Pentecostal notions of power are grounded, as well as ideological discourses that authorise practices of power. Thus, decoloniality is not a matter of merely changing frames of thinking and approaches to neo-Pentecostal notions of power. Rather, it is a critical approach to kenotising and decolonising the way power is articulated and practised in order to promote a decolonial kenotic articulation of relational meanings of power based on experiences of the margins.⁷

The chapter argues that the uncritical inculturation of traditional concepts of authority/power within neo-Pentecostalism is a critical factor in shaping local contextual forces such as social, relational, gender, sexuality,⁸ economic, political, and cultural. There is a need to interrogate the religious paradox within neo-Pentecostalism which simultaneously rejects and uncritically perpetuates core elements of traditional cultural forms of authority while not adequately interacting with the kenotic authority of Jesus Christ. Kenosis is engaged using a decolonial approach, as too often the concept has also unwittingly been utilised to promote subordination of women and girls. I shall demonstrate how from the perspective of decoloniality, kenosis could help to challenge some misconceptions, such as the view that authority is identical with coercive power, male dominance, and the prophet's sole access to the divine, as something that the clergy possess, and that is enforceable through top-down interactions in which the laity is reduced to a spiritual clientele. The chapter suggests a life-affirming decolonial kenotic theology of authority which is boundary-crossing from the centre to the margins, from spiritual to material, from divine to human, and/or from power into powerlessness and vulnerability, whereby the pastor is emptied of human authority for the sake of the marginalised.

On the sacred: a definition

In a search to interrogate the misuse of authority in some African neo-Pentecostalism, the first step is to understand the African traditional notions of sacred authority. I follow David Chidester's definition of the sacred as

that which is set apart from the ordinary, everyday rhythms of life, but set apart in such a way that it stands at the center of community formation. In between the radical transcendence of the sacred and the social dynamics of the sacred, we find ongoing mediations, at the intersections of personal subjectivity and social collectivities, in which anything can be sacralized through the religious work of intensive interpretation, regular ritualization, and inevitable contestation over ownership of the means, modes, and forces for producing the sacred.⁹

If we accept Chidester's delineation of "the sacred", then the concept of sacred authority does not need to be limited to any specific religion. As Tinyiko Maluleke stresses, "Nor, then, should we confine the concept of the religious to the four walls of religious institutions".¹⁰ In African religious heritage, religious leaders, as set apart by ancestors and divinities, have been at the centre of community formations. Metaphysically and epistemologically, African ontologies are inhospitable to dichotomies such as those between God and creation, the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, the individual and the community, and so on. In the absence of such dichotomies, there is no sharp distinction between secular authority and spiritual authority.¹¹ Authority is rooted in the meanings and interpretations underpinned by an African spiritual heritage. However, the notions of power/authority are not simple or monolithic, but rather embrace all aspects of human experiences. Most African people believe in the spiritual significance of all human authority, whether political or religious.¹² Spirituality cannot be removed from the experience of most African people in considering any type of authority/power, especially religious authority, which is a focus of this chapter.

African feminist theologians have lamented over how African spirituality and authority easily get entangled within gendered relations of power.¹³ For example, and as demonstrated in the following case studies, in some parts of Africa, Christian women have been forced to define their sex and sexuality from the perspective of being the causers and *loci* of sin. In worse cases, coercing women to subordinate their sexual desires to their male counterparts is perceived as a form of purification from sin.¹⁴ African feminists resist regarding authority as neutral. For them, neutrality is hardly part of any form of religious authority. Some African notions of authority are well-springs of patriarchy and abysses in which women and girls groan in pain. Thus, African feminist theologians, although they regard African religious heritage as a critical source for creating theology, have nevertheless rejected uncritical retrieval of every element of African religio-cultural heritage, as too often these have reinforced and perpetuated patriarchy in many African churches.¹⁵ As I shall demonstrate in what follows, Christian patriarchy has found fertile ground within African Christianity, in which the dialogue between Christian and traditional patriarchies now informs a certain type of male hegemony which replicates itself through ecclesiastical spaces in many parts of Africa.¹⁶

The coming of Christianity has not changed the predisposition toward non-dichotomisation of sacred authority and secular authority among African Christians.¹⁷ As a way of life, the African religio-cultural worldview lays the foundation for collective African consciousness, which continues, albeit in a modified or loosely reinterpreted form, to shape the understanding, interpretations, and conception of reality of many African people. In contemporary African neo-Pentecostalism, these African religious imaginations function in the interstices between continuity and discontinuity in

terms of their notions of authority.¹⁸ This means that while many Africans have converted to new religious traditions, their notions of authority have not been converted. In fact, the word appears to have been reinforced by biblical conceptions of spiritual power.¹⁹ Various scholars studying African religions and Christianity in different parts of the continent have noted that key elements of traditional African notions of authority remain salient, resilient, and deeply entrenched in African Christian imaginations.²⁰ However, it must be acknowledged that traditional African notions of authority cannot easily be assigned to the whole of African neo-Pentecostalism; rather, it is possible to identify some salient characteristics that influence and shape their gender and sexual relations.²¹

If theology as critical reflection on the missio-political praxis of the church is contextual in character, such that historical and cultural context is a factor in experiencing and articulating Christian faith, then to understand the religious foundation of neo-Pentecostal notions of power we have to turn to the religio-cultural heritage. This religio-cultural heritage can give us some clues to help us understand the cultural psychology that is at work in African Pentecostalism.

The world of sacred authority

On the question of continuity and discontinuity between neo-Pentecostalism and African religious notions of sacred authority, many scholars are increasingly affirming both continuity and discontinuity in varying degrees.²² In *Worlds of Power*, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar demonstrate that most Africans believe “power has its ultimate origin in the spirit world”.²³ Gerrie Ter Haar, in *How God Became African*, observes how some Africans (including politicians) seek to manipulate mystical powers to increase their vital force.²⁴ She believes that the spiritual realm affords one of the most accessible and strategic forms of power for many African leaders. The source of power for most neo-Pentecostals is the spirit world. For instance, Asonzeh Ukah, in the article “Obeying Caesar to Obey God”, observes that “charismatic authentication or the legitimization of Pentecostal authority is central to understanding the organisational behaviour of Pentecostal associations in Africa, as well as their” gender and sexual relations.²⁵ Ukah concludes (in keeping with an African understanding of the ultimate source of power and authority) that “the source of Pentecostal authority is, therefore, anchored on a non-human, suprahuman, supraprimate entity”.²⁶ Thus, Ogbu Kalu, in *African Pentecostalism*, accentuates that:

African Pentecostalism is an important dimension of Africans’ attraction to pneumatic expressions of the gospel that resonates with the power theme in indigenous religions, the power that sustained the cosmos, the socioeconomic and political structures, the power that gave

meaning to life's journey from birth through death, and the sojourn in the ancestral world reincarnated and return to the world.²⁷

He perceives contemporary African Pentecostalism as "another phase of the quest for power and identity in Africa".²⁸ Perhaps this is what scholars such as Birgit Meyer have described as "Africanization from below" – the inculturation practices of grassroots neo-Pentecostalism.²⁹ However, for African neo-Pentecostalism the main point of convergence with African religious heritage is not the devil, as Meyer argues, but rather the theme of spiritual power. Allan Anderson wonders "whether African Pentecostal churches conceive of the Holy Spirit's power in a biblical sense, thus transforming traditional power concepts, or whether continuity is maintained by giving traditional power concepts a 'Christian' guise".³⁰

Neo-Pentecostal notions of authority arise out of historical and cultural power grounded in the traditional African religious cosmological frameworks. It is a reinterpretation of this framework which shapes specific neo-Pentecostal notions of relationship, gender, and sexuality.³¹ To put it another way, the concepts of authority arise out of the African understanding of being bound together in an inseparable reality – physical and spiritual, individual and community, women and men, humanity and creation, the living and the dead, and God and creation.³² In short, African religious imaginations provide the basic framework for both conceptualisation and interpretation of how contemporary African neo-Pentecostals understand authority. Jacob Olupona, one of the most prominent scholars of indigenous African religions, stresses that "religious worldviews, often unique to distinct ethnic groups, reflect people's identities and lie at the heart of how they relate to one another, to other people, and to the world at large".³³ He further argues that these religious worldviews encode, as well as influence, the collective values and shared knowledge of each particular ethnic group. The religious framework, therefore, constitutes the foundation upon which the meaning of authority and power is established. In other words, authority cannot be conceived without reference to religion. Authority is spiritual in character – it originates from God/gods.³⁴

In African spiritual systems, authority is an attribute of God which human beings access through the mediatory role of ancestors.³⁵ The mystical source of authority forms the foundation of religious imaginations for the majority of African people, an element which has found a safe modern haven within African neo-Pentecostalism. The traditional priest is perceived as "a representative, a bearer of power, a hand used by power", the eyes of the gods.³⁶ He is inseparable from ancestors and the gods. His words are received and revered as words *from* and *of* ancestors, and the words of the ancestors are in essence the words of God/gods. Violating them is not only defying the authority of the ancestors and God/gods, but a breach in the cosmological balance.³⁷ In many cases, this incurs misfortune. Similarly, contemporary neo-Pentecostal religious leaders locate themselves as

the embodiment of sacred authority. Their authority, derived from the call of God, is legitimised through demonstrating that they have secret access to sacred knowledge. In a study conducted among Pentecostals in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Katrien Pye established that many members of Pentecostal churches are persuaded that their pastors have unlocked or unmasked the secret of sacred knowledge.³⁸ The act of being called by God brings the pastor into a mystical union with the Holy Spirit. There is a belief that the pastors in a mysterious way function as conduits through which the power of the Holy Spirit flows to reach their congregants.³⁹ In the traditional context, people believe that the power of the ancestors is embodied in the priest, who acts as the union of spiritual and physical power in his body and personality. The belief has been adapted in its loosely reinterpreted form in some neo-Pentecostalism in which pastors are increasingly perceived as sacred authorities who are unlike other people; in their person and being, they are mystical beings, sacred vessels of God.⁴⁰ In heterogendered contexts, this kind of authority, coupled with literal biblical interpretation, figuratively and literally makes women vulnerable to patriarchal oppression and sexualised treatment. The kind of authority that neo-Pentecostal leaders command over their members, as discussed previously, seems to sanction gendered and sexual violence against women and girls.

On account of being the embodiment of the secret knowledge from the Holy Spirit, the pastors are perceived as sacred, and are feared and approached with reverence in much the same way as the traditional priests. This means the more pastors exercise unrestrained power over their members, the more women and girls become easily sexualised, and the more patriarchal pastors establish a broader unjust alliance between spirituality and the sexualisation of women's bodies and sexualities. The pastors are regarded not as ordinary beings, but rather as those occupying a special office, and representing a visible link between the spiritual realm and the natural world. In this way, they appear to exercise indirect pneumatocratic influence over their followers. Their being, knowledge, and activities are presented to their members as shrouded in mysteries of the Holy Spirit. This could be described as a theo/pneumatocratic-complex, a situation whereby pastors unwittingly take the place of God/the Holy Spirit as his representatives in the everyday affairs of their members. The contemporary African neo-Pentecostal exercise of power has increasingly encouraged a blurring of the lines between the pastor and the Holy Spirit.

In the neo-Pentecostal scheme of things, it is difficult to distinguish between the pastor and the Holy Spirit. Pastors are feared because it is believed that whatever they proclaim comes to pass. Thus, the neo-Pentecostal religious leaders' source of authority is, as it were, removed to a mystical dimension, and the leaders themselves are perceived as sacred beings beyond human criticism.⁴¹ In the context where individuals are increasingly perceived as "spiritual systems" in themselves, members have tended to relinquish their autonomy and personal subjectivity and power to their pastors in their

quest for spiritual solutions. Thus, within most neo-Pentecostal churches, there is a great disproportion between the pastor as medium of Holy Spiritual power and members as beneficiaries of such power. Members too often are subjected to theologies of personal disempowerment which render them manipulatable and too docile to engage their pastors in life-giving ways of exercising spiritual power. Since sex is usually utilised as a tool of power, in such heteropatriarchal contexts with unconstrained exercise of power, women and girls are the most vulnerable. Whereas traditional priestly authority was embedded in mystery, scholars underline that the system also ensured checks and balances. This was done through continuous critique of the system by the presence of ancestors, and through revision and transformation by human symbolic actions through ritual performances.⁴² The people perform these rituals as a social mechanism to critique and revise outdated aspects of cultural traditions by reconstructing them within collectivist personhood. This *Ubuntu*-isation process ensures development of “new ways of being and becoming so that social healing can follow in the community”.⁴³ Catherine Bell underlines that “rituals did not simply restore social equilibrium, they were part of the ongoing process by which the community was continually redefining and renewing itself”.⁴⁴ However, within African neo-Pentecostalism with its “big human” or superhuman centred structure, members are powerless to critique or revise the mystical powers of the Holy Spirit embodied in the pastor.⁴⁵

The overemphasis on the mysterious source of neo-Pentecostal authority makes the systems vulnerable to, manipulatable by, and abusive of power. The neo-Pentecostal spiritual system does not provide an adequate mechanism to help prevent abuse of power. As demonstrated in the following case studies, the pastoral exercise of sacred power is not constrained by proper checks and balances in this religious moral system.

On gender and sexual relations: two case studies

There are countless sexual scandals in contemporary African neo-Pentecostalism. This ranges from pastors who suck single women’s breasts to exorcise them of demons to pastors who claim to be commanded by the Holy Spirit to have sexual intercourse with married women together with their daughters.⁴⁶ Thus, to limit my discussion, I focus on two prominent cases in South Africa.

The case of Omotoso

On 20 April 2017, a Nigerian televangelist Timothy Omotoso was arrested on 22 counts of “human trafficking, sexual assault and the rape of young girls”.⁴⁷ Omotoso is the founder and senior pastor of Jesus Dominion International with branches across South Africa, the United Kingdom, France and Nigeria. It was alleged that he was grooming young people and sexually

abusing girls as young as 14. He was accused of raping over 30 young women who testified in court to their experiences. The pastor coerced young girls to massage his phallus, and then had intercourse with them without condoms. After the act, he recited Psalm 51 and prayed.⁴⁸

Sarojini Nadar, in her reflection on Omotoso's trial, argues:

the problem is not regulation of churches – the problem is the *regulated teachings* within the churches which socialise girls and women to submit to male authority; which promote what the SACC calls the “family fabric” which is ostensibly a heteronormative – “daddy-mommy” family and takes no account of the ways in which power is exerted in harmful ways within families.⁴⁹

She believes that “Timothy Omotoso is not the leader of a ‘cult’ – he is not part of a lunatic fringe – but that Omotosos exist in all of your churches, because your teachings allow and promote the existence of Omotosos”.⁵⁰ She underlines that

there are thousands of Omotosos in this country alone, and that they too are happy to read Psalm 51 after they perpetrate their acts of manipulation, coercion and, ultimately, violence through their invitations to young submissive victims, schooled in your “BC” (biblically correct) teachings and not “PC” (politically correct) teachings.⁵¹

Nadar points out that “a young girl who subscribes to these Christian teachings is at greater risk of coercion, manipulation, and pressure because she has been socialised to submit to male authority, and she witnesses a church where men and women don't share equally in authority”.⁵² For Nadar,

teachings which promote abstinence instead of consent, “bodily belonging” instead of “bodily autonomy”, and modesty codes for women instead of “thou shalt not touch” codes for men, make it difficult to talk about power and male entitlement in the church.⁵³

“As long as churches remain environments where men have all the power”, she stresses, “then church leaders can use their authority to groom and control women. Patriarchal culture that is steeped in Christian teachings creates conditions that make abuse possible”.⁵⁴ Nadar concludes, “The ‘biblically-sanctioned’ teachings that encourage and teach power differentials between genders is what made the Omotoso case possible”.⁵⁵ Omotoso was regarded as a spiritual father by his congregants. The spiritual father plays a similar role to that of the traditional father. In most African patriarchal cultures, the father controls the affairs of the home.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, we have demonstrated how Zambian neo-Pentecostals have equated ecclesiastical spaces to a home where the pastor is regarded as the father of the members.⁵⁷ This

inculturation of the church into a home is problematic on many levels. In some traditional societies, African women have argued that home discourse is a dangerous ideology for women and girls. They stress that the home discourse was based on conservative traditional African cultural heritage, in which culture and spirituality intertwined and placed women at the centre of the ritual in order to domesticate their sex and sexuality for male gratification and reduce them to objects for procreation.⁵⁸

The case of Seven Angels

The second story is similar to the first. In February 2018, the leaders of the Mancoba Seven Angels Ministry⁵⁹ were accused of masterminding the killing of police officers and a retired army officer inside the police station in Ngcobo, a small town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The police suspected the seven Mancoba brothers of murder and stealing guns from the police station before blowing up two automated teller machines (ATMs). A search at the church premises led to a shootout between the police and the alleged criminals, and the deaths of three of the Mancoba brothers.⁶⁰ The church was established in 1986 by the father of the seven brothers, Sphiwo Mancoba, in Umzimkhulu, KwaZulu-Natal. It was initially called “Angel”, an acronym for All Nations God’s Evangelical Lamp. Shortly after his death in April 2015, his seven sons refused to succeed him as leaders of the church, choosing instead to break away and form Seven Angels Ministry, which would be overseen by their mother. The church resisted secular education and employment outside of the church as doctrines of devil worship. Members of the ministry were required to relinquish all of their wealth as gifts to the “Angel Brothers” upon joining the congregation. As a result, in 2016, the church appeared before the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) to answer to allegations of commercialisation, abuse, and exploitation of people’s beliefs.⁶¹ One of the brothers told the CRL Rights Commission that they were “angels coming from heaven” and not mere humans who should obey the national constitution. He accentuated, “we are saying as Seven Angelic Ministries, firstly I am not a pastor; I am an angel from heaven, seated at the right of the father”.⁶²

The church refused to cooperate with the CRL Rights Commission. It was only the shootout that granted the police access to the church premises. The National Police Commissioner confirmed that “not less than 100” young women and girls between the ages of 12 and 25 were rescued.⁶³ These girls and young women were “indoctrinated and brainwashed”⁶⁴ and reduced to sex slaves. Besides their wives, the Mancoba brothers, “who saw themselves as angels sent by God”,⁶⁵ indoctrinated many women in their church into sexual submission. The church considered providing the Mancoba brothers with sexual satisfaction as an honourable service to God. It was reported that “In this church it is forbidden to have identity

documents. Children are not allowed to have birth certificates and they are not allowed to attend school”.⁶⁶

These two cases demonstrate how culturally-shaped masculinities are enforced and policed through neo-Pentecostalism – “with a view to the maintenance not only of a general system of male supremacy, but the continuation of a particular type of hegemonic male supremacy: the heterosexual type”.⁶⁷ The traditional beliefs and practices which sacralise religious leaders were uncritically adopted and utilised as instruments to legitimise and maintain the distinctiveness of angels from the laity. In fact, adopting the title “angels” is intimately tied up with contextual worldview and cultural contingencies in which traditional priests often adopt mysterious names as instruments of legitimisation. This perception of religious leaders in mystical terms contributes to abusing religious authority, especially in a neo-Pentecostal context in which the spiritual authority of ancestors who mercilessly punished wrongdoing has been replaced wholesale by the Holy Spirit – regarded as a gentle, merciful, and forgiving Spirit. Thus, most neo-Pentecostal religious leaders, as in the two cases discussed in this chapter, are increasingly perceiving themselves as having unlocked access to unlimited sacred power, which is too often abused due to lack of adequate structures of accountability.⁶⁸

It is not just the biblical teaching at the core of gender and sexual relations of power, but rather the way the process of organic inculturation has taken place, that has weakened traditional African spiritual systems. Just as male African theologians, in their process of formulating a theology of liberation deeply rooted in African cultures, normalised and essentialised male experiences as African experiences,⁶⁹ the neo-Pentecostal leaders have normalised male experiences. Some elements of African religio-cultural heritage which nurture and perpetuate heteropatriarchy have been comprehensively adopted in contemporary neo-Pentecostal Christianity.⁷⁰ Hence, there is a need for constant engagement in theological dialogue, first in order to draw afresh life-giving conceptions of sacred authority, and second to develop viable ways of exercising sacred authority that promote and enable the full humanity of women and children, and the integrity of all creation.

Decolonial kenotic theology of authority

The need for decolonial kenotic theology of authority arises out of the understanding that neo-Pentecostalism has uncritically inculturated a patriarchal reading of the concepts of traditional authority into its religious system. Elsewhere, we have demonstrated how this uncritical and subconscious inculturation of traditional concepts of authority has reproduced and accelerated gendered constructions and violent enactions in some neo-Pentecostal churches such as those in the two cases discussed in this chapter.⁷¹ In my research among Zambian neo-Pentecostals, I demonstrated how, through their subconscious organic process of inculturating Christianity in African

cultures, neo-Pentecostals have adopted a superficial and naïve reading of traditional authority, ignored ideas of *Ubuntu*, and excluded the experiences of women, or rather, sexualised their being and bodies.⁷² In the ever-evolving neo-Pentecostal elitist culture embedded in African cultural and Christian theologies, which are both informed by patriarchal imaginations, women and their bodies are increasingly consigned to having a completely obliterated self, which makes them vulnerable to the disempowering effects of religio-normativity as explained in the cases discussed in this chapter. As established, the dominant and accepted praxis of authority within most neo-Pentecostals continues to reproduce and perpetuate heteropatriarchal patterns of male control and women's subordination in both homes and churches. There is a continuation of heteropatriarchal imaginations in the value systems of Christian faith and traditional religious heritage. This describes a situation in which a new religious system has not only emerged but has also redefined asymmetric social relations of power between the pastor and laity. This has made neo-Pentecostal beliefs and practices in relation to gender and sexuality a locus for enunciation and reproduction of sexualised theo/pneumatocratic-complexes which continually manifest in gender- and sex-based violence perpetuated by pastors.

As a solution, I am proposing authority rooted in decolonial kenosis. Kenosis comes from κενόω (*kenoō*, "I empty, make empty"), and, in Philippians 2:7, refers to Christ's self-emptying in the incarnation, which is a realisation and praxis of the divine authority within the flesh. Because God took on embodied existence, the flesh becomes an ever-potential site of manifesting and demonstrating the attributes of God such as love, justice, mercy, hospitality, equality etc.⁷³ In this perspective, Christ's power was demonstrated in kenosis – the power to empty himself. In so doing, Christ highlighted the margins of society as the reason for divine authority – the women, lepers, children, tax collectors, the sick, poor, and those who are marginalised and vulnerable. He crossed the divine-human borders that were artificially created through sin. This has nothing to do with giving ontological privilege to the marginalised in their relationship with God over and above other human beings; rather, it is a conviction based on radical affirmation that Jesus, through kenosis, is on a divine mission of emptying divine justice and full dignity into the marginalised even as the marginalised themselves participate in their own struggle alongside God.

In the older Jewish paradigm of priesthood (similar to the traditional African model), it was the human priest who crossed the spiritual borders to represent the religious community before God. This paradigm promoted a clear distinction between the priest and the worshipping community. The priest was a special mediatory figure who bridged the gap between God and the community of worshippers. He alone had access to the secret sacred knowledge of God, whereas, in the new paradigm inaugurated with the incarnation of Jesus, God, in the person of Christ, crossed the divine borders, not to represent God but to dialogue with humanity. This act of crossing borders radically overcame the dichotomy between God and

humanity/all creation, and between the priest and the community of faith – described as the priesthood of all believers. God and human are no longer separated, but rather are in dialogue. The incarnation collapsed the dichotomy as God emptied Godself into humanity and humanity into God without losing the distinction. Jesus was fully God, fully human (John 1:1, 20:28; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:11–13), identical to God and humanity. This means that God is human, Jesus Christ, and the human is also God – Jesus is very God and very human, both natures “unconfused and unmixed, but also unseparated and undivided, in the one person of this Messiah and Saviour”.⁷⁴

Jesus’ power was not only in what he could do for others, but in what he could make out of himself – the power to empty himself in order to become like sinful humans. However, it was also the power to resist being co-opted into sin and becoming a sinner. Through his temptations (Matthew 4:1–11), Jesus refused to associate himself with the powerful and the rich – the global colonialist – the devil and his imperialist extensions manifested through human elitists of his day – the religious leaders and Roman powers. He introduced a paradigm for reinterpreting power and authority, in a way that was not only about service, but about a power which is devoid of self – the power to restore humanity to its authentic humanity in mutual dialogue with the divine. The fundamental objective of the union between human and divine in Jesus was the promotion of greater social justice and restoration of human dignity. The divine in Christ embraces humanity in Christ while transcending it – not giving in to temptation to sin.

However, while *kenosis* provides a vital conversation partner, it is important to also underline that, nonetheless, the seeming humility in *kenosis* has not insulated against facilitating human perception of divine relationality as “power over”, in turn supporting a divine metaphysics of power as domination or hierarchical.⁷⁵ Feminist theologians have argued that *kenosis* is anything but an innocent concept. As already argued, in most African societies and churches, *kenosis* is culturally interpreted and women are expected to sacrifice their needs, concerns, and sexualities in order to appease and tame the violent tendencies of patriarchy.⁷⁶ This makes *kenosis* a dangerous concept which requires a cautious approach through reimagining neo-Pentecostal ecclesiastical spaces in decolonial terms. In short, since the *kenotic* vision is vulnerable to misinterpretation and corruption, it needs to dialogue with critical theories such as decoloniality.

Gianni Vattimo perceives *kenosis* as the inauguration of secularisation through de-socialisation. For Vattimo, *kenosis* – as a process of secularisation – undoes the violence not only of metaphysics, but also of religion. Through incarnation, God has moved out of eternity and into spatial temporality. He sees *kenosis* as God’s abasement from the position of master of humanity to being its friend (John 15:15).⁷⁷ Vattimo believes that *kenosis* as secularisation is a process of emancipation and liberation through weakening strong structures such as religions or metaphysics, for at the core of both is

violence, because they privilege God or religious systems at the expense of the margins and marginalised.⁷⁸ There is a way in which Vattimo's kenosis could be regarded as reductionist. Kenosis interpreted from an African perspective could be regarded as God "striking an intricate balance" between eternity and spatial temporality; between God and humanity; between God and creation; between the spiritual and material; between the religious and secular, etc. It is God taking on *Ubuntu*. God demonstrates that God is because we are, and because we are, God is. God demonstrates that power is embedded in the quest for balance of forces. Power is generated as *Ubuntu* – promoting empowering and liberating power within the relational nexus⁷⁹ in which the humanity of all is affirmed through shared inclusivist power. This is not the power over, but rather power with others – power in just socio-relational actions. Kenosis as God taking on *Ubuntu* resists both secularisation and sacralisation of power/authority. Jesus through his incarnation reconfigured and relocated all powers that have a direct effect on the community of life, including supernatural powers, within the realm that promotes full accountability to humanity and non-human creation. For Kwame Bediako, this approach to kenosis affirms the continuation of the African world as a spiritually animated reality but functioning with configured powers in which all the various forms of human leadership have undergone *Ubuntu*-isation.⁸⁰ Bediako underlines the incarnation of Jesus, which reflects a dynamic encounter between God and creation; this relationship was a form of radical accountability and served as a divine witness and the witness of creation to justice and equality for all. He believes that this approach to power is critical for subverting dictatorial and absolutist claims that seem to be inherent in contemporary African neo-Pentecostalism.

Thus, decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to maintain balance between the pastor and the community of faith, based on the critical pillars of justice and human rights. It is power in sound and just relationships. The power of the pastor is generated within and for just relationships. The humanity of the pastor is bound up within the humanity of his/her congregants. The power of God is that power which empowers the community of faith to live justly, to act justly, and to affirm the humanity of all. The pastor is not distinct from the community of faith. The pastor is first and foremost a member of the community of faith. The pastor is a sinful person, just like the rest of the community of faith. This is important, as it has been proved that any artificial separation between the pastor and the members can easily lead to the pastors usurping the place of God as they increasingly become absorbed with demonstrating their spiritual gymnastics and claiming to have unlocked the secret to divine knowledge. Decolonial kenotic theology of authority rejects sacralisation of any human being and resists perceiving any human as possessing authority – all authority/power belongs to God alone. It focuses instead on the mutual empowerment of the pastor and the marginalised, in the struggle to actualise the fullness of life in Jesus Christ (John 10:10).

Decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to empty human authority of its mysteriousness through the work of the Holy Spirit, who, through spiritual gifts, distributes power as he pleases, and thus to relocate all powers only in God. Spiritual gifts are the various measures of divine power/grace by which Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, enables the community of believers to participate effectively in God's mission in the world. The act of distribution of these gifts by the Holy Spirit means that power is not located in mysterious dimensions, but rather within God as manifested in the community of faith. These gifts are measured by the operation of divine power in each member of the faith community. This means that no single individual possesses all the power, but that each participates in a portion of God's grace. Only Jesus has all the power in heaven and on earth, in which believers participate through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is through all believers' equal participation in the power of the Holy Spirit that an individual is emptied of claiming more access to God than others. Since the Holy Spirit distributes gifts as he pleases, access to the power is not necessarily derived from the Holy Spirit directly, but from one another, since the power has already been distributed. This is a radical emptying of the spiritual dimensions of power, which is divided among believers. It is also important to note that each gift depends on other gifts, which essentially means that other gifts are given so that a community of faith has clear internal mechanisms of accountability. When applied to the pastor, the pastor is a facilitator whose authority is a measured gift of the Holy Spirit which does not receive its legitimisation in some mysterious dimension, but rather in fulfilling its function by serving the common good. It also means that the office is accountable to all other spiritual gifts for its proper functioning.

As Nimi Wariboko argues, a prophetic lifestyle is all about participating in Jesus' incarnation among, and living in radical solidarity with, the marginalised people and allowing their indignation to nourish⁸¹ decolonial kenotic authority. Leadership in postcolonial Africa is always about crossing the long-standing legacies of colonial borders in order to touch people at the core of their humanity. Thus, decolonial kenotic theology of authority "must not only be anchored to the history of injustice, discrimination, and suffering, but must also be grounded in a vision of love, hope, equity, and justice to facilitate the responsible new alternatives and lean toward the unexpected".⁸² Decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to kenotise and decolonise minds and subjectivities by giving hope and promoting confidence among women and girls to struggle for a possible life-giving socio-relational order which reflects the intention of God for his good creation.

For, as Jesus states in Matthew 28:18, "all authority in heaven and on earth is given to me". Bediako reminds us that these "words are in the context of post-resurrection appearances of our Lord, and hence come from the realm of 'spirit-power'. In an Africa which understands authority and power as emanating from the transcendent realm, the words make full sense".⁸³ However, these words also mean that no one possesses any authority in

heaven or on earth, except through participation in Christ. It also means that power can only be exercised in the same way Christ himself demonstrated through crossing borders of segregation between God and creation, the spiritual and material, the divine and humanity, and so on. Any failure, such as those that could be seen in the case studies discussed in this chapter, is a clear indication that the powers have fallen – and according to Walter Wink, all fallen powers are demonic;⁸⁴ thus, they must be held accountable. The way of Jesus constitutes a new, alternative use of authority in the world, overridden by Roman and religious oppression and exploitation. According to the Gospels, Jesus understood power in terms of marginality, that is, the power to humanise the marginalised, the power to side with the dehumanised, the power to heal and deliver the oppressed, the power to sacrifice his life for others, the power to forgive sin, the power to serve and not to be served, the power to promote justice and equality for all. His understanding of power culminated in his death on the cross, where he *Ubuntu*-ised all power and authority. It is on the cross where he stripped all powers at every level of human society – “stripped them of any pretensions to ultimacy”.⁸⁵ And as Bediako concludes, through his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that “authority truly belongs only to God”.⁸⁶

In this way, decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to articulate a shared inclusivist notion of authority that considers the neo-colonial context in which most women and girls remain disempowered and are easily manipulated to sexually empty themselves in order to survive or because of ignorance. In this context, interpretations of authority should be based on the continuous experiences of legacies of colonialism that shape the margins of African societies. Decolonial kenotic theology of authority is opposed to the paradigm of domination and the paradigm of a distinction between the pastor and his/her congregation. In this model, authority undergoes a radical shift from a pastor-centred spirituality to a marginalised-centred spiritual conception of emptied selves, others, and the world. It argues that, like Jesus, authentic religious leadership is about converting into the likeness of the marginalised. Decolonial kenotic theology of authority refuses to collaborate with any form of patriarchy – especially with the interpretations of God as a male who through the process of incarnation empties himself into marginalised flesh, especially female flesh. This view of God disempowers women to resist their sexualisation and objectification.⁸⁷ Thus, decolonial kenotic theology of authority is a radical refusal to take the place of God in the exercise of power, and a conscious embracing of continuous self-kenosis.⁸⁸

Conclusion

The chapter has employed kenotic imagination as a decolonial analytical tool to interrogate the cultural and historical root of contemporary manifestations of “authority” in African neo-Pentecostalism in relation to gendered constructions and violent enactments. It has argued that, with

Christianity now deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural landscape in much of sub-Saharan Africa, and neo-Pentecostalism playing a prominent role in this development, these are potential shapers of public notions of authority. It has demonstrated that neo-Pentecostal notions of authority are contributing to shaping local contextual forces, such as social, economic, political, and cultural factors. Through kenotic decolonial thinking, it has become clear that neo-Pentecostalism functions with a religious paradox in that they simultaneously reject and uncritically perpetuate some core elements of traditional cultural forms of authority. The pastors in these churches reinforce and legitimise their authority by adopting sacred attributes that give them unquestionable and unaccountable power, thereby creating an almost authoritarian atmosphere in which women and children are easily manipulated and subjected to sexualised treatment. Through the two cases presented of sexual abuse of women and children by neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa, the chapter stressed that this inculturated form of authority is dangerous to the wellbeing of women and girls, as it has not adequately interacted with the kenotic authority of Jesus Christ. A decolonial kenotic theology of authority is proposed to challenge some misconceptions, such as the view that authority is identical with coercive power, male dominance, and access to the divine, that it is something that the pastor alone possesses, and that it is enforceable through top-down interactions in which the laity is reduced to a spiritual clientele. The chapter concludes that decolonial kenotic theology of authority is boundary-crossing from the centre to the margins, from the spiritual to the material, from the divine to the human, and/or from power into powerlessness; in this way, the leader participates in Jesus' incarnation among, and is indistinguishable from, his/her congregation in their equal participation in the ultimate source of and sole possessor of all authority in heaven and on earth – Jesus Christ.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, African Pentecostalism refers to neo-Pentecostalism, especially the current phenomenon scholars describe as neo-Propheticism, unless indicated to the contrary.
- 2 In this chapter, authority and power are used interchangeably.
- 3 For a detailed explanation of various approaches Christians take in their interactions with various cultures, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).
- 4 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the distinctions between decoloniality and postcoloniality. However, decoloniality is preferred based on its geo-historical and biographical origin. Decolonial thinking originates from the Global South within the matrix of colonial power, whereas postcolonial thought emerged from the experience of British colonisation from the centres of power. For discussion on the distinctions between postcoloniality and decoloniality, which I believe are superficial, see Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

- 5 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 106.
- 6 For a detailed discussion of the concept of vital participation from an African perspective, see Vincent Mulago, "Vital Participation: The Cohesive Principle of the Bantu Community," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, eds. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969), 137–58.
- 7 Chammah J. Kaunda and Mutale M. Kaunda, "Mobilising Religious Assets for Social Transformation: A Theology of Decolonial Reconstruction Perspective on the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA) in Zambia," *Religions* 9, no. 6 (2018): 176.
- 8 On the need for a new sexual ethics in a Latin American context, cf. Elina Vuola's Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 9 David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 5.
- 10 Tinyiko Maluleke, "Of Wounded Killers and 'Failed Men': Broadening the Quest for Liberating African Masculinities," *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 24, no. 1 (2018): 33–78, 35–34.
- 11 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.
- 12 See Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and Church in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publication, 2006); Mutale M. Kaunda and Chammah J. Kaunda, "Infunkutu – The Bemba Sexual Dance as Women's Sexual Agency," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (2016): 159–75.
- 13 Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Isabel A. Phiri, Beverly Govinden, and Sarojin Nadar, eds., *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).
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4 Gender, ethnicity, and lived religion

Challenges to contextual and liberation theologies

Elina Vuola

My long-term interest in and interaction with liberation theology and feminist theology has primarily focused on some theoretical and practical limitations in Latin American liberation theology from the perspective of feminist theology, and vice versa.¹ Latin American feminist theology is not as known as it should be, either by feminist theologians from the Global North or by liberation theologians and feminist scholars from other fields in Latin America. At the same time, it is important to tell the narrative of feminist theology as a global, ecumenical, and interfaith movement.²

Since my early critique of the lack of sexual ethical thinking and practice in Latin American liberation theology, the situation has somewhat changed. While early Latin American feminist liberation theology did not engage with sexual ethics – especially Catholic sexual ethics – younger scholars have indeed taken up the challenge.³

Another research interest of mine has been the creation of more dialogue between feminist theology and gender studies in other fields. The problem of much of feminist theorising, in Latin America and elsewhere, has been a superficial and often non-existent interaction with and lack of knowledge of gender studies of religion, including feminist theology. In fact, feminist theology has been a ground-breaking field within gender studies in engaging with women and feminist thought of the Global South.⁴

Thus, the development and contemporary situation of global feminist theology looks somewhat different when analysed internally as a theological endeavour, on the one hand, and when analysed in relation to the broader development of gender theorising, on the other hand. This interdisciplinary challenge is still at the heart of any coherent understanding of liberation theology, globally and in all its forms, which includes feminist theologies and, to some extent, contextual theologies.

In this chapter, I will continue from my earlier research by asking what the pressing challenges of liberation and contextual theologies are today. I rely on my earlier research, aiming to discuss it in the context of this book. My aim is primarily theoretical. By that, I do not mean a juxtaposition of theory and practice. Rather, I ask what some contemporary theoretical developments in the study of religion and other fields relevant to liberation

theologies would mean for the development of a liberation (contextual) theology, which does not have women, indigenous people, and other groups at the margins of critical theological thought. Obviously, this means also clarifying the relationship between liberation theologies, contextual theologies, and feminist theologies. For example, is gender a “context”? How are gender issues related to “culture”? How much has the expansion of subjects in liberation and contextual theologies really affected them – or has it? One possibility for thinking about these questions is the perspective of lived religion, which has become a major theoretical way of thinking about what is meant by “religion” and, especially, how to understand it from the perspective of marginalised and subjugated groups of people.

To sustain my more theoretical perspectives I will offer empirical examples from my own research on the meaning of the Virgin Mary for women in two different cultural and religious contexts (Costa Rica and Finland; Catholicism and Orthodoxy), on the one hand, and my ethnographic work among the Finnish Skolt Sámi, on the other hand. These two empirical works are related: my interest in both has been to expand the notions of the meaning of religious traditions for people (women, and ethnic and racial minorities) who have not been considered as theological subjects in their own right even in most liberation and contextual theologies. Further, research on indigenous people and their religious traditions, including various branches of Christianity, has usually not been linked to theological issues or theology as a discipline – possibly with the exception of missiology and mission studies, but certainly in the case of liberation, contextual, and feminist theologies. Finally, in order for any theology to be “global”, it is important to draw from different cultural contexts, from both the Global South and the Global North. Neither is monolithic, or culturally or religiously singular, and in both, it is women who struggle to be recognised as subjects, including theologically.

Lived religion and liberation theologies

During recent decades, the perspective of lived religion has been influential in the study of religion, especially sociology of religion. Scholars of lived religion have focused on ordinary (lay) people and their ways of being religious and practising religion.⁵ Some of these scholars use the term everyday religion (Ammerman) or vernacular religion (Primiano).⁶ These terms are not entirely overlapping, but they share an interest in the ordinary, the margins, the everyday, and the material, and most of them also in gender. The different uses of the term reflect disciplinary differences: for example, Primiano is a folklorist, Ammerman a sociologist of religion, and Orsi a historian of religion. Methodologically, empirical work is at the heart of lived religion. At the same time, ethnographic work among ordinary people stresses their agency, instead of them being passive objects of religious knowledge and guidance from above.

Nancy T. Ammerman has written a (self-)critical evaluation of the history and contents of lived religion.⁷ According to her, scholarship on lived religion has tended to focus too narrowly on certain geographical and cultural areas (mainly the United States) and religious traditions. Most of the publications on lived religion are written in English. The initial tendency of scholarship of lived religion to focus on the ordinary, the lived, instead of the official and institutional, has also led to an unnecessary binary between the institutional and the lived. In most religious traditions, especially in the Abrahamic religions, religion is lived at the intersection of these.

Written texts, their interpretation into doctrines, and how those affect the institutional are part of the lived experience and practice of the ordinary faithful, even when this relationship can be – and often is – contested. Liberation and feminist theologies, in my judgement, are good examples of how traditions, texts, and institutions are challenged and changed from the bottom up, even when the formulation of this critique is done primarily by academic theologians. The institutional and the doctrinal, too, are “lived”. This is not usually taken into account in the scholarship of lived religion – one reason being its meagre dialogue with theology and theologians.⁸

The challenge of liberation theologies is both theoretical and practical, even political. The self-understanding of all liberation theologies has been that liberation theology is “lived”; it stems from real circumstances of marginalisation and outright oppression. The liberation theological theoretical critique has challenged Euro- and androcentric interpretations of theology and their relationship to issues of power. As a result, contemporary theology and its repercussions in religious institutions and doctrines have been changed because of this critique – even if not enough. For example, the feminist critique of Christianity has been both theoretical and practical: explaining and questioning the image of women in the history, authoritative texts, and doctrine of Christianity, but also demanding concrete changes in the exclusion and marginalisation of women in Christian churches. This feminist rewriting of Christian theology has been influential in all Christian churches, but it is primarily some Protestant churches which have been willing to draw practical consequences of it, whether in the area of ethics or priesthood.

Thus, various liberation theologies have also had an impact on the institutional and doctrinal. This is true also of the Catholic Church, although it has been – and still is – surprisingly resistant to feminist theology, in spite of the fact that most important feminist theologians are Catholic. It is important to pay attention to this influence of liberation theologies, because it highlights how institutions and the official are never entirely separated from the lived, the everyday, and the cultural, or from issues of power.

In textual religions, such as Christianity, changes in doctrine and interpretation of sacred texts are of direct practical importance, especially for people who have been excluded from positions of authority and right to interpretation. Feminist theology, probably more than any other form of liberation

theology, has challenged traditional theology due to the simple fact that women are half of humanity and they have been the primary objects of gendered religious restrictions and teachings, even on issues which are relevant only for them, such as motherhood, pregnancy, and menstruation. Both “the lived” and the doctrinal and institutional change, even if slowly, when tradition is reinterpreted and challenged by women.

A further potential restriction of the lived religion approach lies in its focus on the individual. This focus on individual people’s thoughts, practices, and interpretations, as important as it is, may lead the lived religion approach to another binary between the communal and the individual. Even individual experiences are never detached from culture, tradition, and community. This is related to the previously mentioned relationship between the institutional and the lived.

Latin American liberation theology has since its beginning claimed that its roots are in *la religiosidad popular* (popular or folk religion) of Latin American people. Latin American Catholicism has since the early days of the Conquest been fused with indigenous religions and later with African-based religions. Thus, the liberation theological interest in *la religiosidad popular* may be interpreted as coming close to what is called lived religion. In Latin America, it has meant the recognition of indigenous people, lay Catholics – including women – and Afro-Latin Americans.

However, as I have argued elsewhere, Latin American liberation theology has failed in including indigenous, gender, and ecological concerns in its theoretical and practical core.⁹ This is largely due to a lack of applying the critique expressed by the corresponding social movements, which demand concrete political changes at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, class, ethnicity, and ecology. In gender issues, particularly, liberation theology did not explicitly distance itself from racist and sexist elements of Christian (Catholic) theology.¹⁰ The importance of *la religiosidad popular* was emphasised in liberation theology, but without adequate and in-depth knowledge of indigenous spiritualities, popular Catholicism and Afro-Latin American religions.

Ethnographic methods have not been widely used in either feminist or liberation theology. The focus has been primarily on doctrinal and philosophical issues. Nor has there been much dialogue with anthropology or sociology of religion, not to mention gender studies. There is a broader under-development or even lack of religious studies in Latin American universities. Thus, the issue is also of somewhat narrow multidisciplinary at the heart of liberation theological claims.

Some Latin American feminist theologians have proposed that their theology stems from *la vida cotidiana*, which could be translated as “everyday life”.¹¹ This, again, comes close to what is called lived religion in the Anglo-Saxon world. However, these possible antecedents of and overlappings with lived religion are not taken into account in standard presentations of lived religion.

This is for at least two broad reasons: first, the already mentioned lack of knowledge and dialogue with theology, whether from the Global North or South, and second, the geopolitics of knowledge,¹² which tends to universalise from theoretical traditions of the Global North, especially the United States, without recognising even influential traditions of thought elsewhere, such as liberation and contextual theologies.

I argue that the perspective of what is called lived religion has been and is in many ways present in feminist and liberation theologies, but whereas scholars of lived religion use primarily ethnographic methods (but, as said, may arbitrarily exclude the importance of theology), liberation theologies have – in a way contradictorily – focused on doctrine. Claims about the importance of indigenous spiritualities and women's interpretations remain superficial if they are not based on detailed scholarship done in these areas. At the same time, liberation and feminist theologies have opened up entirely new ways of thinking about theology and its subject. The “adding model” (of women, indigenous people, etc.), however, does not develop these theologies further if their central arguments and claims are not taken seriously and integrated at the core of theology.¹³ This need is as challenging for liberation theologies as it is for any other form of theology.

A greater use of ethnographic methods and interaction with such scholarship which allows issues related to gender, race, and ethnicity to be explained and understood – which includes showing how they are intertwined – would both take liberation theologies to new avenues of development and stay faithful to their original radical thought of changing the subject of Eurocentric, patriarchal theology.

Contextual and liberation theologies

What exactly is the difference between contextual and liberation theologies?¹⁴ They are sometimes presented as overlapping, often not, and at the least they have different emphases. Contextual theologians often remind us that all theology – and in the end, all human activity – is always contextual. Theoretically, this comes close to the emphases in other fields of research, which argue for the importance of positionality. It has been especially influential in cultural studies and gender studies: the possibility of stronger objectivity is anchored in the consciousness and reflection of the scholar of her/his cultural, racial, ethnic, and gendered position. In contextual theologies, the context – however defined – is the conscious point of departure for theological reflection: the context is defined, explicated, and reflected on in relation to other forms of theology. In contextual theologies, the context is often that of a subjugated or marginalised group. In this respect, they come close to liberation theologies: the context is not just something to be taken into account, but also to be changed.

For example, Stephen Bevans seems to understand contextual theology as somewhat overlapping with liberation theology. According to him, contextual

theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the Gospel, the tradition of the Christian people, the culture in which one is theologising, and social change in that culture, including struggles for equality, justice, and liberation.¹⁵ His very broad definition includes a variety of ways in which contextualisation happens.

A culturally anchored approach would consider culture as a context: there is necessarily no political or other demand for change, but rather a conscious reflection on the Christian tradition from the perspective of other cultural realities than that of early Christianity and later that of its European developments. However, from the perspective of anthropology and cultural studies, it is difficult to consider any culture as monolithic or homogenous. Thus, when culture is taken as a point of departure, there is also a need for a more varied and detailed understanding of culture, including issues of historical changes, constellations of power, and heterogeneity within any given culture (e.g. gender, ethnicity). This is also what Bevans seems to be pointing at: the “context” or the “culture” is never neutral or homogenous, and within them, there are all kinds of inner variations and issues of power: cultures are not static.¹⁶

The history of Christian mission and the expansion of Christianity to other parts of the world, as well as the overlapping of this enterprise with European colonialism, are central points of reference. Here, culturally oriented contextual theologies again may come close to liberation theologies and their more explicated demands for change. Christianity arrived in what today is understood as the Global South intimately tied to the colonial interests and structures of Europe. The Christian message – interpreted and transmitted through European culture – was proclaimed as the universal truth. Contextual theologies have questioned and challenged this universality.

Contextual and liberation theologies are thus closely related, yet different. In both, critical de- and reconstruction of the Christian tradition and legacy is central. The locus and subject of traditional theology are consciously shifted in both, often with an emphasis on marginality, otherness, and subjugation. Feminist theologies bring yet another aspect to both contextual and liberation theologies by also challenging their androcentrism. However, it is difficult to consider race, gender, or ethnicity as a “context” in the sense in which it is usually understood in more culturally inclined contextual theologies. Similarly, ecotheologies are difficult to place adequately into either group, although it can be argued that both liberation and contextual theologies have a close methodological affinity to ecotheology and ecofeminist theology. Finally, if all theology has a context, it can be argued that there can be contextual theologies which can theologically and politically be in direct contradiction with liberation and feminist theologies. Thus, I prefer to use the term contextual theology of those theologies which share at least some basic tenets of the liberation theological impetus and which are also sensitive to gender issues and willing to consider feminist theology as a central part of their self-understanding.

Global feminist theology

The issue of gender becomes particularly crucial when theologians take (their) culture as a point of departure. As previously stated, the presentation of any “culture” is intrinsically tied to issues of historical and contemporary power. In both liberationist and very conservative, even fundamentalist, contexts, women may be seen as primordial carriers of culture, on the one hand, and changes in their position as a threat to that culture, including religion, on the other. Contextual and liberation theologies need to be especially alert in mainstreaming gender in detailed ways, relying on adequate scholarship, in order to avoid such presentations of culture that principally harm women and in which women’s roles and position are not taken into account. The same is true of issues of race and ethnicity: women and indigenous people may become both excluded in their own right and romanticised as the primary carriers of culture.¹⁷

Another kind of lack or meagreness of deep multidisciplinary which affects the development of adequate gender theorising in the context of religion is between feminist study of religion – including feminist theology – and other fields of gender research. An important part of my scholarship has focused on this lack of interaction between various forms of feminist theorising in different disciplines, which is especially striking when it comes to religion. This is true also of Latin American gender studies.¹⁸

Gender issues when related to religion may thus be ignored in both “secular” gender studies – even when making claims about the relationship between women and their religious traditions – and in contextual and liberation theologies, if there is not enough knowledge of and dialogue with the vast field of gender studies in religion. This includes feminist theology and the empirical, lived religion type of research on the variety of ways women interpret and live their religious traditions in different parts of the world.

The term “intersectionality” has become a major theoretical way to conceptualise gender.¹⁹ Today, it is a standard way in gender research to theorise on and understand how gender is always construed in relation to other differences and hierarchies of power, such as class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation, to name the most often used categories. Religion, by and large, has not been substantially theorised as a difference, and it may be difficult or even unnecessary to do so. However, religion crosscuts other differences, and is thus important to take into account. As a concept and way of taking a variety of crosscutting differences into account, intersectionality may possibly also serve a function in contextual and liberation theologies. Further, intersectionality theorises similar questions in gender studies and feminist politics to those that most liberation and contextual theologies do in theology and the study of religion.

Unfortunately, gender remains an issue to be mentioned but not adequately theorised in most contextual and liberation theologies. Similarly, religion has been – and, by and large, still is – an area of study that standard gender

studies do not take into account. Gender scholars of religion, whether theologians or sociologists of religion, are thus not dialogued with in substantial enough ways to change the way we conceptualise both gender studies and liberation and contextual theologies. In Latin America, feminist liberation theologians' work is seldom quoted or recognised by gender scholars in other fields²⁰ or the first generation of male liberation and contextual theologians.

In a recent publication for a gender studies audience, I pointed out how religion has not been substantially engaged with in the field of feminist studies.²¹ In order to make my argument about the exclusion of religion – and the feminist study of it – more concrete, I analysed how the idea of intersectionality was employed in feminist theology much earlier than in other fields of feminist studies, even though it was not called intersectionality then.

