CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Edited by

Eduardus Van der Borght

BRILL

Christian Identity

Studies in Reformed Theology

VOLUME 16

Christian Identity

Edited by

Eduardus Van der Borght

BRILL

CONTENTS

PART THREE

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

PART FOUR

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

PART FIVE

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN CONTEXT

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: AN INTRODUCTION

Eduardus Van der Borght

When we discuss issues such as ethnicity or violence, does it really matter that we are Christians? If we say that we are against violence, secular humanists and Buddhists will say the same. So do Christians have a specific identity? And what is its nature? Is it ethical or is it something else? These questions took central stage during the discussions held at the members meeting at the end of the biannual conference of the *International Reformed Theological Institute*, with the theme of *Faith and Violence*, in Kinasih, Java, Indonesia in July 2003. The members decided to make *Christian Identity* the central theme of the next biannual conference that was to be held in Seoul from 5 to 10 July 2005.

This volume contains a part of the keynote lectures and the workshop presentations of the 2005 IRTI conference. Not all were submitted for publication, and they all went through a double, blind, refereeing process that led to the withdrawal of some papers and the thorough redrafting of many others. At the conference, the keynote lectures were organized according to the three themes of Christian identity and the socio-political contexts, Christian identity in the context of religions, and Christian identity in cultural contexts.

Bram van de Beek, the then director, opened the conference with a lecture, *Christian Identity as Identity in Christ*, in which he did not not only introduce the theme, but in which he also placed his cards on the table in a provocative style. With a reference to the first question and answer of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Van de Beek defined Christian identity as one who belongs to Christ and no longer to oneself, and juxtaposes this position against the tendency in church history to reduce Christian identity to applied ethics. When Kant reduced God to the field of practical reason at the dawn of modernity, he did not invent something new. Eusebius of Caesarea had already theologically justified the merger of the mission of the Roman Empire and the mission of the church. He recognizes the same tendency of the merger of politics and Christian faith, and of empire and the kingdom of God, in the documents of WARC and WCC. The consequence of the rediscovery of righteousness as a central biblical concept in the 20th century

should not lead to Christian strife for justice in the world, and also not to the hope that human beings will change the world for the better; but rather, to a focus on death (Irenaeus)—The death of Christ for our sins, and our own death, since we no longer live our own identity. Dying with Christ in baptism, we have been transferred to his eschatological community in which we are called to sanctification—not in the sense of moral improvement, but of growing in our true identity as citizens of heaven. Free in Christ, Christians lose their fear of confrontations, and expect God to save and renew this created world through death.

The volume opens with this challenging lecture. We have arranged the contributions according to five themes: theological basics of Christian identity, Christian identity and the identity of the church, Christian identity on the public square, Christian identity in religious dialogue, and Christian identity in context.

Theological Principles

Flip Theron points to the central Christian doctrine of justification as the correct entrance to the theme of Christian identity in *Devastating Grace: Justificatio impii and I-dentity*. He describes the tragedy of the Western world in which the search for the self—since the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modernity—ended in uncertainty, isolation, and void in the post-modern era, and compares that to the uncertainty of Afrikaners after the breakdown of *apartheid* as a political system that was invented to safeguard the identity of the Afrikaners in South Africa. The fear of being nobody can only be taken away if one realizes that our identity is a mystery that needs to be revealed to us. Encountering God involves facing judgement about our constructed identities. Our true identity is located outside ourselves in Christ crucified and raised from the dead, and that will be revealed as part of an eschatological new creation.

Chris Mostert refers to the recent commotion in his home country, Australia, when a minister refused permisson to drape the coffin of a 'returned serviceman' at the funeral service. At the heart of the debate is the question whether the primary purpose of such a service is thanksgiving for a particular person's life, or for worshipping God and celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that witnesses to the faithfulness of God in life and death. It is precisely this aspect that

is symbolized in baptism. In his sacramental theological contribution, *Christian Identity as Baptismal Identity*, Mostert explores baptism as the identity marker *par excellence* for Christians. Baptism is not only the first step of lifelong faith journey, but it gives shape and direction to the whole journey. Faith in Jesus Christ and participation in his baptism, his own death and resurrection, are fundamental to Christian identity. Baptism is a sign that effects what it signifies. Christians are called to "a baptismal living."

Nico Koopman also explores baptismal identity in *Christian Baptism and an Identity of Inclusivity, Dignity, and Holiness*. As a South African he contrasts apartheid philosophy and theology and its identies of exclusion and of violation of human dignity with baptismal identity. In a threefold manner, he describes baptismal identity in terms of inclusivity and belonging—as opposed to exclusion, alienation, and marginalization—in terms of restoration of dignity, and in terms of holiness as cleansing from idols. In a following move, he unfolds the ethical implications in relation to class, globalization, race, gender, and homosexuality. The baptismal truth that we are because we belong to God and to each other, that we do have inherent dignity and worth, and that we are sanctified by the Triune God leads to a relaxed understanding of our secondary identities and to a commitment to our baptismal identity.

The social role of a person cannot be separated from his or her personal identity. In the Bible, corporate identity prevails over the personal one. Against this background, Ferenc Szűcs reflects on the relationship between one important social identity in relation to the Christian identity—the national identity. He is convinced that the baptismal exploration in Gal. 3:28 with the clause, "neither Jew nor Greek," should not be explained as the annulment of national identity. In order to prove this, he refers to Romans 9–11 where Jewish identity is not destroyed in the name of Christ. He distinguishes between nationalism as aggressive self-realization, and patriotism that is taking responsibility for one's nation.

Amie van Wyk finds inspiration for Christian identity in Augustine's writings on faith, hope, and love. The church father of North Africa argued that there is no love without hope, no hope without love, and neither love nor hope without faith. Without these three, there can be no Christian identity, no Christian individuality, and no Christian community (church). Van Wyk explores faith as a point of departure, hope as goal, and love as the center and zenith.

Binsar Pakpahan, with Batak roots in North Sumatra, grew up in Jakarta on Java Island. When you no longer speak the language, nor understand the culture, it is difficult to keep to Batak identity. Still, memory is a strong instrument to keep at least part of the history that has shaped you as person. From this personal experience, he moves to the importance of the notion of remembrance in the Old Testament. Pakpahan analyzes the use of memory with God and with Israel as subject in *Identity and Remembrance*. God's remembrance of Israel is not merely a psychological act of the mind—a recollection—but refers to his active interference in the life of Israel. Israel's remembrance of God is based on God's remembrance of Israel, and is the basis for God's new saving actions in history. Just as Israel was able to maintain its identity as God's chosen people in the act of remembrance, Christians, by remembering their identity in Christ, are able to maintain their identity as Christians in the midst of a multilayered existence.

Another young scholar, Jaco Kruger, asks the question whether we can still use the philosophical concept 'identity' in this post-modern era and proposes an answer. He traces the development of the concept since Augustine—the self as self-contained, rounded-off subject—to Luther—the shift toward the self in the salvation *pro nobis*—to Descartes—his methodical doubt as a *reductio ad hominem*—until the understanding of personal identity as absolute otherness in the writings of Hegel. After analyzing the violent nature and the fundamental impossibility of this identity concept, J. Derrida and the French philosophers of post-modernity have called for the recognition of the other as other in an attitude of non-violent openness. Recognizing the need for another identity concept, Kruger proposes to understand identity as *deixis* that is based on an analogical relation between God and creation. Translated theologically: Christians live a life of pointing to, following, and answering God's call in Christ in the power of Holy Spirit.

Christian Identity and the Identity of the Church

Several contributions relate Christian identity to the identity of the church. Various articles focus on the confessional nature of the church, and use this as an instrument to define the identity of the church. Conrad Wethmar in *Confessionality and Identity of the Church: a Reformed Perspective* describes the evolution of the *praesymbola* in the New Testament to the earliest Christian confessions and the shift in meaning of the

word dogma—especially through the linking of dogma to catholicity understood as universality, antiquity, and consensus by Vincentius of Lerinum. In opposition to the original double meaning of confessing as an act of decision and commitment (*homologia*) and content of the Christian faith (*credo*), this tendency led to the reduction of faith to its intellectual aspect and to a legal approach that was motivated by the need to have Holy Scripture seen as an obscure book that must be interpreted by church officials. The Reformation brought new emphasis on the external and internal clarity of scripture, and a renewed broader understanding of the confessionality of the church implicating existential commitment. The clarity of scripture as truth, promise, and fulfilment corresponds with three aspects of faith: knowledge, trust, and obedience. As a consequence, Reformed confessionality includes orthodoxy, orthopathos, and orthopraxis. The Reformed notion of confessionality is an attempt to revitalize the comprehensive, earliest Christian confessions. Wethmar understands the balanced interaction between doctrine, spirituality, and morality as a major contribution that this tradition can make to the ecumenical church. Since the identity of the church has to take the form of an existential response to the Word of God in each time and place, Reformed confessions will always be *in tempore et in loco*. As creation of the Word of God, the church should not be frantically occupied by preserving its identity.

Alan Sell takes a closer look into the use of these numerous confessions within the Reformed tradition in *Confessing the Faith and Confessions of Faith*. Although admitting the value of confessions as corporate affirmations creating clarity, he refrains from expecting too much from them. Not only is the corporate identity of the church expressed by other means—such as hymns, personal confessions, local covenants, etc.—the contextual character of Reformed confessions also prevents absolutizing one formulation. The method and content of these confessions reveal a variety of forms. Belonging to the Congregational strand of the Reformed family, Sell reminds the reader of the Congregational anathema on formal acts of confessional subscription that was often enforced by governmental authorities in the past. He warns against the danger of elevating confessional documents into tests of faith or criteria of church membership: the danger of substituting *fiducia* by *assensus*; the fostering of the myth of the saving system; the development of a system of controling ecclesiastical agents; the development of a sectarian attitude as the result of an authoritarian, legalistic ecclesiasticism; and the illusion that confessional documents can guard the faith. He sees no

solution in free-wheeling liberalism as an alternative for hard-line confessionalism, but is convinced that Christian identity is constituted by the grace of God in the gospel, especially God's saving act at the Cross.

Callie Coetzee also links Christian identity to the identity of the church. In *Christian Identity and Church Unity*, he defends the traditional Reformed approach to link identity with the unity of the church, and to understand that unity as a confessional unity is based on the notion that confessions of unity formulate the truth of scripture. Diversity should be preserved for non-theological factors. Ethical issues (e.g. homosexuality) are not part of that non-theological diversity, neither are doctrinal issues. The tragic phenomenon of the disunity within the church is not to be accepted as pluriformity or as pilgrim identity, but should be challenged by the will to continue talking to one another in the existing divisions.

The call for dialogue finds an echo in the title of Clint Le Bruyns contribution *Transforming Identities: Reformed Churches and the Petrine Dialogue*. With reference to Zygmunt Bauman's observation that identity discussions find their origin in situations of struggle, the author analyzes the emergence of Reformed identity during the religious struggles of 16th century Europe, and focuses on the issue of the papal office and its particular claims to divine institution, jurisdiction, and authority. Calvin's outspoken opinion is well-known: the papal office is not merely corrupted, but an illegitimate institution, in essence, that obstructs the true presence of Christ in the church. He continues to describe how, since that time, the changed situation has led to renewed Reformed—Roman Catholic dialogue that clarified differences and sought ways of working together in order to give common witness. In this common journey, the churches' respective identities are being valued, critiqued, and reformed through their ecumenical dialogues and activities. Le Bruyns is of the opinion that the papal invitation in *Ut Unum Sint* to join in the dialogue to reform the papacy provides an excellent occasion to join the discussion on finding ways to strengthen this ministry of accountability that impacts the public life of the church.

In the introduction of his *Identity and Ministry*, Eddy Van der Borght reminds the readers of Barth's decision to change the title of his opus magnum from 'Christian' to 'Church' dogmatics. If Christian identity is linked to the identity of the church, how can the church be identified? The theoretical answers referring to the *notae ecclesiae* (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) or to the marks of the church (pure ministry of the Word and pure ministry of the sacraments) become problem-

atic if one realizes the disunity in the church—most of all within the Reformed tradition. Apparently the traditional instrument to protect the unity and the identity of the church—the confession(s)—cannot prevent continuing disunity within the church. The author pleads for a re-appraisal of that other traditional element for unity of the church— ordained ministry—to be reconsidered as an instrument and symbol of unity and continuity.

In *The Church's Corporate Culture and Identity*, Johan Buitendag sees a new way to help the church focus on its identity. The difference between essence and form of the church is not only the result of sin, but also of perception. Buitendag describes a church as an enterprise that operates as an open system in a given situation with mutual interdependence between it and its environment, or a kind of non-profit organization aimed at growth, market share, social responsibility, wellbeing of employees, productivity, and service to the consumer. Seen from this perspective, the church can learn much from business management. Strategic management stresses the importance of vision as prior to structure. Is there a dream to be realized? In order to define its identity, the church should first decide what its actual business ought to be, and what extra value it can add to its environment. Next to that, it should consider the image it communicates. Buitendag concludes that the church must begin again from a dream that is related to direction, value, style, and culture. An inspiring vision carries members along. Visionary management in the church manifests itself strategically in its identity and an effectively communicated corporate image.

Wim Verboom explores a key text within the Reformed tradition in his contribution, *Why are you called a Christian? Question 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism*. The answer reveals the strong Christological emphasis of this major Calvinistic confession. Verboom makes an analysis of the prophetic, priestly, and kingly references in the text and describes its topicality in relation to Christian identity.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Some contributions approach the quest for a clear Christian identity as an issue of understanding the nature of the Christian presence in the public square. Carol Bechtel, in *Salt, Yeast, Lamps, and Gadflies: Biblical Guides for Christian Identity and Civil Society*, is in search for biblical

metaphors that can function as guidelines for Christian identity in civil society. Instead of focusing on the traditional salt, yeast, and lamps in Matthew 5, she prefers the 'gadfly' of Jeremiah 46:20. The prophets were like the gadflies of God, "landing relentlessly on the necks of the self-satisfied and arrogant, biting with a word from the Lord that refused to be ignored and refused to be shaken." The actions and words of the prophets Isaiah of Jerusalem in Isaiah 1, Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22 and Elijah at Mt. Horeb in 1 Kings 19 illustrate this point.

Poverty and the social-economic tensions in Latin America define the contexts for the work of Brazilian Osni Ferreira, a Presbyterian pastor, church-planter, and professor of urban theology. In *Christian Identity in the Context of Social-Economic Tensions*, Ferreira understands the role of the church as being an agent of transformation. Ferreira is convinced that the social theology of the church is to be based upon the theology of the kingdom of God. Leadership in the churches that is not thoroughly inspired by the model of Christ's leadership is one of the main causes of the weakness of many churches to be transformative agents in society. Ferreira points to the growing importance of charismatic movements and explores human rights, justice, social responsibility, and the preference for the poor in the Latin American context.

Annette Mosher offers an analysis of Christian identity in the context of increased nationalism in the USA after 9–11. Against the background of a growing identification of American values and convictions with Christian values and convictions, in *Stranger in a Familiar Land: Living as a Christian in Christian Nationalism* she compares identity through nation with identity through Christ. In contrast to the construct of the nation as a family against threatening outsiders, she accentuates the unfamiliar God, who calls us to be strangers.

Martin Laubscher looks to Karl Barth, who wrote 'public' theology *avant la lettre*, for inspiration. Instead of referring to his writings in resistance of the Nazification of the church in Germany in the thirties, Laubscher prefers to focus on the texts of Barth in the decade after World War II. He describes Barth's intention and method and evaluates these critically. He then turns his attention towards the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the Faculty of Theology of Stellenbosch University (BNC) that operates in post-apartheid South Africa, making the same exercise: describing and evaluating. In a last move, he re-reads the intentions of BNC through Barthian spectacles and differentiates between a prophetic-confessional and a priestly-apologetic mode of

theology in the public square, and between public theology in the church and through the church.

In *Christian Identity and calling in a .com world*, Frank Sawyer examines the influence of the current .com culture on Christian identity. In the context of globalization and the consequent fear of self-loss, he balances the dangers and challenges.

Christian Identity and Religious Dialogue

In most parts of the world Christians live among people of other religions, but for Christians in North America and Europe this is a new experience due to globalization. Radicalization of pluralism and conflictive relations between religions have urged a rethinking of the existing theology of religions. Henk Vroom, in *Christians and Religions: Towards a Contextual Theology of Religions*, signals two developments: a growing awareness of the need to engage in dialogues with the adherents of other religions and the development of a contextual theology of religions. The basis for encounter is the insight that people have insights that are valuable and true—in accordance with the biblical experience that God works also outside Israel. Neither the liberal view that all religions are equally true, nor the opinion that Christianity is true and all other religions are false are an adequate basis for a dialogue that should begin from the premise that there will be truth in other traditions that helps people to live a genuinely human life. Vroom differentiates between encounter on the personal level driven by the will to look the other in the eyes, encounter on the local level in order to work for the common good in society, and on the global level. He also distinguishes between aims of religious dialogue: personal dialogue of the heart, the encounter between various religious groups on the grassroots level, societal dialogues on common issues, and theological dialogue.

Paul Kruger describes in his contribution, *Christian Identity in Interreligious Dialogue*, the challenge of Hans Küng's strategy. In a later stage of his theological development, the Roman Catholic theologian focused on religious dialogues. For Kung, inter-religious dialogue should concentrate on the specific and essential elements of each religion. Kung recognizes the most essential element of Christianity in Christ, most decisively his human aspect. As a consequence, Kung understands the identity of Christianity as radical humanness. Kruger enumer-

ates the positive elements of Kung's approach, and asks some critical questions—especially in relation to his Christological essence.

Religious pluralism has led to a reconsideration of the traditional church-state relations in many countries. Pieter Coertzen offers a case study in *Freedom of Religion and the South African Constitution*. He offers a description of the elements that scholars in the field define as essential elements of constitutional freedom of religion and then evaluates whether these aspects can be traced in the new, post-apartheid, South African Constitution. He describes the role of the state towards religions, according to the constitution, as "benevolently impartial." The author is convinced that in order to protect Christian identity the churches should be vigilant in guarding religious freedom.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN CONTEXT

Asia: Being a Religious Minority

In most Asian countries the identities of Christians is established in dialogue—sometimes in confrontation with other major religions. In most cases, Christians are a minority. In Indonesia 88 % of the Indonesians are Muslims, while only 8 % are Christians. Bambang Subandrijo searches for appropriate Christian identity marker in this pluralistic context. In *Affirming Christian Identity within Indonesian Society*, the author describes how the Muslim doctrine of the oneness of God (*tawhid*) makes it difficult to explore the Christian Trinitarian understanding of God without being misconceived as triteism. Identifying Christ as the identity marker *par excellence*, Subandrijo pleads for a Christian identity in Indonesia in terms of Christian discipleship more than in terms of doctrine.

Seung-Goo Lee makes a similar exercise in the context of Korea. In *Christian Identity in the Korean Context*, he describes how Christians developed a vivid and self-conscious identity in a religious pluralistic society over the last 120 years. Having been perceived as Bible lovers, they shaped a new identity in relation to the Korean religious traditions Buddhism, Shamanism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and in relation to the Korean history marked by brutal Japanese colonization. In recent decades, fast growing mega-churches have become secularized in relation to traditional culture, and churches tend to lose their theological identity. In order to counter the loss of identity following cultural waves,

Lee pleads for the development of an apostolic, biblical, and eschatological theology as an expression of continuity with scripture and tradition.

Africa: the Culture Challenge

Christian identity on the Caribbean Islands is shaped in context of, among others, robust individualism and vibrant creativity, family ties and deep religious faith, and high levels of aggressive behavior and discipline against a background of poverty. Next to these cultural factors, Dan Antwi describes how Rastafarianism is an element to be especially reckoned with in Jamaica. This African religious movement blends the revivalist nature of Jamaican folk Christianity with a Pan-Africanist perspective. In their quest for identity, the Caribbean churches try to emancipate themselves from the received mission theology. Antwi describes the answers of three Reformed theologians in the area.

On the African continent, the discussion on Christianity as an African religion has been going on for decades. Is it a new religion or is it a new form of traditional African religion? Godwin Akper offers a mapping of African Christian identity discourse in order to locate the African Christian identity problem in the ongoing discussion on African agency. He attests the influence of culture, geographical location, race, language, and socio-economic aspects, but he disagrees with those who locate the distinctiveness of African Christianity in the African elements. Using Van de Beek's description of multilayered identity, and the question of which is the dominant identity, Akper is convinced that, as followers of Christ, faith in Christ should be the defining element in African Christianity.

The same issues are at stake in the contribution of Rodney Tshaka. Similar to Akper, he is also moved by the way Maluleke described how Christian faith has been mixed in an almost natural blend with African traditional culture and religion. But at the same time, as a black Reformed Christian in South Africa, he has been challenged about why he would remain in the Reformed tradition—especially since that form of traditional, mainline Christianity has been so heavily involved in the apartheid past of South Africa. In his contribution, he challenges the ambiguous nature of the concept of African theology; he evaluates the contribution of black theology to Reformed theology in South Africa; and pleads for the recognition of the relevance of the theology of Karl Barth for theology in South Africa today.

African culture is also central in Akua Frimpong's, *The Quest for African Christian Women's Identity*. She deconstructs the search for an African type of Christianity as the product of male, academic theologians who have failed to take into account women's experiences of African reality. Frimpong is critical about the tendency in African culture to treat women in a de-humanizing way. African churches—both the Reformed and the African Independent ones—tend to repeat this pattern. To find a way out, Frimpong uses the method used by Bediako in his presentation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the midst of other religions. This claim must not be asserted, but can only be recognized. This uniqueness of Christ is discovered, for example, in the way Jesus approaches a hemorrhaging woman and heals the flow of blood. This challenges the African taboos on menstruating women. African women use cultural hermeneutics and Jesus' treatment of women as an example to be emulated in order to give African Christian women a stable identity that is based on Christ and culture.

Europe: the Struggle with Secularization

For Szylveszter Füsti-Molnar, Christian identity cannot be separated from the church. In his contribution, he analyzes the factors that have determined the identity of the church during the last decades and even the last century. Being confronted with globalization, secularization, and plurality in this post-modern era, the church is confronted with religious indifference, neo-paganism, and the distortion of holiness outside and inside the church. The political changes of 1989–1990 offered new opportunities for renewal within the Hungarian Reformed Church, but the most essential element—a collective penitence—never took place. He is convinced that only with a return to an identity rooted in Christ *extra nos* will the church be able to find its true identity.

In contrast to the situation in Hungary where Protestantism took firm roots during the Reformation, Serbia has traditionally remained an Orthodox region. In the eyes of the law, all religions are equal, but the Serbian Orthodox Church has been offered a special status as the church of the Serbian nation and has been given media and other support. In this context, proselytism is a sensitive issue. In recent decades, a careful ecumenical dialogue has started, but it is still a long way to go in order to overcome centuries of distrust. Protestants are a tiny minority divided between mainline Protestant denominations that are linked to ethnic minorities and neo-Protestant churches. Luka

and Angela Ilic finish their contribution with a suggestion for dialogue among the various Protestant groups, and a continued dialogue with other churches about the challenges of Christians and their identity in a multi-confessional context.

Paul Wells gives an overview of the way the history of French Protestantism has been evaluated by historians and sociologists. During the 19th century, Protestantism in France knew a period of great expansion. Contrary to the anti-revolutionary ideas and party as advocated by the Dutch Groen van Prinsterer and his successors, the French Protestant minority sided with the revolutionaries. Catholic intolerance pushed French Protestantism into the camp of the freethinkers, who were fighting for the cause of freedom and their liberty. They had to prove that they were French patriots over against Protestant 'perfidious Albion' and Prussia. French Protestantism presented itself as the third way between clericalism and atheism. In spite of evangelical revivals during the 19th century, the tenor of Protestantism was generally ethical—particularly among the cultural elites. Protestantism was identified with the primacy of the individual conscience and the freedom of imagination. The French Protestant minority contributed actively to the epoch-making 1905 law separating church and state that became a cornerstone of modern Republicanism in France. But the integration in the secularized France of the 20th century led to a loss of identity. Ecumenism, uncertainty in relation to the meaning of the Reformation, and the tension between orthodoxy and liberalism accelerated this process. The future of French Protestantism has become uncertain since the evangelical communities—often in the cities with a high proportion of immigrants—have outnumbered the mainline Lutheran and Reformed congregations. For Wells, the history of French Protestantism leads to the question about how one is to act as a religious minority in such a way as to be socially involved without losing one's specific Christian character?

