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Introduction

“Living God, renew and transform us.”

Hanns Lessing

This theme, inspired by Romans 12:2, guided the General Council that met 29 June to 7 July 2017 in Leipzig, Germany, in its endeavour to discern the path of the World Communion of Reformed Churches for the next seven years.

In the year of the celebration of the 500th anniversary the theme reconfirms the centrality of the Word of the “Living God” to reclaim Reformed identity and connects it with the two main objectives that guide the work of the WCRC: 1) the call to “renewal” and “transformation” underscores the commitment to *justice*; 2) the emphasis to reconsider the meaning of “us” in the light of the presence of the Living God guides the understanding of *communion*.

The first two issues of the 67th volume of *Reformed World* publish the Bible studies and keynote addresses that were presented to the General Council. In 2017 the Council followed an elaborate discernment model that allowed everyone to discuss all input to the Council in *Discernment Groups*. These groups were called to consider the direction of the WCRC in the main areas of its work—*theology, justice, gender justice, mission and communion*—and these addresses and Bible studies provided important foundational thoughts to this work.

This first issue of these two editions includes the contributions on the themes of *theology, justice and gender justice*. Bible studies and inputs dealing with *mission and communion* can be found in Volume 67, No. 2.

The Council opened with a strong emphasis on *justice*. George Zachariah from Bangalore, India, opened the discussions with an address reemphasizing the WCRC’s commitment to *justice* in a provocative exegesis of the three aspects of the Council theme: The Living God calls all of creation to never comply with marginalization and exploitation but strive towards a “communion of the multitude,” a communion of the marginalized that embodies the politics of the crucified Christ by forming a “borderless church” and a “world without walls.” This message was taken up by the Dutch theologian Janneke Stegeman who interpreted the challenge of the communion of the multitude for the identity of the Global North that is built on the legacy of colonialism.

On the *theology* day on 30 June the Council engaged with the theme “Living God.” In her Bible study of Jeremiah 10:1-10 Bae Hyun-ju, professor of New Testament



studies in Busan, South Korea, discerned the idolatries of today and developed the idea of an “exodus out of the shadow of death” that begins with *metanoia* and leads into a pilgrimage of justice and peace.

The Council then was graced to listen to an address by Professor Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann denounced the “dead gods” of racism, nationalism, capitalism and terrorism as “gods of death” that demand sacrifices and contrasted them with the “joy of the living God.” The “sun of righteousness” proclaims the “justification of the victims,” institutes a “just law” for all creation and leads to the fullness of life. After the address the WCRC honoured Moltmann for his lifelong contribution to the development of Reformed life and thought, and the Council thanked him with standing ovations.

Nadia Marais (South Africa), Isabella Novsima (Indonesia) and Marisa Strizzi (Argentina) engaged with Moltmann’s understanding of the living God and extended his interpretation to different parts of life. Marais read the idea in the light of Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s concept of “a church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene” and emphasized that a church in this spirit cannot exclude its daughters, its queer children and others that do not conform to general expectations.

Novsima applied Moltmann’s thoughts to the situation of people living with disabilities and identified the “an-apathic” spirit of the living God in the life of those that through depression and trauma became entirely apathetic—even to the presence of the spirits of the deceased.

Strizzi interpreted life as tissue, which at close examination appears as a “web of otherness” that does not homogenize the fibres of its mesh but wisely and lovingly weaves them together. This metaphor allows us to perceive the value of life and even its transcendence as a biological phenomenon, which can help us to overcome the traditional notion of an individual salvation and help us to open ourselves “to our shared life, which is eternal life pounding in everyday life.”

Engaging with all these inputs the General Council determined the future direction of the theological work of the WCRC:

- The Council moved to take up the “unfinished agenda of the Reformation” and to recommit to objectives like the principle of the Reformed church always reforming according to the Word of God, the continuing relevance of the Barmen Declaration and the confessions of Belhar and Accra and the inseparable link between evangelization and justice.

- The Council affirmed operative principles for the theological work of the WCRC, such as the commitment to give voice to the faith experiences of people from all continents and to the diversity of voices, particularly those of women and young people.
- The Council finally committed itself to a continuing engagement with ecumenical partners that is also open to new partners that should be guided by the principle that such exercises should be relevant for the WCRC and its member churches' mission of unity and justice and that a global perspective rooted in contextual realities should be applied.

The wording of the actions of the General Council can be found in the Proceedings of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches that shall be published soon.

Hanns Lessing is the World Communion of Reformed Churches' General Council coordinator and incoming executive secretary for theology and communion.



Towards a Communion of the Multitude: Living God, Renew and Transform Us

George Zachariah

Confessing Faith in the “Tense Present”

Chris Ferguson, our general secretary, in his reflections on the theme of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, observes that, “the Reformation commemoration is for us not about theological nostalgia. It is about putting the Reformation into the present tense. This means not just the here and now; it means bringing Reformed traditions, theology and the confessing faith stance into the tense present—into the tensions, conflicts, violence, suffering, beauty, wonder and promise of this historical moment.”¹

We see a similar affirmation in the words of Yolanda Pierce in her reflections on the “tense present” that the African American community experiences today in the United States of America. “Even as the disciples of Jesus grieved at the foot of the cross, they understood there was work to be done. The work of justice is deeply political and requires an engagement in this present world. With tears in our eyes, we are called to march, rally, petition, sing, dance, create art, and use whatever gifts and talents we possess for the work of justice. The work of justice is deeply theological. A grieving people need a theology for such a time as this, a theology that speaks to this present age.”²

How do we theologically engage with the “tense present?” How do we live out our Reformed faith and tradition in the “tense present?” How do we re-imagine our Communion and our churches as signs and sacraments of life in the “tense present?” What is the meaning of renewal and transformation in the “tense present?” How do we define the meaning of “us” in the “tense present?” Brothers and sisters, I invite you to a journey seeking tentative answers to these questions to guide us in our deliberations during this Council meeting. Perhaps the prayer that Yolanda Pierce wrote on the wake of Ferguson, “A Litany for Those Not Ready for Healing,” may inspire and inform us in this journey even as we grapple with these questions:

- Let us not rush to the language of healing, before understanding the fullness of the injury and the depth of the wound.

1 Chris Ferguson, “Preface,” in *Prayerful Preparation: Exploring the 2017 General Council Theme*, (Hannover: WCRC, 2016), i.

2 Yolanda Pierce, “A Theology for the Grieving People,” In *Sojourners*, 8-10-2015, <https://sojo.net/articles/how-blacklivesmatter-changed-my-theology/theology-grieving-people>

- Let us not rush to offer a band-aid, when the gaping wound requires surgery and complete reconstruction.
- Let us not offer false equivalencies, thereby diminishing the particular pain being felt in a particular circumstance in a particular historical moment.
- Let us not speak of reconciliation without speaking of reparations and restoration, or how we can repair the breach and how we can restore the loss.
- Let us not rush past the loss of this mother's child, this father's child... someone's beloved son.
- Let us not value property over people; let us not protect material objects while human lives hang in the balance.
- Let us not value a false peace over a righteous justice.
- Let us not be afraid to sit with the ugliness, the messiness, and the pain that is life in community together.
- Let us not offer clichés to the grieving, those whose hearts are being torn asunder.

Instead...

- Let us mourn black and brown men and women, those killed extrajudicially every 28 hours.
- Let us lament the loss of a teenager, dead at the hands of a police officer who described him as a demon.
- Let us weep at a criminal justice system, which is neither blind nor just.
- Let us call for the mourning men and the wailing women, those willing to rend their garments of privilege and ease, and sit in the ashes of this nation's original sin.
- Let us be silent when we don't know what to say.
- Let us be humble and listen to the pain, rage, and grief pouring from the lips of our neighbors and friends.
- Let us decrease, so that our brothers and sisters who live on the underside of history may increase.



- Let us pray with our eyes open and our feet firmly planted on the ground
- Let us listen to the shattering glass and let us smell the purifying fires, for it is the language of the unheard.³

Reformation was a movement of the unheard. It was a counter-hegemonic movement from below to de-centre the church. All human initiatives in history, unfortunately, have the potential to become oppressive, thanks to the reality of sin and our inability for self-redemption. When we absolutize our fragmentary liberation experiences as ultimate victories, we fail to recognize the pervading hegemonic presence of the empire within us which lures us to internalize and embrace the logic and culture of the very systems that we destroyed in our liberation struggles. History of Christianity testifies that the church is not immune to the possibility to get degenerated into life-denying institutions that legitimize and perpetuate injustice and dominant interests. Betrayal of the original vision is therefore a tragic possibility inherent in all human initiatives including the church.

Nevertheless, history also teaches us that such situations inspire the emergence of radical movements of renewal and reformation from the margins. Biblical witness of the life-giving Spirit that hovers over chaotic situations and brings about life and meaning further inspires us to believe in the divine project of renewal and transformation. Said differently, Reformation was the divine project of making all things new, and we are called to continue to participate in this mission in our times. Even as we celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of Reformation, we need to place Reformation in the tradition of all subversive movements in history that tried to critique the distortion of movements into hierarchical and authoritarian institutions and to midwife the birth of alternative movements to foster life in community. To put it differently, the vocation of the Reformed church is not to romanticize the past and to live in the present, glorifying the past; rather our vocation is to reclaim the subversive faith inherent in our tradition, by putting the spirit of “protest” back in our tradition, theology, faith practices and public witness. Here, the voices of the unheard are the signs of the time that should lead us and inform us in our public witness. With this commitment, let us listen to the laments, melodies, slogans and shouts of the unheard so that we will be renewed and transformed to be a healing and transforming presence in our respective communities.

3 <http://yolandapierce.blogspot.in/2014/11/>

Living God...

Remembrance is always a doxology, and the remembrance of Reformation is an act of thanksgiving for the divine inspiration that challenged people in different generations to be audacious enough to confront the powers that be and proclaim, "here we stand" at the cost of their very lives. Our theme for this gathering is a prayer, and in this prayer, we confess God as the living God. Confessing God as living God is a profound political statement in our context of empire where we are surrounded with the ungoods who bless and sanction genocide and ecocide to satisfy the greed and domination of a tiny minority. Reformed faith is more than a confession; it is a confessing faith. It is a faith that incarnates in particular historical contexts by confessing the God of life, contesting the lordship of the ungoods. In other words, our theme is more than an innocent prayer, it is a call to identify the ungoods of our times and to contest and annihilate them.

Prayer, according to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism and falsehoods."⁴ Prayer is a subversive activity that contests and overthrows the prevailing sinful order and its presiding deities. The story of the golden calf invites us to critically evaluate our faith to see whether we have replaced the living God of the oppressed with the ungoods of power, prosperity and privilege. Idolatry is nothing but the fetishization of our imperial projects, and liturgy in the context of idolatry celebrates the sacrifice of the powerless and the voiceless in the altar of neo-liberal globalization, racism, patriarchy, homophobia and fascism.

The history of Christianity is also the history of the worship of the golden calves. Ungoods are created in history to offer spiritual and theological legitimization to the pyramids of injustice and exclusion. For Sebastian Kappen, the Indian Christian Jesuit theologian, the Christian ungod "is the god whom Christians fashioned to legitimize their lust for wealth and power. It is the Christian ungod who authorized the Christian kings to colonize and enslave all pagan nations and to exterminate indigenous tribes. It is the Christian ungod who permitted the trans-Atlantic slave trade involving more than 30 million Africans. In short, the Christian ungod is a god who takes the side of the affluent against the poor, of the powerful against the weak, a god with hands dripping with the blood of the innocent."⁵

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 263.

5 Sebastian Kappen, *Spirituality in the Age of Recolonization*, Bangalore: Visthar, 1995, 3.



Articulating the experience of the enslaved Africans, Vincent Harding describes their encounter with the Christian ungod, the American Christ: “We first met this Christ on slave ships. We heard his name sung in praise while we died in our thousands, chained in stinking holds beneath the decks, locked in with terror and disease and sad memories of our families and homes. When we leaped from the decks to be seized by sharks we saw his name carved in the ship’s solid sides. When our women were raped in the cabins, they must have noted the great and holy books on the shelves. Our introduction to this Christ was not propitious and the horrors continued on America’s soil.”⁶

As the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and we need to listen to their voices. When the German churches legitimized the fascist tyranny of the Nazi regime, the Confessing Church came out with the Barmen Declaration affirming that, “we reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.” In the context of apartheid, the Confession of Belhar rejected “any doctrine which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.”

The Accra Confession, in its covenanting for justice rejected “any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations—gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.” The *Kairos* document in its critique of state theology observed that, “State theology is simply the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonizes the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy.” The campaign of the National Council of Churches in India, “no one can serve Christ and caste,” was yet another attempt to recognize the presence of ungoods within us, and to denounce them.

We invoke the God of life in a context where dominant expressions of Christianity, with their distorted theology, liturgy, and morality continue to recruit its followers to be idol worshippers. We have lost our ability to

6 Vincent Harding, “Black Power and the American Christ,” in Floyd Barbour, ed., *The Black Power Revolt*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, 86.

distinguish between the God of life and the ungod of prosperity and power. We have become devotees of the golden calves. In our times, it is not only illegitimate to speak against the golden calves, but it can also cost our life. Egypt is around us and within us, and we need to discern it and gather the prophetic rage to destroy the golden calves of our times. It is our faith imperative to occupy our churches, our spiritual practices, and our theologies, so that we may reclaim them from the worship of the ungod. We become the disciples of the living God in our unending journey towards freedom, dismantling the pyramids of systemic sin and evil. Even as we pray together, Living God, during this General Council meeting, it is a lament that mourns and exposes the co-option of our faith, doctrines, spirituality, Scripture and even our god by the forces of death and destruction. It is a prayer of confession that our faith is being incorporated into the logic of the empire. It is also a prayer of protest and re-imagination; reclaiming God as the Living God, the one who authors life and flourishes the movement of life in the midst of life-negating forces.