In my article, I did a re-reading of feminist theology in order to show how, from the early 1970s, feminist theologians stressed the interstructuring of gender, class, colonialism, race, and ethnicity to emphasise their practical and theoretical cooperation with liberation and feminist theologians from the Global South. They did not use the concept of intersectionality, instead using interrelatedness or interstructuring, but conceptually, they meant the same.²²

In feminist theology, this early emphasis on the “interstructuring of oppression” from both the Global North and the Global South was an outcome of its collaboration with liberation theologies. Already in the 1980s, there were Asian and African liberation theologies, Black theology in both South Africa and the United States, and feminist theologies in all those contexts. Early feminist liberation theologians stressed the interstructuring of gender, class, race, and ethnicity to emphasise the practical and theoretical cooperation and dialogue of liberation and feminist theologians from the Global North and the Global South. Feminist liberation theologians – including *womanist* and *mujerista* theologians from the United States and feminist theologians from the Global South – were practically and conceptually linked to liberation theology even with their critical perspectives. Both colonialism, with its far-reaching consequences, and religion became crucial “intersections” of feminist theology of the 1970s. Feminist theology has been global, ecumenical, and interreligious, and it has influenced all other liberation and contextual theologies for a long time already. Feminist theology, thus, can be understood both as a central part of all liberation and contextual theologies and as a critique of them, which sometimes has meant distancing.

Since feminist theology can be understood both as a form of liberation and contextual theology and as a specific field of gender studies, it is important that feminist theologians are read and dialogued with in both. The too meagre and selective interdisciplinarity in theology as well as in gender studies too often leaves out the extensive body of work produced by feminist theologians globally. Any claims about women's relationship

to religion in both fields must start with feminist theological work in order not to reproduce stereotypical and unfounded arguments – whether on religion in secular gender studies or on women in contextual and liberation theologies.

Further, not only intersectionality, but also lived religion, may prove to be a fruitful way to bridge the lacunae that exist between fields. For theologians, it means greater use of empirical and ethnographic research, whether done by others or by oneself. My critique of the stereotypical and faulty presentation of religion and religious women in much of Latin American gender studies led me to learn ethnographic methods. This step does not mean moving from textual to empirical methods, but rather emphasises the need for both. Since the feminist dislike of religion (especially Catholicism) in Latin America gained specific intensity in the case of the Virgin Mary, I decided to interview Catholic women myself, to ask them what the Mother of God means for them. This research I did in Costa Rica, where I had earlier lived and worked. The broad result of this research is that the women I interviewed presented views, experiences, and thoughts on the Virgin Mary which do not easily fit either the traditional Catholic or the secular feminist view of her.²³

My Costa Rican interviewees' views reflected in many ways the kind of image of the Virgin Mary that has been brought forward in Latin American liberation theology: Mary as an ordinary *campesina* woman, poor and young, but who is also the Mother of the poor and the prophetess of the *Magnificat*. At the same time, there were deeply gendered aspects in my interviewees' Mariology and lived Marian piety that are not present in liberation theological interpretations of her. For example, women turn to Mary especially in situations and issues that have more urgency for them as women, such as birth, infertility, and miscarriage. My interviewees tended not to emphasise her virginity, or they offered non-physiological interpretations of it. Because of her gender, Mary was explicitly understood as someone closer to women and more understanding of them than God and Jesus, comprehended as male.²⁴

Christian women's lived religion involves theological pondering and reflection. Also, in order to understand what they actually say, a theological analysis is central. This is why I argue that it is important to use both empirical and theoretical methods. Theology, too, is lived, as all contextual and liberation theologies make clear. Nevertheless, there has been not much ethnography in either contextual and liberation theologies or feminist theologies to sustain the more theoretical analyses. The lack of mainstreaming gender in most liberation and contextual theologies leads to an absence of women's (and other groups') lived religion. As said, the same happens – albeit for different reasons – in much of gender studies, including in the Global South. I am thus proposing greater and deeper interdisciplinarity in both contextual theologies and gender studies. This can result in better theory – through the use of terms such as intersectionality – and better

empirical claims – through the use of approaches such as lived religion. Theology, for its part, can fertilise other fields of study through its more historical, textual, theoretical, and doctrinal analyses.

Indigenous people and liberation theology: the Skolt Sámi

Finally, I will take another example of how ethnography could feed into contextual and liberation theologies or theology generally. Issues of ethnicity, at least in Latin American liberation theology, have suffered from similar superficiality and absence to gender issues. The claims made by liberation theologians about the importance of indigenous cultures and spiritualities and their view of liberation theology as being based on *la religiosidad popular* have usually not stemmed from ethnographic work – either the scholar's own or that of anthropologists.²⁵ My broad argument about the need for greater interdisciplinarity in contextual and liberation theologies is similar in the case of issues of ethnicity to in the case of gender issues: the “inclusion” of women and indigenous people is not enough, and sometimes it can even be detrimental, especially when it happens at the level of generalisations and stereotypes.

The need I perceived for the use of ethnographic methods in the contexts of Latin American gender studies – particularly concerning claims about religion – led me to continue on the same path in my own cultural context, Finland. I interviewed Finnish Orthodox women on their relationship with the Mother of God.²⁶

The Orthodox Church has a long history in Finland, which is geographically and historically between the East and the West. After World War II, Finland lost significant parts of its easternmost territories, including most of Karelia, where most Orthodox lived, to the Soviet Union. Over 400,000 Finnish Karelians became internally displaced people who were evacuated and resettled in other parts of Finland. Among them were about 55,000 Orthodox Christians, two-thirds of the Finnish Orthodox population at that time. The Finnish evacuees included 500 Skolt Sámi (*sä'mmlaž* in Skolt, *kolttsaamelaiset* in Finnish) from Pechenga (Petsamo) in the northeast.

The Sámi are an indigenous people that have historically inhabited northern Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula. They are divided into several tribes, of which the Skolt Sámi is one. Their traditional home area, which includes Pechenga, is situated in the Northwestern Kola Peninsula. It is estimated that there are today about 1,000 Skolts, of whom about 600 are in Finland and the rest in Russia and Norway. Of the Finnish Skolts, today only a little more than half speak Skolt Sámi as their mother tongue. The Skolts are traditionally Orthodox by religion, Christianised in the 16th century by Russian monks. This, besides language, customs, and history, sets the Skolts apart from the rest of the Sámi, who are primarily Lutheran. They are thus a small minority within two minorities in contemporary Finland: within the

Orthodox Church (linguistically and ethnically), and among the other Sámi (linguistically and religiously).

After Finland ceded Pechenga to the Soviet Union, the Finnish Skolt Sámi were resettled in three villages situated on different sides of Lake Inari. The Skolts lost access to their ancestral fishing and hunting grounds, which resulted in the disintegration of their traditional way of life. The Skolt Sámi culture has suffered severely from Finnish national assimilation policies.

As part of my broader research among the Finnish Orthodox women, I also conducted interviews among the Skolt Sámi. All of my 19 interviewees were women, and I originally asked them similar questions to my other Orthodox interviewees on the meaning of the Mother of God. However, it turned out that they did not speak so much about the Virgin Mary as they did about the overall meaning of the Orthodox tradition and Church for them as an ethnic minority.²⁷ My work among the Skolt Sámi was a combination of theological and ethnographic work, which uses intersectional analyses and the perspective of lived religion.

Skolt Sámi culture is intimately connected with the Orthodox faith. Eastern Christian influences set Skolts apart from other Scandinavian Sámi groups, a difference that has historically been a source of discrimination within the wider Sámi community, as well. Orthodox evacuees, both Karelians and Skolts, experienced stereotyping, suspicion and hostilities from the majority Lutheran culture until at least the early 1970s. Other Sámi groups were converted to Lutheranism much earlier, which is a source of pain and trauma even today. Protestant Christianity was much more stringent with the Sámi and their pre-Christian belief system, considered pagan, than the Orthodox Church was in the areas where it was the primary form of Christianisation. In the case of Finland, this means both Karelia and the Skolt Sámi region. At the same time, the Skolt Sámi were also met with suspicion by the other Sámi because of their Orthodox faith and different language and customs.

However, the Orthodox tradition has facilitated the maintenance of a distinctive Skolt identity. The Orthodox Church and tradition are important for the Skolt Sámi. Particularly for many older interviewees, it was difficult to separate religion and culture, for “to be Skolt Sámi is to be Orthodox”.

Indigenous theologies, primarily in North and South America, have until now not informed Sámi theologians, with some few exceptions of young theologians such as Helga West (Finland), Tore Johnsen, and Jorunn Jernsletten (Norway). In their work, they may rely on indigenous theologies elsewhere, but primarily on their own cultural heritage and the traumatic history of Christianisation of the Sámi tribes. Nevertheless, my interest here is to point out how the voices of indigenous people themselves, theologians or not, must inform any contextual, liberation, or feminist theology which claims to speak for the indigenous people or takes their spiritual traditions into account in a liberation theological agenda.

Conclusions

What implications could these thoughts have for contextual and liberation theologies? First, ethnicity – just as gender – is not something to be listed in the long list of contexts and forms of oppression. Rather, it is at the very heart of any liberation or contextual theology. At the same time, the critical view of feminist and indigenous theology of the history of oppression and contemporary marginalisation is a challenge also to contextual theology. The kinds of intersectional differences and contemporary forms of lived religion mentioned in this chapter are important to take into account in such research in order to avoid generalisations and stereotyping. Similarly, sensitivity to intersectional differences and forms of power – whether based on gender, ethnicity, or religion – is necessary in any form of contextual and liberation theology which “adds” culturally and historically subjugated groups (such as women and indigenous peoples) to its subjects.

Second, it is important that there are adequately trained theologians who create knowledge from their own experiences, in their own words, and with all the demands they have for both states and churches. At the same time, it is as important that the knowledge and viewpoints of ordinary people, whether women or indigenous or both, are included in all works that claim to “include” them. Their voices have to be gathered by adequate and ethical forms of research.

Third, more theoretically, true inter- and transdisciplinarity is important. Theologians could dialogue much more with ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and gender scholars in order not to make overly broad and generalised claims about women/gender or indigenous people. The cross-pollination of different fields is particularly important for theologies which have contextuality, liberation, and equality at their centre. Besides factual knowledge, a deeper interdisciplinarity can provide new tools and methods for research. In this chapter, I have taken up two: lived religion from the study of religion, and intersectionality from gender studies. The combination of textual and empirical methods can enrich theology – and, again, this may be especially crucial for the future of contextual and liberation theologies.

Fourth and finally, many of the themes I have discussed in this chapter are already to some extent present in contextual and liberation theologies, if compared with more traditional forms of theology. They may thus turn out to be the sites *par excellence* in which to further challenge both theology and constellations of power in religious institutions, society, and the academy. That requires contextual and liberation theologians to also be attentive to their own positions (of power) and to those who critique them.

Notes

- 1 Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Feminist Theology and the Ethics of Poverty and Reproduction* (Sheffield and New York: Sheffield Academic Press and Continuum, 2002).

- 2 Elina Vuola, "Religion, Intersectionality, and Epistemic Habits of Academic Feminism: Perspectives from Global Feminist Theology," *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 1, no. 1 (2017): Article no. 4, www.lectitopublishing.nl/Article/Detail/DBU1TOTH.
- 3 See for example Marcella Althaus-Reid, ed., *Liberation Theology and Sexuality: New Radicalism from Latin America* (London: Ashgate, 2006). On religiously legitimated sexual and gender-based violence, in an African context, cf. Cham-mah J. Kaunda's Chapter 3 in this volume.
- 4 I argue this in detail in Vuola, "Religion, Intersectionality, and Epistemic Habits of Academic Feminism".
- 5 Nancy T. Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of Its Contours and Frontiers," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29, no. 2 (2016): 83–99; Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robert A. Orsi, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–11; Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- 6 Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field"; Ammerman, *Everyday Religion*; Leonard Norman Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 37–56.
- 7 Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field."
- 8 Cf. also Mika Vähäkangas and Karen Lauterbach, eds., *Faith in African Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2017), and Joel Robbins' forthcoming book on theology and anthropology.
- 9 Elina Vuola, "Latin American Liberation Theologians' Turn to Eco(theo)logy: Critical Remarks," in *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere*, eds. Celia Deane-Drummond and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2011), 91–110.
- 10 See also Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*; Althaus-Reid, ed., *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*.
- 11 Cf. María Pilar Aquino, *Nuestro clamor por la vida: Teología latinoamericana desde la perspectiva de la mujer* (San José: Editorial DEI, 1992). English edition and translation: *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).
- 12 Walter Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002): 57–96.
- 13 See Vähäkangas' Chapter 13 in this volume.
- 14 Cf. also on this central question the chapters of Ulrich Duchrow (Chapter 5), Volker Küster (Chapter 12) and Mika Vähäkangas (Chapter 13) in this volume.
- 15 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 1.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 17 Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*; Vuola, "Latin American Liberation Theologians' Turn to Eco(theo)logy."
- 18 See Elina Vuola, "The Exclusion of (the Study of) Religion in Latin American Gender Studies," *LASA Forum* XLVI, no. 1 (2015): 17–19, <https://forum.lasaweb.org/past-issues/vol46-issue1.php>; and Elina Vuola, "Intersectionality in Latin America? The Possibilities of Intersectional Analysis in Latin American Studies and Study of Religion," in *Bodies and Borders in Latin America*

- Cuerpos y fronteras en América Latina*, eds. Silje Lundgren, Thaïs Machado Borges, and Charlotta Widmark, Serie Haina VIII (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 2012), 131–51. Portuguese translation: “Interseccionalidade na América Latina? As possibilidades da análise interseccional nos estudos latino-americanos de religião,” in *Estudos feministas e religião: tendências e debates*, eds. Sandra Duarte de Souza and Naira Pinheiro dos Santos (Curitiba: Prisma, 2014), 15–38.
- 19 See for example Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, “Ain’t I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004): 75–86; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139–67; Jennifer C. Nash, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89 (2008): 1–15; Nira Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 193–209.
- 20 See Vuola, “The Exclusion of (the Study of) Religion.”
- 21 See my argument in detail in Vuola, “Religion, Intersectionality, and Epistemic Habits of Academic Feminism.”
- 22 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975).
- 23 See Elina Vuola, “Seriously Harmful for Your Health? Religion, Feminism and Sexuality in Latin America,” in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality: New Radicalism from Latin America*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: Ashgate, 2006), 137–62. Spanish translation: “Gravemente perjudicial para su salud? Religión, feminismo y sexualidad en América Latina y el Caribe,” *Pasos* 127 (2006): 14–25; Elina Vuola, “La Morenita on Skis: Women’s Popular Marian Piety and Feminist Research of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, eds. Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 494–524; Vuola, “Intersectionality in Latin America?”; and Elina Vuola, *The Virgin Mary across Cultures: Devotion among Costa Rican Catholic and Finnish Orthodox Women* (London: Routledge, 2019). In this chapter, I am not quoting the interviews I did in Costa Rica (2006–2007) and Finland (2013–2014). These are available in Vuola, *The Virgin Mary Across Cultures*; and Elina Vuola, “The Mother of God in Finnish Orthodox Women’s Lived Piety: Converted and Skolt Sámi Voices,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 195–212. Here, I have a broader and more theoretical interest in the importance of lived religion and ethnographic work for contextual and liberation theologies.
- 24 See more on my interviews in Costa Rica in Vuola, “Seriously Harmful for Your Health?” and *The Virgin Mary across Cultures*.
- 25 See Vuola, “Latin American Liberation Theologians’ Turn to Eco(theo)logy.”
- 26 See the analysis of my work in both Costa Rica and Finland in Vuola, *The Virgin Mary Across Cultures*.
- 27 See Vuola, “The Mother of God in Finnish Orthodox Women’s Lived Piety”; Andreas Kalkun, Helena Kupari, and Elina Vuola, “Coping with Loss of Homeland through Orthodox Christian Processions: Contemporary Practices among Setos, Karelians, and Skolt Sámi in Estonia and Finland,” *Practical Matters*, June 11, 2018, <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2018/06/11/coping-with-loss-of-homeland-2/>.

5 Ecumenical liberation theology

How I experienced its arrival in Germany and Europe after 1968

Ulrich Duchrow

It is a special pleasure to contribute to the project on contextual liberation theology (initiated in Lund). When I was working with the Lutheran World Federation in the early 1970s trying to take the first steps in doing contextual theology, it was Per Frostin from Lund who was one of my dearest colleagues in the international arena. As this type of theology was not easy to introduce, solidarity among committedly searching theologians was key to surviving the necessary struggles. Against this background it may also be interesting for contemporary readers to encounter biographical elements in the following reflections. First, I shall look at some roots of liberation theology, then at its beginnings in the 1960s, and finally at its development in relation to the changing contexts from the 1980s up to the present day.

Some roots of liberation theology

The roots of liberation theology, without any doubt, lie in the Hebrew Bible – read contextually. The Exodus story in Exodus 3ff. is the archetype of liberation theology. But there are other religions and philosophies of that classical period showing analogous liberating approaches, as we shall see. This ancient impulse came from the whole of Eurasia – from China to Greece. The Apostle Paul also passed the Jewish liberating heritage on to Europe. However, this heritage entered into a crisis, when Christianity was imperialised starting with the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 CE and intensified by Theodosius from 380 CE. Yet periodically, persons and movements emerged to recover the liberating message of the Bible in their own contexts: Peter Waldo and Francis of Assisi in the beginnings of early capitalism, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus during its further developments, and at its climax, the Reformers Martin Luther, Thomas Müntzer, and some of the Anabaptists, to mention just a few. This heritage is also found in the British context, for example, Gerrard Winstanley in the 17th century. All of them drew their liberating message from a rediscovery of the Bible.¹ In the Catholic sphere, one should especially mention Bartolomé de las Casas, who was fighting slavery and the colonial abuse of indigenous peoples in

the 16th century, and documents of Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, which was the inspiration for the important Medellín Conference in 1968.

The more direct predecessors of liberation theology emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The first was Christoph Blumhardt (1842–1919), who developed his radical pietism into a radical social and political engagement. He discovered Jesus' message and practice of the kingdom of God, which is one of unlimited love, or more precisely love-powered healing and liberating all life and making the vulnerable human being the centre of concern. Against the massive critique of the conservative wing of the church, he joined the workers' movement and its political arm, the Social Democratic Party, which he served as a member of the Württemberg Parliament for six years. In this way, he became the father of religious socialism and influenced its representatives, the young Karl Barth, Hermann Kutter, Leonard Ragaz, and also Paul Tillich. Religious socialism was also one of the currents at the beginning of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century. Think of the World Conference on Church and Society in Stockholm in 1925 under the leadership of Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom.²

Another source of liberation theology is the struggle against National Socialism (NS) and the "German Christians" in Germany, following Nazi ideology. It is the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934, phrased by Karl Barth and adopted by a synod of the emerging Confessing Church, which articulated the fundamental break with traditional Constantinian imperial Christianity. Thesis II states:

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords – areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.³

This means that the neo-Lutheran "doctrine" of two separate kingdoms,⁴ allowing economics and politics to move according to their "own autonomous laws" (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*, Max Weber), was overcome. This also happened later in Norway, where Bishop Eivind Berggrav upheld the original Luther against the neo-Lutheran assimilation to the Nazi occupiers of Norway.⁵

Probably the most influential theologian for later liberation theologies has been Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As early as 1927, in his doctoral dissertation, *Communio Sanctorum*,⁶ he states that the future of the church will not be bourgeois and that the proletariat has to be the starting point for new ventures of becoming the church. This was confirmed by his experience

of the Harlem black church he became part of while studying in Union Theological Seminary in the middle of New York near the Riverside Church in 1930–1931. But the most important aspect of his contribution to liberation theology is his rediscovery of the Reformation category of *status confessionis*. What does it mean? The answer may be found in his article “Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage” (“The Church Facing the Jewish Issue”) of April 1933, just three months after Hitler took power.⁷ Here he says that when the state is *too much* or *too little* of what it should be, namely too little devoted to order and justice or claiming too much power beyond its realm, then the church is *in statu confessionis*, i.e. has to intervene directly as a matter of faith. In his moment of history, this meant resisting the disenfranchisement of the Jews and not firing pastors of Jewish background as required by the Aryan section of the law (*Arierparagraph*). He put it into a parable ascribed to Luther: “If the coach driver is drunk, the church must not only bandage the wounds but put a spoke in the wheel”.⁸ Bonhoeffer did this by joining the resistance, paying with his life. This sealed his authenticity and credibility for good.

The origin of contemporary liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s

The context for the recent rise of liberation theology was characterised by a complex mixture of international, national, and socio-economic factors. Starting from 1953 in Persia when democratic Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh was deposed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British intelligence service, the United States – in conjunction with former European colonial powers – organised military coups in conjunction with local elites in many countries of the Global South in order to make, or to keep, these countries dependent on Western economic and geopolitical interests and structures (e.g. Brazil in 1964, Congo in 1965, Indonesia in 1965–1967, Chile in 1973, and Argentina in 1975). On the basis of the colonial past, this created what was identified and analysed academically in the form of the so-called *dependency theory*,⁹ showing the splits within and between societies into centre and periphery. So, liberation theology grew up in a context of a specific period of Western domination linked to the violence of elite military rule.

The youth uprisings in the 1960s were also coupled with resistance to US imperialism, which had taken over from France the dirty war against the people of Vietnam. Numerous demonstrations grew bigger and bigger in Germany; these were coupled with demonstrations against the Shah of Iran whom the United States had installed as military dictator after ousting Mosaddegh. However, the protest against the domination of the United States was linked to growing resistance against all forms of domination – against patriarchal power, capitalist exploitation, teachers’ and professors’ non-participatory methods of education, church hierarchy, etc.

Ecumenically, there were two decisive events in the early 1960s which prepared for new ecclesial and theological developments in this context:

- 1 The Second Vatican Council, 1962–1965.
- 2 The World Council of Churches' 3rd Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, which integrated into the WCC the Orthodox Churches and the International Missionary Council, including many churches from Asia and Africa.

The Second Vatican Council

The importance of *Vatican II* cannot be overestimated in terms of liberating effects in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly from below in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It was not by accident that, given the dependency context, the first big continental ecclesial expression of liberation theology happened within the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín in 1968. This development did not originate in the hierarchies, but came from below, namely the ecclesial base communities (CEBs) at the local level. They were the most important subjects of change. Here, lay people, together with the priests, engaged in reading the Bible in the context of their daily problems and acted according to the famous triad *see, judge, act*. This formula had been developed by the Catholic Worker Movement and taken up in Pope John XXIII's Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra* of 1961. It recommends the triad as a way of reading and responding to the signs of the times:

There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act.¹⁰

Implementing these principles meant, in the practice of the communities, reading the Bible contextually, in a way linked to clear analysis and common action.

The effects of the World Council of Churches' 3rd Assembly

The larger presence of Churches from Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the WCC after the New Delhi Assembly (1961) led to a watershed event of the ecumenical movement in 1966: the Geneva Conference of the Commission on "Church and Society" in 1966 entitled "Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of our Time".¹¹ Here we locate the decisive shift of the WCC in social ethics. Between the founding Assembly in 1948

and 1966, the formula of social ethics was “responsible society”. It was influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Christian Realism”. In short, this concept presupposed a capitalist democratic society of the Western type. Here, the task of the church and Christians was seen as intervention *within the system* to strive for more social justice. Geneva 1966 looked at reality from the perspective of the Global South, at that time called the “Third World” or “under-developed countries”. This meant that the *system as such* had to be questioned and transformed because it was discovered that through the structural dependency the under-development of the poor was the result of the development of the rich (a classic book, unfolding this, was later written by Walter Rodney under the title *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*).¹² Therefore, the whole concept of “development” was questioned because it was seen as embedded in the dominating system. The new theological formula became “God’s preferential option for the poor”, and in 1968 this was also crucial for the message of Medellín. Another term used at the 1966 Geneva conference was “theology of revolution”. In any case, here we have the perspectives of what later was termed “liberation theology” with its systemic critique replacing the Western reformist approach within the WCC. This was also the starting point of tensions between some Western churches, including German ones, and the more radical approach of the WCC.

The term “liberation theology” did not exist as a technical term before 1968. It was coined by the Brazilian Presbyterian theologian Rubem Alves in his doctoral dissertation called “Toward a Theology of Liberation”, presented at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1968.¹³ I personally was privileged to participate in a conference in Cartigny, Geneva, in 1969 where Rubem Alves and Gustavo Gutiérrez presented their thinking about this concept for the first time – three years before Gutiérrez’s seminal book was published under this title in 1972 (where, in the introduction, he mentions the conference in Cartigny as the first occasion on which he presented his thinking on this matter). This conference was organised by Charles Elliot, secretary of SODEPAX, the acronym for “Society, Development, and Peace”, a new unit created cooperatively by the Vatican and the WCC. The conference tried to design a new concept of development – overcoming the Western technocratic understanding using a liberating and participatory one. This shows how near to each other the Roman Catholic and Protestant/Orthodox communities had come at that time.

This also became clear in the 4th WCC Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968, the birth year of the term “theology of liberation” and at the same time the climax of the worldwide student movement. At this Assembly, the Vatican representative, the Jesuit Cardinal Roberto Tucci, in his keynote address, even reflected on the possibility of membership of the Roman Catholic Church in a new form of WCC. Moreover, he offered full cooperation in the field of justice and peace – one of the fruits of this being SODEPAX.

South African apartheid creates a new *status confessionis*

With the Uppsala Assembly, another crisis moved into focus: the apartheid system in Southern Africa. It was characterised by a mixture of economic injustice, racist arrogance, geopolitical interests in the form of the West against the East, military violence and theological legitimisation – the capitalist world system in a nutshell. The Uppsala Assembly laid the foundation for the Program to Combat Racism (PCR). Here, the former General Secretary of the WCC, Willem Visser 't Hooft, pronounced the famous sentence:

It must become clear that church members who deny in fact their responsibility for the needy in any part of the world are just as much guilty of heresy as those who deny this or that article of the faith.¹⁴

This confessing, unambiguous approach was not really taken up in the PCR, but we used it in situations that arose as I shall explain shortly. The PCR's spearhead action was instead the "special fund", which provided racially discriminated groups with financial humanitarian aid in order to strengthen them in their resistance. This included the liberation movements the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and the South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). This programme created an uproar in the West, including in German churches and particularly among Evangelicals. In my synod in the Evangelical Church of Baden, some people were calling Nelson Mandela a terrorist, even though the UN had recognised the liberation movements as legitimate South African and Namibian governments in exile. Before we continue to discuss the further development of this issue, let me turn to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) during that time.

In 1970, the Lutheran World Federation was supposed to have its 5th Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil. As the local Lutheran Church wanted to invite the ruling dictator to the assembly, the Officers of the Federation decided to move the Assembly to Evian, in France. I was invited because I had been called to lead an integrated Department of Studies to be developed out of seven separate units after the Assembly. The events of 1968 had motivated the Executive Committee to also call a Youth Pre-Conference and have its delegates participate in the Assembly. After the Assembly, the Executive Committee elected the members of the Studies Commission which had the task of directing the work of the forthcoming Department of Studies. One of the members was Anna Marie Aagaard from Denmark, another the young Manas Buthelezi from South Africa, part of the Black Consciousness Movement, both very committed to the liberation perspective. He was later called by Dr. Beyers Naudé to join the staff of the Christian Institute, which was under attack by the apartheid government, including being banned for some time.

The Assembly passed very progressive resolutions. It was really a fascinating time of awakening and initiative. We were able to design an exciting

studies programme for the next seven years leading up to the next assembly. Our method was a decentralised participatory action-reflection research project (later called a contextual theology approach) involving the grassroots of the churches. We had project areas like Justice and Peace, concentrating on the root causes of economic injustice and human rights; Encounter of the Churches with Marxism in Different Cultural Contexts; Christian and Theological Education; and, for the first time in the ecumenical movement, a “women’s desk” working with groups around the world on “Women as Innovative Groups”. Gretchen Dutschke from Aarhus was part of this project. All of these project areas were related to an overarching ecclesiology study process under the title “The Identity of the Church and its Service to the Whole Human Being”.¹⁵ We did not call it liberation theology at that time, but it was in fact exactly this because of the method by which we worked. We had an exciting team of mostly young people.

It was in solidarity with our oppressed brothers and sisters in Southern Africa and in the framework of the ecclesiology study that one of the key resolutions of the forthcoming 6th Assembly in 1977 was developed: the resolution declaring apartheid a confessional issue constituting a *status confessionis*, as Bonhoeffer did in the case of disenfranchisement of the Jews.¹⁶ It explains what a *status confessionis* means:

Under normal circumstances Christians may have different opinions in political questions. However, political and social systems may become so perverted and oppressive that it is consistent with the confession to reject them and to work for changes. We especially appeal to our white member Churches in southern Africa to recognize that the situation in southern Africa constitutes a *status confessionis*. This means that, on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the Church, Churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system.¹⁷

As the white Lutheran Churches in southern Africa did not comply with this resolution, their membership in the LWF was suspended by the next Assembly in 1984. In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) made a decision along the same lines, declaring apartheid a heresy.¹⁸ Thus, both organisations implemented what Visser ’t Hooft had already suggested in Uppsala in 1968 in the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But how are insights like these to be implemented?

In traditional understanding, theology used to be linked to great names of (usually male) academic individuals. Liberation theology by definition is linked to real life in communities and therefore necessarily connected with praxis.¹⁹ This is why we, in our ecclesiology study, also looked into the *social forms of being church*. In the messianic scriptures of the New Testament, we discern four or five social forms of the church. There are *local communities* like the one in Corinth (cf. I Corinthians 1:2). There are

groups on the road between the local communities (migrant preachers), and later there are special resident groups like intentional communities including monastic communities. Both I call *discipleship groups*. All these keep in contact within the *worldwide oikumene* as a third social form. Fourth, there are *regional entities*, e.g. Paul addresses the local communities in the Roman province of Galatia. But according to Matthew 25:31–40, there are *people who receive Christ*, the Human One, although they do not know this. They are feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, visiting the sick and the prisoners and receiving foreigners, in short, *the most needy ones*, in whom Christ is hidden. These people and groups do not call themselves Christians, but they receive Christ in the needy. So this is the hidden form of the church which is at the same time the yardstick, the criterion for all the other forms of the church to test whether they really are the Church of Christ. This is also the reason why the church, in reading the signs of the times, must build alliances with these groups and movements who are responding to the needs of the people.

It is with this understanding that I used my connections in Germany to experiment along these lines. In 1967, I had been appointed to the Presidium (governing board) of the German Kirchentag. In 1969, we had the Kirchentag in Stuttgart, where students of the 1968 generation created a very revolutionary atmosphere, organising sit-ins, passing resolutions, commandeering microphones, etc. The governing board, not acquainted with these methods in the universities at that time, was becoming very concerned. I, coming from the context of the university, responded to this fear by suggesting we reshape the Kirchentag to become a “Kirchentag from below”, because the key request was for participation. So we developed rules to make participation possible, which led to huge success of the Kirchentag in the 1970s and 1980s. One crucial element of this was developing a Shalom Forum together with the peace groups. When in 1979–1983 the military buildup with medium-range missiles created a heated debate, the Shalom Forum served as the infrastructure for the first big demonstration in Europe, with 90,000 people at the Kirchentag in Hamburg in 1981. The Reformed Church in Germany even proposed regarding the question of weapons of mass destruction as a *status confessionis*. It was in this context that I proposed – according to Bonhoeffer’s understanding – that we speak of *processus confessionis* leading to the corporate ecclesial decision of *status confessionis*, which turned out to be helpful in the discussions that started in the 1980s.

Global economy: a confessional issue for the churches in the context of neoliberalism

The context of the 1980s was the introduction of *neoliberalism* into national and international politics. The first experiment had started in Chile after the CIA induced the military coup of General Augusto Pinochet, ousting the

democratically elected president, Salvador Allende, and inviting the “Chicago Boy” Milton Friedman to implement that ideology. Margaret Thatcher followed in Great Britain in 1980, Ronald Reagan in the United States, Helmut Kohl in Germany, and others a little later. These names merely symbolise the process; in reality, this counter-revolution was well prepared on a broad level by think tanks, particularly by the Mont Pèlerin Society under the leadership of the economist Friedrich August Hayek, and also of Milton Friedman.²⁰

In response to the negative developments linked to the emerging neo-liberal hegemony, in my region we started to gather the grassroots groups working for justice, peace, and creation in the years from 1981–1983, because we felt that the problems in all these fields were linked to the neo-liberal global economy. At Pentecost 1983 we founded the “Ecumenical Network for Justice, Peace and the Preservation of Creation (to translate the German literally) in Baden”. It happened that in the same period I was elected delegate of my church in Baden for the upcoming 6th Assembly of the WCC in Vancouver, Canada, in July–August 1983. By chance, I was asked there to give the introduction to one of the eight issue groups on the issue of justice. In addition, my friend Heino Falcke, Dean of Erfurt in East Germany, was asked to present the introductory paper for the issue group on peace and creation. So we agreed to put the focus on the triad of justice, peace, and creation from both sides. As we also knew the plenary speakers, we were able to convince them to concur in this perspective. We had also worked along these lines in our respective East and West German delegations. As the Commission on Faith and Order also presented what it called the Eucharistic Vision to the Assembly, linking ecclesiology with socio-economic, political, and ecological responsibility, we were able to achieve the Assembly decision calling the churches to embark on a “Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” (JPIC). This was a real *kairos*.²¹

After the Assembly, the WCC called me to work with the different departments and the representatives of the Vatican to design a framework for the process, which we did from 1985 until June 1986, before Preman Niles took over the newly created staff position. This meant that all the previous and present work of the WCC departments could flow into this overarching process. All social forms of the church could also be engaged. The ecumenical grassroots networks were already multiplying, congregations developed special programmes including international partnerships, national churches organised ecumenical assemblies, and continental convocations were even called. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) under the leadership of Jean Fischer was able to convince the European Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference to organise the common Ecumenical Assembly in Basel, Switzerland, in 1989. In 1990, the world convocation on JPIC in Seoul, South Korea, tried to bring together the insights of the different continents, issuing ten affirmations.²²

Many things could be said about the effects of this process in the different regions. I will mention only one. The people in the former German Democratic Republic claim that it was this process that helped them in their “peaceful revolution”, as they call it. The Dresden Ecumenical Assembly in particular had a great public effect by raising questions of human rights. But also the non-violent methods in which – thanks to the process – they were trained helped to avoid a violent clash with the state. In West Germany, we used each Kirchentag not only for the issue of peace, but also for the anti-apartheid struggle and JPIC. It was in 1985 at the Kirchentag in Düsseldorf that we persuaded the physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker to get involved in the JPIC process, which led to a lot of publicity.

Content-wise, the *global economy* started to become the focus in the process because it became clearer and clearer that injustice, war and armament, and ecological destruction were systemically caused by the imperial capitalist economy becoming more and more brutal in its neo-liberal form. The debt crisis of the 1980s emerged as the clear indicator. So in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Barmen Theological Declaration in 1984, the Latin American liberation theologian and economist Franz Hinkelammert and I – independently from each other – raised the question of whether, after the cases of Nazism and apartheid, the global economy created a new *status confessionis* for the churches. At that time in Europe, only the Dutch economist Harry de Lange agreed to some extent. But when I visited Brazil in 1985, theologians such as Julio de Santa Ana (the former director of the WCC Commission of the Churches’ Participation in Development), Leonardo Boff, and others were very open to this analysis and theological conclusion. In the JPIC process, we also discovered that the confessional approach, traditionally familiar to the Reformation Churches, was not the only way to express the unequivocal YES and NO in critical contexts. In other church traditions, other terms express the same seriousness, such as covenant, discipleship, conciliar decisions, eucharistic fellowship, catholicity, etc. This diversification also helped in this case of ecumenical consensus building on global economy. The results of these deliberations, with reference to Luther and Bonhoeffer, I summarised in my book *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?*²³

The ecclesiology question had also led us to intensify our *biblical scholarship*. As early as in the 1960s, new ways of reading the Bible contextually had emerged, e.g. materialistic Bible reading, or Jewish forms of biblical interpretation, called the “house of learning”, and especially socio-historic Bible research. This approach made it abundantly clear that the central starting point and perspective of the Bible is the Exodus, the liberation from the exploitation of human labour as expressed in the preamble of the Decalogue and – if you look at the tenth commandment, “you shall not covet” – the prohibition against accumulating greedily. Jesus, in the context of the Roman Empire, declares the key theological issue the decision between God

and mammon, which in his presence becomes good news to the poor (Luke 4:16ff.) because it is they who have been impoverished by the mechanisms of debt, taxes, etc. in the service of accumulating treasures.²⁴ Paul sees the empire as totally governed by injustice and idolatry (Romans 1:18) and the liberation through God's spirit as leading to solidarity (*agape*) by overcoming the divisions between the ethnic groups, master and slave, patriarch and woman (Galatians 3:28). So liberation towards justice and peace is the fundamental perspective of the Bible, not just the name of a particular theology. A theology which is not liberating towards these ends is no biblical theology. Gerhard Liedke and I tried to nurture the grassroots process in this perspective by publishing the book *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice and Peace*.²⁵

This liberation perspective has to be interpreted in each situation, reading the signs of the times – therefore, it is a key example of contextual theology. The ecumenical movement has been working with this principle since 1983, the Vancouver Assembly, i.e. for more than 35 years now. The issue at stake had been identified as the imperial global economy – the life and death issue (the theme of the Vancouver Assembly was *Jesus Christ, the Life of the World*). The results of the subsequent ecumenical processes are astonishing. Let me quickly summarise this period. It was the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), after Milan Opocenský from Prague had taken office as General Secretary in 1989, which started a process of regional consultations in the 1990s to probe this issue. In 1995, the African Consultation called for a *status confessionis* in the case of global economic injustice. This was taken up in 1997 by the WARC General Council in Debrecen, Hungary, which called for a seven-year “committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction”.²⁶ In 1998, Milan Opocenský and the responsible staff person, Park Seong-Won from Korea, invited the WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, to join this process, which was decided positively. The economist Rogate Mshana from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania was called to lead this process. In 2000, Karen Bloomquist became director of the LWF Study Department and also joined the emerging team. After further regional consultative processes, the three following Assemblies of the three organisations came to clear conclusions. The LWF started with the Declaration on Globalization in Winnipeg, Canada, in 2003, stating:

Through our diverse experiences, we are facing the same negative consequences of neoliberal economic policies (i.e., the Washington Consensus) that are leading to increased hardship, suffering and injustice in our communities. As a communion, we must engage the false ideology of neoliberal economic globalization by confronting, converting and changing this reality and its effects. This false ideology is grounded on

the assumption that the market, built on private property, unrestrained competition and the centrality of contracts, is the absolute law governing human life, society and the natural environment. This is idolatry and leads to the systematic exclusion of those who own no property, the destruction of cultural diversity, the dismantling of fragile democracies and the destruction of the earth.²⁷

WARC followed with the General Council in Accra, Ghana, in 2004 issuing the Accra Confession, which was intentionally drafted in the form of the Barmen Declaration. Here are just a few sentences:

11. . . . the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by empire. In using the term “empire” we mean the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests . . .

18. We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps 24:1).

19. Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism . . . which def[ies] God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule.²⁸

After these clear decisions of the LWF and WARC, some Western churches, including the German ones, did everything to hinder the WCC from joining in with such clarity. So the next Assembly in 2006 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, only issued a call for AGAPE, an acronym for “Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth”.²⁹ But the WCC continued the work in different programmes and adopted several documents in the following Assembly in Busan, South Korea, in October–November 2013. Let me first mention the second WCC Declaration on Mission “Together Towards Life”:

31. Jesus has told us “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24, KJV). The policy of unlimited growth through the domination of the global free market is an ideology that claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and from nature. “It makes the false promise that it can save the world through creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance, which amounts to idolatry”. This is a global system of mammon that protects the unlimited growth of wealth of only the rich and powerful through endless exploitation. This tower of greed is threatening the whole household of God. The reign of God is in direct opposition to the empire of mammon.

88: the Spirit rejects the idea that Jesus' good news for all can be consumed under capitalist terms, and the Spirit calls us to conversion and transformation at a personal level, which leads us to the proclamation of the fullness of life for all.³⁰

This declaration also warns not to fall into the trap of the pseudo-charismatic "prosperity Gospel" looking for growth like capitalism.

There is also a conference document, called "The São Paulo Statement: International Financial Transformation for the Economy of Life", which led to a programme under the title New International Financial and Economic Architecture (NIFEA), sponsored by the WCC, WARC, LWF and Council for World Mission (CWM), also accepted in Busan. It says:

There is thus a requirement for an active radicalizing of our theological discourse that will no longer allow too much power being placed into capitalist ideologies that have resulted in an inability to think beyond existing financial and economic structures . . .

We reject an economy of over-consumption and greed, recognizing how neoliberal capitalism conditions us psychologically to desire more and more, and affirm instead Christian and Buddhist concepts of an economy of sufficiency that promotes restraint (Luke 12:13–21), highlighting, for example, the Sabbath economy of rest for people and creation, and the Jubilee economy of redistribution of wealth . . .

We seek to overcome capitalism, its nature and its logic and to establish a system of global solidarity. We search for alternatives, for just, caring, participatory and sustainable economies such as a solidarity economy and gift economy.³¹

These four organisations continue the process of NIFEA for an Economy in the Service of Life up to this day, preparing a significant input for the 11th WCC Assembly, to be held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022.³²

It was a special gift that two weeks after the Busan Assembly Pope Francis published his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). It is in many ways the climax of 30 years of ecumenical work and struggle on the issue of global imperial capitalism, fundamental for the life or death of humanity and the earth. He plainly states:

53. Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills . . .

Therefore,

No to an economy of exclusion [53–54] . . .

No to the new idolatry of money [55–56] . . .

No to a financial system which rules rather than serves [57–58] . . .
 No to the inequality which spawns violence [59–60].³³

I regard it as a unique and historic event for the church that all historical churches have within 30 years come to an agreement to reject the imperial capitalism that is threatening human life on earth. Why is it threatening all human and even animal life on earth?

Death-dealing capitalism as climax of a money-driven civilisation: what are the alternatives?

It is the essence of capitalism that capital must grow. Therefore, it creates limitless *compulsory economic growth*. Limitless growth on a planet with limits is impossible. This is why capitalism is not sustainable. This can best be understood against the background of the whole history of money. It starts in the 8th century BCE in the whole of Eurasia from Greece to China. I and others have written extensively about this, for example in a book I co-authored with Franz Hinkelammert: *Transcending Greedy Money: Interreligious Solidarity for Just Relations*.³⁴ The thesis is that money, besides being a useful instrument for exchange and credit, develops a tendency to make money out of money, coupled with greed to accumulate without limit. This has to do with the insecurity that emerges when people do their economic work no longer in communities, but as individuals in a market.³⁵ In Jesus' time, the time of the Roman Empire, this accumulation of money ended in treasure building, which Jesus called mammon – creating the decisive theological choice between accumulation of money and the God of justice.

Starting in the 11th century in Upper Italy, money was transformed into capital in the sense that profit had to be immediately reinvested to create more accumulation of money, first in the form of *commercial and usury capital*. So, more and more, the economy became a money-accumulating machine penetrating all spheres of life including religion. Luther rejected this throughout his life. In modern times, capital conquered the sphere of production, creating *industrial capitalism*. Here, the ecological question comes into play because the issue is not only the exploitation of workers and splitting of societies – the material throughput creates the exhaustion and pollution of the earth. In the present stage of *financial capitalism*, the compulsory economic growth is even enhanced by financial speculation. This means that we are not just living in a new phase of money-driven civilisation, but in the final phase. It has become not only death-producing, but suicidal. For example, concerning the climate catastrophe, Richard Heinberg speaks of the time of the “Great Burning” and concludes: “Climate change is contributing to a mass extinction of species, extreme weather, and rising sea levels – which, taken together, could undermine the viability of civilization itself”.³⁶ Some scholars even talk about the *self-burning of humanity*.³⁷ These are facts in spite of a certain president's narcissistic ignorance. To avoid this catastrophe, humanity in the medium

and long term is bound to develop a trans-capitalist, life-enabling, and life-enhancing culture and economy.

Of course, there is the question of what alternatives would look like. This has to be demonstrated against the framework of what can be called the *three pillars of capitalism*: 1) money, b) property, and c) labour. Here are just some basic aspects:

The key feature of a *new monetary order* is that money must turn from a commodity for accumulation into a public good, democratically managed.³⁸ It has to be an instrument for exchange and credit (without interest), not an end in itself.

A *new property order* will be built on the commons, on the world as a gift to be used for life, not as a privatised commodity.³⁹ This starts with land, water, air, and seeds, but also includes common cultural goods produced by collectives such as the internet. Consequently, all basic goods and services – including, for example, transport, education, and health – which satisfy people's basic needs must be public. This does not mean that they all should be transformed into state property. Public property must and can be organised as near to the people concerned as possible. Indeed, there are many legal forms through which this can be done.⁴⁰ The struggles against privatisation, together with the struggles against capital-serving imperial structures, are the main allies of liberation theology and churches, besides initiatives building up such new orders from below.

The *new labour order* has to start with full participation in decision-making and move towards ownership of the means of production by the workers, e.g. in the form of cooperatives. One key element is the reduction of working hours. In the recent past all productivity gains have been siphoned off into capital accumulation. This has to be changed in order to justly distribute the remaining work in the digital era – and distribute it in a family-friendly way. Here faith communities and the labour movement must build alliances.⁴¹

The role of liberation theologies for transformation

The necessary change does not only concern structures. It was probably the mistake of parts of the movements after 1968 to isolate the structural issues, to ideologise them, and even mirror the dominating system by using violence, as did the RAF (Red Army Faction; Rote Armee Fraktion) in Germany, for example – thus giving the reactionary forces a pretext to push back and start a counter-revolution. The original impulse of 1968 was holistic, including the question of improving human relations in all aspects, because the whole of capitalist civilisation is penetrated by calculating, egocentric thinking and spirituality. It is here that specifically *liberation theologies* come into play. In our book *Transcending Greedy Money – Interreligious Solidarity for Just Relations*,⁴² mentioned earlier, Franz Hinkelammert and I have shown that all world religions and philosophies in the first phase of the money-driven

civilisation (called the *Axial Age*) reacted critically to these developments. Thus not only the Hebrew Bible, the messianic scriptures of the New Testament, and the Qur'an – i.e. the Abrahamic religions – but also the Buddha in India, the Greek Socratic philosophy, and Daoism and Confucianism in China each in their particular cultural language resist the tendency to accumulate money with all its social and psychological consequences.

So my interpretation of *liberation theology* is that in our times, in all religions and wisdom traditions, movements have emerged in view of the present crisis.⁴³ They tie their own critique and actions to the power of resistance within their original sources, which protest against the negative consequences of the then-emerging money-driven civilisation.⁴⁴ They do so to counteract the assimilation of their own religious communities to the imperial capitalist economy and the imperial way of life linked to it.

Religion has power over people. This is why the powers-that-be are interested in religion, and aim to co-opt it for their own purposes. The *South African Kairos Document* of 1985 developed categories to analyse the assimilation of churches to apartheid which are still relevant today: state theology, church theology, and prophetic theology.⁴⁵

- *State theology* actively adapts itself to the dominating political and economic power. This is why we also call it *capital theology*. In Christendom, the great transformation into state theology happened under Emperor Constantine in 312 CE. The transformation of Protestantism into a protagonist of capital theology for the first time occurred with Puritanism.
- *Church theology* looks for reconciliation and harmony without establishing justice as a basis for sustainable reconciliation. At that time, churches criticised apartheid with words without raising the systemic question. Their main interest was that people were nice to each other.
- *Prophetic theology* is the theology faithful to the original sources and, therefore, critical of the systems and powerful actors, and promoting justice and peace. This theology also aims at building solidarity alliances with people of other faiths and all humanist forces, and can also be called liberation theology.

Thus, liberation theology always has to go through the critique of religion, deconstructing state/capital and church theologies, before it can unfold its prophetic life-enhancing mission.

Today, prophetic and liberation theologies are emerging not only in all world religions, but also in the *indigenous cultures* of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Korea, the indigenous worldview is called *Sangsaeng*; in Africa, *Ubuntu*; in Latin America, “good life” (e.g. *sumak kawsay* in Quechua). They are characterised by the search for a new culture of life overcoming the Western civilisation that counts success only in terms of money (Gross National Product). Here, life for all in harmony with

nature replaces maximum profit for the few, as a way of thinking and the objective of the economy.

Certainly, you find dissidents of modernity turning against the trends of the dominant civilisation across the centuries. In terms of our theme, it is interesting to see that it is in the 1960s when the rethinking started, not only in the *Christian Oikumene* but in wider alternative movements including those within faith communities, and those processes of rethinking are linked to the rediscovery of the original sources of the world religions critical of the emerging first phase of the money-oriented civilisation. Thus, liberation theology can be interreligious today. Alliance-building between faith communities and social movements is the key to building up countervailing force from below. As Antonio Gramsci has argued, this work from below is linked to the support of what he calls “organic intellectuals”, i.e. people of the social and natural sciences, theology, environmental humanities, etc., committed to the popular struggles.⁴⁶

In Germany, churches and theology are not living up to these enormous challenges. They mainly preach an individualised, i.e. capitalist, Gospel. The worldwide ecumenical consensus looking for alternatives to imperial capitalism has not been communicated to the congregations, and so did not create a critical discussion and practice throughout the church. There is *one exception*: the church is quite clearly positioning herself against the frightening right-wing extremist developments in our society, especially the hate speech and actions being directed towards refugees. But the church tends to be more committed at the humanitarian level. It is not challenging the root causes of the situation. As mentioned previously in relation to the Jewish question, Bonhoeffer correctly said: “If the coach driver is drunk, the church must not only bandage the wounds but put a spoke in the wheel”. Here the wheel is imperial capitalism creating the crises driving people from their homes to Europe. This is why Kairos Europa is developing a network of congregations called “Interreligious Solidarity against the Root Causes of Forced Migration” (“Interreligiöse Solidarität gegen Fluchtursachen”).⁴⁷

Here is the project in summarised form. The congregations publicly challenge the talk about a “refugee crisis” because this term is turning victims into perpetrators creating a crisis. Instead they ask, with the refugees, “who is creating the crises” driving you and other people away from home? With this question they invite refugees to help the congregation to learn about the causes of their being in Germany. Half of the refugees have fled the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Who has waged or fuelled these wars through breaking international law? The United States, together with its European allies. So how can it be that the far right – be they movements, parties, or governments in Europe – are aggressively handing the responsibility over to the victims instead of changing their imperial and neo-colonial policies? This is how congregations learn about the geopolitical structural issues – by joining with the peace movement to challenge government policies and right-wing spiritualities.

Second, the refugees can teach our congregations who is destroying the local economies in Africa by selling subsidised, overproduced goods at dumping prices there. Who is stealing the fish with big fishing boats off Africa's west and east coasts – all this on top of the colonial and neo-colonial past? Who is mainly responsible for the climate catastrophe? It is Europe and the West in the first place with their unsustainable way of life, their free trade agreements, etc. Here the main political problem seems to be that the social democracy in Europe became neo-liberal in the 1990s, robbing the people of the opportunity to develop, elect, and implement an alternative to the forces making capital accumulation and therefore economic growth the absolute priority over the wellbeing of people and sustainability of the earth.

Refugees from Africa can also tell us about the results of the climate change produced mainly by the industrialised countries. It is predicted that in some areas of Africa the temperature will increase by 10 degrees Celsius. Droughts and climate wars are the consequence and a growing cause of people being driven from their homes.

So we ourselves produce the refugees as a boomerang of our own actions and/or of our silence about the real issues to be resolved. And it is the political right who profit from the failure of progressive parties, but even more, who push neo-liberal policies, thus aggravating the problems they pretend to solve. Thus they gravely disorient people about the real situation to be addressed. This is what the participating congregations are learning with the refugees. And they are building alliances with social movements working for alternatives to global capitalism as their way of doing liberation theology.

Conclusion

Summing up what we have considered, we face a decision between life and death. But we do have strong helpers.

- We have the original sources of our religions and philosophies, calling for a decision between God and mammon – and in the case of Jesus' followers, they have the inspiring and strengthening Spirit of God.
- We have the Reformers' rejection of early capitalism.
- We have today's ecumenical, interreligious and humanist movements' trans-capitalist orientation.