Willem Jan de Wit considers Christian identity in post-modern Amsterdam. From its 750,000 citizens in 2000, only 25,000 are regular church visitors—of whom 14,000 go to migrant churches. It has led to an intellectual, existential, and practical plausibility crisis of the church. Dismissing the traditional confessional, liberal, evangelical, and catholic answers, De Wit re-reads the cry of the psalmist, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God"[1] as a cry of post-modern humanity. He inter-

---

[1] Psalm 42:2.

prets the desire of the heart as the desire for the living God. As a con-
sequence, the church should, first of all, speak about the God of the
Bible, and only after that about the Bible of God. This cry accommo-
dates a life in via in which human identity is to be found eccentric
in God, walking the way in love and liberty, understanding Christ as
the Glorious Accident—not derived from nature or history, and as the
sacramentally Present. At the same time, there is an invitation to the
church to read scripture in relationship to the actuality of the Living
God—shifting from a past-bound to a God-bound identity.

Epilogue

The many contributions to this volume attest to the awareness within
the Reformed tradition of the complicated nature of the question on
the nature of Christian identity. The topic of this volume forms a multi-
faceted issue, in which almost everything is linked to everything. It
raises questions about the understanding of baptism. It has to be placed
in the context of philosophical and social identity interpretations. It
brings the functions of Christian confessions and the role played by
ministries within the church to the table. It is related to the question
of what is Christian in the presence on the public market. And how
should Christian identity be perceived in the context of interreligious
dialogues? And how does the specific context interfere with the devel-
opment of Christian identity.

Not only is the question complex, but the answers are many—some-
times complementary, sometimes oppositional. Van de Beek challenges
the reduction of Christian identity to ethics, but many others stress the
need within specific contexts for an ethical approach to Christian iden-
tity. The role to be played by the confessions is evaluated differently in
various contributions. The multi-religious context is valued and some-
times seen as positive, and sometimes approached with caution. A pos-
itive appreciation of cultures is counterbalanced by antithetical stances
to culture. Secularization is understood as a blessing and a curse.

Within this complicated situation of complex questions and diverse
answers, two convergent trends can be perceived. The first is the almost
general awareness that the hard core of Christian identity is to be found
in Christ himself. Only in so far as the Christian church is able to link
up with Christ will the church be able express its Christian identity.
This leads to the question of how this linking up with Christ is to

be realized in many cultures. The second is the recurrence in many contributions of the theme of baptism. Christian identity is baptismal identity—not only referring to Christ, but specific to the death on the cross and the resurrection. Baptism has never been a central issue in Reformed theology. It is a challenge to rethink how Christian identity as baptismal identity can be better expressed, explained, and promoted.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IS IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Abraham van de Beek

Belonging to Christ

My only comfort is "that I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." This phrase from the first answer of the *Heidelberg Catechism*[1] expresses the core of what we can say about the identity of Christians. They do not belong to themselves. They do not have their own identity. Their being is in Christ.

We can understand the depth of this confession only if we see it in the perspective of New Testament theology. The Reformed tradition is inclined to interpret it mainly in terms of substitution. Christ paid for us, or even: He paid for our sins. The catechism itself refers to this idea by saying that Christ "with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins."[2] Then it seems that Christ only solves our problems. We are in trouble due to our sins, and He pays the debt. However, the first answer goes deeper: He does not only pay for our sins; we *ourselves* are owned by Him. Here the image of slaves and their owners is more relevant than paying of debt. In the ancient world, slaves did not have their own identity. They could not vote; they could not go where they wanted. They were considered as non-persons. They depended fully on the person of their masters. He decided about their life. He was responsible for their doing, just like today an owner is responsible for his or her dog. For everything that slaves do, the master is responsible. Their trespasses come on his account. That is actually also the meaning of "He satisfied with his blood for all my sins." Therefore the New Testament uses the word *lutron* for the price that is paid for us by Christ.[3] This is not just a price in order to buy us. That is a misunderstanding that evokes the

---

[1] Text taken from http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=heidelberg.html.

[2] *Heidelberg Catechism*, answ. 1.

[3] Mark 10:45.

question to whom the price must be paid—and who would be our legitimate owner before Christ died.[4] He came to his *own*.[5] But *as* his own, we are in the field of sin and death—precisely because we do not accept Him as our owner. Because we are slaves, that makes us guilty unto death. The grace of Christ is that He takes on death on behalf of us. He liberates us from this identity: that we create our own identity as sinners. He frees us from *ourselves* in the identity that we created as sinners who did not want to be owned by the Lord. That is the meaning of not being owned by ourselves and belonging to our Savior. He liberates us from our own independent identity, and He does so by sharing our lives that are doomed to guilt and death.

New Testament language about our identity in Christ goes further. We are the body of Christ. *Soma* can be considered as a community of people, e.g., a council.[6] The body of Christ is the community of people who are identified by their belonging to Him. But the way that Paul uses body language in the New Testament makes it clear that he thinks very concrete about the body.[7] We are members of his body just as ears, eyes, hands, feet, and head belong together. This body *is* even Christ.[8] We are members of a body that is identified by Christ, and we do not have our own identity—just as ears or feet do not have their own personality.

---

[4] The catechism is open to that misunderstanding because immediately after the phrase of the ownership and the satisfaction, it refers to the deliverance from the power of the devil.

[5] John 1:11.

[6] Cf. L. Varga, "What Do we Believe about 'The Resurrection of the Body'?" in A. van Egmond & D. van Keulen (eds.), *Christian Hope in Context* I, Studies in Reformed Theology 4 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), 111–118. See also E. Schweizer, "Soma" in G. Friedrich (Hrsg.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* VII (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964), 1037.

[7] Schweizer, "Soma," clearly shows the dominant meaning of 'soma' as the concrete body in Greek. The stress on the communal aspect by Varga, "Resurrection," seems to be exaggerated.

[8] Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12: "Like the body is one … so also Christ." (Translations often avoid this close analogy and make less strict circumscriptions, especially by interfering 'with' before 'Christ'.) Thus the body of Christ does not mean that the church is a body that is owned by Christ, but that He himself is the body. There is a full unity of Christ and the body, just as our bodies do not so much belong to ourselves than that we *are* the body. Therefore the differences in the use of body language between Corinthians (and Romans) and Ephesians should not be exaggerated, as if in the former the body is something next to Christ and in the latter Christ is the head (so e.g., H. Ridderbos, *Paulus: Ontwerp van zijn theologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 404–432). Also in 1 Corinthians there is a real unity of Christ and all his members.

According to the New Testament, this community is an eschatological community. The end of time has come. The birth of Christ is at the fullness of time.[9] The kingdom of God has come. We cannot overstate the eschatological character of the coming of Christ, in which his first and second coming are aspects of one and the same event. Actually, since the coming of Christ, time has lost its character of duration. It is no longer history, but an event—a *kairos*. The church is the congregation of the first-born people[10] of the eschatological consummation of the world, related with the first-born Son of God.[11] Therefore they are a new creation.[12]

The authors of the New Testament have different images and language fields, but all agree that the church is the new eschatological community that has its identity in Christ. They no longer belong to the world of sin and death, and they no longer belong to their self-created identity—but they are the children of God,[13] heirs of an eternal kingdom,[14] in which they are kings and priest.[15] That is not only a promise for the future. It is far more a reference to the reality of the present identity of Christians. They have clothed themselves with Christ.[16] They are in Christ. They are citizens of heaven.[17]

Visions of an Ideal World

During their last conferences, the members of the International Reformed Theological Institute discussed the role of Christians in relation to burning issues in world politics: ethnicity and violence.[18] What is the specific responsibility that we have in the conflicts that afflict the world? What makes the difference? Of course, we can argue that we

---

[9] Gal. 4:4.
[10] Hebr. 12:23.
[11] Hebr. 1:6. Cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Rev. 1:5.
[12] 2 Cor. 5:17.
[13] Rom. 8:1–17.
[14] Jam. 2:5.
[15] 1 Pet. 2:9.
[16] Gal. 3:27.
[17] Philipp. 3:20.
[18] See the proceedings: E.A.J.G. Van der Borght, D. van Keulen, M.E. Brinkman (eds.), *Faith and Ethnicity* 1–2, Studies in Reformed Theology 7–8, (Zoetermeer: Meinema 2002); D. van Keulen, M.E. Brinkman (eds.), *Christian Faith and Violence* 1–2, Studies in Reformed Theology 10–11, (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005).

are against violence. But humanists and Buddhists state the same. And certainly not all Christians are pacifists. So we have to consider once again: what difference does it make in the world that we are Christians?

Since the nineteenth century, it has become common to focus on ethics when answering this question. That fits into the tradition of modernity that is most clearly expressed by Immanuel Kant: God has to do with practical reason. The impact of this thought is so enormous that at the end of the twentieth century it seems almost self-evident. A theological debate is decided by the question: "What are the ethical implications of your thought?" This impact is worldwide. In the South and the East Christian religion is also placed into the framework of ethics. Liberation theology is a child of modernity, just like theologies of empowerment. Christians have an ideal to change the world for the better. The clearest expression of this was the worldwide program of the WCC on *Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation*. That is the main task of Christians: to strive for the items that this program indicates.

The craving to change the world has a long tradition in the church. It was not invented by Kant. He just clarified what was going on. Actually, it is rooted in antiquity and, especially, in the tradition of Rome. The Roman Empire was convinced that it had a mission. They had to bring people into the *pax romana* and to keep them there. The *pax romana* was related to Roman law. Peace and justice go together. This idea did not come from out of the blue. It was propagated by Roman poets, especially by Vergil. The core of it is the famous hymn in Vergil's *Ecloge* about the child that will be born and will bring peace on earth. Vergil borrowed this idea from the Jews,[19] ultimately from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 9. He did not write it on behalf of the Emperor Augustus, as is often stated, for it was written even before Augustus become an emperor. It is an ideal of a utopia.[20] It was just picked up by Augustus because it fit very well in his own ends. Rome will bring peace and justice, and therefore it is legitimate for the emperor to call on people to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of the empire, and

---

[19] See G. Erdmann, *Die Vorgeschichten des Lukas- und Matthäus-Evangeliums und Vergils vierte Ekloge* (FRLANT, n.F. 30), (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1932); H.S. Versnel, "Geef de keizer wat des keizers is en Gode wat Gods is. Een essay over een utopisch conflict," in *Lampas* 21 (1988), 253f.

[20] Versnel, "Geef de keizer," 233–256; H.S. Versnel, "Religieuze stromingen in het Hellenisme," in *Lampas* 21 (1988), 111–136.

thus for the well-being of the emperor. Soldiers and gladiators gave their life, as did common citizens for this end.[21]

When Rome became a Christian empire in the fourth century, this ideology was Christianized as well. The merger seemed easy since the scripture is full of justice and righteousness, and peace is the highest gift that God's people can receive. Vergil became a prophet of Christianity, and the emperor became a representative of the kingship of Christ. The theologian that led this merger was Eusebius of Caesarea. His laudation of Constantine depicts the emperor as the implementation of the kingdom of God on earth.[22] There is complete identity of the empire and the kingdom of Christ.

Although in his *City of God* Augustine mended this ideology by giving the church a different position from the state, the impact of Eusebius has lasted. There is always a tendency, both in the West and the East, to not distinguish church and state correctly. That was the case in the Byzantine Empire and in the empire of Charlemagne. That was the case in the Crusades, in the religious wars in Europe, and with the conquistadors in South America. It is remarkable how close theologians were to the courts. At times, even the emperor himself was the main theologian of his time, as Justinian was in the sixth century.[23] The emperor decided about life and death, and about truth and heresy.[24]

Later colonialism displays this ideology in a more secular form. Here the ideal is also to change the world for the better, and missionary activities and conquest go hand in hand. Today it seems that Christian religion and imperial power have fully integrated again. We live in a post-Augustine era. The Augustinian critique on the Eusebian, unambiguous, imperial theology is silent. This is the case in spite of the constitutional claim of the separation of church and state in West-

---

[21] Cf. Versnel, "Geef de keizer," 254.

[22] See Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*; *Oration of Constantine "to the Assembly of the Saints"*; *Oration in Praise of Constantine*. Translations of the church fathers in this article are from http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/.

For the relation of Eusebius' theology and the Emperor see: H. Berkhof, *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1939); H. Berkhof, *De kerk en de keizer. Een studie over het ontstaan van de byzantijnse en de theocratische staatsgedachte in de vierde eeuw* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1946).

[23] See the theological works of Justinian in J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 86a.

[24] How important the emperor was in religious conflicts can, e.g., be noticed both from the influence of Justinian in the posthumous condemnation of Origenes, and the role of Charles V in the Luther controversy, where the ban of the pope was confirmed by the emperor.

ern constitutions. The claim only means that the church should not interfere in state affairs, but not the other way around.[25] A cross in a school might be forbidden, but a flag in a church is allowed.[26] It is the clearest indication that the church is claimed by the government. In the USA, this serves the necessity for the unity of the nation in supporting the sacrifices that are required for the proclaimed freedom and democracy in the world.[27] In the Netherlands, it serves the call for standards and values in the public area.

There is a counter-movement against the leading powers of globalization. The most prominent is the Muslim contest against the merging of Christianity and worldwide power.[28] They are not impressed by the ideology of freedom and peace, or of human rights and justice. Just as the Romans did with those who opposed them, today many people conceive these opponents as barbarians. I think we should not begin criticizing those who have critique, but use their critique as a source for self-examination.

Critique is, however, not limited to other religious traditions. The churches also express critique of the Eusebian implementation of Christianity. In 2004, the assembly of the WARC (Ghana) was very clear about that. The conspiracy of imperial power must be unmasked. Christians should call for a different world and different politics.

The problem, however, is that they propagate alternative politics. Fundamentally they have the same theological method as those they criticize: merging politics and religion. They only have a different politics. At the bottom the Byzantine theology of the East, the impe-

---

[25] Interesting is that the Reformed churches in the Netherlands erased the phrase about the role of the government towards religion from the *Confessio Belgica* in 1905. After the re-union with the Dutch Reformed Church in 2004, the united church (The Protestant Church in the Netherlands) has the unchanged version as a confession. Once again a gravamen is handed in against this phrase (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 10 juni 1005, 2). People in some of the smaller Reformed denominations are very sensitive about state influence in the church, but this is against the mainstream, even within most of the smaller denominations that often are very nationalistic—especially in the USA.

[26] The conflicts of Herman Hoeksema in the CRC finally resulted in his expulsion from the CRC, and the foundation of the Protestant Reformed Church began when he refused to accept an American flag in the sanctuary during the worship (P.J. Baskwell, *Herman Hoeksema: A Theological Biography*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2006, 100–104). A similar conflict easily could rise again in the present day USA.

[27] Cf. A. van de Beek "Christians in the Army," *Acta Theologica* 26.1 (2006), 159–179.

[28] Cf. A. van de Beek, *Ontmaskering: Christelijk geloof en cultuur* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), 65–67.

rial theology of colonialism in its different phases—liberation theology, the program for *Justice, Peace and Integrity* of the WCC, and the anti-conspiracy call of the WARC—all have the same format: a merging of politics and Christian faith, just as mainstream Islam propagates a merging of religion and politics. It is precisely the original roots of the ideology as developed by Vergil that arose once again in the program of the WCC: justice and peace go hand in hand with prosperity—not only for human beings, but for the whole creation. It is the same format that even the materialist Karl Marx could not avoid, after the revolution of the laborers, in his utopia.

Righteousness and Death

Is it then not the main task for Christians to strive for justice in the world? It is not one of the discoveries of twentieth century theology that righteousness is the core of the biblical message? Should we go back to an uncritical theology that the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, contested with all his power, which contest precisely made him the greatest theologian? Should we return to the time before the *Barmer Thesen* and *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde*?[29] Should we return to the time before the Confession of Belhar?

Can we place all ideologies in the same box? Can we place Constantine and the WARC, Vergil and the WCC together so easily? Does it not depend on what the content of the utopian message is? And should not that be the core of Christian faith, that this content is righteousness? So it should not be about the format, but about the content.

Is it not the main task for Christians to strive for justice in the world? The church father Irenaeus mentioned a different task: "It is the main task for Christians to think about their death."[30] It is a quote from a lost writing, but other church fathers picked up this citation so that it survived. "It is the main task for Christians to think about their death." Is there not a huge gap between thinking about death and striving for righteousness? Is righteousness not directed to life?

How can we relate righteousness to death? Or did Irenaeus not read his Bible well? I think he read it better than all those present idealists

---

[29] K. Barth, *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946).

[30] Irenaeus, fragment XI (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 7: 1233).

who strive for a change of politics in the world. Irenaeus read his Bible, and he knew that it is about righteousness. But he knew it is not about the righteousness *we* bring about. Humanity is unable to change things for the better. They are sinners and can never escape from that state as long as they live. They are only saved by Christ. *His death* brings righteousness. It is this confession that Luther rediscovered and that renewed the church in the Reformation. And it was this message that was forgotten almost as quickly as it was discovered. Human beings receive righteousness only by the death of Christ. They are justified by Him, and by Him only. Justice is *sola gratia* and *solo Christo*. It is not by the works of the law, but by faith.

Irenaeus refers to death. Christians should think about death. That is first of all the death of Christ. That death is not different from our death—for He died our death. He died for our sins and to our state of death and corruption. His death is liberating death for us. That implies our own death: we no longer live our own identity. We have died with Christ in our baptism. By dying to the world we were transferred to his eschatological community, receiving our identity in Him. In that perspective, we can think about the life of death that we conducted before we lived in Him. Then we see our former lives as living death.[31] Actually, it was not life at all, for it was a life not willed by God.

The core of Christian faith is justice. But it is the justice through the death of Christ. Our being is in his body in the eschatological community that celebrates his death, as the new covenant and the new creation.

As an eschatological community the church is not one of the competing ideologies in the world. We do not want to bring a utopia on earth. Therefore, Christians have no army. Christ did not call for his servant to protect Him.[32] He did not make use of his legions of angles,[33] let alone the ridiculous sword attack by Peter,[34] because his kingdom is not of this world.[35]

---

[31] Cf. Eph. 2:1–10.
[32] John 18:36.
[33] Matt. 26:53.
[34] John 18:10 f.; cf. Matt. 26:51 f.; Luk 22:49–51.
[35] See, about early Christianity and the use of violence, A. van de Beek, "No Violence in God? No violence in us?", D. van Keulen, M.E. Brinkman (eds.), *Christian Faith and Violence* 1–2, Studies in Reformed Theology 10–11, (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005), 12–27.

Since Christianity is not one of the competing religious or philosophical ideologies in the world, it cannot be compared with them. You can distinguish capitalism from socialism—at least in theory. They have evidently different characteristics. You can conceptualize the differences between modern humanism and Islam. All of them have different ethics and different features that identify them and cause them to compete with the rest. Christianity does not compete. Of course, there are versions of Christianity that do so, but they neglect the death of Christ. They do not take in account that He died on behalf of us. His death is the judgement of the world. It clarifies that God did not have hope that human beings would change the world for the better.[36] The death of the Lord who came to his own is the final judgement on human activities. And those who believe in Him, as followers of the apostles and fathers, know that. His death is the death of human ideals.

Ethics and Sanctification

From the very beginning, people had difficulties in understanding what this means. Both opponents of Christianity and people in the church itself conceived the salvation in Christ as cheap grace. If we are saved from sin by the grace of God, "shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" is already Paul's rhetorical question.[37] Of course not, because death to ourselves is death to sin. We died to sin—how can we live in it any longer?[38]

In one short sentence the French theologian Jean Ansaldi has summarized what it is about: Conversion is the transition from ethics to sanctification.[39] The whole world is full of ethics, in competing moral systems. They try to conquer the world in order to improve the world—according to their own standards. People who are converted to Christ do not have ethics. They are immoral in the deepest sense because they have died to all moral systems, since those are based on human activities.[40] It is with respect to this that people in the Roman Empire called

---

[36] Cf. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* III,31.

[37] Rom. 6:1.

[38] Rom. 6:2.

[39] J. Ansaldi, *Dire la Foi aujourd'hui: Petit Traité de la Vie Chrétien* (Aubonne/Poliez-le-Grand: Moulin, 1995), 21.

[40] Cf. J. Cha, "Is God Violent in the Concept of Sacrifice of Origen and in the Practice of Sacrifice in Vanuatu?", D. van Keulen & M.E. Brinkman, *Christian Faith*

Christians *atheoi* because the gods were the guarantees of ethics, as for Kant. You could even have different gods. The only requirement was that they fit into the ideal of keeping the world in justice and peace, in the *pax romana*. Christians did not enter the competition.[41] They did not search for wealth. They did not long for bread and games. They did not try to improve social structures for the liberation of slaves or the emancipation of women from patriarchal bounds. They were people who did not belong to normal society because they did not proclaim an alternative society. They belonged to a different world, without moral ideals and the gods that guaranteed these.

They were *atheoi* because they died to the gods of this world. They belonged to a different world: the new creation in Christ. They belonged to the community of the Holy One, and therefore they were holy. That means sanctification: as long as we still think that we are able to improve the world, the human 'I' is the subject of this acting. But that is precisely original sin: to think that we have our own identity and are not owned by God. The message of the gospel is that we die to ourselves and live in Christ. We belong to Him, and all we do is dying to ourselves and living in Him. That is what the *Heidelberg Catechism* calls the mortification of the old, and the quickening of the new man.[42] It is an ongoing process as long as we live in this world.[43] But it is not a process of moral improvement, it is a process of growing within our true identity: our citizenship in heaven.

Sanctification is expression of our identity in Christ. First, this means we do not strive for self-fulfilment. Modern liberal Christendom does not understand this. It searches for self-realization. In this type of Christendom, emancipation movements are dominant as are dreams of progress. Christianity should help you strengthen your position in the world. Sanctification is precisely the other way around. It jeopardizes

---

and Violence 2, Studies in Reformed Theology 11 (Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2005), 282, note 66: "[T]he argument that Christ became a moral example on the cross that we have to follow cannot be retained in its own logic if we prioritize it, because death itself, without any interpretation of it, cannot and must not be regarded as a moral value. … Paradoxically, if the cross has a moral value only, it cannot have any moral value at all."

[41] Celsus challenges the Christians to do so because of their critique of Hellenistic society. His invitation is refuted by Origenes who tells him that Christians have a different calling since they have a king of a different kind (*Contra Celsum* 8,75).

[42] *HC*, answ. 88.

[43] Cf. the Prayer in the classic Reformed baptismal instruction: "This life that is nothing else then an ongoing dying" (*Dienstboek voor de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk in ontwerp*, ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1983⁸), 47).

your position in the world. We die every day, says Paul.[44] If we do not fit into the ideologies and systems of the world, we are outcasts. You will never be accepted. As far as we are accepted by the leaders of this world, it is usually there where we are not holy: where we are strong in ourselves and not in the Lord.

That does not mean that sanctification is self-denial. It is the awareness of our *true* identity: Christ. We do not need to strengthen our self-esteem and personhood because we have absolute freedom and the highest position, since we are set in heaven with Christ[45] who is the head of all.[46] We are not in need of emancipation since all *mancipes*, all captures in the hands of the other ones and all unjust ownerships, are broken in the freedom of Christ.[47]

That brings us to the other aspect of sanctification that is actually its core: we are in Christ. We live in his Spirit. We live in justice and peace. We do so with the attitude 'that fits into being in Christ, who made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.'[48] We can give up ourselves. We do not stick to our lives, and thus we are available to save other people, as Christians in antiquity were free to help the leper. We are not afraid to be touched by an AIDS patient. We can call for liberation of the imprisoned because we do not fear those who can imprison us. We can call a corrupted regime to justice because we are not afraid, even if they threaten us with death.