Reformed theology is reforming theology, and hence “Living God” is a contextual confession of the Reformed faith. As Jürgen Moltmann beautifully describes, Reformed theology is a reformatory theology which is not “grounded in confessional statements laid down once and for all, nor is it based on a tradition of infallible and irreformable doctrinal decisions.... It is grounded in the ‘reformation’ of the church ‘according to the Word of God’ attested in Holy Scripture, which is to be confessed anew in each new situation.”⁷ Said differently, Reformed theology is reforming theology, and its vocation is to make reformation a permanent experience in the life of the church. Reformation is therefore “an event that keeps church and theology breathless with suspense, an event that infuses church and theology with the breath of life, a story that is constantly making history, an event that cannot be concluded in this world, a process that will come to fulfillment and to rest only in the Parousia of Christ.”⁸ However, it does not mean that reformatory theology with its emphasis on contextual articulations reduce theology and faith into political and ethical rhetoric and actions. Reformulating the doctrine of God and searching collectively who Jesus Christ is for us in our context are profoundly theological acts which will make Reformation a contemporary experience. “Living God,” is therefore a contextual theological reformulation of God in a context of “impossibility of life.”

7 Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda,” in David Willis and Michael Welker, eds., *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Tradition*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999, 120.

8 Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda,” 121.



Renewal and Transformation: Being Confessional in the Public Sphere

Confessions are theological statements that articulate the fundamental doctrinal positions of the church. In many cases confessional statements are fixed in content and form and non-negotiable as they contain the universal and timeless truth and beliefs of the church. However, Reformed churches are confessing churches, where the confessional statements serve as guidelines for churches in particular contexts to become confessing churches, affirming contextual reformulations of the confessions. As Jürgen Moltmann rightly observes, “confessions are not supposed to be rigid formulas, incomprehensible to many. Confessions are meant to express in concrete terms what needs to be said in the name of God concerning matters of faith here and now.”⁹ Therefore, it is imperative on us to negotiate our non-negotiable confessions, informed by our discernment of the signs of the times, to transform them into gospels of renewal and transformation in our neighborhoods and communities. In that process, we become a confessing church proclaiming our faith in the living God, by disrupting life-denying powers and principalities.

Seong-Won Park succinctly presents the Reformed understanding of confessing in the following words:

Confessing is the resistance of saying no to the idolatrous powers that claim ultimate authority. Confessing is the denunciation of powers that are evil and demonic. Confessing is the firm belief in God who is sovereign over life on earth, in God who promises the new garden of life in the new heaven and the new earth. That is to say, confessing is the visioning of this new life. Confessing is the foundation of all imaginations about a new future. Confessing is the celebration of the feast of life in times of *kairos*. Confessing is the taking of a stance on a definite alternative, even if it is not perfect and ultimate. Confessing is participation in the movement of resistance in solidarity with the people. Confessing is a humble posture, being open completely to all persons of deep religious or philosophical commitment.¹⁰

This understanding of confessing is not a theoretical construction developed in a library. Rather it is the commentary of the daring witness of our ancestors—

9 Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda,” 123.

10 Seong-Won Park, “A Journey for Life: From Debrecen to Accra and beyond,” in *Reformed World*, Vol. 55, No.3, September 2005, 198.

ancestors in the Reformed tradition, who were filled with prophetic courage and consciousness and witnessed the living God in the public sphere contesting the lordship of the powers that be. *Status Confessionis* is, therefore, the church becoming the real presence of the living God in concrete historical situations. According to Milan Opocensky, it “stems from the conviction that in an alarming situation of oppression, exploitation, hypocrisy and heresy, when the boundaries between right and wrong, between good and evil are blurred, the integrity of the gospel and its proclamation are at stake.”¹¹ In such situations, the confessing church emerges and witnesses publicly the gospel of the living God, destabilizing the forces that unleash death and destruction. Our theme is, therefore, an invitation to practice this Reformed tradition of prophetic witness in the public sphere, through our spiritual and political engagement for renewal and transformation.

Renewal and Transformation: A Call to Creative Maladjustment

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed by the renewing* of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). How do we understand the meaning of renewal and transformation in our context even as we prepare ourselves to become a confessing church? For Apostle Paul, the present eon is a state of corruption, and hence being conformed to the present eon is to participate in its corruptness. Non-conformism is not a negative response. Our non-conformism towards the present eon is creative as it leads to resistance and transformation. As Paul Tillich reminds us, “a church in which the divine protest does not find a human voice through which it can speak has become conformed to this eon.”¹² Non-conformity is the resistance to idolatry. It is the critique of our attempts to absolutize ourselves, our church, our tradition, our nation and our community.

Non-conformism was a favorite slogan for Martin Luther King, Jr. For him nonconformity is creative when it is directed by a renewed and transformed life. “There are certain things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the

11 Milan Opocensky, “Processus Confessionis,” in Wallace M. Alston Jr., and Michael Welker, eds., *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003, 394.

12 Paul Tillich, “Do not be Conformed” in *The Eternal Now*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963, 142.



inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating method of physical violence... The salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted."¹³ In a sermon based on Romans 12:1-2, King further elaborated his theology of creative maladjustment: "The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming majority."¹⁴

To be creatively maladjusted is an alternative worldview and behavior, a radical departure from what is usually expected. Creative maladjustment means to be aligned with the gospel imperative to be persistent on reversing any trend toward exclusion and discrimination, and to be engaged in the struggles of the marginalized. Creative maladjustment means to be inclusive and to reject the purity maps and codes of the dominant. Creative maladjustment, as Paul observes, is not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Renewal and transformation begin with a new baptismal vow where we denounce conformity to the prevailing order and intend to live a life of creative maladjustment. This requires the courage to identify systemic evils, to name them, to challenge them, and to eradicate them by participating in the ongoing struggles of the subaltern communities. Renewal and transformation challenge us to radical discipleship to incarnate God's power and embodied presence in history through our creative maladjustment for the sake of life.

Renewal and Transformation: Towards a Borderless Church

The Reformation commemoration is an occasion for the church to become self-reflexive and to undergo radical renewal and transformation. Church reformed is a church in need of continuous reformation. Like the Babylonian captivity of the medieval church, today the church is under new doctrinal and ecclesiastical captivity. Our theological formulations continue to remain elitist and racist, and our biblical reflections and liturgical practices are not sufficiently capable to inspire and inform the congregations in their discipleship journey to bring about healing and restoration in our communities. The church continues to remain as

13 James Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York: Harper Collins, 1986, 89.

14 <https://www.transformingcenter.org/2016/01/transformed-nonconformist/>

a centralized, hierarchical power structure without sufficient commitment to the virtues of democracy, transparency and accountability. Voices of dissent and non-conformism within the church are silenced violently. Subaltern communities who embraced Christianity as a means of liberation from structures and practices of discrimination and exclusion feel betrayed as they confront the same powers and principalities of darkness within the church. In a context when the church speaks the language of the empire and its liturgy and theology legitimize and perpetuate imperial interests, we need to sit in ashes and pray together, Living God, crucify the church!

Reformation continues to happen when spirit-filled communities assume their agency, assert their identity, and question the dominant power relations within the church. In that process, they identify theologies and ecclesial practices that legitimize and perpetuate injustice and marginalization. These are irruptions from the underside of the church, which are informed by the re-reading of Scripture and tradition, privileging the body-mediated experiences of those who are made voiceless and powerless. We see several such reformation movements within the church today, and they continue to destabilize the elitist, racist and patriarchal foundations of the church. M.M. Thomas articulates passionately the importance of continuous reformation in the church: “What is real church history? It is not the history of its Popes and Archbishops—no, not at all. It is the history of people who filled with the vision of a redeemed church, created strife and division within the church. It is the history of its reformers, of its heretics excommunicated, of its infidels martyred for causing revolution in the church. If we are to be worthy of that heritage let us make quarrels and more quarrels for the sake of its redemption.”¹⁵

The model of house is a dominant model that we use for church in our theological reflections. The house provides us a sense of identity and offers us security, social acceptance and power. Our membership in the church is based on our allegiance and obedience to the rules, regulations and the hierarchy. The social acceptance and the cultural capital of the church lure us to consider taking membership in the church not only as a symbol of pride and status but also as a wise investment. The identity of the house is determined by the fortified walls that keep the Other away from it. Said differently, it is our practices of exclusion which provide the house its identity. Our supremacy and honour are mediated through our practice of exclusion which discursively constructs the Other as impure, shameful and inferior. Another problem that is inherent to the model

15 M.M. Thomas, *Ideological Question within Christian Commitment*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1983, 29-30.



of house is its possibility to become an idol. When the household becomes an idol, we lose our ability to experience the Divine beyond the idol. A genuine soul search should help us to see whether we have reduced our tradition, liturgy and practices into new golden calves.

Church is not a monument that is built on the foundations of traditions and doctrines; rather it is an empowering and transforming experience that happens in the lives of the communities at the margins. Here church becomes an event. Church happens as fellowship, solidarity, love, care, compassion, justice and restoration in the lives of people, who go through the tragic experience of utter God-forsakenness. The model of the church here is no more the household with fortified walls and exclusive claims of supremacy and purity. Rather, the alternative model for the church happening is the model of street. In the context of death and destitution, the street represents our availability and accessibility to each other. It is this sense of mutuality and relationality that helps our brothers and sisters on the margins who barely hang on to life to face life with determination and reclaim their God-given humanity. Street is the abode of those who are thrown out from their homes. Street is also the home of those who are denied entry into houses because of their race, caste and sexual orientation. It is in the street that the “homeless” has redefined the concept and practice of “home.” Hence the street invites us to experience the happening of church in the most unexpected places. Is it possible for us to get out of the security and comfort of the idolized church to become part of the transformative experience of the church happening in the street? The Church of South India’s resolve to become a borderless church is worth mentioning here.¹⁶

The mission of the church is not to protect or defend our heritage, liturgy, doctrines, ecclesiastical offices or even Bible. Rather, we are called to midwife

¹⁶ Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, the general secretary of the Church of South India says, “Today we live in a neo-colonial, capitalistic world where exclusive communities, club memberships and gated communities are emerging. In such a scenario, how can the Church become a borderless community, discovering and acknowledging Christ among people of living faiths and religions? The theological understanding of a borderless community begins with faith in one God, the Creator. God’s glory penetrates all creation. It is in the act of creation that relationships are designed and expressed. Everything created are related to each other, and God relates Himself to creation.” [Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, “From Mission Compounds to a Borderless Church – Living in Harmony in a Multi-Religious Context: Contribution of the Basel Mission in the Light of Conversion and Religious Tolerance Debates in India Today” in *Interkulturelle Theologie* 1/2016 (January 2016): 115.]

the process of making these means of grace and the rich resources of our faith to incarnate in the street by exposing them to the challenges in the street. Church happens in our constant leap from house to street. When the church happens in the street, the street becomes an epiphanic space. The witness of the church in the street—our songs, our ministries of compassionate justice and care, our actions of solidarity, our struggles, our rituals—provides the community the foretaste of the eschatological banquet. “Church is not the end; it is the wrappings that cover the Divine gift that we await with anticipation: The Reign of God.” Our call is to strive together for the blossoming of God’s reign. In that journey, as Vitor Westhelle, the Brazilian Lutheran theologian reminds us, “church is a provisional reality; a transitional organization; and the vestibule of the Reign of God.”¹⁷

If we want to make reformation a living experience in the life of the church, it requires a costly commitment. As M. M. Thomas rightly observes, “there cannot be true church with the continuity of existence in the world. It is a contradiction in terms. Die and get resurrected—everyday a new fellowship—a new creation—not the old one continuing. That alone be Christ’s Church.”¹⁸

Renewal and Transformation: Towards a World without Walls

“We live in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all.” Yes, Accra was right. We live in a scandalous world that rejects the abundant life that the living God offers to the entire community of creation. This is not due to natural calamities or fate or the laziness of the poor and the marginalized. It is the manifestation of structural sin and systemic evil that are inherent in our contemporary projects of globalization, development and nationalism. Let us listen to the Zapatista movement: “Our misery meant the wealth of a few; that on the bones and the dust of our ancestors and our children the powerful built their house. That our steps could not enter that house, and that the light that brightened it was fed by the darkness imposed on our people. That the abundance on the table at that house was fed by the emptiness of our stomachs. That house’s roof and walls were built over the fragility of our bodies; and the health that filled its space resulted from our death; and the wisdom lived in that house nourished itself of our ignorance. The peace that sheltered it was war

17 Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

18 M.M. Thomas, *Ideological Question within Christian Commitment*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1983, 31.



waged on our people.”¹⁹ Yes, we live in a scandalous world.

A renewed and transformed church is called to be a witnessing presence in the public sphere, and hence it is a public church. State is a divine instrument to bring about legal justice in a fallen world. However, the church must be suspicious of the idolatrous tendencies of the state and be prophetic in denouncing all state theologies. Particularly, in the context of rising fascism, cultural nationalism and exceptionalism we need to draw inspiration from the Barmen Declaration and become confessing churches in our respective contexts. “We reject the false doctrine that there could be 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.” We need to invoke the memory of our ancestors and be present in our history reminding the state of its moral limits.

In a world infected with racism, casteism, patriarchy, xenophobia and homophobia, the Reformed tradition invites us to revisit the Belhar Confession and to become an alternative community that practices reconciliation and celebration of diversity. As Belhar reminds us, “Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another.” Renewal and transformation should enable the church to become an Easter community that manifests proleptically the signs of the reign of God in the here and now. The first step to become an Easter community is to be conscious of our privileges as individuals and churches and immerse in the struggles of the Other. All lives do matter. But remember this slogan did not arise in a vacuum; it was a response and a counter-point to the Black Lives Matter movement. Along with Pope Francis, we should show the courage to pronounce divine judgment on people and rulers “who think only about building walls, and not building bridges.”