So we should be able step by step to leave the dominant 3,000-year-old death-bound civilisation, driven by greedy money and greedy persons. We can build alliances for a new culture of life. This would include not only structural but also mental, epistemological, and spiritual alternatives. Not only is another world possible, but renewed human beings are as well.

This is how I hope for a New Reformation as a fundamental cultural revolution, driven by compassion and justice for life in the midst of the

struggles of the people to avoid the forthcoming disasters. These are some aspects of how I understand liberation theology today, more than 50 years after the youth rebellion in 1968.

Notes

- 1 An international group of researchers showed this in a research and action project called “Radicalizing Reformation – Provoked by the Bible and Today’s Crises” between 2010 and 2017. It culminated in the publication of seven volumes of interdisciplinary studies (www.radicalizing-reformation.com/index.php/en/publications.html, accessed February 13, 2020) and an International Conference in Wittenberg, in January 2017, issuing the “Wittenberg Declaration” (www.radicalizing-reformation.com/index.php/en/3rd-and-final-international-conference-2017/165-declaration.html, accessed February 13, 2020). One key element of this project for coping with “today’s crises” was the rediscovery of Luther’s complete rejection of early capitalism, mostly forgotten now by Lutheran churches in Europe but inspiring in many ways. For Karl Marx, for example, Luther was the “first German National Economist”, and he quoted him extensively (Elaborated in Ulrich Duchrow, *Mit Luther, Marx und Papst den Kapitalismus überwinden* [Hamburg and Frankfurt/Main: VSA and Publik-Forum, 2017], summarised in <http://ulrich-duchrow.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Peoples-Reporter-Overcoming-Capitalism-with-Luther-Marx-Pope.pdf>).
- 2 A short summary may be found at <http://oikoumene.net/hostudies/gerecht.book/one.book/index.html?entry=page.book.1.2.2>, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 3 www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 4 Refuted by Ulrich Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983 [1970]); and Per Frostin, *Luther’s Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Critical Study* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1994).
- 5 Cf. Ulrich Duchrow, ed., *Lutheran Churches – Salt or Mirror of Society? Case Studies on the Theory and Practice of the Two Kingdoms Doctrine* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, Dep. of Studies, 1977), 84–94. Here, Torleiv Austad shows Berggrav’s reasoning for resistance as one of the few cases where the Two Kingdoms concept was not misused for assimilating to powers.
- 6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*, ed. Joachim von Soosten, DBW 1 (München: Kaiser, 1986 [1930]; Engl. ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2009).
- 7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage (1933),” in *Berlin 1932–1933*, eds. Carsten Nicolaisen and Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth, DBW 12 (München: Kaiser, 1997), 349–58.
- 8 Cf. Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* (Geneva: WCC, 1987), 34ff.
- 9 Cf. one of the classic books on this topic, Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press Classics, 1967).
- 10 Pope John XXIII, “Mater et Magistra: Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Social Progress,” May 15, 1961, accessed February 13, 2020, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html.
- 11 M. M. Thomas and Paul Abrecht, intr. and eds., *Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Time: World Conference on Church and Society, Geneva, July 12–26, 1966: The Official Report* (Geneva: WCC, 1967). A summary may be found at <http://oikoumene.net/hostudies/gerecht.book/one.book/index.html?entry=page.book.1.2.7.1>, accessed February 13, 2020.

- 12 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Undeveloped Africa* (London/Dar es Salaam: Bogle-L'Ouverture/Tanzania Publishing House, 1972).
- 13 Rubem Alves, "Toward a Theology of Liberation" (Doctoral diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1968). A summary can be found in Bruno J. Linhares, "Princeton Theological Seminary and the Birth of Liberation Theology," *REFLEXUS – Revista Semestral de Teologia e Ciências das Religiões* 8, no. 12 (2015): 19–43, doi:10.20890/reflexus.v8i12.234.
- 14 Willem Visser 't Hooft, "The Mandate of the Ecumenical Movement," *Ecumenical Review* 70, no. 1 (2018): 105–17, 114.
- 15 Cf. Ulrich Duchrow, ed., *The Identity of the Church and its Service to the Whole Human Being, International Consultations, 3 volumes* (Geneva: LWF, 1973–1975); Ulrich Duchrow, *Conflict over the Ecumenical Movement: Confessing Christ today in the Universal Church* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).
- 16 Bonhoeffer, "Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage (1933)," 349–58.
- 17 Arne Sovik, ed., and the Lutheran World Federation, *In Christ – A New Community: Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Dar-es Salaam, Tanzania, June 13–25 1977* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 179f.
- 18 Lennart Henriksson, *A Journey with a Status Confessionis. Analysis of an Apartheid Related Conflict between the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1982–1998*, Studia Missionalia Suecana CIX (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 2010).
- 19 See Elina Vuola's Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 20 Cf. Bernhard Walpen, *Die offenen Feinde und ihre Gesellschaft: Eine hegemonietheoretische Studie zur Mont Pèlerin Society* (Hamburg: VSA, 2004).
- 21 Cf. Stylianos Tsompanidis, *Orthodoxie und Ökumene – Gemeinsam auf dem Weg zu Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schöpfung* (Münster: LIT, 1999).
- 22 www.oikoumene.net/home/global/seoul90/seoul.grund0/index.html, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 23 Duchrow, *Global Economy*.
- 24 Cf. Douglas E. Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Prayer: First-Century Debt and Jesus' Intentions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).
- 25 Ulrich Duchrow and Gerhard Liedke, *Shalom: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Justice and Peace* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989). Here we also elaborate the concept of the social forms of being church.
- 26 www.oikoumene.net/eng.home/eng.global/eng.reportdebrecen97/index.html.
- 27 See Lutheran World Federation Assembly, Winnipeg, June 2003. IX. TRANSFORMING ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION. A summary can be found at <http://oikoumene.net/eng.home/eng.global/eng.winnipeg2003/index.html>, accessed February 8, 2020.
- 28 <http://wcr.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 29 www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/alternative-globalization-addressing-people-and-earth-agape, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 30 www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 31 www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/finance-speculation-debt/sao-paulo-statement-international-financial-transformation-for-the-economy-of-life, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 32 Cf. <http://wcr.ch/justice/economic-and-financial> and <http://kairoseuropa.de/>.

- 33 Pope Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” apostolic exhortation, November 24, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.pdf.
- 34 Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert, *Transcending Greedy Money: Inter-religious Solidarity for Just Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 35 On the power of greed in relation to economy and liberation theology cf. Atola Longkumer’s Chapter 6 in this volume.
- 36 Richard Heinberg, *Afterburn: Society Beyond Fossil Fuel* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2015), 2.
- 37 Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, *Selbstverbrennung: Die fatale Dreiecksbeziehung zwischen Klima, Mensch und Kohlenstoff* (München: C. Bertelsmann, 2015).
- 38 Cf. Harald Bender, Norbert Bernholt, Klaus Simon, and Akademie Solidarische Ökonomie, eds., *Das dienende Geld: Die Befreiung der Wirtschaft vom Wachstumszwang* (München: oekom, 2014).
- 39 Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, “Die Welt als Ware oder Haushalt? Die Wegwahl der trinitarischen Kosmologie bei Gregor von Nazianz,” *Evangelische Theologie* 53, no. 5 (1993): 460–70; and Sigurd Bergmann, “Life-Giving Breath: Ecological Pneumatology in the Context of Fetishization,” *Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 114–28.
- 40 Ulrich Duchrow and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). In Chapter 7, we propose an alternative “property order from below”.
- 41 Jörg Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America’s Inequalities* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016).
- 42 Duchrow and Hinkelammert, *Transcending Greedy Money*.
- 43 See also Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).
- 44 On both Christian and Islamic theology’s potential for critique of and resistance to oppression in global capitalism, cf. Teresa Callewaert’s Chapter 8 in this volume.
- 45 Cf. <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>, accessed February 13, 2020.
- 46 Cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Books* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), 9.
- 47 Kairos Europa, eds., *Interreligiöse Solidarität gegen Fluchtursachen* (Heidelberg: Kairos Europa, 2016).

6 Economy, greed, and liberation theology

A critique from a border location in India

Atola Longkumer

For those who want the world to remain as it is have already acceded to its self-destruction and, consequently, betrayed the love of God and its restlessness before the status quo.

Dorothee Sölle¹

How then shall we understand the cross? Not as a death required by God in repayment for sin, but as an event of divine love whereby the Creator of the world entered into intimate contact with human suffering, sinfulness, and death in order to heal, redeem, and liberate from within.

Elizabeth A. Johnson²

Introduction

An Uncertain Glory is the title of a book on India's recent socio-economic development by the Belgian-born Indian sociologist Jean Dreze and the economist Amartya Sen.³ The phrase "uncertain glory" aptly conveys the socio-economic, religio-cultural, and political realities of contemporary India. Even as the authors affirm the recent development and the rapid changes that modern India has experienced, they argue that inadequacies and contradictions are evident across different sectors of India. Supported with convincing statistics concerning the prevalence of crushing poverty and debilitating social conditions of a large percentage of the country's demographic, *An Uncertain Glory* captures the paradox of modern India. On the one hand, India today is listed among the 20 top economies of the world,⁴ with a global presence and influence, yet, on the other hand, the conditions of abject poverty and the abysmal quality of life for many of its populations is telling of the contradictions and lopsidedness of the modern image of an economic powerhouse of the 21st century. Socio-culturally, the realities of the lived experiences of caste violence, gender discrimination, linguistic divisions, power hegemony, religious exclusivism, and ethnocentric social interactions continue to persist in the so-called secular, democratic, and egalitarian society of modern India. In other words, the social index of the country in general remains dismal.⁵

The discriminations and marginalisations are most starkly evident in the communities of the most vulnerable sections of Indian society, rendered victims by multiple factors and complex intersections of caste, religion, region, class, gender, and political landscape. Within the complex and intersecting socio-economic canvas of the country, the Dalits, the Adivasis and the tribal/indigenous ethnic minorities of the Indo-Myanmar regions of India comprise the country's most vulnerable and neglected communities.⁶ In a metaphorical sense, the Adivasi/indigenous communities are located at the boundaries of the nation, fenced out by many forms of borders, not just geographical boundaries.

Premised on the persistence of debilitating poverty and powerlessness of the marginalised, this chapter attempts to engage the rhetoric of egalitarian liberation. Drawing from conditions and experiences of border locations of indigenous/Adivasi people of India, the chapter argues that contextual theologies need to critique the inherent social and cultural hierarchies in particular contexts to be truly liberative and enable flourishing for every member of the community. Culturally sanctioned boundaries that exclude and alienate the vulnerable persist in maintaining the economic and cultural status quo of deep inequality. Inclusive justice continues to be elusive; the chapter will argue that it is possible only when the alleged cultural norms within contexts are exposed, challenged, and overcome, and egalitarian practices are intentionally cultivated.

In what follows, some portraits and vignettes are described to mediate the border locations of marginalised communities in modern India. The next section highlights the rigid web of hierarchy that undergirds the persistent exploitation, making injustice pervasive. Identifying the forces of power, greed, consumption, and routinisation of spirituality forms the following section. The final section of the chapter explores a re-imagination of liberation theology for the common good and flourishing of all. The re-imagination proposes three postures that mark an inclusive way of life: first, a critical remembrance of the Christian mission movement, particularly its complex tradition of engaging in projects of social upliftment; second, a call to revisit the prophetic tradition in order to create a just society; and finally, a re-imagination of a mystical spirituality that radically resists the hegemony of the ways of the world. In other words, the theological discourse of liberation and egalitarian visions remains in the form of trendy documents and fashionable ideas without intentional lived practices, which in turn feed the structures of oppressive discriminations that produce and exploit the most vulnerable members of the community.

Frames of border locations in India

The usage of the term “border” refers to more than a geographical boundary.⁷ Border location describes a state of alienation and peripheral locations demarcated by social and economic forces such as caste and gender.

For instance, despite the prohibition of caste discriminations by the Indian Constitution, caste hierarchy continues to isolate Dalits and render them the most vulnerable community in the country.⁸

The contradictions, diversities, and multilayered identities that make modern India are most vividly portrayed in the sights encountered in a casual stroll down one of the main streets of any of the metropolitan cities in the country. Crowded with tourists and local shoppers satisfying the modern psyche of indulging the market and its glamour, a regular sight that interrupts the carnivalesque exposé of materialism is the beggar in rags. Few would take note of the pleading cry from the beggar for a few spare coins. While the oblivious middle class shoppers can be perceived as possessing some identity, not least their ability to participate in the market economy of buying and acquiring, the beggar can only be perceived as a victim: nameless and powerless. He is probably a victim of redundancy, a migrant from a remote region of the nation, who has suffered misfortunes with regard to health, rendering him helpless; or the victim could be an Adivasi whose ancestral lands were transformed into mining caves; perhaps he is a Dalit, who was ostracised from the village for some caste transgressions.⁹ The paradox of a modern economy with its wealth and poverty continues in the country.

Thachur is a village on the outskirts of the metropolitan city of Chennai and has a sizeable Christian community, but is demarcated clearly along caste divides. Caste divisions and identities remain rigid, even in death. Separate burial sites for each caste group, control of land by the higher caste, and the inhuman feudal structure of land ownership dehumanises landless Dalits as bonded labourers.¹⁰ Rendered marginalised by caste boundaries, Dalits continue to exist on the borders, marked by exclusion and discrimination.

Another vignette of margins comprising the borders in the country is portrayed in the skewed gender ratio in the country. The drastic consequence of female infanticide and male preference is the millions of missing women in the country. According to the latest census, the gender ratio in some states in the country is as low as 850 females to 1,000 males.¹¹ Studies on the consequences of female infanticide estimate that around 63 million girls are missing from the country's population.¹² The skewed gender ratio has a critical impact on traditional social institutions such as marriage. Media reports from Eastern India describe the practices of brothers "buying" one bride to share between them from the impoverished Adivasi communities of the region, because of scarcity of women in the community.¹³

The rapid changes initiated by the liberalisation of the economy in India included transformation of traditional spaces and practices, and development of infrastructures in sync with a modern lifestyle characterised by consumerism. These changes created significant need of labourers across different sectors of the economy, ranging from unskilled labourers to skilled workers who could adapt to a global standard of service and professionalism. Migration of labourers from the remote, neglected, under-developed,

impoverished regions to the metropolitan cities became a reality of the late modern period in India.¹⁴ The movement of people into the centre of economy and power brought with it challenges to different aspects of Indian society, not least in the socio-cultural dimension. While India is quintessentially a pluralistic nation, with diverse identities at different levels, the communal tensions between diverse religious and linguistic groups have remained a reality and have manifested in sporadic incidents of communal violence.¹⁵

Another persistent practice of exploitation in the country is that of housemaids. As the middle class grows, along with the invariable demands of a liberal economy on the time and freedom of professionals, there is a growing need for domestic maids to assist in chores ranging from childcare to housekeeping. This need is fed by exploiting the existing socio-cultural structure of discrimination, whereby young women (mostly impoverished and illiterate) from the Adivasi communities are lured to the city to serve as housemaids. Unorganised and unprotected, these women remain one of the most vulnerable groups of citizens, risking verbal/physical/sexual abuse and inhumane treatment, and often being underpaid.¹⁶

These vignettes are some portraits that constitute a collage of border locations in the so-called growing economy of India. Undoubtedly, the economic growth of India in recent years cannot be denied, but its GDP remains low and the growing wealth has not benefitted the most vulnerable sections¹⁷ of the country's population. Related to the economic disparity is the persistence of socio-cultural hierarchies such as those of caste, gender, and ethnicity. With a complex web of intersections of caste, ethnicity, gender, and economic class, the demographics that comprise the most vulnerable continue to be victimised, exploited, and marginalised.

The selected portraits therefore demonstrate that oppressive, exclusive, hostile borders and demarcations are created and maintained by the rigid religious and economic conditions of the country. If geographical boundaries isolate and delineate between insider and outsider, religious and economic boundaries produce margins, characterised as the "other", that is, strange and alien. As borders signify marginality, to inhabit the edges of society, removed from the centre of privilege and axis of power to reside in borders, is to exist in uncertainty and vulnerability, ignored and isolated.¹⁸ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen rightly attribute the state of "continued disparity between the lives of the privileged and the rest" and the "persistent ineptitude and unaccountability in the way the Indian economy and society are organized"¹⁹ as factors in the persistence of peripheral locations for many in the country.

The alienations and disparities are not confined to society at large; these conditions are prevalent in ecclesial spaces. For instance, despite the progress made in the participation of women in ministry and theological education, women across different socio-cultural groups in the country face discrimination in the community of faith. Sexist attitudes derived from a

“kyriarchal”²⁰ theology persist, often manifested in language, behaviour, and church practices. Caste tensions and divisions remain a stark reality inside the church.²¹ Robust scholarship and organic activism of Dalit, Adivasi, and gender liberation issues have created awareness to some extent; some churches in the country have participated in global ecumenical movements, such as Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. However, the recognition and participation of women is making only incremental progress.

*Caste, economy, greed, and the making
of the vulnerables in India*

Embracing the neo-liberal economy in the last quarter of the 20th century, India has seen rapid transformation from a traditional economy to a liberalised and globalised economy, effecting tremendous changes in some aspects of society. However, the economic growth has not translated into quality of life for all citizens. As illustrated in the preceding discussion, poverty, gender discrimination, caste violence, and ethnocentrism remain challenges across different sections of Indian society. The glaring gap between the wealthy class and the poor is palpably visible in many aspects of life, ranging from access to medical care to basic amenities such as electricity. In the second decade of the millenium, India stands at the threshold of innovation and industrialisation, with a large youth population; however, the threat of the rising religio-nationalism remains a potent reality. The assertion of a dominant religion²² in politics and the economy portends further alienation of the marginalised communities such as the Dalits, Adivasis, tribals, and religious minorities.

Writing on the new economic policy that India adopted as part of globalisation and its impact on the Dalits, Manas Upadhyay notes that “Dalits remain poor, illiterate, lack requisite skills for competing in the modern world, enjoy unequal access to productive resources, and remain deeply tied to land and traditional occupations”.²³ A market economy with maximum profit for wealthy corporations has only accentuated the existing marginalisation of the Dalits by way of land acquisition, mechanisation of most production, professionalisation, and concentration of wealth in the hands of the traditional land owners.²⁴

India’s new economic policy has undeniably brought seismic changes in the standard of living and lifted many from abject poverty; yet, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen’s more realistic analysis of poverty in the country is also shared by Gail Omvedt, who notes only a fractional decline in poverty among the Dalits.²⁵

Despite the economic growth, the existing socio-economic hierarchies have remained unchanged and therefore the economic growth has not translated into social progress. As Dreze and Sen caution, “it is extremely important to point to the fact that the societal reach of economic progress

in India has been remarkably limited”.²⁶ The economic reforms that tuned the country to the demands of globalisation have not made any “effort to make small producers – small farmers, artisans, fish workers [sic], Dalits, tribals – the focus of the economy growth”.²⁷ Without measures for social justice for the marginalised communities in the country, an economic policy of finance-capitalism and consumerist production stands only to contribute to the growing inequalities between the powerful and the most vulnerable citizens such as the Dalits, Adivasis, and tribals. The deep social hierarchies that sustained caste injustice, feudal ownership of agricultural land, gendered economic roles, and caste-assigned occupations are some of the rigid conventions compounding the capitalist economy geared toward maintaining economic inequalities.

Analysis of the unchanged socio-economic conditions for the most vulnerable people in the country calls on the liberation movements, such as Dalit and tribal theologies inspired by liberation theology, to continue tenaciously in the struggle to journey towards justice. Felix Wilfred writes,

the radicalness of Dalit theology could be seen also in the way it unmasks the traditional social constructs of purity and pollution, high and low, and its restlessness regarding the ideological justifications, be it in the society or within the Christian communities.²⁸

Inspired by liberation theology, movements and theologies of the people were fervently initiated, disrupting the dominant discourse and drawing attention to the oppressive structures of the de facto representative socio-cultural traditions.²⁹ Drawing global attention, enlarging the lens and shifting the emphasis, these liberation theologies in the country have changed the discourse and undoubtedly created awareness among the people.

It must, however, be emphasised that critical observations of the marginalised communities reveal parallel chaos and injustices within the communities. In general, caste identities and collective cohesion persist, tribal parochialism exists, and gender roles remain unchallenged on many levels, particularly within the ecclesiastical structures.

While reasons for such a stagnation of the movement of liberation vary, an underlying causal factor might lie within the traditional and limited understanding of Christianity itself. On the one hand, Christianity was understood as seeking to accommodate the good of Sanskrit Hinduism, and on the other hand, as being limited in its scope to salvation alone, without social critical engagement. Both of these understandings of Christianity were muted in challenging the social and economic marginalisations of the poor and the dispossessed.³⁰ The force of the market and consumerist pressure is another reason why individuals have tacitly given in to the idol of mammon.³¹

Given the persistence of marginalisation and socio-economic disparities, compounded by the rise of a political class aligned to a dominant

religion, a critical revisiting of the liberation movement is necessitated. From the border locations of vulnerabilites in India, crucial questions of power, Christian prophetic traditions, Christian missions, and Christian spiritualities emerge. Answering the questions and accounting for a just world entails explorations of the inherent Christian theological vision of righteousness manifest in a just and inclusive creation. In the following section, I shall explore a critical re-imagination of liberation theology, engaging three dimensions of Christianity: mission, prophetic tradition, and mystical spirituality.

A critical re-imagination of liberation theology in India

Liberation theology has its roots in the socio-economic contexts of Latin America in the 1970s. The beginning of this revolutionary movement was in Medellín, Colombia, at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in September 1968.³² The conference at Medellín was preceded and inspired by the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, through seminal presentations; his was a theology rooted in Scripture that took experience as crucial for social transformation.³³ Gutiérrez's foundational text, *Theology of Liberation*, is cited as the kernel of liberation theology, and the famous conference at Medellín "legitimate[d] a new kind of Catholic radicalism in Latin America that could now cite the official statements of the bishops in support of their arguments".³⁴

Anchored in the Roman Catholic church in Latin America,³⁵ liberation theology articulated a demand for liberation from the dominant Eurocentric theology amidst the crushing exploitation of a capitalist system. Liberation theology in its seminal form sought the freedom and welfare of the poor peasants and labourers caught in the complex web of economic development characterised by industrialisation and the profiteering of multinational corporations. According to some perspectives, the conference in Medellín was inspired by Vatican II and its call for a church that was more engaged with the people; furthermore, the leadership of Dom Helder Camara was significant in directing the church to serve the poor and foster greater dialogue between the industrial and undeveloped worlds.³⁶

Leonardo Boff also locates the beginning of liberation theology "[at] Medellín (1968) [as] the Church began to walk with the underworld of poverty and misery that characterised the Latin American continent, then and now. By the power of the Spirit, Latin American pastors made a courageous option for the poor and against poverty", implementing

a practice of integral liberation: not only from our personal and collective sins, but from the sins of oppression, the impoverishment of the masses, discrimination against indigenous people, contempt for people of African descent, and the domination of women that men have practiced since the Neolithic age.³⁷

In other words, the liberation theology that had its origins in the Latin American context unmasks the many forms of oppression beyond the immediate environs of Latin America.

The basic question underlying liberation theology is “how to be Christians in a world of destitution”.³⁸ Upon this foundational question, Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff anchored the rationale, urgency, and praxis of liberation theology kindled by the immense suffering of the poor. In its fundamental content, liberation theology was a theological cry with the vulnerable poor, rendered victims by different powerful forces such as free-market capitalism, landowners, and privileged elites. The Boffs write, “liberation theology can neither exist nor be understood” without sharing the suffering of the poor.³⁹ Therefore, liberation theology has its genealogy in a moment of crisis for people of faith, facing extreme poverty and destitution; in such a context, the question arises of how to live out the belief in a compassionate God, who suffered for the “sins” of the world. A confident theology of the sovereignty of God was shaken when confronted with wilful injustice done to the poor by the selfishness of the few.⁴⁰ The option for the poor becomes a reality when the proponents of liberation theology struggle in solidarity with the poor. In the solidarity with the exploited and the vulnerable, the witness to the crucified Christ translates into realities of life.

According to the Boffs, the objective of liberation theology – to gain dignity and freedom for the exploited poor – required a “strategy of liberation” wherein the oppressed come together, and through a process of conscientisation arrive at an understanding of the oppressive structures and act together as an organised movement.⁴¹ Liberation theology, therefore, is a collective praxis sharing a common vision of a just system; as summarised by Christopher Rowland, liberation theology springs from a life engaged in struggles and deprivation, and “from the insights of those men and women who have found themselves caught up in the midst of that struggle, rather than being evolved and handed down to them by ecclesiastical or theological experts”.⁴²

As a collective movement, Latin American liberation theology in the last quarter of the 20th century went beyond its immediate contexts, inspiring other people’s movements for freedom from different forms of domination and oppression. In India, liberation theology provided the vision, the primary framework, and the initial vocabulary to Dalit, tribal, and various feminist liberation theologies.⁴³

Rowland writes on the continuing task of liberation theology that

the seeds of hope have been sown. Yet everywhere the situation which prompted liberation theologians to write and explore a different way of engaging in theological reflection from what had become the norm, has not improved. In many parts of the world it has become worse, and it is this continuing context which prompts a continuing need for the kind of theological engagement we find in liberation theology.⁴⁴

Indeed, from the perspective of marginalised communities in India, despite the decades of theological articulation and the variety of ecclesiastical programmes initiated towards inclusive justice for the marginalised and excluded in the country, the conditions of deprivation and discrimination persist. Exclusion is manifested in different forms in the country: caste, tribal identity, gender, and economic class. An underlying factor in marginalisation is the unchallenged structures of cultural practices that are normalised. In deeper analyses, there is a disconnect between rhetoric and the practices of daily living. The persistent experiences of discrimination in relation to caste, gender, and class identities, particularly of marginalised members who comprise the border location, beg the question of why victimisation of the vulnerable continues, despite the legal prohibition and decades of social conscientisation. The option for the poor requires the dismantling of the structures that produce the poor, and deconstruction of the norms that sustain exclusive hierarchies. The rigid and normalised structures are more than the capitalist economy; they include caste practices, gender privileges, and inherent ethnocentric biases. The discourse of liberation theology is essentially a discourse of inclusive justice that provides the impulse for transformational praxis in daily ways of living.

In the following section, the chapter will explore three modes of continuing the liberation movement as inspired by liberation theology as a way of answering the basic question of liberation theology: “how can we proclaim the freedom inherent in a loving God manifested in Jesus of Nazareth?”

Remembrance of Christian mission and human dignity

Christian mission and liberation theology make an ambivalent pair. From a certain reading of Christian mission, often the dominant perspective, the history, practice, and theology of Christian mission is criticised as inherently intertwined with the globalised market economy.⁴⁵ While to some extent the multifaceted work of Christian mission enabled the expansion of the market economy, the situation is arguably more complex than a simplistic pairing of colonial commerce and Christianity. Nonetheless, the subjugation of local cultures, the intense professionalism, privatisation of wealth, and transfer of modes of industrialisation are seen as consequences of Christian mission. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is a critical response to a theological view that is predominantly Eurocentric in its ambivalence towards globalisation. Christian mission evaluated from a limited perspective arguably posits a critical challenge to the project of liberation theology, for in its essence, Christian mission traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth century emanating from the West did possess a fundamental theology that established practices, structures, theology, and teleology characterised by progress and power often measured in terms of accumulated wealth. In the following list, Brian Stanley summarises the five basic rationales that

undergirded the practice of Christian mission from the West in the 18th and 19th centuries:

- A . . . belief that non-Western peoples were “heathens”, lost in the degradation of sin and in need of salvation through the gospel of Christ.
- A . . . tendency to dismiss other religions either as “heathen idolatry” or as . . . superstitions . . . devoid of any trace of the presence of God.
- A belief in the manifest superiority and liberating potential of Western “civilisation”, in both its intellectual and technological aspects.
- Confidence in the regenerative capacity of rational knowledge . . . linked to Christian proclamation.
- An assumption that the Christian message was addressed principally to individuals.⁴⁶

Despite being more complicated, Christian mission’s shared legacy with imperialism and its operational structures drawn from an attitude of assumed superiority justifying the subjugation of cultures does impede the argument for Christian mission’s project of freedom and liberation in oppressive socio-economical contexts. Therefore, a return to Christian mission in critical engagement with an unfinished agenda of liberation theology might provoke incredulity, particularly in the context of India, with its many forms of malaise, not least the discrimination against those of low caste, Adivasi, women, and other minority communities.

That Christian mission history and practice has inevitably shared imperialistic structures cannot be disputed. However, it is crucial to recognise the complexity of Christian mission in its project across varying historical periods and disparate organisations and diverse theological understandings expressed through different ways of working. Put simply, Christian mission’s legacy is complex and multifaceted, especially as unfolded in the historical and contextual realities of India.⁴⁷

During the heyday of the Western missionary movement, Christian mission in India saw a variety of mission organisations and activities. Without elaborating on the details, it is common knowledge that translation of vernacular languages, dissemination of knowledge, printing newspapers, establishing educational institutions and hospitals, forming women-focused programmes such as the Zenana mission, organising agricultural institutions to enhance the rural economy,⁴⁸ and nascent settlements for landless lower castes⁴⁹ were all conduits of Christian mission.

Naturally, the socio-economic activities of Christian mission were secondary to the primary objective of evangelistic zeal to preach the good news and establish communities adhering to Christianity. While this is generally indisputable, to ignore the commitment of Christian mission to share the features of the perceived “good life” characterised by “modern” aspects of progress, and organised activities contributing to human dignity and flourishing, would amount to a rigid ideological stance.

The criticism against Christian mission *in toto* was most vehement and pronounced in the late-20th-century post-independence period.⁵⁰ Despite the critical denouncement, to re-evaluate Christian mission and its socio-economic activities that express commitment to justice and human dignity is vital given the persistence of discrimination, inequalities, accumulation of wealth, ecclesiastical excesses, and gender exclusion in contemporary India.

Despite initial resistance from home mission boards and other limitations, women missionaries were instrumental in connecting to local (native) women and their circumstances, which were curtailed by cultural conventions. The phenomena of Bible Women,⁵¹ female education, reforms of socio-cultural rituals, and hospitals are directly related to the work of women missionaries in the modern missionary movement. From the many historical records, the example of Helen Barrett Montgomery (1861–1934) will suffice, a Baptist who championed women's missionary engagement in the "Eastern Lands" and the cause of progress for women. She was a child of her times, yet a visionary for women's liberation, as the following words from her speech to the gathering of the Third Baptist World Congress, at Stockholm in 1923, illustrate:

Jesus Christ is the great Emancipator of woman. He alone among the founders of the great religions of the world looked upon men and women with level eyes, seeing not their differences but their oneness, their humanity. He alone put no barriers before women in his religious teaching, but promulgated one law, equally binding upon men and women, opened one gate to which men and women were admitted upon equal terms.⁵²

Collobaration in establishing modern socio-economic structures and preparing agents to partake in the modern structures are both Christian mission legacies.⁵³ A balanced analysis, therefore, will include the aspects of Christian mission that contribute to the flourishing of the good life for every member of the community. Remembering Christian mission's commitment to human dignity shares a common vision with today's call for socio-economic justice in an inclusive society. In a growing economy such as India, with lopsided developments and contradictions rendering millions vulnerable, Christian mission's fundamental commitment to uplifting every individual across the diverse socio-cultural contexts is even more urgent. The foundational principle of liberation theology in its option for the poor finds a parallel commitment in a Christian mission that understands that proclamation of the Gospel includes social justice in a holistic flourishing of creation.⁵⁴

Reclaiming a prophetic voice for justice

The prophets in the Hebrew Scripture announced the kingdom of God characterised by a just society. The denunciation of abuse of power, misplaced

sacrifice, and unfaithfulness of the people to Yahweh sprang from a deep sense of justice that included economic justice. Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah all have passages that vehemently condemn greed, abuse of power, exploitation of the poor, and ritualistic practices that are meaningless.⁵⁵ Michael Barram underlines the passionate language Amos employed to denounced those who “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:7, NRSV).⁵⁶ In brutalising the most vulnerable among them, the Israelites displayed their arrogant neglect of the covenantal code as a people.⁵⁷ Explaining the central message of the prophet Isaiah, Barram writes,

The people are out of practice with justice; they need a radical reorientation in their thinking, accompanied by drastically different conduct. To “seek justice” in a covenantal context is to foster a holistic community of interdependent relationships in which all, including the most vulnerable, flourish consistently.⁵⁸

In denouncing the injustices, the prophets were announcing the call to return to righteousness and liberation as God intended for his people.

Being convinced of the vision of God for a just society, prophets are individuals who announce freedom for victims of oppressive structures – social, political, and economic – and the destruction of religiosities devoid of meaning. The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scripture has modelled a way for individuals and communities to seek justice and the good of the people with passionate commitment springing from an unsettling aversion to injustice that renders people vulnerable. Drawing from the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scripture, individuals and movements through history have taken up struggles against powerful structures of self-interest, risking hostility, alienation, and life itself.

Liberation theology agrees with the prophetic tradition in seeking the liberation of people who are rendered vulnerable victims of dominant structures such as the profit-seeking economic system of the late 20th century. Liberation theology addresses how to proclaim a God who is revealed as love in a world of poverty and exclusion, and how to proclaim the “Gospel of liberation”.⁵⁹ To proclaim the love of God as manifest in the life and work of Jesus is to proclaim liberation. To proclaim the love of God is to proclaim the kingdom of God. But amidst debilitating poverty and marginalised powerless, proclaiming the kingdom of God that is marked by inclusive love is meaningless unless the causes and roots of oppression and exploitation are destroyed.⁶⁰

The task of theology as a prophetic articulation of the central message of the Gospel of freedom from destructive self-centredness also finds strong emphasis from Dorothee Sölle, who categorically states, “The gospel has to do with freedom for all, or more precisely – since the reality of oppression remains in the picture – its essence is the liberation of all”.⁶¹ The liberation

and freedom of the individual is interconnected with the liberation and freedom of the collective community. Faith as nurtured by the Gospel posits the liberation of all, not the isolated event of an individual act.⁶² Sölle summarises this, saying that theology cannot be mere theoretical abstraction, but is “a praxis of love that has value only as an apparent consequence of faith, because it conceives truth not as knowledge, but as fulfillment of life”.⁶³

Theology that is action-oriented in its solidarity with the vulnerable reclaims the prophetic traditions amidst the challenges, and nurtures the passion to interrupt structures that feed systems of exploitation. Borrowing the term “interrupting” from the theologian Johann Baptist Metz, Matthew A. Shadle proposes an interruption of capitalist forms of economy. According to Shadle, interrupting capitalism is “‘breaking into’ the economy, adopting practices of solidarity that have the potential to transform the economy”.⁶⁴ While interrupting capitalism is not synonymous with dismantling the global economy, it calls Christians’ attention to the economic conditions of the present age and underlines the imperative for Christians to proactively engage in transforming the global economy, drawing from the traditions of justice and practices of generosity inherent in the faith. To interrupt capitalism in its self-destructive drive today is to demonstrate an alternate reality of solidarity rather than hopelessness and despair.⁶⁵

Prophetic pronouncements against injustice interrupt the status quo and declare an alternative reality. Through the prophets, God interrupts and shifts the priorities to the marginalised. Theological interruptions such as Dalit theology and tribal theology⁶⁶ in the Indian context have challenged the traditional theological orientations. Felix Wilfred astutely captures the significant impact of Dalit theology in this way: “Dalit theology has shaken the traditional way of pursuing theology by drawing our attention to the experience of the most oppressed and marginalized groups in the Indian society”.⁶⁷ Further, to persist in the struggle for freedom for the many victims inhabiting border locations in India entails reclaiming the prophetic tradition in announcing the alternative reality that is the kingdom of God.

Mystical spirituality for collaborators towards justice

Critical re-imagination of liberation theology amidst the demanding challenges of modern India also calls for a spirituality that is marked by a deep, mystical relationship with the sacred. A radical belief sustained by confidence in sharing an interdependent relationship with God is sufficient for engaging in resisting mammon and its debilitating structures. In sharing the solidarity of the struggle with the poor and the marginalised, in sharing the vision of a just inclusive humanity, the ordinary people become collaborators with God. They become agents of transformation and form the bridge between the righteousness of God and a humanity in need of reconciliation. The agents for transformation become the conduit for God’s passionate justice to be realised. Collaborators are sustained by a mystical spirituality that

holds humanity and the divine together – a mystical spirituality marked by immersion in a radical denouncement of the ways of the world and complete surrender to the ways of God.

Interrupting the rigid hierarchies entails an encounter with the divine that illuminates a deeper understanding of the faith – an understanding that faith is meaningful only when expressed in praxis.⁶⁸ The web of hierarchies and scaffold of oppressive networks as designed by an economic policy biased towards accumulation, excess profit, and extreme consumerism can only be resisted with a lifestyle rooted in the unfathomable wisdom of God. Because of its realisation in the absoluteness of God in all things and the interconnectedness of all creation, mystical spirituality enables us to resist the distractions of mammon and of the powers of the world.⁶⁹

Dorothee Sölle realised this truth, that seeking an inclusive community, yearning for peace, hungering for justice, and desiring healing in the world required a mystical dependence on God. The search for the liberation of humanity could only be sustained by balancing a prophetic zeal with a passionate longing for God, because human liberation included God in the journey as well as in the destination.⁷⁰ Solidarity with the vulnerable unveils God's own pain at humanity's selfishness; as Sölle writes,

suffering does not necessarily separate us from God. On the contrary, it may actually put us in touch with the mystery of reality. To follow Christ means to take part in his life . . . *Compassio* in this sense . . . arises in the immediacy of innocent suffering and from solidarity with those who have to bear it. . . . Without *compassio*, there is no resurrection.⁷¹

A vision and deliberate lifestyle that embraces the suffering and the limitations experienced by the marginalised poor declares in effect the shallowness of the dominant powers, and in participating in the struggle for justice expresses itself “in mystical defiance” that suffering will be overcome through the unfathomable love of God only comprehended by those who share the deep knowledge of God's own self.⁷²

The enormous challenge for justice calls for a spirituality deeply grounded in God; as Elizabeth A. Johnson writes, “[w]ithout the incomprehensible God as the horizon and ultimate fulfillment, the human project itself would meet an impenetrable limit such that the human spirit would shut down, having no further depths of knowledge, or love to plumb”.⁷³ Therefore, a prophetic theology of interruption can only be sustained by a mystical relationship with the ineffability of God, because the human mind is incapable of grasping the reality of the divine mystery that desires the good of all creation.⁷⁴

While mystical spirituality might indicate an interiorised spirituality that is oblivious to the external environs, and therefore might seem untenable for a liberation theology, a prophetic interruption calls for an intense spirituality marked by ineffable trust in God as proclaimed in the good news

of Christ received by faith. In the context of deep misery and faced with the despair of contemporary socio-economic realities, humanity can only entrust its existence to the holy mystery of God, full of wisdom and unfathomable love.⁷⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a portrait of the global situation today as manifested in a particular context, India, where there is immense marginalisation, made vulnerable by an economic system beholden to wealth and profit. Such an economic system is further sustained by existing rigid socio-cultural structures of caste, class, race, and gender. An economic system of profit-making poses an immense threat to the natural environment, as evident in the tremendous changes in natural seasons and habitats across the globe. What is distinct about the contemporary depraved situation of extreme inequality is its reach around the globe. Furthermore, the existence of extreme inequality and insecurity amidst the tremendous wealth and progress of humanity points simply to the greed of a few. A commitment to an inclusive and just way of life is required to ensure the flourishing of all creation.

In the context of persistent marginalisation in India, the chapter has proposed three practices that have enduring relevance in movements striving for justice and the wellbeing of society. The immense number of the victims of the socio-economic structures necessitates a critical remembrance of Christian mission's commitment to realisation of human dignity and freedom as integral to the Gospel. Furthermore, a critical recalling of liberation theology in the country also entails a prophetic passion to persist and continue the initial movements of liberation, such as Dalit, tribal, and feminist theologies in the country. Finally, the chapter underscored the centrality of a mystical spirituality that nurtures the journey of struggle and solidarity with the marginalised. In its essence, a mystical spirituality draws its confidence from the deep relationship and union with the mystery of the divine, whose grace upholds all of creation.

In the task for theology to continue to interrupt oppressive norms and to articulate the truth of the Gospel that is inclusive, the following words from Jon Sobrino are helpful:

what takes my breath away is when people keep saying that liberation theology has gone out of fashion. Poverty is increasing in the Third World [sic], the gap between the rich and the poor countries is widening, there are wars – more than a hundred since the last world war and all of them in the Third World [sic]. Cultures are being lost through the imposition of foreign commercial cultures. . . . Oppression is not a fashion. The cries of the oppressed keep rising to heaven . . . more and more loudly. God today goes on hearing these cries, condemning oppression and strengthening liberation. Anyone who does not grasp this has not

understood a word of liberation theology. What I ask myself is what theology is going to do if it ignores this fundamental fact of God's creation as it is. How can a theology call itself "Christian" if it bypasses the crucifixion of whole peoples and their need for resurrection, even though its books have been talking about crucifixion and resurrection for twenty centuries? Therefore if those doing liberation theology are not doing it well, let others do it and do it better. But someone must keep on doing it. And for the love of God let us not call it a fashion.⁷⁶

The good news as expressed in the work and life of Jesus of Nazareth gives life, and not to share this faith is to betray the love of God for every creature,⁷⁷ and would be to withhold the kingdom of God marked by healing, life, joy, and liberation⁷⁸ that Jesus Christ inaugurated.

Liberation theology emerged in the context of tremendous economic changes in Latin America, and the theological articulations and the sacrifices of the pioneers of liberation theology went beyond this, inspiring many other people's movements of liberation. Given the global realities of economic inequalities and rise of exclusivism manifested in violent resistance to the other, liberation theology that articulates the love of God and its intentional option for the poor and the marginalised is even more urgently needed today.

Notes

- 1 Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 3–4.
- 2 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 13.
- 3 Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 4 Available data from global economic statistics in 2019 positioned India among the top economies in the world, despite the vast task of providing a sustainable livelihood, modernised infrastructure, and quality of life to the millions living in precarious poverty. See www.worldbank.org/en/country/india/overview, and www.imf.org/en/Countries/IND#countrydata, accessed November 11, 2019. Incidentally, more discouraging is data that indicates India's position in the Global Hunger Index 2019; India is ranked 102nd out of 117 countries, behind Myanmar (rank 69), Pakistan (rank 94), Nepal (rank 73) and Bangladesh (rank 88). www.thehindu.com/news/national/global-hunger-index-2019-india-ranked-lower-than-nepal-pakistan-bangladesh/article29714429.ece, accessed November 11, 2019.
- 5 The cache of data provided by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen parallels other sources; for instance, the poverty deduction data provided by the World Bank indicates minuscule change in the corresponding years of growth in the GDP of the country; see <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND>, accessed August 3, 2019.
- 6 The terms "tribal" and "Adivasi" are gaining more currency in their usage to describe the communities that are outside the Indic/Hindu traditions. Sharing broad features more akin to those of other indigenous people, the Adivasi and

tribals are people with distinct oral languages and shamanic religiosity who inhabit the remote regions in the country. The Indian Constitution categorises them under the term Schedule Tribe (ST). For more detailed discussion, see Virginius Xaxa, *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India* (Noida: Pearson, 2008); Nandini Sundar, ed., *The Scheduled Tribes and Their India: Politics, Identities, Policies and Work* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); Meena Radhakrishna, ed., *First Citizens: Studies on Adivasis, Tribals, and Indigenous Peoples in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

- 7 The concept of “border” is employed here to frame conditions of binary divide and as a metaphor to delineate the locations of marginality, which are not just limited to spatial boundaries; for instance, a lucid discussion on the implications of the term within the discipline of critical education is presented by Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21–22. A Christian mission perspective of border crossing is discussed by Peter C. Phan, who highlights three functions of borders as barriers and identity markers. Peter C. Phan, “Crossing the Borders: A Spirituality for Mission in our Time from an Asian Perspective,” accessed November 11, 2019, https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/phan_2.htm.
- 8 A recent publication provides a comprehensive context and catalogue of violence against Dalits and Adivasi in the country. See Martin Macwan, ed., *Bhed-Bharat: An Account of Injustice and Atrocities on Dalits and Adivasis 2014–2019* (Ahmedabad: Dalit Shakti Prakashan, 2018).
- 9 According to reported data from the National Crime Records Bureau, there were a total of 119,872 incidents of atrocities on Dalits in three years, 2014–2016. See Martin Macwan, ed., *Bhed-Bharat*.
- 10 S. Dorairaj, “Caste Divide,” *Frontline: India’s National Magazine*, February 25, 2011, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl2804/stories/20110225280403800.htm>.
- 11 http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/fsex.aspx, accessed May 15, 2019.
- 12 Priyanka Pulla, “What are the Consequences of India’s Falling Sex Ratio?” *The Hindu*, March 3, 2018, accessed May 15, 2019, www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/what-are-the-consequences-of-indias-falling-sex-ratio/article22920346.ece. See also Manasi Gopalakrishnan, “Female Feticide in India – a Paradox of Development?” *Deutsche Welle*, August 1, 2019, accessed November 7, 2019, www.dw.com/en/female-feticide-in-india-a-paradox-of-development/a-49852825.
- 13 Haryana Kotla, “Seven Brothers,” *The Economist*, April 7, 2011, accessed May 15, 2019, www.economist.com/asia/2011/04/07/seven-brothers.
- 14 For a recent study on migration of northeasterners to the cities, see Bengt Karlsson and Dolly Kikon, “Way Finding: Indigenous Migrants in the Service Sector of Metropolitan India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2017): 447–64.
- 15 Among the plethora of texts on the communal tension and violence, an excellent study highlighting the modern roots may be found in Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence and India’s Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Incidentally, the recent rise of the aggressive Hindu-right political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has seen growing violence, such as lynching, against minority communities.
- 16 N. Neetha, “Urban Housekeepers from Tribal Homelands: Adivasi Women Migrants and Domestic Work in Delhi,” in *First Citizens: Studies on Adivasis, Tribals, and Indigenous Peoples in India*, ed. Meena Radhakrishna (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 219–32, discusses the impact of the changes in modern economy in the communities of Adivasi, most evident in the migration

of Adivasi women to cities to work as domestic help. She writes, “The movement of women from Adivasi pockets to cities for domestic work goes back to the late 1970s. It witnessed an unprecedented increase in the 1980s and more so in the 1990s. The major source areas for Adivasis women are the states of Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh, Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal. The cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru are the receiving places for Adivasis migrants” (230).

- 17 For example, the economic deprivations of the Adivasi population across the country continue, compounded by mismanagement of the digitisation programs designed to enable efficient distribution of public services such as ration cards. Recent media reports of Adivasi (tribal/indigenous people) in the state of Jharkhand dying of starvation only confirms these grim economic realities; see Shiv Sahay Singh, “Death by Digital Exclusion? On Faulty Public Distribution System in Jharkhand,” *The Hindu*, July 13, 2019, accessed November 11, 2019, www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/death-by-digital-exclusion/article28414768.ece.
- 18 Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 15; herein the mission document of the World Council of Churches spells out the conditions of margins as “exclusion from justice and dignity”; by contrast, those occupying the centre are those “having access to systems that lead to one’s rights, freedom, and individuality being affirmed and respected”.
- 19 Dreze and Sen, *Uncertain Glory*, 11.
- 20 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza coined the neologism “kyriarchy” to point out the complex and intersecting multiplicative social structures of oppression that go beyond patriarchy – male-centric domination. Derived from the Greek word “kurios”, the neologism kyriarchy redefines the structures of domination. Developed within the area of biblical interpretation, the concept of kyriarchy is adopted in feminist critical theory to describe the web of dominance and interconnected oppressive structures. See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 5–6.
- 21 A. P. Nirmal, “Toward a Christian Dalit Theology,” in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 27–40; John Webster, *Dalit Christians: A History* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1992); James Massey, *Indigenous Peoples: Dalits: Issues in Today’s Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994).
- 22 The categories of both religion and modern Hinduism need clarifications underscoring the complex working of power in controlling and solidifying the trajectory of modern knowledge. For detailed discussion on the topic, see Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999); Michael J. Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721–1893* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Altman discusses the role of American university programs in contributing to the category and the study of Hinduism as it is known today.
- 23 Manas Upadhyay, *Globalization and Dalits: Still Lagging Behind* (New Delhi: Serials Publications Private Ltd., 2017), 88.
- 24 Sundar, ed., *The Scheduled Tribes and Their India*, 31–33.
- 25 Gail Omvedt, “Economic Policy, Poverty and Dalits,” in *New Economic Policy and Dalits*, ed. P. G. Jogdand (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000), 38–57.
- 26 Dreze and Sen, *Uncertain Glory*, 8; we might consider, for instance, the dismal situation regarding power (electricity). There are frequent outages daily for those who have access to electricity, along with 200 million who do not have electricity.

- 27 Omvedt, "Economic Policy," 56.
- 28 Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 61.
- 29 One of the pronounced shifts is the intervention in the theological conversation dominated by brahminical texts and worldviews.
- 30 Gail Omvedt, "The Doubly Marginalised," *Seminar* 602 (2009): 70–75, accessed May 21, 2019, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/17278/1/2009/602/602_gail_omvedt-1.htm.
- 31 Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016); see also Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
- 32 For a more comprehensive discussion on the history of the beginnings of liberation theology, see also Ulrich Duchrow's Chapter 5 in this volume.
- 33 Paul E. Sigmund, *The Birth of Liberation Theology: Medellín and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 30; Christopher Rowland, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Kent, UK: Burns and Oats, 1987).
- 34 Sigmund, *The Birth of Liberation Theology*, 28.
- 35 Although the kernel of the movement was sown in the Catholic church and by the priests in Latin America, the distinctive development that included the reading of God's inclusive justice and acts on behalf of the oppressed has a Protestant dimension, as highlighted by Brian Stanley. See Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 237–38.
- 36 Jay Corrin, "The English Catholic New Left and Liberation Theology," *Journal of Church and State* 59, no. 1 (2017): 43–58, doi:10.1093/jcs/csv090.
- 37 Leonardo Boff, *Come, Holy Spirit: Inner Fire, Giver of Life and Comforter of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 3–4.
- 38 Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 1.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 42 Rowland, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2.
- 43 While liberation theology inspired theologies of liberation in other local contexts, the second stage of liberation theology also saw critical interventions, particularly from feminist theologians incorporating more wide-ranging identities of marginality including LGBTQ; see Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexuality Identity and God* (London: SCM, 2004).
- 44 Rowland, *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 250.
- 45 Norman Etherington, *Mission and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Brian Stanley, "'Commerce and Christainity': Providence Theory, the Missionary Movement, and the Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 1 (1983): 71–94. Drawing from the context of the Tswana of South Africa, the complex relationship between Christian mission and the introduction of market economy is astutely discussed by the anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 165–71. The critique of collusion between Christian mission and imperial power is more complex; for a judicious discussion of the theme, see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 302–12. The dynamics of Christian mission and the transformation it wrought were wide-ranging, as were the missionaries and their home bases; see David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries*

Tried to Change the World but Changed America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 3.