That is the way Christians live. They do not try to change the world because the world will not change for the better. They themselves have a different style of life.

---

[44] 1 Cor. 15:31.

[45] Col. 3:1–3.

[46] Eph. 1:22.

[47] Luther marvelously expressed this relation of unity with Christ as ultimate freedom and therefore total servitude to everyone in his *Concerning Christian Liberty*, which is an elaboration of the statement in the first chapter: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." (translation R.S. Grignon, http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/luther/freedom/harvard/freedom2.txt).

[48] Phil. 2:7. It must be noted that Paul in Phil. 2:5 does not make an equation of Christians and Christ. He does not write: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" as the New International Version has. The literal translation of the Greek is: "Think that as also in Jesus Christ," not: "Think that as also Jesus Christ did." So, it is not that our attitude should be like Jesus', but that we should be as is in Jesus Christ that means: as is fitting to being in Christ. Since we are merged in Him, our basic attitude is defined by his being. It is not about following his example, but about living according to our being.

> For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.[49]

This life that is fully different attracts the attention of those who are the victims of history. Christians are recognized as people that do not strive for themselves, but are free to give themselves on behalf of others.[50] This attitude is not the identity of Christians in themselves—then it would once again be an alternative moral. It only stems from their true identity: being inserted in Christ.

The kenotic attitude of Christians does not mean they are weak people. On the contrary, because they are free in Christ, they are strong in Him. As Christ did not fear the confrontation with those who

---

[49] *Ad Diognetum* 4, transl. Ante-Nicean Christian Fathers, on www.newadvent.org/ fathers button: *Mathetes*.

[50] Cf. Justinus, *Apology* I, 14. See E.P. Meijering, *Geschiedenis van het vroege Christendom: Van de jood Jezus van Nazareth tot de Romeinse keizer Constantijn* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2004), 193.

were to be corrected, the members of his body do not avoid conflicts. But they do not use this power for self-affirmation. They do so on behalf of others, for the help of the victims, and the salvation of the perpetrators. They can even be very confrontative within the Christian community itself. The paraenesis in the New Testament is directed to the *Christians* in order to keep them faithful to their identity in Christ. The most furious Philippics in the letters, such as in James and Jude, are not against the pagans, but against members of the church, just as Jesus' confrontation with the leaders of his *own* people as the people of God. This kind of confrontations often requires more self-surrender than is required for quietism and to be silent before the persecutors. But Christians do not fear the risk because they do not belong to themselves, but are owned by their Lord.

The impact of the belief that we are owned by Christ and do not propagate an alternative society can be made clear by a story that is told of Luther. It is said that one day somebody came to Luther and asked him: "What would you do if you would know that the Lord would return tomorrow?" Luther's answer was: "Then I would plant an apple tree today." That means two things. First, that the kingdom of God does not disturb earthly conditions to the very end of earth's history. Luther does not want to change the world as did the Anabaptists. He does not build the kingdom of God on earth, but plants an apple tree. Do not have visions, but maintain earthly limited conditions unto the very end because we do not save the world, it has already been saved by Christ—long before Martin Luther was born. At the same time, it clarifys that it is *this* world that is loved and saved by the Lord: the world of apple trees and finite human beings; the world of the body, and the world of trees and fruit. We are not able to change this into the Garden of Eden, just as we cannot make ourselves better human beings. The kingdom of God will come through death, both for human beings and for apple trees and mountains and gardens. But it will come for this created world and not for some kind of spiritual world. In his coming God was faithful to his creation—and so are we. The same patristic tradition that speaks of surrender unto death and a kingdom of heaven stresses the resurrection of the body.[51] And she does so against those Gnostic and Marcionite idealists who are not content with the present world. *This* world will be saved, *this* human body. God

---

[51] See the many writings on the resurrection of the body by early Christian writers, e.g., Athenagoras, Justinus, Tertullianus, Methodius, Gregorius van Nyssa.

even cares for the hairs of our head. "Why would He count them if He would not save them?" says Tertullian.[52] Because God saves our body we know it is precious and we take care of it. And because God created the earth and loved it to the very end, we know how precious it is and care for it. We do not damage our bodies, and we do not damage the rest of creation. We know our limits and do not try to re-create God's work. There is only One Creator and only One who recreates.

Christian identity is identity in Christ, and that is no other confession than: The earth is the Lord's and its fullness. Therefore, Christian identity is saving the world precisely by dying to the world.

---

[52] Tertullian, *On the resurrection of the body*, 35.

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

DEVASTATING GRACE:
JUSTIFICATIO IMPII AND I-DENTITY

PHILLIPE (FLIP) THERON

INTRODUCTION

In the Western mind personal identity has become increasingly complicated. Lately, the three-dimensional view, which maintains that a person can be wholly present at a given moment, has been replaced by a four-dimensional perception, which claims that "persons are aggregates of momentary person-stages…including every person-stage between origin and end."[1] Gilles Deleuze even suggests "to stop thinking oneself as an 'I' in order to live as a current, as a bundle of currents in relation to other currents inside and outside oneself."[2] In reaction against the Cartesian 'I' of modernity, it would appear that in certain postmodern circles the self as such is in danger of dissolving.

From the perspective of the Reformation, personal identity is first and foremost defined by Christian identity. This, at least, is the basic proposal of this paper. It is argued that personal identity is fundamentally a forensic issue, which is dealt with in the doctrine of justification. As the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, justification is crucial for Christian identity. It should, however, not be reduced to the saving of souls, since it involves nothing less than a radically new creation.

WHO AM I?

In a comprehensive volume dealing with *Identity and Anxiety*, Rollo May pays attention to the "centrality of anxiety in our day" as reflected

---

[1] Ramond Martin and John Barresi, "Introduction: Personal identity and what matters in survival: an historical overview," Raymond Martin, John Barresi (eds.), *Personal Identity*, Malden, (Oxford/ Berlin: Blackwell, 2003), 3.

[2] Quoted by M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abington, 1996), 289.

in literature, psychology, sociological studies, philosophy, religion, and politics.[3] W.H. Auden wrote a poem and Leonard Bernstein composed a symphony entitled *Age of Anxiety*.

The pervasiveness of the question—*Who am I?*—seems to insinuate that something is seriously amiss. Apparently we have a niggling feeling that we are not ourselves. The search for my *self* is a sign of the so-called *identity crisis*, which refers to an acute form of confusion and disorientation[4] that affects individuals, peoples, nations, and institutions.[5]

The question—*Who am I?*—is closely related to the question—*Why am I?*—in the sense of *what is the meaning, value, and purpose of my life*? This quest for *I amness* involves a yearning to know not merely who I am; but rather, who I ought to be in order to be myself.[6]

Knowing ourselves entails judging our *selves*. This self-assessment is largely informed by the judgment of others and our assessment of their judgment. As John Locke already pointedly put it in a chapter entitled "Of identity and diversity," *person* is a forensic term.[7]

According to Calvin, knowing our *selves* is beyond our pale.[8] My core identity is a mystery that must be revealed. In encountering God, we concurrently encounter ourselves. In his commentary on Jer. 9:23f., Calvin comments that "we cannot know God without knowing ourselves. These two things are connected."[9] This encounter makes the reply, "pleased to meet you," neither possible nor appropriate. When meeting my Maker, I am at the same time confronted by my own

---

[3] Rollo May, "Centrality of anxiety in our day," Maurice R. Stein, Arthur J. Vidich, David Manning White (eds), *Identity and Anxiety. Survival of the Person in Mass Society*, (Chicago: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 120–128.

[4] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The making of the modern identity* (Cambridge/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 27.

[5] Dick Keyes, *Beyond Identity. Finding yourself in the image and character of God* (London/Sydney/Auckland/Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), 5f.

[6] Ian Kent, William Nicholls, *I AMness. The Discovery of the Self beyond the Ego* (Indianapolis: Bobbo-Merrill, 1972).

[7] Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith. Justification and Sanctification*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 4.

[8] J. Calvin, *Institutes 1.1*, Translated by H. Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962). Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's doctrine of Man*, (Westport: Greenwood, 1977), Chapter 1: "Man's knowledge of himself."

[9] J. Calvin, *Jeremiah* Vol. 1, Calvin's Commentaries, (Edinburgh: Calvin's Translation Society, 1850), 500.

miserable self. "Woe to me!", cries Isaiah (6: 5). "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."[10]

In this regard, Calvin closely echoes the views of Martin Luther.[11] In his *Disputatio de homine*, Luther contends that knowing God coincides with knowing ourselves.[12] He is convinced that this knowledge is the only appropriate theme of theology. In his *Preface* to Ps. 51, he submits, "the proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the justifier and Saviour of man the sinner."[13]

This view of the Reformers is at variance with the Greek injunction, γνωϑι σεαυτον (know thyself) and the advice of Alexander Pope in his *An Essay on Man* during the time of the Enlightenment: "Know then thy-self, presume not God to scan,/The proper study of Mankind is Man."[14] They are, however, in full accord with the counsel given by Pascal in the previous (17th) century: "Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Be humble, impotent reason! Be silent, feeble nature! Learn that man infinitely transcends man. Hear from your master your true condition, which is unknown to you. Listen to God."[15]

WHO ARE WE?

The isolated 'I' is a figment of modern imagination that is far removed from biblical thought in which societal factors play a major role in defining the individual person.[16] The inquiry—*Who am I?*—is inter-connected with the question—*Who are we?* According to Erikson, "the

---

[10] This coincidence of knowing God and knowing ourselves is, according to Tom Torrance, the essential direction of all Christian theology from which Calvin never deviates. Torrance, *Calvin's doctrine of Man*, 14.

[11] For Luther's view, see Hans Joachim Iwand, "Gotteserkenntnis und Sündenerkenntnis," *Glaubensgerechigkeit*, (München: Kaiser, 1980), 27–41.

[12] See Hans Joachim Iwand, "Sed originale per hominem unum. Ein Beitrag zur Lehre vom Menschen," *Glaubensgerechigkeit*.

[13] Iwand, *Glaubensgerechtigkeit*, 175. Cf. Paul O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi: The Justification Debate*, (Dublin/Portland: Four Courts Press, 1997), 20.

[14] M.H. Abrahams (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 1 (New York/London: Norton, 1993), 2270.

[15] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by A.J. Krailsheimer, (Penguin Classics, 1980), fragment 131, 64.

[16] Cf. Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament* (Minneapolis.: Fortress, 2003), 28 f.; also 35 f.

term identity expresses…both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others."[17] Consequently, personal identity has a composite character that comprises many identities including, in my case, being an Afrikaner.[18]

During the 17th century, our ancestors emigrated from Europe and settled at the southern tip of Africa. By and large, the Afrikaners share the same history, culture, language (Afrikaans), and (Reformed) religion.[19] As a result, we also share the sin and shame associated with *apartheid*. This political system was invented to safeguard our identity and continued existence as a separate people. The failure of this experiment in social engineering, and the subsequent breakdown of apartheid, shattered our self-assurance and caused great uncertainty.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the issue of identity is once again furiously debated among the Afrikaners. Many fear that our existence as a people is in jeopardy. What has recently happened in our neighboring state, Zimbabwe, is not conducive to a sense of security. "Affirmative action" has caused many of our children to leave the country to eke out an existence elsewhere. Farmers are afraid they might lose their land. The predominance of English in public life and education is cause for concern for the future of our culture.

Given the history of apartheid some would argue that it is unwise and insensitive to emphasize our own identity, and that we should rather cooperate to create a national identity encompassing all the peoples of our country. *Adapt or die* is their advice. Others remain uncertain what this adaptation would involve. They are afraid this amounts to saving ourselves by committing suicide.

Since the demise of apartheid the focus has shifted from Christian identity to religious tolerance. Concurrently there is a strong tendency within our own ranks to consider our Reformed roots expendable in favor of a (misunderstood) form of ecumenicity. Also a number of theologians seemingly feel our Reformed character is 'for sale.' Some

---

[17] E.H. Erikson, "The Problem of ego identity," Stein, Vidich and White, *Identity and Anxiety*, 38.

[18] For the composite character of personal identity, cf. A. van de Beek, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek—or both Jew and Greek?," E.A.J.G. Van der Borght, Dirk van Keulen, Martien E. Brinkman (eds.), *Faith and Ethnicity* (Volume 1), Studies in Reformed Theology 6 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 21–36.

[19] See Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: biography of a people*, (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003).

have performed a remarkable feat by jumping from what they consider to be a sinking ship, straight onto the bandwagon.

The theological justification of apartheid contributed to a large extent to the lukewarm and even hostile attitude towards the Reformed faith. In many people's minds, Calvinism has become closely associated with self-righteousness and smugness. The Afrikaners were considered to be God's chosen people, and therefore apartheid was of paramount importance. Such an ideology of election can only transpire when this doctrine is fundamentally misconstrued, and the unity of *election* and the *justification of the wicked* not clearly understood.

I-dentity and Idolatry

Hans Mol refers to the "fragile frame of identity," and defines it as follows: "Identity on the personal level is the stable niche that man occupies in a potentially chaotic environment which he is prepared vigorously to defend."[20] On the social level he describes it as a "stable aggregate of basic and commonly held beliefs, patterns, and values (that) maintains itself over against the potential threat of its environment and its members."

The need for identity is related to Spinoza's *conatus essendi*[21] (the craving to be) and has been called "the most powerful and the most pervasive among all species."[22] This urge is revealed in the intensity with which an animal will protect its territory, but also in the tenacity with which the Afrikaners clung to the policy of apartheid. This drive to be something or someone and to be recognized as such involves a never-ending endeavor to justify our existence. Oswald Bayer correctly claims, "humankind is in a battle of justifications" that involves a "striving and struggling for mutual recognition."[23] This fight for justifica-

---

[20] Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred. A sketch for a new social-scientific theory of religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 65.

[21] Theo de Boer, *De God van de filosofen en de God van Pascal. Op het grensgebied van filosofie en theologie* ('s-Gravenhage: Meinema, 1989), 41.

[22] Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative*, London 1969, 361, quoted by Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred*, 2.

[23] Oswald Bayer, "The doctrine of justification and ontology," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43 Heft 1 (2001), 49f. See also Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith*, chapter 1: "In the dispute of 'justifications'."

tion is manifested on the level of personal history and the histories of the many peoples that comprise world history, as well as the history of nature.

The autonomous 'I' of liberalism, which fostered what Paul Vitz has described as a "selfist psychology" and a "cult of self-worship,"[24] has also resulted in much loneliness, anxiety, self-loss, and shame. After all, sinful self-love and equally sinful self-hate are two sides of the same coin.[25] Both are symptoms of slavery to *self*.

Personal identity is extremely precious and at the same time exceedingly precarious. The attempt to secure my *I amness* can be dangerous and idolatrous. In the development of the *sense of self* in the Western world, the *cogito* of Descartes, in which the self was placed at the very center of the universe,[26] played an important and influential role.[27] Although it was not Descartes' intention, his choice was basically atheistic in character. The autonomous Cartesian *I am*, whose advent was announced during the Renaissance but was temporarily delayed by the Reformation, would in due course displace the *I AM* of Ex. 3: 14.

In the process man replaced God, historical progress divine providence, and human reason biblical revelation. What Otto Rank has termed "the apotheosis of man as a creative personality"[28] involved a superhuman task; namely, the creation of a perfectly structured world and society in order to keep the threatening chaos at bay. This, however, proved to be a Herculean task. The euphoria over the much vaunted freedom celebrated in Pico della Mirandola's *De dignitate hominis* did not last.[29] Zygmunt Bauman has brilliantly described how this enterprise of man's freedom turned out to be "a long march to

---

[24] Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-acceptance. The Problem of Identity in Theology and Psychology*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 14.

[25] Terry Cooper, *Sin, Pride and Self-acceptance*, chapter 6: "Pride and self-hate: two sides of the same coin?" See in this regard also Judith Plaskow on the sin of self-denial and self-abnegation in *Sex, Sin and Grace. Women's Experience and Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham/New York/London: University Press, 1980).

[26] Jean A. Perkins, *The Concept to the Self in the French Enlightment*, (Genève: Droz, 1969), 13.

[27] Charles Taylor has traced this development in his comprehensive study, *Sources of the Self*.

[28] Otto Rank, *Art and Artist: Creative urge and personality development, New York 1932, 24*, quoted by Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), xxvi note 4.

[29] Cf H.G. Geertsema, *Van Boven naar Voren, wijsgerige achtergronden en problemen van het theologische denken over geschiedenis bij Jürgen Moltmann*, (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 29.

prison."[30] In *post-modernism* the chickens of *modernism* are coming home to roost.

Bauman depicts the postmodern mind as "marked above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving destructiveness."[31] This has profound and chaotic consequences within the sphere of morality. "The deposition of universal reason did not reinstate a universal God. Instead, morality has been privatized; like everything else that share this fate, ethics has become a matter of individual discretion…"[32] Amid a plurality of available moral choices, the individual is deprived of all moral resources.

The isolated individual is faced with the *fear of the void* that modernity tried in vain to dispel by social organization and personality formation. This attempt was discarded by postmodernity. Bauman blames post-modernity for doing "next to nothing to support its defiance of past pretence with a new practical antidote to old poison."[33] In its "imag-ined communities,"[34] which lack stability and institutionalized continu-ity, postmodernity has privatized fear.

In reaction against Descartes, the *self* as such is in danger of being destroyed. Postmodernity reminds one of the demon-possessed man from the region of the Gerasenes. To Jesus' question: "What is your name?", he replied: "My name is Legion…for we are many." (Mark 5: 9). According to Kenny, "the self is a mythical entity…It is a philo-sophical muddle to allow the space which differentiates 'my self' from 'myself' to generate the illusion of a mysterious entity distinct from …the human being."[35] In a never-ending process of self-constitution the human body is "seen as the sole constant factor among the pro-tean and fickle identities: the material, tangible substratum, container, carrier and executor of all past, present and future identities."[36] Post-modernity's deconstruction has indeed been devastating, but one can hardly call it gracious. In this regard, it differs fundamentally from the critical character of the Reformation.

---

[30] Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xvii.

[31] *Intimations of Postmodernity*, vii.

[32] *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xxiii.

[33] *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xvii.

[34] Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xviiif. He borrows the concept from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[35] A. Kenny, *The Self*, Milwaukee 1988, 4, quoted by Galen Strawson, 'The Self,' in Martin and Barresi, *Personal Identity*, 335. See also 364.

[36] Baumann, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, 194.

ARTICULUS STANTIS ET CADENTIS ECCLESIAE

It comes as no surprise that the doctrine of justification plays such a pivotal part in the theology of the Reformation. It deals with God's judgment, his opinion, and his estimation of us. It is the focal point of the Christian faith in which the *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, solo Christo*, and *soli Deo Gloria* all merge. In each instance the *sola* has an extremely critical character. It proclaims the justification of the *ungodly*, which entails that the idolatrous self is shattered and simultaneously re-centred and saved *extra nos* in Christ. In God's devastating judgment we are crucified with Christ and liberated from self-centredness in the shape of sinful self-love and self-hate.

Although Luther and Calvin did not use the exact words, the formula *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesia* most certainly reflects their feeling.[37] Luther perceived it as the "only solid rock" on which the church can repose.[38] Accordingly, the *Augsburg Confession* describes it as "the chief article in the Christian faith."[39] In spite of the noticeable fact that in his *Institutes* Calvin deals with sanctification before justification, he calls the latter the *cardo praecipuus sustinendae religionis* (the principle ground on which religion must be supported).[40] Even if the doctrine of justification as such does not occupy central stage in Calvin's theology, he most certainly considers it to be decisive.[41]

---

[37] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics 4, 1*, (Edinburgh: Clark, 1961), 522: "The well-known description of the doctrine as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* does not seem to derive from Luther himself, but it is an exact statement of his view. He found in it the one point which involved the whole." The precise expression is used by J.H. Alsted in the 17th century and by V.E. Löscher in the 18th century. In his commentary on Ps. 130: 4 Luther writes: "quia isto articulo stante et stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia." O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi: The Justification Debate*, 19. According to Calvin, the doctrine of justification is "the main hinge on which religion turns." Inst. 3, 2, 1. See also Klaas Runia, "Justification and Roman Catholicism," D.A. Carson (ed), *Right with God. Justification in the Bible and the World*, (World Evangelical Fellowship: Paternoster, Baker Book House, 1992), 197.

[38] "…unicam hanc et solidam petram…" Preface to Luther's commentary on Galatians. See Iwand, *Glaubensgerechtigkeit*, 14.

[39] Cf Michael Root, "The implications of the *Joint Declaration on Justification* and its wider impact for Lutheran participation in the ecumenical movement," William C. Rusch (ed.), *Justification and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement. The Joint Declaration of Justification*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 48.

[40] Inst. 3, 11, 1. See Runia, "Justification," 197. Also Gabriel Fackre, "The Joint Declaration and the Reformed Tradition," Rusch, *Justification*, 64.

[41] Before focusing on sanctification and justification separately, he has already dealt

Surely, the object of the Christian faith is not a doctrine—that would be idolatrous—but the grace of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Unquestionably, as Barth reminds us, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not the doctrine of justification by itself, but rather the confession of Christ, our Savior.[42] However, in giving content to this confession, the doctrine of justification is critical. Paul O'Callaghan rightly contends that for Luther it "acts as a kind of global criteriological principle which serves to interpret the entire gamut of doctrines and practices that go to make up the Christian whole."[43] The numerous dialogues in the ecumenical debate over the previous decades testify to the centrality of this theological theme.[44] Also, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church describes this doctrine as "an indispensable criterion."[45]

Its hermeneutical function is to safeguard the gospel from distortion. It has been called a "metalinguistic stipulation"[46] or "metatheological rule."[47] Lindbeck compares it to the grammatical rules of a language.[48] One may know the grammar without being able to communicate properly in a particular language. On the other hand, it is possible to be proficient in a language without knowing the grammatical rules. Although justification is predominantly associated with the time of the Reformation, Thomas Oden is convinced that there is a basic, classic consensus in this regard.[49] Clearly, it is not the letter of this article, but

---

extensively with the character of faith, which for the Reformers is intrinsically related to justification.

[42] *C D* 4, 1, 527.

[43] O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi*, 19.

[44] Outside the Lutheran-Reformed/Catholic dialogue, Paul O'Callaghan, pays attention to Lutheran/Reformed, Lutheran/Anglican, Lutheran/Methodist, Lutheran/Baptist, Lutheran/Orthodox, Evangelical/Old Catholic, Methodist/Roman Catholic, and Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogues. *Fides Christi*, chapter 4.

[45] *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 18. It is noteworthy that the Declaration adds that while Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria. That gives one pause to ponder.

[46] O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi*, 200 refers to Robert Jenson's use of the concept.

[47] Lindbeck in an article dealing with "The limits of diversity in the Understanding of Justification," George A Lindbeck (edited by James J. Buckley) *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 42.

[48] Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 43 f.

[49] Thomas C. Oden, *The Justification Reader*, (Grand Rapids: 2002).

the spirit is crucial. This, however, does not render hermeneutical rules and the criteriological function of this article of faith redundant for church and theology.

The Critical Character of the Word

There is a close connection between the criteriological significance of this doctrine and the critical character of the Word. The dogma of justification deals with the judgment of God, as proclaimed in his Word, on the entire creation. Heb. 4: 12f.: "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges (κριτικος) the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Κρινειν, to judge (κρισις = judgment), means to separate. A judge distinguishes and separates between good and bad, right and wrong, guilt and innocence, and life and death. The Word of God is κριτικος because it plunges this world into a permanent crisis. It judges and reveals "the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." It is not for nothing that the final book of the Bible is called *Revelation*.

The critical Word of God is not merely informative, but performative and creative. "It is living and active" In Genesis 1 it separates the light from the menacing darkness, and the inhabitable land from the intimidating waters of the deep where the chaotic powers like Rahab (Isaiah 51:9) and the Leviathan (Ps. 74: 13) lurk. It is the same Word that in the final judgment (Matt. 25: 32) "will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." This living, active, creative Word separates being from non-being, life from death, the old man from the new, and "the present evil age" (Gal. 1: 3) from the world to come.