What has Reformed faith to do with subaltern political activism in the public sphere? In what way do the politics that emerge from the creative expressions of the excluded and the incarcerated inform the theological in our times? In our times, public witness seems to be reduced to an apolitical advocacy work, which Arundhati Roy calls “the NGO-ization of resistance.” For her, such social interventions “defuse political anger” and turn “people into dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance.” “Apolitical (and therefore,

19 Quoted in Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, 173.

actually, extremely political) distress reports from poor countries and war zones eventually make the (dark) people of those (dark) countries seem like pathological victims. Another malnourished Indian, another starving Ethiopian, another Afghan refugee camp, another maimed Sudanese...in need of the white man's help. They unwittingly reinforce racist stereotypes and reaffirm the achievements, the comforts and the compassion (the tough love) of Western civilization. They're the secular missionaries of the modern world." NGO-ization of our witness "turns confrontation into negotiation. It depoliticizes resistance."

Roy's critique of dominant forms of social interventions are extremely relevant for us as we explore the nature and challenges of our public witness as Reformed tradition. Remember, "the NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job. With a few perks thrown in. Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary."²⁰ Renewal and transformation should lead us to radical discernment in choosing the politics of our public witness.

How do we theologically articulate our political witness? According to Mark Lewis Taylor we need to begin our theological re-imagination from the context of the weight of the imposed social suffering and its theological legitimization. The weight of the world, for Taylor, is the imposed social suffering caused by racism, economic injustice, gender discrimination and the diverse ways in which communities are being constructed as the "other." Emancipatory politics is the agonistic politics of the communities that are forced to bear the weight of the world. They are not merely weighed-down victims; rather they are communities with moral agency—the new subjects of the emancipatory politics, who are committed to "weigh-in." "This weighing-in occurs wherever weight concentrates, not just in the prison houses, but also in the warehouses of neglect that hold our infirm, aged and mentally distressed—in the shanty towns of the poor, every "Gaza" where bodies are amassed, abandoned, reckoned disposable, weighed, finally, as of no account."²¹

The theological, as Taylor proposes, "traces and theorizes the ways that persons and groups rendered subordinate and vulnerable by agonistic politics and its systemic imposed social suffering nevertheless haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems. The theological traces and theorizes

²⁰ <http://massalijn.nl/new/the-ngo-ization-of-resistance/>

²¹ Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, 46.



the way this haunting congeals into specters and forces both threatening and promising alternative patterns and lifeways.”²² It is in such places, as Arvind Nirmal reminds us, that the church should engage in public witness: “The ‘original’ and the ‘given’ in this context is our own situation, our own history, our own struggles, our own aspirations, our own fears and our own hopes. God is dynamically present in these. He [sic] is savingly active in these. This is where we have to discern the Gospel happening and becoming.”²³

Renewal and Transformation: Towards a Redeemed Earth

Ecological justice has been central to the life and witness of the World Communion of Reformed Churches for the past several decades. Exposing the correlation between neo-liberal capitalism and the ecological crisis, the Accra Confession concludes with the passionate assertion that “we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing, and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (Deuteronomy 30.19).” Choosing life is a political action, and we need to be intersectional in our analysis and engagement to redeem the earth.

“Upper caste farmers use machines to plough their land, heightening the climate crisis with fertilizer and other things. Our impact on the climate is much smaller. Larger farmers grow money, we grow food.”²⁴ This is an observation made at the COP 15 Summit in Copenhagen by Dalit women from India. For Berta Cáceres, the Honduran indigenous rights campaigner, “there is an imposition of a project of domination, of violent oppression, of militarization, of violation of human rights, of transnationalization, of the turning over of the riches and sovereignty of the land to corporate capital, for it to privatize energy, the rivers, the land; for mining exploitation; for the creation of development zones.”²⁵ What we find in these observations is an alternative problematization of the ecological crisis which exposes the correlation between racism, casteism, patriarchy, capitalism and the ecological crisis. Reflecting upon the experience of the Pacific islanders, Maina Talia from Tuvalu observes that, “Relocation literally means our death, as it entails profound losses for us—loss of our land, loss of our culture, loss of our

22 Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World*, 46.

23 Quoted in Franklyn J. Balasundaram, *Prophetic Voices of Asia—Part II*, Colombo: Logos, 1994, 81.

24 <http://idsn.org/resources/case-stories/upper-caste-farmers-grow-money-we-grow-food/>

25 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/honduran-indigenous-rights-campaigner-wins-goldman-prize>

language and the loss of our identity."²⁶

These are voices that contest our “feel-good environmentalism” where we valorize terms such as “*oikos*” and “our common home,” and at the same time engage in the politics of wall-building, privatizing the *oikos*. James Cone shifts this discussion into a different level by stating that, the basic question for us is not whether we are concerned about the future of the earth, but “whose earth is it, anyway?”²⁷ What we find in Cone’s disturbing contestation is an invitation to go beyond romanticizing the *oikos* and to perceive the ecological crisis as an injustice caused by the colonization of the commons and to engage in the struggles for the decolonization of the earth.

The historic struggle of the Standing Rock is a conflict between two world views. On the one side, we see the proponents of the doctrine that commons is merely a warehouse of lifeless materials that have been given to some of us by God or conquest, to consume and exploit. Human vocation, according to this doctrine, is to convert water, soils, minerals and wild lives into corporate wealth, and the state is committed to support and protect this plunder. On the other side, we see people who consider commons as a nourishing gift to all beings. The fertile soil, the fresh water, the clear air and the creatures require gratitude and respect. These gifts are not commodities. It is the communion of the subsistence communities that ensure the flourishing of the commons.

Commons are sanctuaries of the community of creation, created co-creators, who continue God’s creative work by birthing, nurturing, protecting and celebrating life. It is in the commons that we practice our vocation to till and to keep the earth. The commons is the sacred space where we celebrate communion with the Creator in the community of our siblings—the plants, the birds, the water bodies, and the air. Commons is the Scripture that reveals the glory of God, and our life together as community of creation in the commons is the true doxology. Colonization of the commons is, therefore, a desecration of this sacred space and sacred communion, and hence a sin against God.

Renewal and transformation should enable us to discern commons as God-indwelling sanctuaries. A non-anthropocentric theological anthropology,

26 Maina Talia, “We Have No Right to be Silent: The Cry of a Climate Victim,” in *Theologies and Cultures*, Vol. XII, No. 2, December 2015, 17.

27 James H. Cone, “Whose Earth is it, Anyway?” in Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (Eds.) *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001), 30, 32.



informed by the paradigm of commons, invites us to be the priests of the commons. In the context of the ecological crisis, we as a Communion are called to be a subversive and creative presence, engaging in the mission of “commoning.” “Commoning” signifies commons as verb; an active political engagement through which the community of creation flourishes its life and continues to nurture, protect and celebrate life. Church happens when “commoning” becomes a reality in our communities. “Commoning” invites us to create sanctuaries that provide solidarity and hospitality to refugees and undocumented people, defying the policies of our states and religious communities. In the context of social, economic and ecological injustice, “commoning” is the appropriate form of public witness of the living God.

Us: Towards a Communion of the Multitude

Today, in Leipzig, we begin a journey as a Communion that confesses our faith in the God of life. It is a journey of thanksgiving, introspection, confession, repentance, intercession and affirmation. It is a journey that will equip and inspire us to a new discipleship journey to witness the living God in the midst of empire. Where do we go from here? What do we mean by “us?” How do we re-imagine Communion in our context? Drawing from the insights of the Indian theologian Yahu Vinayaraj,²⁸ let me conclude with the vision of a communion of the multitude.

We are all caught up in the reality of empire which imposes its subjectivity on all living beings. Empire as sovereignty forms our subjectivities with a neo-liberal capitalist worldview. Multitude is the new communion of subjectivity that resists empire from within, challenging its borders. It is the living alternative that grows within empire. Multitude consists of a host of “irreducible singularities.” Multitude is a political subject with radical social consciousness to transform the world. While retaining their differences, multitude strives together for a common alternative life—the Commonwealth. It is a democracy that invites all to share and participate in the commons—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, all nature’s bounty—the habitat of the community of creation. Multitude is, therefore, an anti-imperial communion of diverse communities, practicing the art of resistance and creating alternatives to empire.

A communion of the multitude is a communion of de-imperialized subjectivities. It is a community that refuses to be co-opted by empire to be incorporated into

28 Yahu Vinayaraj, *Empire, Multitude, and the Church: Theology after Hardt and Negri*, New Delhi: ISPK, 2017.

the imperial logic. Cross is the assurance for us to believe in the possibility to become de-imperialized subjectivities. The vocation of the communion of the multitude is to disrupt the culture of empire. The communion of the multitude is a communion of the marginalized and it embodies the politics of the Crucified Christ. It is in our communion with the subaltern social movements that we re-imagine the meaning of “us” and become the communion of the multitude.

“Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe. The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling—their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability. Remember this: We be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”²⁹

Living God, renew and transform us so that we may become a community of the multitude with anti-imperialistic imaginations and subjectivities. Living God, renew and transform us so that through our alternative politics we may destabilize the power of empire. Living God, renew and transform us so that we may permeate our surroundings with the de-imperializing gospel of the Cross and flourish the movement of life in the commons.

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29 Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, 86.



“Living God, renew and transform us” A Response to George Zachariah

Janneke Stegeman

Thank you very much, George, for your living words that make us feel uncomfortable—which is what we need. Thank you for defining—or redefining maybe—Reformation as a counter-hegemonic movement, a subversive movement. It focuses our attention to power—something often overlooked in church and theology. If we believe in justice, we need to understand the complex ways in which power functions; power not as an absolute, but as something that is continually negotiated between centre and margin. We need to uncover how narratives are used to protect abusive and dehumanizing use of power and to cover up its “collateral damage.” Colonial logic protects the interest of those in the centre; Reformation as a subversive moment questions what the centre considers normal.

The Reformation challenged the authority to voice and shape Christian tradition. I believe that today voices from the margins, rather than my voice that is rather located in the centre, are needed to re-reform our tradition. Privilege creates powerful bubbles. My privileges hinder me to recognize much of the liberating force of Reformed tradition, and it equally hinders me to see where and how this same tradition confines and damages lives.

Thank you also for citing subversive voices of our time, and making these voices that speak truth to power present here among us. Voices like theirs and yours are important, even crucial—for the future of the Christianity, and of our planet.

The Global North

Our earth, and we, the human species, are in danger. We live in the age of the Anthropocene—a new geological epoch in which the influence of the human species is becoming clear—and it is a destructive influence. Here I need to point out my own social location: I am from the Netherlands, located in the Global North, in Europe. Our wealth is obscene: the top one percent of the global population has accumulated more than the bottom two-thirds put together. The majority of those living in abject poverty live in the Global South. We exploit others to live like we do—and we make sure this exploitation remains invisible and does not disturb our lives: others who make our clothes, others who live where our food grows, others who suffer the consequences of our weapon industry—others who suffer the bulk of the effects of climate change. I am a

white woman, highly educated, healthy, cisgendered, heterosexual—privileged in many ways.

Can we become a multitude in communion?

“Multitude” in the sense in which George used it cannot come into being unless we locate and contextualize ourselves, unless we unpack the many ways in which we construct differences and hierarchies between our bodies—in terms of colour, gender, class, sexuality.

I cannot and I do not want to pretend that Christianity as it has been and is expressed in the Global North is an innocent bystander of colonialism, neoliberal globalization, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia and fascism. George, you cited the late Vincent Harding on the god of the enslaved. This quote is horrifying: it invokes the immense human suffering of the middle passage. It makes us acutely aware of what Christianity became in the hands of colonizers.

This quote also testifies to the strength and the resistance of those who were enslaved. Their Christianity was not the Christianity of the enslavers. They re-invented Christianity, they transformed it—into something no longer oppressive and dehumanizing, but life-giving. What I think we need to be very explicit about, and aware of, is the existence of such different Christianities, and of the ways in which forms of Christianity that allowed its followers to enslave other human beings is still alive among us—because we have not yet fully unpacked this ideology. We have not dared yet to understand how our Christianity and our privileges are intertwined.

I cannot claim Vincent Harding or Yolanda Pierce as part of my tradition. They are not. They speak truth to imperial power, and in that equation I represent power, they represent truth. Their voices are prophetic voices, blessing us by uncovering the dehumanizing effects of the constructions of “black” and “white.”

Idealizing our traditions—whether they are national or religious, or both—is highly dangerous, and I am afraid that such idealization is not absent from the way in which the Reformation is commemorated at present. We cannot reshape the Reformation into something innocent or nostalgic. The movement of Reformation is not only counter-hegemonic. This is where I want to enter the conversation.



Fear of loss of identity

Today, the image of tolerant Dutch colonial rule is slowly being broken down, and the voices of black and brown Dutch people who have always protested racism and colonialism are finally being acknowledged and heard—by some. This process uncovers the fragility of Dutch identity. They hear “racism,” and hear an accusation where in fact it is an invitation to engage with the reality of racism and whiteness, and acknowledge one’s position. It is not about the need to feel shame or guilt, but to acknowledge responsibility for the ways in which our colonial past continues in the present.

One of the fearful, angry responses is that Dutch post-Christian society now prides itself in its supposedly superior Judeo-Christian roots. I see a Eurocentrism that continues to see Europe as the only possible source of knowledge, freedom, democracy and truth. What I think we have to deal with is the loss of culture, identity, life-giving structures we inflicted on others, and that in this process we also destructed parts of our identity and humanity.

Dutch Calvinist colonialism

The Trekkers, white Calvinist colonizers with Dutch roots, identified themselves with Hebrews fleeing from Egyptian slavery. They derived moral authority from the Bible. Exegetes may respond by saying that the analogy is false. However, this protects the biblical narrative from criticism: as Palestinian exegetes taught me: we should also learn to read from the perspective of Canaanites.