- 46 Brian Stanley, *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 8.
- 47 For a resourceful discussion on the dynamics of Christian mission and its project of establishing Christianity in the country, see Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 48 For instance, the Presbyterian mission, as part of which Sam Higginbotham contributed to the establishment of the Agriculture University; for discussion of this, see Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad*. See also Felix Wilfred, "What Is Wrong with Rice-Christians? Wellbeing as Salvation: A Subaltern Perspective," *Third Millennium IV* (2001): 6–18, 6–8.
- 49 For more details, see Mrinalini Sebastian, "Localised Cosmopolitanism and Globalised Faith: Echoes of 'Native' Voices in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Missionary Documents," in *European Missions in Contact Zones: Transformation through Interaction*, ed. Judith Becker (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015), 47–64; see also Albrecht Frenz, *Freiheit has Gesicht: Anandapur, eine Begegnung Zwischen Kodagu und Baden-Wurttemberg* (Stuttgart: Staatsanzeiger fur Baden-Wurttemberg, 2003).
- 50 Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century*.
- 51 See Eliza F. Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 150–53.
- 52 Quoted in Kendal P. Mobley, *Helen Barrett Montgomery: The Global Mission of Domestic Feminism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 13.
- 53 For a discussion on the beginnings of women's higher education and professionalisation in India, see Maina Chawla Singh, *Gender, Religion, and the Heathen Lands: American Missionary Women in South Asia, 1860s–1940s* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000).
- 54 C. René Padilla, "The Globalization of Solidarity," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 9, no. 2 (2004): 69–90.
- 55 See Michael Barram, *Missional Economics: Biblical Justice and Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 120.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 122.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 59 G. Gutiérrez, "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," translated by Judith Condor, in *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 61 Sölle, *Political Theology*, 67.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 64 In the context of the financial crisis of 2008 in the United States, Matthew A. Shadle draws on Catholic social thought to renew the theological tasks of working for a just society; see Matthew A. Shadle, *Interrupting Capitalism: Catholic Social Thought and the Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.
- 65 Shadle, *Interrupting Capitalism*, 158.
- 66 For pioneering tribal theologies, see Nirmal Minz, "Religion, Culture, and Education in the Context of Tribal Aspirations in India," *Journal of Dharma* 24, no. 4 (1999): 402–16; Wati Longchar, *Tribal Theology: An Emerging Asian Theology: Issue, Method and Perspective* (Jorhat, India: ETC Publications, 2000).
- 67 Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies*, 61.

- 68 Shadle, *Interrupting Capitalism*, 20.
- 69 In a daily reflection of the Centre for Contemplative Action, Richard Rohr highlighted an understanding of mysticism that is not otherworldly but a realisation of a responsible relationship with the whole of creation, using the following words from Beverly Lanzetta: “Mysticism also refers to a universal and unifying view of the world. One of the quintessential insights of the mystics through the centuries is that the entire cosmos is intersubjective – all beings are embedded in webs of relationship that are interconnected, interdependent. . . . Today, mystical awareness expands to incorporate our relationships, and . . . the whole of humanity, creation . . . the suffering of the planet, . . . and violence caused by religious superiority, national self-interest, poverty, homelessness, starvation, and war”. See <https://cac.org/living-mysticism-2019-08-07/>, accessed November 11, 2019.
- 70 Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 151.
- 71 Ibid., 138–41.
- 72 Ibid., 149.
- 73 Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 7.
- 74 Shadle, *Interrupting Capitalism*, 21.
- 75 Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 7.
- 76 Quoted in Christopher Rowland and J. Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: The Murder and Martyrdom of the Salvadorean Jesuits* (London: CIIR/CAPOD, 1990), 50–51.
- 77 Sölle, *The Silent Cry*, 4.
- 78 Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 13.

7 The dissemination of Vikings

Postcolonial contexts and economic meltdown

Sigríður Guðmarsdóttir

During the first years of the new millennium, the Icelandic banking system grew rapidly and was boosted by the risk-seeking confidence of financial tycoons. The financial tycoons were nicknamed *útrásarvíkingar*, that is, “Outvasion Vikings”. Instead of the violent invasions of the Vikings of yore, these new Vikings represented themselves as leading peaceful conquests, “outvasions” into the global market. In 2008, the three main banks of Iceland suffered an economic meltdown. The news was mediated to the nation by a national address on the television by Iceland’s prime minister.

We were all watching, gathered round TV sets and computers screens in our workplace, in cafés and at home on that misty afternoon. It was not just that this sophisticated and usually perfectly composed man seemed shaken but that he concluded his unique address by asking God to bless Iceland. This is when we knew we were in serious trouble.¹

The downward spiral of the Icelandic economy has deeply affected the living standards of Icelanders, and simultaneously opened up the potential for complex cultural identities. Eiríkur Bergmann has described the boom as a “postcolonial project”² and the meltdown as a political crisis that was “simultaneously a crisis in capitalism and a crisis of national identity”.³ Bergmann maintains that “the enthusiastic behaviour of the outvasion Vikings and the widespread, almost cheerleading acceptance of their endeavours at home must be explained in relation to Iceland’s history and through its post-colonial national identity”.⁴

Homi K. Bhabha envisioned (with a little help from Jacques Derrida) that instead of looking at the scattered peoples on the margins of cultures and societies as dispersed crowds, they might be seen as a “gathering” in their own right, a “dissemiNation” as it were. Bhabha argues for the complexity of discursive strategies of cultural identification which form identity as a nation, or as a people, and “make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives”.⁵ This chapter takes its cue from Bhabha’s pun of dissemiNation as a disseminal identity and probes the literary devices and contexts that formulate a national identity as “Viking identity”.

The chapter reads and interprets the economic meltdown of the Icelandic economy and its aftermath through the lenses of contextual theology. If Bergmann is right (and I think he is) that the postcolonial context must be taken into account in understanding the economic bubble and its aftermath, this contextual theological approach needs some help from postcolonial and poststructuralist theory and theology. The chapter comprises four sections. The first one lays out some of the premises of contextual theology which are important for our methodology. The second section analyses the Icelandic economic “miracle”. To deepen the analysis, the third section ventures into postcolonial and poststructuralist theory and theology, while the fourth recontextualises the analysis within contextual theology.

Contextuality, recontextuality, and kontextuality

Bhabha is adamant that disseminNation is not the discourse of nationalism per se. Rather, he is pointing to what he calls “living the locality of culture”, namely, focusing on complex and hegemonic temporalities, the symbolics of communal life, and the differences and hybrid mythologies that challenge common ideologies and stable identities.⁶ If Bhabha thus puts a name on the ambiguity of lived cultural localities, Stephen Bevans addresses such subtleties as context. Bevans argues that “all theology is contextual theology”, and that those who advocate for more universal types of theology are usually “deeply rooted in European, Western culture, shaped by Greek thought and the Roman genius for order and law”.⁷ Bevans explains how the turn to the subject in modern theology flourished into political theology, theology of liberation, and the various forms of feminist theology, and argues that “contextual theology could include both reflections on the mutual interaction between the Christian tradition and culture, as well as the struggles of the poor and marginalized for dignity and basic rights”.⁸ For Bevans, rooting theological inquiries in diverse contexts is justified by the incarnational, trinitarian, sacramental, and catholic nature of the enterprise.⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid reminds us that all theologies are political, economic, and sexual, although not necessarily consciously so.¹⁰ For her, the aim is “to explore the contextual hermeneutical circle of suspicion in depth by questioning the traditional liberationist context of doing theology”. Althaus-Reid makes it clear that she is not criticising the contextual endeavour of liberation theology to read theology from the standpoint and context of the poor. Rather, she points out that contextualisation is a continual process of social transformation. “Liberation Theology”, she says, “needs to be understood as a continuing process of recontextualization, a permanent exercise of serious doubting in theology”.¹¹ Like Althaus-Reid, and from the standpoint of indigenous theology, Jione Havea treats contextuality with suspicion and argues that contextualising is a dynamic process. “Whether any contextual statement can be inclusive enough, I am not sure. But the contextual raft must still be pushed forth”.¹² Although Havea has

thus affirmed the main principles of contextual theology, he doubts that all contexts are created equal, and postulates that “the North still controls the theological game”.¹³ Havea asks what it means to be contextual: “Can one be contextual without being rooted, actually, in the context of interest?”¹⁴ He answers his own question by relocating the hyphen from context- to con-, or even to kon-, because his own Tongan language does not have a c in its alphabet. Havea names five “cons” that he detects in contextual theology. The first is contextuality’s hidden agendas, which run the risk of presenting a complex context as a thin guise for their own essentialism. Havea asks, “Whose interests do contextual theologies serve?” Second, Havea points to the importance of native languages and the difficulties of translation: “As long as we fail to account for the maneuverings of language and translation, in my opinion, our contextual project is naive”. In other words, if the North still runs the theology game, English and other colonial languages run the language game. Havea’s third point has to do with globalisation, which for Havea forms a “trinity of power” with colonisation and the Christian mission.¹⁵ The fourth con in Havea’s vocabulary is the different borders that shape consciousness, culture, and identity, in spirituality and relationships. For him, the need to contextualise arises from the lack of relations to ancestors and spirits, which are results of colonisation. Finally, Havea addresses the danger that contextual theology runs when it seeks to harmonise and simplify the context too much. Instead of harmonisation and oversimplification, Havea emphasises the importance of respecting and understanding the differences within cultures and contexts.

These methodological insights from contextual theology serve as leads for interpreting the Icelandic meltdown. Bevans insists on reading texts from location, to honour the cultures of diverse peoples and disturb the universal idea of theology as one. This acknowledgement of diverse cultures as vital resources for theology is important for the present chapter, which claims that the economic meltdown in Iceland has relevance as a resource for contextual theology. Likewise, Althaus-Reid’s point that recontextualisation is a perennial affair is an invaluable insight for this chapter, because it addresses the complexity of the lives and narratives of the people involved. Such complexities can only ever be partly addressed. Bhabha, in his dissemination of discursive strategies, points us to this complexity, away from the homogenous narratives to the gathering of the dispersed, from the centre to the margins. Finally, the method of the paper can be understood as a nod from an Arctic islander to the Pacific islander Havea, who reminds us that sometimes we need to con our own contexts, kontekstualise, bring out fates, cultures, thoughts, dreams, failures, and languages of the few, to destabilise the rhetoric of the powerful and universal and to question everything. Islanders understand that “the contextual raft must be pushed forth”, or else all of us drown.

Outvasion Vikings: “You ain’t seen nothing yet”

Iceland was settled by Viking dissidents in the year 874, won by a Norwegian king in the 13th century, colonised by the Danish crown in the seventeenth, and given partial independence in 1918 and full independence during World War II. Kristín Loftsdóttir argues that a strong sense of Icelandic national identity was created through exceptionalism during independence struggles of the 19th century. Loftsdóttir explains such exceptionalism as the discursive attempts to belong to the Western civilised world, indoctrinated and maintained through schoolbook texts where Icelanders are presented as descendants of the prime of the Norwegian population. Loftsdóttir writes: “Within such narratives, Icelandic exceptionalism is laid out, emphasising Icelanders as different from anyone else”.¹⁶ She maintains that the “nineteenth century nationalists tended to regard the Danish colonial government as the result of Iceland’s decline from a glorious historical past”, but that the relationship between the two nations was “unnatural”, since the Danes ruled over the Icelanders as if they were uncivilised. According to Loftsdóttir, the national mythology that later became the drive in the economic boom takes its energy from this postcolonialist struggle.¹⁷

In 2005, the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, gave a speech in a business club in London to distinguished business leaders. The presidential discussion of the Icelandic business consisted of 13 points, which all pointed to the national characteristics of Icelanders which make such impressive foreign business relations possible. President Grímsson’s speech in 2005 exhorted businesspersons to re-examine their previous beliefs and the norms that they thought would guarantee results. “Third”, Grímsson postulated, “Icelanders are risk takers. They are daring and aggressive”.¹⁸ Most of the traits on the presidential list have to do with attributes of aggression, risk, and mastery that have in Western symbolism historically been linked to diverse myths of masculinity. Grímsson continued:

Eighth on my list is the heritage of discovery and exploration, fostered by the medieval Viking sagas that have been told and retold to every Icelandic child. This is a tradition that gives honor to those who venture into unknown lands, who dare to journey to foreign fields, interpreting modern business ventures as an extension of the Viking spirit, applauding the successful entrepreneurs as heirs of this proud tradition.¹⁹

The “Viking spirit” allusions are interesting in light of history, since the interactions between the Celtic populations of the British Isles and the Nordic Vikings were violent. Thus, Icelandic allusions to “Viking spirit” function as a political and sexual economy, which erases the past of enslavement which runs in Icelandic veins, as well as the seven and half centuries of humiliating Icelandic colonisation under the Norwegian-Danish empire.

This historical reading of Icelanders as the descendants of brave and adventurous Vikings situates cultural fantasies of conquest back in the “good old days” when Nordic people terrorised the British Isles and their surroundings. The Icelandic glorious past is naïvely explained with images of conquest, where everyone wins and the sufferers have been erased.

Grímsson concluded his analysis by promising the advent of even greater signs and wonders in the years to come: “Let me leave you with a promise. . . . I formulated it with a little help from Hollywood movies: ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet’”. The President’s public enthusiasm for the Viking business spirit was in no way unusual or unique at the time. The Icelandic Chamber of Commerce published a report in 2006 that argued that Iceland should “no longer compare itself to the other Nordic states, as we overreach them in most fields”.²⁰ The University of Iceland Business Department founded a research project called “INTICE: Outvasion of Icelandic Companies” and Icelandic musicians referred to themselves as part of a “cultural outvasion”, “wanting to conquer nations and peoples”.²¹ These sentiments of economic acuity and superiority were echoed in an 88-page report on the image of Iceland sponsored by the Prime Minister’s Office in Iceland in April 2008 called “The Image of Iceland: Strength, Status and Prospects”. The report ambitiously starts by stating the importance of Iceland continuing to be “the best in the world, the country with the highest living standard in the world”.²² According to the report, the term that best describes Icelandic people and their economic relations is “Natural Power”, and they advise an Icelandic image-campaign that emphasises this natural strength of the people as well as the place. The report describes the national myth of Icelanders in this way:

The first Icelanders were people who came to this country in search of freedom and better standards of living. The nation was poor for a long time, but rose with more freedom and political independence from being a developing country to one of the richest nations of the world within a century. The Icelanders are a nation industrious and proud, marked by their struggles of inhabiting tough, rural areas.²³

There seem to have been few challenges to the national Viking mythologies during the boom, and criticisms and warnings from economists abroad were generally classified as ill will, interference, or jealousy over the Icelandic economic “miracle”.²⁴ A notable exception to the rule was the Icelandic Society of Historians, which in June 2008 criticised the Prime Minister’s image report for its naïve metanarrative of Icelandic origins and traits in a public letter. The historians pointed out some of the inconsistencies and myths of the report, especially the notion of the Viking freedom fighters and the Golden Age of Independence. They equate its rhetoric to the political ideology used to achieve independence at the beginning of the 20th century.

They end their letter by directing the prime minister to recent historical research on representations and constructions of Iceland.²⁵

The downward spiral of the Icelandic economy after the crash has affected the living standards, employment, and savings of Icelanders, and has had an impact on neighbouring countries as well because of high-interest personal saving accounts. Privately owned Icelandic banks opened online saving branches in the United Kingdom, called Icesave and Kaupthing-Edge. These savings accounts were promoted with pictures of the Icelandic countryside and attractive slogans of natural purity and transparency. “Icesave” was owned by Landsbanki and its particular slogan was “Clear Difference”, placed under a picture of a blue Icelandic waterfall.²⁶ The Icesave website promised “Peace of Mind” to prospective customers, whose savings were to be doubly guaranteed by UK laws and by the state budget of Iceland as collateral. Haukur Már Helgason succinctly described the political situation in Iceland after the recession in 2008: “Our beloved Vikings took the money and ran, and left the Icelandic state with a foreign debt of €20 billion. Divided between the country’s [300,000] inhabitants, that is almost €[67,000] per person”.²⁷ Not only did the banking system in the country collapse, but because of the online savings abroad, Iceland ran into a tough crisis in terms of foreign relations after the British government decided to freeze all the assets of Landsbanki in Britain under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, which froze all of the assets of Icelandic banks for a period of time, the Central Bank included.²⁸ This unusual move launched a wave of protest in Iceland, and InDefence, a grassroots movement, was formed to protest the freezing orders. InDefence formed the largest petitions in Icelandic history by posting photographs of thousands of Icelanders online, under the heading “I am not a terrorist”. Cultural critics in arts and literature pointed to the racial undertones of using the faces of blonde-haired and blue-eyed families to convey the message that theirs was not the face of the Other. Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir derides these racial undertones in the short poem “A Letter to Mister Brown”:

stundum eru augun í mér svo blá	sometimes my eyes are so blue
að þau skelfa mig í speglinum	that they startle me in the mirror
lít ég út fyrir að vera	do I look like I’m a terrorist? ²⁹
hryðjuverkamaður?	

In a short period of time, the Icelandic Viking myth morphed from public cheerleading of the outvasions of the financial tycoons to the stay-at-home Viking who defends his family and country from evil foreigners who wrongfully call “us” terrorists, freeze “our” accounts abroad and demand that “we” pay the debts of the Vikings in full. I have in this chapter cited Bergmann’s careful account of the early days of the economic boom. Bergmann indicates in the preface to the book that he was one of the founders of the

InDefence movement.³⁰ He describes the campaign and the petition, but omits the photographs and the criticism of the project.³¹ Bergmann meticulously explains the postcolonial project of the outvasion Vikings and the national cheerleading of their business ventures, but curiously omits the part where the InDefence group contributed to the reinforcement of the Viking values and exceptionalism.

Third space: postcolonial and poststructuralist perspectives

Bhabha reminds us that the discursive practices of addressing the “self-hood” of a nation are formed by double-writing or dissemination, that is, first, by positing this nation as different from other nations, and second, by denying the heterogeneity and cultural difference of those that do not fit the fictional national identity.³² A presidential address can thus be interpreted as a discursive strategy of representing some of the nation’s identities. Public speeches through which this symbolism is expressed are thus of importance for those who are interested in the way national identities are built, disseminated, and built anew. Such discourse shapes the hopes, values, and desires of people, and is as such a valuable and important resource for a theological investigation.

Hardt and Negri maintain that the rhetoric of the national state and international capitalism emerges through new empires of international corporations:

The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow.³³

Hardt and Negri thus explain the deterritorialisation of an Empire that mimics the fluidity of the postmodern condition while simultaneously making use of myths and metanarratives of national identities for its own purposes. The presidential speech at the Walbrook Club reveals discursive strategies of a myth of origin. Such myths shape national identities and reinforce the glorification of the new financial tycoons, who peacefully explore and “out-vade” new territories for the benefit of all. If empire is shaped by the fluent currents of international currency, the Icelandic “Vikings” of the Icesave bubble considered themselves to be the strange hybrid surfers of the capitalistic wave, “a clear difference” in the muddy soup of postmodernity. Thus, the presidential speech reveals a curious example of national identities that

rise in no relevant proportion to the nation's boundaries, economy, population, or production.

The economy of the world and the national economies are relational affairs, some of which are addressed by other chapters of the book.³⁴ Joerg Rieger asks, "On which authorities, powers, and energies do we rely? What is it that gives us ultimate hope, shapes our desires, and provides reasonable levels of stability?"³⁵ Loretta Napolioni reminds us, "Economics is the unpredictable science of interdependency",³⁶ and Althaus-Reid points out that "economics like theology is the old science of human relationships".³⁷ If Rieger, Napolioni and Althaus-Reid thus remind us of the mutuality and interdependency of the world's economic systems, one might ask what constitutes such joint assurances of trust, credence, and credit.

Sigurd Bergmann points out that the shift from exchanging physical objects to trading commodities builds on what Marx called "fetishism of commodities", and consists of a separation between human labour and its products.³⁸ According to Bergmann, fetishism replaces the animistic skill of relating to an interconnected physical place with the labour of the individual. If economic theory is a science of relation, Bergmann reminds us that economic systems build on relations that are decontextualised and asymmetrical.³⁹ Rieger argues that economic models have produced their own dogmas, sometimes called "market fundamentalism". Dogmas such as the optimistic idea of the self-organising freedom of the "free market", of the goodness of individualism, and the idea of wealth as breadcrumbs that trickle proportionally down to the poor go almost undisputed under capitalism.⁴⁰ Rieger points out that the same people who have a fundamentalist view of religion are also likely to be uncritical of economic dogmas.⁴¹ Instead, Rieger proposes "the logic of downturn", that is, practices that are sensitive to the asymmetry of power and in solidarity with the poor, powerless, and disadvantaged who live on the margins of the economy.

Marion Grau points out that

behind the use of the oracular term "the economy" in popular political rhetoric stands the ancient theological term *oikonomia theou*, the economy of God, describing divine agency within the cosmos, the way in which the universe functions and develops throughout the course of human history, specifically as it relates to redemptive agency.⁴²

Grau argues that many contemporary theologies are too stuck in either/or categories in economic structures to offer room for reflections on resistance, agency and subversion. She writes,

Theological critiques of economic systems remain incomplete if they simply replace one grand narrative of omnipotence with another, a theological for an economic dominology. Attempting thus to address both economic and theological oppressions, we must ask what kind of

oikonomia serves as the basis for a reconstruction of economic theology. Until we begin to ask that question, our position as contemporary interpreters of Christian “economic” traditions may be dangerously compromised.⁴³

Grau proposes a “theology of countereconomy” and offers readings of Christian narratives through the lenses of poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial criticism. For Grau, a critical reading of the divine economy reveals “that the line between economic justice and exploitation is not comfortably located outside ourselves but goes right through our investments, theological, relational, and financial”.⁴⁴ Such abundance and terrors of scarcity, such mysteries of excess and lack blur the binaries of inside and outside and shake up the very ideals, trust, values, and currencies which build our ontological establishments of cultural, religious, political, and national identity constituted through a “clear difference” from the Other. Grau writes of her vision of the divine economy as finding “kinship” with what Catherine Keller locates in the biblical beginning of creation: the chaos that is “always already there, that is now being recognized as an alternative order that had been so long mistaken for disorder”.⁴⁵ Thus, Grau is probing the abjected notion of the chaotic in the grand narrative of the West, and finding ways of expressing its unruly power in political, economic, and theological relations. If Rieger has suggested turning the tables and getting to the margins of society, Grau is trying to stay put in the third space between the lines, and between the opposites, in order to disrupt the binaries between those in power and those without it. John Milbank once remarked that “the Christian *mythos* . . . is able to rescue virtue from deconstruction into violent, agonistic difference”.⁴⁶ If Milbank proposes the Christian narrative as the antidote to capitalism and its heretical, chaotic connotations, Grau probes the anxieties and contradictions built into the theological household, as well as its contemporary counterparts in neo-classical capitalism and neo-Marxism. Grau proposes the sacred image of the trickster as a theological “third space” metaphor to counter the false stability of capitalism. Grau asks herself if her image runs the risk of being connected to the image of the confidence man, or con man. She answers her own question by pointing out that the interpretation and locality of the figure is ambivalent and can point in many directions. For her, the trickster imagery is attractive, because divine tricksters can “de-monstr-ate, show forth the monstrous, perform perfidy, hail the hysterical, provide a hyperbole, a syntax of sarcasm, and invent idioms of irony”.⁴⁷ For Grau, the mythological trickster image thus serves as an important reminder that instability and chaos are a part of the messy relationships of human existence, the economy included.

If Milbank warns his readers against the “violent, agonistic difference” of deconstruction, Chantal Mouffe welcomes the multiplying agonies of the political subject. Like Grau, Mouffe is looking for a “third way” to think

about relational and political economy. For Mouffe, Derrida's "constitutive outside" functions as a way to understand

the antagonism inherent in all objectivity and the centrality of the us/ them distinction in the constitution of collective political identities. . . . In order to be a true outside, the outside has to be incommensurable with the inside, and at the same time, the condition of emergence of the latter.⁴⁸

Mouffe opposes any easy return to dialectics of the inside/outside, friend/enemy binaries, or "antagonism proper". Instead, she advocates a Derridean "third way", which she calls "agonistic pluralism", as the second and more viable notion of antagonism leading to democratic politics. According to Mouffe, agonism

involves a relation not between enemies but between "adversaries", adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as "friendly enemies", that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.⁴⁹

Mouffe argues that relationality has been expressed too narrowly in terms of ethical goodness and empathy. Instead, she wants to bring dark, antagonistic, and conflictual sides of sociability to the fore. For Mouffe the democratic role of agonistic pluralism is not to eliminate the antagonistic, but rather to turn enemies into adversaries and "antagonism existing in human relations into an agonism".⁵⁰

Grau and Mouffe are thus both trying to speak about economic and societal relations by holding together nonessential and ambiguous notions of subjectivities – an economy of difference, as it were. Both thinkers connect such a notion of human reciprocity to the mythological and biblical concept of chaos. Mouffe writes, "Every consensus appears as a stabilization of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Chaos and instability are irreducible, but this is at once a risk and a chance, since continual stability would mean the end of politics and ethics".⁵¹

Moving from the third space of ambiguity, ethics, tricksters, and democratic agonism presented by Grau and Mouffe to the turmoil and cons of current Icelandic politics, I turn back to the myths of the Icelandic economy which so perplexed British business people and gave the president an exhilarating sense of mystery and revelation.

Recontextualising the meltdown

Havea's method consisted of the five "cons": the agendas of the stories we choose to tell, the problem of linguistic interpretation, the trinity of power,

our relational borders, and finally the risk of false harmonies. The contextual approach that Havea adheres to has been an inspiration to this chapter, to question everything, even one's own motives. I concur with Havea that "the north still controls the game" in sorting and harmonising stories and metanarratives in the proper language of the empire. I would add that the geographical North also harbours its own anxieties and doubt of civility. The indignant blue-eyed families posing for photos to convince the prime minister of Britain that they were not terrorists because they look Western provide an important example of this type of colonial exceptionalism and fear of the other. "Clear Difference", the slogan of Icesave, and the clear waterfall included in the transaction are directly linked to the cultural and economic representation of Icelandic bodies as white mythologies of natural power-Vikings and their natural, powerful, pure, virgin land as different from, purer, cooler than the bodies of anyone else. This same natural-power identity exudes from the Prime Minister's Office Report on Natural Power and the image of Iceland. Clear Difference and Natural Power point to Icelandic Viking exceptionalism as a special nation, different from and superior to other nations.

Havea's contextuality that "cons" contextual theology chimes with Grau's trickster. Grau has pointed us towards the divine trickster economy as an ambivalent model of possibilities as well as crisis, of new hopes as well as insecurities. In comparison to the Viking testosterone exuding from the official reports and speeches in Iceland during the economic boom, Grau's trickster readings might help us to detect the vulnerability and anxiety of such overcompensations in the deified relations of contemporary capitalism, and write new identities which accept the hybrid as gatherings and identities in their own right. Keeping in mind Havea's cons and Althaus-Reid's hermeneutics of suspicion, I would pay careful attention to the type of accounts and accountabilities that one chooses to tell of when identifying a context, the economic meltdown in Iceland included. One should also be sensitive to the stories that are omitted. "The symbol of God functions", as Elizabeth Johnson wrote.⁵² Likewise, the mythologies that are existentially meaningful to us are resilient and tend to morph easily. More than a decade after the crisis, several explanatory stories and selected contexts have emerged, some criticising the Viking myth, others reinforcing it. Some of these explanatory stories put the blame for the financial crisis on the Icelandic public for having caused the crash by buying flatscreens and SUVs during the boom and having thus increased inflation in the economy. The so-called flatscreen theory was first put forward by the majority owner and chairman of Landsbanki, Björgólfur Guðmundsson, a few days after the crash.⁵³ Other stories have put the blame on particular individuals, corrupt politicians or reckless tycoons. While none of these explanations necessarily excludes the others, the focal choices may have a strong impact on the narratives of representation of national identity involved.

Does God bless Iceland, like the prime minister asked the divine to do? If the economic meltdown in Iceland has theological relevance for those outside the island, what would be the possible lessons, images, and metaphors drawn from the crash for contextual theology? The blame game in Icelandic politics and finance almost automatically translates into the powerful models of sin-repentance-forgiveness registers in Christian theology. Do the people need God's forgiveness for driving around the golden calf in their SUVs while watching flatscreen TVs? Who gains from such an interpretation of the meltdown? Are the outvasion Vikings prodigal sons in disguise? Are the Icelanders the Canaanites or the Israelites in the story? Is individual greed presented as the problem, or the collective hubris? Should one accept such models of translation or "push the contextual raft further" still?⁵⁴

In this chapter, I have chosen to present a postcolonial reading of the economic bubble exploring white Viking mythologies and exceptionalism of a postcolonial nation in economic meltdown. Bevans maintains that the incarnational, trinitarian, and sacramental character of theology coincides with rooting theological enquiries in the diversity of contexts.⁵⁵ Likewise, Grau points to *oikonomia theou*, divine economy, as an appropriate metaphor for divine relationality, which counters some of the prevailing myths of economic theory and dogma. For her, the trickster image serves as an incarnational model of ambivalence and third space. Mouffe reminds us that "continual stability would mean the end of politics and ethics",⁵⁶ which in this context might mean that the ethical lesson to be learned from the crash is to allow oneself the risk of deconstructing old, dangerous, and exclusive narratives of the past. If Havea has provided us with indigenous "cons" to challenge contextualities of the economic meltdown, Sigurd Bergmann likewise lays out a reconstruction of Christian pneumatology more sensitive to animism and indigenous sensibilities of relation and spiritualities, which might serve as an instance of countering the fetishisation of Viking mythologies and exceptionalism. Might the theological work, perplexing and bewildering as it is in the current context, lie in these broken images of blue-eyed Vikings, natural power, and clear difference? Might the chaotic spaces where new departures are born, and where past insecurities become resources for dissemination, provide new cons for contextualisation? Perhaps we ain't seen nothing yet.

Notes

1 Eiríkur Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis: Boom, Bust and Recovery* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 3.

2 Ibid., 17.

3 Ibid., x.

4 Ibid., 6.

5 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 140.

6 Ibid., 140.

- 7 Stephen Bevans, "Contextual Theology as Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, eds. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 45–60, 45–46.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 47–48.
- 10 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 12 Jione Havea, "The Cons of Contextuality . . . Kontextuality," in *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Steven B. Bevans and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams (Cambridge: Wipf & Stock and James Clarke & Co, 2011), 38–54, 39.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, 44–46.
- 16 Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Belonging and the Icelandic Others: Situating Icelandic Identity in a Postcolonial Context," in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*, eds. Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 57–72, 61.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 18 The transcript of the speech given at The Walbrook Club, London, 3 May 2005, may be found at Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, "How to Succeed in Modern Business: Lessons from The Icelandic Voyage," *The Reykjavík Grapevine*, October 10, 2008, accessed February 14, 2020, <https://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2008/10/10/how-to-succeed-in-modern-business-olafur-ragnar-grimsson-at-the-walbrook-club/>. The speech was available on the official website of the President of Iceland until 2016, when President Grímsson resigned from office. Most of the former president's speeches are available electronically from www.forseti.is, but this one seems to have been deleted. The speech was published in the magazine *Grapevine* two days after the financial crash in 2008.
- 19 Grímsson, "How to Succeed in Modern Business."
- 20 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*, 85.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 22 The Prime Minister's Office, *Ímynd Íslands: Styrkur, staða og stefna* (Reykjavík: Forsætisráðuneytið, 7 April 2008), 4, accessed February 14, 2020, www.stjornarradid.is/media/forsaetisraduneyti-media/media/Skyrslur/Forsaetisr_arsskyrsla_END2.pdf.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 24 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*, 86.
- 25 The Icelandic Society for Historical Research (Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands), "Letter to the Prime Minister of Iceland," *Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands*, June 12, 2008, accessed February 14, 2020, www.sagnfraedingafelag.net/2008/06/12/11.34.26/.
- 26 www.icesave.co.uk, accessed April 22, 2009. The Icesave website closed down in October 2009, but some of its online offers can be accessed on Wikipedia's entry on the Icesave dispute.
- 27 Haukur Már Helgason, "The End of Neo-Liberal Neverland," *The Reykjavík Grapevine*, April 3, 2009, <https://grapevine.is/mag/feature/2009/04/03/the-end-of-neo-liberal-neverland/>.
- 28 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*, 123.
- 29 Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, *Skrælingjasýningin* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2011), 27.
- 30 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*, i.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 32 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 148.
- 33 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), xii.

- 34 On the dynamics of the financial system and the markets' tendency to catalyse greed to accumulate without limit, cf. Ulrich Duchrow's Chapter 5 in this volume. On the power of greed in relation to economy and liberation theology, cf. Atola Longkumer's Chapter 6 in this volume. On Christian and Islamic theology's potential for critique of and resistance to oppression in global capitalism, cf. Teresa Callewaert's Chapter 8 in this volume.
- 35 Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 4.
- 36 Loretta Napolioni, *Rogue Economics: Capitalism's New Reality* (St. Paul, MN: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 7.
- 37 Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 112.
- 38 Sigurd Bergmann, "Fetishism Revisited: In the Animistic Lens of Eco-Pneumatology," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012): 195–215, 209.
- 39 Ibid., 210.
- 40 Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 4–28.
- 41 Ibid., 10.
- 42 Marion Grau, *Divine Economies: Refinancing Redemption* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 5.
- 43 Ibid., 37.
- 44 Ibid., 15.
- 45 Ibid., 5; Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 28.
- 46 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (London: Blackwell, 1993), 376.
- 47 Grau, *Divine Economies*, 174.
- 48 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 12.
- 49 Ibid., 13.
- 50 Ibid., 135.
- 51 Ibid., 136.
- 52 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1992), 4.
- 53 Jón Trausti Reynisson, "Hann lagði þjóðina að veði," *Dagblaðið Vísir*, October 28, 2008, 14, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://timarit.is/page/6448436#page/n13/mode/2up>.
- 54 Havea, "The Cons of Contextuality . . . Kontextuality," 39.
- 55 Bevans, "Contextual Theology as Practical Theology," 47–48.
- 56 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 136.

8 Reclaiming tradition as critique of oppression

Teresa Callewaert

This chapter¹ sets out to discuss if, why, and how theology should be used for critique of and resistance to oppression. I will do this through an engagement with two thinkers from the beginnings of what in Christian tradition has been referred to as liberation theology, but which, for the purpose of treating both Islamic and Christian thought, could be more aptly called liberationism.² The idea is, through such an engagement, to identify some of the reasons these early thinkers had for choosing theological tools for their resistance and to analyse their strategies. I will then move on to a couple of contemporary thinkers who have also chosen to articulate resistance to oppression through theological thought, and try to sketch how certain tendencies evident in the early stages of liberationism have renewed relevance for our current world.

When Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian theologian and priest who was one of the first people to put Catholic liberation theology into writing, wrote *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971, it was in the firm belief that Christian faith and theology represented a tremendously important resource in the struggle for human dignity and liberation, a struggle which to him involved a critique of, and revolution against, the power of global capitalism.³ At roughly the same time, in an Iran ruled by the authoritarian regime of the Shah, Ali Shariati, a Shiite Muslim public intellectual and mystic, developed ideas about Islam being the only viable force for resisting the blatant oppression and exploitation of capitalism and imperialism.⁴

There are important similarities between their approaches; most notably for our discussion today, they have similar reasons for involving theology in the struggle against oppression. To them, theology, or religious tradition more generally, is a vehicle for conscientisation. That is, it can create awareness of oppression, of the possibility of another world, and mobilise people for the struggle. There are several reasons why theology can fulfil this task, which can be roughly divided into two sets.

The first set of reasons centres around the fact that theology, or religious tradition, is the tradition of the poor. This means that it is a tradition to which the people already belong. A struggle starting from that tradition uniquely restores the poor's confidence in themselves and in what belongs to

them. In contrast to other modes of thought prevalent at the time – developmentalist, Marxist, capitalist – religious tradition is something the poor can claim as their own. By starting from such a tradition, mobilisation can be free from condescension, and can therefore build self-reliance, independence, and a sense of identity. Reliance on tradition is, to Shariati and Gutiérrez, empowering. Moreover, tradition represents a kind of entry point for awareness. Because it is something already familiar and close to their hearts, its revolutionary content can be discovered by the poor as something in a sense already embraced and believed, although not consciously so. This is the meaning of Gutiérrez's concept of conscientising evangelisation. The starting point in tradition makes the revolutionary message fundamentally legitimate and believable to the poor.

But there is another set of reasons for relying on tradition when resisting oppression, on which the first set of reasons depend. In order for theology to fulfil a conscientising role, it must also in and of itself be morally and philosophically viable and adequate for the task; that is, it must contain insights and knowledge that are valuable to such a struggle. The claim made by both Gutiérrez and Shariati is that theology has such a content, and indeed that, when properly understood, it contains unique insights with relevance for the resistance. The three central insights that theology delivers according to both Shariati and Gutiérrez, although in slightly different ways, are these:

- 1 That God considers the poverty that people live in to be an abomination. Shariati makes this argument by relying on the doctrine of *tawhid*. This is one of the most important – one could claim the most fundamental – doctrine of Islamic thought: the oneness of God. Because God is one, humanity is called to mirror this oneness through equality and social justice. Since there is but one God, all of the world belongs to God, the material world no less than the spiritual. This means that God is concerned with the realisation of human dignity in material terms, and that poverty is a kind of blasphemy.⁵ Gutiérrez develops his argument from creation, also highlighting the importance of material realities: God has created the world, and the world in its material aspects is of concern to God. Moreover, God created human beings in his image and with the intention that humans should have life in abundance. Poverty constitutes a defilement of the face of God, because the image of God, given in creation and confirmed in the incarnation of Christ, is sullied. The incarnation, God taking flesh, teaches us to see God in our neighbour and to abhor the destitution of the poor.⁶
- 2 That the cause of poverty is exploitation and oppression. For both Gutiérrez and Shariati, this point leads to a critique of theologies and religious authorities that describe poverty as either natural and inevitable, or lamentable but sorting itself out. Such theologies legitimise poverty by obfuscating its origin, and should, according to these writers, be understood as part of and serving oppressive structures.

Shariati speaks with condemnation of the spread of ignorance, quietism, and superstition among the conservative religious authorities of his day. The *ulama*, i.e. those learned in traditional Islamic sciences, betrayed the trust put in them by the people. Instead of preaching the Islam of resistance, he claimed that they encouraged conservatism and withdrawal from political life.⁷ Gutiérrez criticises hierarchical church structures and theologies that legitimise those in power. The church, in his view, should be a church that is poor and stands with the poor. In the particular situation in Latin America of his day, the church must take a stand against power in order to break with an age-old complicity with the rich and the powerful. Gutiérrez claims that its legacy of legitimising power puts the church in a position where it must visibly choose the other side so as not to lapse into a silent assent to the status quo. That means speaking the truth about the nature of exploitation, and turning away from theologies that treat poverty as a normal state of affairs. Both Shariati and Gutiérrez thus attack both theology's political quietism and the theological distinction between spiritual and material that underpins it.⁸

- 3 That the poor are able to become subjects of their history and successfully fight exploitation and oppression, and change their world. Shariati claims that the liberation of the oppressed is promised by God in the Quran – that at the very core of Islamic faith is its revolutionary spirit. The oneness of God means that human beings are subordinate to no one but God, and that they are free to revolt against all despotic or authoritarian powers. Muslims have a unique source of hope and confidence because they know that God is always on the side of the oppressed and that victory is promised by God to every group which struggles for its rights.⁹ For Gutiérrez, the theological figure of the kingdom of God plays a vital role in explaining the position he takes on struggle. Faith in the kingdom, Gutiérrez claims, shows the provisional character of any human order. Nothing that is built by humans is everlasting, oppressive orders included. Although the obstacles might seem insurmountable, the struggle for justice is possible because it is sustained by the gratuitousness of God, closely connected to the freedom of God which makes possible what to humans is unforeseeable.¹⁰ The works of solidarity and the struggle for justice must be practised with humility, because the kingdom of God always goes beyond what humans can achieve and imagine. But it can also be practised with hope, because the kingdom is present in and enables the temporal processes of liberation.

These three insights – that poverty is an abomination, that its cause is exploitation and oppression, and that the poor can successfully fight the oppression to which they are subject – are all contained in their respective religious traditions as Shariati and Gutiérrez understand them. But more than that, these insights receive their urgency from the fact that they are

insights about what God wants for humanity, and thus insights of ultimate importance for believers.

Gutiérrez calls the tasks of theology denunciation and annunciation. The church is called to denounce the present conditions of oppression and injustice and announce the good news of God's love, the coming of the kingdom and the task of furthering God's purposes in the present through the struggle against degradation of his creations. In Gutiérrez's understanding, the whole truth about human liberation, the nature of sin, and the nature of salvation is available only in Christ.¹¹

Shariati understands Islam as an ideology, in the Gramscian sense of a worldview that can demystify oppressive relations and make resistance possible.¹² In Shariati's understanding, Islam is in fact the most powerful resource against oppression and colonialism. It is a tool of critique and analysis of both society and religion, a lens through which the world is understood and can be changed. Shariati claims that concepts such as oppression, justice, and righteous leadership receive their most lucid articulations in Islamic tradition. Through Islam as a worldview, critique of the injustice of society as well as visions about an alternative order can be articulated.¹³

It might be interesting enough to dwell on this comparison. One could discuss the reasons for the similarities in the *Zeitgeist* of these two writers, a time imbued with ideas from the Bandung conference, the revolution in Cuba, the non-aligned movement, and so on. As examples of contextual theologies, the works of Gutiérrez and Shariati are interesting because the context of oppression, poverty, and struggle is formulated and openly dealt with. This is often highlighted in discussions about what I have called liberationism. The designation "contextual" should, however, be problematised, given that their theology is no more contextual than any other. One could easily claim, starting from the very similarity between their approaches, that liberationist thought was, at least at the time, remarkably universal and more global, in its explanatory power and ability to resonate with experience, than what was produced at seminars in Europe at that time. Furthermore, what makes their contribution interesting is precisely the fact that they claim not only to articulate what their tradition is about in a particular time and place, but rather to impart something belonging to the very core of that tradition without which it would lose its soul.

A comparison of these writers also brings into focus what traditions can bring to reasoning as an endeavour. There are important differences in their thoughts, despite the similarities in context and political thrust. These intricate patterns of particularities can be analysed and shown to arise from how different resources in the respective traditions are actualised when resistance to capitalism is articulated through them.¹⁴

Something about how theology matters to the entire understanding of a particular political problem can be gauged from how these writers wrestle with their respective traditions in their particular contexts, understood not only as time and place and political situation, but more importantly as the

texts, practices, beliefs, and reasons that make up the context of theological thought within a particular tradition. Such questions could be productively treated by delving deeper into, for example, Gutiérrez's understanding of the incarnation as the act that completes and universalises the bond between God and the neighbour, such that every act in the secular realm can be defined as an act toward Christ as we meet him in the face of the destitute.¹⁵

In Shariati, a vital role is rather played by the central dogma of *tawhid*, the oneness of God, in criticising all spiritualisation of religion and insisting on the necessity of understanding God's justice to concern the material world of the here and now. While these writers are, in many ways, situated in similar contexts historically and socially, and arguing for similar politics, they do so by working with something quite central to their respective traditions' theology. And conversely, the things they have to struggle with, to redefine or explicate in new ways, also depend on the elements of their tradition that are central enough to demand answers from their perspective. Thus, Gutiérrez struggles with the ideal of poverty in Catholic tradition, which leads him to redefine evangelical poverty as solidarity with the poor, in order to be able to condemn material poverty as against God's purposes.¹⁶ Shariati wrestles with the interpretation of religious practices and duties and defines them as requiring a responsible subject with adequate resources. In Shariati's understanding, spirituality is understood as closely connected to morality, and morality requires solidarity with and fulfilment of duties to the poor. Because you need to have in order to be able to give, he can articulate the material welfare of the believer as the foundation of spirituality and a prerequisite for giving an account of oneself on the day of judgement. A person's dignity requires the means to show solidarity to others.¹⁷

However, one might also ask, who cares? If the understanding of Christ or of *tawhid* was once a matter of life and death, or at least something to which people partaking in political reflection and practice were expected to be able to relate, today it might seem as though these questions are marginal footnotes in the discussions of increasingly irrelevant religious organisations and some weird people in academia. One could, of course, argue that this is not globally the case – that in the world outside supposedly secular North-western Europe religion as a motivating and legitimising force is not only alive but thriving. But in the context of contextual theology of Sweden, home of the religiously illiterate? One could argue that, increasingly, the rest of the world is here too, both materially and digitally. One could argue that the forces of darkness, of nationalist chauvinism and closed borders, are making a grab for the local religious heritage and we would do well not to retreat from the battlefield.

There is an even better reason, however. Even if the first set of assumptions of Shariati and Gutiérrez – the ones about theology being the primary language of the oppressed and destitute, uniquely positioned to raise awareness and instil confidence – do not hold and are not relevant in our context, I would claim that the second set of assumptions – the ones about insights

to be had from theological reflection – are still worth taking seriously. Theology still offers particular insights. Perhaps these are not in each and every case the most lucid, but nonetheless, they enable us to see things we did not before. Theological articulations of human life as profoundly social and creative, for example, might be needed to counter increasingly utility-centred understandings of human beings. Accounts of the dignity of the person as envisioned by the Enlightenment, resting on a particular ability such as rationality, are increasingly in trouble, and might need anchoring in ideas of being redeemed and loved, or being responsible on the day of judgement.

The case for theology as a resource for resistance is strengthened, I believe, by the realisation of postmodern philosophy of the impossibility of drawing sharp boundaries between secular and religious thought, but even more so by the insight that there is no view from nowhere. There is no outside, from which we can look in on the world and prescribe remedies.

This might mean that we need traditions in order to be able to think at all, and that traditions are not mere vehicles or empty vessels to be filled with the same original or purely human content. Traditions are avenues for thought; they are methods through which we proceed painfully and piece-meal, to discover something about being human, about justice, truth, and God. Because traditions are contingent, messy, beautiful, and complicated, and not at all alike, it is a dangerous position to limit one's partners in conversation and solidarity to one or a couple of ones that are related, say the traditions of Enlightenment, liberalism, secular humanism, and human rights.

But, in order for traditions to fulfil this role, as avenues for thought, through which conceptual resources are developed by which we can articulate critique, there might be a need to revisit the starting points of theologies of liberation. I would claim that there are at least two such starting points.

In the writings of Gutiérrez and Shariati, and in theologies aspiring to liberation generally, I would claim that there is sometimes a tendency to place oneself outside tradition as its critic, relying on tools from, for example, Marxist, feminist, or queer theory. Perhaps this should rather be termed to place oneself beside tradition, since we just concluded that one is never outside *tout court* – one is always assuming some kind of vantage point. From the perspective of tradition, however, one is outside.

This tendency to assume an outside starting point is manifested in Gutiérrez's use of some aspects of social theory of Marxist varieties. While nowhere near as indiscriminate as the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith claimed,¹⁸ the use of such theories is nevertheless not in every instance justified by tradition. I am not saying that such justification would not be possible. I am merely pointing out that while Gutiérrez takes great care to show how the aspirations of the poor and of liberation theology are firmly anchored in the Gospel's ideas such as the preferential love of God for the poor, he does not perform the same justification when it comes to the Marxist view of the laws of history, and so on.

Meanwhile, in Shariati's writings, there is a tendency to bypass Islamic *fiqh*, i.e. the rich heritage of jurisprudence that represents the development of historical interpretations of Sharia in various law schools and historically influential thinkers. Instead, Shariati often goes directly to the Quran, the Sunna (the example of the Prophet), and the popular traditions surrounding the first Muslims, the Companions of the Prophet. This in a sense had become a traditional move for Muslim reformers in his day, common among the thinkers of the Islamic renaissance of the turn of the previous century. However, it is also a move that conceives of much of tradition as a problem and an encumbrance to be discarded, rather than a resource. As a strategy, it can endanger the perceived identity and authority of the interpreter.

However, there is also in both writers the inverse impulse – to place themselves squarely inside tradition, insisting that the tools of tradition itself are sufficient to develop a theology that is truly liberating, without sacrificing any claims to identity or belonging, indeed claiming to represent a more orthodox position than conservative religion. Assuming a position that reclaims tradition does not necessarily entail accepting the limits and boundaries of tradition, but rather accepting that one has to constructively relate to such limits, even while transgressing limits or pushing boundaries further. This can be done by reinterpreting tradition through quite regular and orthodox interpretative methods of one's tradition, maybe expanding them but with recourse to justifications that derive their authority from inside tradition itself.

In the case of Shariati, it is important to both him and his followers that he understands his reinterpretation of Islam as mandated by tradition itself, indeed as an extraction and refinement of hidden resources. He insists that it is by following the imperative of tradition that he has arrived at his radical position. He vindicates his position by using the central Shiite theme of being the defeated, martyred, and consequently hidden religious tradition, and makes a vital dogma of Islam, *tawhid*, the oneness of God, the supreme vantage point from which to judge what constitutes faithfulness to tradition.¹⁹

To Gutiérrez, it is the Gospel itself as the good news to the poor that justifies his understanding of what Christian faith entails and the concomitant engagement with struggle for both a more just world and a more just Church. He constantly refers to the workings of the Spirit through quite orthodoxly authoritative channels such as the magisterium of the Second Vatican Council. His notion that theology grows out of a reflection on Christian faith and practice is quite a traditional one; it assumes its specifics in Gutiérrez's account because the practice in question is situated in the struggle for justice.²⁰

As remarked by Christian feminist theologian Jenny Daggars, while the very notion of theological orthodoxy is sometimes understood as antithetical to the struggle for liberation, others have remarked that critique of power is in itself a thoroughly orthodox Christian position.²¹ I believe that the latter tendency, to reclaim tradition, to understand one's reinterpretation as not a

critique from the outside but rather as a higher order of faithfulness mandated by tradition itself, is the one that also holds out the greatest potential for the context of the religiously illiterate. In a situation where the political position of religious tradition and theological interpretation on any given issue does not immediately and necessarily concern everybody, there is in a way even more reason to insist on giving voice to distinctly theological insights. This is necessary if theology is to contribute to the contemporary critique of oppressive orders, and not just be a cognitive detour ultimately making the same claims as secular critique, although in another language or for another audience, or be confined to supplying motivational force and legitimacy to a struggle we already have decided to be right.

But this in turn requires maintaining confidence in the possibility of reforming tradition through its own tools and methods. If there is no universal rationality that can set standards and be the arbiter between interpretations, plausible methodology and norms of interpretation must be articulated from within traditions. Of course, it is not possible to completely distinguish and separate tools, methods, or interpretative measures as originating outside or inside tradition. Religious traditions of thought have a long history of interaction, overlap, and intermingling with both philosophical and political thought, as well as social movements. Traditions are dynamic, not monolithic, and what is perceived as the centre of tradition or as heresy is constantly undergoing change, even if slowly. While the very concept of tradition implies evolution, traditions are also homes to a certain continuity-in-difference, a directionality that one can aspire to be faithful to without being conservative. For this to be possible, tradition must somehow be respected as an avenue for thought that contains its limitations, methods, concepts, and resources. Not all boundaries need be respected, but they need to be related to in some constructive way that makes their transgression a matter justified by recourse to tradition itself.