This has already occurred in the Cross of Christ in which God's judgment has been executed. Rom. 4: 25: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." In God's active, creative judgment, the forensic and ontological dimensions coincide. Word and sacrament proclaim "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Rom. 4: 17). In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther declares: "Baptism thus signifies two things—death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justifica-

tion…This death and resurrection we call the new creation, regeneration, and spiritual birth. This should not be understood allegorically as the death of sin and the life of grace, as many understand it, but as actual death and resurrection."[50]

That explains the 'realism' displayed in Kohlbrugge's Easter sermons.[51] He proclaims that Jesus, who was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5: 21), took with him to the grave the old Adam with everything he was, including his flesh, skin, bones, heart, head, mind, desires, works; in short: the "whole disgusting carcass," and buried him for good. This old Adam never again rose from the grave. Having justified everything in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, Jesus re-appeared from the grave with a new creation—a new man with skin, flesh, bones, heart, head, mind, feet, and all his limbs. In the old Adam there is nothing that survives this devastating judgment. This tallies with Luther's view that justification is a matter of "death and life."[52] $\Delta\iota\alpha\varkappa\varrho\iota\mu\alpha$ (condemnation) denotes death; $\delta\iota\alpha\varkappa\alpha\iota\omega\mu\alpha$ (justification) spells life (Rom. 5: 16).[53] In this destruction, sinful man is destroyed. This did not happen, as Barth put it,

> out of any desire for vengeance and retribution on the part of God, but because of the radical nature of divine love which could "satisfy" itself only in the outworking of its wrath against the man of sin, only by killing him, extinguishing him, removing him. Here is the place for the doubtful concept that in the passion of Jesus Christ, in the giving of His Son to death, God has done that which is 'satisfactory' or sufficient in the victorious fighting of sin to make this victory radical and total.[54]

As judgment proclaimed on the old, the Word is at the same time a promise of the new. In the judgment of the old, the coming of the new is already announced. In this passing world the eschatological resurrection takes the form of the cross. All God's promises have been confirmed in the cross of Christ in whom God has graciously given us everything (Rom. 8: 31). As Paul writes in 2 Cor. 1: 20: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ."

---

[50] *LW* 36, 67–68. See also Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith—A Matter of Death and Life*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 16.

[51] See O. Noordmans, "Kohlbrugge. Festpredigen," *Verzamelde Werken* 3, (Kampen: Kok, 1981), 317–320.

[52] Cf. Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 1982.

[53] J.M. Hasselaar, *Erfzonde en Vrijheid*, ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1953), 317.

[54] Barth *CD IV/1*, 254.

Consequently, as far as human judgment is concerned, Paul could not care less. 1 Cor. 4: 3: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court." That also applies to his own judgment as he continues: "Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."[55] Therefore, we should refrain from judging in advance, but should rather "wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts" (1 Cor. 4: 3–5).

The Cruciformity of Faith[56]

The unity of knowing God and knowing ourselves is reflected in Luther's view concerning *deum justificare* in which the human subject concedes to God's judgment.[57] Consequently, there obtains conformity between God's judging Word and man's faith. *Similis forma in verbo et in credente*,[58] as Luther pronounces in his commentary on Rom. 3: 4: " …Let God be true and every man a liar. As it is written: 'So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge'."

It is not our faith, but God's Word of judgment and promise that is the foundation of our justification. Kohlbrugge contends that we are justified not by our faith, but by the faith of Christ the only "Righteous One" (1 Jn 2: 2).[59] In Christ crucified God has identified Himself with us to such an extent that his Word and our faith became one.

It so happens that the expression πιστις (Ιησου) Χριστου (or υἱου του Θεου) is used on seven occasions in the letters of Paul in contexts that deal with the foundation of justification.[60] In Bible translations, it was

---

[55] That corresponds with the consolation given by 1 John 3: 19 f., i.e., that we can "set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."

[56] This phrase was coined by Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity. Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, Chapter 6 ('Cruciform Faith') (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[57] In his commentary on Rom. 3: 4 Luther writes: "Et justificatio illa Dei passiva, qua a nobis iustificatur, est ipsa iustificatio nostri activa a Deo." Iwand, *Glaubensgerechtigkeit*, 21.

[58] Iwand, *Glaubensgerechtigkeit*, 21.

[59] J.H. Grolle, *De boodschap van Kohlbrugge nú!, (*Wageningen: Veenman, 1946), 45. For a comprehensive study of Kohlbrugge's understanding of faith, see A. de Reuver, *'Bedelen bij de Bron'. Kohlbrugge's geloofsopvatting vergeleken met Reformatie en Nadere Reformatie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1992).

[60] Rom. 3: 22, 26; twice in Gal. 2: 16; Gal. 2: 20; 3: 22; Philippians 3: 9.

traditionally understood as an objective genitive and rendered as "faith in Jesus Christ." Lately there has been a growing consensus to see it as a subjective genitive. In that case it does not refer to the faith of the believer, but to the "faith (respectively: faithfulness)[61] of Christ."[62] The available space does not allow us to discuss the exegetical arguments, but I do find them rather compelling.[63]

Apart from the "faith of Christ," these texts also make mention of the faith of the believers. According to Gal. 2: 16 we believe (literally:) "*into*" (ἐις) Christ[64] that we may be justified by the (literally:) "*faith of Christ*." Christ's faith(fulness) has an incorporative character in which we participate by being *in* Him.[65] From Gal. 2: 20 it is clear that the faith(fulness) of Christ refers to his "giving himself for me" on the cross. Our faith is not an independent imitation of Christ's faith, but is founded on his faith (respectively his cross), which—according to Rom. 3: 21—is the manifestation of God's righteousness (respectively: faithfulness). Our faith is not excluded, but "the accent is placed, however, on the faithfulness of God manifested in the faithful death of Jesus."[66] Through his "inclusive substitution" Christ lived and died (respectively: believed) in our stead.[67] Participating in his faith involves dying with Him.

That Christ died *for us* was possible because we were *in Christ* and therefore died *with Him* (cf. 2 Cor. 5: 14). Consequently, his vicarious life and death is far removed from forensic fiction. In this regard, Gal. 2: 20 is especially illuminating. That Christ "gave himself for me" involves that "I have been crucified with Christ." This entails that "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." This does not imply that "I" have been

---

[61] *Pistis* can have both meanings.

[62] The *NET Bible* or *New English Translation*, a recent electronic translation, has already opted to translate this phrase as "faith of Christ."

[63] See among others, Morna D. Hooker, "Pistis Christou," in her volume *From Adam to Christ. Essays on Paul*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1990); Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ. The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3: 1–4: 11*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002); Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity*. Chapter 6, P.F. Theron, "Unity and Justification: The Faithfulness of God, the Faith/fulness of Christ, and the Faith of the Church", E.A.J.G. Van der Borght (ed), *Religion without Ulterior Motive*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 119–138.

[64] The same expression is used in Galatians 3:27: "For all of you who were baptized into (εις) Christ."

[65] Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, xxix.

[66] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 118.

[67] Hartmuth Gese, "The Atonement," *Essays on Biblical Theology*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg), 93–116.

eliminated, for Paul adds that "the life I live in the body, I live by the (literally:) *faith of the Son of God*." The subject of my faith is not an independent 'I,' but my faith is participating in the faith(fulness) of Christ manifested on the Cross. The reverse side of my being crucified *in*, and therefore *with* Christ, is Christ's living in me. "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2 Cor. 5: 5).

JUSTIFICATION AND NEW CREATION

In the mind of Luther (not necessarily the Lutherans) and Calvin (not necessarily the Calvinists), justification and sanctification were inseparable. That is the reason why Calvin can treat sanctification before justification, and Luther can state that the Christian "is righteous and holy by an alien or foreign holiness."[68]

In discussing the work of the Holy Spirit, one could make a distinction between justification and sanctification, but it is also possible to include the latter within the former.[69] The Greek words for 'justification' ($\delta\iota\varkappa\alpha\iota\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$) and 'righteousness' ($\delta\iota\varkappa\alpha\iota\sigma\sigma\nu\nu\eta$) derive from the same root. To "justify" means to "rightwise" (Grobel, Sanders)[70] and involves a creative act of God, which He has already performed in the crucified and resurrected Christ. Since Christ is the "inclusive anthropos," his death and resurrection are inclusive, eschatological events in which the "old man" and the "body of sin" were destroyed and the coming of the new age was announced.[71] This involves a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5: 17) including Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 4: 16) encompassing the "whole creation" that "has been groaning as in pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8: 22).

The conflict that often happens in theology between justification and sanctification, should rather be seen as the eschatological tension between the 'already' in Christ, and the 'not yet' in ourselves.

---

[68] *LW 12*: 328. Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification," *Justification and Sanctification in the Traditions of the Reformation*. Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 42, (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 98.

[69] Cf. O. Noordmans, "Herschepping," in: *Verzamelde Werken 2*, (Kampen: Kok 1979), 307.

[70] Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *Anchor Bible*, 1129.

[71] Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ. A Study in Pauline Theology*, (Berlin: Topelmann, 1966), 27–30.

That is the intention of the adage, *simul iustus et peccator*.[72] It does not deny that there is progress in the Christian life, but that consists in a progressive dying—and therefore living—in and with Christ. For the post-Enlightment mentality, which has sold its soul to the ideology of progress, this tension is intolerable. In Luther's *theologia crucis* it is essential. In his *De servo arbitrio* he explains:

> In order to make belief possible, everything that is believed must be hidden. It is, however, most hidden, precisely when confronted with perception, the senses and experience. So when God vivifies, He does so in killing; when he justifies, He does so in making us guilty; when He leads us into heaven, He does so in leading us to hell…Thus God hides his eternal benevolence and mercy behind eternal wrath, his justice behind injustice.[73]

The Inner Man

This tension is reflected in the contrast between "inner" and "outer" man in the *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, and the *Letter to the Ephesians*.[74] According to 2 Cor. 4: 16, the "outer man" is wasting away while the "inner" (man) is being daily renewed. This distinction has nothing to do with a dichotomy between body and soul, but refers to the disparity between the present and the *parousia* that already impinges on it. Paul adds (vs. 17): "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Our true identity is, and remains, an eschatological reality. That is why the groaning creation is still waiting in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (Rom. 8: 19). "What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 Joh. 3: 2). In the meantime Paul prays (Eph. 3: 16f.:) that the Father "out of his glorious riches

---

[72] For an excellent discussion of the *simul iustus et peccator*, see Theodor Dieter, "Justification and Sanctification in Luther," *Justification and Sanctification in the Traditions of the Reformation*, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 42, (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 87–112.

[73] Translated from the Latin text in *WA 18*, 633, 7 by Ulrich Kühn, "The modern soteriological debate in the Lutheran Tradition," Rienk Lanooy (ed.*)*, *For Us and for Our Salvation. Seven Perpspectives on Christian Soteriology*, (Utrecht–Leiden: IIMO research publications, 1994), 77.

[74] Berger, *Identity and Experience*, 79.

…may strengthen you with power of his Spirit in your (literally:) 'inner man' (εσω ανθρωπον), so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

In a moving meditation on this text entitled, *The Inner Man*, Noordmans portrays the poverty of this inward "I."[75] One is never "at home" with oneself. When I search for my *self* behind the fullness of my daily existence, I come across a void, an anxious emptiness. What remains of Elijah's inner being after the momentous events on Mount Carmel? And of Luther after Worms? Who will save their gasping souls? They saved others, but cannot save themselves (cf. Matt. 27: 42). On several occasions Noordmans quotes P.A. de Genestet: "Be yourself, I said to some one. But he could not: he was no one."[76]

Over against the poverty of the inner man stands the "glorious riches" of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). He does not remove our poverty, but strengthens us by comforting our quivering hearts. That is why the "poor in spirit" is called "blessed" in the first beatitude (Matthew 5:3). The Holy Spirit creates the Christian "inner man" by consoling our souls. This, according to Noordmans, is the only difference between the inwardness of the Christian and of humanity at large.

Conclusions

1. My identity is a mystery that must be revealed. Only in meeting our Maker do we encounter our *selves*.

2. Encountering God involves facing his judgment. Gal. 4: 8 f.: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now…you know God—or rather are known by God…"

---

[75] "De inwendige Mens," "*Zondaar en Bedelaar*", *Verzamelde Werken 8*, (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 88–90.

[76] O. Noordmans, "De idée der persoonlijkheid en de Heilige Geest," *Verzamelde Werken 4*, (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 429; "Heidegger en Augustinus," *Verzamelde Werken 4*, (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 399; "De achtergrond van de Bergrede," *Verzamelde Werken 2*, (Kampen: Kok, 1979), 49.

3. My true identity forms part of an eschatological new creation. 1 Cor. 13: 12: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

4. My true identity is located outside myself in Christ crucified and raised from death. I am not "the master of my fate…the captain of my soul" (W.E. Henley). 1 Corinthians 6:19 f.: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price."

5. At the same time, my "only comfort in life and death" is "that I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins…" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1).

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AS BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

CHRISTIAAN MOSTERT

INTRODUCTION

Many answers are possible to the question, 'what is it to be a Christian?' A wide range of images and metaphors are available for the task of answering this question, both drawn from the Bible and from other sources. This parallels the many forms which Christian life and discipleship can take, depending on the situation in which people enter into such a life. The forms and styles of spirituality also vary widely across the spectrum of Christian ecclesial life, as do the forms of worship found in Christian communities. None of this should be in the least surprising. We live our faith in widely different theological, liturgical, spiritual, and ethical traditions, and these differences are, to a considerable degree, regarded as enriching rather than threatening. This is not to say that diversity is an unqualified good as such or that we are excused from various forms of mutual accountability in respect of these differences. There are limits to diversity, but in principle diversity in forms of Christian theology, spirituality, and action are—and are to be—welcomed.

The major element in being a Christian is a sense of belonging to Jesus Christ, perhaps better expressed as a sense of belonging to God *through* Christ or *in* Christ.[1] The relation of the believer to Jesus Christ, typically characterized in terms of discipleship—faith and hope in him and love for him—will certainly feature prominently in any Christian's self-understanding. However strong or weak may be the disciple's sense that he/she has made a commitment to him—leaving aside the Johannine insistence that any such choosing is preceded by

---

[1] This is well stated in the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563): "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The answer: "That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ …" Michael Owen (ed.), *Witness of Faith: Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting church Press, 1984), 87.

Christ's choosing of the disciple (John 15:15)—Christian self-definition will normally have this relation or relationship as a central element. We understand our Christian identity (and we define ourselves as Christian) in these terms, belonging to a community that understands itself as his, indeed as his 'body.' His gift to us and his claim on us are at the heart of being Christian.

But Christian identity is no simple thing; indeed it is complex. Being Christian does not take place in a vacuum. Christian faith and life finds its form in very particular conditions and circumstances in a larger world. As Werner Jeanrond says, "Christians always already 'belong' to a number of traditions and communities."[2] Even Christian identity is not exhausted in any one 'belonging,' though there is, of course, only one belonging that is ultimate: our belonging to God. We are to have no other gods than the one God (Exod. 20:2 ff.), the God narratively defined for Israel in the Exodus and for Christians unsurpassably in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Nevertheless, under this one fundamental belonging there is a plurality of belonging. We necessarily belong to a context marked by 'space, time, sociality, and language';[3] there are ethnic, familial, cultural, and political belongings. Varying degrees of tension mark the relations between these different belongings. In a previous age different denominational belongings were full of tension; these days much less so. We are now as much preoccupied with co-existing or conflicting *religious* belongings, since in the 20th century people of different religions encountered each other on a much larger scale. On the one hand, we are decisively shaped by our traditions and formed by our belongings; on the other hand, just as we can learn new languages, we can also embrace new traditions and receive new structures of belonging, though the capacity to do so varies greatly from person to person. Apart from this subjective difference, however, some degree of tension cannot be avoided, if there is a recognition that one belonging is ultimate and others are relative.

It will be the argument of this chapter that Christian identity, though potentially widely inclusive, is very particular. It is marked by a belonging to God in Christ, the God who is identified in the story of Jesus. Particularity and universality are both features of the Christian confes-

---

[2] Werner G. Jeanrond, "Belonging or Identity: Christian Faith in a Multi-Religious World," in C. Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 106.

[3] Jeanrond, "Belonging or Identity," 107.

sion of Jesus Christ. He lived at a particular time and place; his ethnicity, culture, and religious formation were highly particular. But he came among us because of God's love for the world, the whole of it. In Christ the walls that divide Jew from Gentile are broken down (Eph. 2:13 ff.). In him the division of humankind into Jew and Greek, slave or free, male and female is transcended (Gal. 3:28). The relation between each Christian and Christ is effected and sealed in baptism; this is the norm for the New Testament.[4] One of the major ways of describing Christian identity is to see it as *baptismal* identity; in baptism we are given a new identity, new inasmuch as it displaces an earlier identity or crystallizes around a new defining center. In baptism we are called into a new belonging which relativizes all other structures of belonging. To establish this it will be necessary to consider baptism as an identity-forming ritual act, and then to suggest why this act relates to our *ultimate* belonging, our belonging to God in Christ. Before turning to this task, however, a recent controversy about funerals that attracted considerable media attention in Melbourne, Australia, may highlight some of the main issues.

Flags and funerals

In earlier times in Australia, it was not uncommon to see the national flag, often accompanied by the British Union Jack, in churches, especially Anglican and Presbyterian churches, the 'established' churches of England and Scotland respectively. People who went to war did so under the motto, 'For God, King and Country.' It was unthinkable that there was any tension between these three. Even today, when former servicemen are buried, the national flag will be placed over the coffin. A brief service of remembrance by former military 'mates' will be held at the end of the Christian funeral service, whether it is held in a church or not. The idea that there may be some conflict between the symbol of the flag and Christian symbols such as the cross, water, or an Easter candle would have occurred to few, if any members of the church, including ministers. Recently, one of the leading ministers of the Unit-

---

[4] This is not to overlook the fact that some Christian communities do not baptize at all or not in water. For the New Testament, however, both baptism (in water) and faith stand in the center of the picture; baptism is clearly the norm. At the edges of the picture some qualifications may be required.

ing Church in Australia refused permission to allow the national flag to cover the coffin of an old member of his congregation who was (in our expression) a 'returned serviceman.' Not only did this lead to a pastorally very difficult situation—in fact, a compromise could not be found, and the family decided to have the funeral service in another church—but it created a furor in the media. The minister at the center of all this was severely criticized on all sides, including by some other ministers of the church, and was treated very badly. He even received a death-threat. Clearly, his action had touched a raw nerve.

It has to be said that in recent times funeral services in our country, even when held in a church, have been felt more and more to 'belong' to the family. The service has had to make room for idiosyncratic requests for music, poetry, memorabilia, and the telling of stories, and the Christian content has had to be accommodated to the personal content. Already the Roman Catholic Church has started to review this trend. The sense that the deceased person belongs to 'us' (the family, the sporting and hobbies organizations, the professional association, the Returned Servicemen's League, or the Masonic Lodge) has come more or less to overshadow the sense in which the person belongs to Jesus Christ and his church. The question arises whether the prominent display of many personal items and the symbols of these other 'belongings,' including the national flag, have come to compromise the integrity of the Christian funeral service. Clearly, some ministers have begun to think so. It is forgotten that the funeral service does not only serve the purpose of giving thanks for a particular person's life, but also of worshipping God and "celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which witness to the faithfulness of God in life and in death."[5] It is particularly appropriate, the discussion paper goes on to say, to recall the baptism of the deceased person, which has already in life symbolized his/her immersion into the death of Jesus Christ and which now in death is completed, and which is accompanied by the hope of resurrection with Christ. It is part of the Easter faith that God, in Christ, has "embraced our death and offered the gift and promise of new life."[6]

---

[5] The phrase is taken from the discussion paper prepared at the request of the Moderator of the Synod in which the events happened, "Establishing the Relationship between Christian Funeral Services and Civic Funeral Rites," unpublished paper, 12 May 2005, 3.1.

[6] "Christian Funeral Services and Civic Funeral Rites," 3.1.

The national flag has become a symbol of this much-discussed and controversial event. In many contexts the national flag arouses very deep feelings, mostly very positive, but not invariably so. Those who have brought honor to their country, especially in sport, are usually proud to hold up their national flag. Flags are flown on national occasions to symbolize the history, the achievements, or the aspirations of a nation. However, those who feel let down or betrayed by their country will respond to the national flag very differently. Many people who served in the armed forces of their country undoubtedly saw this as part of their Christian service: cross and flag were easily associated; the flag functioned more or less as a Christian symbol. This situation has changed in two main ways: it is no longer widely assumed that Australia is a Christian country, with the result that the flag is not seen as a Christian symbol; and some Christians have come to feel more strongly that Australian involvement in recent military conflicts has been a *failure* to be faithful to the gospel, so that the flag and the cross have come to be regarded as conflicting symbols. The association of God with the interests of the nation, whether military or other, has become highly problematic. A few lines from the discussion paper develop this sentiment.

> For the Christian, nationality does not provide either ultimate identity or hope. Christians believe the identity of all people is God-given. Their identity, in life and death, is in the merciful and gracious action of God the Holy Trinity in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Further, whereas nationality represents distinction and division of the world's people, the Christian gospel is for all people of all nations; the kingdom of God is for all humankind.[7]

The fact that the discussion paper keeps open the possibility of the use of a flag at a Christian funeral service, though not draped over the coffin, is not the important point. More to the point is the fact that in a world of multiple 'belongings' not all symbols can be held together. It is not difficult to imagine how the members of the Confessing Church in Germany in the early 1930s felt about the association of the cross and the swastika. The issue is the relation between the gospel and the culture; what can co-exist and what cannot. In this question the place of the flag in Christian funerals merely illustrates the fundamental problem.

Reference has been made several times to baptism as a symbol of Christian identity, and as something which should be recalled and

---

[7] "Christian Funeral Services and Civic Funeral Rites," 3.4.

celebrated in a Christian funeral. Almost all churches practice baptism as the rite of initiation into the community of faith, though with well-known but now somewhat converging differences. Both baptism and faith are at the heart of Christian identity (or Christian 'belonging'); it would never have occurred to the earliest Christians to separate them. Only more recently has the *continuing* importance of baptism in the Christian life begun to receive its due emphasis. Baptism defines the shape of our whole life in Christ, not merely its beginning. The matter of baptism must now be explored more explicitly, not in a comprehensive way, but especially in respect of its decisive role in the shaping of Christian life, and thus in determining Christian identity.

Christian Baptism

It is self-evident that Christian identity or Christian 'belonging' is decisively shaped by Christian belief, faith, and hope. What people believe about the world in its fundamental relation to God, how they relate to God in trust and hope, and how, from this faith, they live in and relate to this world in all its ambiguity is deeply formative and indicative of who they are and of who and what they understand themselves to be. The importance of faith, understood broadly as belief, trust, hope, and moral commitment, cannot be over-stated. However, faith is not complete without baptism; St. Paul mentions them in the same breath in Gal. 3:26 f.: by faith we are children of God and through baptism we are clothed with Christ. Needless to say, there are Christian communities which do not baptize—and there are people of faith who for various reasons never receive Christian baptism—without surrendering the claim to be *Christian*.[8] But it is normal in the whole *oikoumene* of the church that faith leads to baptism, though the converse, that baptism leads to faith, is also true.[9] Faith receives baptism; it does not replace baptism. Pannenberg states the point this way: "Baptism certainly does not bring salvation without faith. It relates always in some way to the

---

[8] Nor should the rest of the church deny their *Christian* character and identity.

[9] See the 'Baptism' Statement in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), §12. Each of these statements can be applied both to infant (*paedo*) baptism and believer's (*credo*) baptism. For a good summary of pre-baptismal life and the 'initiatory structure' of becoming a believer, see Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 20–22.

faith of the baptised, but my faith does not make baptism—it receives it."[10] As Luther also insisted, our own faith is never a basis for the baptism that links our life to Jesus Christ; "if we are baptised into our own faith, everything is insecure."[11] Faith is too fragile to bear such a weight. It is not our grasp of the reality and goodness of God that counts, but, as the gospel assures us, God's having hold of us.