I want to stress that a reformation-approach of tradition that is counter-hegemony can never arrive at a “pure” form of tradition—simply because it does not exist. Biblical narratives are never innocent; we have to be honest about the power struggles and hidden voices in the text. Ongoing reformation also means to me that we learn to struggle with the biblical narratives, without posing as if they are ours, and without idealizing them.

Palestine: a journey of personal reformation

I want to indicate my own journey of ongoing reformation, of discovering my provinciality, and elements in my tradition that need transformation. White theologians from the Global North such as myself need have not yet learned to contextualize themselves. We are trained to perceive subaltern voices as contextual, and to hear Western voices as universal. Such whiteness needs to be uncovered, provincialized and contextualized, and stripped of its innocence and the entitlement by which it speaks and positions itself.

For me, this journey began in Palestine. I want to unpack why it was so difficult for me—as it is to others from my context—to understand the call of the Palestinian Kairos Document.

I believe it is the failure to acknowledge the Dutch and European colonialism and the blindness to the privileges of white people from the Global North that blinds us to today's reality in Israel. Our perception of the Bible, the categories we use when we read it, the colonial binaries that have shaped our perspective and the colonized other we cling to is what is blinding us.

Yes, this is a theological issue—not because the Israelis and Palestinians are disputing religion, but because our understanding of the biblical text, Israel as a people, prevents us from analyzing the Israeli/Palestinian context. From our perspective, religion does play a role: at present we identify with Jewish Israelis much easier than we do with Palestinians, who are in majority Muslims.

In the media, journalists often appeal to the cliché that “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict goes back thousands of years.” But historically that is false; it largely goes back to the late nineteenth century and the emergence of Zionism. We do need to understand that the roots of our understanding and position goes back hundreds of years.

Protestant Zionism served as crucial inspiration to Jewish Zionism. It was born out of self-interest and anti-Judaism and even anti-semitism rather than love of Jews of Judaism. Christian Zionism originates in white Christians understanding themselves as the central protagonists of the biblical narratives. Protestantism contributed to the support of Israel as a settler-colonial state and to the silencing of Palestinian voices. We also need to acknowledge that in the Reformation anti-Semitism—that regarded Jews and Muslims as one category of Arabs—was present.

It is also—and I am aware this is very sensitive—a problem of our own anti-Semitism, and our failure to connect this reality to our own colonial past.

When I attempted to understand the position of my church towards Israel and Palestine, and, later, towards the Dutch colonial past, I became aware of parallels. In both cases, we pose as innocent and well-meaning outsiders.

Connecting histories of racialization

Paradoxically, I believe it is so hard to speak truth to power in the context of



Israel and Palestine because of our own history of exclusion of and violence against Jews. Because we represent “power” rather than “truth.”

Let me take you back to 15th century Iberia, where Christian diabolization of Jews went hand in hand with that of Muslims. The two stories of Jews and Muslims are often told in isolation, but in fact the two groups were subjected to the same inquisition and continued to live together within Muslim spaces. In the Reformation, too, Jews and Muslims were regarded as endangering Christianity. In that sense, the Reformation was not counter-hegemonic and not subversive.

Later, 19th century racist discourse declared not only Jews, and Muslims, but also Asians and Africans as inferior. Two Jews from the margins, now both living in the US, point out these parallels: Santiago Slabodsky, from Argentina, and Ella Shohat, who was born in Baghdad. Slabodsky makes clear that the histories of capitalism, colonialism, anti-Semitism and racism are interconnected. Ella Shohat underlines that 1492—the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain—has to be connected to the other 1492: the “discovery” of North America by Columbus.

For the largest part of European history, Jews fell into the same category as Palestinians and people of colour: they were racialized as non-white. We fail to see such connections. We fail to identify as the bearers of long traditions of anti-Semitism and rather accuse Muslims. Without understanding the links between colonialism, capitalism and racism Western European churches of the Reformation risk to continue to misunderstand their position in the world, their power, their responsibility. In such a situation, the image of multitude and communion of love and resistance remains a dream.

We tend to disconnect colonialism from (Western) Christianity, anti-Semitism from colonialism and Islamophobia. We need to be precise about which practices and theologies are racist, exclusive, elitist, sexist. We need to go further and much deeper in exposing the correlation between neoliberal capitalism and the ecological crisis, and not forget the role of the Reformed churches and theology from the Global North played. Colonialism centered the white person. It centred the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgendered male. Theology produced part of the software of that endeavor, to borrow a term from Mitri Raheb.

When we do start to make the connections between different histories of exclusion and racialization, we begin to see how much Reformation—in the sense of breaking down imperial forces—is necessary. Our appropriation of

Scripture is not one that understands power dynamics and the complexities of oppression and resistance. We have domesticated the Bible—a book containing such destabilizing and radical narratives—that keeps us from understanding contemporary forms of dehumanization and oppression.

I am afraid it is the same blind spot that prevents many Dutch Protestants to take growing aggression against Muslims seriously, to really see what the Palestinians are experiencing. It is our failure to see the destruction and deaths caused by our weapon industry. It is our understanding of our safety as the first concern.

Others, who are from the margins, such as Black Lives Matter activists, see the parallels between their oppression and that of Palestinians: protesters in Ferguson held up signs declaring solidarity with the people of Palestine. Palestinians posted pictures on social media with instructions of how to treat the inhalation of tear gas.

Challenging injustice and exclusion is going to cause stress, anger and insecurity among those in the centre. Typical for those in power is a preference for order over chaos, even if the order is unjust. They will not applaud efforts for change towards a less blatantly unjust world. Working towards justice is a struggle. We shouldn't worry or be shocked if indeed it looks and feels and smells like a struggle, and when it causes anger and frustration, even polarization. When those of us with privileges feel uncomfortable—that's good. Greet this feeling with a sense of joy, as it enables us to become aware of our privileges. We should be willing to pay a price—the price of sharing our power, losing our privileges.

I want to remind churches from the Global North, including myself as a member of such a church, that if the church is to be a borderless church, of multitude, we should not be too quick to understand ourselves as already part of it. We cannot use the language of inclusion here: we are not the ones to extend a welcome. Rather, when Reformation as a counter hegemonic movement takes place in the periphery, we are called to get up and move. This Reformation is inspired by the voices from the margins, and these voices we are called to listen, and listen more, and to learn, and be reformed and transformed.

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Bible Study **“Living God, we repent our idolatry; lead us to justice and peace” (Jeremiah 10:1-10)**

Hyun Ju Bae

I. Encountering the “Living God”

Good morning! I would like to begin our first Bible study with examining the richness and depth of the biblical designation “living God.” As this invocation will repeat itself during the worships and the Bible studies of this historic General Council, it deserves our primary attention. The theological reflection of the Bible is fundamentally shaped by the knowledge of the *living* God. The appellation “living God” appears very frequently in the Old Testament and occurs in the New Testament as well (Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalms 42:2, 84:2; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Jeremiah 10:10, 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26; Hosea 1:10; Matthew 16:16, 26:63; Acts 14:15; Romans 9:26; 2 Corinthians 3:3, 6:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Timothy 3:15, 4:10; Hebrews 9:14, 10:31, 12:22; Revelation 7:2; etc.). In the Bible, “living God” is a significant invocation of God that is uttered with profound wonder at the divine mystery. By pronouncing “living God,” believers stand before the God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) and are drawn into the amazing sphere of God’s presence, redemptive action in history and creative love for life.

First of all, “living God” is the holy and eternal God. The encounter with the immortal and infinite God who is supreme and majestic above all creatures brings up a “creature-feeling,” or a sense of nothingness (Rudolf Otto). Abraham said, “I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). Habakkuk expresses pointedly the human feeling arising from the encounter with the living God: “Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my ‘Holy One’ who shall not die” (1:12; cf. Hebrews 10:31).¹ When a theologian seeks to contrast the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the “God of Jesus Christ,” with the “God of the philosophers,” as Blaise Pascal did, he or she tends to rely on the biblical appellation “living God” among others. For it conveys a profoundly mystical experience of the transcendent God that defies a mere conceptual straightjacket. Living God with sovereign freedom is neither for domestication, nor under magical control, nor

¹ This translation comes from Hans-Joachim Kraus, “The Living God: A Chapter of Biblical Theology,” in *Theology of the Liberating Word* ed. Frederick Herzog (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 91.

under priestly guardianship (Acts 7:48). Living God is the source of iconoclastic vocation of prophets and reformers. Jesus Christ, whose ministry unmistakably reflects prophetic engagement and reforming commitment, is “the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:13-16).

Secondly, “living God” with sovereign freedom and in unapproachable majesty is the God of fidelity as well. Characterized by a dynamic intervention in history, living God is in faithful covenantal relationship with the people of God. The livingness of God is demonstrated in God’s deliverance of people, God’s pedagogy and judgment and the fulfillment of God’s promise, that is, in God’s will to saving, forming, guiding, rectifying and communicating with the people of God (Psalms 22:4; 1 Samuel 14:39; Jeremiah 16:14-15, 23:7-8; etc.). The name of Yahweh, the God of exodus (Exodus 3:13-15), means “I will be there (for you).”² The resurrected Jesus told the disciples that, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20; cf. 1:23; 18:20). While the people of Israel broke the covenant, which brought forth the divine rage and judgment, the faithful God promised a creative way to enact a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31; 1 Corinthians 11:25). In the New Testament, Paul declares that even the unfaithfulness of the people of God didn’t nullify the faithfulness of God (Romans 3:3-4). He was convinced that the living God formed the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16) in and through Jesus Christ, and that God has made the apostle and his coworkers competent to be ministers of a new covenant, a covenant of life-giving Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). Christians have “our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). The intimate and sure knowledge of the faithful God finds its most paradoxical expression in Job’s discourse: “As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter”(Job 27:2). In the midst of dark mystery in which God appears as the adversary, Job declares that “Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven”(Job 16:19), and that “my redeemer lives” (Job 19:25). Anchored in the knowledge of the living God of covenantal fidelity, the believers in the Bible don’t interpret the darkest valley of pain and suffering as God’s death, but laments in the silence of God.

Thirdly, “living God” is the God of life. As the Creator of heaven and earth, God gives life to all humans (Genesis 1-2; Psalms 139:13-14; Jeremiah 38:16) and all things (1 Timothy 6:13). Life in fullness of human and earth communities is God’s joy. As for the Creator of life, any violence crushing life or any destruction of

2 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1962), 180-81.



human dignity and community life is a challenge to God's own work. The God of life denounces the power of death. Being a sinful and arrogant rebellion against the God of life, the power of death manifests itself in oppression, domination, exploitation, discrimination, exclusion and alienation. God's preferential option for the poor and the weak is natural because their life is most vulnerable and easily under the threat of death. God is the defender and friend of life (Wisdom of Solomon 1:13, 11:26; Ezekiel 33:11); Jesus Christ is the author of life (Acts 3:15), and the Holy Spirit is the breath of life. The living God who gives life imparts graciously new and eternal life (Romans 6:4; John 3:16). Life is a gratuitous gift. The core secret of flourishing life is love. Love is to life what hatred is to death (Matthew 5:21-22). The God of life is characterized by a will to creative love (Ephesians 2:4-5; Romans 5:8; 8:35, 37, 39). John states with lucidity that, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The experience of the living, faithful and loving God in Jesus Christ opens up a road to the actualization of seemingly impossible possibilities on earth: conquering fear (1 John 4:18), breaking down the dividing wall and the hostility (Ephesians 2:14) and loving even enemies (Matthew 5:44).

II. Faith and Idolatry in Jeremiah 10:1-10

In Jeremiah 10:1-10, the reference to the living God is situated within a context of a classic argument of the prophetic condemnation of idolatry (cf. Isaiah 44). The text describes the fascination and fear that Israel felt towards the idols of the nations. Fascination and fear are two fundamental elements of religious feeling. Religious emotions are susceptible to distortion unless the true knowledge of the living God is there. They have a danger of degenerating into false religion or pseudo-mysticism and engendering the idolatrous faith. In commenting on our text, Calvin distinguishes between the true astrology as a genuine art and science and the adulterated astrology as the hotbed for superstition. The former serves as "the alphabet of theology," as Calvin believes that the contemplation of the celestial structure inevitably leads to the admiration of God's wisdom, power and goodness. It was God that let lights in the dome of the sky "for signs and for seasons and for days and years" (Genesis 1:14). On the other hand, the corrupted astrology which Jeremiah attacks in the text is obsessed with foolish divinations. It regards the signs of celestial bodies not as natural marks used to differentiate diverse seasons but as decisive factors prognosticating future events and fate determined by necessity.³ The prophet attacks superstitious religiosity, and exhorts, "Do not fear stars, but fear the true and living God" (Jeremiah 10: 2, 5, 7, 10; cf. Proverbs 1:7; Matthew 10:28).

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. 2, trans. and ed., John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 6-18.

Israel was attracted to the customs of the surrounding empires, which exerted crucial political influences over the historical courses of Israel. In the ancient times, Egyptians and Chaldeans enjoyed the international fame for possessing the supreme knowledge and wisdom, while Yahweh and the laws of Israel were often despised. The prophet deplors that Israelite people lost the faculty of discernment due to the seductive power of the idols of the empires. Forgetting their own identity as the covenantal people of the faithful God as well as their own way as such (cf. Acts 9:2), they followed the way of noncovenanting empires, valuing worthless and empty deities. They worshipped the false, human-made and dead idols that cannot speak, nor move, nor save, nor give life. The direction of their commitment and obedience was wrong. They forsook Yahweh, “the fountain of living water,” and “dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

It is noteworthy that Israel’s blind idolatry is embedded in the contemporary economics (Jeremiah 10:3, 4, 9). The industry of idolatry involves a long-distance trade (9), employs committed agents (3, 4, 9) and produces the narrative of lie and deceit to brainwash people and make their minds dull (8). The idols do not simply reside in a religious sector but penetrate into the manner of organizing the whole communal life, offering the symbols and the instructions for concrete practices. By mindlessly surrendering to the economics of idolatry, Israel let lifeless commodities and impotent fetishism prevail in the society. A result is the diminished life among people.