In the field of liberation theology today, among feminist theologians, queer theologians, disability theologians, and critics of capitalism, there are aspects of both the approaches that I have identified in my treatment of Shariati and Gutiérrez, although I would say that the strategy to reclaim tradition from the inside is gaining ground. It is present, for example, in the practice of hadith criticism of Muslim feminists such as Amina Wadud-Mushin and Fatima Mernissi, theologians such as Virginia Burrus or Amy Hollywood, and the analysis of the traditions about the Prophet Lut by queer Islamic thinker Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle.²²

An example which highlights the importance of orthodoxy to the project of reclaiming tradition is queer Catholic theologian James Alison. He deliberately eschews standards and resources from outside tradition such as gay experience or queer theory and relies firmly on Church authority. Alison challenges the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality on the basis of the understanding of original sin, grace, and anthropology developed by the Council of Trent of the 16th century.²³

The Tridentine position, according to Alison, entails that human nature is damaged, but not destroyed, by sin. Human desire is intrinsically good, but always and everywhere experienced as accidentally disordered. Desire is not, however, radically corrupt. That was precisely the Reformed position the Council of Trent rejected. Rather, a Catholic understanding is that God's grace gradually transforms and orders desire so that persons are brought to flourishing from where they are. Grace perfects nature; it does not abolish or replace nature. All humans start out with a life that is moved by disordered desire, and all humans can, from within that disordered desire, learn what is good. Importantly, something about what is true and good can be discerned through attention to human desire and what is conducive to human flourishing.²⁴

But, Alison claims, the Church's teaching on homosexuality seems to imply that, for homosexual people, there is no relationship between what is desired and what is good. What feels natural is an "inclination that is objectively disordered", and only by complete rejection of what one longs for can one come to know creation. This means, according to Alison, that the Church's anthropology has been fundamentally altered into a *de facto* Reformed teaching. As such, it treats certain people as incapable of being perfected by grace but rather in need of having their nature abolished.²⁵ This is grave because it is a failure of Catholicity. The Church has lost touch with a Catholic understanding of original sin as something that affects everybody but still leaves the person with some insight to be discerned and some desire to be perfected.²⁶

Alison understands the interpretative method he uses in relation to Catholic teaching to be justified through the example of Jesus. Through this method, what is currently understood as the orthodoxy of tradition is exposed as being in contradiction to the deepest and most resilient elements of tradition. Such an understanding, claims Alison, challenges us not to break with tradition, but to rediscover and make alive within tradition that which enables the breaking out of the order of the world.²⁷

Another good example, which is particularly interesting in relation to Shariati's tendency to bypass Islamic jurisprudence, is Islamic scholar Kecia Ali's insistence that Islamic feminists should reclaim the tradition of *fiqh*, i.e. jurisprudence as done in the classical Islamic law schools, through traditional methodologies of interpretation. Ali discusses several issues raised by feminists such as marriage, divorce, sex, female genital cutting, and homosexuality. She claims not only that classical jurisprudence should be addressed because its fundamental assumptions continue to affect regulations and mindsets, but also that there are resources in the traditions of classical scholars that can be constructively brought to bear on the dissonance experienced around these issues.²⁸

One such resource is precisely the methodological sophistication of classical scholars in relation to the complex and heterogeneous intellectual and textual legacy. According to Ali, jurisprudential methods can offer Muslim

feminists much because the ways in which jurists have related source texts to social contexts demonstrates that the law they constructed is always already subjected to interpretation.²⁹ This interpretive precedent of early jurists can authorise a similar adaptive effort today, which will allow, through a variety of very traditional legal manoeuvres and interpretive devices, a more radical interpretation. The second resource pointed to by Ali is acceptance of divergent perspectives. This is a central feature of classic jurisprudence. In contrast, proponents of progressive politics often make problematically grandiose and sweeping claims about what is Islamic and un-Islamic, which reduce interpretive leeway and minimise attention to complexities and contexts. Ali asks whether it is acceptable and ultimately productive to engage in methodologically problematic oversimplifications for strategic aims. Instead, she advocates a detailed investigation of the layered jurisprudential material, making use of various interpretive measures, such as relying on traditional standards to determine the authority of rulings one wants to challenge.³⁰

Alison and Ali can both be understood as continuing the struggle to reclaim tradition for a radical agenda. While their issue is not with global capitalism, they are struggling with the forces of oppression of their contexts, and the theological thought that legitimises such oppression. Their methods resonate with the claim of the early liberationists: a claim to a greater faithfulness toward tradition and a more plausible understanding of its implications than those that generally pass for representatives of the traditional.

Making one's intellectual enterprise dependent on the criteria, methodologies, and concepts internal to a specific tradition can be understood as restricting one's possibilities, as accepting certain limitations. While such limitations are often feared as obstacles to full emancipation, they can also act as bulwarks against a rampant conservatism masquerading as orthodoxy. Moreover, the constraints in themselves constitute possibilities in that they open up certain avenues for thought and enable a certain kind of critical enterprise. The persistent effort to situate one's thought inside tradition by relating to its concepts, using and developing its method, justifying interpretations through its criteria, and justifying one's departures from them or reinterpretations of them with recourse to the motifs and reasons that tradition supplies makes a difference to what one is able to think. Traditions form conditions of thought, which become evident in lingering emphases, directions taken, perspectives adopted, and the specific shape of the solutions to certain intricate problems. This can be understood as tradition's tendency to resist, and might lead to new and surprising things being discovered. A certain stringency of method might be the prerequisite for allowing tradition to exert its resistance, to realise the critical and transformative potential of tradition.

While liberationist efforts will perhaps never reach the point where there is no need for any foothold outside tradition in order to be able to develop

critique of tradition itself, it is increasingly recognised, precisely in our present conditions, that tradition represents an outside to the horrendous suffering and vacuous uniformity of modern global capitalism, that theological thought can contribute another story about what human life and ultimate purposes are about.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on a lecture delivered at the Centre of Theology and Religion in Lund, at the conference *Liberating Theology – 25 years of Institute for Contextual Theology, Sweden*, November 24, 2017.
- 2 Where not otherwise indicated, I rely in my research on Gutiérrez and Shariati, available in Teresa Callewaert, *Theologies Speak of Justice: A Study of Islamic and Christian Social Ethics* (Uppsala: ACTA 2017).
- 3 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).
- 4 Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998).
- 5 Ali Shariati, *What Is to Be Done? The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance* (Houston: IRIS, 1986), 43.
- 6 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), xiii.
- 7 Ali Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2003), 32–36.
- 8 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 266.
- 9 Shariati, *What Is to Be Done?* 92–93.
- 10 Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 96.
- 11 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 105–8, 152.
- 12 Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 168–204, 190–93.
- 13 Shariati, *What Is to Be Done?* 50–53.
- 14 On the power of theology to resist (and overcome) capitalism, cf. also Ulrich Duchrow’s Chapter 5 and Atola Longkumer’s Chapter 6 in this volume.
- 15 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 300–1.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 287–302.
- 17 Shariati, *What Is to Be Done?* 23.
- 18 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Ten Observations on the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez” (1983) and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’ ” (1984) in Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 348–50 and 393–414, respectively.
- 19 Shariati, *What Is to Be Done?* 22.
- 20 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, ix.
- 21 Jenny Dagers, “Girls and Boys Come Out to Play: Feminist Theology and Radical Orthodoxy in Lucid Encounter,” in *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marko Zlomislac (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 97–118, 98.
- 22 See for example Fatima Mernissi, “A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 112–26; and Amina Wadud-Mushin, “Qur’an and Woman,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127–38; Virginia Burrus, “Queer Father: Gregory of Nyssa and the Subversion of Identity,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking*

- the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 147–62; and Amy Hollywood, “Queering the Beguines: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Anvers, Marguerite Porete,” in *Queer Theology*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 163–75; Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2010).
- 23 James Alison, “The Gay Thing: Following the Still Small Voice,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 50–62.
- 24 Ibid., 55–56; James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 226–28.
- 25 Alison, “The Gay Thing,” 57–59.
- 26 Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 96–99.
- 27 Ibid., 221.
- 28 Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: One World, 2006), 11–13.
- 29 Ibid., 154.
- 30 Ibid., 99–101.

9 “Speaking from experience”

Comparing Mahdawi and Pentecostal approaches to equipment for outreach

David Emmanuel Singh

Introduction

This chapter is partly about two paths and two journeys. “The image of the Path” has been used by charismatics across religions. Schimmel has written about the three-fold spiritual journey in Christianity, namely, purgation, contemplation, and illumination,¹ which has parallels with the *Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*’s outline of purgation, illumination, and union.² The two are not necessarily different, since the nature of the relationship and the extent of proximity (conveyed by the term “union”) between God and the human subject is central to both classifications. Schimmel, however, goes a step further by comparing this journey with the Islamic one: *shari’a* (lit. the main path), *tariqa* (lit. a branch of the main path), and *haqiqa* (reality/the internal stages of this path). Those who travel this path are therefore considered travellers journeying towards an intimate experience of God or union with God.³ Mahdawi, a Sufi-inspired sect,⁴ could give one a more detailed view of this journey. Going beyond Schimmel’s categories, the disciples of this sect do not aspire to “union” or “vision/illumination” as the end in itself. The experience serves as a preparation or certification of readiness for missionary outreach. The journey involves finer steps: retreat/trust in God, remembrance-ritual, the vision/illumination, and speaking from experience.

My early experiences as a Pentecostal explain my interest in charismatic phenomena. I am interested particularly in the apparent similarities I see between the Mahdawi case and memories of my own Pentecostal tradition. Pentecostalism and Mahdawyya obviously belong to different religious spheres and are marginal to mainstream Christianity and Islam respectively; and yet both are expressions of millenarianism.⁵ In this light, my aim here is to first present a simple comparative description of “the journey” using the Mahdawi case as a provisional template. The form of the presentation in this section follows “comparative juxtaposition”;⁶ this is a simple way of comparing apparently similar ideas or practices. The aim is to look for theological meanings behind apparent similarities. In this sense, this is a theological search. The inspiration for this approach comes from

Approaching God.⁷ Human effort in seeking nearness with God is not a one-sided exercise; God reciprocates human effort at seeking him. Phenomenology involves comparative descriptions of the subjects' experiences as they appear or are presented to the researcher; theology presupposes the reality of God and his initiatives and responses towards his creatures. This is therefore a search for meaning by a student of Sufism and a Christian traveller on a Godward journey.

Comparative juxtaposition

Retreat and trust

Both the notions of retreat and trust are associated in Sufism with asceticism. Mahdawi *dairas* (communities) were open to receiving any number of people who wished to submit to the rigorous conditions of the community retreat leading up to the experience of God:

Anyone who intends to live in this world and does not depend on God, God permits him to leave [the *daira*]. . . . God is merciful and forgiving. He has not said that you should seek the world or desire it or go to the houses of those who seek the world.⁸

Even friends or strangers could potentially lead the believers on this mission astray.⁹ Those who chose this path of experience were expected to "die before death".¹⁰ One did this not in isolation but in the context of a community of likeminded aspirants and enablers: "in the *subbat* (company) of the [other] seekers of God (*taliban-e khuda*)".¹¹ The attitude of trust involved two steps. The first step involved voluntary poverty or the absence of personal possessions – absence of personal initiative for gathering food, money, or property. The idea was not to engage in any immodest economic activity or wealth generation. The examples of failures were meant to teach the aspirants how not to live in the *daira*: "Hadrat Mahdi said, 'whoever [in the *dairas*] trusts in food, has not learned to trust God'. Hadrat Mahdi [further] said, 'Anyone who waits for gifts has not learned to trust God'".¹² The second step involved trust in God alone. *Insaf* defines trust in God as the principal means by which the believers orient themselves towards God: "*Trust* is the name for one's release from the world (*makhluq*). It enables you to turn your gaze upon God".¹³

One can highlight cases of mainstream church-going Christians becoming similarly conscious of the need for deeper trust in God. In writing about the "pentecostalization of mainline churches" in Cameroon, for example, Akoko argues that the "mass defections from the established churches" were a way of "addressing spiritual and material needs of the followers", a way of finding "spiritual fulfilment" or a way of maintaining an existing spiritual practice.¹⁴ Socio-economic research into Pentecostalism highlights

not just the “taxonomies of prosperity” but also specific “case studies” in the global charismatic movement.¹⁵ Before the influx of the idea of asking “and you shall be given”,¹⁶ Wacker’s work reminds readers, “primitive Pentecostalism” emphasised personal asceticism, a behaviour pattern inspired by millenarianism.¹⁷ The tradition of Pentecostalism I grew up in also enforced “symbolic fences” between the believers and the world out there, and those excluded often included other Christian traditions. Gambling, alcohol, tobacco, and any practice involving amusement (including TV, cinema, dancing, etc.) were banned. My list of several other banned luxuries coincides with Wacker’s and includes any demonstration of wealth, even something as simple as wearing jewellery of any sort.¹⁸ Life in the privacy of the family was not spared, and even the bedroom was not out of bounds in a bid to control any urge for “excess” or “inordinate fun”. Those caught in any such “immoral behaviour” could risk censure or even excommunication unless they were willing to repent and reset their holiness through prayer and deliverance from the devil. An instance of the absolute trust in God and not human agency can be found in Lindhardt’s work on Chilean Pentecostalism; humans are utterly powerless and all good things are made possible only through God’s agency.¹⁹ We lived life in the expectation of Jesus returning unannounced and no one wished the believers to remain behind. Pentecostalism has perhaps come a long way. It was seen to be “incompatible with capitalist enterprise” or as a millenarian “ecstatic religion” of people looking to “forget their failures”.²⁰ Today, it is pointed out to be a religion of “super-capitalists”; no more “the epitome of ‘primitive’ religion”, today Pentecostalism is said to be a far cry from its old self, an “ultramodern” religious movement.²¹

Remembrance-ritual

The ritual of remembrance (*dhikr*) among the Mahdawis distinguished a “believer” from a “non-believer”.²² A believer was one who performed the ritual at prescribed times, just as faithful Muslims performed the ritual prayer: “the believer is one who remains turned towards God morning and evening and in all circumstances”.²³ *Dhikr*, it appears in this context, was understood by Mahdawi leaders to be synonymous with ritual prayers but exceeded it. Prayers said five times a day were considered “the abundant *dhikr*”, but for those who had attained the state of perfection (those performing eight *dhikrs*), a return to the five-time prayers and the accompanying *dhikr* was tantamount to backsliding.²⁴ This was “the new way of doing the *namaz*”;²⁵ *dhikr* was considered the “inner dimensions” of the *namaz*.²⁶ The Mahdawi disciples were allowed to perform *dhikr* in whatever posture they were in.²⁷ *Dhikr* was seen to be not merely a simple repetition of words (as in the *namaz*) but rather a means of accessing the deeper meanings of the scriptures, “the *batin* of the Qur’an”.²⁸ The following example might suffice. In one of the sources, Sayyid Khundmir was asked if the reading

of the Qur'an was useful. The reading of the Qur'an as a mere intellectual exercise was not adequate.²⁹ The aim was to seek divine knowledge so as to be able to speak from experience. This knowledge was gained not through intellectual effort, but through unveiling (revelation of God). Even the illiterate could gain it. Thus, for instance, in the case of the Mahdi himself, it was reported that God wipes out his acquired knowledge before filling him with the hidden knowledge (*batini 'ilm*). The *dhikr* worked like the longing of lovers that draws them together. Pen, paper, and ink were not essential in this process, for "it is a matter of *'ishq* (love), which a workplace (*daftar*) cannot encompass".³⁰

There is possibly nothing comparable to the circadian ritual of the *dhikr* in Pentecostalism or in charismatic Christianity in general. Perhaps the ritual practice that comes closest to it was called the *prabhu bhoj*, the Lord's Table in my tradition of Pentecostalism.³¹ It was a weekly affair and involved a form and content not too dissimilar to other Christian traditions. As a child, I was especially aware during this phase of a range of ritual practices. It was made to seem especially mysterious, and as a child, it fascinated me more for its mystery than its significance as a means of remembering the sacred substitutionary sacrifice of our Lord and as a celebration of the hope of fellowship with Him. I was, for years, quite in dread of the ritual and do not remember ever "unlawfully partaking" of the sacred objects for fear of divine punishment. Unlike in the Muslim case, here this remembrance-ritual did not necessarily play the role of a gateway to the experience of God. The experience itself and its manifestations seemed rather *ad hoc* and dispersed. Manifestations of the Spirit could happen without warning at any point in the service, although times of prayer, preaching, healing segments and singing seemed like the most likely occasions for this. Thus, the experience of God itself was dispersed rather than being logically arranged in a sequence of cause and effect.

This does not mean, however, that Pentecostalism is bereft of rituals. Csordas' work can help to illustrate my point about the lack of sequence. He classifies every event in a believer's life as "Charismatic and Pentecostal ritual". To him, the "specific ritual practices" include speaking in tongues, laying on of hands, and resting in the Spirit; his list of "ritual events" includes prayer meetings, healing services, and revival meetings, and the "ritual language genres" include prophecy, prayer, teaching, and witnessing.³² Ryle would add reconciliation through repentance from sin to the list of rituals, based on her work on the charismatic healing services led by a priest from India in Fiji.³³ The ritual life of Pentecostal believers has been a topic of an edited volume by Lindhardt.³⁴ Often the emphasis in commentaries is placed upon the *charismata*, personal salvation and the second coming of Jesus; what is often missed is the reality of what Lindhardt describes as "high degrees of ritual activity".³⁵ Robbins too in his essay refers to the idea of "ritual activity" in all forms of charismatic Christianity. He sees the "high degree of ritual activity" as the main feature of Pentecostalism.³⁶

Experience of God

When the Mahdawi disciples saw God, they were considered perfect believers (*mu'min*). Mentoring by qualified teachers was the key to this end: "If the seeker is faithful (*sadiq*) and *murshid* (teacher) is perfect (*kamil*) then he (the seeker) will soon find Allah, the Most High".³⁷ It was believed that God waited to be seen by the believers: "Where will God go except to be in front of the seeker? This means that if there is a seeker, he will find God without much effort".³⁸ The seeker's experience of God was facilitated by a teacher; the teacher's responsibility was to enable the student to recognise God in the experience, because "though people generally see God, often they do not recognise him".³⁹ Despite being commonplace, the disciples' declaration of having seen God was an occasion worthy of celebration. One saw God through a) the physical eyes, b) the eyes of the heart, or c) in a dream state. Seeing God through the heart, or in dreams, was understood to be as real as physical seeing: "if one does not see God through 'the eyes in the head' [physical eyes], or 'the eyes of the heart', or the dreams, he shall not be a believer".⁴⁰ Seeing happened to those who, like lovers in the passion of love, directed their hearts towards the supreme object of desire, God.⁴¹ The model for such proximity and seeing was drawn from the Qur'anic and traditional accounts of the prophet's nocturnal journey and ascension (Surah 17.1) – a journey that may happen in dreams or be unfolded upon the heart, or on rare occasions through spiritual or bodily ascension.

My sources do not provide the details of exactly what the disciples saw. We know from the writings of mystics like Ibn 'Arabi, for example, that this proximity was perhaps about witnessing the root of the entire affair in God, or seeing the majesty of God, or about the experience of unity with God. The disciples showed visible signs of their inner states, so the teachers could make their declarations about their progress. We know one of the external signs of the inner states of seeing was their loss of consciousness (*jazbas*). This indicated their absence from the world and their proximity to God. The teachers routinely debriefed their disciples. The disciples' reports, combined with the judgement of the teachers, probably played an important part in deciding whether or not the seeing had occurred.

Mentoring also plays an important role in the Church of Pentecost in Ghana (COP).⁴² Discipleship and leadership training models of the COP are part of Tsekpoe's ongoing doctoral research. In an unpublished paper on the topic, Tsekpoe argues that direct mentoring is happening in an increasingly institutionalised manner in his church.⁴³ "Christ-like living and personal . . . devotion to God" is emphasised and, here, the aim is to enable the disciples "know Christ in a personal way".⁴⁴ Various ritual events here also include prayers for people to "receive the Holy Spirit and speak in other tongues".⁴⁵ The mystical spirituality in Pentecostalism appears to be fundamentally not about ascension, though dreams and visions may happen; it is about the descent of God through the Holy Spirit. Part of Pillay's

research on Pentecostalism focused on Indian converts' testimonies in South Africa. All of them attributed their transformation to the experience of the Spirit that was understood to be "real". This resulted in their sense of God being real like a person; knowing God and not about him; and God being with them/in them and not just in heaven (immanent rather than transcendent).⁴⁶ Pillay argued that The Apostolic Faith Mission, the Full Gospel Church of God South Africa and the Assemblies of God all had "identical positions regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit".⁴⁷ The baptism of the Holy Spirit was, for them, not a sign of regeneration but a consequence of it; it was to enable the believers to achieve a higher level of preparedness and empowerment, as promised in the scriptures (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:5-8, etc.). All believers had the potential and indeed the privilege "to receive this supernatural experience" and this was distinguished from the conversion experience or "the experience of the new birth".⁴⁸ Pillay offers what he calls "descriptions typical of the experience of 'having the Spirit'", who reaches out to the believers:⁴⁹ the Spirit is experienced as "the power from heaven"; "immersion in the Spirit"; the Spirit entering "the soul of a person" and filling "his whole life";⁵⁰ overtaking the disciples' will and motivating the believers' lives. This experience was expressed outwardly through *glossolalia*, a moment in this encounter when the believers conversed with God. The believers' life following this (in service, healing, prophecy, etc.) manifested this state of communion.⁵¹

Missional engagement

In the Muslim case I investigated first, the experience of God as described previously was not the end in itself. It was like achieving the qualification and equipping for missional engagement through going out into the world and preaching. The word used for this phase was *hijrat* (exodus). I expect similar evidence in the Pentecostal cases, although I understand there will be variations.

Going out into the world

Muhammad's *hijrat* (exodus) and the Sufi practice of engagement in society⁵² provided a model for going out. This was also a model for the growth of the sect I investigated. The aspirants who successfully completed their terms in their mother community began their own communities, usually by going out voluntarily, but also sometimes due to persecution, differences of position, or outright excommunication.⁵³ The onset of the *jazbas* heralded their readiness to speak: "you ought to know that after the *jazbas* the message from God came to Hadrat Imam [the Mahdi] that, 'O Sayyid Muhmmad, perform the *hijrat* for Us'".⁵⁴ Stories immediately following this quotation suggest that the Mahdi used the principle of *hijrat* to preach in different locations. He won his early converts in these locations. Some of the outstanding early

converts became the Mahdi's immediate successors.⁵⁵ The *hijrat* was linked with the starting of the *dairas* with one of the newer disciples in control. The *shawahid* testifies to the newly qualifying disciples performing the *hijrat* to as distant a region as the Deccan in the south of India from Gujrat in the northwest of India. The *shawahid* also speaks of the king of Deccan welcoming the *muhajirs* and inviting others, "like the saints" he has met from Gujrat, to settle in the Deccan.⁵⁶ Miyan Mulk, an early disciple, is said to have attracted several hundred "seekers of God"; these were people leaving their homes and beginning to live around him. The reason for the unusual following of Miyan Mulk was his perceived extraordinary ability to speak. That is, he had "something new to tell each day" to his disciples and what he told his disciples each day was said to be "from God".⁵⁷

We know from the COP's example⁵⁸ that schisms within a rapidly growing church probably help rather than stunt growth. These schisms afforded an opportunity to similarly gifted leaders to strike out on their own and lead and grow the movement more rapidly than would have been possible otherwise.⁵⁹ Disciples who were understood have completed their apprenticeship were "posted to the field";⁶⁰ disciples with different manifest gifts understood to have been equipped "for the work of ministry" were expected to replicate this model of director mentoring. The ability to speak in tongues was considered merely "the initial evidence of this experience".⁶¹ This was the external sign of the believers' experience of God through the Spirit. Pillay also notes the exceptional case of Bethesda (the Indian branch of the Full Gospel Church). Whereas in the AOG churches public speaking in tongues followed a ritualised process involving prayers, fasting, and pursuit of holiness (also accompanied by ecstasy, convulsions, etc.), in the Bethesda community, speaking in tongues was rare in public and was not expected as evidence of the experience of the Holy Spirit. It was seen to be a possible initial sign of the Spirit, and the baptism of the Spirit was understood to be much bigger than mere speaking in tongues.⁶² This experience was distinguished from both regeneration/conversion and baptism into the church. Consequently, the gifts of the Spirit generally meant for all believers were distinguished from the gifts of the Spirit following the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Again, it was clear that the purpose of the experience and the gifts that accompanied it was neither just for the subjects nor for the mere edification of the community to which the subjects belonged, but for "the enlargement of the church"; it was to provide "divine direction" and to infuse those having the experience with "spiritual power for service" and for going out to engage.⁶³ Bialecki's work on "Quiet Deliverances" stresses the socio-anthropological description of Pentecostalism in terms of both experience and embodiment. He presents the concrete example of the Vineyard to illustrate this point. A Pentecostal denomination, the Vineyard originated in California and is now global. It combines "both Pentecostal and Evangelical practice" in that its emphasis on embodiment derives from experience; going out to plant churches is the very purpose and end of the experience

of God.⁶⁴ Robbins observed too that "it is . . . Pentecostalism's promotion of ritual to the centre of social life that has allowed it to travel so well and to build institutions so effectively".⁶⁵ Thus Pentecostalism's ability to spread globally and build institutions is owed to its "ritualised approach to social life".⁶⁶ Ritual creates opportunities for people to travel or gather in order "to experience ritual" (e.g. revival); the experiences generated by this were then replicated elsewhere; rituals generated trust in people who would otherwise be socially distant – something necessary for movements.⁶⁷

Speaking as a revelatory process

It was evident that a Mahdawi person who had been through the process outlined was qualified to preach.⁶⁸ Preaching involved three interrelated aspects: plain report or testimony (a witnessing role), the eloquent exposition of the scriptures (an interpretive role), and expressing God's revelation (a prophetic role).

"PLAIN REPORT" AND TESTIMONY

Chapter 2 of the *shawahid* contains a brief "history" (*tarikb*) from Adam to Muhammad and Muhammad to the Mahdi; the term used to refer to this *tarikb* is *bayan*, which in the context means "plain report" or "account".⁶⁹ The mysterious guide of Moses, traditionally called the Khidr, is presented as passing on the guardianship (*amanat*) from Muhammad to the Mahdi; the retelling of this experiential story of how the *amanat* is passed on to the Mahdi is also called *bayan*; clearly *bayan* here means an account.⁷⁰ Similarly, the events relating to the Mahdi's state of ecstasies (*jazba*) were called "the account of the Mahdi's *jazbas*".⁷¹

It has been suggested that Pentecostalism is "pre-literate and oral based".⁷² Lewis has noted, therefore (as have also many others he cites), that testimonies play an important part in the emerging theology. Personal testimonies also play a role in according positions to individuals in a dynamic "social matrix" where aspirants can aspire to and gain progressively higher positions by testifying to their ever deepening experience of God.⁷³ Testimony plays another important role in "outreach to non-believers"; Lewis sees this to be a characteristic of the relational oral cultures where narrative is thought of "as the source of knowledge". Knowledge is gained relationally "within the relationship with God"; what one sees or hears is what one speaks, and there is no sense of dichotomy between the subject and the object of experience.⁷⁴

EXPOSITION OF THE SCRIPTURES

The Mahdi is said to have given a *bayan* (exposition) on Sura al-Fatiha in a manner unsurprisingly judged by Mahdawiyya as "perfect eloquence", so

that the critics simply could not find any faults in any of his utterances. Further, this *bayān* was alleged to have been presented in such a skilful manner of weaving the utterances with what the critics knew from their schools of law (*madhhabs*) and commentaries (*tafsirs*) that their carefully prepared questions and arguments became unnecessary. The power of his words was believed to be so great and the depth of his knowledge so vast that he was able to hold the attention of people and sustain their interest in the exposition on Sura al-Fatiha for the whole period between the two ritual prayers. True to the form of other similar narratives of the Mahdi's encounters with *ulama* (religious scholars), the critics' experiences led them to accept their defeat: "our knowledge ('ilm) is like the babble of children" and "no one except Muhammad himself did the *bayān* in similar fashion".⁷⁵

Pentecostals have a high view of scriptures, and so hermeneutics as a "science of understanding" plays an important role. Their experiential narratives connect them to the world of the Bible. Pentecostals, therefore, belong to neither a purely "literate" nor a "pure oral culture".⁷⁶ Pillay speaks of four "basic tensions" in Pentecostal theology and here the first concerns authority (scripture/revelation and Pentecostal hermeneutics).⁷⁷ The antithesis here is not between experiences and the scripture, but between "literal and non-literal approaches" to generating meanings. The Pentecostals normally hold on to the belief in the inerrancy and authority of the whole and parts of the Bible. This does not mean that there is no space for interpretation. Since the experience the believers have is that of the Spirit (who is also the fount of the revelation), the meanings one uncovers are therefore assumed to be aligned with the scriptural revelation and are thus declared as "'the plain' meanings"; there are no creative readings rendered by the application of methods such as historical criticism. Thus, the Bible's authority as "the final word" is maintained. Experiences the believers have of the Spirit enable them to reconcile the authority of the Bible in its fixed textual form and the orally expressed revelatory meanings.⁷⁸ Gifford's work on the Bible in African Pentecostalism highlights not just the Spirit-filled "expository preaching", but also a use of the scripture that is "fairly loose". The preaching from the scripture is often "a launching pad for ideas that may have a rather tenuous link back to the text", but importantly both in his mind and in the listeners' the words emanate from the direct experience of the Holy Spirit, and often the words are assumed to be God's and not the preacher's.⁷⁹

REVELATION FROM GOD

Speaking in the Mahdawi sect derived its authority from the belief that it expressed the aspect of God's revelation that remained hidden in the scriptures or in the Prophet. The revelatory knowledge was passed on to the disciples without involving any intellectual effort on their part.⁸⁰ They consequently did not need to be particularly qualified as experts. The

hagiographers of the Mahdi tell us that he was able to give Qur'anic "expositions" as he drew directly on the hidden aspects of revelation. This was considered to be the essence (*mahiyya*) and the gist (*muradan/murad*) of prophecy. The Mahdi also answered questions on the Qur'an that even the great Sufi Shaykh Danyal struggled with.⁸¹ Even at the age of 12, he was recognised among the *ulama* for his extraordinary abilities.

A report on Pentecostalism defines it as being "energetic and dynamic"; the insiders are "driven by the power of God moving within them". The emphasis is laid upon "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" – which transforms the believer and prepares them to "live a truly Christian life". This "direct experience of God" is manifested externally through "tongues, prophecy and healing".⁸² Thus this experience, leading to its expression, can be characterised as "revelatory", though presumably delimited by the scriptural revelation. *The Economist* article on "Global Pentecostalism" highlights two principal characteristics which are relevant here: "Ecstasy and Exodus".⁸³ In the article, Teju Hassan is said to be from a far country (Lagos, Nigeria), a convert engaged in "reverse mission" in Ireland among a "multi-national congregation". His 100 followers are "people who seek an ecstatic experience", through the "baptism of the Holy Spirit". They are described here as "charismatic", and although their worship is apparently not as organised in set stages as in the Mahdawi case I described, the key aspects of their community lives are not too dissimilar: there is both ecstasy and exodus. An ecstatic form of "Christianity thrives among people on the move"; it "offers a sense of self-transcendence" among people cut off from their roots; the experience of God through charismatic phenomena such as exorcising of demons, miracles, visions/dreams and other forms of seeing, or hearing or speaking (prophecy) provides stability and purpose in lives lacking balance and certainty.⁸⁴ An example of the revelatory nature of "speaking from experience" comes from Coleman's review of Kenneth Hagin Sr. (the founder of Rhema Bible Training Center in the United States). A charismatic preacher, Hagin justified similarities in the content of his words and E. W. Kenyon's by appealing to "a charismatic version of a Durkheimian conscience collective" – the idea being they were both inspired by the same God and thus their revelatory utterances were unsurprisingly similar.⁸⁵

Comparative categories

I could easily be faulted for forcing a set of stages in the spiritual preparation of "speakers" from a tradition in Islam upon the Pentecostal context, especially since a similarly structured ritual focus is lacking in the latter. That would be a fair methodological critique; but what is clear is that even though one could add or remove specific elements here and there, the broader impulse for proximity to God or the Spirit of God and its observable outcome in "speaking from experience" appear not to be too dissimilar. Even if one is methodologically faulted for being inordinately reliant on or

privileging the Islamic case for deriving the categories for comparison, the comparison itself says a lot more than the stages outlined. Thus, for example, it highlights several underlying themes that are undeniably characteristic of both traditions and hence worth a review. In order to identify these themes, I used Microsoft Word to do the analysis for me. This analysis from the data for the comparative description above brought to light three recurring themes worth highlighting here which unsurprisingly apply to both traditions: community, scripture, and speaking (from experience).

Community

In a relatively brief chapter such as this, there were ten key references to community. Social identity theory explains, among other things, “the bases for differentiation and discrimination between groups”,⁸⁶ but also conditions under which individuals see themselves (self-categorise) as being part of a group.⁸⁷ Retreat from the world, understood to be different, even evil, is often a standard means of differentiating oneself/one’s group from the others. Here, the insiders or likeminded aspirants intermix with the enablers in what can be said to be a repetitive ritual or a set of rituals in order to replicate communally sanctioned experiences. The key aspects of community life may be summarised by the two Es: “ecstasy” and “exodus”. As I have observed before, based on Robbins’ work, charismatic phenomena appear to flourish especially among people who are on the move. Experience is therefore not just for the benefit of the individuals or the mother community which nurtured them, but for the replication of this community. The effect of this nurturing can thus be said to be “missional”. The experience is embodied in the broader sense of becoming an extension of one’s mother community, and this becomes an instrument or means of this community’s lateral growth.

Scripture

Hermeneutics is understood simply as a means of interpretation, not just of texts,⁸⁸ but also of “verbal and non-verbal communication”.⁸⁹ The term is used in its broadest sense, which includes reading, performative practices involving texts, or performances on their own. Hermeneutics in this sense occurs on both the Mahdawi and the Pentecostal sides. The texts acquire a dynamic reality, especially when they are performed in rituals or where the texts feature as part of sacred performances. Those observing play a key role in generating meaning, understanding, and knowledge of the performed texts. The “reader” may appear to be at centre stage as someone engaged in mining for meanings; however, he/she becomes a less central figure once the connection between him/her and the source of revelatory knowledge (God) is established. Just as in the *jazba*, the Spirit’s operation exhibited externally through prophecy or tongues becomes not only a sign of regeneration but a

consequence of it; regeneration through conversion is thus a separate stage in the disciples' preparation for the baptism of the Spirit or seeing God. The resultant phenomenon of "speaking" (preaching, teaching, tongues, prophecy, testimony, etc.) is not seen to be unconnected to the scriptures; it is seen to be bounded by it/its spirit and is often claimed to "expose" the scriptures. The believers in both camps appear to have a high view of their sacred texts, but it is their spiritual experiences that connect them to the very reality that brings the scriptures into being. As noted before, one sees that the antithesis is not between the experience and the scripture, but between literal and non-literal "meanings of the scriptures". The science of understanding/accessing knowledge therefore involves being connected to God, who underlies the scriptures.

Speaking (from experience)

There were about 45 references to experience in the comparative part of this chapter. One could use different adjectives to make a finer point about the nature of experience, such as "spiritual", "sacred", or "mystical". Any such experience remains largely subjective and unbounded until the subject begins to describe it in words through testimonies or through the disparate "signs" that accompany these testimonies. In classical Pentecostalism, as also in the Islamic case here, asceticism involving retreat and absolute trust in God could be advanced as one such sign (or prosperity and wellbeing in certain other traditions of Pentecostalism).

In the Islamic case, the gateway to experience involves certain ritual practices, the most central of which is the remembrance or *dhikr*. In Pentecostalism, rituals are dispersed and therefore cannot be said to be a stage or a means to experience, so prayer, preaching, healing, speaking in tongues and singing, etc. are not as neatly organised as steps towards experience and its exhibition. The cause and effect is not as clearly distinguished as in the Islamic case. But ritual itself plays an equally significant role in Pentecostalism. In fact, Pentecostalism's ability to become global is owed partly to the "ritualised approach to social life"; this is why, it has been suggested, the study of rituals should be "central to our approach to Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity".⁹⁰ Such rituals, however dispersed they may be in community events, replicate the right environment for all to participate in and with the experience that results from such a participation; this also generates trust and cohesion in the community. There is in both cases, however, an intent, expectation, or even requirement to experience and report.

The experience of the Spirit (Spirit baptism) is to be distinguished from the conversion experience or "the new birth" in Pentecostalism, as also in the Islamic case – i.e., normally it is those who are already deemed to be insiders that engage in the ritual performances and therefore are the ones that interpret their experience or others like it in terms of the religious framework they subscribe to. In both cases, one of the main means

of outward manifestation is through word, as e.g. (at the risk of repetition) through testimony, preaching, tongues, prophecy, etc. The words spoken bear a revelatory authority. Although there is often a revealing word for the insiders, the experience is not an end in itself; it is the starting point for the “departure” for one equipped for outreach. One concrete example from the Pentecostal angle may suffice: the Church of Pentecost (COP). The COP exhibits different “mission models” which “depart from the general pattern” of church-led missions; rather than being shaped by a specialised mission organisation, it is the COP “members at the grassroots” who shape what is described as “a mission from below”.⁹¹ What characterises these models is the dynamic involvement of people on the move locally, regionally or beyond.⁹² White’s work gives us a better view of how “leaders” are equipped for missional engagements. Each aspect of the five-fold ministry (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher) that this formation entails involves speaking; each of these also involves a structured process of nurturing or mentoring to uncover both “one’s spiritual gift or calling” and also theological knowledge.⁹³

A theological rationale

It is one thing to engage in such an exercise involving a Christian tradition on its own, but quite another to juxtapose this with another tradition. This unsurprisingly raises more questions, not least of which is a fundamentally theological one: how does one theologically justify a comparative approach such as this – and to what end?

To begin with, I am not so naïve as to suggest that resemblance equals sameness. If anything, the comparative juxtaposition has highlighted significant differences between the ritual dimensions of the cases; if space allowed, one could also have dug deeper into comparing the nature of the experience of God and how it is differently controlled and justified. What I have highlighted is that the idiom of the “journey” is a helpful starting point; though ritual plays an important role in both, in the Islamic case, the “journey” was far more firmly structured (and therefore more easily comparable to Christian mysticism) than in the Pentecostal tradition. This does not mean that such a design or intent is lacking in Pentecostalism, as is evident from Pentecostal theological schools focused on the “backend” task of training and spiritual formation. These institutions arguably work in support of churches’ ministry and mission. There is also evidence of emerging institutionalisation of “direct mentoring” in the broader context of the congregations in some examples of Pentecostalism, such as the COP, which I shall refer to in what follows.

My theological justification for the comparative framework arises from both ontology and theology. Arguably, the idea of “the divine spark” in Western mystical traditions comes from Gnosticism. The idea is that this spark in human beings “derives from the divine realm, fallen into this world

of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self" and return to God (hence the idea of journey in mysticism). This has been argued to be a parallel sort of revelatory tradition to the biblical and Qur'anic revelatory traditions.⁹⁴ In Gnostic Christianity, Jesus was seen to be the divine being who in the form of man was calling humanity back to the Divine Light; this idea is picked up also from the Gospel of John (John 1:1–5). A similar idea is also found in the equally ancient traditions of philosophy from India. *Atman* (true self/spirit) resides in all beings. This is the essence of people, and liberation involves recognising the true nature of self and its affinity with the *paramatman* (the Great Soul/Spirit). Many Indian Christian theologians have argued for what Sathianathan Clarke calls "the cosmic potency of Jesus".⁹⁵ Panikkar came from a mixed Hindu and Christian background and was deeply interested in forms of common expressions in religious experiences. Christ, as the face of God for us, was all important to him. This Christ was Lord of all and is present in Hinduism as in Christianity, even though he often remains unknown.⁹⁶ Unlike many converts, Panikkar saw the best of the two religious faiths, and so a positive image of encounters that defined his theology of religion was drawn from the Indian notion of "sacred rivers" – "Christian waters and the Hindu river".⁹⁷ The essence of the sacred waters was the unknown Christ whom Hindus will encounter when the "rivers merge". The notion of the universal Christ parallels the discourse on *logos*, which has its own history. This discourse

compels Christian theology to clarify the relationship between . . . the God of Jesus Christ and the discourse about God present in other religious traditions. The bond between Christ and the cosmos, which the Christian faith confesses, precisely seeks to give the reason for that universality.⁹⁸

The context of Genesis 1 highlights for me humanity's dignity and pre-eminence in the created order, which has been conceptualised in terms of *homo imago dei*. Psalm 8:5–9 is also relevant here, as it brings human beings in close comparison to angels; here human persons' dignity is affirmed in terms of the idea of the crown of "glory and honour". But is this meant only to accord dignity to human beings in relation to creation, or does it also have ontological substance? If the latter is true, then Christian theology needs to take religious experience and beliefs seriously. Altman asks the same question: is *imago dei* merely about the "dignity of human beings", or is this anchored more deeply? In the history of the *imago dei*'s interpretation, Christians have understood the phrase differently. Tarus has suggested that their understanding ranges from "substantialist" to "relational" and "functional" senses.⁹⁹ Altman speaks of a view subscribing to the idea of *imago dei* mainly in relation to Jesus (in line with II Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24; John 1:1–5) and only offers the distinction of

becoming an image of God through faith in Christ. Another view suggests that although human beings were created in the image of God, they were “destined to remain a man . . . liable to sin”; sin causes the loss of the image, which can only be regained through faith and obedience.¹⁰⁰ Altman also points out that Calvin rejected the Platonic notion of “man as an image or copy of God”.¹⁰¹

The substantialist approach is particularly significant for our understanding of human dignity. This approach presupposes an ontological connection between humanity and God, and not merely one that is functional or relational. This means that humanity is possibly good in essence (despite being marred by sin). Some, like Mendelssohn, writing in the Enlightenment context, emphasised the idea of “the essential goodness of man” and “implicitly rejected the theological doctrine of original sin”.¹⁰² The Genesis account seems unambiguous in supporting an essential understanding of the image in humanity without abandoning the notion of sin: “God made man in his own image” (Genesis 9:6); the Fall tarnished this, but we see that Paul applies the distinction to all humans: “he is the image and glory of God” (I Corinthians 11:7). Sin does not cause the image to be lost. This seems to be a more wholesome position. The presence of the image in human beings is by design and ontology. The image in humanity must be understood in a non-deterministic sense; what this means is that there is room for sinning, but also for being Godlike. The presence of the image is therefore not acquired by effort; it is tarnished and suppressed, but humans never cease to belong to God. The best example for this comes from the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the son was away, despite his transgressions, in his father’s eyes he was still his son, always welcome and deserving of the privilege and distinction. It is true that the New Testament does not identify those not in Christ as the children of God; but this is not because they are not God’s children, but because they refuse to acknowledge God as their father.¹⁰³ In Islam, for example, the traditional conception of God as the Master is only one aspect of the bigger picture. Sufi traditions are full of imageries of intimacy and proximity to God even to the extent of considering God to be closer than one’s “jugular vein” (Surah 50.16). The ideas of perfection, friendship, and unity of witness and being are not just debated, but part of everyday living and spiritual practice.

Much of the 19th-century Christian missionary theology of religions was rather unsympathetic and antithetical. Even scholars like Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899) and Frederick Fiske (1815–1850) – associated with Oxford (1878) and Cambridge (1849) respectively – while understandably favouring scholarship for the service of evangelisation, did not see much comparative value in Hinduism or Islam. John Nicol Farquhar (1861–1929) was exceptional in being one of the first in the late 19th/20th century to construct a missionary theology not “on Christian assumptions alone but on the belief that God speaks/acts universally and that this is evident also in the universal witness of God”.¹⁰⁴ He saw revival and reform in religions around

him which may have been owed to the challenges of colonialism and missionary enterprise, but for him these were also signs of the "steady advance of the ancient faiths".¹⁰⁵ The reforms encompassed movements towards the worship of one God, and excluded polytheism, mythology, idolatry, and veneration of men; these reforms included a renewed interest in seeking conversion and socialisation; these also included aspirations to broader socio-religious transformations. For Farquhar, these movements were a sign of the Spirit's operation in religions.¹⁰⁶ His sympathetic approach significantly dwelt on commonalities rather than differences. His model of missionary theology was not the only one; in 20th-century India, several other missionary theologians such as C.F. Andrews (1871–1940) and E. Stanley Jones (1884–1973) modelled their practice on this approach.

Roland Allen (1868–1947), a prominent missiologist, was a "radical critic of the church". He supported the idea that local churches should "be adapted to local cultural conditions and not be mere imitations of Western Christianity". The lack of such indigenisation was due to missionary control over leadership and the paucity of trust in "the Holy Spirit to guide the new church in its development". These views were underlined through his visit to India in the early 20th century.¹⁰⁷ Allen's approach sought "commonalities" and "common ground" rather than differences, and in this he was inspired by Paul's strategy towards the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17:16–34) and patristic apologists such as Justin Martyr.¹⁰⁸ Rutt outlines Allen's approach to missionary theology developed particularly in the context of China. This approach was based on what he saw as three basic characteristics: a) conservative instinct – the tendency which attracts the Chinese to remain attached to "the tried, the ancient, the historical" – and rather than opposing this and "demonising" Chinese traditions, he recommended missionaries work with these and even embrace them; b) love of propriety – the tendency to favour authority structures and hierarchy, which involved the question of linkages and connections with those higher up in the chain; and c) love for union – with an emphasis on belonging to a community with broader affiliation, rather than an "individualist doctrine" emphasising mere personal salvation.¹⁰⁹

This theological rationale relates to the simple comparative juxtaposition of the Mahdawi and the Pentecostal phenomena. Notwithstanding the limitations of this approach, this theological discussion helps me (and hopefully the readers) to not just dismiss the apparent similarities in my cases as mere accident. Religious experiences may be manifestations of human attempts at seeking God; but if humans long for God and seek him, would not God respond to them as those bearing his image (however tarnished this may be)? Why would God not be reaching out to those who search for him? Reforms in religions could therefore be seen as signs of a dynamic response of God to a human cry to him. Visions and dreams that transform individuals, families, and societies could also be God's gifts to them as first fruits of the fullness of the vision of God in Christ. If this is the case, should

we not accord greater dignity to other faiths and indeed the faithful seekers belonging to them in seeing them as “the children of God” waiting for their redemption in Christ? So, as readers can see, this remains an unrealised theological quest, not least for me as a student of Sufism and a Christian traveller on a Godward journey.

Conclusion

The search for understanding of the phenomenon of “speaking (from experience)” is rooted both in my background as a Pentecostal and in my training as a student of Sufism. My particular study of a millennial sect inspired by Sufism focused on a structured programme involving experience or seeing of God which had a missional purpose. In investigating the Islamic case, I highlighted five broad stages which provide a more detailed view of the journey Schimmel speaks of in relation to both Christian and Islamic mysticism. I understand that I am guilty of imposing the details upon the Pentecostal case. The simple juxtaposition was, however, not fruitless. Three themes emerged which were critically central to experiences across my cases: a living community, the dynamic role of scriptures, and the experience of God leading to missional engagement. Methodologically, my approach drew from phenomenology and theology. What this chapter underlined was that the human search for nearness with God is arguably never one-sided. God does not abandon his creation; he reciprocates human effort at seeking him. Phenomenology involves comparative descriptions of the subjects’ experiences as they appear or are presented to the researcher; theology presupposes the reality of an all-powerful God who not only creates living/feeling/thoughtful beings, but also expects them to seek communion with him. The power and presence of God encompasses the world he has created and, thus, there is no place and no genuine story of experience where he is absent. Roland Allen’s insight is useful – there is in all religions the undeniable presence of a “conservative instinct”. This draws those that belong to them back towards the ideas that are fundamental to them. The Christian missionary can dismiss them and want to replace them, but this is where one needs the mind of Christ and a cultivation of an attitude also informed by the example of his servant Paul (Acts 17:22).

This is a continuing search for meaning – not one by a mere scholar, but also by a believer.

Notes

- 1 Annamarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 98.
- 2 David T. Gies, *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 173.
- 3 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 98.

- 4 There are an estimated 150,000–300,000 Mahdawi. A Mahdawi Murshid from Hyderabad believes that the total number of Mahdawis today is around 10 million, which appears grossly inflated. Mahdawiyya, an Islamic millenarian movement, was founded by Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri (847/1443–910/1505), the proclaimed Mahdi (henceforth the Mahdi), and continues until today in pockets (see Jan-Olaf Blickfeldt, *Early Mahdism: Politics and Religion in the Formative Period of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985); P. B. Clarke, *Mahdism in West Africa: The Ijebu Mahdiyya Movement* (Avon: Luzac Oriental, 1995); and Butt Qamaruddin, *The Mahdawi Movement in India*, IAD Oriental (original) series 28 (Delhi: Idarah-e Adabiyat-e Dehli, 1985). Mahdawi sources highlight Mahdawiyya’s connection to the mainstream Chishti brotherhood of Sufism (Hadrat Burhan, *shawahid al-wilayat al-muhammadiyya ‘al-aqaua’ad al-hujjat al-muhammadiyya* (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha‘at Salaf al-Salihin Jami‘a Mahdawiyya, 1379 AH/1959), 3.29). We know that the Mahdi’s teacher Shaykh Danyal belonged to the Chishti order of Sufism (Burhan, *shawahid*, 4.31ff. and Hadrat Yusuf, *ma³la’ al-wilayat* (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha‘at Salaf al-Salihin Jami‘a Mahdawiyya, 1374 AH/1954), 8 ff.) widely practised in South Asia.
- 5 Stephen Hunt, *Christian Millenarianism: From Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Stephen Hunt, “Deprivation and Western Pentecostalism Revisited: The Case of ‘Classical’ Pentecostalism,” *PentecoStudies* 1, no. 1 (2002): 1–32.
- 6 See the idea in Nelson Ndubisi, “Factors of Online Learning Adoption: A Comparative Juxtaposition of the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Technology Acceptance Model,” *International Journal on E-Learning* 5, no. 4 (2006): 571–91.
- 7 Patrick Masterson, *Approaching God: Between Phenomenology and Theology* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 8 Hadrat Wali, *hashiya insaf nama*, 2nd ed. (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha‘at Salaf al-Salihin Jami‘a Mahdawiyya, 1418 AH/1997), 31.
- 9 Ibid., 75.
- 10 Ibid., 214; D. E. Singh, “The Way of the Heart for Understanding Religious Plurality,” *Dharma Deepika* 2, no. 2 (1998): 15–26.
- 11 Wali, *hashiya*, 45.
- 12 Ibid., 23, 64, 67–68.
- 13 Hadrat Wali, *insaf nama* (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha‘at Salaf al-Salihin Jami‘a Mahdawiyya, 1407 AH/1987), 68; see also Hadrat Mahmud, *Tark-e dunya- islam aur mahdawiyyat: ta’limat-e mahdi maw‘ud ‘alay al-islam*, vol. 1 (Hyderabad: Markazi Anjuman Mahdawiyya, 1407 AH/1986), 6.115, emphasis mine.
- 14 Robert Mbe Akoko, “‘Ask and you shall be given’: Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon” (Doctoral diss., Leiden, 2007), accessed July 19, 2018, www.researchgate.net/publication/28649259_Ask_and_you_shall_be_given_Pentecostalism_and_the_economic_crisis_in_Cameroon.
- 15 Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 16 Akoko, “‘Ask and you shall be given’”.
- 17 Grant Wacker, “The Function of Faith in Primitive Pentecostalism,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 3–4 (1984): 353–75.
- 18 Ibid., 371.
- 19 Martin Lindhardt, “When God Interferes: Ritual, Empowerment and Divine Presence in Chilean Pentecostalism,” in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 220–48.

- 20 Trad Nogueira-Godsey, "Weberian Sociology and the Study of Pentecostalism: Historical Patterns and Prospects for the Future," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (2012): 51–70, 66–67.
- 21 Nogueira-Godsey, "Weberian Sociology and the Study of Pentecostalism," 51–70, 66–67. In further nuancing this, one needs to recognise that the "primitive" forms continue well into our times, especially in India but also in many movements in Africa and Latin America. Clearly not all are prosperity-oriented or ultramodern. See Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 22 Mahmud, *Tark-e dunya*, 5.10–125.
- 23 Wali, *hashiya*, 4.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 *Namaz* is the five-time obligatory ritual prayer of Muslims.
- 26 Wali, *insaf*, 10.210.
- 27 Ibid., 11.239–40.
- 28 Ibid., 10.212–13.
- 29 Ibid., 10.209–11.
- 30 Ibid., 10.216; Hadrat Burhan, *Hadiqa al-haqa'iq haqaqa al-daqa'iq*, Book II, Text with translation into Urdu by Sayyid Muhammad alias Rôshan Miyañ (Hyderabad: Majlis-e Intezami, 1400 AH/1978), 134; Burhan, *shawahid*, 33.432; and Shaykh Gujrati, *Makatib* (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha'at Salaf al-Salihin Jami'a Mahdawiyya, 1414 AH/1993), 8, 105–6.
- 31 I grew up in an Assemblies of God (AG) church context in Northern India. Both my parents were theological educators in a small AG seminary training pastors and missionaries. My early years were immersed in charismatic environments and regular community worship and prayers. Witnessing the experience of speaking in tongues, prophecy and other spiritual manifestations was a fairly normal part of my upbringing. I am well past the phase of "rebellion", but I feel I have, to use Wacker's image, "one leg still stuck in the tent", and hence this comparative work. See Wacker, *Heaven Below*, x.
- 32 Thomas J. Csordas, "Ritualization of Life," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 129–51.
- 33 Jacqueline Ryle, "Laying our Sins and Sorrows on the Altar: Ritualising Catholic Charismatic Reconciliation and healing in Fiji," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 68–97.
- 34 Martin Lindhardt, ed., *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011).
- 35 Lindhardt, "Introduction," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1–48.
- 36 Joel Robbins, "The Obvious Aspects of Pentecostalism: Ritual and Pentecostal Globalisation," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 49–67, 50.
- 37 Wali, *hashiya*, 210.
- 38 Hadrat 'Alam, *naqliyyat az-hadrat bandagi miyañ sayyid 'alam* (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha'at Salaf al-Salihin Jami'a Mahdawiyya, 1376 AH/1956), 52.
- 39 Ibid., 45; Wali, *hashiya*, 72.
- 40 Wali, *hashiya*, 214.
- 41 Ibid., 75.
- 42 Christian Tsekpoe, "The Development of James McKeown's Mission Models and its Implication for the Church of Pentecost, Ghana," paper presented at the doctoral seminar at OCMS on 1 August 2018.