The Christian proclamation centers on the 'good news' of the incarnation of the Son of God, who brings the light and life of salvation, to mention particularly Johannine themes. Or it is about the 'good news' of our justification by grace, not works, received through faith, to use Pauline terms. It is essentially about something that takes place outside of us (*extra nos*) and effects something salvific or redemptive for us (*pro nobis*). The word of the gospel is addressed *to* us; we do not find it within us, and we do not speak it to ourselves as our *own* word. Its source is outside us. If it awakens faith in us, through its own power, it works its renewing and transforming effects in our lives, and does so for the rest of our lives. In that sense, it is the gospel that transforms us, not our faith, though it will not be effective in the absence of faith. The same must be said of baptism. The sacrament of baptism is administered *to* us; we do not baptize ourselves. In baptism the same good news is declared to us; the same holy mystery is enacted toward us and upon us. We are its recipients, not its 'doers.' We are taken up into the reality of which it is the sign. Baptism is an act in which the active and passive moods come together; it includes a confession of faith on the part of the person being baptized, but this is not what constitutes the baptism.[12] Baptism is a baptism into Christ (Gal. 3:27, Rom. 6:3); by means of it we are united with him, 'assigned' to him, the crucified and risen one, as Edmund Schlink expresses it.[13] The apostle Paul does not separate "the insertion of the baptised person into the event of the cross" and his/her "assignment to the living Lord."[14] To put it in other words, there can be no separation between our participation in the death and

---

[10] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans & Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 261.

[11] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 272. Cf. 258: "If baptism is primarily dying with Christ and new birth of water and the Spirit, then the pledge of the baptised can no longer stand on the same level as this act of God."

[12] Hans Schwarz, *Divine Communication* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 65.

[13] Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 42–47. See also Pannenberg's metaphor of 'an act of transfer'; *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 239.

[14] Schlink, *Doctrine of Baptism*, 43.

resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new structure of 'belonging' to him. Baptism effects the participation and the union, on the one hand, and the transfer and assignment, on the other. In churches in which other signs accompany the baptism in water—always subsidiary signs—the marking of the baptized with the sign of the cross marks the person as belonging to Christ, as part of the great company of those who are at his disposal, and placed under his rule. If in faith we offer ourselves for his service, this commitment builds on the foundation of what is already done in our baptism.

To receive baptism, then, is to be determined or shaped in a particular way;[15] we no longer have our being apart from him who died and was raised for us. This new determination or formation can be considered under five categories: the christological, the pneumatological, the eschatological, the ecclesial, and the ethical.[16]

1. The fundamental determination is *christological*. Baptized persons are "immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the 'old Adam' is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken."[17] There is no longer any other to whom we can go, for he has the words of eternal life; he is the Holy One of God. (John 6:68f.) There is an intentionality toward a new way of life in which Christ envelops us in himself and gives us the new freedom of living as his disciples and friends. (John 15:15)

2. Equally important in the New Testament is the *pneumatological* determination. Schlink expresses it succinctly: "Through Baptism God makes the believer Christ's own, gives him [or her] the Holy Spirit, and receives him [or her] into the church."[18] Christian life is characterized by being *in* the Spirit and living *according to* the Spirit (Gal. 5:25); the Spirit is the source and power of the new life, on the one hand, and its norm, on the other.[19] The Spirit is the divine enabling and the divine direction of life in Christ, life as a baptized person, 'baptismal' life.

---

[15] It is necessary, when writing in English, to add that the use of the verb 'to determine' does not necessarily imply a hard 'determinist' sense of the word.

[16] This roughly follows the categories under which the meaning of baptism is discussed in *BEM*, §§ 3–7.

[17] *BEM*, Baptism, § 3.

[18] Schlink, *Doctrine of Baptism*, 82.

[19] See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1952), 336.

3. This, together with the experienced reality of the resurrection of Jesus, determines Christian life as *eschatological*. Life in the Spirit is eschatological existence; the early Christians knew that "the drought of the Spirit had ended."[20] The death and resurrection of Jesus constitute the break between the old age and the age to come, which had already begun even as the old age was coming to its end. The present time is an in-between time, for the *already* of the new is *not yet* present in its fullness. Already 'justified' through faith, we have been 'saved' only in hope. (Rom. 8:24) Everything has indeed become new (2 Cor. 5:17), but there is still much suffering, and the glory that is to be revealed has not yet appeared fully. (Rom 8:18–25) The promised future is not yet present, and the kingdoms of the world have not yet become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. (Rev. 11:15)

4. Christian life is also *ecclesially* or communally determined. Baptism initiates people into a full engagement in the community of believers, the church. Christian life is not normally lived in privacy and isolation; by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. (1 Cor. 12:13) Kavanagh identifies the four essential elements of this life: attending to the teaching of the apostles, participating in the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the community, breaking bread together in remembrance (*anamnesis*) of Christ, and joining in the community's prayers.[21] The ecclesial determination of baptism is made concrete in a 'local' community, but joins a person to the one universal church of Jesus Christ. The recognition of this is imperfect, but the *BEM* statement on baptism suggests that "churches are increasingly recognising each other's baptism as the one baptism into Christ … Mutual recognition of baptism is acknowledged as an important sign and means of expressing the baptismal unity given in Christ."[22]

5. To receive baptism is also to receive a new *ethical* determination. Baptism includes the call to live "in newness of life" (Rom 6:4), that is, in a manner that reflects what Christ is making of us. Here the emphasis on sanctification, characteristic of Reformed theology, comes into its own. Baptism makes us disciples of Christ, and our life together

---

[20] James G.D. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: T & T Clark, 1998), 418.

[21] Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 22.

[22] *BEM*, Baptism, §15.

in community as well as our work in the wider social and political fabric of the world has a particular character.[23] From the beginning, the shape of this has been a matter of sharp disagreement; this continues to the present time, when churches are seriously divided from each other (and within their own membership) over moral, political, and economic issues.

Baptism as Constitutive of Christian Identity

If baptism is to be understood along the lines suggested in the last section, it is quite inadequate to regard it simply as one event in the course of our lives, however much we may value it subjectively. If baptism defines or determines our lives as suggested above, its ongoing effect in our lives should receive much greater emphasis. It is common to see baptism as the sacrament of our beginnings as Christians and the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion) as the sacrament that sustains us throughout our Christian life, and this is entirely justified. However, baptism should also be understood as defining our Christian identity throughout our lives. Every baptism that we witness in our own community of faith and worship serves to remind us that we too were once brought to the water of baptism and are among the baptized, whether we can actually remember the occasion or not. It is a reminder that our own Christian journey began in precisely this way or, if we were baptized at some point later than the beginnings of our faith, that there was a time when we too stood in this place to receive the sacramental assurance that the grace of God in Christ Jesus precedes even our most fervent declaration of faith and the most radical conversion to him.

It follows from this additional way of regarding baptism that we do not only live *from* our baptism, but also live *toward* it or *into* it, just as we might live both *from* an inheritance already promised but not yet received and *toward* it. This reflects exactly the eschatological character of baptism; there is a substantial and defining *already*, to which we can look back with gratitude, as well as a considerable *not yet*, which ensures that our faith lives also in the mode of hope and gives us more

---

[23] Pannenberg (a Lutheran) makes the connection between sanctification and politics explicit in his *Christian Spirituality and Sacramental Community* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), ch. 3, 50–70.

than enough reasons for humility. In fact, we never leave our baptism behind us, any more than we leave our birth behind us. Despite the fact that, based on Rom. 6:3f., it is rightly held to be unrepeatable, baptism "is *there all our lives*," as Pannenberg puts it.[24] For this reason, the church continues (for the greatest part) to deal with baptized people who have fallen away from the faith and found their way back to it not by baptizing them again, but by reminding them (even ritually) of their baptism and celebrating the fact that that it has been taken up again. In fact, it is to be appropriated again and again by *all* Christians, not only by those who have dramatically returned to the faith into which they had been previously baptized. It is noteworthy that in many churches there is a regular renewal of baptismal vows, either on Holy Saturday or on some other significant day in the life of that church. It is a reminder that we *have been* baptized into union with Christ crucified and risen, and while the sacramental sign of it lies in the (perhaps distant) past, the full reality of this union still lies ahead of us. If in certain Christian traditions the sinful nature of human existence receives heavy accentuation, there should be at least an equal emphasis on the fact that we are also baptized Christians: *simul iustus et peccator*, as Luther rightly said.

Baptism, then, is not a matter of the moment that can be safely ticked off as a rite of passage duly completed; it is, on the contrary, an *anticipatory* sacrament, looking ahead to the entire life that lies before it. The dying and rising that is to take place at the end of life is anticipated in the sacrament of baptism. Although it is clearly an act of washing and cleansing, it is much more an act of dying, a point which the practice of infant baptism and its associated 'covenant' theology has largely concealed. We die to the power of sin in the death of Jesus, irrespective of the age at which we receive baptism, but only in order that the new life of righteousness and grace, received from Christ in faith and expressed in love, may increasingly displace the old. If baptism denotes and anticipates all this, it cannot possibly be simply relegated to the past as a mere point of departure. On the contrary, it already looks ahead to its goal. When looking back on the course of our lives, it is easy to divide it into stages, associated with major events or experiences. Essentially this division into stages has no parallel—or at best only a superficial parallel—in the life of faith. Here the end is

---

[24] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 253; my emphasis.

already present in the beginning, and therefore the beginning, together with its ending, proleptically enacted in our baptism, is present with us at all points.

For these reasons, baptism must be understood as constituting our identity, for it is simultaneously a working out of our baptism and a fuller actualization of it. It reminds us as often as we think of it—which should be daily—whose we are and to whom we belong; for by virtue of our baptism we are no longer our own but Christ's.[25] We are what we are *through* him and *in* him, in particular, as we participate in his relation as the Son to the Father. We also live in the new freedom and power of his Spirit, who leads us into the truth and works transformingly in the world. Correspondingly, we are constituted also by our being part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, this extraordinary community of faith which Margaret Mead is reported to have described at the 1975 Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches as a sociological impossibility.[26] Throughout our lives, as in faith we appropriate the new identity that rests on baptism,[27] we are becoming what we already are. This paradox only makes sense when understood eschatologically.

Our identity is shaped or determined by many 'belongings'; it cannot be reduced to a single one. For anyone to whom it matters, *Christian* identity is at least a major determinant of our identity as persons. William Willimon suggests that the identity question—'Who am I?'—is asked all the way "from womb to tomb."[28] Many answers are given to this question by the many voices that address and claim us in contemporary society. The Christian answer is given in our baptism, in which Willimon sees 'the norm, the model, the pattern, the beginning and end of the Christian life.' He goes on, "The way for a Christian to find out who he or she is, is not to jump on the rear of a Honda and head west, but rather to come to the font and look into those graceful waters. The reflection of yourself which you see there is who

---

[25] See the words of John Wesley's Covenant Service in any Methodist Book of Worship: "I am no longer my own, but yours." See the Uniting Church in Australia's *Uniting in Worship: Leader's Book* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988), 74.

[26] Although I have been unable to document her precise words, she was certainly a guest of that Assembly and addressed it. See David M. Paton (ed.), *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975*, the official report of the fifth Assembly of the WCC, Nairobi, 23 November – 10 December 1975 (London: SPCK & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 99.

[27] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 273.

[28] William Willimon, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1980), 108.

you really are."[29] We find our *Christian* identity in our baptism. But how does our Christian identity relate to the many other possible things by which we define ourselves, such as our cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, and political context? There is no single answer to this, for the relation is felt by different people to have a very different force, as the story of flags at funeral illustrates, and as H. Richard Niebuhr demonstrated decades ago.[30] Clearly, Christian identity can stand in considerable tension with other determinations or 'belongings.' Rowan Williams understands baptism in radical terms as "a ritual setting aside of ordinary identity."[31] The 'ordinary' determinants of our identity are relativized by our baptismal 'belonging,' sometimes radically so, sometimes gently so. Grace sometimes cuts across nature and sometimes brings it to its perfection, but in any case transforms it.

Conclusion

The attempt has been made in this chapter to answer the question: what is it to be Christian? What characterizes Christian identity or 'belonging'? It is impossible, of course, to reduce this to a single quality or characteristic. The view put forward here is that both faith and baptism are at the core of it, neither without the other. In this context, faith has to be understood broadly as including a number of things, not just intellectual belief, and baptism has to be understood not merely as the first step of a long journey, but as giving shape and direction to the whole journey. In other words, faith and trust in Jesus Christ, relationship with him as disciple and friend, and participation in his baptism, his own death and resurrection, are fundamental to Christian identity. Baptism is the sign, the *effective* sign, of this; it effects what it signifies. And faith is the response to the grace of God in calling us into this relationship and participation; it is itself called into being by grace.

In no way does this view imply a negation of the contextual pole of Christian faith, the amalgam of factors engendered by our particular location in time and space, our cultural inheritance and formation, and the particularity of our social, political, and economic environment.

---

[29] Willimon, *Remember Who You Are*, 108.
[30] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), ch. 1.
[31] Rowan Williams, "Between the Cherubim," *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), ch. 12, 189.

These will (and should) influence the form of our Christian life, the particular responsibilities we undertake as part of our sharing in the mission of God in the world, and the style of our spirituality and discipleship. These two inseparable aspects coexist in a polar relationship; each will pull against the other. Neither can be independent of the other. But our fundamental belonging—though not our only belonging—is to Jesus Christ, with whom our baptism connects us. Our life in him and from him, for which the Word and the Holy Communion continually nourish us, is the mainspring of our life as Christians in our particular situation and historical and political context. Moltmann argues that our Christian identity and our relevance in our context should not be separated, since the point of reference for each is the cross of the crucified one.[32] However, in practice, these two structures of identity are set over against each other. To illustrate this tension at the level of symbols, the paper drew on a recent issue in the writer's immediate context: Australia. The conflict of symbols at a funeral service may indicate where the priority does lie, and where it should lie.

In whatever ethnic or cultural, social or political context our faith is lived out, it is proper to see it as a living out of, as well as *into*, our baptism, and what it effectively signifies. Our lives are determined christologically, pneumatologically, eschatologically, ecclesially, and ethically, precisely as a consequence of our baptism. Gordon Lathrop suggests that baptism offers itself as a metaphor for Christian witness (and suffering). Baptism has its "continued echoes in the Christian life."[33] Worship itself is "a continual reminding, continual reinsertion in baptismal faith."[34] Worship, if properly done, leads to mission, to engagement with the needy within and beyond our immediate communities of faith, and this engagement itself sends us to worship and prayer. Rowan Williams speaks of a living baptismally as a living through the process of chaos, the chaos which Jesus himself confronts in his own baptism. "The baptized … are those who live in the name of God in the neighbourhood of chaos … To take on the baptismal identity is to take on something of that being poised over the nothingness out of

---

[32] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), 25.

[33] Gordon Lathrop, "The Water that Speaks: The *Ordo* of Baptism and its Ecumenical Implications," in Thomas Best & Dagmar Heller (eds), *Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith & Order Paper No. 184 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 15.

[34] Lathrop, "The Water that Speaks," 20.

which God calls us."[35] Baptismal identity, in other words, implies no removal of faith from engagement with its present-day context, including the 'chaos' of competing attachments, loyalties and belongings, the chaos of our own lives, and the chaos of other people's suffering. But it will assuredly send us back to the worship of God, with its echoes of baptism and its 'reinsertion into baptismal faith.'

   In all the movements and shifts of our contexts, our baptismal identity is a constant, not one that is detached from our context, but one that sends us profoundly into it. Rowan Williams, concluding his lecture on living baptismally, connects the constant and the variable in this way: "Baptismal living is living … in the proximity of Jesus and therefore in the neighbourhood of those to whom Jesus is near."[36] To be baptized is to be united with Jesus Christ in his own baptism, the baptism of his suffering, his death, and resurrection. (Mark 10:38) It is to be called into the proximity of Jesus, and those whom he called the least of his brothers and sisters. (Matt. 25:40,45) Our baptism is not merely the first step of our life in Christ; it gives both content and form to every subsequent step, until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness.

---

[35] Rowan Williams, "Sacramental Living: living baptismally," *Australian Journal of Liturgy*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2003, 5.

[36] Williams, "Sacramental Living: living baptismally," 17.

CHRISTIAN BAPTISM AND AN IDENTITY OF INCLUSIVITY, DIGNITY, AND HOLINESS

Nico Koopman

Introduction

During the last two decades, the rapid changes that have taken place in South African society and in other societies all over the world cause people to search for new orientation, fresh direction, and certainty. In situations of disorientation and uncertainty, the quest for orientation, certainty, and identity is very much alive.[1] In different parts of the world, people from a plurality of national, racial, ethnic, tribal, cultural, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic groups make fresh attempts to define themselves and others.

This quest is undertaken by South Africans who live in new realities—no longer in an apartheid state, but towards an inclusive democracy; no longer more diverse and separated, but towards diverse and together; no longer violations of human rights (political, civil, broad social, economic, and environmental), but towards a culture of human rights; no longer unity in uniformity and homogeneity, but towards unity in diversity; no longer Afro-pessismism, but towards the celebration of Africanness; no longer discrimination against women, but towards a partnership of equality of men and women; no longer homophobic, but towards the dignity of homosexual people; no longer handicappism, but towards recognizing and protecting the dependent nature of all human life; no longer ageism, but towards appreciating and celebrating all the development phases of the human life span. All South Africans, those who benefited and those who were wronged by apartheid, need re-orientation, new certainties, new ways of naming ourselves, and new identities in this new situation. It would not be diffi-

---

[1] In chapter 1 of our book, Robert Vosloo and I describe the major processes of change in South Africa, the rest of the African continent, and in other parts of the world. See N. Koopman and R. Vosloo, *Die ligtheid van die lig. Morele oriëntasie in 'n postmoderne tyd* (Wellington: Lux Verbi BM, 2002), 15–40.

cult to demonstrate the convergence between the South African transformation processes and those in other countries of the world.

Reflecting upon the identities attributed to you by others or the identities constructed by yourself is an important task. The way we name ourselves and others is, in the end, not innocent. The names we give to ourselves and to others impact the way that we deal with each other as humans in all walks of life. They influence the relationship of humans with the rest of creation. Identities determine the type of societies we eventually build. They influence discourses on human dignity, human rights, justice, reconciliation, and peace from the most personal to the broadest international levels.

Seeking re-orientation and certainty is not wrong. On the contrary, to live well as humans we need adequate levels of orientation, direction, and certainty. This quest for new names, new identities, and new ways of describing and explaining ourselves and others in our new environments can, however, take on a variety of wrong forms. Apartheid philosophy and theology taught us how not to deal with identity, and how not to name others and ourselves. The apartheid identities were identities of exclusion and violation of human dignity, and identities of morally wrong and unholy living.[2] People were excluded, separated, and wronged, and their dignity was violated in terms of the diversity of categories mentioned above.

The rest of this article argues that Christian baptism paves the way for a discourse about identity along the lines of inclusivity, human dignity, and holiness. The works of various authoritative authors, as well as the important BEM document of the World Council of Churches, are appealed to in the discussion of the relationship between baptism and an identity of inclusivity, dignity, and holiness.

Baptism and Inclusivity

South African, Reformed theologian Adrio König gives a helpful description of the meaning of baptism.[3] He reckons that baptism refers to

---

[2] Other related wrong ways of dealing with identity is the fact that the quest for new foundations and certainties in increasingly pluralistic societies can lead to fundamentalisms in different forms, e.g. absolutism, simplicism, rigorism, exclusivism, judgementalism, and even enmity and violence in religious and moral matters.

[3] A. König, *Die doop as kinderdoop én grootdoop* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel Transvaal, 1986), 18–59.

a four-fold inclusivity or unification.[4] Baptism in the *name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), and elsewhere in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5 and implicitly in 1 Corinthians 13:13, 15) symbolizes, confirms, and celebrates our unification with the Triune God. To be baptized in his name means that God pronounces his name over us, as a king did in the times of the Old Testament after he conquered a city. Baptism, therefore, confirms that we are God's property. We belong to Him.[5]

Baptism, according to König, also means that we are incorporated into the *covenantal community* (Galatians 3–4; Acts 2:38–39; Colossians 2:11).[6] The Old Testament covenantal formula is applicable to us: I shall be your God, and you will be my people. Steve De Gruchy even argues that it is in and through this covenantal relationship with God that we enjoy the status of image of God.[7] He does not limit the traditional Christian conviction that merely because we are human, whether or not we stand in this covenantal relationship, we are created in God's image. He rather wants to indicate the framework; namely, the covenantal relationship with God and fellow-humans and even with the rest of creation, within which this status of being created in God's image comes to full fruition.

It is not unimportant to note that the environment, i.e., animals, plants, and the rest of creation are included in this fellowship of life. The care for the environment, and the joyous relationship with it, is a central theme in both the Old Testament and New Testament (cf., creation narratives, Sabbath and jubilee laws, and prophetic and apocalyptic visions).

Third, baptism proclaims our union with the historical *Jesus Christ*.[8] We are so intimately united with Christ that what happened to Him, i.e., his life on earth, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven has also happened to us. The so-called Negro spiritual reflects this

---

[4] Besides these incorporating meanings of baptism, König also refers to the fact that baptism confirms our forgiveness, cleansing from sin, rebirth into new spiritual, moral and material life, and lastly, the gift of the Holy Spirit. See König, *Die doop*, 46–53.

[5] König, *Die Doop*, 18–20.

[6] König, *Die Doop*, 33–46.

[7] S. De Gruchy, "Human being in Christ: resources for an inclusive anthropology" in P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (eds) *Aliens in the household of God. Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 247–248.

[8] König, *Die doop*, 21–31.

union effectively: *were you there when they crucified my Lord* (Romans 6: 1–14; Colossians 2:12 f.; Galatians 2: 19–20; Ephesians 2: 1–10)?

Baptism celebrates our incorporation into *the church as the body of Christ*. We are not alone, but we belong to our brothers and sisters in the church all over the world and the church of past and future generations (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4).[9]

Various important Christian theologians—as well as the well-known document of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*—emphasize these incorporating and unification functions of baptism.

The BEM document was formulated in 1982 in Lima, Peru. More than one hundred theologians from virtually all the major church traditions participated in the formulation of this consensus document. These include the following traditions: Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, United, Disciples, Baptist, Adventist, and Pentecostal. This document identifies a five-fold meaning of baptism; namely, participation in Christ's death and resurrection; conversion, pardoning, and cleansing; the gift of the Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and sign of the kingdom.[10]

Like König, BEM emphasizes the meaning of incorporation into the church as the body of Christ: "Administered in obedience to our Lord, baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place…The union with Christ which we share through baptism has important implications for Christian unity…Therefore, our one baptism into Christ constitutes a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship."[11]

For Hendrikus Berkhof, to be unified with Christ through baptism is to be unified with the covenantal people.[12] Because of the grace of God on which our faith rests, partnership in the covenantal community is broader than those who believe. It includes those who still do not believe, those who stopped believing, as well as very small children, mentally disabled people, psychologically sick people, and the down-

---

[9] König, *Die doop*, 31–33.
[10] *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 3.
[11] *BEM*, 3.
[12] H. Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof* (Leiden: Callenbach, 1979), 369–370.

trodden, hopeless, and wronged people of the world. This high level of inclusivity based on the grace of God does not mean that faith is not important. Small children who cannot express faith are included in the church as long as there are believers who make the commitment that they will introduce the baptized one to the love and redemption of the Triune God of which faith is not a condition, but a fruit.

In this regard, it can also be added that this accentuation of inclusion does not imply that good works are excluded. This inclusion is not cheap. Though good works, just like faith, are not the basis for inclusion, inclusion implies, as its fruit, good works. Where people are exposed to this unconditional love, inclusion, and acceptance, they do not remain the same, but are transformed so that they can increasingly conform to Jesus Christ. It is not without reason that baptism also confirms our forgiveness, cleansing, receiving of the Holy Spirit, and new spiritual and moral life. Those who are included and accepted, and to whom dignity is imputed, are forgiven and cleansed ones who receive the Spirit and new spiritual and moral lives.