Israel failed to remember not only the fidelity of God but also the sovereign freedom of God the ultimate judge. The idolatrous faith and superstitious fear clouded their mind to forget that the true and living God of Israel is not only their King but also the King of the nations (Psalms 96:5, 10). Despite Israel’s singular status before God, God’s dynamic intervention in history was neither monopolized nor domesticated by Israel. With sovereign freedom and in unsearchable wisdom, God chooses the nations as partners, judges them when they absolutize power and despise Yahweh’s will to justice and truth. God “will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (Psalms 96:13). There is no escaping the true and living God who is the ultimate judge of both Israel and the nations.

In Jeremiah 10:1-10, a sharp contrast is presented between God and the idols, and between faith and idolatrous faith. Another antithesis that looms large throughout the book of Jeremiah concerns a confrontation between false prophets and true ones (Jeremiah 14, 42). To God’s rage, “from the prophets



ungodliness has spread throughout the land” (Jeremiah 23:15). Jeremiah accuses the false prophets of speaking visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord (cf. Ezekial 22:28). As the mouthpieces for spurious peace and security (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:3), they “keep saying to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you;’ and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, ‘No calamity shall come upon you’” (Jeremiah 23:16-17). In reality, dooms were approaching. Perverting the words of the living God (Jeremiah 23:9ff), the false prophets produced the narrative of lie and deceit. To that extent, two competing narratives were inevitably in clash.

Jeremiah was a true prophet sent by the living God. He was compelled to speak the word of the Lord, “something like a burning fire” within his soul (Jeremiah 20:9). The prophets were not so much foretellers whose specialty rested in the prediction of things in the future as leaders who considered themselves the ambassadors of Yahweh. As a messenger of the living God, Jeremiah spoke God’s perspective of national and international reality in the crisis of Judah and denounced her complacent and self-serving nationalism and pervasive idolatry. He proclaimed that Israel should leave behind the idolatry to turn to the true and living God. While the destination of going after other gods is Israel’s hurt (Jeremiah 7:6), the plan of the Lord is not for harm, but for welfare of Israel, to give them a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11; 30-33).

Regarding the way for “a future with hope,” there were different opinions. Jeremiah emphasized the importance of the covenantal obedience rather than blind religious rituals (Jeremiah 7: 1-7, 22-26, etc.). What matters is the practice of commandments not to oppress the alien, the orphan, the widow, not to shed innocent blood and to act justly one with another. Neither idolatry nor the temple-centrism is an option, as these routines are void of the true knowledge of God and the ethical obedience coming from covenantal responsibilities (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

Jeremiah lived a solitary life (Jeremiah 16:1-2), full of turmoil during the tragic period of Judah. The prophet witnessed a deportation of his people into Babylon and the fall of Jerusalem. He himself became an exile in Egypt. Feeling the impending disaster in his bones, Jeremiah spoke fiercely truth to the kings, priests, prophets, officials and the people. He even saw and conveyed a vision of a world on the brink of regressing to pre-creation chaos, “as if struck by a mighty nuclear bomb”⁴ (Jeremiah 4:23-31). As Israel didn’t want to listen to his warning,

4 *The Oxford Annotated Bible* (1973) on Jer 4:23ff.

Jeremiah became “a man of strife and contention to the whole land” (Jeremiah 15:10). Jeremiah experienced the curse from all of them, the imprisonment (Jeremiah 36:5; 37:11-21; 38:28), the threats of murder (Jeremiah 26: 8, 11), and the burning of the entire scroll of his prophecies by King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36:23). The suffering servant went through persecutions “like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (Jeremiah 11:19; Isaiah 53:7; Acts 8:32).

Jeremiah was a man embracing polarity tension. His twofold role as spokesperson for Yahweh and spokesperson for the people rendered him an active mediator who produced many oracles and prayers. Jeremiah traversed two different dimensions. On the one hand, he sympathized with God’s heart, the divine pathos, and listened to God’s voice, the divine logos. On the other hand, he felt truly human anger, self-pity, despair, fear, doubt and joy as well (Jeremiah 20:13). One can also find in Jeremiah a coexistence of strong masculinity and compassionate maternity/perceptive femininity. While being as stalwart as “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls” (Jeremiah 1:18), he was as susceptible as a mother weeping for her children (Jeremiah 31:15). On the one hand, Jeremiah uttered severe divine judgment fiercely, expressed God’s rage firmly, and denounced the false optimism of the false prophets tenaciously. On the other hand, he wept over the tragic destiny of his own people. Such weeping signals “the end of all machismo.”⁵

Being “the most human of the prophets,”⁶ Jeremiah the griever was a pilgrim on *via dolorosa*. Later Jesus was identified with Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14), and the story of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44) reveals a point of similarity between the two, among others. Paul the apostle also joins this group of grievers, when he reveals “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” for his own people in his heart (Romans 9:2). One can have a glimpse of what an “*orthopathema*,”⁷ a right way of suffering, is like, in the life of these great figures in the Bible. It is an indispensable element beyond words (orthodoxy) and deeds (orthopraxis) in the process of accomplishing God’s mission and ministry in the world where the sin and rebellion against God abound. It is astonishing and inspiring to find how faithfully these grievers trusted in the ultimate triumph of the living God amidst their own sorrow and suffering.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 61.

6 Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 339.

7 Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bookes, 1992), 37.



III. Discerning Idolatry Today

An abandonment of idolatry was a prerequisite for faith not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament (Acts 15:20; 17:16; 19:35; Romans 1:23; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 10:19; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 5:20; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5; 1 Peter 4:3; 1 John 5:21; Revelation 13:14-15; etc.). The proclamation to turn from the worthless, futile and foolish things of the idols to the living God, and from dead works to the living God, was a core of the *kerygma* of the early churches (Acts 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 9:14). Paul the apostle admonishes to the Corinthians: “Do not become idolaters” (1 Corinthians 10:7), and “flee from the worship of idols” (1 Corinthians 10:14). It is noteworthy that the worship of idols is closely intertwined with the economics in the Corinthian situation as well (1 Corinthians 8, 10). The New Testament offers a crystal clear definition of idolatry: greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5) and one who is greedy is an idolater (Ephesians 5:5). Jesus said, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Greed diminishes life, not increases it.

An antithesis between faith and idolatry might sound antiquated in our post-modern, sophisticated world that is more familiar with a contrast between faith and atheism. If we define the concept of idolatry as putting trust in what is not ultimately God and blindly following fake gods and lesser lords (1 Corinthians 8:5), however, a contrast between faith and idolatry becomes all the more relevant for our time when a number of penultimate priorities fascinate people, possess their hearts and claim their loyalty. There is nowadays an increasing number of enlightened atheists who are alienated from religion in disillusionment when they experience its violence, misuse of reason and deep-seated patriarchy. Yet idolaters could be found in both religious and atheist sectors if limitless profits, power, technology, consumerism, militarism, nationalism, individualism, fundamentalism, racism, patriarchy or any other finite objects or penultimate values are venerated as infinite and ultimate on their priority altar. Now just as then, both faith and idolatry are not confined in the realm of religion but penetrate into the manner of organizing the whole life of individuals and societies. A confrontation between faith and idolatry inevitably involves a battle between two competing narratives that provide two different perceptions and understandings of reality, just as in the case of Jeremiah and the false prophets.

Two recent ecumenical texts employ the term “idolatry” explicitly. Both documents attempt to identify and debunk the myth of contemporary idolatry

in the areas of economics, militarism and nuclear industry and present an alternative narrative in prophetic tradition. As the perceptions of reality vary, producing a whole spectrum of perspectives, the dichotomous presentation of reality could seem to lack sufficient sophistication and prudence, not paying attention to the complex reality. Yet when the churches listen to the voices of victims, the complex matters frequently become simple, and a dichotomous confrontation between two competing narratives are often inevitable. Jesus Christ was himself a victim of hegemonic oppressive structure of the Roman Empire. Being the body of Christ, the church takes seriously the experiences and the perspectives of the vulnerable and weakest members of human and earth communities and considers the right to life and happiness of the next generations.

One is the Accra Confession, titled “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth” (2004). It takes issue with the fundamental tenets of neoliberal economic globalization and summarizes them as follows:

- unrestrained competition, consumerism and the unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth are the best for the whole world;
- the ownership of private property has no social obligation;
- capital speculation, liberalization and deregulation of the market, privatization of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investments and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital will achieve wealth for all;
- social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, an relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation (9).

According to the Accra Confession, this position “makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance which amounts to **idolatry**” (10). The Accra Confession offers an alternative narrative in prophetic tradition as follows:

We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are



called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience. Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation (22, 23).

The other document, "For a World of Peace, a World Free of Nuclear Weapons" (2010), explicitly declares as follows:

The ideology of security through nuclear armament is heretical. In light of the biblical faith that true/authentic security comes from Yahweh God, to depend on nuclear weapons for the security of nations and peoples is an expression of unfaith that does not trust God's protection and care, and is the sin of **idolatry** that relies on what is not God as if it is God. "If God does not protect the house, the guardians guard in vain."

This position might sound naive to the people living under the nuclear threat before their nose and indoctrinated in "the myth of deterrence" and the doctrine of "the balance of terror." Yet time is ripe for Christians in such a situation to consider Paul's exhortation: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). The document quoted above came to serve as one of background statements for the WCC's "Statement towards a Nuclear-free World," which was approved by its Central Committee in 2014. The Statement warns that the fascination and obsession with the nuclear power continues despite all the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and Fukushima in 2011 and calls for "nuclear exodus as pilgrimage of justice and peace." The nuclear competition among nuclear weapon states and the desire to go nuclear among other states continue to be reproduced on the basis of the "myth of deterrence." The WCC's Vancouver Assembly (1983) already declared: "The concept of deterrence, the credibility of which depends on the possible use of nuclear weapons, is to be rejected as morally unacceptable and incapable of safeguarding peace and security." It is well known that one of the nuclear military strategies is named MAD (mutually assured destruction), as if admitting self-scornfully the contradiction and suicidal vision behind the national security policy making nuclear enterprise as its beloved idol.

The myth of deterrence that feeds on fear is to be replaced by the prophetic imagination to envision the world of peace, free of war and mass killings. Instead of a doctrine of mutually assured destruction, we need to cultivate a culture of

mutually assured conviviality and abundant life for all. Joint human security for all, committed to the freedom from fear and the freedom from want, should become a more viable priority than militarized security that worships the weapons of mass destruction as its idols. The WCC's "Statement towards a Nuclear-free World" presents an alternative vision in prophetic stance: "We are called to live in ways that protect life instead of putting it at risk—neither living fearfully, defended by nuclear weapons, nor living wastefully, dependent on nuclear energy. We are invited to build communities and economies in harmony with God's manifold gifts and promises of life." As people equipped with the knowledge that "perfect love casts out fear" and that "whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1 John 4:18), Christians need to examine the nuclear issue from the standpoint of the victims of radiation poisoning such as the *hibakusha* (Japanese atomic bomb sufferers), *pi-pok-ja* (Korean atomic bomb sufferers), test site victims in the Pacific whose bodies are deformed by genetic mutation and laborers working in mines and power plants under the threat of radiation. The concern for the next generations with the right for full life in a healthy environment and for the earth poisoned by nuclear tests need to be prioritized.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic speech, "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence," delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City. In this illuminating address, King pinpoints "a very obvious and almost facile connection" between the war in Vietnam and the struggle for poor—both black and white:

A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor - both black and white - through the poverty program. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

I am struck by the precise truth in King's observation of "the war as an enemy of the poor." We are living in a scandalous world where an astronomical amount of finance is invested into military industry while the unprecedented food crisis



and hunger are taking place, and the gap between the rich and poor is widening. The Accra Confession states, “the annual income of the richest 1% is equal to that of the poorest 57% and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition.” Humankind is a wolf to humankind (Plautus: *homo homini lupus*). Greedy idolatry worships a murderous god, who doesn’t care about how much blood of innocent people is shed in the blind pursuit of limitless profits and monetary interests. Jeremiah conveys the divine indictment of King Jehoiakim: “But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence” (Jeremiah 22:17; cf. Ezekial 22:27, 29; Ecclesiasticus 34:18-22; Matthew 21:33-43). The evildoers make a kind of counter covenant with the power of death and consider strength the norm of justice (Wisdom of Solomon 2:11-12).

The mindset that regards armament and militarism as the sole means to conflict resolution is a major stumbling block to the people aspiring for more collaboration beyond national borders for healthy common life in peace. Northeast Asia suffers from thick fogs of fine dust, or fine particulate matter, which is called a silent killer due to its grave health threat. The transnational nature of this phenomenon deserves an urgent and more active cooperation among governments, scientists, business sectors and civil societies. At such a critical juncture, a rise of military tension with a prospect of a possible nuclear “Hot War” is simply insane. The global climate change requires our collaboration and wisdom-sharing at a global scale. The unprecedented crisis demands the partnership at an unprecedented scale. The church needs to lead by example in unity. The church is to make a crucial contribution in transforming the necrophilic desire for “a balance of terror” into the life-loving insight of “a balance of mutual trust” to terminate a never-ending vicious cycle of destruction and death for the sake of the abundant life for all (John 10:10). The church should keep open a channel of alternative communication by offering the safe space where the victims could voice out, and as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), should speak truth to the powers.