- 43 Christian Tsekpoe, "Direct Mentoring as a Discipleship and Leadership Training Model in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana," unpublished paper presented at OCMS, 1–5 August 2018.
- 44 Ibid., 2.
- 45 Ibid., 4.
- 46 Gerald J. Pillay, *Pentecostalism among Indian South Africans* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1994), 183–84.
- 47 Ibid., 196.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., 194.
- 50 Ibid., 195.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 See Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Sufis were part of their society, both Muslim and non-Muslim. In this, they often came into conflict with the Ulema, the upholders of "orthodoxy" and at times the state.
- 53 Yusuf, *ma³la'*, 64, 66, 70–72.
- 54 Burhan, *shawahid*, 8.51.
- 55 Hadrat Husayn, *Tadhkira al-salihin* (Hyderabad: Dar al-Isha'at Salaf al-Salihin Jami'a Mahdawiyya, 1381 AH/1961), 6–270.
- 56 Burhan, *shawahid*, 40.524–25.
- 57 Wali, *insaf*, 8.183.
- 58 Citing Christine Leonard, Robert Wyllie, and Kingsley Larbi, Tsekpoe ("The Development of James McKeown's Mission Models") points out a British missionary; James McKeown was one of the first Apostolic Church missionaries. The church experienced several schisms, which in a sense helped its expansion; one of these indigenous Pentecostal churches in Ghana was led early on by McKeown himself. This church is called the Church of Pentecost (COP), which alone has over 20,000 congregations and over 3 million members.
- 59 Tsekpoe, "Direct Mentoring," 1.
- 60 Ibid., 4.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Pillay, *Pentecostalism among Indian South Africans*, 197–98.
- 63 Ibid., 196.
- 64 Jon Bialecki, "Quiet Deliverances," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 249–76.
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- 66 Ibid., 65.
- 67 Ibid., 62–63.
- 68 Wali, *hashiya*, 220.
- 69 Burhan, *shawahid*, 2.23.
- 70 Yusuf, *ma³la'*, 11.
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- 72 William MacDonald, "Pentecostal Theology: A Classical Perspective," in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, ed. Russell Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 58–74, 59.
- 73 Paul W. Lewis, "The Baptism in the Holy Spirit as Paradigm Shift," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 13, no. 2 (2010): 301–44, 317.
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- 75 Burhan, *shawahid*, 54–55.
- 76 Lewis, "The Baptism in the Holy Spirit as Paradigm Shift," 318.
- 77 The other three are freedom (work and grace), history (chosen remnant and the idea of church), and certainty (crisis of faith).
- 78 Lewis, "The Baptism in the Holy Spirit as Paradigm Shift," 211–13.

- 79 Paul Gifford, "The Ritual Use of the Bible in African Pentecostalism," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 179–97.
- 80 Hadrat Giroh, *Jami' al-usul* (Hyderabad: Jami'a Mahdawiyya, 1402 AH/1982 AD), 5; Wali, *insaf*, 211, and Wali, *hashiya*, 10.
- 81 Burhan, *shawahid*, 5.38–39; Yusuf, *ma'la'*, 11.
- 82 BBC, "Pentecostalism," February 2009, www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/pentecostal_1.shtml, accessed February 11, 2020.
- 83 *The Economist*, "'Global Pentecostalism': Ecstasy and Exodus," January 23, 2016, www.economist.com/international/2016/01/23/ecstasy-and-exodus.
- 84 See "'Global Pentecostalism': Ecstasy and Exodus."
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- 90 See Robbins, "The Obvious Aspects of Pentecostalism," 66.
- 91 Tsekpoe, "The Development of James McKeown's Mission Models."
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- 96 See Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964); and Raimundo Panikkar, *Salvation in Christ: Concreteness and Universality, the Supername* (Santa Barbara: Privately Published, 1972).
- 97 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 98 Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, "Jesus Christ, Incarnation and Doctrine of Logos," in *INTERS – Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science*, eds. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, I. Colagè, and A. Strumia, 2008, <http://inters.org/jesus-christ-logos>, doi:10.17421/2037-2329-2008-GT-2.

- 99 David Tarus, “Imago dei in Christian Theology: The Various Approaches,” *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 5 (2016): 18–25. “Substantialist” suggests that the image of God in humanity means we are like God in some sense; “relational position” suggests that humanity acquires God’s image by being in relation; and the “functional position” suggests that humanity has the role of being a representative of God over creation.
- 100 Alexander Altman, “Homo Imago Dei in Jewish and Christian Theology,” *The Journal of Religion* 48, no. 3 (1968): 235–59, 257–58.
- 101 Ibid., 235–59.
- 102 Ibid., 258.
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- 106 Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 1915.
- 107 Gerald H. Anderson, *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1998), 12.
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- 109 Ibid., 44–48.

10 Theology in the Anthropocene – and beyond?*

Sigurd Bergmann

Ever since the Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London in 2008 made a case for incorporating the Anthropocene into the geological time scale, the debate about the understanding of the Anthropocene has made massive waves.¹ The notion of “Anthropocene” implies a shift from the Holocene to a new epoch in the earth’s history, where human impacts since the so-called Industrial Revolution in the 18th century have increased on such a scale that “The human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system” [Fig. 1].² Among many other pieces of evidence, such as accelerating rates of species invasion and extinction, [Fig. 2] increasing sea level, and human disturbance of the climate system, [Fig. 3] the traces of human activities, such as nuclear waste, plastic waste, and soot, on planet earth have increased on a significant scale.

While scientists have enthusiastically embraced the suggestion, which, it should be noted, was not developed by geologists, but by self-critically aware geengineers and chemists, others have criticised the implicit anthropocentrism and the practice of human eco-management as an almost God-and-nature-given imperative.⁴

How is religion, in general, and Christian theology, in particular, affected by this discourse? A hint lies in my title’s “in”: religion and theology cannot simply relate *to* the Anthropocene and its discourse, but are already affected by it as faith unfolds as a practical and ideological human activity that in itself, for good and bad, affects the environment and history of the earth. Theology, and religion (as we showed earlier⁵), necessarily takes place today *in* the Anthropocene. Liberating theology needs to reinvent itself as a critical creation theology *within*, and as I will envision, also *beyond* the Anthropocene. One of the significant contexts for doing theology today is the ongoing anthropogenic change of the planet’s atmosphere and life worlds.

In the following, I will, to begin with, discuss some critical arguments against the triumphalist interpretation of the Anthropocene. As a second step, I will try to formulate the central challenge within the discourse – for faith communities as well as for other agents – and search for antidotes.

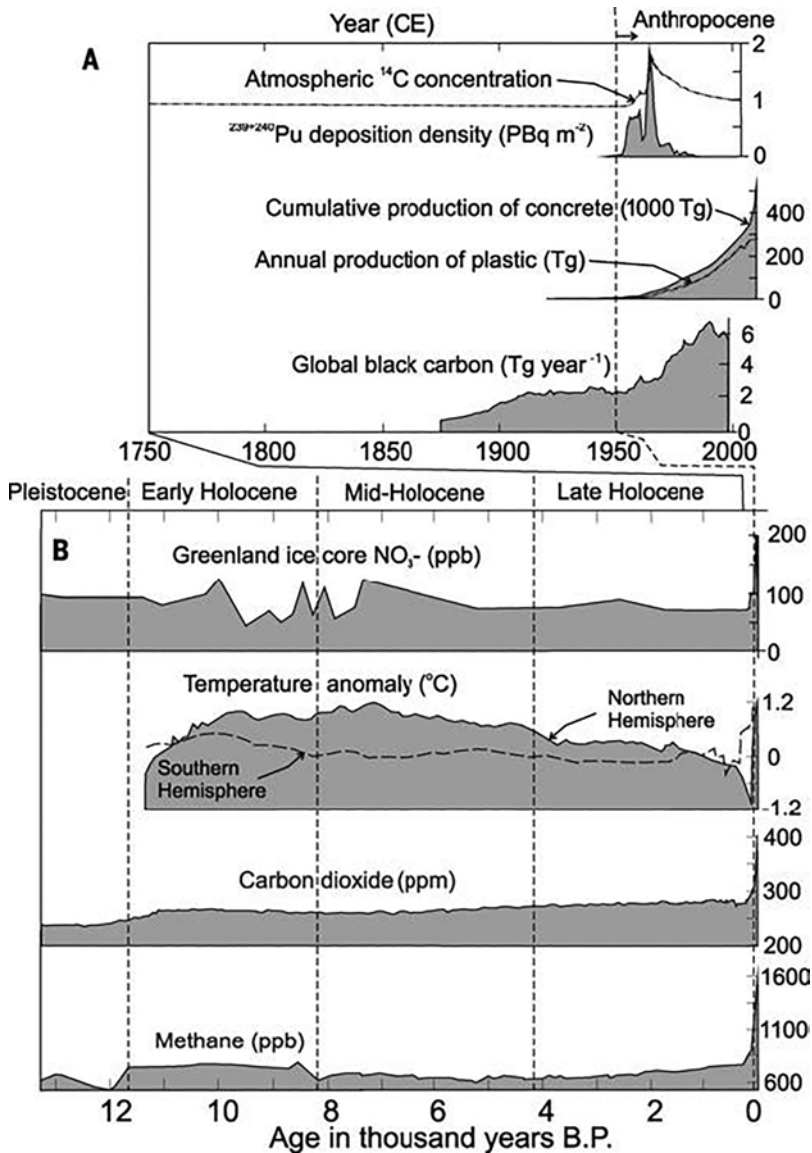


Figure 10.1 Key markers of anthropogenic change

Source: Waters et al., Figure 1

Finally, theological skills will be explored, in order to widen our vision from the past and present to a future beyond the Anthropocene. In this way it will move toward a contextual theopolitics of the earth experienced as the Ecocene.

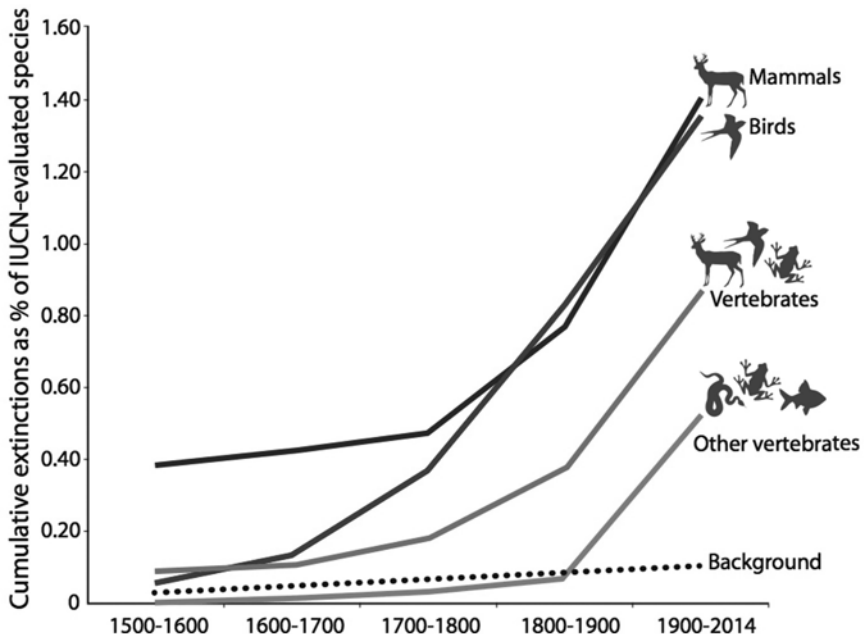


Figure 10.2 Vertebrate species extinction

Source: Ceballos et al.³

Triumphalist eco-management or eco-justice? the ambivalence of the Anthropocene narrative

After some initial hopeful optimism about the consensus that humans today are impacting on all kinds of habitats on the “Earth, our home”,⁶ my feelings have transmuted into an increasing ambivalence towards what now seems to function as a homogenising concept and a problematically generalising screen for projection.⁷ The normative ambitions of the Anthropocene narrative remain ambivalent.⁸ The notion of Anthropocene appears as a Janus-faced character.⁹

Three critical points should be emphasised.

First, will the insight into the all-embracing impact of humans lead to a new humility towards both human and other life forms, *or* will it fertilise a new triumphalist self-understanding of humankind and a utilitarian agenda with regard to human technocratic and economic management? Even if the introduction of the term, fortunately enough, has rather followed the humble path, one can trace among earth system scholars a certain degree of a self-aggrandising and, so to speak, socio-engineering attitude to the human/cultural/social/spiritual spheres of life. The narrative about

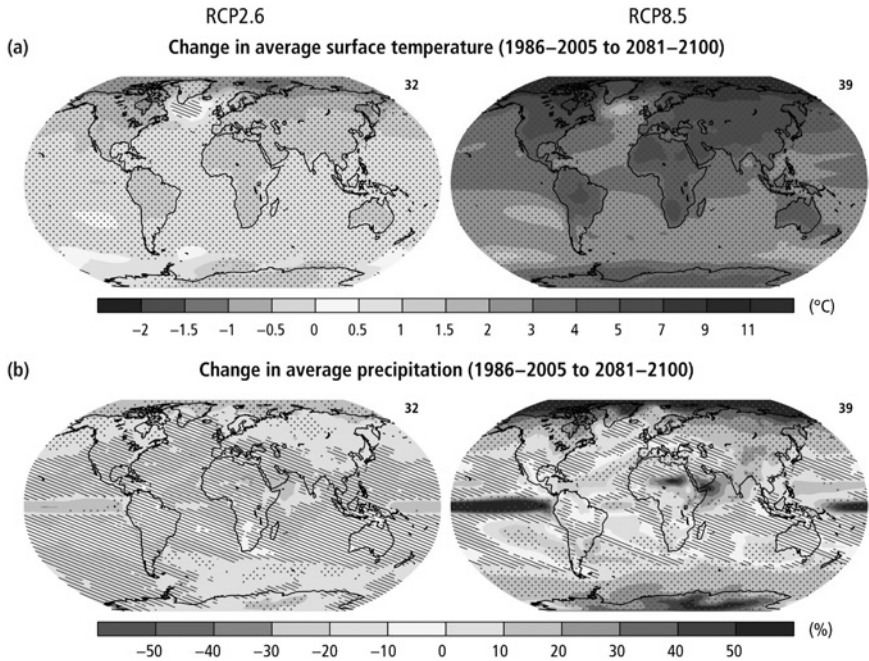


Figure 10.3 Change in temperature and precipitation

Source: IPCC Climate Change 2014, *Synthesis Report*, Fifth Assessment Report, http://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/ipcc/sites/default/files/AR5_SYR_Figure_SPM.7.png, 16 November 2017

the Anthropocene does not, to put it plainly, produce any antidotes against anthropocentric superiority and absolutism.

While the environmental humanities, to which ecotheology and the studies of religion and the environment also belong, reflect on nature as a source of gifts and commons of life,¹⁰ regarding the human as an integral part of nature, earth system analysis often, even if not in general,¹¹ operates with a poor reductionist understanding of the human and social, which is designed in sharp contrast to its highly sophisticated model of complexity with regard to natural processes. While religions compress the narrative into the language of “respect towards”, “wisdom about” and “compassion and wonder within” nature, science continues to take an external, somehow metaphysical position from which to describe nature. The fatal doctrine of nature as (a market [?] for) “ecosystem services”, which is popular in economics and some earth sciences, builds furthermore on the illusion that all life exists mainly for the sake of humans. But is the sky really made for us? [Fig. 4]

A second criticism regards the lack of power analysis in the narrative. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg rightly accuse the narrative of neglecting



Figure 10.4 Clouds over Kattegatt

Source: photo by author, October 2017

the uneven distribution of wealth as a condition for the very existence of modern, fossil-fuel technology, and of ignoring the fact that humans have caused global warming over the course of their long history.¹² Is Anthropocene thinking simply extending the natural scientists' worldviews to society?

Humans *in general*, in my view, do not exist; they always live and act in particular, in concrete contexts. Given the fact that the majority of the planet's poor are suffering from the violence of ongoing climatic change caused by a minority of countries that have become rich at the expense of others, both human and non-human, one must ask if the Anthropocene narrative can include the necessary reflection on environmental and climate justice.¹³ The naturalness of a consensus about the human impact in general tends to obscure the violation of justice, in the relational web of nature as well as in the asymmetry of world society.

My third critical point focuses on the somewhat apocalyptic tone of the Anthropocene narrative. Have we really reached the end? Is the whole of the planet's future from modernity onwards at the mercy of the humans now and hereafter? Or might there be a new *-cene* [Greek *cene* = recent, new] after the Anthropocene, and might there be other forces that affect our common future and our common earth?

Questions like these seem impossible to ask within the current narrative. Theologically, we must therefore state that it breaks with an essential understanding of eschatology. From a religious perspective, the future of the Creation must always remain open, for the Creator and for Creation's

own power of evolution. Time, as well as space and place, cannot simply be confined by humans in the cage of technical models. However, much computer monitoring is done in empirical scenarios; it is the bodily awareness and perception of our environment that remains significant for what we feed into the computers.¹⁴

Life as a gift cannot simply be turned into a scientific scenario, and it can definitely not be turned into a commodity to be managed and exchanged along the well-known paths of fetishising capitalism. The method of fetishising and commodifying all that exists has certainly proven successful in the history of capitalist forms of exchange ever since antiquity, but the so-called price is destruction, injustice, violence, and a movement of the planet towards an “un-inhabitable” earth for most creatures.¹⁵

The narrative of the Anthropocene therefore leads to a radically new thinking about the human condition of being alive. And it demands not only a new narrative but also a new understanding of visibility, as the production of images now moves into the centre of our understanding of the world and ourselves within it.¹⁶

From the perspective of the Abrahamic religions, with their belief in the world as a creation of the One, the challenge is deeply painful. How can one believe in a good Creator while his/her own creatures threaten the earth as a habitable place to live? “Is God angry?”¹⁷ at the humans, or does He/She still love them all and the poor most of all? How can one continue to believe in a good creation, and envision a *creatio continua* and *creatio futura*, the



Figure 10.5 J. M. W. Turner, *The Deluge*, 1805, oil paint on canvas, 142.9 × 235.6 cm

Source: Tate Britain, London, public domain: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turner-deluge.jpg>, accessed 16 October 2019

coming world, in such a situation? What will happen after the deluge, so masterly depicted by Turner [Fig. 5]?¹⁸ How is the image of God connected to the (scientifically designed) images of the world?

Delineating the spiritual pain so sharply should sufficiently convince us not simply to regard the anthropogenic impact on the earth as a question of environmental ethics, but to become aware that being alive in the Anthropocene implies a radically new challenge to reconstruct one's identity, world-view, and image of God. No more, no less.

Antidotes

My critical questions for the Anthropocene narrative should not be misunderstood. There is, of course, substantial value in a scientific consensus about the depth and scope of the human significance for the further course of the planet. Without such a general consensus, environmentalism can rarely develop its transformative strength. It is further important to acknowledge the variety and multivalence of the Anthropocene discourse.¹⁹ My point, nevertheless, is that the narrowness of some dominant voices in the present narrative must be overcome, and that faith communities and the environmental humanities seem to have a central role herein.

Among others, I can imagine four antidotes to be used in order to bridge the abyss of the narrative's "lack of power, history and ethics".²⁰

History and remembrance

Franz Mauelshagen and Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly state that the Anthropocene narrative affects our understanding of history in general.²¹ Once more, it reveals the clash between the cultures of science and the humanities in a reification of the past and future.

Historically, the idea of an overarching impact of humanity on the earth is not new at all. Vladimir Vernadsky coined in 1938 the notion of "noosphere", inspired by Teilhard de Chardin. Before him, Catholic geologist Antonio Stoppani argued in 1873 for a new geological period. Alexander von Humboldt's understanding of nature as a painting, *Naturgemälde*, and the earth's surface as a living face offers a further early holistic view of the earth affected by the human imprint [Fig. 6].²² While these early thinkers were able to integrate spiritual, human, and cultural dimensions into their fairly holistic approaches, contemporary earth scientists instead operate with quite a poor understanding of the human.²³

My first antidote, therefore, is to plead for a more complex historical understanding of the interaction of socio-cultural and natural processes, as it has been developed recently in the new discipline of climate history. In particular, the discourse about memory and remembrance offers here a much deeper understanding of the dynamics and diversity of continuities and changes in history.²⁴ Climatic change offers in such a view a radically



Figure 10.6 Friedrich Georg Weitsch, *Humboldt and Aime Bonpland in the valley of Tapia on the foot of the volcano Chimborazo*, 1810, oil on canvas, 100 × 71 cm

Source: Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin; public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Humboldt-Bonpland_Chimborazo.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

new *Erinnerungsraum* (space of remembrance).²⁵ The history of religions should also necessarily be included herein, as human ecology is intimately interconnected with religious practices, values, and worldviews. Images of the sacred impact directly on human thinking of and acting with and in nature. Secularist modern and late modern environmental practices are also driven by doctrinal forces, which again one can analyse by applying methods from cultural and religious studies.

Aesthetic wisdom

Another antidote regards the lack of self-critical thinking with regard to ethics. Much has been said and written about environmental ethics in the last 50 years, although unfortunately, not much has been applied in environmental politics. Here I would only like to point to one contribution from epistemology – the distinction between knowledge and wisdom.

Following Nicholas Maxwell,²⁶ science, as well as the humanities, is producing knowledge that is not simply the agglomeration of information into

a computer model, but a qualitative synthetic process of bringing together different kinds of observations and reflections. But how should one apply knowledge? And how should one select the preferable among the many insights?

Following Maxwell, wisdom is the art of reflecting on how one should use knowledge. Wisdom includes rational reflections and moralities, and it also integrates worldviews and values that can be anchored in a religious and/or cultural context. With regard to nature, wisdom and wonder are deeply interconnected.²⁷

According to Tim Ingold, it is the perception of our environment and the skills to become aware of what it means to be alive that are necessary to achieve meaningful negotiations about what we should or should not do. Liberation theology has, in a similar way, argued that seeing the poor represents a necessary presupposition for acting and thinking. The well-known circle “*Seeing-Thinking-Acting . . . and Seeing again*” has served as a central method for both pastoral and academic contextual theology, but it is in my view the third bridge, from “*Acting*” to “*Seeing (anew)*”, that has received far too little attention. Applied to the Anthropocene discourse, far more wisdom is therefore needed in evaluating the empirical insights of scientists, and a stronger aesthetic dimension is needed in perceiving and becoming aware of the suffering of the victims, both in nature and society – the “poor creatures”, so to speak.²⁸

Complexity of the whole

A third antidote regards complexity and holism. Certainly, the environmental sciences and especially climatology, which is a driving force within the Anthropocene narrative, interconnect a large variety of different empirical data, methods, and theories. Earth systems analysis represents in itself an enormous success of transdisciplinary research, and its results are impressively differentiated and clear.²⁹ Even if empirical observations are turned into artificial, human-made, computer simulations that are limited by engineering practices and thinking, one can without doubt rely on the conclusions, as these are constantly empirically reviewed and verified with regard to the ongoing process of change.

Nevertheless, human beings, local and regional populations, sociohistorical developments, and unexpected so-called irrational behaviours are not included to a satisfactory degree in the same complex and differentiated way as the scientists’ investigation of the atmosphere. Although climatology explicitly focuses on the anthropogenic impact, it seems to be fairly ignorant about the complexity of its cause, that is, the human, cultural, historical, and spiritual dimension of this impact.

In brief, the Anthropocene narrative deals with human impacts – but unfortunately, not much with humans. The feedback impacts of climatic change on human responses are not included in the scenarios, nor is the

complex diversity of human behaviour with regard to response to change adequately monitored. In the last IPCC reports, some ethical aspects have just started to be included, mainly due to the commitment of the economist Ottmar Edenhofer and others.³⁰

Furthermore, the concept of change in climate impact science seems philosophically to build on a rather limited and narrow understanding. Change is (as one can learn from Kandinsky's rhythmic composition) never simply a transfer from one state to another, but a multifaceted, hard-to-predict movement of variation – but that is another discussion (which one could approach, e.g. from becoming aware of the flux of weather with and beyond modern meteorology).³¹ Kandinsky's painting [Fig. 7] provides an intriguingly compound expression of motion, where colours are sounding with and against each other, and where shapes and surfaces are transmuting and metamorphosing in a rhythm of flows, standstills, and interactions: an excellent contrast to the streamlined simplifying concepts of change in scientific and media debates about climatic change.

Social psychologist Harald Welzer has rightly recently criticised environmental organisations and the committed political green parties for a fragmentation of the complex interconnectedness of environmental processes. Environmentalist politicians often operate in what he calls a “reductive culture”,³² with a kind of problematic illusion of the technocratic doability of



Figure 10.7 Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913, oil on canvas, 200 × 300 cm

Source: The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vassily_Kandinsky,_1913_-_Composition_7.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

everything, and pretend that there are easy solutions. Let us reduce the number of cars; let us eat less meat, increase solar energy, etc. Of course, we need not only an energy turn, but also a mobility turn, a food production turn, an urban planning turn, etc. But as long as political agendas of the day only focus on selected issues, they will never achieve the cultural revolution that is needed to avoid the earth turning into an uninhabitable place. For many regions, this turn is already in full swing, and climate and environmental conflicts and migration waves are accelerating. The call for repentance should therefore not be split up, but remain unified and comprehensive.

Conversion

To use a classic word from the Christian tradition to summarise Welzer's conclusion, what we need is conversion. Biblical Greek *metanoia* aims at the conversion of the mind, but it certainly also includes the conversion of the eye, the body, and the social modes of existence.

Especially in the Christian tradition, eschatology contributes to this ongoing social communication of imagined futures with a specific capacity to act: repentance and conversion. Both seem, if one follows the biblical sources, to have their place at the beginning of a believer's life in the eyes of God, as well as needing to be practised continuously in daily life, as everyday conversion. Leonard Cohen's lyrics can provoke us with this constant challenge: "When they said 'repent repent' / I wonder what they meant".³³

Reading the Gospels, the act of conversion is directly connected to a specific quality of time, in the present time of the early Christian believers, that is, the *kairos*, a time of challenge and conversion, connected to the cruelties and life-threatening social processes of the Empire. Matthew's "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2, NIV) is directly located in Mark's identification of the present time as *kairos*, a specifically challenging time of crisis as well as of future-shaping decision: "The time (*kairos*) has come" (Mark 1:15, NIV). The call to repentance is anchored in the Jewish faith, where it was central in the Hebrew Bible and especially in the prophetic tradition. Repentance was here anything but an individual affair – it was a prophetic call for the whole people, and a clear resistance to the fabrication of life- and faith-threatening idols.

A fourth antidote might be circumscribed as spiritual. Some theologians and representatives of faith traditions are arguing that religion in general offers salvation and solutions to problems, and that religious faith is necessary for transforming this world for the better. I am rather sceptical, as religions represent human practices – no more, no less – that can function constructively as well as destructively. Faith carries the same pros and cons as all other human practices, such as politics, culture, and economics, and can therefore be regarded neither as absolutely good nor for that matter absolutely bad (as many secularist voices like to preach). Life-enhancing liberating and pathological life-threatening forces, rather, can walk hand in

hand. In the tradition of Reformation theology, 500 years later, one can certainly wonder what it means in the context of the environmental challenge to be both a sinner and justified: *simul iustus et peccator*. Can Christian sin-talk be of any value herein, and how should one apply it as a force for conversion and liberation?³⁴

Nevertheless, faith is, due to its specific skills, highly fruitful for overcoming the Anthropocene narrative's danger of turning into one more imperialistic grand narrative of the universe.³⁵ "Faith" offers, in my view, a better technical term than "religion" or "spirituality", as it does not pretend that religion is a clearly separated and isolated social subsystem, or that there is a separation of the spiritual from the bodily being alive. Faith in the biblical sense implies vision, belief, hope, trust, and truthfulness, and it manifests as a skill to relate and communicate. It departs from the existence of the sacred, whether that be a God, spirits, or an inspirited nature. What we regard as sacred impacts on our feelings, perception, thoughts, and acts.

Much could be said about the diverse contributions of faith communities and spiritual wisdom with regard to the environmental challenge, and here I will only refer to some recently published standard works, such as Ernst Conradie, Willis Jenkins, John Hart, Laura Hobgood, and Whitney Bauman, and our Forum's³⁶ volume on "Religion in the Anthropocene".³⁷ The new transdisciplinary research field of the environmental humanities is also producing a wide range of insights.

Different theological approaches to the debate about the Anthropocene are emerging at present. While some regard the Anthropocene as "a grammatised *context*" with high relevance for doing public theology,³⁸ others are emphasising the ethical dimension. Eschatology offers, without doubt, certain tools for encountering the previously discussed lackings of the narrative. While Marion Grau, for example, develops a petro-eschatology to overcome the uninhibited use of fossil energy, I have designed a spatial eschatology whereby the encounter with the life-giving Spirit in the topographies of social and environmental suffering moves into the spotlight.³⁹ Assisted by such a spatial eschatology, one can also overcome the narrow and apocalyptic timeline of the Anthropocene narrative, and envision the Ecocene beyond the Anthropocene, or better the Ecocene that is growing within the Anthropocene.

Another shared future: towards the Ecocene

My strongest objection to the Anthropocene narrative lies in the question of how we imagine what we might meet *beyond* the Anthropocene. Is there space to imagine a new geological era beyond the Anthropocene? Maybe the "Ecocene", where human and other life forms cohabit on earth in fully just and peaceful entanglements?⁴⁰ Or rather an era of apocalypse where humans eradicate themselves from the planet, followed by an era of new genesis

where evolution searches for new paths without human intervention? Or a “post-technocene” where the fetishisation of money and machines has been overcome and technical spaces have turned into lived spaces?⁴¹

Is there any thought about the future in the narrative of the Anthropocene, or rather a total absence of utopia? While religions always operate more or less strongly with images of the future, and some explicitly develop so-called eschatologies, the narrative of the Anthropocene, as far as it is negotiated at present in the Anthropocene Working Group, seems to lack not only self-critical skills with regard to power, history, and ethics, but also the skill to imagine a future beyond the present. How could it thereby make politically evident its social and environmental relevance?

In my view, the notion of Ecocene offers the most constructive term for a synthetic vision of an open shared future.⁴² While terms like “capitalocene” or “post-technocene” operate with a limited focus, the notion of Ecocene can include entangled dimensions and envision an epoch in which the collective wisdom and interactions of all living beings in one common earth system are at the core.

The term is in the air, so to speak, and has most recently entered the discourse not so much in science but in other spheres such as architecture, design theory, and theology. It refers to a geological period beyond the Anthropocene, or rather a slow transformation from the one into the other, where the whole of the ecological sphere embraces and integrates the human. Design theorist Rachel Armstrong states that “there is no advantage to us to bring the Anthropocene into the future. . . . The myth of the Anthropocene does not help us . . . we must re-imagine our world and enable the Ecocene”.⁴³

For biologist Robert Steiner, it is “inevitable that the current Anthropocene era will evolve into an ecologically sustainable era – which can be called the ‘Ecocene’. The current trajectory of environmental and social decline cannot continue much longer”.⁴⁴ Consequently, he focuses on the question of what comes beyond, as

indeed, the Anthropocene will be gone in the blink of geologic time. The real question is: what will be left of the biosphere at the dawn of the Ecocene, e.g. what species, including *Homo sapiens*, will survive the Anthropocene evolutionary bottleneck?⁴⁵

As we have seen, the contemporary discussion about the Anthropocene suffers from a fatal lack of historical consciousness and a lack of including the future, or better different futures, in its narrative. While scientists at present mainly debate about the beginning of the so-called Great Transformation, and its main reasons and driving forces, their discussion of the future remains quite general. While some imagine it as an apocalypse and cosmic disaster, others regard it as a promising new arena for socio-engineering. The challenge in contrast is not to fall into either of these gaps,

but to imagine and negotiate our shared future,⁴⁶ a just and sustainable future that can be shared equally by all creatures.

It is probably this lack of a qualified reflection on potential sustainable and unsustainable futures that accelerates the triumphalist danger of celebrating this new period as a new period of human geo-management. This lack also seems to be part of a wider cultural shift whereby our ways of imaging the future (and the past) are undergoing a radical shift in the modern time regime.⁴⁷

Such an interpretation immediately produces a deep conflict with faith, as the future in the Christian tradition must remain always open for the Creator and Liberator to act in. According to Moltmann, God encounters His/Her creation from the future, and I would add also from the past. Time and history, as well as space and place, always remain transparent for the Triune.

The Christian creed summarises this belief in its words about the new world (aeon) to come, and this aeon can scarcely refer to today's Anthropocene, a time of human mismanagement and an uninhabitable place for humans to live in as God's images.

While apocalyptic thinking imagines the end as a future of chaos and disaster, and manipulates and terrifies its audience, eschatology operates with an integrated present and future dimension. It is not simply the interconnection of the now and then, but also develops, as Vitor Westhelle and I have recently shown, as a spatial theory. The placial encounter with the God of the Here and There and the God of the Now and Then transforms the places in need of liberation. Climatic change represents such a place as it makes it necessary to encounter the life-giving Triune Spirit who takes place both now and then, and both here and there. Faith needs to be reconstructed, faith in the Spirit hovering over the vibrating waters of chaos in the beginning and the Spirit as the Giver of Life and as the source of the new creation to come.

Applying such a spatial and liberative eschatology to the narrative of the Anthropocene, it is impossible to imagine the future as a simple age of the humans. "Eschatology as imagining the end"⁴⁸ must necessarily stretch beyond the life-threatening anthropogenic impact that the rich nations have executed in the great transformation. Hope needs to flourish so that another age might appear.

In my view, such a vision of the Ecocene fits perfectly with the biblical vision of a *creatio continua* that flows into a *creatio futura*; that is, the (ongoing) creation of the new heavens and new earth. Biblical imaginaries for such an Ecocene are many: the heavenly Jerusalem as a truly eco-urban life sphere, peaceful pastoral grazing of wild and other animals in the meadows, the pastoral vision of God as good shepherd and the people and creatures as a herd in a harmonious ecology, or the thanksgiving ritual after the flood and climate change disasters when the bow in the sky turns from a symbol of war to a colourful sign of peace between all created beings.

Ethically, theologians have argued from such a vision for a future-oriented human ethics of responsibility, following Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁴⁹ Personally, I would prefer a discourse ethic model to a virtue or responsibility model, but that could be worked out later.⁵⁰

In short, it is the vision of another period beyond the Anthropocene that allows a deepening and widening of the ambiguous Anthropocene narrative and a transformation into another period when humans are no longer masters and rulers of Creation, but subjects of Creation, no longer shepherds but sheep in a flock, no longer alleged givers but true receivers of life.

To sum up, one of many substantial critical and constructive contributions to transforming the narrative of the Anthropocene is to nurture hope and to establish practices that manifest this hope for the Ecocene. It envisions earth as a home where justice, synergy, and peace can flourish, a world such as in Giovanni Bellini's Renaissance paintings [Fig. 8 and 9] that embraces most of the movements in God's history of salvation: the earth as a home where the life-giving Spirit is taking place.



Figure 10.8 Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Jerome Reading in the Wilderness* (detail), 1505, oil

Source: public domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni_Bellini_St_Jerome_Reading_in_the_Countryside.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019



Figure 10.9 Giovanni Bellini, *Sacred Allegory*, circa 1490, oil

Source: public domain; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacred_Allegory_by_Giovanni_Bellini.jpg, accessed 16 October 2019

God amidst popular problems

Finally, as this text was originally written for the 25th birthday celebrations of the Swedish history of contextual theology, I would like to conclude with a short gift in the form of a new definition of contextual theology. Alluding to John B. Cobb Jr., theology is reflecting on what matters for Christians,⁵¹ and alluding to Leonard Cohen, popular problems are what we all commonly struggle with: the problems of the people.⁵² Contextual theology therefore is simply to reflect encountering the Triune God in the midst of what matters among people's popular problems (sic!). Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God is not found where the church is, but the church must move to the places where God acts; the church is only church in its "being-for-others".⁵³ Lived spaces of anthropogenic climate change are such places.

Notes

- * This text offers a revised version of my keynote address at the conference "Liberating Theology – Institute of Contextual Theology in Lund 25 years", Lund, November 24, 2017. It also underlies a more extensive elaboration of the entanglement of Anthropocenic and atmospheric thinking in my monograph Sigurd Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), Chapter 8.

- 1 For the present state of the debate and the understanding of “the Anthropocene”, see Colin N. Waters, Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Summerhayes, Anthony D. Barnosky, Clément Poirier, Agnieszka Gałuszka, Alejandro Cearreta, Matt Edgeworth, Erle C. Ellis, Michael Ellis, Catherine Jeandel, Reinhold Leinfelder, J. R. McNeill, Daniel deB. Richter, Will Steffen, James Syvitski, Davor Vidas, Michael Wagreich, Mark Williams, An Zhisheng, Jacques Grinevald, Eric Odada, Naomi Oreskes, and Alexander P. Wolfe, “The Anthropocene is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene,” *Science* 351 (2016): aad2622, doi:10.1126/science.aad2622.
- 2 Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 842–67, 842, doi:10.1098/rsta.2010.0327.
- 3 Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, Anthony D. Barnosky, Andrés García, Robert M. Pringle, and Todd M. Palmer, “Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction,” *Science Advances* 1, no. 5 (June 19, 2015): e1400253, doi:10.1126/sciadv.1400253.
- 4 Cf. Bonneuil’s description of four different Anthropocene narratives at work at present and Pearson’s emphasis on moving the discourse from the age’s beginning to the “possibility of endings” (9), from the apocalyptic to the eschatological. Christophe Bonneuil, “The Geological Turn: Narratives of the Anthropocene,” in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, eds. Clive Hamilton, François Gemenne, and Christophe Bonneuil (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 18–23. Clive Pearson, “Is It Too Late? Doing Theology in the Anthropocene,” public lecture at the University of Otago, December 17, 2015, accessed November 19, 2017, www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/otago419801.pdf.
- 5 Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, eds., *Religion in the Anthropocene* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017).
- 6 Earth Charter Commission 2000, *The Earth Charter*, www.earthcharterinaction.org, May 25, 2015.
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of the criticism, see Sigurd Bergmann, “Is There a Future in the Age of Humans? A Critical Eye on the Narrative of the Anthropocene,” Consortium for the Study of Religion, Ethics, and Society Forum, Spring 2016, Indiana University, accessed November 19, 2017, www.iu.edu/~csres/csres_archive_14Dec2016/www/forum.php#Bergmann.
- 8 Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, “The Future of Religion in the Anthropocene Era,” in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017), 1–15, 14.
- 9 Sverker Sörlin, *Antropocen: En essä om människans tidsålder* (Stockholm: Weyler 2017), 209.
- 10 For a detailed theological discussion of the “commons”, see Catherine Keller, Elias Ortega-Aponte, and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, eds., *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 11 An increasing number of earth scientists, however, seem to be becoming aware of this, and some are engaging in more holistic approaches; see for example the LOOPS activity, www.pik-potsdam.de/research/projects/activities/copan/loops, and its Special Issue, www.earth-syst-dynam.net/special_issue18.html, November 27, 2019. For a reflection on “deeper human dimensions”, including religious ones, see Dieter Gerten et al.’s thought-provoking and forward-looking argument: Dieter Gerten, Martin Schönfeld, and Bernhard Schauburger, “On Deeper Human Dimensions in Earth System Analysis and Modelling,” *Earth System Dynamics* 9 (2018): 849–63, <https://doi.org/10.5194/esd-9-849-2018>.

- 12 Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69, 64.
- 13 For a theological exploration of social and environmental justice, see Rasmussen's elaboration of "creation justice". Larry L. Rasmussen, "From Social Justice to Creation Justice in the Anthropocene," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 239–55.
- 14 Cf. Karolina Sobecka, "The Atmospheric Turn," in *Arts and Religion Responding to the Environment: Exploring Nature's Texture*, eds. Sigurd Bergmann and Forrest Clingerman (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 43–58.
- 15 Cf. the widely distributed and debated article by David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth: Famine, Economic Collapse, a Sun That Cooks Us: What Climate Change Could Wreak – Sooner Than You Think," *New York Magazine*, July 9, 2017, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>.
- 16 Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 131–42.
- 17 Rolita Machila, "Why Are Earth and God Angry?" *Thinking It Over* 20 (August 2008), pamphlet published by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTS-Thinking-20.pdf.
- 18 For a detailed interpretation of this and other works of Turner, see the chapter "Inventing Weather: Conveying the Mysteries of Alteration in J. M. W. Turner's Painting" in Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*.
- 19 Maria Antonaccio, "De-moralizing and Re-moralizing the Anthropocene," in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017), 121–37, 128.
- 20 Celia E. Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Markus Vogt, "The Future of Religion in the Anthropocene Era," in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al., 1–15, 2.
- 21 Franz Mauelshagen, "Redefining Historical Climatology in the Anthropocene," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 2 (2014): 171–204, 172. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Verändert der Klimawandel die Geschichtsschreibung?" *Transit. Europäische Revue* 41 (2011): 143–63.
- 22 Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, "Religion at Work within Climatic Change: Eight Perceptions about Its Where and How," in *Religion in the Anthropocene*, eds. Deane-Drummond et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock/Cascade, 2017), 67–84.
- 23 Cf. for example the excellently differentiated analysis of the human signature on earth's history by Waters et al., where "humans" and "humanity" throughout the whole investigation are simply treated in the singular and in general, probably due to the interest in geology and earth system analysis and the fact that the methods used are exclusively for large-scale exploration.
- 24 Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: C. H. Beck, 1999); Jan Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Zehn Studien* (München: Beck, 2000/2006); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory) (1989): 7–24.
- 25 One might therefore construct a new analytical method for exploring trans-disciplinarily – with combined methods from climate impact science, geography, and environmental humanities – what I have called the "lived spaces of climatic change", that is, the specifically changing environments where processes

- of anthropogenic external impacts and local human adaptations, which again produce new kinds of impacts, can be studied in one common “Funktionskreis”. S. Bergmann, “Religion in Climatic Change” (unpublished application to the ERC, March 2011).
- 26 Nicholas Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution in the Aims and Methods of Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Nicholas Maxwell, “Can Scientific Method Help Us Create a Wiser World?” in *Practical Wisdom in the Age of Technology: Insights, Issues and Questions for a New Millennium*, eds. N. Dalal, A. Intezari, and M. Heitz (London: Gower, 2016), 147–61.
 - 27 Cf. Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006).
 - 28 On “the poor among other creatures” (*die armen Naturen*), see Sigurd Bergmann, *Geist, der Natur befreit: Die trinitarische Kosmologie Gregors von Nazianz im Horizont einer ökologischen Theologie der Befreiung* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995), 20 (Russian edition, Arkhangelsk, 1999; revised English edition *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 2).
 - 29 Cf. <http://ipcc.ch/>, accessed February 19, 2020.
 - 30 Cf. Ottmar Edenhofer and Michael Jakob, *Klimapolitik: Ziele, Konflikte, Lösungen* (München: C. H. Beck, 2017), 118–23.
 - 31 Cf. Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*.
 - 32 Harald Welzer, *Selbst Denken: Eine Anleitung zum Widerstand*, 7th ed. (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2016), 133.
 - 33 Leonard Cohen, *The Future*, Columbia 472498 2, 1992, compact disc.
 - 34 For a deeper exploration of such questions, see Ernst M. Conradie, *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction* (London: Lexington Books, 2017).
 - 35 The Anthropocene narrative might also offer an analogy to some of the negative dimensions of the so-called New Cosmology and (grand) Story of the Universe as it has been critically investigated. Cf. Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
 - 36 www.religion-environment.com/, accessed February 19, 2020.
 - 37 Ernst Conradie, S. Bergmann, C. E. Deane-Drummond, and D. Edwards, eds., *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); John Hart, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017); Laura Hobgood and Whitney Bauman, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Nature* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).
 - 38 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Doing Public Theology in the Anthropocene Towards Life-Creating Theology,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 3 (July 2015): a1443, doi:10.4102/ve.v36i3.1443. While Meylahn pleads for us “to seek God in the text, or rather as part of the grammatisation” (italics in original) and to do contextual theology about God in the Anthropocene (rather than about a God beyond), my approach here implies both doing this and encountering God in the not-yet-seen future and space beyond the age of the humans.
 - 39 Marion Grau, “The Revelations of Global Climate Change: A Petro-Theology,” in *Eschatology as Imagining the End: Faith between Hope and Despair*, ed. Sigurd Bergmann (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
 - 40 The notion of “Ecocene” might enhance positive visions of the future and include entangled dimensions, envisioning “an epoch in which not one single

- species determines the future of the Earth but the collective wisdom and interactions of all species and the bio- and geophysical world". Arjen E. J. Wals, Joseph Weakland, and Peter Blaze Corcoran, "Preparing for the Ecocene: Envisioning Futures for Environmental and Sustainability Education," *Japanese Journal of Environmental Education* 26, no. 4 (2017): 71–76, 72.
- 41 For the notion of "technocene", see Alf Hornborg, "The Political Ecology of the Technocene: Uncovering Ecologically Unequal Exchange in the World-System," in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, eds. C. Hamilton, C. Bonneuil, and F. Gemenne (London: Routledge, 2015), 57–69. For the notion of "technical space", see Sigurd Bergmann and Tore Sager, eds., *The Ethics of Mobilities: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 42 For a more extensive discussion of the Ecocene concept, I refer to my final chapter "Atmosphere and Anthropocene" in Bergmann, *Weather, Religion, and Climate Change*. Cf. also Keller, who has recently started to reflect on the Ecocene as "a time of agonized attention to the interdependence of humans with the planetary plenum of nonhumans". Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 161.
- 43 Rachel Armstrong, "Architecture for the Ecocene," *Architecture Ukraine*, July 31, 2015, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://architectureukraine.org/rachel-armstrong-architecture-for-the-ecocene/>. Cf. Joanna Boehnert, *Design, Ecology, Politics: Towards the Ecocene* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018). Cf. Joanna Boehnert, "Naming the Epoch: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Ecocene," *EcoLabs: Design, Ecology, Politics* blog, May 22, 2016, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://ecolabsblog.com/2016/05/22/naming-the-epoch-anthropocene-capitalocene-ecocene/>.
- 44 Robert Steiner, "From Anthropocene To Ecocene By 2050?" *Huffington Post*, October 23, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/from-anthropocene-to-ecocene-by-2050_us_59e7b66ce4b0e60c4aa3678c.
- 45 Ibid. Thomas Berry had earlier coined the term *ecozoic era* to overcome anthropocentrism, but the notion of an Ecocene includes not only living beings, but all planetary forms.
- 46 On the significance of "shared future" in the context of "making oneself at home in the future", see Scott and Rodwell in their introductory chapter "Dialogues of Place and Belonging," in *At Home in the Future: Place and Belonging in a Changing Europe*, eds. John Rodwell and Peter Manley Scott, *Studies in Religion and the Environment* 11 (Berlin: LIT 2016), 9.
- 47 Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2013), 247.
- 48 Cf. Bergmann, ed., *Eschatology as Imagining the End*.
- 49 Robert Vosloo, "Time Out of Joint and Future-Oriented Memory: Engaging Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Search for a Way to Deal Responsibly with the Ghosts of the Past," *Religions* 8, no. 3 (2017): 42, doi:10.3390/rel8030042.
- 50 For an environmental ethic in the frame of discourse ethics see Konrad Ott, *Umweltethik zur Einführung*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Junius, 2014); and for a differentiated theological approach to such an environmental discourse ethics, see Christof Hardmeier and Konrad Ott, *Naturethik und biblische Schöpfungserzählung: Ein diskurstheoretischer und narrativ-hermeneutischer Brückenschlag [Nature Ethics and Biblical Creation Story: Bridging the Gap through Discourse Theory and Narrative Hermeneutics]* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2015). For a discussion of the pros and cons in an environmental ethics of responsibility vs. an ecological discourse ethics, see Sigurd Bergmann, "Diskursiv bioetik – für

offrens skull,” in *Miljöetik – för ett samhälle på människans och naturens villkor*, eds. Uno Svedin and Anne-Marie Thunberg (FRN Rapport 94:2) (Stockholm: Miljödepartementet/Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1994), 68–89 [“Diskursive Bioetik – um der Opfer willen,” in S. Bergmann, *Geist, der lebendig macht: Lavierungen zur ökologischen Befreiungstheologie* (Frankfurt/M.: IKO, 1997)]. An environmental discourse ethics and an ethics of responsibility need not, of course, contradict each other; both could be connected in a statement that might follow Haber, Held and Vogt’s plea for a new culture of responsibility (“eine neue Kultur der Verantwortung,” p. 13) that necessarily includes the qualities of a non-violent dialogue as suggested in discourse ethics. Wolfgang Haber, Martin Held, and Markus Vogt, eds., *Die Welt im Anthropozän: Erkundungen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ökologie und Humanität* (München: oekom, 2016).

- 51 Cobb describes theology as “Christian reflection over important matters”. John B. Cobb, Jr., “The Role of Theology of Nature in the Church,” in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, eds. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 261–72, 262.
- 52 Leonard Cohen launched the album *Popular Problems* on his 70th birthday. Leonard Cohen, *Popular Problems*, Columbia 88875014292, 2014.
- 53 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Die Kirche ist nur Kirche, wenn sie für andere da ist,” in *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, eds. Christian Gremmels et al., DBW, vol. 8 (München: Random House, 2011), 560.

11 Theology of “eco-anxiety” as liberating contextual theology

Panu Pihkala

Introduction

I have an ever-worsening anxiety and terror of all this, the full destruction which seems inevitable. I am paralysed. What can I say to my child, when I have to? She's so small, she doesn't yet know anything about this, but it feels like the end can be so near that she will still be small when all this breaks down. And how will it happen, how fast? How long do I have to wait for the end after the moment when nobody can escape the facts? It feels so strange to live through these days which have been camouflaged to look like normal, when there is nothing which one could expect – except that there would come as many camouflaged days as possible.

– a Finnish person who suffers from eco-anxiety,
translation by the author¹

In a 2012 volume on *Religion and Climate Change*, the editors Dieter Ger-
ten and Sigurd Bergmann stated,

How people can cope with large-scale suffering and, ultimately, death as a consequence of climate change (due to short-term extreme events such as floods and gradual processes such as rising sea levels or repeated droughts) is a largely unexplored domain of research.²

In the 2010s, these impacts, vulnerabilities, and methods of coping – both adaptive and maladaptive – have been studied in psychological and psycho-social research.³ A major part of the psychological impact is “eco-anxiety”: distress, worry, fears, and anxieties generated by the changing ecological conditions and the inadequacy of human reactions in mitigation and adaptation.⁴

Eco-anxiety has been defined as “a chronic fear of environmental doom”⁵ or “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse”.⁶ On my reading, the term can be used with two interlinked meanings. First, it can refer generally to difficult emotions and mental states related to the environmental crisis; second, it can be used

to refer to more specific anxiety states. Most scholars use the term in the first sense. Many different emotions, if they become repressed, can cause anxiety-like symptoms. I use here the terms “difficult emotions” and “dark emotions” instead of “negative emotions” because in industrialised societies there are problems related to over-emphasising the value of “positive” emotions at the expense of the “negative” ones.⁷ In fact, this problematic often worsens eco-anxiety, because grief and anxiety are simply labelled as negative and not socially supported.