Hans Küng describes the incorporative meaning of baptism in a remarkable way.[13] Because the baptized one's sin is forgiven, she becomes part of the community of saints; because the baptized one bears Christ's seal of property, she is part of the property of Christ; because she has received the Spirit, she is a living stone which is part of the congregation as spiritual building; because she is unified with Christ, she is part of the Easter community of faith and love. Because inclusion into the congregation occurs through baptism, baptism is, according to Küng, *seminarium ecclesiae*.

In his writings on baptism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps us to re-value this incorporative and unifying meanings of baptism. "It is their baptism into the Body of Christ which assures all Christians of their full share in the life of Christ and the Church. It is wrong, and contrary to the New Testament, to limit the gift of baptism to participation in the sermon and the Lord's Supper, i.e. to participation in the means of grace, or to the right to hold office or perform a ministry in the Church. On the contrary, baptism confers the privilege of participation in all the activities of the Body of Christ in every department of life."[14] Bonhoeffer does not only agree with the unifying meaning of baptism; he is also concerned with the fact that the union with Christ and his

---

[13] H. Küng, *De Kerk* (Hilversum: Paul Brand, 1967), 242.
[14] D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 230.

church has redemptive implications for all walks of life. In the next section, Bonhoeffer's thinking about these implications will be investigated.

In his *Institutes*, book 1, chapter 1, John Calvin writes about the question 'who am I.'[15] He argues that we cannot gain self-knowledge without knowing who God is; we cannot know ourselves without knowing God; we cannot answer the question who am I without asking the question Who is God. The outline on the meaning of baptism above teaches that God is the One who unites us with Himself and therefore with his other creatures. To ask who am I can therefore only be answered by the question whose I am. I am, namely, God's, and I am the one who belongs to others.[16]

Baptism and Dignity

The analysis of the previous section made it clear that baptism confirms and builds an ethos of inclusivity. Baptism, however, also confirms our dignity as human beings.

Bonhoeffer's works, which mainly came into being in the sad period of the growth of the Nazi identity, have significance for our discourse about identity. It affirms that we cannot talk about the identity of human beings without talking about dignity. He stresses that we are one man (*sic*) through baptism. However, Bonhoeffer states that the body has a diversity of members.[17] This unity in diversity has significant features: diversity of race, class, and gender is not only tolerated, but appreciated; unity does not exist in uniformity; various members may differ in form, but they are equal in worth and dignity.

Bonhoeffer gives an exposition of Paul's request to Philemon regarding the treatment of his slave, Onesimus, in order to demonstrate how this baptism into Christ and his body paves the way for treating even those who are considered to belong at the bottom of society's ladder of worth and status not only as equals, but as brothers and sisters in

---

[15] J. Calvin, *Institutie. Onderwijzing in den Christelijk Godsdienst* (translated from Latin by A Sizoo). (Delft: Meinema, 1931), 1–4.

[16] The African anthropology of *ubuntu* expresses human identity in this famous formula: *umntu ungumtu ngabanye abantu*, i.e. one human is a human because of other humans. Christian baptism, however, gives a far deeper foundation and perhaps a much more inclusive character to human identity. *Ubuntu* is used by some in an exclusive way; namely, to refer only to next of kin relationships.

[17] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 230–232.

all walks of life.[18] "To allow a baptized brother (*sic*) to take part in the worship of the Church, but to refuse to have anything to do with him in everyday life, is to subject him to abuse and contempt."[19] Allen Verhey echoes this view that baptism stands in service of the restoration of dignity.

> Baptism was also, of course, an act of the church, an act in memory of Jesus and in hope for God's good future, an act of faith, an act of receiving the grace of God and the promise of God by welcoming those who were different into a community of mutuality and equality … A new identity was owned in baptism, and a new world was envisioned— an identity and a world in which sexual hierarchies (along with ethnic and class hierarchies) were radically subordinated to community and equality in Christ … 'no longer male and female' was an eschatological reality, but it made its power felt already in the mutuality and equality of members of the community and in a sexual ethic that honored singleness and chastity.[20]

L. Gregory Jones strongly pleads for a re-valuation of the baptismal practices of the early church. He proceeds to give an insightful description of the implications of these baptismal practices for a life of dignity. These ancient texts and practices offer a comprehensive theological focus for human life that is directed toward the eschatological consummation of fellowship with the Triune God.[21] They offer rich ways to deal with issues of interpreting scripture and doctrine,[22] and they suggest that initiation into the Christian tradition shapes a 'habitus'—a whole pattern of learning to think, feel, and live well as holy people.[23]

---

[18] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 231–232.

[19] Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 230–231. This belonging that baptism symbolizes, confirms, celebrates, and actualizes implies a life of solidarity, nearness, sympathy, empathy, and interpathy. For an excellent discussion about sympathy, empathy and interpathy, see D. Augsberger, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures* (Louisville: John Knox/Westminster Press, 1986), 29–32. "Sympathy is a spontaneous affective reaction to another's feelings experienced on the basis of perceived similarity between observer and observed. Empathy is an intentional affective response to another's feelings experienced on the basis of perceived differences between the observer and observed. Interpathy is an intentional cognitive and affective envisioning of another's thoughts and feelings from another culture, worldview and epistemology." (31).

[20] A. Verhey, *Remembering Jesus. Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 194–195.

[21] L. Gregory Jones, "Baptism. A Dramatic Journey into God's Dazzling Light: Baptismal Catechesis and the Shaping of Christian Practical Wisdom" in J. Buckley and D. Yeago (eds) *Knowing the Triune God. The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 162.

[22] Jones, *Triune God*, 164.

[23] Jones, *Triune God*, 166.

They offer a distinctive theological conception of teaching and learning as joint inquiry,[24] and they stress the eschatological character of discernment.[25] All these central aspects of the baptismal texts and practices of the Christian tradition stand in service of the restoration of dignity.[26]

If we claim that our identities as Christians are formed by baptism, the implication is that the restoration of dignity is a crucial element of our identity.

At the end of these sections on the meaning of baptism, we can conclude that Christian baptism offers two guidelines for the identity of Christians. First, baptismal identity entails inclusivity and belonging. It opposes exclusion, alienation, and marginalization. Second, to be baptized and to be Christian implies that we participate in the restoration of dignity.

Baptism and Holiness

The identity of inclusivity and dignity that baptism entails is not the only word about baptismal identity. American theologians Kendra Hotz and Matthew Mathew argue that dying and rising with Christ constitutes the heart of baptism.[27] They argue, in line with Adrio König, that to die in Christ is to be purified and cleansed. They specifically refer to cleansing from the idols that we adhere to. The idols that they refer to are our sinful brokenness, our individual transgressions, and our adherence to false beauties that are offered by consumerism,

---

[24] Jones, *Triune God*, 168.

[25] Jones, *Triune God*, 170.

[26] Isaiah 43: 1–7 is a good example of a pericope in the Old Testament which can be Christologically interpreted and utilized to illuminate the role of baptism in the restoration of dignity. *God knows us by name* (v. 1). Because God knows us—our dreams, our hopes, our fears, and our anxieties—we do have worth and dignity. God values and treasures us (v. 5) so highly that *He gives the most treasurable for Him*; namely, his only begotten Son, to die in our place. The cross of Jesus is an affirmation of our worth. God pronounces his name over us. *He links his Name to us* (v. 7). In what happens to us, his name, his honor, and his glory is at stake. Christians bear the name of Jesus Christ, and therefore of the Triune God. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God. Those who carry this name know humans have dignity. We have dignity because *God has created us* (cf Isaiah 43: 7). According to Jeremiah 1:5, God has designed us and knew us even before we came into being in our mothers' wombs. We are part of his perfect design! We have dignity.

[27] K. Hotz and M. Mathew, *Shaping the Christian Life. Worship and the Religious Affections* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), 141–145.

amusement, and nationalism. To rise in Christ is to live a new life, a holy life, a life where we participate in the beautification of the world, and a life where we say no to idols and yes to icons. This new life of holiness is described as follows by Hotz and Mathew:

> Baptized life is life in which we actively work for the beautification of the world; we work to bring harmony in the midst of fragmentation by resisting the urge to transform all creatures into commodities, seeking conditions of economic justice that enable all people to flourish, celebrating sexual intimacy in lifelong covenantal relationships that honor and enhance the well-being of our beloved, and overcoming political conflict and the divisiveness of racism with acts of reconciliation grounded in justice.[28]

A life of being included in the communion with God and the church—a life where dignity is enjoyed—is a life of contrition, continuous dying and rising in Christ, and of being cleansed from idols and being renewed for icons. Without this dying and rising, notions such as inclusion and dignity sound like ideological language, like idols (!), and not like the good news confirmed in baptism.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF BAPTISM FOR CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY DISCOURSES

In the last part of this article we explore the significance of this primary baptismal identity of inclusion and solidarity, and of dignity and holiness, to the discourses on secondary identities such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, disabledness, and age.

Baptismal Identity, Class, and Globalization

Jürgen Moltmann points out that so many people are economically, politically, and culturally excluded from the benefits of modernity that they can be defined as people living in submodernity.[29] Although globalization has brought good developments, it has also marginalized and excluded millions of people from a life of dignity.

Economists and sociologists are not in agreement about the effects of globalization. There are those who reckon that globalization, as

---

[28] Hotz and Mathew, *Shaping*, 142–143.
[29] J. Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

a product of modernity, has fulfilled the expectations that modernity
has raised. The North American theologian Larry Rasmussen outlines
these expectations as follows: "… through scientific knowledge and
technology, and the extension of industrial civilization and democratic
process, poverty, disease and toil could be supplanted with an abun-
dance that would permit the good life as one of enriching, individual
choice in the context of enhanced liberty and untrammeled opportu-
nity."[30]

The North American theologian Mark Amstutz outlines the achieve-
ments of a market economy and specifically of the global market econ-
omy. As proof of the success of the market economy, he cites the statis-
tics of the World Bank on the improvement of living conditions in the
thirty-seven poorest countries of the world between 1965 and 1985.

> 1. The annual crude death rate per thousand declined from 17 to 10. 2.
> Owing largely to a decline in the fertility rate, the annual crude birth rate
> per thousand people declined from 43 to 29. 3. Average life expectancy
> increased between from 47 to 60 years for men and from 50 to 61 years
> for women. 4. Infant mortality for children under one year declined from
> 127 per thousand to 72 per thousand. 5. The child death rate for children
> aged 1–4 declined from 19 per thousand to 9 per thousand. 6. Average
> daily caloric supply per capita also increased—from 2,046 to 2,339.7.
> Finally, the average percentage of children in primary schools increased
> from 74 to 97 and in secondary schools from 21 to 32.[31]

Besides these positive statistics about the achievements of the global
market economy (and we would be able to quote positive statistics
for South Africa as well—our economic growth rate is now more
than 5 %), there is also convincing evidence that globalization has not
freed the economically and socially subjugated people of the world.
Famous economist Jeffrey Sachs describes the failure of the global
market economy to bring about liberation from poverty and related
miseries:

> Every morning our newspapers could report, 'More than 20,000 peo-
> ple perished yesterday of extreme poverty'. The stories would put the
> stark numbers in context—up to 8,000 children dead of malaria, 5,000
> mothers and fathers dead of tuberculosis, 7,500 young adults dead of

---

[30] See L.L. Rasmussen *Moral Fragments and Moral Community. A Proposal for Church in
Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 27.

[31] See M. Amstutz, "The Churches and Third World Poverty," in M. Stackhouse
et al (eds) *On Moral Business. Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life*
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 822.

AIDS, and thousands more dead of diarrhea, respiratory infection, and other killer diseases that prey on bodies weakened by chronic hunger. The poor die in hospital wards that lack drugs, in villages that lack antimalarial bed nets, in houses that lack safe drinking water. They die namelessly, without public comment. Sadly, such stories rarely get written. Most people are unaware of the daily struggles for survival, and of the vast numbers of impoverished people around the world who lose that struggle.[32]

Moreover, the global market has also not succeeded in safeguarding the integrity of creation. James Nash identifies seven main dimensions of the ecological crisis; namely, pollution, resource exhaustion, global warming, ozone depletion, over-population, maldistribution of the earth's resources (less than one-fourth of the world's population consumes more than three-fourth's of the world's goods), and the radical reduction and extinction of species.[33]

In South Africa the market economy that increasingly functions in the context of the global market has also brought negative developments in addition to its many positive developments. In a clear and courageous way, the renowned South African economist, Sampie Terreblanche, outlines these failures.[34] I refer to only two aspects; namely, poverty and unemployment. Terreblanche refers to the 2000 report of Statistics South Africa that states that in 1996 at least 41.4% of all households live in poverty, i.e., they have to live with an income of between 601 and 1000 rand. He also refers to other statistics that paint an even gloomier picture. He quotes various statistics to make the point that unemployment has increased in democratic South Africa.[35] He, for instance, refers to the fact that in 1995 65% of black people between the ages of 16 and 24 were unemployed.[36] Many researchers argue that this figure has not changed for the better during the last few years. May I add that the HIV/aids pandemic that has its highest growth in this country is not unrelated to the influence of global economics.

Christians who adhere to a primary identity of inclusion, dignity, and holiness cannot but be committed toward participating in various

---

[32] See J. Sachs *The end of poverty. How we can make it happen in our lifetime* (London: Penguin Press, 2005), 1.

[33] See J. Nash, "Ecological Integrity and Christian Political Responsibility," in Stackhouse et al (eds), *On moral business*, 842–843.

[34] See S. Terreblanche *A history of inequality in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002), 383, 412.

[35] See Terreblanche, *A history*, 407.

[36] See Terreblanche, *A history*, 374.

discussions and actions in and outside churches, and to address all these forms of exclusion and violation of dignity that are associated with globalization.

Baptismal Identity and Race

Various theologians apply the inclusive identity of baptism to the racial exclusions that are still alive and well and are even on the increase in some countries.

US, black theologian Cornel West states that racism is not over in the USA: "Though no longer legalized, de facto segregation in American life is still more radically prevalent today in terms of where we live, with whom we socialize, and to which churches and mosques and synagogues we go."[37] One can even add that besides the continuation of structural racism that excludes others, we also exclude other races due to racial prejudices that live in us, even on a subconscious level. In South African society we continuously witness how racism remains on two levels; namely, that of (often subconscious) prejudice, as well as racist societal structures.[38]

US theologian Tammy Williams states that baptism forms part of the age-old Christian practices of "inclusive hermeneutics, forgiveness, conversion, reconciliation, group repentance, multiracial church-planting … and communion."[39] She proceeds as follows: "… baptism and communion are perhaps more essential to our witness against racism than the activities of sit-ins, pray-ins, and marches that millions of Christians have participated in throughout history …"

Although Williams does not underestimate the importance of these protest actions, she emphasizes that the baptismal identity of inclusivity, dignity, and holiness does have the potential to finally break racial alienation in the world.

---

[37] C. West, "Black Theology and human identity," in D. Hopkins (ed), *Black Faith and Public Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 18.

[38] For a detailed discussion of racism in terms of notions such as prejudice and structure, see N. Koopman, "Racism in the postapartheid South Africa," in L. Hulley and L. Kretzschmar (eds) *Questions about life and morality. Christian ethics in South Africa today* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 1998), 153–167.

[39] T. Williams, "After racism," in M. Murphy et al (eds) *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition. Christian ethics after MacIntyre* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 278.

Baptismal Identity and Gender

In an almost shocking article, Beverly Harrison exposes the persistent and oppressive presence of patriarchalism.[40] She even links the misogyny that women experience in androcentric cultures to homophobia. At its deepest level, homophobia is an expression of discrimination against women. Gay men are rejected by many because they behave like women. The more active partner in a lesbian relationship is judged because she dares to act like a man.

In this world of the war of the sexes, the baptismal identity of inclusivity, dignity, and holiness paves the way for the development of solidarity and interpathy that can help to overcome alienation.

Baptismal Identity and Homosexuality

On the basis of our covenantal relationship with God and with each other, a relationship that says that we, indeed, are created in God's image, a relationship confirmed in baptism, De Gruchy constructs an anthropology of inclusivity.[41] This anthropology of inclusivity entails that heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals reflect the image of God. Only in sharing together do these orientations reflect the *Imago Dei*.[42] Luke Timothy Johnson is of the opinion that this inclusivity regarding bi and homosexuals is actually opposed by the existing precedents that exist regarding the interpretation of scripture.[43] According to him, evidence is convincing that the Judeo-Christian tradition regarded homosexuality as incompatible with life in the kingdom of God. He, however, reckons that this can be overturned and that other orientations besides heterosexual can be morally included in the community of faith, if there are narratives of homosexual holiness to which the community of faith can listen.

The purpose here is not to reach a consensus on homosexuality or to engage critically with the two positions mentioned here, but to propose

---

[40] B. Harrison, "Misogyny and homophobia: the unexplored connections," in W. Boulton, et al (eds), *From Christ to the World. Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 331–441.

[41] De Gruchy in Germond and De Gruchy, *Aliens*, 233–269.

[42] De Gruchy in Germond and De Gruchy, *Aliens*, 262.

[43] L.T. Johnson, "Debate and discernment, Scripture and the Spirit," in Murphy, et al., *Virtues and practices*, 215–220.

that the implications of the baptismal identity of inclusivity, dignity, and holiness for homosexual and bisexual orientations be discussed.[44]

This meaning of the baptismal identity of inclusivity, dignity, and holiness can also be discerned for other relationships, e.g. refugees and citizens, abled and disabled people, as well as for different age groups. The worth and value of these marginalized and vulnerable people do not reside in what they can offer or in how well they perform, but in the fact that they receive. Moreover, this is exactly what baptism proclaims: I am included not on merit and not because of my good performance, but by grace—grace which means I receive the most treasurable and precious in the world; namely, salvation for this and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The search for identity need not be the threatening and panic-stricken matter that it currently is for so many people all over the globe. Where we accept the baptismal truth that we are because we belong to God and to each other, that we do have inherent dignity and worth, and that we are sanctified by the Triune God, there we speak in a relaxed way about various types of secondary identities.[45]

The identity of baptized people is one of inclusivity and hospitality. It is one of human worth and dignity. It is one of holy living. Christians are people who are known and defined by the love of the One who acts in baptism; the One who includes, who shows hospitality, who sanctifies, who allows people from different races, classes, genders, sexual orientations, levels of abledness, and age groups feel accepted—to put it in the words of Paul Tillich:

> Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted,

---

[44] For a very helpful outline of seven Christian positions regarding homosexuality, see William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace. Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–155. These positions are prohibition, toleration, accommodation, legitimation, celebration, liberation, and consecration.

[45] Baptized people may appreciate the example of inclusivity and dignity in the definition of Africanness proposed by South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki in his famous *I am an African* speech in which he includes the diversity of African ethnic groups in his definition of Africanness. See T. Mbeki, "I am an African," in A. Hadland and J. Rantao *The life and times of Thabo Mbeki* (Rivonia: Zebra, 1999), 153–155.

accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!' If that happens to us we experience grace ….[46]

Those who know this acceptance as expressed by baptism develop a church and world transformative identity of hospitality, openness, and acceptance that makes people feel: I am included! I have worth and dignity! I am committed to holy living! We celebrate this acceptance, dignity, and holiness in baptism. In celebrating baptism, we commit ourselves to this acceptance, dignity, and holy living. In addition, this celebration and commitment occur continuously in Holy Communion. Bonhoeffer rightly states that "Baptism makes us members of the Body, and the Lord's supper confers bodily fellowship and communion …".[47]

Jürgen Moltmann stresses this commitment when he describes baptism as a calling.[48]

In baptism as a call, the important thing is to stress not merely the alienation from the existing groups and associations of life, but even more the commission to service for their reconciliation and liberation. Thus baptism must not become the symbol of inner emigration and resignation in the face of 'the wicked world'. It is the sign of the dawn of hope for this world and of messianic service in it … Baptism as the calling event in the life of the individual person corresponds only to a church that follows Christ's call, the 'call to freedom'. Baptism as the liberating event in a person's life corresponds only to a church which spreads the liberty of Christ.[49]

In baptism we celebrate and commit ourselves anew to a life of inclusivity, dignity, and holiness—this life that we receive as gift from the gracious Triune God.

---

[46] P. Tillich *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 162.

[47] Bonhoeffer *Discipleship*, 26.

[48] J. Moltmann *The church in the power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 241.

[49] Moltmann, *The church*, 242.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ferenc Szűcs

Identity Personal and Social

The term 'identity' that comes from the Latin word 'idem,' meaning sameness, has a long tradition in both philosophy as well as modern psychology. In Plato's usage, the word 'tauton' "had two basic meanings, one being sameness, and the other being distinctiveness."[1] The father of the modern concept of identity and humanist psychologist, Erik Eriksson, uses the word as a reply of the individual to the changes of cultural and social situations as a continuity. In spite of changes within the life cycle, personhood remains constant.[2] It seems that in the concept of identity, sameness and continuity stand versus change and social history. Modern social sciences differentiate between personal so called I-identity, and group identities. However, the social role of a person cannot be separated from his or her personal identity.[3] In biblical times, corporate identity prevailed over personal identity. The Ten Commandments are written in a personal form, but it is vital to note that its addressee is the covenant person because individual independence within a group was unknown.[4]

Applying these rules to Christian identity, a clear conclusion can be reached. The individual is baptized in the church, which is the body of Christ. In regards to sameness, continuity, and change, one must state that only Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8); Christians were not the same in the past, and they are not the same today, so one may state that they will not be the same in the future. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology reflected on this problem by emphasizing apostolic succession, although they

---

[1] The head-word 'Identität' in *TRE* Bd. 16. Berlin–New York, 1987, 25.

[2] E. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International University Press, 1980), 109.

[3] B. Weisshaupt, "Identität," in E. Gössmann…H.S. Strautmann, *Wörterbuch der Feministischer Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1991), 194–197.

[4] G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Vol. I.* (Norwich: SCM, 1979), 192.

interpreted it in various ways. The Roman Catholic answer seems to be more simplistic in that Catholic tradition calls for a continuous chain of bishops. This brings about the oneness of the Holy Catholic Church, which includes her past, present, and future. The Protestant answer is more complex in its way of dealing with the content of the apostolic faith.[5] Yet, there is a basic conviction in the ecumenical movement that this apostolic faith could be defined to say "the church is called upon to proclaim the same faith freshly and relevantly in each generation and every place."[6]

But even at this point, strong criticism arose in theology concerning the proclamation of the same apostolic faith in our time. Already in the early seventies, Jürgen Moltmann spoke of the double crises of the church and theology: he called them the *relevancy crisis* and the *identity crisis*.[7] The first refers to the idea that the church cannot reach contemporary people, while the other implies that there is no common agreement on what the Christian church really is. In following this judgment, one may conclude that Christian identity would be equal to the identity of the church. Since there is a diverse understanding of what makes a community the church of Christ, we can speak of the identity crises of Christianity as a whole.

IDENTITY AS RELATEDNESS

Not denying the truth of the above statement, one must add that neither individual nor social aspects of sameness and distinctiveness are static. It is rather a dynamic interaction in time and space.[8] An individual usually becomes aware of his or her identity when it is challenged or threatened by others, or as they become a reflection through a 'social mirror' from the outside. This can be seen at the very beginning of Christianity. The word 'Christian' is mentioned first in Acts 11:26. Some think that it was a 'nickname' given by the populace

---

[5] See K. Barth, *KD IV/1* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1960), 798–807.

[6] *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC, 1998), 34.

[7] Quotes and analyses of the problem, K. Douglas, *Az új reformáció 96 tétel az egyház jövőjéről* (*Die Neue Reformation, 96 Thesen zur Zukunft der Kirche*) (Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó, 2002), 24–38.