IV. Exodus Out of the Shadow of Death

Our civilization suffers from the disease unto death. We now live in a disgraceful “global jungle” where the cruel culture of the “survival of the fittest” triumphs. There is “the obvious disparity between the value assigned to life in developed nations versus developing nations—most particularly as reflected in World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) decisions” (“Value of life” from Wikipedia). The fundamental threat of

the exploitative economic system lies in the commodification of human life, the devastation of human relationships and the dehumanization of both the oppressor and the oppressed. The advent of artificial intelligence might accelerate a danger of making a narcissistic idolatry of human omnipotence more attractive and pervasive in the area of economy and military industry in a smart way (cf. Acts 7:41). Even space is being militarized. In the world characterized by the loss of transcendence and the obsession with human autonomy, space exploration with an expectation to find another home for humanity is embarrassing to many, as the earth, our true and sacred home, suffers from insufficient remedy for its pollution. The average citizens often feel like living in a culture of obscurantism and obfuscation regarding crucial decisions influencing their own daily life and security. Antidemocratic elements prevail in the hard-won democracy of the world. The culture devoid of transparency and democratic participation in many important areas of life signifies a retrogression into an aristocratic oligarchy of the empire that builds up its own tower of Babel with its top in the heavens (Genesis 11:4). People are increasing who don't and can't discover a sensible meaning in grand enterprises of the national and world leaders and are silently suffocated by the feeling of emptiness and despair. Hamlet's words, "To be or not to be," fit in. Two opposite responses often come to the scene: violence and escapism. Yet it is evident that neither aggression nor indifference may well open a way to life for all.

An exodus out of the shadow of death begins with *metanoia*. The 20th century was the most violent era with two World Wars and with the devastation of the Earth, and yet we didn't learn from the dark abyss of death crucial key lessons for flourishing life in the 21st century. The prophets deplore at people who keep listening but do not understand, who keep looking, but do not perceiving (Isaiah 6:9, 10; Matthew 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). Like Israelites who said to Aaron, "make gods for us who will lead the way for us (Acts 7:40)," we tend to rely on the idols, not on the true and living God, for guidance, in persistent blindness and naive optimism. "Our present stark global reality is so fraught with death and destruction that we will not have a future to speak of unless the prevailing development paradigm is radically transformed and justice and sustainability become the driving force for the economy, society, and the Earth. Time is running out."⁸ In order for God to build up and plant anew (Jeremiah 24:6, 42:10, 45:4), we need to tear down and pluck up our own conscious and unconscious collusion with idolatry. *Metanoia*, our repentance, our reversal of priorities, and our reformation of relationships and practices, should be the first step for our pilgrimage of justice and peace.

8 "Economy of Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to Action" (WCC document), para. 9.



In the world fascinated with life-destroying values such as competition, individualism, limitless growth, greed and hostile confrontation, the church needs to try to articulate, speak loudly and live up to the fundamental tenets of Christian values. The list would be endless: prayer, faithfulness, unity, solidarity, shalom, justice, compassion, hospitality, jubilee, the kingdom of God, eucharist, *oikos*, *koinonia*, the power of love instead of the love of power and so on. These Christian values are “antidotes for fear” (Martin Luther King Jr.) and building blocks for human villages. However, it is our ecclesial reality that in many contexts these great biblical motifs and inspirations remain “solid food,” hard to digest (1 Corinthians 3:2). It would be an irony for the church to claim the canonical status of the Bible without attempting to live up to its noble horizon, urgently required for the healing and wellbeing of humanity and the natural world. Let us not “accept the grace of God in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1). Let us humbly open up to the grace of God that invites and inspires us to come out of our comfort zone and empowers us to create the safe space for genuine human communication and for bold prophetic imagination for a new civilization. Theological education both at seminaries and at local churches should develop the curriculum to teach in a relevant way such concepts as eco-justice, sustainability, greedline, ecological debt, the spirituality of enough, human security, and restorative justice, to mention a few topics, so that a new lifestyle embodying such concepts could become a Christian norm in the 21st century. The Bible supports these notions that are critical for the life in fullness of human and earth communities. Ecofeminist theological insights that try to usher in the new civilization need to be consulted in this context for the new practice of ministry and mission.

God’s love formed us as children of the living God (Romans 9:26). On Pentecost the Holy Spirit enabled people to understand each other despite differences. We are invited to live in love as friends, brothers, and sisters. The first letter of John, that emphasizes love so emphatically, finishes with the exhortation to God’s children to keep themselves from idols (5:21). It sounds as if idolatry is the major element to make love grow cold (Matthew 24:12) or to entice lovers of God to become lovers of themselves, lovers of money, lovers of pleasure (2 Timothy 3:2, 4). Baptized with the water of iconoclastic love, we do need each other in our Christian witness and in our uphill struggle (2 Corinthians 7:3). The pilgrims on the journey of faith are nourished by the friendship with Jesus Christ (John 15:13-15) and each other. One year before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well-known German theologian who resisted the regime of Hitler at the risk of his own life, composed a poem, titled *The Friend*. It highlights the “comradely” part of friendship:

Distant or near
 in joy or in sorrow,
 each knows in the other
 his loyal helper
 to freedom
 and humanity.

Friendship in love renders our *via dolorosa*, our *orthopathema*, bearable and even beautiful, and blesses our pilgrimage of justice and peace to become a hopeful and joyful journey.

The Reformers were iconoclasts to deconstruct petrified faith and to shake and wake up the people of God to turn to the living God. I hope that we, as Reformed families who inherit the iconoclastic spirits of the Reformers, could summon our courage in God's grace to take initiative in discerning our contemporary idolatry within and without, reignite our living faith in the living God and spearhead and shape the ecclesial and social changes in the 21st century for the glory of God. "If we dream alone, it is just a dream. If we dream together, it is the beginning of new reality. If we work together, following our dreams, it is the creation of heaven" (a Brazilian saying). May the living, faithful and loving God be with us today and throughout all the programs of the General Council, refresh us with inspirations and friendships, and bless us with all the joy coming from the Holy Spirit!

Questions for Discussion

1. When do you feel God as alive, as living God, in your personal life, in the church, and in the society?
2. What can be identified as the idols and idolatry in your context?
3. In the Letter from Birmingham City Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed his deep disappointment over the laxity of the church. He distinguished between a thermometer-like church and a thermostat-like church. The former records the ideas and principles of popular opinion, while the latter transforms the mores of society. What is needed for the transformation of a thermometer-like church into a thermostat-like one especially for the sake of economic and ecological reformation and peace-making movement?

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“Living God, renew and transform us”

Jürgen Moltmann

This theme of the World Communion of Reformed Churches is a prayer that sounds like a hoarse cry from the depths:

We have grown old, tired and cold—renew us, give us a new heart! We have become confused and uncertain—transform us. Awaken a new spirit within us!

Hear the answer of the living God from my favourite verse in Psalm 103:

“Who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Psalm 103:5).

I first spoke at a General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational) in Nairobi in 1970—47 years ago. I followed the World Council of Churches’ Programme to Combat Racism, and in 1976 I contributed to WARC’s human rights programme, “The Theological Basis of Human Rights.” I was present at the tragic act in Ottawa in 1982 when black South Africans refused to take Holy Communion with white South Africans, and the latter went away during the night. That same year, 1982, the Belhar Confession appeared in South Africa and paved the way for the disappearance of apartheid ideology from South African churches. I welcomed the covenanting of the Reformed Churches in Accra in 2004.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches has only spoken up loudly every seven years, but then it has always been close to the “living God” and close to human need.

What is on the agenda for the Christian life in a world that has grown old, tired and cold, and for confused, uncertain human beings?

I have three points:

- I. The living God and the gods of death
- II. The joy of the living God and the desolation of atheism
- III. The sun of righteousness. Just law and the fullness of life.

I. The living God and the gods of death

1. The living God

The living God is a God who brings life. The dead gods are the gods of death.

To what extent is the true God a "living God"?

a. The living God is also the eternal God. Eternal life is God's substance. Eternal life is not only unending life but life of such intensity that it flows over and calls forth other life. All finite life stems from the infinite life of the living God. Hence all finite life longs for the eternal source of life.

b. "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:2). "My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God" (Psalm 84:2).

c. The "living God" seems attractive through God's own liveliness. God's living power goes forth from itself and seeks the thirsty souls and bodies of people hungry for life. There is movement in God's eternal life. The living God goes forth in Christ and brings life. He looks for the lost. He lights a lamp in the "dark night" of the soul. The living God is not "unmoving" like the god of Aristotle. God can move the divine self and be moved by the cries of suffering creatures (Exodus 3:7).

d. Where the living God creates life, there arise fullness of life and fulfilment of life. "My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." There our lives are eternally affirmed, there arise lust for life and joy in life with all our bodily senses. There arises a fervent love of this life. When our "heart and flesh sing for joy," spirituality and vitality are one. There arises a new spirituality of the senses and the earth:

"The spirit (of life) is poured out 'all flesh.'" The joy of body and soul in the living God is at the same time the joy of the living God in the body and soul of God's beloved creatures.

e. I see how a comprehensive theology embracing life is arising throughout the Christian world: Pope Francis showed the way to Catholic theology with the encyclicals "Gaudium Evangelii" and "Laudato Si." In Reformed theology an OHN theology has emerged in Korea and an "oopmaak" (gateway) theology is coming up in South Africa, i.e. a theology of opening.



2. The dead gods – gods of death

a. The German racial ideology began with Nazi terror on our streets and ended in Auschwitz with 6 million murdered Jews. For the Nordic race that was destined to take world supremacy, the eastern European peoples were considered “Untermenschen.” With the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 the “Plan for the East” was that 30 million people should starve in order to provide Lebensraum, space to live, for the German race. The German army (Wehrmacht) let over two million Russian prisoners of war die of hunger and thirst in camps. The German race-godhead not only brought appalling suffering upon the peoples but burdened the German people with intolerable guilt.

For a long time the racial boundary ran between white and black: white was good, black was bad. In the United States and in Germany white racism has not disappeared. It is deeply ingrained in our souls. Angels are all white; all the devils are black. My daughter discovered a black angel in Venice that now hangs on our Christmas tree.

b. The gods of the fatherlands have the First World War on their consciences: the “European Ur-disaster.” “Holy fatherland” we boys sang with our fathers: “a man must defend his fatherland,” and dying for the fatherland was considered a holy sacrifice. The great powers of Europe annihilated each other from 1914 to 1918 and sacrificed their youth, although there would have been ways of making peace. In France and Belgium the crosses stand in serried ranks in soldiers’ cemeteries just as their owners stood to attention in the barracks yard.

What a tragedy! When my generation was expected to die for the Führer of the German fatherland we ran blindly into death. Only afterwards did it become clear: there is no fatherland in a dictatorship. Our patriotism no longer applies to our own people but to the democratic constitution, with human rights as the fundamental rights of all people. The fatherland-god is a dead god and a god who was sacrificed in vain on the battlefields of the First and Second World War. May God preserve us from “Germany for the Germans” and “America First!” The first will be last, Jesus said.

c. The god of capitalism is a god who promises wealth and produces poverty. The god of capitalism divides our societies and consumes what we have in common. There is enough for all, but 60 million people are threatened by starvation. The freedom of the “free market economy” does not serve the life of all people. Freedom in a society of privileged and unprivileged is good for the former but not for the latter. The only thing that benefits disadvantaged groups is just laws,

with international organizations to enforce them. Long before Marx, Luther called the god of capitalism Mammon and termed it the most common idol on earth. Let us resist this idolatry!

d. Today we are experiencing terror from below. The 21st century has invented suicide bombers; or, more accurately, suicidal mass murderers. In terrorists we encounter a new "religion of death." "Your young people love life," Mullah Omar from the Taliban told western journalists, "Our young people love death." After the mass murder in Madrid on 11 March 2004 a letter claiming responsibility was found with the same content: "You love life, we love death." A German who joined the Taliban in Afghanistan declared: "We don't want to win, we want to kill and be killed." Why? I think that killing bestows power, the absolute, divine power over life and death. That is why terrorists seek maximum publicity. Spreading terror brings huge pleasure. We saw this love of death in European fascism: "*Viva la muerte*," cried an old fascist general in the Spanish civil war: "Long live death."

Terrorism arises in people's hearts and minds and must be overcome in people's hearts and minds. It is the language of peace, not of violence, that creates life. "Terrorists only understand the language of force," we are told from all sides. But this "language of force" has caused the number of terrorists to soar from a few hundred at the time of bin Laden to tens of thousands in ISIS and Boko Haram today. It is good when joint Christian-Muslim peace initiatives deter young men from volunteering to kill and being killed in Syria, winning them back for life and love. It is good when Muslims and Christians care for abused child soldiers and heal them from the trauma of death.

The living God does not demand sacrifices, but instead sacrifices himself for love in order to be with his godless people. Faith creates life; idolatry is lethal.

II. The joy of the living God and the desolation of atheism

1. A Religion of Joy

Christianity is a religion of joy in God. At any rate, the Christian faith in the resurrection makes life into a festival, "a festival without end," as church father Athanasius said one Easter Day in Alexandria.

Let us measure the positive dimensions of "great joy" in the broad spaces of God, who is closer to us than we think, and widens our lives more than we suspect. Joy is the strength to live, momentum to love and pleasure in the creative beginning. We are made for enjoyment.



Let us look first into the Psalms in the Old Testament: God's love and presence call forth joy, not fear:

"You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;

In your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

This enlivening presence of God is often described as the "shining face" of God. When does a face shine? When someone wants to make a gift—or when a mother looks at her newborn child, their faces shine. God's shining face radiates the blessing that brings fulfilment to human life and heightens its festive side.

Joy is amazingly also linked with God's judgment: when God comes, it is to judge the earth, and joy will bring nature to bloom.

"(...) let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord; for he is coming to judge the earth (Psalm 96:11-13).

When God comes to judge the earth it is like the sun rising. God will straighten up the bent and make the withered green again, heal the sick, revive those who are flagging, and give the weary back their youth.