As I will discuss in more depth following, eco-anxiety is related both to practical situations and to deep existential questions. The character of eco-anxiety as existential anxiety makes it very closely tied to deep spiritual, religious, and theological questions. People face troubling questions about the meaning of life on a planet whose ecosystems seem to be heading for one disaster after another. The ancient, disturbing, and elementary questions related to death and finitude are close at hand, but they are often repressed or escaped from. In industrialised countries, people feel difficult feelings of guilt and even shame because of the ways in which their lifestyle and their societies are contributing to the damage done. Many people feel sorrow because of the many losses involved: for humans, for other animals, for places and ecosystems. The nature of ecological grief as disenfranchised grief often makes eco-anxiety worse.

As the quote at the beginning of the chapter shows, people can have devastating feelings of anxiety, alienation, and despair. This is why alleviation of eco-anxiety can be profoundly liberating. There is always a danger that this alleviation will become the kind of therapy which does not help to alleviate social and ecological problems, but this is a danger that can be avoided. And on the other hand, any action against ecological damage or any growth in resilience is very difficult if people are struck down by depression and anxiety. There is a profound need to practise ways of living with anxiety and ambivalence, so that hope and resilience can be strengthened. The mission of liberating people from paralysing eco-anxiety aims to increase psychological wellbeing and resilience, but this also results in providing more resources for empowerment and socio-ethical action.

In this chapter, I construct a model of theology of eco-anxiety as contextual theology done by people who are affected by the anguish related to the environmental crisis and by those people who want to help them, out of compassion or a sense of duty. There can be various forms of theologies of eco-anxiety; I will focus especially on one, Finland-based, form of it. The Finnish version, in whose development I have personally strongly taken part, is in several ways quite extensive compared to many other countries and contexts at the moment. However, I think it highly likely that more forms of theology of eco-anxiety will be generated in the near future. It is my hope that the Finnish version might offer some resources for creative theological work for others, if and when they wish to develop their own versions of such contextual theology.

There are several levels of contexts here. A wider “context” for theologies of eco-anxiety, as well as for ecotheologies in general, is the global environmental crisis with all its local implications. I write “context” here in quotation marks, since this is a rather special context: it touches practically everyone in the world. Ecosystems around the world have been damaged, many of the so-called planetary boundaries are either exceeded or in danger of being exceeded, and climate change is causing unstable weather worldwide.⁸

However, even though the ecological crisis in some way touches everyone, at the present moment there are vast differences in the levels of impact and vulnerability that people face. Often the poorest people suffer the most from the ecological crisis because they do not have as many resources to react to the problems or try to prevent them. There are vast structural injustices in relation to the ecological crisis and climate change, against which there are growing movements of “eco-justice” and climate justice.⁹

The poorest and the most vulnerable also suffer most heavily from the psychological impacts of environmental problems – including eco-anxiety. Thus, the struggle for eco-justice and climate justice is also a struggle for more psychic and psychosocial resilience. The task of liberation has both physical and psychological aspects: people should be liberated from both oppressive social structures and oppressive forms of eco-anxiety.

In this chapter, I discuss eco-anxiety first and foremost as related to those people who do not yet suffer heavily from the physical impacts of environmental problems. There is deep anxiety among those who do, but their situation is somewhat different. For example, despite certain similarities, it is a different matter to leave your homeland as a climate refugee and to experience psychological turmoil in a European country because of climate change.

I am myself a European and my proposal for a theology of eco-anxiety is related to people close to me: this is one strand of explicit contextual theology, done by a certain group of people in a certain context. In this chapter, I will give an introduction to the phenomenon of eco-anxiety and discuss various proposals that have been made in relation to it worldwide, but the final and constructive part of my text is directed most of all to people in industrialised countries. To give one example: there is ecological grief in both of these general contexts – those who already suffer more and those who as yet suffer less – but the grief is more intense in the first case and more complicated or vague in the second case. Grief rituals and public recognition help in both cases, but the nature of the rituals is different, because the grief itself is of a somewhat different form.

The structure of the chapter runs as follows. First, I will provide an introduction to the phenomenon of eco-anxiety and the ways in which it can be alleviated. This is closely related to questions of hope and meaningfulness. Second, I will discuss key proposals and initiatives which have been made to deal with eco-anxiety. The work of the Buddhist activist and scholar Joanna

Macy is of special note here, but I will also discuss perspectives from Christian theologies. Third, I will present my own constructive account of what a contextual theology of eco-anxiety can be like, drawing from my experiences in conducting such a praxis in Finland.

Eco-anxiety, meaningfulness, and hope

Eco-anxiety, denial, and social tensions

Eco-anxiety is anxiety which is generated in a significant manner by the ecological crisis. It is often intertwined with other anxieties and life issues, which sometimes makes it difficult to separate eco-anxiety from other anxieties. For example, a major part of eco-anxiety is so-called climate anxiety, anxiety due to climate change.¹⁰ And since climate change affects practically everything, there is an element of climate anxiety in many ordinary anxieties. I will mention two common examples from the Nordic countries. First, many people are hesitant about which profession they should pursue, if climate change is going to change societies in a radical way in the future. Second, many young people feel anxiety about the idea of trying to have children, since the fears related to future are so strong. In both of these cases, there are other factors which also have a role, but still the ecological crisis is having a clear effect.¹¹

Eco-anxiety as a term surfaced around the year 2008 in several media stories. Prominent users and developers of the term have been the Australian scholar and activist Glenn Albrecht, who has invented several names for “earth emotions”,¹² and social psychologists.¹³ Cossman provides a short history of the use of the term before 2013 and discusses the ways in which participatory social and environmental action can at the same time be a form of “anxiety governance”.¹⁴

Since a landmark 2017 report¹⁵ about the mental health impacts of climate change, there has been growing public discussion about eco-anxiety.¹⁶ The raising of global consciousness about the ecological crisis and climate change has inevitably had an effect on the fact that more and more people feel a certain connection with the terms eco-anxiety and climate anxiety.

However, the discourses are very different in various parts of the world and in various parts of societies. In some countries, such as Sweden and Finland, there has been much public discussion about these anxieties, especially since certain extreme weather events in 2018 and the ensuing publication of the alarming climate change report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in October the same year.¹⁷ In some other countries, there is not yet much public discussion about these dimensions, or the discussion is strongly characterised by conflicts and tensions. Such is the case, for example, in Australia, where the physical and mental impacts of climate change are already severe. In the Australian discussion, there is both strong

climate change denial (or disavowal) and pioneering initiatives to recognise and alleviate eco-anxiety.¹⁸

The psychosocial dynamics related to denial and distancing are closely tied to the phenomenon of eco-anxiety. The massive ecological crisis is by its nature anxiety-provoking. Understandably but tragically, people wish to avoid such disturbing thoughts and emotions. Denial and distancing are psychological ways to keep the menacing ecological crisis further away. Denial has many forms, of which literal denial, such as strong climate change denialism, is only one part. Disavowal is much more common and probably more dangerous, since it allows people to partly admit the problem and still carry on business as usual.¹⁹ Denial and distancing can be called “maladaptive coping” or defences, depending on which psychological theories one draws from.²⁰ It has been noted that there are socially organised mechanisms of denial in relation to the ecological crisis, which often makes it difficult to breach the silence around these issues.²¹ The result can be a vicious circle whereby (partly repressed) anxiety breeds silence and silence breeds more anxiety.

The symptoms of eco-anxiety include restlessness, deep despair and depression, and psychosomatic symptoms such as sleep disturbance.²² Anxiety can lead to “eco-paralysis”,²³ a frozen state when action becomes stalled. At its worst, eco-anxiety can lead to destructive behaviour.²⁴ However, it should be emphasised that eco-anxiety is primarily a sensitive reaction to the troubling state of the planet’s ecosystems. If the symptoms are severe and if eco-anxiety is not recognised, it can be a serious problem, but basically, eco-anxiety is a healthy reaction which tells of the need to adapt and mitigate.²⁵ This message is especially important because those who feel eco-anxiety, such as young people, are often ridiculed by those who practise cynicism or denial (such as many of the so-called climate sceptics).²⁶ As a result, many people who feel eco-anxiety have often felt that they have somehow failed if they cannot stand the condition of the world. This is oppression and must be challenged.

Eco-anxiety as both existential anxiety and practical anxiety

I propose that eco-anxiety can be best understood by characterising it both as existential anxiety and as related to practical situations. Anxiety scholar and philosopher Charlie Kurth recently (2018) proposed a model of anxiety as a biocognitive emotion. Kurth emphasises that anxiety is often a very useful emotion: it helps individuals to recognise that a certain situation needs attention, and it generates vigilance which helps them to perform well in that situation. Kurth divides anxiety into three types: “environmental anxiety”, “punishment anxiety”, and “practical anxiety”. He does not discuss ecological problems, per se: his “environmental anxiety” means anxiety about any perceived potential physical danger.²⁷ However, there are ecological

situations of this kind, for example, when the potential danger comes from a direct ecological problem such as a toxic spill.

In fact, all three types of anxiety as categorised by Kurth can be applied in the context of ecological problems and eco-anxiety. Punishment anxiety is related to “the possibility of receiving negative evaluations or sanctions from others”, while practical anxiety is “anxiety about the correct or appropriate thing to do”.²⁸ Eco-anxiety has a social dimension: many people feel anxiety about their practical choices as regards environmental issues. They fear embarrassment in front of others if they behave against the social rules of their group or of the wider community. Sociologists and other scholars have studied the social dimensions of environmental behaviour,²⁹ but more work is needed in order to integrate the depth of eco-anxiety dynamics into these studies. In different situations, both guilt and pride can motivate people into sustainable action.

Kurth’s term “practical anxiety” can be used to capture the practical, and ethically and psychologically necessary, dimension of eco-anxiety. As an emotion, anxiety guides people to act in more constructive ways. The problem is not anxiety itself, but the cases when there is too much or too little anxiety.

Kurth discusses existential anxiety only briefly, but I regard it as essential to eco-anxiety. Philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich’s model of existential anxiety can be applied into eco-anxiety:

- 1 Anxiety about fate and death.
- 2 Anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness.
- 3 Anxiety about guilt and condemnation.³⁰

In small-group work within a therapeutic and safe setting, it has been noted that environmentally worried people bring up “existential fears about impermanence, death and non-existence”.³¹ I have noticed this also in my own work as a leader of workshops which provide a safe space for sharing deep thoughts and emotions related to the ecological crisis. The strong feelings of guilt have been noted in many studies; shame has been much less studied and further research on “eco-shame” would be very important, since there are strong hints of its significant existence.³² The concerns about the significance or meaning of life, on the one hand, are deep existential questions on their own, but on the other hand, they are also closely linked with some often-discussed problems related to environmental behaviour. Individuals often believe that their actions do not have any significance in the face of global environmental problems. It is easy to feel powerless, helpless, and insignificant.³³

Tillich thought that death anxiety is a kind of basic anxiety which has connections to all other anxieties.³⁴ All human life, all creature life, takes place within the limits of mortality. The connections between death anxiety and eco-anxiety have been less studied, but the so-called Terror Management

Theory has been applied to this point. It has been shown that the ecological crisis often reminds people of death or the possibility of death, which can cause people to utilise primitive defences against such messages and situations.³⁵ Because of this, "education in mortality", or death education, can be a profound way to help people to face the ecological crisis. Scholars of environmental education have only recently started to probe this important question.³⁶ As I will discuss following, this is an area in which the religious communities, with their long experience of encountering mortality, have many possibilities.

Closely related to eco-anxiety is ecological grief: sorrow because of losses related to ecological problems. Ecological grief, sometimes called environmental grief, has recently become a field of study of its own.³⁷ Unprocessed grief often transforms into anxiety. Thus, in order to enable people to live with eco-anxiety without being overcome by its negative effects, there have to be opportunities and resources for encountering (ecological) grief. This is yet another area where religious communities have long-term general experience, which now needs to be explicitly adapted into ways of dealing with eco-anxiety and ecological grief.³⁸ As Clinebell has already observed, mourning practices connected to natural environments and ecological themes help with both eco-anxiety and general death anxiety.³⁹

Empowerment, meaning-making and hope

Many people have felt that it is more efficient to approach issues through positivity and by emphasising things other than difficult emotions and anxiety. Would it not be better to be more positive and to stress that the problems can be solved? This debate between optimism and "doom-saying" has been underway for a long time in environmental communication and philosophy.⁴⁰

On one hand, I agree on the importance of empowerment and a sense of efficacy, but on the other hand, I strongly emphasise the need to encounter dark and difficult emotions. People have them already: we cannot avoid anxiety simply by ignoring its existence. Silence about difficult emotions causes much distress for many people.⁴¹ Therefore, the way forward towards more empowerment and efficacy goes through the terrain of the dark emotions. Emotions are part of life and while there can be movement from, for example, (ecological) trauma to posttraumatic growth, the challenge of living with dark emotions is lifelong. It is possible to move forward from paralysing eco-anxiety, but at least milder forms of eco-anxiety will continue to manifest themselves.⁴²

This is even more evident because the ecological problems seem to grow rapidly. There is careful scholarly work which shows the tendencies among many scientists, not to mention politicians, to underestimate the risks related to climate change and other ecological problems.⁴³ The current scientific evidence from around the world shows that climate change is proceeding

much more rapidly than had been presumed. Thus, at the moment, it seems highly likely that there will be a growing need to be able to deal with anxiety produced by ecological and social circumstances which are getting more difficult.

What is required can be called meaning-making: the ability to maintain resilience and a sense of meaning in difficult circumstances. This is closely related to hope. Among the many different conceptions of hope, I, along many other environmentalists, emphasise the need for “resolute hope”, which is differentiated from pure optimism.⁴⁴ Hope which is linked with meaningfulness, even though we cannot know if there will be success, can sustain us even in dark times. This kind of hope has been called “authentic hope” or “radical hope”.⁴⁵

The psychologist and environmental education scholar Maria Ojala has done a great deal of research on climate change attitudes and emotions, especially among young people. She distinguishes between “false hope”, which means wishful thinking, and “constructive hope”, which is more realistic and is linked to personal participation in adaptation and mitigation. Ojala advocates “meaning-focused coping”, a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, whereby the key point is to maintain a sense of meaning.⁴⁶ I agree with Ojala and emphasise the need for existential hope; many people have pursued this through Victor Frankl’s approach of meaning-making.⁴⁷

Thus, there are two imperatives: there must be enough ways to encounter dark emotions and enough opportunities for action. Both are related to meaning-making and hope. Resilience, the ability to survive sufficiently intact through changes, includes the dimensions of emotional resilience⁴⁸ and existential resilience.⁴⁹

Previous theology and spirituality related to eco-anxiety

Before describing and delineating my own constructive approach to a liberating contextual theology of eco-anxiety, I will first give an introduction to certain existing resources for such a theology and spirituality.

Ecotheology and eco-anxiety

Christian environmental theology, comprising both thought and action, is often called ecotheology (or ecological theology). A wider ecotheological movement was generated gradually from 1970 onwards, but in my earlier studies, I have shown that in the first half of the 20th century there were already significant, albeit often scattered, forms of Christian ecotheology.⁵⁰

There has been much ecotheology which has been explicitly contextual. Ecumenical ecotheology in general has been much influenced by some famous (explicitly) contextual theologies, such as theologies of liberation from South America. While there have been scattered discussions about

dealing with difficult emotions related to the suffering of creation, overall the themes of eco-anxiety and ecological grief have received surprisingly little attention in ecotheological writing or in studies about religion and ecology.⁵¹ Psychology has not featured as a major discussion partner in eco-theology, with the few exceptions that I will discuss following.

Regarding existential anxiety, the so-called "existential theologians" (theologians who apply existential philosophy and related themes; historically, for example, Rudolph Bultmann) would be, in principle, well-equipped to discuss eco-anxiety as existential anxiety, but to my knowledge this has not yet happened to any great extent. One of the reasons, besides general socially constructed silence about eco-anxiety, is the fact that many existential theologians have not had much in the way of ecological sensibilities. However, there are exceptions, starting with Paul Tillich. Although this is not well known, Tillich discussed environmental concerns to a significant extent, and he even ventured to ponder on shame and environmental problems.⁵²

Joanna Macy

The single most important pioneer in developing psychosocial and spiritual tools for dealing with eco-anxiety has been Joanna Macy. Macy is a writer, scholar, activist, and spiritual leader, who has worked on several continents. Originally Christian, Macy later became a Buddhist, and she links both systems theory and Buddhism into her Deep Ecology⁵³-oriented thought. However, there is a certain openness towards various spiritualities and religions in her thought, such as the poetic and sometimes radical Christian theology of Rainer Maria Rilke and indigenous spiritualities.⁵⁴

Macy's approach bears strong similarities to the so-called Creation Spirituality-style ecotheology (for example, Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme), which has an elementary emphasis on interconnectedness and what Willis Jenkins calls ecological subjectivity.⁵⁵ The sacred is encountered amidst natural life in all its variety.

The threat of nuclear pollution became a key interest for Macy in the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1983 she published a book called *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*.⁵⁶ "Nuclear anxiety" and eco-anxiety do have much in common.⁵⁷ The work that Macy and her colleagues did in producing ways to encounter difficult emotions, such as despair, took seed in many countries and later developed into forms which explicitly dealt with other ecological concerns as well. Originally, this work was explicitly linked to Deep Ecology, but later it was named "The Work that Reconnects". An extensive manual on leading workshops and sessions was published, websites were created, and education for facilitators was provided.⁵⁸

The influence and impact of Macy's work has been enormous. Her ideas about the need to face what she calls "our pain for the world" are found, in one way or another, in the background of nearly all later forms of materials

and activities which have been designed to deal with difficult emotions related to the ecological crisis.⁵⁹

Key words related to difficult emotions in these materials were grief, despair, and pain; not exactly anxiety, but in substance, Macy's work deals extensively with what others call anxiety. The dark emotions that Macy confronts are exactly those which easily cause anxiety if they are not encountered and "held" in a safe space. The model developed by Macy has four stages, which can be repeated over and over:

- 1 Coming from gratitude.
- 2 Honouring our pain for the world.
- 3 Seeing with new eyes.
- 4 Going forth.⁶⁰

In Macy's model, there is encouragement to action, but this is closely tied to the emotion-processing activities. Macy highlights the importance of "holding actions" which try to prevent damage to ecosystems through non-violent resistance which is strengthened by a spiritual connection to the universe.⁶¹

Christian resources

An early pioneer in applying insights from Macy and other ecopsychologists was Howard Clinebell (1922–2005), an influential pioneer of pastoral psychology. In his later years, Clinebell published a book called *Ecotherapy*, which is a comprehensive account of the psychological tasks for ecotheology. This very creative book, which also includes discussion about "ecological angst",⁶² was ahead of its time and is unfortunately not very widely known. It includes a lot of material and many exercises which are still most relevant, and I warmly recommend this book. Its major focus is on the need for healing, but the dimension of environmental action is also included.

Another Christian writer who has ventured deep into the existential dimension of the ecological crisis is the Scottish activist and writer Alistair McIntosh. His book *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope, and the Human Condition* probes deep into the psychosocial aspects of the era of climate change. McIntosh does not use the term eco-anxiety, but he discusses numerous themes which are related to it, such as despair, guilt, and the need to find forgiveness.⁶³ Robert C. Saler has developed certain similar themes in his articles.⁶⁴

Two writers who have addressed ecological grief (without using this exact term) from Christian perspectives are Douglas Christie and Steven Chase. Christie provides a book-length discussion of contemplative practice in the era of ecological crisis, drawing from patristic theology and environmental transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau. Christie offers resources for ecological grief and death education.⁶⁵ Chase has written a two-part

book entitled *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, creatively combining traditional Christian spiritual practices with ecological themes. His books include exercises for writing ecological lamentations, as well as songs of gratitude for what still remains.⁶⁶

From among social theologians, I mention Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's book *Resisting Structural Evil*. The main focus of the book is on ethical action and on the need to see the structural, systemic nature of the problems, but the dimension of emotions and healing is also present, especially as regards grief and guilt.⁶⁷ Among pastoral theologians, Ryan LaMothe has called for more emphasis on “ecological trauma” and the ways in which the ecological crisis affects the whole discipline.⁶⁸

There are evidently other important authors who have written on related themes. I believe that much good would come from a project which would apply the wisdom generated in various (explicitly) contextual theologies to theology of eco-anxiety. For example, there might be rituals and small-group work in theologies of liberation which touch upon eco-anxiety and ecological grief; there simply is no common international field yet in which information about such resources could be shared. It should be remembered that this is at the same time anxiety and grief related to both humans and other life forms.

A constructive theology of eco-anxiety

Theology of eco-anxiety is liberating in several ways. People, even in the industrialised countries, are in many ways oppressed by the current global economic and political system: it is generating damage to both ecosystems and people, and this damage includes psychological impacts. Dealing with eco-anxiety through both action and emotional work can be profoundly liberating. In addition, there are several groups of people who are especially burdened by eco-anxiety, such as young people⁶⁹ and environmentalists. Environmentalists have extensive exposure to eco-anxiety and ecological grief, but often very little opportunity to share difficult emotions.⁷⁰

Explicit contextual theology of eco-anxiety is on the rise in several countries. There have been scattered activities relating to it in the United States. In Spring 2019, for example, the GreenChristian organisation in the United Kingdom organised activities for encountering eco-anxiety and ecological grief,⁷¹ and there was a session in Australia about “Climate Pastoral Care”.⁷² I earlier developed a model of eco-anxiety as a pastoral challenge, based on ecumenical and Lutheran theology.⁷³

Internationally, in the new environmental movement called Extinction Rebellion, there has been from the start a focus on dealing with the emotions as well. One of the principles and values of the organisation is that “we avoid blaming and shaming: We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame”.⁷⁴ In addition to civil disobedience activities, sessions have been organised where people can share difficult emotions. Many

Christians have participated in Extinction Rebellion activities and the support for the movement by the former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams has been noted.⁷⁵ Personally, I have led workshops on emotional work relating to eco-anxiety for Extinction Rebellion Finland.⁷⁶

Finnish theology of eco-anxiety

As I mentioned in the introduction, I focus in this chapter on the context of industrialised countries, on people who are not the poorest and the most marginalised, and especially in the Finnish context. In what follows, I will describe the Finnish movement related to eco-anxiety, hope, and theology, and I will provide an agenda for a theology of eco-anxiety. However, I wish to emphasise that there is a need for other takes on theology of eco-anxiety, written and practised by people from various contexts. For example, there is profound climate anxiety in the Pacific Islands where the sea level is rising, but I am not the right person to write about that.

A liberating contextual theology of eco-anxiety recognises the need to encounter dark emotions, and dares to hope and act at the same time. It is built on “authentic”, “realistic”, or “radical” hope: hope which is not optimism, but finds life meaningful even in dire circumstances. My proposal for such a theology has been partly influenced by ecumenical ecotheology, which has its own roots in various explicitly contextual theologies, and by the so-called “realist theologians” from the mid-20th century, such as Daniel Day Williams, the Niebuhr brothers, and Joseph Sittler.⁷⁷

During recent years, I have witnessed the birth of a vague but notable movement in Finland which has practised an explicit contextual theology of eco-anxiety and hope. The leading figures have been few, a handful of people, but the message has spread widely and many people have joined in organising various activities. This has been a people’s movement, although I have spent a lot of energy on leading and developing it. Sometimes this movement has operated in the frames of openly Christian theology, sometimes in a manner more like “secular theology”: theology-based reflections and activities, which have been offered without an explicit Christian frame. The majority of Finns still belong to Christian churches, although they are usually not active participants. Thus, in public sessions which deal with eco-anxiety, there are practically always Christians present.

Important elements of this Finnish activity have been

- Giving voice to the voiceless, this time meaning those who suffer from eco-anxiety and ecological grief, but who have suffered from socially constructed silence. This has been done by writing stories about eco-anxiety in all kinds of journals and newspapers, large and small, and by several leading figures of the movement (most extensively myself) participating in television and radio interviews. In the background has

been the attention gathered by my book about eco-anxiety and hope, published in Finnish in October 2017.⁷⁸

- Developing and conducting small-group sessions, both in congregational spaces and in public libraries, where people have received the chance to discuss and share their dark ecological emotions in a safe space.
- Designing and leading grief rituals for both acute loss and anticipated loss in relation to ecological themes. In Finland, the theme has often been lament, either for felled forests or for climate change.
- Public witness to politicians, members of the parliaments, business people, and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This has happened through media, various conferences and seminars, and by designing sessions fit for special NGOs.

As a result of this and endeavours by psychologists, there is now a national discussion and growing recognition about eco-anxiety in Finland, and some influence of this has spread to other countries.⁷⁹

Among Finnish Christians, there have for a long time been various forms of environmentalism, although the situation has been complex. The main Christian church in Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran, has so many members that there are various opinions about environmental issues. Still, there has been Christian endorsement for nature preservation since the late 19th century. This was started especially by Zacharias Topelius, a Lutheran educator and churchman, and continued by others in the 20th century.⁸⁰ In the 1980s, more institutional support for ecotheology was gained in the church. Since the 1990s, there has been an active group of people working for the greening of the congregations, with the support of the Church Council.⁸¹ Scholars of theology and religion from both the University of Helsinki and Åbo Akademi have participated in ecotheological efforts. The recent activity as regards eco-anxiety and hope has found many proponents and supporters among these people, who have already had an environmental interest, but new recruits have also appeared.

Elements of a Christian theology of eco-anxiety and hope

On the one hand, Christians can benefit from many of the activities and approaches which have been developed in the general movement related to eco-anxiety. For example, many of Joanna Macy’s activities can, and have, been used in Christian congregations. However, Christians have some strengths of their own (and of course, some challenges of their own) for such activities. Following, I describe several key points related to various elements of Christian theology and congregational life as regards eco-anxiety and hope. Because there is already much literature on the possibilities for practical environmental action in congregations,

I focus here on aspects which have a strong dimension of dealing with the emotional side of the issues.

Encountering suffering, grief, and mortality

Christian theology and congregations have much experience of living with suffering, practising compassion for those who are in sorrow, and providing people with resources to deal with the fact that they are mortals. These skills are not prevalent in the general atmosphere of industrialised societies, which makes the potential contributions of Christians very powerful. The “pastorological skills”, which Sigurd Bergmann has discussed,⁸² are very much needed amidst the ecological crisis.

Skills of encountering mortality have been discussed in relation to ecological grief by the aforementioned writers Chase and Christie, and in relation to eco-anxiety by myself.⁸³ The ancient Christian attitude of remembering human mortality and practising joy and compassion at the same time is in high demand in the current ecological crisis. There has begun to appear general literature about “learning to die in the Anthropocene”, but this literature, albeit insightful, is very stoic in nature.⁸⁴ There is a need for Christian interpretations of the same existential challenge.

Spiritual care and pastoral care

Numerous people are in need of spiritual and pastoral care because of the ecological crisis.⁸⁵ Christians have a profound task and opportunity to help people. However, this requires understanding of the predicament which humanity is now in. Both action and rest are needed. Spiritual care in our times should not be just therapy which lets unsustainable practices be, but neither should its only purpose be to increase capacity for sustainable consumption choices. There is a need for deeper encounters with the dark emotions. For example, hidden eco-shame presents difficulties. A lot of people suffer from always feeling inadequate. Simply telling them that they are righteous or forgiven does not work; in Tillich’s phrasing, people should be able to “accept that they are accepted”.⁸⁶

In the history of Christian faith, there have been many ways in which believers have provided each other pastoral care; it has not been the task of only the pastors.⁸⁷ Since the communal aspects of finding meaning and mutual acceptance are so crucial amidst the ecological crisis, there is a need for strengthening both pastor-led and mutual pastoral care in relation to eco-anxiety.

Diakonia

The ancient Christian notion of service now applies to both humans and other creatures, towards Creation.⁸⁸ Those people who suffer greatly from

eco-anxiety and are rendered weak or voiceless are targets of “diakonia”.⁸⁹ However, “diakonia” can also be a channel which offers people opportunities to help others. This strengthens resilience and a sense of efficacy, which are elementary for psychological survival and wellbeing. The kind of activities which Macy calls “holding actions” have been taken by Christians in many parts of the world, including Christians protesting against the oil pipeline plans in North America or against the cutting down of the rainforests in South America.

There are several kinds of possible actions, and providing emotional and spiritual support is also one of these. Not everyone feels at home in demonstrations, but there are other possible tasks available, such as helping children to cope with climate anxiety or assisting local adaptation and mitigation activities. This can be framed as increasing both individual resilience and community resilience.⁹⁰ In these tasks, spirituality and religious communities have been perceived to be in an important position.⁹¹

Education

There is a need and a possibility to integrate environmental education which includes both a sense of tragedy and a sense of hope and meaningfulness into religious education. There are resources available in the field of environmental education for this,⁹² but there is work to do for Christians in integrating theology and practical Christian spirituality into them.⁹³

Worship

Because Christians have a hope that is related to both the visible and invisible world – one which is eschatological, both immanent and transcendent – they have special resources for practising radical joy and compassion amidst the growing ecological crisis. This joy and compassion should inform Christian education and worship life. Liturgy has always comprised both joy and sadness; now these elements resonate within a world characterised more and more by climate crisis and other ecological catastrophes. The efforts towards “greening” Christian worship life should be explicitly integrated with an increased understanding of the seriousness of eco-anxiety, ecological grief, and “eco-guilt”.⁹⁴ The recent work in studies on religion and ecology about ritual and ecological emotions provides important resources for this work.⁹⁵

Bible studies, study groups

The biblical texts offer many moving and deep depictions of various dark emotions and of people finding hope in the midst of difficult circumstances. There are many possibilities for Bible studies and study groups on themes related to eco-anxiety and hope. Some resources for this can be found in existing literature on ecological hermeneutics.⁹⁶

Places, spaces, and art

Congregations have many spaces which they can use creatively to provide people with opportunities to engage with eco-anxiety and hope. Because eco-anxiety can be difficult to face, holistic and embodied methods can help in this. Various forms of art and architecture can enable easily accessible but profoundly moving instances of encountering difficult emotions.⁹⁷ There are resources for this in art-based environmental education.⁹⁸

Concluding remarks: towards the future

It is impossible for me to express how much this discussion about eco-anxiety has helped me.

– feedback from a reader of my book on eco-anxiety⁹⁹

In this final section, I will briefly discuss the present and future challenges of the Finnish theology of eco-anxiety and its public implications. For this purpose, I also have to dwell a bit on recent history.

I have not collected actual academic data of the liberating results of my – and our – work on the theology of eco-anxiety, but I have several email messages and many personal experiences where people speak of profound relief. Especially in the winter of 2017–2018, a major change happened: socially constructed silence about climate change and eco-anxiety, including climate anxiety, was shattered in Finland. Lots of people were greatly relieved to be able to finally speak of their ecological emotions. The very fact that one receives public recognition for eco-anxiety can be uplifting. Many people have also sent or expressed feedback for the practical tips I have offered (for example, “10 Recommendations for People with Eco-Anxiety”¹⁰⁰).

In 2019, I and several other members of our vague eco-anxiety movement took part in organising more public advocacy, social support, and research projects. Various organisations, both in the social and health sectors and in education, have now started to offer support structures for people who suffer from eco-anxiety. Many groups or segments of people have provided contextual versions of their own for the alleviation of eco-anxiety, often drawing from the resources produced by me and others. For example, young climate activists have developed forms of eco-anxiety self-care and organised social gatherings where various dark emotions, including climate grief, have been shared and processed. We now have some research on the various emotions that Finns have in relation to eco-anxiety and climate anxiety.¹⁰¹

On one hand, we have witnessed liberating effects of theology of eco-anxiety (and its secular versions). But, on the other hand, there has also been backlash. Especially in winter 2019, several right-wing populists framed eco-anxiety and climate anxiety as something unnecessary and foolish. This is linked to wider phenomena which are studied in the field of

political emotions.¹⁰² There are explicit and implicit norms and power structures related to emotions and the public expression – or non-expression – of them. Certain groups of people have desired to portray almost any public expression of emotion as non-rational and foolish. Eco-anxiety and climate grief, to name two examples, have been challenged by some groups of this kind. This is usually linked to views that it is not necessary to make any rapid changes in environmental behaviour or legislation.

Reality is always complex, but if generalisations are made, certain factors related to people become connected with resistance towards recognition of eco-anxiety. For example, such recognition has been difficult for many older people and many men. These phenomena have direct implications for eco-anxiety discussions in such contexts as schools or congregations.

In schools and educational institutes, there have been both bold new initiatives in encountering eco-anxiety and resistance towards encountering the whole issue. In Finnish congregations, many of the active members are elderly people. Thus, in congregations, there have also been both initiatives and resistance. Some pastors, for example, have organised discussions and liturgies related to encountering ecological emotions in confirmation school camps. But many members of the parish councils – the local decision-making bodies – are sceptical of the validity of eco-anxiety, or at least they insist that younger people should move rapidly from anxiety into action.

I mention these examples because I presume that similar things may well happen in other countries where eco-anxiety will become a wider topic of discussion. It remains to be seen what the relationship of various strands of Christianity with environmental issues and eco-anxiety will be. Psychosocial pressures are rising as environmental damage and the impacts of climate change intensify. Which groups of people will turn towards denial, disavowal, and distancing? And which groups of people will bravely try to face the situation with honesty and effort?¹⁰³

In the Finnish theology of eco-anxiety, we – and I – have stressed the need both for acknowledging ambiguity and for action. This makes it possible to avoid black-and-white thinking and increases the ability to feel both grief and joy. Regardless of what the future brings, there is potential to find hope in the sense of meaning-making in the common struggle for human rights and ecological flourishing. This kind of hope is movingly summarised by Vaclav Havel: “Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well . . . but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good”.¹⁰⁴

Notes

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- 101 For an overview, in Finnish, see Panu Pihkala, "Ilmastokasvatus ja tunteet [Climate Education and Emotions]," *Biologian ja maantieteen opettajien liitto BMOL ry [BMOL Association of Biology and Geography Teachers]*, December 2019, <https://toivoajatoimintaa.fi/ilmastokasvatus-ja-tunteet/>; for a nationwide study, see Jaakko Hyry, "Ilmastotunteet 2019 – kyselytutkimuksen tulokset [Results of a National Study on Climate Emotions]," *Sitra*, June 24, 2019, <https://media.sitra.fi/2019/08/21153439/ilmastotunteet-2019-kyselytutkimuksen-tulokset.pdf>.
- 102 For an introduction to this field, see Simon Clarke, Paul Hoggett, and Simon Thompson, *Emotion, Politics and Society* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 103 John Foster, ed., *Facing up to Climate Reality: Honesty, Disaster and Hope* (London: Green House Publishing, 2019).
- 104 Quoted in Orr, *Down to the Wire*, 182.

12 Contextualisation through the arts

Volker Küster

Contextualisation matters¹

The term *contextualisation* emerged from discussions around the third mandate programme of the Theological Education Fund (TEF; 1970–1977), then closely related to the World Council of Churches. The TEF argued that seminaries in the Third World should be equipped with library resources and encouraged to develop theological curricula that are relevant to the local context. The copyright on this term may well be ascribed to its director, Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe (1914–1988), mentor of his internationally much better known fellow countryman C.S. Song (b. 1929), one of the pioneers of contextual theology in Asia. Coe criticises the earlier concept of indigenisation as static and backward-oriented, and opts for a more dynamic view of the interaction between text and context.²

Typology of contextual theology

The phenomenon that Coe is addressing on a theoretical level was already flourishing simultaneously all over the Third World in the early 1970s, in the aftermath of secular emancipation movements. While Africa and Asia were decolonised in the course of the reorganisation of the world after World War II, they were immediately entrapped in neo-colonial structures with their former colonisers or the new superpowers of the Cold War era. Latin America, which had already gained independence from the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in the 19th century, was infiltrated by a neo-colonial US imperialism that regarded these countries as their “backyard”. The new coordinate system in the second half of the 20th century was shaped by the East-West and North-South conflicts, with bloody surrogate wars in the territory of the Third World. Christian intellectuals were under pressure to justify why they kept the religion of the coloniser and still wanted to contribute to nation building. The result was theological identity reconstructions in the colonial twilight that fostered cultural renaissances and denounced poverty and oppression under military regimes and the Western capitalist market system.³

While the term contextualisation has a Protestant background, the phenomenon it describes is ecumenical. In the aftermath of the reform of liturgy central to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Catholic missiology coined the term *inculturation*, which also pays attention to the dynamic interaction between Gospel and culture, and diverges from the older *accommodation* model. The latter regards Gospel and culture as static entities (kernel and husk model) and promulgates a certain optimism that the interaction processes can be controlled, and form and content kept separate.⁴ More recent documents of the Vatican on mission, however, still use the term *inculturation* but conceptually have turned back to the earlier accommodation model.⁵ A term that is also frequently applied in regard to these phenomena is *syncretism*.⁶ While historians of religion consider intercultural-religious exchanges as inevitable and use the term in a neutral, descriptive way, the evangelical wing of the missionary movement considers it heretical. Contextual theologians, finally, propagate a positive view. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, for instance, talks about a “creative syncretism” that enhances Christianity with African resources.⁷ For me, integration has become an important criterion. Is a particular Christian community able to integrate elements of another religion in a way that makes sense within the overall Christian reference system?

I prefer the term *contextualisation* not so much for confessional reasons, but because it suits well as an umbrella term for the two major schools of contextual theology, namely liberation theologies that focus on the socio-economic and political dimension of the context, and inculturation and dialogue theologies that engage with the cultural-religious dimension.⁸ Today, gender, ethnic, and ecological dimensions are addressed as well. When I started my research on contextual theologies, I soon came to the conclusion that we need an intercultural theology as a frame of reference and platform to engage in a dialogue among the different strands of contextual theologies. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians has been a vivid laboratory for observing such intercultural interaction processes.

Methodology of contextual theology

While scope and generative themes vary by context, contextual theologies share a methodological framework that I describe as the hermeneutical circle between text and context.

The hermeneutical circle

This is not the proverbial vicious circle, but a *circulus progrediens*. One never returns to the same point where they started their theological journey. The context is rapidly changing in the so-called developing countries. Contextual theology by its very nature has to respond to these changes, which in turn opens up new perspectives on the text. The rich reservoir of meaning of the

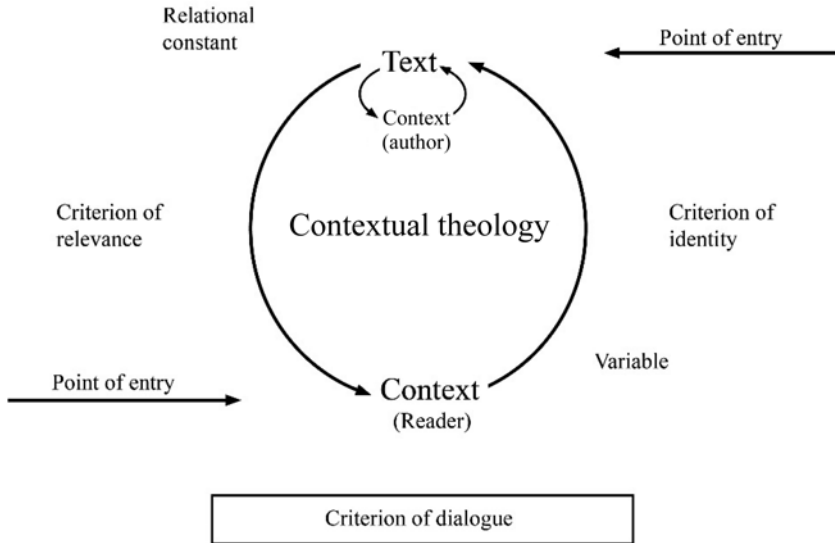


Figure 12.1 The hermeneutical circle

text can never be exhausted by one interpretation. Therefore, the context is the variable in the hermeneutical circle and the text is the relational constant [Fig. 1]. Nevertheless, not everything goes “interpretation-wise”; the text itself sets the limits of its interpretation. I distinguish two criteria in the production of contextual theology. The message of the text will only be understood if it unfolds a certain relevance in the particular context. Checks and balances are guaranteed, in the first place, by the identity criterion, which applies the text again to measure whether the theology formulated is in line with it. On top of this there is a third criterion – the dialogue among the global community of storytelling and interpretation that Christianity is today. Text, in my understanding, is not only the biblical text but the Christian tradition, which can be understood as different layers of interpretation of the text. There is always at least a twofold question with respect to the context, namely the context of the author and the reader respectively. Since it is a circular process, it does not matter whether one enters into it via the text or the context.

Hermeneutics of suspicion

Latin American liberation theologian Juan Louis Segundo (1925–1996) introduced in his Harvard lectures a hermeneutics of suspicion,⁹ a conception that was soon embraced by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. While liberation theologians were suspicious of the interpretation of the text but not of the text itself, feminist theology also addressed the

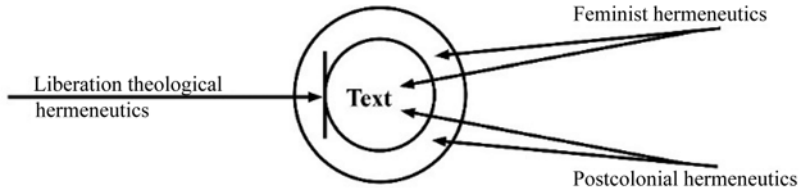


Figure 12.2 Hermeneutics of suspicion

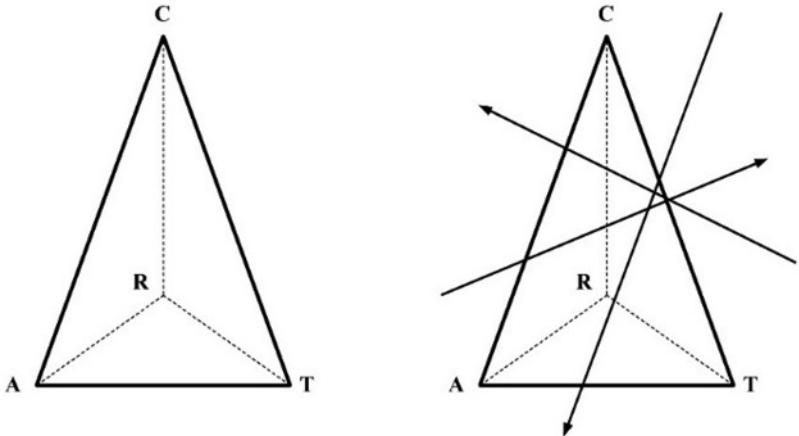


Figure 12.3 The hermeneutical prism

patriarchal bias of the text. Postcolonial theologians should follow that path by laying open imperialist texts in the Bible [Fig. 2].

The hermeneutical prism

I consider hermeneutics as a game with four players in which each of them has taken the lead in a given moment. Author-centred hermeneutics (A) wanted to understand the author better than the author understood him/herself (F.D.E. Schleiermacher). Text-centred hermeneutics (T), to the contrary, talked about “the death of the author” and “the autonomy of the text” (Umberto Eco). Reader-centred hermeneutics (R) asks for the reader-response or the implicit reader (Wolfgang Iser). Context-centred hermeneutics (C) in a way integrates the earlier models, since the context is eccentric and multiple – that is, author and reader have their contexts and the text is read in different contexts through the ages. I opt for a pluralism in method that applies the different hermeneutic perspectives like a prism [Fig. 3].¹⁰

Hermeneutics and aesthetics

Hermeneutics are theories of interpretation. While aesthetics is usually defined as the study of art and beauty, I follow a broader understanding of it as a theory of the perception of the senses (*aisthesis*),¹¹ which includes all the senses as well as the realisation of the ugly and evil. The relationship between aesthetics and ethics is no longer a given, but has to be reconstructed in every case anew. Aesthetics is first of all based on a non-verbal sensory experience and emotion. The attempt to verbalise it inevitably leads to some loss. Here is where hermeneutics come into play as a way to negotiate that loss. Hermeneutics is aware of the fact that each interpretation is only a temporary demarcation of a certain sense.

Christian art in context¹²

If we talk about Christian art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, all parts of the term have to be problematised. Already in contemporary Western discourses on art, it is debated whether there is something like *Christian* art at all, or whether there is only good art and bad art. If we turn to other cultural-religious spaces, we should not just transfer our Western conceptions but listen to local perceptions of what art is. In Asia and Africa, art is first of all to follow the craftsmanship of the master and the iconographic conventions. Changes happen, but slowly. Still, once one gets used to the particular local art forms and their iconographies, differences in artistic quality or aesthetic value become obvious. My working definition is that Christian art is Christian according to its content and purpose.

The artists and their public

I differentiate between three groups of local artists:

- 1 Those who are commissioned to produce Christian art. They are trained in the particular art forms of their traditional religions, whether their background is Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or, rather seldom, Jewish, etc. This means that non-Christian artists may become subjects of contextualisation by using their familiar iconographies to depict Christian themes.
- 2 Those who become interested in Christian themes, be they Christian themselves or not. Their works may be motivated commercially, producing a kind of Christian airport art for tourists or for spiritual purposes, as in the case of the Hindu Renaissance or the socially engaged Buddhist monk Uttarananda.¹³
- 3 Those who are Christian and regard the production of Christian artwork as their contribution to communicating the Gospel.

Mobility and overlap among the groups is possible, but this categorisation has still proven to be helpful. A fourth group is foreign artists who came with the missionaries or the colonisers and who either perpetuate the Western style for the colonial elite and local gentry or study local art forms and apply them to Christian themes.

Epochs of Christian art in the Global South

The epochs of Christian art in the Global South follow the phases of the missionary expansion of the Christian faith. Until the second half of the 20th century, accommodation was the iconographic paradigm. Important for Christian intellectuals from Asia and Africa is the first phase, namely the expansion to the East along the Silk Road all over Asia, and to the South into Ethiopia. They emphasise that there was a Christian presence on their continents before the Western missionary project that started in the 16th century, which is therefore regarded as being the second phase.

In our case, the Jesuit mission is of special interest because their mission strategy was to accommodate the Christian faith to the local culture and its religious underpinnings. This led to conflicts with rival missionary orders, who accused them of syncretism. The resulting so-called accommodation or rites controversy (ca. 1610–1744) ended finally with the temporary liquidation of the Jesuit order.

The third phase started with the missionary awakening of the 19th century, which was a Protestant lay movement to begin with. Many missionaries came from the lower echelon of society, which was rather distanced from the cultural refinement of the bourgeoisie. Mission was a chance for social upward mobility, as long as one could survive the extreme conditions in the mission field. On top of this, Protestantism has historically had a rather biased relationship with the arts. In order to delimit itself from Catholicism, it cleared its churches of images. Yet there is a range between Luther (who regarded images as *adiaphora*), Calvin, and the iconoclastic radical wing of the Reformation. In the slipstream of the Protestant mission movements, the Catholics also entered the mission field again. The Papal letter *Maximum Illud* (1919) that demanded a local Chinese clergy became another turning point in the mission strategy of the Vatican. The rites controversy had ended with a total neglect of all things contextual. Now neo-accommodation and a renaissance of Catholic mission art emerged.

The fourth phase is marked by the coming of age of the local or younger churches in the Global South after the end of World War II. Contextual theologies were often even anticipated by contextual Christian art. Today we are standing at the threshold of a new phase. Christian themes have entered secular galleries in Africa and Asia. Even though these artists are not producing it for Christian ends, they still contribute to a new religious iconography.

Iconography

More than 90 per cent of the images produced are either of Christ, the Madonna and Child, scenes from the life of Jesus, or the parables. Old Testament themes are rather rare. There is hardly any reference to mission history, or, in the Catholic Church, to the saints, unless there are local martyrs.

The terminology and theory developed in the research on contextual theology can also be applied to contextual Christian art. We always have to reckon with the interaction of at least two iconographic systems. Regarding the genre of local iconographies, we have to distinguish between temple and court art, on the one hand, and folk art, on the other hand.

Documentation

The sources for Christian art from the Global South are postcards, calendars, pamphlets, and more recently coffee table books and the internet. The material is often delicate and the storage unprofessional, so many things have already faded, due to lack of interest and ignorance.

The many faces of Jesus Christ

I will concentrate here on examples from the fourth epoch, the era of contextualisation. For a long time, Nyoman Darsane (b. 1939) was the artist of “the beautiful gospel”,¹⁴ the Indonesian master of contextualisation.¹⁵ Yet after the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2004 tsunami, there was a dramatic change in his paintings as far as themes, form, and colour are concerned. The equilibrium between good and evil that is at the root of Balinese culture was disrupted.

In *Rain of Blood*, [Fig. 4] Christ is dancing on an imaginary cross. Thick red streams of colour are running over a violet background. As behind the screen of a shadow puppet master (*dalang*), one can see shifting shadows of demons.

The *Crucifixion* of Ketut Lasia (b. 1945), [Fig. 5] on the other hand, is a typical example of accommodation art. It shows the crucified Christ in a Balinese landscape in Ubud style. Form and content are clearly separable. Even though the blood is dripping from the wounds of the nails as in early medieval paintings, the depiction of the suffering of Christ is not convincing. One of the armoured men under the cross has already raised his spear to pierce Jesus’ side. Yet the whole atmosphere is not aggressive, but rather restrained. This is even true for the mourning women who are crouching at the bottom of the painting.

Indian artist Solomon Raj (b. 1921) is also an academically trained theologian who has written on contextualisation. Yet against expectations, he



Figure 12.4 Nyoman Darsane, *Rain of Blood*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 76 × 66 cm
Source: © Photo Volker Küster, courtesy of the artist

rarely uses Hindu iconography. Instead, he turns to Buddhism and Ethiopian icons. When regarded in the context of Dalit theology, this appears to be a reflective contextualisation that renounces inculturation following the dialogue of theologians of Brahmin descent with Hinduism.¹⁶ Ambedkar, the famous Dalit activist, is quoted as having said, “I was born as a Hindu, but I don’t have to die as a Hindu”. He converted with half a million of his followers to Buddhism, which was the beginning of the flourishing of Neo-Buddhism in India, after Buddhism had been absorbed by Hinduism and extinguished by Islam a thousand years earlier.

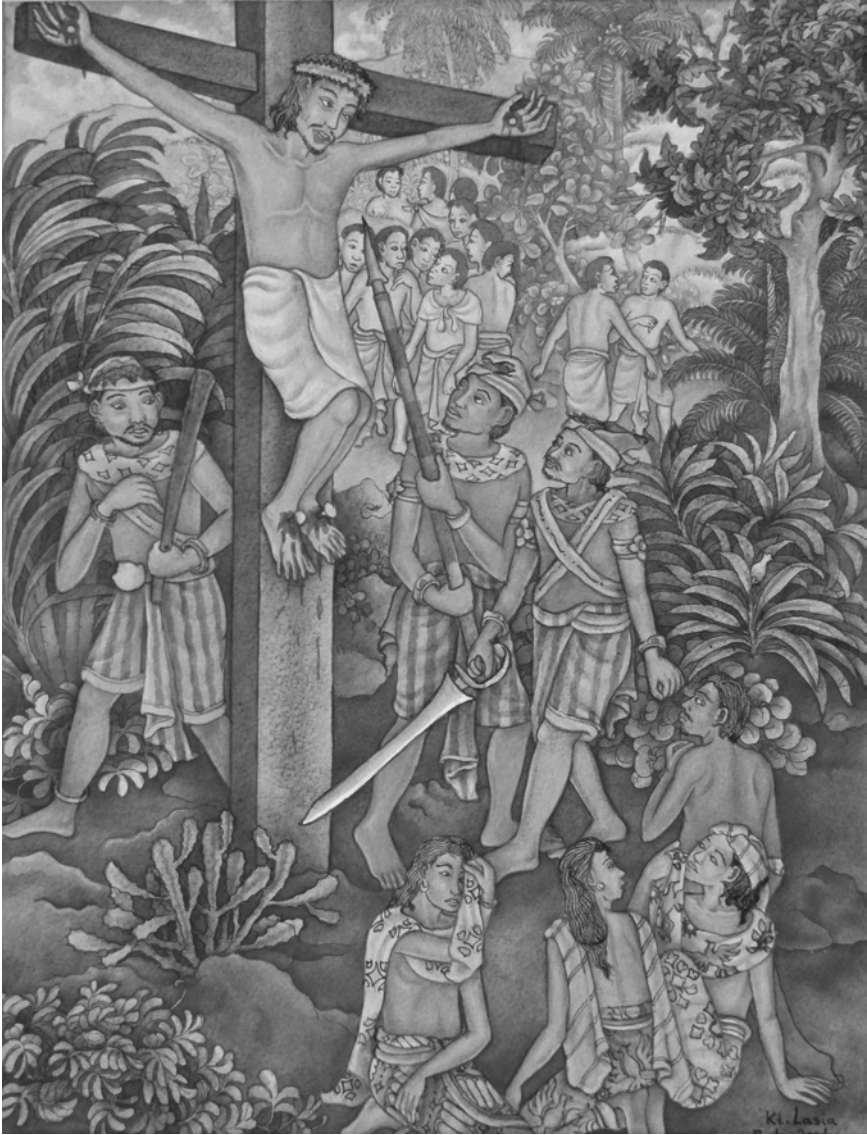


Figure 12.5 Ketut Lasia, *Crucifixion*, ca. 2000, traditional paint on canvas, ca. 70 × 50 cm

Source: © Photo Volker Küster, courtesy of the artist

The linocut *Jesus, the Teacher* [Fig. 6] depicts Jesus in the dress and posture of the seated Buddha. The palm of his open right hand, bearing the mark of the cross, is directed towards the viewer, pointing to the ground. This is the Buddhist hand gesture (*mudra*) of wish fulfilment. The left hand is raised in



Figure 12.6 Solomon Raj, *Jesus, the Teacher*, 1980s, linocut

Source: courtesy of the artist¹⁷

front of his chest in the Christian Orthodox gesture of blessing. His index and middle finger point upwards, while his ring, little finger, and thumb touch each other, forming a circle, as a symbol of the Trinity. At the same time, it is reminiscent of the Buddhist *prana mudra* that increases life force.