[8] H.A. Harris, "Should we say that Personhood is Relational?" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 51, No. 2 (1998) 217–230.

of Antioch rather than the self-definition of the congregation itself.[9] It was not a derogatory term, so it could easily be accepted as a general designation of the disciples of Christ. It should also be noted that the original term was not an adjective, and not even a general term (such as Christianity or Christendom), but a noun that referred to people who were said to be disciples of another person. The name does not contain a confessional character, so we can use it in a more inclusive sense than the WCC does. In Hungary, as well as Transylvania/Romania, the question concerning whether or not Unitarians are Christians often arises. If we interpret the cousin meaning of the word as the one who belongs to Christ or follows him, we can answer, yes. On the other hand, it is also obvious that Christian identity has a long development that cannot simply be defined by a word of origin.

Relational identity is well-characterized by the metaphor of the door in John 10. It is used here in two contexts. In the first one, Jesus applies this *paroimia* (riddle) to his rightful coming to his sheep that opposes the thief and robber (v. 1.). In the second case, Jesus calls himself the door for the sheep (v. 7.). In both cases, the defense of identity is at stake. In the role of the fence, by having relations and communication, and in the instance of the door,[10] both otherness and relatedness are important factors.

In the beginning, Christian identity had two components: first, a distinctive designation of a group of people that was probably defined by others; and second, an identification of a community that is accepted as it has named itself. They were different from both the Jewish synagogue and the Gentile cult communities. At the same time, however, a clarification needs to be made regarding the meaning of a new creation, the new people of God, and living in the boundaries of other identities such as gender, ethnicity, and social situation. The letter to the Galatians prominently deals with this paradox. The solution is that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). For Paul, Christ is a universal person,[11] who not only embraces all other human identities, but also makes them relative.

---

[9] I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Tyndale, 1989), 203.

[10] J. Bolyki, *'Igaz tanúvallomás'* (*True Testimony*) (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 275–277.

[11] A. Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater*, THK zum NT 9 (Berlin: Theologische Verlagsanstalt, 1984), 126.

The Paradox Identity

This relativity does not mean that one could ignore the distinctiveness of the realms enumerated above. Gender identity and other collective and social identities still exist. The historical interpretation of Gal. 3:28 shows that the eschatological existence and the earthly being can easily be separated or set against each other. The paradox identity, as Rudolf Bultmann calls it,[12] in the first instance, refers to the Lutheran *simul iustus et peccator* (justified and sinner at the same time). But it can also be applied to the church as the object of faith and the empiric earthly reality. This entails a shortcut by solving one side of the paradox—emphasizing either our heavenly nature or the easy compromise with the earthly status quo.

The history of interpretation of this text gives an example of how nature and grace, and protology and eschatology can relate to each other. Though national identity is not a creational order such as 'male and female' yet it is and earthly ordinance that should be taken into account when we speak of our Christian identity.

"Neither Jew nor Greek …"

Acts 6:1 speaks about the first tension in the Christian congregation between Hellenists and Jews. However, even the word usage shows that *hellenistes* in Jerusalem were not the same group as *hellen-s* in Galatia. In the first case, Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews who came back from Diaspora and settled in Jerusalem.[13] They had a double identity: they were Jews and also members of the Messiah's community, but their language and cultural background was Greek. The story makes it clear that even this difference places them in a secondary position in the early church. Thus, cultural identity cannot be underestimated even in the Christian congregation.

The case was different in the congregations in Asia Minor. Here, both Jews and Gentiles belonged to the same language group, but Jews differed from the others by their religion and ethnic culture. Paul also refers to a second group of Gentiles as *Barbarians* (Rom 1:14).

---

[12] R. Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, (Hamburg: Herbert Reich, 1964), 183.
[13] G.W.H. Lampe, "Acts," in *Peake's Commentar*, 893.

For the Greeks, this onomatopoeic word meant anyone who spoke in unfamiliar tongues (I. Cor. 14: 11).

As can be seen by the letter written to the Galatians, Gentiles were forced to assume Jewish identity with their Christian faith. Some experts suppose that beside the Judaist influence of Jerusalem, two factors might have helped the reintegration of Gentile Christians into the Jewish religion. First, the status of a Jew seemed to be more prestigious in the Roman Empire than that of a Christian.[14] Second, the synod of Jerusalem did not directly prohibit circumcision; rather, it only rejected its obligation. Some might have thought of circumcision in Galatia as an adiaphoron.[15] But while Paul fought against the ritualism and nomism of the Gentile Galatians, he did not deny any Jewish identity, including his own.

This became obvious later, when the identity of Jewish Christians became questionable in the congregation of Rome. One may suppose that not only theological reasons stand behind Romans 9–11, but also political and social ones. After the edict of Claudius in 49 AD, Jews as well as Jewish Christians had to leave Rome. But when Claudius died five years later, both Jews and Jewish Christians were able to return. This caused great tension among Gentile Christians, and resulted in an awakening of anti-Semitic feelings. That is why Paul had to clarify the role of Israel in the salvation history.[16] It turns out that Paul speaks here as a devoted and patriotic Jew. How can this be compared with Gal. 3:28? In the two different situations he stood beside the threatened community. He dealt with the problem of identity in an ambivalent way. If national or religious identity overcomes our unity in Christ, it should be the lesser priority. But no one can annihilate or destroy another God given identity in the name of Christ.

Paul's Jewish identity is understood as responsibility. In spite of his bad experiences in the synagogues, he could not deny the commitment to his people. There is a kind of identity that is not freely chosen, but it is given freely to an individual. Even holding a prestigious and high position such as being the apostle of the Gentiles is no excuse to

---

[14] L. Goppelt, "The Existence of the Church in History According to Apostolic and Early Catholic Thought," in W. Klassen and G.F. Snyder (eds), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1962),195; G. Theissen, *Az első keresztyének vallása* (*Die Religion der ersten Christen, Eine Theorie des Urchristentums*), (Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó, 2001), 278, 293.

[15] Theissen, *Az első keresztyének vallása*, 292.

[16] O. Cullmann, *The New Testament* (London: SCM, 1968), 69–70.

separate oneself from one's roots. Yet, even Gentile Christians are not allowed to do that: they should also remember their coherence with Israel (Romans 11:13–24). Prophetic responsibility also implies one's participation "in the foreign sin" (Bonhoeffer), as can be seen with Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). On the contrary, Wolfart Pannenberg adds that the church did not weep "when saw God's judgment over Jerusalem in A.D. 70…It did not bow with the Jewish people under the divine judgment that hung over it also. In false self-righteousness it thought that the Jewish people alone had come under divine condemnation for the death of Jesus. In so doing it forgot that Jesus himself had hoped that beyond the judgment there would be an eschatological restoration of Israel."[17]

The way leading to this separation is simple to follow: The early church promptly began seeing herself as the new and true Israel.[18] The unity of the two covenants was also evident for the writers of the New Testament, and was strengthened by the debate on the heresy of Marcion.[19] By the reformation (especially by Calvin), the continuity and equality of both Testaments were newly emphasized.[20] In a unique way, the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the church "from the beginning of the world"[21] that also includes the history of the ancient Israel.

This process has two consequences: a) First of all, the substitution theory became dominant in the church at the time when the New Testament church replaced the Old Testament people.[22] All the promises of the Old Testament became a concern for the church at this time. Only the apocalyptic millennial movements have questioned this view emphasizing the collection of Israel in the promised land in the last days. b) Next, the church itself identified who a Jew was and what Israel meant. (Even Romans 9–11 leaves open whether 'Israelites' means the synagogue or a nation.) As Link states, the church does not listen to the self identification of the Jews, and consequently she often identifies herself as being against them.[23] It should be noted that in the New Testament, (and especially in the Gospel of John) the term 'Jews' had

---

[17] W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol. 2.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 342.

[18] Ch. Link, U. Luz, L. Vischer, "…*kitartóan részt vettek a közösségben…*" (*Sie aber hielten fest an der Gemeinschaft*) (Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó, 2004), 227.

[19] D.L. Baker, *Két szövetség, egy Biblia* (*Two Testaments One Bible*), (Budapest: Hermeneutikai Kutatókozpont, 1998), 17–22.

[20] Baker, *Két szövetség, egy Biblia*, 24.

[21] 54, Q.and A.

[22] D. Ritschl, *Theorie und Konkretion in der Ökumenischen Theologie* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 73.

[23] Ch. Link, *kitartóan részt vettek a közösségben*, 225.

multiple meanings,[24] and thus, it is difficult to apply that term in naming anyone today. The problem has become more complex since 1948 because of the political existence of the state of Israel. The 'mystery of the Jews' in history has remained a challenge for the church, and it may be addressed only by sincere dialogue with the Jews themselves. Furthermore, the hope that Jews and Christians reunite in the eschaton is, in part, the identity of the church.[25]

Israel reminds the church of her broken identity that is expressed again by the Messianic groups among Jews. The reason why they do not identify themselves as Christians calls the church's attention to her sins, negligence, and Christian anti-Semitism. If they keep both the Sabbath and Jewish meal customs, they emphasize that there is room for different identities at the Messiah's table, including Jewish ones. One cannot forget the importance that these outward characteristics, as well as the maintenance of sameness and distinctiveness, had for the chosen people, both in exile and in the Diaspora. Why should they disappear now?

If these customs are regarded as a part of the social construction of identity, they can be extended to a wider context, e.g. to national identity. This problem became vital again in the European Union during the process of globalization. The situation that this question brings up is overshadowed by the reborn nationalism of today's world. Nationalism can be interpreted as an aggressive self-realization, and should not be confused with patriotism, which is the responsibility one possesses for their nation. The command "love your neighbor" refers to the concentric circles of responsibility. Perhaps the new slogan rightly expresses the relation of these two circles: "think globally, act locally." The universality of the Holy Catholic Church and the existence of a local congregation within it can give a good theological model in solving this problem. Local colors may enrich the whole picture, while the absence of any cultural or language groups makes it poor and simplistic.

Special attention should be given to minority groups. In most cases, they are defenseless against the assimilating tendencies of the majority. In the New Testament, minority is not a question of quantity, but rather a situation in which the 'little ones' (*mikroi)* live. It is a situation where someone is oppressed and defenseless. They are similar to children

---

[24] Bolyki, *'Igaz tanúvallomás'*, 250–251.
[25] Ch. Link, *kitartóan részt vettek a közösségben*, 225.

who cannot exercise their rights and are dependent on the "greater ones."[26] Helping to preserve their identity is also the responsibility of the majority.

---

[26] F. Szűcs, "National Church?", in Ch. Lienemann-Perrin, H.M. Vroom, M. Weinrich (Eds) *Contextuality in Reformed Europe* (Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi, 2004), 163–164.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY. AUGUSTINE
ON FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE[1]

J.H. (Amie) van Wyk

Introduction

When considering the concepts 'identity' and 'spirituality' in connection with Augustine, one cannot fail to reflect on three characteristics that fundamentally determine the Christian person and also the Christian church; characteristics that are also typical of the entire theological oeuvres of Augustine; namely, faith, hope, and love. There can be neither be a Christian nor a Christian church where these characteristics are lacking,

Truly, the church could be qualified and identified by the four well-known attributes; namely, unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity—of which we find an explanation in the Heidelberg Catechism (21:54–55). It is well-known that the Reformers of the sixteenth century found this identification insufficient and augmented it by the three distinctive marks of the (true) church: sound propagation of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments, and church discipline (*Confessio Belgica*, art. 29)—although Calvin acknowledged only the first two marks.[2] It is, however, striking that in the *Confessio Belgica*, article 29, attention is also drawn to the marks of 'Christians,' with specific reference to 'faith' and 'love.'

The question remains, nevertheless, whether the confession on the *attributes* and *marks* of the church—however obscure this distinction

---

[1] This is a reworked article which was first published (in Afrikaans) in P. van Geest & J. van Oort (ed.), *Augustiniana Neerlandica. Aspecten van Augustinus' spiritualiteit en haar doorwerking* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 341–354. For the original, see: Augustine, J.B. Baur, ed. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Vienna, 1992 (abbr. CSEL); Augustine, J.B. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (32–47), Paris, 1841–1842 (abbr. PL).

[2] *Institutio*, 4.1.9 (abbr. *Inst.*) Calvin regarded the doctrine of salvation through Christ as the "soul" and the discipline as the "nerve" of the church (*Inst.* 4.12.1). J. Calvyn, *Institusie van die Christelike Godsdiens 1559* (Potchefstroom: CJBF, 1984–1991) (trans. H.W. Simpson).

may be—should not be amplified by a confession concerning three *characteristics* of the church and of a Christian; namely, faith, hope, and love, these three (*illa tria*) (1 Cor. 13:13). Is this not the most fundamental fact that could be claimed by a Christian: a person of faith and hope and love? The same would then apply to the church: a church of faith, a church of hope, and a church of love?

Van Oort justly referred to faith, hope, and love as 'the foundation of the church' when he discussed Augustine's ecclesiology.[3]

There are few theologians who have made the theme of faith, hope, and love so much a part of their spiritual and theological thoughts as Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. Consequently, I would like to meditate in this article on the meaning of these three themes as regards our Christian identity and spirituality, in particular, and the Christian church, in general. As regards the meaning of the Christian 'faith,' I am going to focus on Augustine's *Handbook on faith, hope and love*.[4] For Augustine's perspective of the Christian 'hope,' the focus is particularly on his book, *The City of God*.[5] As regards the meaning of the Christian 'love,' the emphasis will be on his *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*.[6]

I made this selection because it is well-known that the father of the church dealt extensively with 'faith' in his *Enchiridion* (9–113), but cursory with 'hope' (114–116) and 'love' (117–120). By far the larger part of the *Enchiridion* deals with 'faith,' wherein Augustine renders an exposition of the *Symbolum*,[7] succeeded in the second part by a short commentary on the *Lord's Prayer*, dealing with 'hope.'

In regard to the relationship between the three concepts, the bishop remarks that there can be no love without hope, no hope without love,

---

[3] J. van Oort, "Augustinus over de kerk" in W. van 't Spijker et al (ed.), *De Kerk. Wezen, weg en werk van de kerk naar reformatorische opvatting* (Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan, 1990), 83. It is remarkable that Karl Barth also made use of this trio in his summary of evangelical theology; see his *Evangelical Theology. An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979).

[4] *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide spe et caritate* (421/422)(abbr. *Ench.*)(PL 40).

[5] *De civitate Dei* (413–427)(abbr. *Civ. Dei.*)(PL 41, CSEL 40).

[6] *In epistulam Joannis ad Parthos tractatos* (406/407) (abbr. *Ep. Jo.*)(PL 35).

[7] The *Symbolum* agrees largely with our *Apostolicum*. See in this respect J.T. Lienhard, "Creed, *Symbolum*," in A.D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 254–255; also G. Wijdeveld, vert. *Twintig preken van Aurelius Augustinus* (Baarn: Ambo, 1986), 22. According to C. Lancel the congregation in Hippo also used the *Niceanum* in the public worship; see his *St Augustine* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 160. J.J. O'Donnell, *Augustine. Sinner & Saint. A new Biography* (London: Profile Books, 2005), 197 refers to the Apostles' Creed.

and neither love nor hope without faith.[8] Accordingly, 'faith' is the departing point, although it is not the goal or the acme.

There is a reasonable consensus that the *Enchiridion* contains a compendium of Augustine's matured theological convictions, that it is one of his writings with which many theologians occupy themselves, and that it contains one of the most lucid defences of his doctrine on sin and grace.

<center>CHRISTIAN FAITH AS POINT OF DEPARTURE</center>

In the first part of the *Enchiridion*, Augustine offers, as remarked, an explication of the Christian doctrine of faith in view of the *Symbolum*.[9] He deals first with faith in God (9–32), then with Jesus Christ (33–55), and ultimately, with the Holy Spirit and the church (56–113). Augustine's stressing of 'sin' is noticeable: where the concept is first mentioned at the end of the *Symbolum* (resp. *Apostolicum*), the bishop broaches it at length in every subsection.

Augustine defines faith as trust—trust in God that naturally means trust in the Triune God, on which he wrote a great book, the *Trinity*.[10]

To Augustine 'belief in God' meant 'belief in the Triune God.' Not that this confession of faith is easy to understand. No, he uses the concept 'three persons,' "not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence."[11] *De Trinitate* was Augustine's difficult effort at spelling out that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of identical substance and essence,[12] and that we are, in this way, concerned with the only true God—always realizing that when we deal with God, his transcendence always exceeds our limited precepts. "God can be thought about more truly than he can be talked about, and he

---

[8] *Ench.*, 8.

[9] A short summary of the Christian faith by the young Augustine is also contained in his *De vera religione* (390)(PL 34, CSEL 77) and his *De fide et symbolo* (393)(PL 40, CSEL 41).

[10] *De Trinitate* (399–422/426) (abbr. *Trin.*) (PL 42). See A.D.R. Polman, *De leer van God bij Augustinus* (Kampen: Kok, 1965); M. Schmaus, *Die psychologische Trinitätslehre des hl. Augustinus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1967). O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 7,179–181, 290–294, describes the 'god' of Augustine as an "absolutist god." The way in which O'Donnell exposes the doctrine of 'god' (small letter) in Augustine is wide open for critique.

[11] *Trin.* 5.10.

[12] *Trin.* 1.4.

is more truly than he can be thought about."[13] Accordingly, our limited knowledge can never fully define and comprehend God.

Augustine regards Christology as the disclosure of the teaching of God: "the sure and proper foundation of the catholic faith is Christ."[14] Consequently, he rejects the Christology of the Arians—who profaned the true deity of Christ—in books 5–7 of his *De Trinitate.*

Faith in the true God characterizes, according to Augustine, the Christian and the Christian church. To this should be added that, whoever speaks about 'faith,' speaks at the same time about 'grace,' and who speaks about 'grace' speaks also of 'sin.'

It is so that the true God asks from us to have faith, but it is also true that God gives what He asks from us (that is the grace to be able to believe). In this instance, one thinks involuntarily about the church father's famous and often quoted words in his *Confessiones*:[15] "Give what you demand, and demand what you will." Or about his repeated appeal to heed 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What do you possess that you have not received?"[16]

It is especially in his anti-Pelagian writings that Augustine explicitly developed his views on sin and grace. His great homiletic commentary on Psalm 118/119 (422) also spells out clearly his dogma of grace in close connection with the 'theology' of the apostle Paul.[17] The faith demanded by God is first given in grace by his Holy Spirit (Rom. 9:16, 1 Cor. 4:7). This grace is free. It is true that God forgives sins by his grace, but it is also true that He expects repentance from the sinner.[18]

The *Enchiridion* spells it out clearly: man is not saved by good works or by his own free will, but by the mercy of God and faith.[19] Faith is also a gift of God that culminates in good works.[20] Grace alone was required after the Fall, but also before the Fall.[21] Even predestination to eternal life reflects God's free grace.[22]

---

[13] *Trin.* 7.7. see also Lancel, *St Augustine*, 371.

[14] *Ench.* 5.

[15] *Confessiones*, 10.29 (397/401)(abbr. *Conf.*)(PL 32, CSEL 33).

[16] *Conf.* 7.21.

[17] Aurelius Augustinus, *Commentaar op Psalm 118/119* (Baarn: Ambo, 1996), 8–12 (trans. T.J. van Bavel).

[18] *Ench.*, 65,70,74.

[19] *Ench.*, 30.

[20] *Ench.*, 31.

[21] *Ench.*, 106.

[22] *Ench.*, 98,99.

It is because confession of sin and grace are so indissolubly linked for Augustine that he gives so much (excessive?) attention to sin in his explication of the *Symbolum*—that is original sin and actual sin,[23] heinous and trivial sins,[24] venial, as well as unpardonable sins.[25] Sin is especially understood to be self-will, pride, and selfishness.

It is clear that in his doctrine of salvation the bishop gives the last word to God's grace in Christ. God ultimately gives what He demands.[26]

One last remark in this connection: the Christian faith demands, of course, that it should be confessed openly and sincerely; it should be revealed in a public confession of faith—of which the *Symbolum* is a striking example. Inevitably, it should be a true confession. That was proved by Augustine's conflict with Arianism, Manichaeism, and Pelagianism (and to a lesser extent also the Donatists, who were, however, not heretics). Accordingly, Augustine strived for a strict adherence to the unity and sanctity of the church—to which we will return later.

Christian Hope as Goal

"Hope has the last word," that was how Lancel ends his informative chapter on *The City of God* in his comprehensive study on the father of the church from North Africa.[27] By these words was this great book; this *magnum opus et arduum* typified a book of hope—yes, even a theology of hope—many centuries before Jürgen Moltmann was to write his well-known *Theologie der Hoffnung* in 1964. Van Oort correctly remarked that the theology of Augustine could be characterized as "a theology of hope."[28]

It has already been remarked that in his *Enchiridion* Augustine gave very little attention to the theme of hope, whereas he gave a cursory explication of the *Lord's Prayer*—for everything that a Christian may

---

[23] *Ench.*, 26, 46–48, 51.

[24] *Ench.*, 78–80.

[25] *Ench.*, 83.

[26] Due to lack of space, we do not elaborate on Augustine's theory of knowledge (epistemology).

[27] Lancel, *St Augustine*, 410.

[28] Van Oort, "Augustinus over de kerk," 84.

hope for is contained in this prayer. Whoever wants to know more about the theme of hope should consult the church father's great book on *De civitate Dei*.[29]

It is generally known that this great book comprises two volumes: Books 1 to 10 refute the false accusation of the heathens who blamed the doctrines of the Christians for the fall of Rome in 410. Augustine argued that the fall of Rome was owed to moral decadence and human pride. In books 1 to 5 he refutes those who alleged that happiness in this life is to be found in idolatrous worship instead of the highest, true God; books 6–10 refute those who alleged that complete happiness could be experienced in the after-life by worshipping idols in this life.

The second principal part, books 11–22, contains a positive explication as well as a defense of the Christian religion in view of the example of two cities found in the world; namely, the city of God (*civitas Dei*) and the worldly city (*terrena civitas*): their origin (books 11–14), their development (books 15–18), and their end (books 19–22).[30] The point of intersection of history, Augustine maintains, was to be found in the incarnation of Christ. In this magisterial book, the father of the church offers a sublime exposition of a theology of history, a theology of the kingdom, and a theology of hope.[31]

It is true, though, that the large dividing principle between the two cities is the theme of *love*, but the two cities are also radically separated by the theme of *hope*. In one city there is genuine love, but not in the other; in one city there is steadfast hope and in the other false hope.

Like he indicated in his catechism textbook, *On the catechising of the uninstructed*,[32] but later expanded on, Augustine differentiates two human societies and two cities on earth.[33] "One is the city in which the people

---

[29] See J. van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon. A Study into Augustine's City of God and the Source of his Doctrine of the Two Cities* (Leiden: Brill, 1991); J. van Oort, "Civitas dei— terrena civitas. The concept of the two antithetical cities and its sources. Books XI– XIV" in C. Horn (ed.), *Augustinus. De civitate Dei* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 157– 169.

[30] *Civ. Dei*, 1.35.

[31] See H. Eger, *Die Eschatologie Augustins* (Greifswald: Bamberg, 1933).

[32] *De catechizandis rudibus*, 19.31, 31.37 (399/400)(abbr. *Cat. Rud.*)(PL 40). See Van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 164–198.

[33] One of his earliest references (390) to the 'earthly kingdom' and the 'kingdom of heaven' is found in his *Vera rel.*, 50. See J.H.S. Burleigh, (ed.), *Augustine: Earlier writings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 250.

live sensually, in the other the people live spiritually… ."[34] In one city people live according to the will of man and in the other according to the will of God.[35] The "great difference" between the two cities is revealed by love; love towards God is dominant in one city, in the other it is self-love.[36]

> Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of the self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord.[37]

Both cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, are to be found on earth, but the cities are intermingled.[38] What separates them is the two loves, the two wills, the two faiths, and the two ways of hoping. It concerns what people love (God or themselves), that which they believe in (God or the idols), their will (good or evil), and what they hope for (eternal life or eternal death). The *terrena civitas* is built on self-love (*amor sui*), desire (*cupiditas*), and pride (*superbia*); characteristics that find expression in a craving for power (*libido dominandi*). Whereas the *civitas Dei* is characterized by love (and hope), the *terrena civitas* is characterized by domination and exploitation.