When God comes to humans there is a double change of direction—in God and in people. God turns from the "hidden face" (*hester panim*) to the "shining face." This change in God—away from aversion to human wrongdoing to the kindness of God's grace—calls forth a corresponding change in the person concerned:

"You have turned my mourning into dancing;

You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy" (Psalm 30:12).

And when the ransomed of the Lord return, "everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isaiah 35:10).

God will rejoice with those who have been saved.

"He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

Isn't that a wonderful picture? The exultant God, rejoicing with his ransomed creatures? From this compilation from the Psalms and the Old Testament prophets we see a great, wonderful harmony of joy—God's joy—the joy of the earth—the joy of the ransomed. Back in 1940, Helmut Gollwitzer called his exposition of Luke 15 "God's Joy."

Joy is more original than faith. After all, what does the gifting God expect other than that the gifted human rejoices? In Greek, *charis*, grace, and *chara*, joy, are linguistically very close. Paul can use faith and joy interchangeably when he writes:

"We are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith" (2 Corinthians 1:24).

The Pharisees publicly reprimanded Jesus' amazing behaviour towards "tax collectors and sinners" ("This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2)). Luke interprets it by recounting three parables: of the lost-and-found sheep, of the lost-and-found coin and of the lost-and-found son (Luke 15:1-32).

"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7)

This theology is not exactly correct: the "joy in heaven" is quite right, but Jesus did not only accept repentant sinners and eat with them. In addition, the lost sheep could not contribute much to being found, let alone the lost coin. The "joy in heaven" lies first with the seeking-and-finding God.

"When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices" (Luke 15:5).

The prodigal son (German: "lost son") is the only one who repents. He turns away from his misery in a foreign land and goes back towards his father's house, wanting to tell him:

"Father I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Luke 15:21).

Yet before he can make this special confession, the father comes before him:

"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).



Only then does the found son confess that he was lost, yet his father is not bothered; he rejoices:

“This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:24).

The God who seeks and finds the lost rejoices, and those who are found rejoice with God. Finding a lost person is like awakening someone who has died. Rejoicing in that means tuning in to God’s joy. It is about welcoming life, where there was death.

2. The desolation of atheism

Compared with the fullness of life in the living God, modern atheism offers a reduced life. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas famously echoed Max Weber in saying he was “religiously unmusical.” We can live without music but it is a poorer life. We can also live without religion, but it is a reduced life. The modern world directs its residents towards humanist ideals, but mostly towards naturalist or capitalist approaches to life. A life that has abandoned the living God is, so to speak, a life without an overhead light, without transcendence. A life that has lost transcendence becomes a life without self-transcendence. Your relationship to yourself dries up and your conscience may be twisted. Yet rationales for atheism may differ greatly.

I experienced humanist atheism in my own family. My grandfather Johannes Moltmann was Grand Master of the Hamburg Masonic lodge but had to leave it because of his criticism of religion. He agreed with the humanist ideals of Gottfried Ephraim Lessing and the religious critique of Ludwig Feuerbach. He wanted to make the human being *great* and yet yearned for a “future God,” the title of his last essay.

I experienced the atheism of the Nazi dictatorship in my personal life. That was racism and idolatry: Give an order, Führer, and we will follow you. This was political idolatry, and the idol was called Hitler.

In the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) I also got to know Stalinist atheism, with its motto: “Without God and sunny weather, we will reap our crops together.”

In the 19th century there was theological “protest atheism.” People protested against God because of the suffering of the innocent of the earth. They

protested against God and the state, because throne and altar had allied themselves against the people. "Neither God nor state," proclaimed anarchist Michael Bakunin (1814-1876) in Tsarist Russia. In the 20th century Catholic novelist Heinrich Böll (1917-1985) said: "I don't like these atheists. They are always talking about God."

Today protest atheism is rare in Europe. Banality atheism is widespread. People have lost their faith in God and hardly feel the loss. Human beings have become "economic animals" and allowed life to be commodified. The "post-secular" generation has moved beyond theism and atheism, faith and idolatry.

When atheism wins and theism disappears, what will become of atheism? It will disappear too, because, along with theism, atheism will also destroy itself. It offers nothing positive!

III. The sun of righteousness. Just law and the fullness of life

1. The justification of the victims

The World Communion of Reformed Churches has now approved the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification agreed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. Yet there is something missing at the heart of Reformation theology. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa brought it to light: the justification of the victims of the sins committed.

The Reformation doctrine on justification arose from the medieval sacrament of penitence. The power of evil is called sin—godlessness. We talk of "the forgiveness of sins by God's grace alone, by faith." That is also true and important but it is only half the truth. The sinner who committed the wrongdoing is forgiven, but where do the victims of this sin stand? We pray "forgive us our sins," but where are the victims of our sinful action? The sacrament of penitence is one-sided, focusing on the perpetrator. The doctrine of justification forgets the victims. There is a gap here in the Christian doctrine of grace.

That is already recognizable in the teaching on sin of the apostle Paul. In Romans 7 he writes, honestly and self-critically:

"For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Romans 7:19-20).



Why does Paul not direct our attention to those to whom he has done evil and not done good? Why is he only concerned about himself?

In the Old Testament Psalms we find God's righteousness in the forgiveness of sins:

"In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me" (Psalm 31). However, God's righteousness is on the side of the victims of sin:

"The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed"
(Psalm 103:6). "He works justice for the poor, the widows and orphans"
(Deuteronomy 10:18).

God's righteousness is not a justice that only determines good and evil. It is a creative righteousness that works justice. For the victims, it is a righteousness that brings them justice. For the evil-doers it is a righteousness that reinstates justice and puts things to rights.

The first issue is not the penitence of the perpetrators but the pain of the victims. What can the justification of victims look like? Here is a suggestion:

1. The first step is like the sacrament of penitence: *confessio oris*. It is a step into the light of truth. The victims of injustice and violence must emerge not only from their suffering but, even more, from their spiritual humiliation. This closes their mouth. In the case of sexual violence, there is the additional shame at the violation they have suffered. They need a free space recognizing their suffering, so that they can cry out their pain. They need a listening ear, someone to whom they can tell their story, so that they can regain self-respect. The victimizer's confession of guilt can help them here. But they should not wait for it because they also have to be liberated from fixation on the victimizer—they must not remain "victims" forever. In the God "who works justice for those who suffer violence" they rediscover their human dignity. They also need a protective space of a community in which they can feel recognized.

2. The second step is raising up the victims from humiliation, and their raising their heads to God. The victims, too, need repentance. It is a turning away from self-pity and self-hate, into the wideness of a loving self-affirmation. That is the precondition for the third step.

3. It is not reprisals but forgiveness that makes us free. Everyone who suffers a wrong-doing or some offence will dream of revenge. That is quite natural. But if we return evil for evil, we do not gain justice, but only a doubling of evil. "Do not

be overcome by evil," Paul rightly says (Romans 12:21). Nor by the evil by which evil is repaid. Whoever murders a murderer is also a murderer.

"Overcome evil with good," Paul continues. If we forgive those who sin against us we do not only them good but also ourselves: we overcome the evil that has entered our lives.

2. Just law

It is well-known that Reformed Christianity has a passion for "law and justice." After all, Calvin was a lawyer and our fathers regarded the *tertius usus legis* as the goal of the law and the actual use of the law: "Actions speak louder than words." Freed for just life! The Heidelberg Catechism deals with God's law, the Ten Commandments, in its Part III on "Gratitude."

All peoples suffer today from social impoverishment and are crying for social justice. For over 40 years we have heard the lament of governments that, despite all efforts, the divide between rich and poor is widening. You just need to read the Poverty and Wealth Reports in Germany. Not only in less-developed countries does a small, rich, upper class dominate a mass of poor people; also in the industrialized democracies the gap between astronomic manager salaries and the income of unemployed people is grotesque.

Democracy is founded not just on the freedom of its citizens but also on their equality. The democratic idea of equality is incompatible with an economic system that produces ever greater inequality among people. Without equality in life opportunities and without equality of life conditions there is a loss of common good and social cohesion.

In a society of very high and very low earners, freedom for the most vulnerable can be fatal. Only just laws protect life. The alternative to poverty is not property. The alternative to poverty and property is community. You can live in poverty if it is something everyone puts up with together. It is only injustice that makes poverty hard to bear. The contempt for solidarity shown by rich tax-evaders enrages people. When everyone is in the same situation, they help each other mutually. If, however, equality ceases because some are winners and the others losers, that is the end of mutual assistance. By community I mean manageable social security systems based on solidarity and also the welfare state. The internal cohesion of a society is social balance and social peace. Social peace calls for just social legislation. The state must reclaim the right to regulate the economy and the finance because it is the only one able to enforce social



legislation. With the present economic and financial globalization, international organizations from the EU to the UN must adopt and enforce rules for just economic dealings and for fair trade. Rather than a “free” market economy, I am for a just market economy.

“Competition” and “competitiveness” are strong driving forces, certainly, but only in the framework of a common life, i.e. only within the boundaries of social justice. There are areas of life that must not be subjected to the expansive logic of the market because they follow other laws. Patients are not “customers” of our hospitals and students are not “consumers” of our faculties at the universities.

“Security” must not become a “commodity” that only the rich can afford with their private security firms. The state and the police are responsible for the security of citizens, otherwise societies will be divided into gated communities and slums. In gated communities the police are unnecessary, and slums are places they do not enter at night. When that happens, the state is turning into a “failed state.”

Security is not a commodity, it is a fundamental right of citizens. It must not be privatized. The modern state has a monopoly on the use of force and must not delegate this to others.

3. Human rights and the rights of nature

For the last 40 years I have followed and participated in the discussion about the ecological turn taken by theology. I recently reread WARC’s statement of 1976, “The Theological Basis of Human Rights” and its 1989 paper called “Rights of Future Generations—Rights of Nature—Proposal for enlarging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” I was surprised to see how up-to-date they are today. They are also unique in that they develop the legal side of human rights and also the rights of future generations. The rights of nature are seen as the basis for solving the environmental crisis. That is something I have not found in any of the theological books on the ecological crisis. It bears the signature of Reformed theology:

“Community with all creation on this earth nonetheless remains a pipe-dream unless it is realized within the community of law for all life. Such an earthly legal community must open the human legal community to rights of other forms of life and to rights of nature. We must open human laws within

universal laws of the life of the earth, if we want to survive" (Studies of the WARC 19, 1990, p. 24).

We have developed human rights from the law of God to man, as suggested by the biblical account of God-likeness (*imago dei*). Human beings are created in the image of God, they become the covenant partners of God, and in the community of Christ sons and daughters of God and heirs to the kingdom of God. This applies to individuals as well as to the human community. We have therefore adopted the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, like the International Covenants of 1966, in order to balance individual freedoms of the person and the social rights of the community. We then laid special emphasis on reformed right of resistance (p. 66). We have called "the right of future generations" as tasks for further development, because people live in generations, and "the right of nature," because people live in the life community with the earth.

A small working group of lawyers and theologians led by Lukas Vischer met regularly in Geneva and presented its findings at the WARC General Council in 1989 in Seoul, South Korea (Studies from the WARC No 19). The "rights of nature", the earth, of plants and trees, of animals and the ecosystems were developed theologically from the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9. The resolutions (12-13) were sent to the United Nations organization but also to the individual nations. Thanks to these resolutions, Lukas Vischer and Prof. Peter Saladin, Geneva, were able to influence legislation in Switzerland.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches should take up these resolutions from Seoul again and keep working on them. They can then complement the well-known Earth Charter (2000) which evolved following the UN's Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro.

The Accra Confession of 2004 cannot be praised highly enough. Finally we have a document in clear language with a series of affirmations ["We believe in..."] and statements of rejection, saying "no" ["We reject..."/"*Wir sagen Nein...*"] instead of the many pointless "dialogues." The "god of capitalism" is met with the confession of the living God. And the call for justice for the poor and the Earth is raised globally in addressing economic and financial "globalization."

The work on just laws done in WARC from 1976 to 1989 must be combined with the Accra Confession. Accra 2004 must be supplemented by Seoul 1989: the "rights of future generations" and the "rights of nature" must be refined and



enhanced. And there is something else: every Reformed confession mentions the right of popular resistance. That is found in the *confessio scotica* (Art. 14) and in the 1572 *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* by Philippe Duplessis Mornay. It is found in the Belhar Confession of 1982 and in the Accra Confession. This right of resistance presupposes a quite specific understanding of the state: covenant politics instead of sovereignty doctrine, democracy instead of authoritarian rule. Who should implement human rights and the rights of nature better than a just state? We have neglected constitutional theory for too long.

4. Fullness of life

When the “sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2) rises, the *sun of life* rises at the same time. It is the same in spring: the sun awakens everything to life, the flowers spring out of the ground, the trees turn green and the animals are aroused from sleep. It is like that when the “spirit of life” is “poured out” on all living things: humanity begins to blossom, strength grows, there is hope for the future, the diversity of life unfolds, a wealth of talents comes to fruition. “Let a hundred flowers bloom,” Mao once said. We need a vision for the future for the new scientific and technological possibilities we have today, otherwise they will be used for the death and destruction of humanity. “Fullness of life” is that kind of vision of the future, reaching far beyond what is possible here—into eternal life.

The cry for justice always comes too late, when violence and wrongdoing make the life of vulnerable people difficult. But it has to come, if we take the future vision seriously. Yet negating the negative does not lead to anything positive. Overcoming wrongdoing does not of itself produce what is right, and nonviolence does not lead to service for peace. That is why we should not only talk to the poor about their poverty, and the victims of violent systems must not always remain victims. There is no right to be right nor to non-violence.

The poor are only “poor” by comparison with the rich. In my experience they do not want only to be approached about what they do not have and are not, but rather about what they are and what they can do. The victims of violent acts and systems must not always remain fixated on the perpetrators and violent systems—they must free themselves from a fixation on the perpetrators and find their way to themselves again.