The linocut *Black and White* by black South African artist Azariah Mbatha (b. 1941) [Fig. 7] tells a story. The upper left part shows the reality of apartheid:

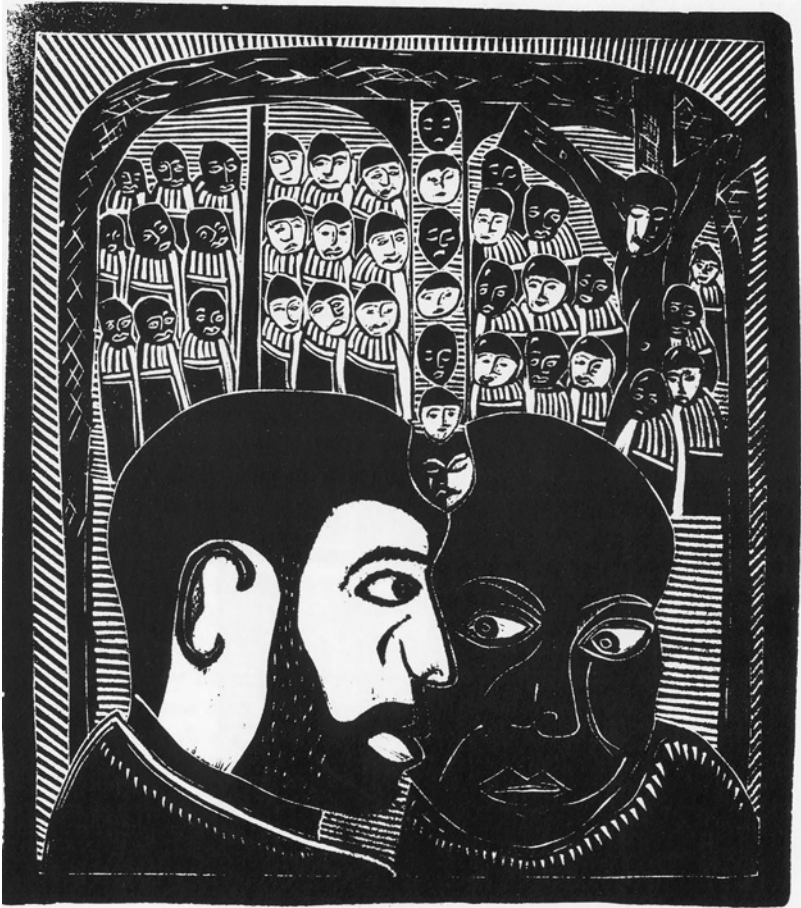


Figure 12.7 Azariah Mbatha, *Black and White*, 1970s, linocut¹⁸

black and white are segregated. On the right side, however, they are mingled chessboard-like under the cross. A black tear is running over the white left half of Jesus' face, with the right half being black. The two scenes are integrated in a kind of wooden construction with a beam in the centre. The beam is reminiscent of an ancestor pole with interchanging black and white masks on it. The beam ends in a mask that is half black and half white, in inverted order from the face of the crucified, now with a white tear running over the black half of the face. Inversion is a central concept in traditional religions. The ancestors, for instance, are imagined to be white instead of black. Therefore, the mask depicts the resurrected Christ being present with the portraits of a white and a black man in the foreground. "Where two

or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). The black person is watching the white with a sceptical look, yet the artist of this prime example of liberational expressionism is obviously already arguing for reconciliation under the draconian apartheid system. The ancestors of South Africa are black and white together, and Jesus is among them as a black-and-white Christ.

There is a less known visual version of Ernesto Cardenal’s famous Gospel of Solentiname.¹⁹ He gave painting tools to the fishers and farmers of Lake Nicaragua, with whom he read the New Testament, and they illustrated in a naïve manner the Gospel stories situated in their life world. I call this liberational primitivism, reclaiming the later term in spite of being well aware of the discussion on the alleged derogative meaning.

In *The Massacre of the Innocent* by lay artist Julia Chavarría, [Fig. 8] we see Somoza’s soldiers raiding a village, killing the children in front of their mothers and ready to also rape the women.

In a gallery in Jakarta, I discovered two paintings by F. Sigit Santoso (b. 1964) that were obviously dealing with Christian themes.²¹ When I enquired about the artist, the gallery owner presented me with a catalogue of a past exhibition that also contained a painting under the title *Namaku Isa* [Fig. 9].

The artist blends the iconographies of Jesus and Mary in an intriguing manner. The face is female, but the body bears the marks of the cross, signified by a red spot of blood on the white garment under the right breast. Both

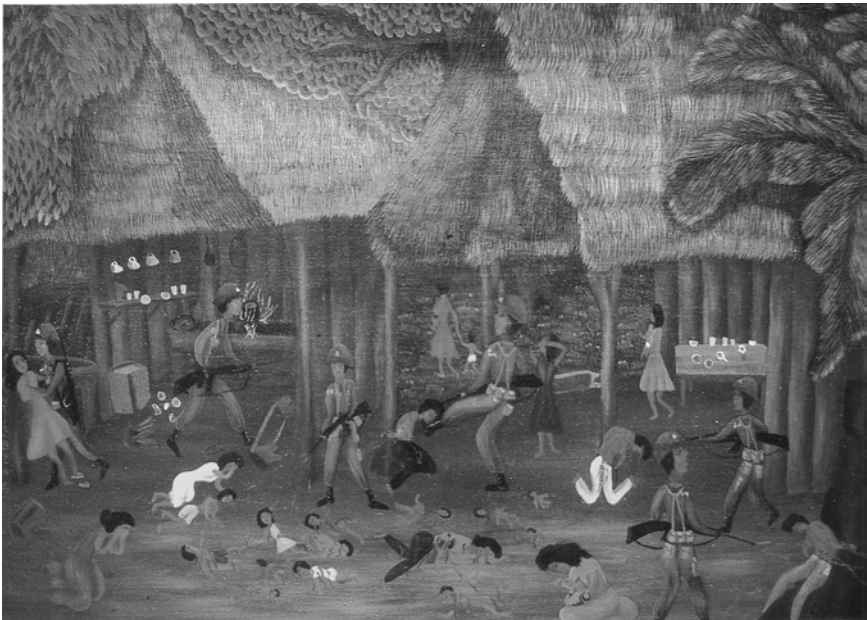


Figure 12.8 Julia Chavarría, *The Massacre of the Innocent*, ca. 1981/82, watercolour²⁰



Figure 12.9 F. Sigit Santoso, *Namaku Isa*, 2005, oil on canvas, 140 × 110 cm²²

hands bear the marks of the cross. The left female hand is resting in front of the chest. The palm of the right male hand is directed towards the viewer in the Buddhist gesture of wish fulfilment. Yet at the same time, it points to a red plastic-like fish that has been cut in half by a knife symbolising sacrifice. It is lying on a plate on a small round table with a white tablecloth standing in front of the Jesus figure. This painting of a queer Christ goes beyond the classical contextualisation model, and is an example of *glocalisation*. It is not restricted to a Christian public, but enters the global contemporary art scene.

What does all this mean for the relationship between the images and the word, contextual Christian arts and theology?²³ Artists often respond much faster to the signs of the times and are more innovative than theologians, even when they are organic intellectuals. As a matter of fact, they not only anticipate the written word,²⁴ but open up a space of meaning that allows deeper and more polysemous insights than an idea fixed in letters. Solomon Raj did not merely anticipate Dalit theology by decades, but also touched on the cultural and (inter)religious issues that the latter is still avoiding today. Yet without being willing to address the role of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, Dalit theologians are caught in a dead-end street. Nyoman Darsane, for his part, is, as the most prolific Balinese contextual Christian artist, at the same time the only contextual theologian as well. The linocut of Azariah Mbatha demonstrates that one picture can contain a whole theology in a nutshell. Whoever has understood this artwork has understood what Black Theology is all about. Hermeneutics cannot exhaust aesthetics, but the latter can open up diverse inroads of comprehension. At the same time, Sigit Santosa not only breaks new ground iconographically and theologically, but also crosses the boundaries of the whole contextualisation project. Contextual Christian art contains a theology in its own right. It anticipates, transcends, and condenses the written word. Now that it is starting to move out of the contextual box, in what direction will contextual theologies develop? The least one can say is that contextual and intercultural theology have become more intertwined than they were at the outset. We are moving from contextualisation to localisation.²⁵

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed account and further references, cf. Volker Küster, *Theologie im Kontext. Zugleich ein Versuch über die Minjung-Theologie* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1995); Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). Other substantial contributions to the discussion about contextual theology's methodology are given by Schreiter and Bergmann. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM, 1985); Sigurd Bergmann, *God in Context: A Survey of Contextual Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 2 Cf. Shoki Coe, "Contextualizing Theology," in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 19–24.
- 3 Cf. Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).
- 4 In Protestant missiology, *indigenisation*, and in its evangelical branch, *translation models*, were synonymous with accommodation.
- 5 Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, encyclical letter, December 7, 1990, sec. 29 and 52–54.
- 6 Cf. recently Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vähäkangas, eds., *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism: Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018).
- 7 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology," in *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-*

- African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17–23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, eds. K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1979), 109–16, 110. M. M. Thomas, with his concept of “Christ-centred syncretism” inspired by the Hindu-Renaissance, and Chung Hyun-Kyung, with her feminist project of “life-centred syncretism”, are further examples.
- 8 On the discussion about inculturation, and contextual and liberation theology, cf. especially Elina Vuola’s Chapter 4, and also Mika Vähäkangas’ Chapter 13 and the editors’ introductory Chapter 1 in this volume. On liberation theology with regard to the economic and political world system, cf. Ulrich Duchrow’s Chapter 5, Atola Longkumer’s Chapter 6, and Teresa Callewaert’s Chapter 8 in this volume, and on public and political theology, see Dion A. Forster’s Chapter 2 in this volume.
 - 9 Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 9.
 - 10 This is common practice today in the writings of postcolonial theologians like Kwok Pui-Lan, Musa Dube or R. S. Sugirtharajah; cf. Küster, *Einführung* §2.
 - 11 Cf. Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Volker Küster, *Gott und Terror: Ein Diptychon* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019); Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space and the Environment* (London and New York: Transaction Publishers, 2014).
 - 12 Cf. Volker Küster, “Christian Art in Asia: Yesterday and Today,” in *The Christian Story: Five Asian Artists Today*, eds. Patricia Pongracz, Volker Küster, and John Wesley Cook (New York and London: Museum of Biblical Art, 2007), 28–43; Volker Küster, “Visual Arts in World Christianity,” in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 368–85.
 - 13 Cf. Volker Küster, “A Dialogue in Pictures. Reform Buddhism and Christianity in the Works of Ven. Hatigammana Uttarananda/Sri Lanka,” *Exchange* 39 (2010): 6–28.
 - 14 Volker Küster and Theo Sundermeier, *Das schöne Evangelium: Christliche Kunst im balinesischen Kontext* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1991).
 - 15 Cf. Volker Küster, “Accommodation or Contextualisation? Ketut Lasia and Nyoman Darsane – Two Balinese Christian Artists,” *Mission Studies* 16 (1999): 157–72.
 - 16 Cf. Volker Küster, “Renunciation of Inculturation as Aesthetic Resistance: The Indian Artist Solomon Raj Seen in a New Light,” *Exchange* 30 (2001): 359–71; Anand Amaladass and Gudrun Löwner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art: From the Mogul Times till Today* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2012).
 - 17 P. Solomon Raj, *Palm Leaf Prayers* (Wuppertal: Vereinigte Evangelische Mission, 1995), 11.
 - 18 Theo Sundermeier, *Südafrikanische Passion: Linolschnitte von Azariah Mbatha* (Bielefeld: Lutherverlag, 1977), 69; cf. Azariah Mbatha, *Within Loving Memory of the Century: An Autobiography* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005). © Azariah Mbatha granted through DACS.
 - 19 Cf. Phillip and Sally Scharper, eds., *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984); Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010 [1976–1982]).
 - 20 *Die Bauern von Solentiname malen das Evangelium: Mit Meditationen von Helmut Frenz* (Gelnhausen und Berlin: Burckhardthaus-Laetare Verlag, 1982), 19. The Name of the artist Julia Chavarría has been misspelled in the German edition as Julia Schwania. © Ass. para el desarrollo de Solentiname / H. Schulz.
 - 21 Cf. Volker Küster, *Zwischen Pancasila und Fundamentalismus: Christliche Kunst in Indonesien* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016).
 - 22 *Paradoks Batas: Painting Exhibition/F. Sigit Santoso & Sugiyo Dwiarmo*, curator M. Agus Burhan (Jakarta, 2005), 27.

- 23 Cf. Theo Sundermeier and Volker Küster, eds., *Die Bilder und das Wort: Zum Verstehen christlicher Kunst in Afrika und Asien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).
- 24 Cf. Theo Sundermeier, "Die Daseinserhellung durch Kunst übersteigt immer noch die des Wortes," *Jahrbuch Mission* 22 (1990): 29–41.
- 25 Cf. Volker Küster, "From Contextualization to Glocalization: Intercultural Theology and Postcolonial Critique," *Exchange* 45 (2016): 203–26.

13 World Christianity as post-colonialising of theology

Mika Vähäkangas

In this chapter, I argue that the old-school confessional and ethnocentric theology has no place in today's Western secular academia. Therefore, a renewal is needed unless theology is to transform into religious studies of Christianity. This renewal has already taken place in mission studies, and has often led to the renaming of the discipline as World Christianity or a similar title. The point of view of this chapter is decidedly Northern European, and admittedly, the situation of theology, mission studies, and academia looks very different in other parts of the world.

Theology is an equivocal term, as it can refer to any meaning-making of religious experience or alternatively a rigorous methodologically prescribed way of arriving at religious or philosophical conclusions, or the study of either of the two, or any intermediate activities between those extremes. In the first sense, theology is wherever there are religious people. In this chapter, however, the focus will be on the academic discipline under the name "theology". This discipline consists of both constructive theology and analysis of others' theologies. In most cases, these two tasks are intertwined, as no one can begin theologising from *tabula rasa*, but there are always traditions upon which one's reasoning is building. The constructive theologian's understanding of these traditions through analysis is a necessary part of constructive theology. The crucial questions here, though, are on whose traditions one should construct, and for which audience.

Theology as a Eurocentric confessional enterprise

At a seminar in Finland a couple of decades ago, a student was pondering which good theologian's thought to write her dissertation on. She was not certain, but wished to work on someone who was not German. The professor thought aloud: "Are there good theologians other than Germans?" Whether that was a joke or a Freudian slip of tongue, it was very well in line with the spirit of the day. Traditional theology as an academic discipline could justly be described as a Eurocentric confessional enterprise, and this was the case with practically no exceptions until World War II, and even today in much of Europe the situation is not essentially different. The

notion of Eurocentrism covers here cultures of European background, thus extending to e.g. North America, covering the mainstream culture of European origin. But why would theology be called Eurocentric?

First, it was and largely still is Eurocentric simply because of being academic. Even if, at the time when theology was formulated as an academic discipline, there were traditions of extremely high intellectual quality in some other larger cultural areas, such as India, China, and the Islamic world, it was the Western European intellectual tradition that served as the basis of today's global academia. The campus culture is surprisingly similar globally even today. The form and content of teaching, as well as campus life, are similar in all the corners of the world. This is partly due to the Western roots of academic traditions and partly, of course, due to the global mobility of academics. Just as medieval universities helped to bring intellectuals from the margins into the centres, so does even today's academia. The questions of method and academic procedures are a part of the Western package that academic theology belongs to. English language, the paramount colonial language, functions as the modern Latin that almost all credible academics need to know.

Second, as a highly historically conscious discipline, theology builds predominantly on Western intellectual and ecclesial history. The Latin Church is the centrepiece, and Greek Church Fathers and some other Orthodox traditions are also often included. Orthodox academic voices are rather marginalised in the global theological dialogue even today, as, often, are voices from the majority world. Oriental churches' traditions are virtually ignored even in church history, in spite of them representing one of the mainstreams of Christian culture until the end of the first millennium.¹

Third, the content of theological debate that is most visible and published by most of the large publishing houses mirrors the questions and challenges of the Western world. For example, even though a debate between science and faith exists in the majority world, it is much more central in the industrialised countries. Whichever ethical debate happens to be on top of the agenda in the Western churches reserves the most visible place in the West-dominated international theology. For example, the responsibilities of a Christian under a corrupt regime or questions about religious persecution are seldom internationally heard in academic theology in spite of these being essential in the lives of multitudes of Christians in the majority world.

Fourth, those who are counted internationally as important theologians – that is, deserving of being researched and studied – tend to be 20th-century male German-speaking, and lately also English-speaking, men.² This has partly to do with the question of theological agenda. As long as theology is dominated by men of limited cultural (and social) background, one tends to attach importance to people who have a similar agenda. Additionally, one generally tends to favour not only the ones who think like, but also who are like, oneself.

The result is that there is theology in general, and additionally, there are specific theologies like feminist, Black, African, Asian, Mujerista, Minjung, etc. The implication, mostly not openly pronounced, is that theology without epithets is real or somewhat universal, whereas theologies with labels are second-rate endeavours that may be of interest to “real” academic theology by providing it with material to develop further. However, as pointed out previously, this theology without epithets could well be labelled Eurocentric (or later even Anglocentric), male, and bourgeois. The marginal theologies are called upon whenever theology without epithets needs to display diversity.

However, it would be unfair to label all Western theologians as insensitive to the global realities of Christianity. Some of the European theologians considered among the greatest of their kind did react to the drastic changes in the state, nature, and role of Christianity in the world. Karl Barth, towards the end of his career, could be interpreted as having passed the baton to theologians from the majority world.³ Karl Rahner’s work on the role of non-Christian religions in salvation addressed a question utterly central in the majority world.⁴ Jürgen Moltmann was involved in an intensifying global theological dialogue which profoundly influenced his theological agenda.⁵ In spite of the elevated status of these men in Western theology, this openness has not expanded significantly, especially in Europe. One of the reasons in Europe may be the precarious situation of theology in the European academy.⁶ In such a situation, in order to secure the survival of the discipline at the university, one easily resorts to emphasising the historical importance of theology and Christianity to Western cultural roots and history, thereby limiting the discipline often both culturally and denominationally. However, this efficiently blocks the way to renewal and regained relevance. The attempted goal is thus not reached, and irrelevant theology is pruned out from the branch of humanities at an increasing number of universities.

This paralysing limitedness in Western theology stems basically from the European recent history of ideas. Modern ideas, with their emphasis on rationality and science, challenged the older theologically geared ground for thinking. In the past, majority Christian views formulated the ideological hegemony, in cooperation with the political power. At least since the French Revolution, this has been seriously challenged, and an individual’s freedom of conscience has been emphasised. The basic assumption of this emphasis was faith in human rationality. If humans only gained their freedom and came to know scientific truths, they would obviously choose them.

Since that time, one of the main tasks of academic theology has been to relate to modern thought. At times, the choice has been a frontal attack against modernity, and at times, contextualisation in the modern world.⁷ In both of these, unsurprisingly, there has been a common denominator in that religion is seen still to have a meaningful role in the modern world, and that religion is approached confessionally. Confessionality in this case means that religion is approached from within, and argumentation is related to a

specific faith community's argumentation, even if it may not be fully in line with it. In theology, inasmuch as it is constructive, and not only an analysis of someone's constructive approach, one stakes religious truth claims; this makes it confessional, no matter the content of those truth claims.

This confessionality has placed theology at loggerheads with modernist science. In spite of religion and science at times reaching a truce, whereby science was granted sovereignty in the increasing area of empirically provable facts, and religion in the shrinking gaps in between them, scientists have sometimes proposed their metaphysical convictions as scientific truths. In this case, rationalistic (or sometimes also mystical-religious) conclusions based on the empirical are applied to the non-empirical gaps as well.⁸

As the ideological hegemony moved from Christian faith to empirical sciences from the era of Enlightenment, and religion retreated in the unprovable gaps, religion increasingly became a matter of private conviction. As a result, universal truth claims began to look preposterous, considering that at the same time Europe was growing increasingly plural in terms of religion, especially after World War II. Yet, theology continued to be confessional – for to approach religion confessionally is what defines theology. This caused theology to turn into an anomaly in academia. From the modernist point of view, it is unscientific and therefore does not belong to academia, whereas from a late modern perspective, the obvious lack of pluralism makes it naïve and limited, as theology is still generally only a Christian exercise in Europe.

Is the only way forward to do away with theology and replace it with religious studies that have embraced the modernist project?⁹

The theologian's reality bubble holds no more

In spite of the apparent juxtaposition between modernist rationalism and Christian theology, these two were also engaged in a loop of mutual assertion in two ways. First, both of the partners propagated strongly (their version of) the Truth. Secondly, both of them mostly operated within the national projects.

Varying between times, places, and denominations, there has been tension or even conflict between “scientific” worldviews and Christian theologies. In the case of communist regimes, it was a matter of a mortal conflict, whereas in the Western bloc, the theme “faith and science” was played out in multiple variations. Within the modern framework, in spite of the occasional conflict, the idea of one undivided reality was the common ground for modern science and theology.¹⁰ The point was rather to convince the other about the veracity of one's conception of reality. In much of academic theology, one attempted to construct systems whereby modern science and Christian faith could be reconciled.

The other common denominator was the national projects. Even if both science and Christianity have universalising ideals, both of them mostly adapted to the project of construction of national states. In Christian

churches, this became most clearly visible in Protestant and Orthodox circles where the dominant churches in regions developed into national or even state churches. In spite of its decidedly universal character, even Catholicism became a vessel of nationalist, and sometimes even fascist, endeavours. Science was also harnessed to serve the national interest, and in times of conflict, Christians and scientists alike seldom provided much opposition to the hollow nationalist war frenzy.

As a result of the competing capitalist and communist economic systems and nationalism, in spite of the modern ideal of the one undivided truth, the world was a battleground of competing truths. However, these national truths were often able to gain a hegemonic position in the national states so that the justification and existence of the nation and the national state were not much questioned. In most cases, the national narrative was built on sameness: ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, etc. unity. The result was that the national plausibility pattern was unchallenged in the country, whereas across the border there was another plausibility pattern.¹¹ What was true in the Soviet Union was a blatant lie in neighbouring Norway – in history, economics, politics, religion, and culture. Each nation had its own universal truth, even if many of them overlapped even for the most part. For example, the set of Norwegian and Swedish national truth claims differed from each other only a little. The different national truths could stand on their clay feet because the connections between the nations were limited from today's perspective and thereby the incompatible views of the outsiders could be dismissed as curiosities.

All through the 20th century, there were growing voices challenging the modern concept of truth. These voices opting for polyvalence of truth, and deconstruction of essentialising and reifying of social realities like nation or gender, came to be labelled, for example, as postmodern or late modern, depending on the emphasis and degree of critique against modernism.¹² This critique sometimes took the form of judgement against the grand narratives in terms of both content and use. Several historical developments contributed to the development of pluralism in the Western societies, which was the precondition of postmodernism.

Globalisation was intensifying through colonialism, Christian mission, and trade in the earlier part of the century. Later, heightening of industrialisation led to labour-based immigration to the Western industrialised countries, creating notable cultural-religious minorities. Eventually, tourism increased the movement between different parts of the world. Intensified means of communication, especially the internet, have made the world shrink like never before. An affluent person with the right passport and sufficient funds can communicate with any part of the world at any time, and usually travel there within a day or two. Western societies began to turn pluralistic not only through immigration but also from within, with political, cultural, and religious alternative movements which often fetched some of their inspiration from outside of the West. The quintessential white man

started to see his hegemonic position crumble. While Western societies have turned more pluralistic, older minorities that have always been there – like ethnic, religious, and sexual – have also become more visible and vocal. The turn from monolithic to pluralistic societies is thus partly true and partly a fabrication, as there were never any completely unified national states.

Academic Christian theologies with their universal claims were a part of this game. They thrived in national states' reality bubbles where there was one nation, one religion, and one reality (even though whether it was religious or "scientific" was often a matter of contention). By their very existence, these universalising theologies provided support for patriarchy, nationalism, and confessionalism. Within their limited bubbles, these theologies could be universal, relevant, and credible as the correct interpretations of the Christian Truth.

In the pluralistic Western societies, where there is an intensified experience of global unity, any universalising claims are met with deep suspicion. Even the nationalist populist wish to seal off the rest of the world outside of the national boundaries and to restore national unity is an acknowledgement of this pluralism. If all immigrants would leave, and all ethnically national people would think the same, one would be back to the good old days, the argument goes.

In grassroots theology, Christian churches can, if they so will, continue marketing their doctrines as the universal Truth very much in the same manner as any café can market the "best coffee in the world". Academic theology, however, has the responsibility to be critical and to attempt to formulate argumentation in a manner that can communicate beyond the devotees of a single religious circle. Even if a theologian would not subscribe to a relativistic worldview for philosophical and/or theological reasons, the plurality of worldviews is an issue that she/he needs to address not only as a topic to be dealt with, but as the context in which theology is constructed. This plurality needs to be a part of the package from the very beginning. Traditional Western academic theology is generally ill-equipped to this task, due to its long-time engagement with modernism. Methods, approaches, and theories in mainstream Western theology have often bypassed the pluralisation process of our societies.

From the point of view of credibility, as well as of ethics, Western Christian theology needs to be thoroughly renewed. It has no space in Western academia if it concentrates on defending the existing positions by arguing for the historical relevance of theology. In that case, theology can be transferred to departments of history to aid analyses of Western intellectual history. Academic theology only as Christian theology has no place in Western academia in the long run when the level of religious participation in the former national and state churches is declining and is not being replaced even by growing churches established by immigrants. Ethically, explicit or implicit Eurocentric universal claims tally all too well with the colonial project. The expulsion of such theology from academia is therefore even righteous.

Mission studies and contextual theologies as a widening of the horizon

Mission studies has represented a widening of the horizon in theology in the sense that through it, non-Western cultures and religions have gradually been introduced into the theological agenda, resulting in contextual theologies where the interaction between faith and culture is lifted into focus.

Expressed in a pointed and generalised way, mission studies used to be a rather colonial study of a rather colonial Christian enterprise. The reality, of course, was that there were a multitude of approaches to colonial atrocities, colonialism itself, Eurocentric paternalism, and local religions and cultures.¹³

In spite of the similarities and connections, there was an inherent difference between mission and colonialism in terms of their logic. In colonialism, the mother country was in the centre in all perceivable ways: administration, hierarchy, resources, economic structures, etc. In mission, it was the (expected) convert who was in the centre. The goal of Western mission of that time was to convert individuals or peoples or to establish churches. In all of these variations, the goal is inherently bound to the local people. This would be the case even in the most paternalistic and Eurocentric mission enterprise where the local cultures would be completely despised and the goal would be to transform the converts into Europeans, albeit with strange physical appearances. Colonial logic, in comparison, does not rule out a genocide and colonisation of the country with settlers.

The relative proximity to the locals resulted in many missionaries turning into skilful ethnographers and eventually studying theological questions related to the local Christians' spheres of life.¹⁴ Consequently, missionaries and missions were generally eager to support the creation of local contextual theologies, albeit often within the parameters of their denominational preferences. The role of context in theology was thus profoundly acknowledged in many missionary circles from early on. In this manner, what should have become a concern for all theology became predominantly the hobby of mission scholars, even though the need to recognise the context was just as great in the West, where theology and ecclesial practices were often quickly losing contact with people's everyday realities. Even in cases when there were serious attempts at contextualisation, like Rudolf Bultmann's demythologisation (*Entmythologisierung*),¹⁵ the similarities between the Western and non-Western projects were often missed together with opportunities for mutual enrichment. A partial reason for the lack of communication may be that while missionary circles tended to be on the conservative side, Western contextual theologies often had a radical or liberal edge. This contextuality was, however, for the most part, a matter of relating to the scientific Western world, which was seen as the paramount culture and therefore universal. De facto contextuality did not necessarily translate into understanding one's cultural limitedness.

Gradually, contextual theologies of the majority world would stand on their own feet as majority world Christianity grew academically stronger. This would first be the case on a larger scale with Latin American liberation theologies from the 1960s. The importance of contextual theologies to theology has been that they have reminded Western academic theologians that there is no universal theology, but that all theology is crafted in a context. Additionally, contextual theologies have diversified theological enterprise so that even if the paradigmatic middle-aged Euro-American white man is still the dominant type, there is an understanding that there are other theologies and theologians as well. Contextual theologies have also reminded academic theology of its mutual dependence on the faith communities. Without faith communities' interest in academic theology, there is little value in it outside the limited academic theological circles, and there would hardly be any students of theology, thereby risking the future of the discipline. This interest in academic theology stems from relevance in two senses. On one hand, academic theology should deal with issues that are relevant for faith communities and use their life and thought as a starting point. On the other hand, academic theology must provide added value in the sense of challenging the faith communities' traditional approaches. Finally, contextual theologies have also explored ways to interact with academic disciplines other than philosophy, most notably sociology, political studies, and cultural/social anthropology.¹⁶

Meanwhile, mission studies would increasingly pay attention to local initiatives in majority world Christianity at the cost of concentrating on the role of Western missionaries.¹⁷ Mission studies have maintained a close link to contextual theologies, but mission studies often become more empirical. Previously, mission theology held the place of pride in mission studies, but now different empirical approaches seem to have become the mainstream.¹⁸ While mission as an object of study has aroused interest, e.g. among general historians due to the abundant data on intercultural encounters available in mission archives, what goes under the title of mission studies or missiology has remained almost completely a theological enterprise. This has meant that the discipline has remained theological and one of the major tasks of mission studies within academic theology has been to remind theology of Christianity's global character and of the plurality of religions.

World Christianity as a renewal of mission studies

Mission studies as a title of a discipline has often become a liability in Western secular academia, while in many majority world as well as confessional contexts it still enjoys relative popularity.¹⁹ In the West, mission is considered colonial, intrusive vis-à-vis people of other faiths, and narrow-minded.²⁰ Redefinitions of the term mission have not made the situation any better, because there does not exist a commonly agreed-upon postcolonial definition of the term that would also be known outside of the discipline. In

this junction, postcoloniality would denote not only the end of overt colonial structures, but also conscious attempts to break free from the inherited colonial patterns of thought that still largely direct the relations between the West and the former colonies.

There have been various different attempts to replace the title “mission studies”. There have been new names emphasising the theological nature of the discipline, like intercultural theology or interreligious theology. In some other cases, the title simply refers to the object of study, like World or Global Christianity or Christianity in the Non-Western World. In spite of the fact that these latter names do not reveal any allegiance to an older academic tradition, it is clear that most of the people involved in these studies come from a theological background. This means that the border between mission studies and the study of World Christianity is porous, as many scholars would feel familiar with both. However, the relationship that needs more clarification is between theology and World Christianity.

It goes almost without saying that World Christianity does not share the old-school theological Eurocentrism. Rather, it can be seen as a critique of theology that got stuck to Western Christendom and missed possibly the greatest and fastest religious change in history: Christianity’s shift of gravity to the majority world.

Contextual theologies were an early reaction to theological Eurocentrism. There, in addition to paying attention to the contexts and opening up to disciplines other than philosophy, as indicated previously, another major issue was the question of the interlocutors. In these new theologies, the prime interlocutor was no longer the privileged academic, but often rather the oppressed with whom and by whom these theologies were constructed, at least ideally.²¹ In World Christianity, the question of context is central, and openness especially to empirical realities allows many disciplines to contribute. However, the question about for whom, with whom, and by whom World Christianity is done is not quite as articulated as in many contextual theologies. By virtue of World Christianity being more pronouncedly academic and definitely less ecclesiastical than many contextual theologies, it either tends to overlook the question of interlocutors or implies a general post-colonially minded academic audience. As no production of knowledge is innocent, this difference is notable. This difference may stem from the fact that this new discipline needs to establish itself in Western academia.

Still another difference between contextual theologies and World Christianity lies in their methodology. Contextual theologies, in spite of their criticisms of Eurocentric theology, still generally participate in the project of traditional theology, namely making sense of Christian faith. This sense-making is, in the case of contextual theologies, largely a logocentric exercise whereby written texts are made to relate to each other. The contextual theologies’ insistence on lived realities seldom translates into major methodological modifications. References to lived realities often remain on an anecdotal level or are based on the author’s life experience. Here, World Christianity

definitely differs, as in many cases the analysis of Christian faith in a context builds on robust empirical data. This data is often collected ethnographically or in other qualitative ways. This turn to empirical data is a logical next step in the process of dismantling the hierarchical and centralised ideas of faith communities and theology that contextual theologies began. In contextual theologies, the consciously theologising subject becomes central, with the result that, in spite of attempts to the contrary, academic theologians become pivotal. When studying Christianity empirically, a possibility of listening to the often oral grassroots theologies is opened up.

Does this mean that World Christianity is the name for religious studies that concentrate on the study of Christianity (also) beyond the Western cultural sphere? Do the researchers of World Christianity approach their topic from outside, as if not involved? Were it so, the launching of World Christianity would be for religious studies what Anthropology of Christianity is for anthropology. Traditionally, anthropology studied exotic cultures. However, when anthropologists of religion could no longer ignore the rise of Christianity in many of their fields, they began to address it, first in exotic places but then also back home.²² Is there a difference between Anthropology of Christianity and World Christianity other than that World Christianity is not bound to the anthropological academic traditions?

Traditionally, an anthropologist is a specialist in crossing boundaries of culture.²³ She lands in an exotic culture, learns the language, customs, and the rest of the culture, and makes an analysis of that with the help of anthropological theories (to which her study ideally contributes). She comes from outside but becomes in the fieldwork a marginal insider and thus a broker between the Western academic and the local world. When returning home, she re-enters the Western academic culture and interprets the object of study to the rest of that community. The boundaries between insiders and outsiders have been blurred in many ways when anthropology has been studied in Western contexts, and some of the anthropologists do not come from the Western cultural sphere. Yet, the described case still is the paradigmatic one. A scholar in World Christianity can work in the same manner, but that is not necessarily the standard approach to the same extent.

What makes it difficult for a researcher of World Christianity to wholly embrace the paradigmatic anthropological approach described previously is that inasmuch as World Christianity is a theological discipline, it profoundly shares the world that it is studying. World Christianity covers not only faith communities of the majority world, but also of the West, leading to the conclusion that in the theological endeavour of meaning-making, the researcher and the researched are facing the same task. It is, therefore, not so easy to make clear divisions between the field and academia back home. Considering the foundational criticism against theological Eurocentrism inherent in World Christianity, it would appear false simply to bypass the world's Christians' critique and replace the theological Eurocentrism with a secular one. Therefore, it seems right to exercise World Christianity as a

theological discipline in the sense of entering into the theological debates of Christianity all around the world, and also remaining within that discourse when analysing the data.

Therefore, inasmuch as World Christianity can be seen as an offshoot of theology, the relationship between the researcher and the researched is very complex. Unlike anthropology, theology is a practice-related discipline, rather like law or medicine. Medicine is researched and practised in hospitals and clinics, and law is applied and pondered in courts. Likewise, theology grows and lives in faith communities where it is applied and practised, and in the case of World Christianity, also researched. In medicine, there is generally one normative paradigm that is usually regarded as objective by the practitioners. Theology, therefore, comes closer to law. Law is based on values, and there is no universally accepted approach to law. Yet, even if a lawyer represents a different school of thought, she can participate in the legal discussion and can analyse legal systems and theories other than her own. If she comes to a normative judgement of a legal theory, she has no Archimedean point to stand upon. Likewise, a theologian may be or may not be a member of the faith community she is studying. However, irrespectively of her own convictions, she is a member of the community of theologians in search of transcendental meaning, and in this sense a stakeholder in the process of the faith community, irrespectively of her own faith commitments.

If the World Christianity researcher is a Christian theologian, as is often the case, the relationship between the researcher and the researched can get very complex, no matter how unproblematic the fieldwork as such might feel. There are not only the usual power relation issues, but also questions related to various fault lines within Christianity or within a denomination or a church.²⁴ When there is a shared faith commitment on both sides, the researcher can be at the same time a cultural outsider (becoming hopefully eventually a marginal insider) and an insider as a member of the same imagined community. However, if the variation between the researcher's confessional background and the studied community becomes extensive, there may exist doubt about belonging to the same imagined community, or it may be denied by one of the partners. And yet, there are bound to be many familiar elements in the studied community. In such a case, the studied could be seen as quasi-others.²⁵

World Christianity's approach to the study of religion should be thoroughly postcolonial.²⁶ This means that it may not take a Western normative position, be it theological or secular. The faith of the studied communities has to be taken seriously, and if and when the researcher ventures into normative judgement, it needs to be system immanent. System immanence means that the phenomenon is assessed according to its own premises. For example, if a church claims not to be proclaiming a prosperity Gospel, one needs to figure out how the term prosperity Gospel is understood within the church and compare it to the proclamation of that church to see whether

this is the case. Thus, the researcher's cultural and religious background does not become normative. Its influence on the research process is inevitable, though, and needs to be assessed self-critically.

Theological pluralism in World Christianity style

The renewal needed for theology in Western academia can use World Christianity as its model. What works for World Christianity works *mutatis mutandis* in theology. The resulting theology (as a discipline) needs to be religiously, culturally, and methodologically pluralistic.

Academic theology as a discipline can no longer be only Christian. While Christian traditions historically play a central role in the formation of European (and American) identity, one may not overlook the Jewish and Muslim contributions of the past.²⁷ Today, the reality is far more plural, and academic theology needs to cover not only these three monotheistic religions from the Near East, but also any other major religions in each location.

The first step in encountering the challenge of religious pluralism is to acknowledge the syncretistic nature of all religions.²⁸ For some, this sounds like a truism, while many theologians still stick to the notion of pure religion. In the study of World Christianity, the interaction between Christianity and other religions is sometimes the central question, and in most other cases it simply cannot be overlooked, and is thus an important dimension of the analysis. When much of such research is done on majority world Christianity, there is a danger of Western theologians viewing the majority world Christians as syncretistic while overlooking the syncretistic elements in their own theologies and churches. This hints at the tendency of Europeans to see majority world Christians first as specimens of ethnicities and only secondarily as Christians, whereas one often lumps Europeanness together with Christianity in spite of the fact that we are speaking of the world's most secularised continent. When syncretistic elements grow old enough, like in Europe, they tend to turn into pure orthodoxy, and a syncretistic attitude towards the secular Enlightenment is not often counted as syncretistic because the counterpart is not counted as religion. What is done in the study of World Christianity needs thus to become a standard approach in theology.

Additionally, in World Christianity, one can seldom bypass the question of interreligious relations. Christian life takes place in a world of religions and ideologies, and both Christian practice and theological thought need to be consciously placed in this context. Majority world Christianity, even in cases when it is now in the majority, has usually recently been a minority religion and thus the encounter with the religious other is in its DNA, whereas in the West, the tradition of these encounters has often been forgotten and results in European Christianity's Chihuahua syndrome – a big dog's soul in a small body. Likewise, many former national or state churches have not become used to a situation where they represent the minority of the population.

This interreligious encounter must enter into the very core of theological exercise. Therefore, Christian theology must become a strand among others, adding Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, etc. theologies and theologians in the faculties and departments.²⁹ This would inevitably lead to projects of comparative theologies and interreligious theologies,³⁰ depending on the positions of the academic staff. What needs to be emphasised here is that the need for theology as a discipline to turn religiously plural does not necessarily mean that all resulting theologies would be pluralistic. A pluralistic discipline is truly pluralistic when it allows for multiple voices. However, a pluralistic context of theology can be expected to lead to more pluralistic theologies.³¹ Additionally, because of the differences in seeing the reality and the religion's relation to the world, various religions' theologies even in academia are bound to differ from each other. Therefore, one cannot expect them to be equivalent to Christian academic theology in their goals, methods, and practices, and yet one may expect that they should learn to be conversant with each other.

There are several ways of dealing with the challenge of religious and ideological pluralism in a situation in which a hegemonic position is not attainable for an academic theology, not even in a limited sense of a national-confessional reality bubble. One way would be to give up any metaphysical truth claims and simply concentrate on the analysis of existing theologies and religious phenomena. In that case, however, theology would lose its central task of posing the fundamental human existential questions and turn into religious or historical studies. Another possibility is to resort to absolute or temporary relativism. In absolute relativism, one claims that no credible judgements are possible between e.g. religious movements, and in temporary relativism, the judgement is postponed to the possible eschaton.³² However, I do not need to wait until the eschaton to judge that ISIS is less acceptable than Engaged Buddhism, for example. It means that I have a certain set of values and truths against which I assess religious ideas and practices, even if I would shy away from expressing them in less obvious cases. In order that these values and truths may serve a pluralist theology, they need to be formulated in an ecumenical and interreligious theological dialogue, and be open to modifications and even rejection when encountering strong arguments. This is open confessionality, in contrast to closed confessionality where the outcome of theologising is already known at the outset: it will be theology within a certain denominational and school of theology mould. Possible truth claims in this kind of pluralistic theological project need to be based on a theory of knowledge that allows for not only truth claims, but also humility and flexibility.

In World Christianity, one tends to celebrate cultural pluralism. This is very much in line with the *Zeitgeist* of globalisation. Western academic Christian theology is still relatively monocultural, as described previously. Theology can no longer afford to externalise the task of cultural plurality to contextual theologies, mission studies, or World Christianity, but the

multiple voices in terms of cultures and subcultures need to be recognised throughout. All theology is contextual in the sense of it being constructed in a time and a place, and failure to recognise this does not make it universal. Once one has recognised the cultural boundedness of one's work, there is an opportunity to ponder how to best communicate across the disciplinary, cultural, linguistic, religious, etc. borders.

Methodological pluralism is probably one of the fields where there is most willingness to change in theology. World Christianity is not the only model pupil in the class, but there are also other theologians who are open and innovative in terms of looking for new partner disciplines, methods, and theories. This openness is generally a prerequisite for innovative approaches in any of the humanities. After the era of grand narratives' hegemony, religions can no longer be approached solely as ideas, ideals, doctrines, or principles. Lived religion cannot be bypassed in any discipline of theology any longer. These methodologically progressive researchers have already largely moved on to including lived realities in their agendas, and the rest of theology is to follow. While the death knell of grand narratives was definitely premature, the world of ideas must today be related to the tangible and social realities in the study of religion and theology as well.

Conclusion

Theology as a Eurocentric discipline needs to be renewed if it is to retain its academic and ethical credibility. This renewal needs to cover its self-understanding so that theology is no longer a Christian enterprise in dialogue with Western modernity, but is rather an interreligious process in which religions and (post)modernities are in interaction with each other. Instead of earlier closed national-confessional bubbles, theology needs to exercise open confessionalism whereby truth claims do not lead to exclusion, but rather inclusion of dialogue partners. This renewal needs to cover methodologies, too, by opening towards lived religion without losing sight of the role of contents of faith or religious ideals.

World Christianity as an academic discipline can serve as a resource in this renewal because it can be seen as a result of a similar process of post-colonialisation in mission studies. In this process, mission studies and World Christianity have needed to engage in a global balancing between Western secular academia and Christian faith communities (which sometimes run universities or theological seminaries of their own) all over the world. Losing a hearing in the first would lead to expulsion from secular academia, which would be a loss for both secular academia and the discipline. The discipline can provide secular academia with vistas on the most populous religion around the globe that other less involved disciplines would miss, whereas secular academia is a constant source of methodological and theoretical contributions, as well as constructive criticism. Losing a hearing among the faith communities, on the other hand, would have strong adverse

effects on the social impact of the discipline and thereby indirectly on the credibility of the discipline. World Christianity can and should function as a critical partner in dialogue with faith communities. Likewise, theology needs to find itself a new postcolonial and academically credible role that does not lose its relevance in the eyes of the faith communities.

Notes

- 1 There are exceptions, though, like the MOPAI-project led by Prof. Samuel Rubenson, which has produced an electronic library of early Christian sources in Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Greek, Latin, Slavonic, and Syriac (see *Monastica* [s.a.]. *A Dynamic Library and Research Tool*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://monastica.ht.lu.se/>). On early medieval World Christianity, see Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia – And How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). Oriental Christian traditions are the non-Chalcedonian ones like Coptic, Ethiopian (Tehwado), Syriac, etc.
- 2 A case in point would be the widely distributed *The Modern Theologians*, where only white males have reached the heights that allow them a place in the chapter headings. See David E. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1st ed. 1989, 2nd ed. 1997, 3rd ed. 2005). The book has evolved into an increasingly plural collection by way of extension – adding chapters on other than the standard in theology.
- 3 Paul Duane Matheny, *Contextual Theology: The Drama of Our Times* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 59–60.
- 4 Karl Rahner, *Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church*, Theological Investigations 12 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974); Karl Rahner, *Observations on the Problem of Anonymous Christians*, Theological Investigations 14 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976).
- 5 For example, in *Der gekreuzigte Gott*, he refers to a couple of Latin American liberation theologians, and two Japanese thinkers, whereas in *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, Latin American liberation theologians are already one major discussion partner. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1972); Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt: Beiträge zur öffentlichen Relevanz der Theologie* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1997).
- 6 See e.g. Moltmann, *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, 219.
- 7 The frontal attack approach was most visible in Protestant fundamentalism (see Margaret Bendroth, “Fundamentalist Imagination,” *Church History* 85, no. 2 (2016): 328–42), whereas liberal theology represented an attempt to contextualise Christianity into the European and American academic male sphere (on liberal theology, see James J. Buckley, “Revisionists and Liberals,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David E. Ford, 3rd ed. [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], 213–28).
- 8 An example of the first rationalistic conclusions on existential questions by a natural scientist is Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Books, 2006), and of mystical-religious Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration on the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1975).
- 9 It has to be noted that not all religious studies would fit in this category. See, for example, Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, “Introduction,” in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, eds. Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 1–80.

- 10 Lesslie Newbigin's concern for maintaining trust in science under the onslaught of postmodern critique is quite telling, especially when he considers that it is Christian theologian's responsibility to do so. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
- 11 On plausibility patterns, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1966]), 110–21.
- 12 See Lawrence Cahoon, "Introduction," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1–13, 1–2.
- 13 See Mika Vähäkangas, "Can the Study of Mission Become Postcolonial? On Mission Studies in Today's World," *Ortodoksia* 56 (2016): 39–64.
- 14 In Tanzania, Bruno Gutmann (1876–1966) would serve as a paradigmatic pioneer-era example, whereas Raimo Harjula is a later missionary example of a champion of African theology and study of African traditions. See Ernst Jaeschke, *Bruno Gutmann, His Life, His Thoughts, and His Work: An Early Attempt at a Theology in an African Context* (Erlangen: Verlag der ev.-luth. Mission, 1985); Raimo Harjula, *God and the Sun in Meru Thought*, *Annals of the Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics* 16 (Helsinki: The Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, 1969); Raimo Harjula, "Towards a Theologia Africana," *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 58 (1970): 88–102.
- 15 E.g. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie: Das Neue Testament in Licht der Bibelkritik* (Hamburg: Furche, 1964).
- 16 See Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation*, *Studia Theologica Lundensia* 42 (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988), 9–10.
- 17 In this sense, it is telling that the history of the International Association for Mission Studies was titled *Witness for World Christianity*. See Gerard H. Anderson et al., *Witness for World Christianity: The International Association for Mission Studies 1972–2012* (New Haven, CT: OMSC Publications, 2012).
- 18 This was clearly visible in the International Association for Mission Studies general assembly in Seoul in 2016, where there were about 130 papers and only a small minority took a purely theoretical-theological approach, in comparison to different empirically based papers.
- 19 See Stephen Bevans, "Migration and Mission: Pastoral Challenges, Theological Insights," in *Reforming Theology, Migrating Church, Transforming Society: A Compendium for Ecumenical Education*, eds. Uta André, Benjamin Simon, and Lars Röser-Israel (Geneva: WCC, 2017), 178–91, 179.
- 20 See Matheny, *Contextual Theology*, 3.
- 21 Frostin, *Liberation Theology*, 6–11.
- 22 Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes, and Joel Robbins, "The Anthropology of Christianity," *The Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1139–58.
- 23 Michael Jackson's book title *At Home in the World* describes well this ideal. Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).
- 24 On the complicated relations between the researcher and the researched when both are stakeholders in the same community, see Mika Vähäkangas, "Om mig, den andre och mig i den andre: Med Weber och Lévy-Bruhl på besök hos en tanzanisk helare," in *Årsbok 2014*, ed. Henrik Rahm (Lund: Vetenskapssocieteten i Lund, 2014), 158–73.
- 25 On Kimbanguists as quasi-others, see Mika Vähäkangas, "How to Respect the Religious Quasi-Other? Methodological Considerations on Studying the Kimbanguist Doctrine of Incarnation," in *Faith in African Lived Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives*, eds. Karin Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

- 26 On postcoloniality, see, for example, Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- 27 This insight is extensively expressed in the Nordic joint Master's programme Religious Roots of Europe, where the contributions of all three monotheistic religions to European identity and culture are studied. See www.ctr.lu.se/utbildning/nordisk-masterutbildning-religious-roots-of-europe-120-hp, accessed March 20, 2017.
- 28 Mika Vähäkangas, "Theo-logical Positions vis-à-vis Syncretism," in *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism: Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion*, eds. Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 68–87.
- 29 For example, in Münster, there is Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic theology, and at the Free University of Amsterdam, Protestant and Islamic theology. This approach comes close to the second of the three alternatives for theology described by Moltmann (*Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, 220–21). On Islamic theology in northern European universities, see Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Islamic University Theology," *Studia Theologica* 70, no. 2 (2016): 127–44.
- 30 Comparative theologies could be seen as theologies where different faith traditions are involved in the theological argumentation in a comparative manner, whereas in interreligious theology, the resulting theology consciously takes influences and contexts from several religions. However, they can be defined in various ways. See e.g. Paul Knitter, "Comparative Theology Is Not 'Business-as-Usual Theology': Personal Witness from a Buddhist Christian," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35 (2015): 181–92. See also David Tracy, "Theology: Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 14 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 446–55; Leirvik, "Islamic University Theology," 133.
- 31 The concept of pluralism is tricky in theologies of religions, because there does not exist a consensus on what pluralism might mean. Thus, Gavin D'Costa analyses that many theologians who perceive themselves as pluralists actually are not such. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).
- 32 John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 178.

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