Who defines them actually as “poor” or “victims” or “oppressed” or “losers?” It is the wealthy or those who have “made it,” or the violent systems. When we

stand up for the poor and the victims of oppression, who are we? The poor or the non-poor, the victims or the non-victims? The message of Accra was a necessary message to the industrialized world, to the non-poor and the non-oppressed. It was still not a message from the “poor” or the “victims.” If in future we await not only the “sun of righteousness” but, first and foremost, the *sun of life* we will be seized by a passion for the life of the “poor” and the “victims,” for life together.

Anyone who trusts the living God does not just see the world in terms of its reality. Realists do that and they always arrive too late. Anyone who trusts the future sees the world according to its potential. “All things are possible for one who believes,” because “all things are possible to God.” All reality is surrounded by a sea of possibilities. All realities are realized possibilities or non-realized alternatives. For a long time historians told history as though it were a fatal necessity: it had to happen! Today we recognize that the First World War did not have to happen; there were options for peace but no one seized them.

We will therefore become seekers of possibilities of life and justice, and will avoid the recognizable options of death and annihilation. In the cockpit of a plane I found the motto: “Think ahead of the aircraft.”

In order to recognize the objective chances for life we need to be especially attentive: Watch and pray, says the New Testament, and the new emphasis is on watching. In order to discern favourable opportunities for life we must stretch our imagination, our creative fantasy. For our daily lives we need our imagination in order to look after our interests. Why don't we use it for the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and for life and its beauty? You do not need to be a prophet to do that. You just need to wake up and, with Christ, hope and love. All great organizations of church life, mission and diaconal ministry were founded by Christian “inventors.” They had an idea, were alert and seized their chances. We think of the Reformers Luther and Calvin, 500 years ago, or of John Wesley and Count Zinzendorf 300 years ago, or of the founding fathers of the huge churches in Korea, or of the women and men of new South Africa. They all were seized by God's creative spirit and created something new.

“Living God, renew and transform us.”

That happens when the “sun of righteousness” lights our path. Since the coming of Christ into this world it has shone over the earth. The sun has already risen. The future life has already begun.

Jürgen Moltmann is professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen and author of The Living God and the Fullness of Life.



A church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene? A Response to Jürgen Moltmann

Nadia Marais

I want to thank the WCRC, and in particular Dr. Hanns Lessing, for the invitation to participate in this discussion of the theme of this General Council. “You see only half a Moltmann here today.”

These were your words, Professor Moltmann, when you recently visited South Africa. I wonder what your wife and feminist theologian, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, might have said today if she was responding to you. I imagine that, at such an important ecumenical meeting as this one, she might have reminded us that the Reformed tradition is a tradition of friendship, and that we should therefore be *Rediscovering Friendship* (2000)—with God, with one another, with our bodies, with the earth. Maybe she would have urged us to remember that *I Am My Body* (1995) and that “God becoming body” fundamentally changes the way in which churches should talk about sexuality. Or perhaps she would have focused our attention on *The Women Around Jesus* (1982), and in particular the figure of Mary Magdalene to whom she would return again and again throughout her life.

I wonder what she would say to the church today. She writes that “a church which is going forwards” (her words) (2000:77)—or a church that continues to reform (my words)—is a church that calls upon the memory of Mary Magdalene (2000:77). Yet the memory of Mary Magdalene is not uncomplicated; for her story would become distorted by the church and remain distorted after the Reformation (2000:71–72). She is, after all, remembered as a sinner and a prostitute. She—the immoral, childless, unmarried woman—would become the first casualty of our piety.

Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel writes that she imagines three characteristics of what she calls “a church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene” (2000:77): firstly, that such a church is moved by the message of the resurrection, of which Mary Magdalene was the first witness and first preacher (2000:77–78); secondly, that such a church gives sexuality an important place in our life together, for which Mary Magdalene may show us the way (2000:80–81); and thirdly, that such a church is a home to those whose bodies have been discriminated against (2000:80–82), for whom Mary Magdalene can become an ally.

In short, such a church is concerned with the human flourishing of the downtrodden, the poor and the destitute; strangers, orphans, widows and refugees; for such a church confesses that “the church is called to stand where

God stands, namely against injustice and with those who suffer injustice” (Belhar Confession).

If our discussions, debates and decisions; if our church laws and church orders are unconcerned with the human flourishing of those unwanted and unwelcome in our world and in our churches we cheapen God’s grace and the lifegiving work of the Spirit of Christ. Then we reject the deepest comfort of our salvation—namely, that grace is not up to us, but given to all of us by God. Then we betray the confession that we belong, in living and in dying, not to ourselves—but to our saviour Jesus Christ, in whom grace is unapologetically present.

It is a difficult thing to confess that we do not belong to ourselves. Perhaps it is even more difficult to confess that the church does not belong to us. The gospel reminds us that for this very reason we do not get to choose who we don’t want in the church with us. A church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene cannot be church without her daughters: disciples, ministers, theologians in their own right. Such a church can also not be church without her queer children: those who we have reduced to their sexual orientation, those who we have denied ordination, those who continue to experience various forms of violation.

It is therefore unthinkable for a church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene to withhold grace from our gay brothers and lesbian sisters, our bisexual friends and transsexual family, our intersex sons and transgender daughters—those who belong with us to the body of Christ. A church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene cannot continue to discriminate against people based on gender or sexuality; not only because it is an injustice, but also because it is a betrayal of the very grace that calls the church together.

I conclude. I wonder, Professor Moltmann, whether a remembering of Mary Magdalene is not among Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s gifts to the church in this year; perhaps inconveniently so, for through her we encounter the strange grace of the living God. This is a grace that does not wait until we are prepared for it, a grace that is not given on our terms, a grace that does not ask our permission. This is a grace that overwhelms all of us.

And so perhaps the question of our time is not “How can I find a gracious God?” but “Where will I find a gracious church?” How we respond to this question may very well determine the next 500 years.

Nadia Marais is an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa and a lecturer in Systematic Theology at Stellenbosch University.



The God of Spirits: The Anapathetic God A Response to Jürgen Moltmann

Isabella Novsima

Thank you for this gracious opportunity, WCRC! And especially Prof. Moltmann, I have enjoyed reading your words days and nights for the last few weeks. They have helped me rethink my whole theological perspectives as well as enrich my spiritual journey.

I would like to share my responses in three keywords, which are only footnotes to Dr. Moltmann's words: disability, anapathy and spirits.

First: Disability

I found this propaganda poster in Illinois Holocaust Museum, "This person suffering from hereditary defects costs the community 60,000 Reichsmarks during his lifetime. Fellow German, that is your money, too." In Indonesia until now, more than 18,000 people are shackled (*pasung*) due to their mental conditions. Ironically, we are still pondering the very same questions: Is disability a form of suffering? Or do they become burdens that cause suffering to their family and society?

In regards to these questions and concomitant with my response to Dr. Moltmann: Yes, I agree with Dr. Moltmann that we need to be careful with "Apathy as the New Perfection" (Dr. Moltmann), however the counter argument could also bring a new possible danger, that is "Pathos as the New Perfection!" By the experience of people with intellectual disability, I would argue that the ability to claim suffering belongs to the privileged. Thus, the consequence is that the silent sufferers should be or could be eliminated from the society. In this case, human beings are not only reduced on their biology as Dr. Moltmann wrote, but most particularly on their cognitive ability.

Second: Anapathy

I would suggest the term anapathy as the third alternative to pathy and apathy. It is neither in the spheres of apathy or pathy, but also embraces both pathy and apathy and beyond. I need to affirm the significant use of the term because apathy is a human condition. Dr. Moltmann wrote, "But nowadays apathy is a symptom of illness; it means a dulling down of God's attributes, the senses, a lack of participation of heart, and of interest spiritually. Today apathy is a preliminary stage on the road to dying" (38-39). Yes this is utterly true, but people living with apathy caused by their invisible wounds (such as depression and chronic trauma) cannot see hope, because there is not such a beginning and

completeness for them. I would say: even in the time of Godforsakenness, the Holy Spirit is present, when the apathetic Christ is forsaken by the Father. And so She is also present in so many apathetic people today. As mentioned in Romans 6:28: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Dr. Moltmann's Pathos-God is so optimistic that God seems to be reluctant to be in relationship with apathetic people. Their emptiness and meaninglessness should be "conquered" in the hope of resurrection.

Third: God of the Spirits

Dr. Moltmann wrote, "For the living, they are dead, but for the risen Christ they are not dead. He can do something for them, and he does do something for them. He raises them up, and takes them with him on his way to the resurrection and to life" (79-80). I remember when my family visited my grandpa's grave, my uncle lit a cigarette and put it on. He did not only remember the connection with the death, "the inheritance as well as the fail" (Moltmann), but also believed that my grandpa's spirit could enjoy the cigarette. People in my tribe, Karo (in the region of North Sumatra), believe that the spirits can feel. And we could also find in Genesis 4:10: the Lord said to Cain, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" God hears the cry of the dead. It is not only God who can do something for them, but the spirits can also cry to God for the injustice they have endured.

The spirit asks God to do something, not only in a matter of their personal resurrection but also cosmic resurrection: the completeness of justice, beauty and harmony on the Earth. We have the tradition of communion with the saints. But we also need to remember the spirits who were not recognized as "normal" and "fully human" because they were Jews in the Nazi regime, people with intellectual disabilities, black people in the United States, women and children refugees from Syria, members of Communist Party in Indonesia and so on and so forth. And, moreover, how about the non-human spirits? Will God hear and feel their cry and lament as well? Or since they were pathos-less non-human, are they apathetic creation? It is only in the anapathetic God that the renewal and transformation of the creation is possible. Our living God is truly an anapathetic God!

Isabella Novsima is a member of the Karo Batak Protestant Church (GBKP) and an adjunct lecturer at Jakarta Theological Seminary (Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Teologi Jakarta).



A Tissue of Life, a Web of Otherness A Response to Jürgen Moltmann

Marisa Strizzi

I am very grateful for this invitation to share with my colleagues in this conversation started by Prof. Moltmann's challenging address. Although limited and imperfect, human theological task is a task of imagination always responding to the gracious call of the other.

The *Living God* entices me to imagine a *tissue of life*, which is—in fact—a *web of otherness*. That is, a tissue that does not homogenize the fibers of its mesh, but wisely, lovingly and intensely weaves together all sort of different manifestations of life.

Let's think about billions-years-old stars and planets, innumerable galaxies, and in one them, in a little solar system, a tiny little planet where the intricate phenomena called "life" occurs... There, living beings share a chemistry that is part of the old stardust, and human beings are formed of complex biological material that relates them to bacteria, fungi, ferns, worms, fishes, reptiles, birds, ants, apes and countless forms of life that we ignore. We are all interrelated. Actually, many living beings are a part of us: one-and-a-half kilograms of our weight are micro-organisms which share what we eat, help us digest, synthesize our vitamins, protect our skin, and some of them will feed on us when this corporeal format of our existence finishes. We humans are with others because we cannot **be** without others. This includes a message for our proud species: Humans sober up! It also includes a message to us, Christian believers: "Ecology" is not just a new theological fad, it is the substance of the first article of our Creed.

Let's think of our species, its development of precise symbolic language, the sharing of ideas, the capacity for creating collective knowledge and technology, the control over resources and environment, the foundation of complex civilizations and global networks. In this sense, human culture shapes the world, a world that is always already there when we arrive. Our human others are also always part of what we are. We receive language, thought, texts, traditions. However, as we receive what is older and bigger than ourselves, we always choose and interpret. We know that human species evolved making "their" world erasing others, and that modernity delimited a dominant profile of "the human": Homo sapiens, male, white, European, Christian, heterosexual, inhabiting a perfectly functional body, with access to property, political participation and

certain standards of education... Such human assumed the role of interpreter, owner, and/or administrator of all its "others," and upon this were settled complex structures of domination, subordination and exploitation. Because of this, in this world, some lives are barely livable. This brings a message to us: "we are all part of this." And brings a call to us believers: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds..." (Romans 12:2).

Let's ponder now: the living undergo suffering and death, and this is part of being alive. Yet, sin is a reality, and we experience its active role in the "moaning, groaning and travailing of all creation" (Romans 8:18-23). In fact, the systemic crimes of our species give our name to a new geological era: the Anthropocene—which accounts for these times of demolishing late capitalism and global warming. "Anthropocentrism" is thus the sin of our species—which Luther very well described as being "curved in on itself" (*homo incurvatus in se*), because human beings "in all things seek only themselves" and crave for "things that are good in an evil way" (*Lectures on Romans*). To close in upon oneself in the search of self-realization, actually leads to asphyxiation and death. And this refers not only to human egos, but to institutions, traditions and nations: sameness, the exclusion of the other, equals death. The collateral damages of curvedness are devastating, causing the suffering of all: living and non-living, human and non-human.

Now, imagining the Living God as a tissue of life, which is a web of otherness, let us perceive the value of all life as a biological phenomenon, but also its transcendence. Prof. Moltmann furnishes us with this fertile expression about the **intensity** of life that calls forth other life. I think this is eternity made manifest in the living tissue that is stubborn, and the web of otherness that doesn't give up. And this is the grace of God in Christ, enmeshed in this life, in suffering and death, in healing and then rejoicing. We are weaved together, creation and creator, however, we cannot perceive this by ourselves. Faith is the interruption of the curvedness opening us to our *shared life*, which is *eternal life* pounding in *everyday life*. As Luther affirmed, "Christians live not in themselves, but in Christ and their neighbour. Otherwise they are not Christians" (*The Freedom of a Christian*). We are all part of the living tissue of God, there is not such a thing as "individual salvation."

Marisa Strizzi is a member of the Anabaptist Mennonite Community of Buenos Aires (Comunidad Anabautista Menonita de Buenos Aires) and, at present time, a freelance Professor of Systematic Theology (former professor at ISEDET in Buenos Aires, which has closed).





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