It should be borne in mind that the 'love' to which the bishop refers is an *orderly* love (*ordo caritatis*): first comes the love for God, and then the love for man, through the love for God.[39]

The book, *De civitate Dei*, is a book with a strong eschatological dimension. It does not imply that Christians—and the church—should negate their calling in the world, though it does indicate that the earthly dispensation should be viewed as preliminary in nature. The Christian hope for the heavenly city makes relative, on the one hand, all hopes for transitory worldly kingdoms, but on the other hand, awakens the Christian for his work in the worldly domain. However important themes such as righteousness, freedom, and peace may be for the earthly kingdom, they constantly maintain a preliminary character compared with the kingdom of God. Ultimately the Christian is an alien in this dis-

---

[34] *Civ. Dei*, 14.1; 11.1.
[35] *Civ. Dei*, 14.4; 15.8.
[36] *Civ. Dei*, 14.13; 15.3.
[37] *Civ. Dei*, 14.28.
[38] *Civ. Dei*, 1.35; 10.32; 11.1; 16.10,54; 18.49.
[39] *Civ. Dei*, 15.22.

pensation while on his way to the promised fatherland.[40] The citizen of
the city of God uses (*uti*) earthly commodities, but enjoys (*frui*) only God
and his kingdom.[41] Consequently, Augustine did not know such a thing
as a Christian state.[42]

The promised new world does not imply a 'total destruction' of this
world[43] because that which will come to an end will be the 'outward
appearance,' not the substance of the things.[44]

Christian hope reaches out to the great fullness of time and renewal
of God's creation. Thus, the *De civitate Dei* concludes with this beautiful
sentence:

> There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what
> shall be in the end without end. For what other end do we propose to
> ourselves than to attain to the kingdom of which there is no end?[45]

This vision of the kingdom by the church father from Africa is of
decisive significance for every ancient and modern political philosophy:
all worldly empires have a relative and not an absolute importance and
validity.[46] Such a political philosophy should be a warning against every
form of political optimism, political absolutism, and a faith focused
only on progress—as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century
in Europe and now at the beginning of the twenty-first century in
Africa and the United States of America. Such a political philosophy
also rejects all forms of political pessimism like that after the Anglo-
Boer war (1899–1902) in South Africa and after the two world wars
(1914–1918, 1939–1945) in Europe. The kingdom philosophy keeps the
eye of faith expectantly and hopefully fixed on the realization of God's
promises, on the coming of the new kingdom of God, and on the new
heaven and the new earth—an expectation which affects the present
life profoundly at this time in all its facets, stimulating and directing it.
Our earthly life could never be a *replica* of the kingdom of God, but we
may strive after displaying a weak *reflection* thereof.

---

[40] *Civ. Dei*, 19.17.

[41] *Civ. Dei*, 19.17.

[42] See E.L. Fortin, "Civitate Dei" in A.D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages*,
201; Lancel, *Augustine*, 406; J.H. van Wyk, *Etiek en eksistensie—in koninkryksperspektief* (Pot-
chefstroom: PTP, 2001), 143.

[43] *Civ. Dei*, 20.14.

[44] *Civ. Dei*, 20.14; 20.16.

[45] *Civ. Dei*, 22.30.

[46] O. Noordmans, *Augustinus* (Haarlem: Bohn, 1933), 104.

Christian Love as the Center and Zenith

Van Oort correctly observed that the real essence of the church should be sought—according to the view of Augustine—in "the communion of love of the saints in the Holy Spirit."[47] A church without love and a Christian without love are, to the father of the church, tantamount to a square circle. All love is, however, rooted in the love of God for man and the world. Candidates for confirmation in the church had to learn that the main reason for the coming of our Lord was that God wanted to show his love for us.[48] Christian love, even to Augustine, serves as a hermeneutic key to the understanding of scripture.[49] When someone reads scripture, and he does not discover what love is, he has not yet grasped scripture. It is as if the church father wanted to say that no matter how faithfully one may have to study scripture, if the study does not lead one to love, then it is to no avail. The Bible teaches nothing else than love (*caritas*), and condemns nothing else than (wrong) desire (*cupiditas*).[50]

That love is greater than faith and hope is confirmed by Augustine on the strength of 1 Corinthians 13:13;[51] all God's commandments were aimed at and fulfilled in love, the love for God and the love for the neighbor.[52] Because relatively little attention is given to the theme of love in the *Enchiridion*,[53] we have to explore other sources to cover this aspect, and in this regard, my choice is Augustine's beautiful homily on 1 John—although it is an incomplete work.

Just as the first letter of John can be typified, so can Augustine's Easter sermons about this letter: a song of praise about love. The letter contains, for instance, the great and profound announcement "God

---

[47] Van Oort, "Augustinus over de kerk," 85. See at length H. Ahrend, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustinus. Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation* (Berlin: Julius Springer, 1929); J. Brechtken, *Augustinus doctor caritatis. Sein Liebesbegriff im Widerspruch von Eigennutz und selbstloser Güte im Rahmen der antiken Glückseligkeits- Ethik* (Meisenheim: Anton/Hain, 1975); J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei. A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938); R. Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbour in St. Augustine* (Louvain: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1993); T.J. van Bavel, *Augustinus: Van liefde en vriendschap* (Baarn: Het Wereldvenster, 1970).

[48] *Cat. Rud.*, 4.7.

[49] *Doc. Chr.*, 3.15.23 (PL 34, CSEL 80).

[50] *Doc. Chr.*, 3.10.15.

[51] *Ench.*, 117.

[52] *Ench.*, 121.

[53] *Ench.*, 117–121.

is love" (1 John 4:8)—to which we will return later. Augustine states emphatically that he knows of no more fervent proclaimer of the love of God than 1 John, and that nothing gives him more pleasure than to preach on love.[54] These Easter sermons typify Augustine as a *doctor caritatis* more than any other of his writings—although it has to be pointed out that Augustine uses these three words *amor*, *caritatis*, and *dilectio* mostly indistinguishably; "all three can be good or evil according to the object loved."[55] Augustine's sermons on 1 John abound with aphorisms wherein he praises the excellence, essentiality, and imperishability of love. To mention a few: "such is each one as is his love";[56] "love is the beauty of the soul";[57] "love is the consummation of all our works; in it is the end: for this we run, to it we run; when we will have reached it, we will find rest";[58] "love and you will have done nothing else than good";[59] "the practising of love, her power, her blossoming, her fruit, her beauty, her charm, her food, her drink, her sustenance and her embrace know no satiation."[60]

Love is to the church father so much at the center that he remarks—as regards 1 John 4:8—that in case there was nothing said further in the rest of the letter and in the rest of scripture to the praise of love, and we had only this proclamation ("God is love"), we would have no need to seek further.[61] The bishop goes even a step further and states, "love is God,"[62] but then one should take into account that Augustine interprets and completes this pronouncement pneumatologically: by 'love' one has to understand the Holy Spirit.[63]

When one should ask if someone were good, one should not consider what that person believed or what he hoped for, but one should ask what he loved—for the person who loves in the correct way would believe and hope in the correct way, whereas the person who does not

[54] *Ep. Jo.*, 8.14.

[55] T.J. van Bavel, "Love" in A.D. Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the ages*, 509. See T.J. van Bavel (vert.), *Augustinus van Hippo. Preken over de eerste brief van Johannes* (Leuven: Augustijns Historisch Instituut, 1999), 119.

[56] *Ep. Jo.*, 2.14.

[57] *Ep. Jo.*, 10.9.

[58] *Ep. Jo.*, 10.4.

[59] *Ep. Jo.*, 10.7.

[60] *Ep. Jo.*, 10.7.

[61] *Ep. Jo.*, 7.4.

[62] *Ep. Jo.*, 7.6; 8.14; 9.10.

[63] *Ep. Jo.*, 7.6.

love in the correct way believes in vain, even if the contents of his faith were true, and he would hope in vain, even if the object of his hope were real.[64]

Augustine differentiates two kinds of love: (false) love for the world and (true) love for God.[65] Not that we may not love all creation, but it should not be loved in such a way as though the happiness of humans culminates in the creation.[66] Earthly things may be enjoyed, but not unboundedly as though they contain the highest form of happiness.[67]

True love finds the highest expression in the love for God and the neighbor—on self-love the father of the church speaks more subduedly. In the forefront is the love of God. This love unites us with the eternal, immortal God, through whom true happiness is only found. Like the famous first paragraph of his *Confessiones* reads: "Our heart is restless until it finds rest in you."[68]

By 'love' Augustine accordingly understands—as a general rule—that activity of the soul, to enjoy God for his own sake, and to enjoy your neighbor and yourself for the sake of God.[69] Augustine wanted to show by this distinction—which has been criticized—that one should not love the Absolute relatively, nor the relative absolutely; one should not love God like one loves one's neighbor, and one may not love one's neighbor like one loves God.

Augustine understands neighborly love to be an assignment by God, especially because God is also present in the neighbor—after all, a human being is the image of God. The willingness to die for one's brother implies perfect love.[70] The church father strongly emphasizes an 'ethics of disposition': what differentiates the one act from the other is the (loving) intention of the acting person.[71] It is also important that one should distinguish between sin and the sinner. "Love not in the

---

[64] *Ench.*,117.

[65] *Ep. Jo.*, 2.8.

[66] *Ep. Jo.*, 2.11.

[67] *Ep. Jo.*, 2.12.

[68] *Conf.*, 1.1. *Inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.*

[69] *Doc. Chr.*, 3.10.16. See in this connection Van Wyk, *Etiek*, 106–132, wherein it is pointed out that the use of the expressions *uti* and *frui* has gone through a specific development reflecting specific nuances.

[70] *Ep. Jo.*, 5.4.

[71] *Ep. Jo.*, 7.7 It could be questioned whether Augustine does not disregard the ethics of effect, thus not calculating the 'results' of a deed: compare in this respect the ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Van Wyk, *Etiek*, 135–187).

man his error, but the man," says Augustine, "for the man God made, (but) the error the man himself made."[72]

On self-love the church father writes restrainedly, especially because (immoderate) self-love, despised by God, is exemplified by the worldly city.[73] This does not mean that one should despise oneself, or is not allowed to enjoy anything,[74] but it should never happen outside (detached from) God. We may care for and pamper our own bodies—which is different from what the Neoplatonists and Manichaeans[75] believed; after all, our bodies will one day share the glorious resurrection at the last judgement.[76]

In Augustine's sermons on 1 John, the Donatists always figured in the background. The bishop criticized them because of their lack of love and their conceit.[77] It is true that where one finds hope and faith, one also finds the church; it is also true that where there is forgiveness of sin, there one finds the church.[78] This applies much more in our case, "for by love we form part of the church."[79] "Through love one becomes a member of Christ and through love one is accepted into the organism of his body."[80] Accordingly, whoever breaks the unity of the church, like the Donatists did, acts lovelessly, even though it was with good intentions; namely, for the sake of the preservation of the sanctity and immaculateness of the church. "Of the Donatists it is impossible to say that they possessed love, seeing that they had rent the unity of the Church."[81] Putting it more severely: "How can anyone who has left the

---

[72] *Ep. Jo.*, 7.11. Calvin was later to take over this differentiation, making it pastorally fruitful (*Inst.*, 3.4.34, 4.12.10).

[73] *Civ. Dei*, 14.28. See J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei*, 116–126; O. O'Donovan, *The problem of self-love in St. Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[74] *Ep. Jo.*, 2:11–12.; *Doc. Chr.*, 3.10.16.

[75] See S.N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A historical Survey* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992).

[76] *Civ. Dei*, 22.24–28.

[77] See W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Claredon, 1952); J.H. van Wyk, "Faith, ethnicity and contextuality," in E.A.J.G. van der Borght, D. van Keulen & M.E. Brinkman, (ed.), *Faith and Ethnicity 2. Studies in Reformed Theology* 7 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 22–46 with many references to original source material.

[78] *Ep. Jo.*, 10.10.

[79] *Ep. Jo.*, 6.6.

[80] *Ep. Jo.*, 10.3.

[81] *Ep. Jo.*, 6.2.

church, still be in Christ, seeing that he does not belong to the members of Christ any longer?"[82]

It is against the background of the conflict with the Donatists that we should understand Augustine's often quoted pronouncement "love and do what you want to."[83] Christians should love all people, also opponents, and even enemies. This pronouncement was not meant to be *carte blanche* to lead a dissipated life, but it leads to a life, as Augustine added, explaining where all human actions are stamped and saturated with true love. It also applied to the actions of Catholic Christians towards the Donatists.

The conflict in North Africa between the Catholics and Donatist Christians had placed the church, for all centuries to come, before an extremely difficult dilemma in the ecclesiology: unity (solidity) or sanctity (authenticity), catholicity (breadth) or apostolicity (depth)?[84] An easy way out would have been to choose either one or the other— either unity, with the loss of sanctity, or sanctity, with the loss of unity. Augustine had, by choosing love as a fundamental characteristic of the church, tried to resolve the dilemma. After all, love holds fast to the unity of the church, but watches at the same time over the holiness thereof, well aware that the church is a *corpus permixtum* in which much unholiness resides.[85] Undoubtedly, the bishop rendered an important contribution in this regard, but it was not a final solution. Evidently, it was not given to anyone in this dispensation to effect lucidity in the tension between the unity and the sanctity of the church, apart from depending constantly on the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13), praying persistently for the unity and the sanctity, and endeavoring untiringly to attain this. Augustine's approval later for making use of state power to 'force' the Donatists back into the church (Luke 14:23) does not pass the test for Christian love that he himself had set.[86]

---

[82] *Ep. Jo.*, 1.12.

[83] *Ep. Jo.*, 7.8. *Dilige et quod vis fac.*

[84] See S.J. Grabowski, *The Church. Introduction to the Theology of Saint Augustine* (London: Herder Book, 1957); F. Hoffmann, *Der Kirchenbegriff des hl. Augustinus in seinen Grundlagen und seiner Entwicklung* (Münster: Kaiser, 1933); P. van Geest, *Integriteit als weg naar God. Over de spiritualiteit van Augustinus*, (Utrecht: Oratie KTU, 2002), 38–55.

[85] *Ep. Jo.*, 3.9.

[86] When the bishop later reconsidered the results of his written work, he remarked that it had never been his intention that the state should force the schismatics back into the Catholic Church. See *Retractationes*, 2.5; *Retractations* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 1968) (trans. M.I. Bogan.) (PL 32, CSEL 36). Another incomprehensible part of Augustine's love life was possibly his relationship to his (unnamed) concubine with

To study the writings of the great father of the church from North Africa would probably help us to develop once more a passion for the unity of the church of Christ, but then a passion which would have to be saturated with love, love for Christ and his church, and yes, for God and his kingdom because ultimately our concern is not (only) Christ and his church, but God and his kingdom—the new heaven and new earth, where God will be everything and for everyone (1 Cor. 15:28).

In this regard, it should also be remarked that the nearer Christians live to God, the nearer they will come together. The letter of Christ to the congregation of Ephesus could be regarded as a good guide (Rev. 2:1–7). It is clear from the letter that there was good discipline and thorough vigil kept over the sanctity of the congregation and the faithful preaching of the Word of God (Rev. 2:2, 6). Yet, the congregation had to hear: "You do not love me (Jesus) the same as at the beginning" (Rev. 2:4). You do not put love first! And consequently, if you do not repent (*metanoia!*), I will remove the lampstand from its place (Rev. 2:5). It was, as if Christ wanted to say: orthodoxy without orthopraxy is empty, just like orthopraxy without orthodoxy is shallow. What is necessary is faith that acts through love (Gal. 5:6).[87]

Conclusion

The identity—and the spirituality—of a Christian and of the church, as far as it concerns Augustine, is radically stamped by the biblical themes of faith, hope, and love. Without these themes, there can be no Christian and no church. It is the first and the last, the highest and the deepest that could be said of a human being and of a church: a person of faith, hope, and love—especially: a person of love. And also of the church: church of faith, hope, and love—and especially: church of love.

---

whom he lived for 16 years (and by whom he had a child, Adeodatus), from whom he had to part heartbreakingly in Milan (*Conf.*, 6.15) (see Lancel, *St. Augustine*, 72–73).

[87] Calvin (*Inst.*, 4.2.6) points out the two cords of unity which bind the church; namely, the concord in the sound teaching and the brotherly love—but then he gives priority to the doctrine (of faith).

IDENTITY AND REMEMBRANCE

Binsar Pakpahan

Introduction

There is no doubt that memory is important for people to live. To remember is to have a hold on your memory and to have an identity. One can barely live without memory. Memory of the past is important to get a hold of the future. As Wiesel writes,

> Memory is a passion no less powerful and pervasive than love. What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it. To remember is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death.[1]

To remember is actually to live and to have your identity, or a sense of self through memories. It is a revival of one's existence by preventing the past from disappearing and to call upon the future.

There are difficulties in choosing one identity. Everything is no longer as clear-cut as it was. For instance, in my grandfather's time, it would be easy to say that he is a Batak, coming from an area in Samosir, North Sumatra, Indonesia. But now, even I—a Batak born in Medan, the capital of the North Sumatra province, and raised in Jakarta—have difficulties saying that I am a real Batak. I have to choose a history, which is a history of my grandfather's, to say that I am a Batak from Samosir. The question of identity has been a problem in a culture where traditions were very important. How can one say that she/he comes from a certain tradition when she/he does not even speak the language or understand the culture? The problem of personal identity must reassess the role of memory of your own root in searching for the answer of the questions: Who are you?; What is your identity?

---

[1] E. Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs Volume 1, 1928–1969* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 150, as in Robert Voslo, "Reconciliation as the Embodiment of Memory and Hope," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, vol. 109* (2001), 25–40.

Christianity is a religion full of traditions and is rooted in the history of the Israelites. The author chooses to explore the idea of memory and identity in the Old Testament because it played an important role in forming the identity of Israel as a nation. Edward P. Blair said that a nation is a people with common memories and common hopes. Without them, human beings remain an aggregation without cohesion and national consciousness. Therefore, "Israel was a pre-eminently a nation."[2] Israel remembers her history and her identity as God's chosen people who are bound to God in the covenant. This is their identity and their history. As Dykstra says, "perhaps this is why the Bible commands us to remember. Our memory is our life."[3] Without memory, we do not only lose our past, but we miss our present and future as well. For Israel, the order to remember is, in fact, the identity of the nation. In the theme of 'Christian Identity,' this paper will try to show how remembrance and memory played an important role as the identity in Israelites lives. The author will use the book of Brevard Childs as the main source for this paper, with the help of biblical dictionaries for terminology, especially on the topic of remembrance in connection with Israel's identity in the Old Testament.[4]

WHAT IS REMEMBRANCE

From the understanding of the word, *remembrance* is derived from the verb *remember*, and often connected with the word *memory*. Long before

---

[2] Edward P. Blair, "An Appeal to Remembrance: The Memory Motif in Deuteronomy," in *Interpretation*, Vol. XV, (January 1961), 41–47.

[3] Craig Dykstra, "Memory and Truth," in *Theology Today* Vol. 44, No. 2 (July 1987), 160.

[4] Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel*, (London: SCM Press, 1962). Childs wrote this book following a general attack on the book of Johs Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture I–II*, London—reprinted 1946, 99 ff. by James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, (London—third impression 1991). Childs studies the use of the verb 'remember' in the setting of the cult, the law court, the prophecy narrative, etc. in the methods of form-criticism. However, the book of Childs only focus on the word 'remember.' As Barr has warned us, we must be careful of the complexity of the use of an isolated word-use in languages for they can have different meaning. Childs' focuses his research as (1) an attempt to find the scope of meaning and understanding of memory in the Old Testament; (2) to discover through a form-critical analysis of the

the development of modern social science, Augustine reflected the pro-
found nature of human's memory. He said that it is like "a great field or
a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which
are conveyed to it by the senses…"[5] In her book on memory, Elizabeth
Culling, a senior advisor in the Diocese of York, notes that medieval
scholars did not separate memory from learning as now happens. In
their understanding, memory turned knowledge into useful experience
and memory that combined information-turned-experience into what
we call ideas and what they termed judgments.[6] This understanding of
memory developed throughout the years.

There are two types of memories: personal memory and corporate
memory. Personal memories depend on the person who recalls the
scene, and it is his/her emotional feeling that is part of the memory.
Corporate memory helps a group or a nation embrace their identity.
Culling says, "Groups share memories of the past, including origins
and subsequent events, which make them what they are in the present,
in the same way that an individual may have a regular behavioral
response which arises from personal memory."[7] Memory is something
important both in personal and community lives.

Since memory is important in personal and community, what about
remembrance? We shall first look at the lexical meaning of the word.
According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, "remembrance" is: "*n.*
the act of remembering or process of being remembered; a memory or
recollection. While the verb remember means: keep in the memory, not
forget; (*also absol.*) bring back into one's thought, call to mind (knowl-
edge or experience *etc*)."[8] The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychol-
ogy mentions that the word 'remember' comes from the Latin word:
Re+memiri, which is to be mindful thought; to exercise memory. More-
over, *remembrance* is a term used in a very loose way to cover mem-
ory, recollection, and retention, or the result of the memory function

---

context within Israel's life in which memory plays a significant role; (3) to discuss the
theological problem of memory and its relation to tradition.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions*, (London: Harmondsworth 1961), Book X, 8. See also Eliza-
beth Culling, *Spirituality and Remembering* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd., 1996), 3.

[6] Culling, *Spirituality*, 4.

[7] Culling, *Spirituality*, 5. For a detailed study of collective and social memory see
C. Elliot, *Memory and Salvation* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1995).

[8] Taken from Della Thompson *et.al.* (eds.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current
English* 9th edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

generally.[9] Memories are an active and dynamic component of human nature. When we call something to mind, it is actually to re-member it. We become a member of the memories of past events by calling them to our mind.

Collective memory also shapes the community's identity. It is a high point of any specific group that unifies it after having a certain feeling towards an event. Yael Zerubabel, in his research on the role of collective memory in the making of the Israeli nation, said that the commemorative narratives of specific events often suggests one's unique character, while their examination within the context of the master commemorative narrative indicates the recurrence of historical patterns in the group's experience.[10] Yet, this remembrance of one's identity cannot avoid configuring the other in accordance with some model of cognitive apprehension.[11] One's identity always has the tendency of placing others in the construction of her/his memory.

In the book entitled *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory: The Politics of Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, David E. Lorey and William H. Beezley explain that at the very center of all these issues of recovery, reconciliation, and looking forward is history—"here in particular, is the social processing of memories of genocide and collective violence. All the faces of history are present in this connection: history as imagined; history as practiced by historians, policy-makers and others; history as battleground of ideas, ideals, and ideologies; history as therapy; history as taught in the schools; and history as the patrimony of a society or nation."[12] Memory is like a battle ground for everything. Inevitably, the memory of events is multi-layered, and often fractured. How the events are remembered is influenced by the age, gender, nationality, and political or religious affiliations of the individual or group remembering.[13]

---

[9] James Mark Baldwin *et.al.* (eds.), *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology Vol. II*—copyright 1901, (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1960).

[10] Yael Zerubabel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1994).

[11] Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9–10.

[12] David E. Lorey and William H. Beezley (*eds.*), *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory: The Politics of Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, (Wilmington: SR Books, 2002), xiv.

[13] Isabel Wollaston, *A War Against Memory: The Future of Holocaust Remembrance*, (London: SPCK, 1996), 1–2.

Remembrance in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, "Remember!" and "Behold!" are some of its great commands. Craig Dykstra says that Israel is constantly told to remember the day of their freedom from Egypt, to remember that they were once slaves, and to remember how God has led them through the wilderness and into the land of Canaan.

> Israel is told to remember the entire law God has commanded them. They are told to remember the covenants and to remember how God has judged and has been merciful. Above all, they are to remember God as God remembers them in steadfast love. And often, they do remember. They remember in times of trouble and affliction. They remember as they seek understanding and a way to live. They remember in the midst of judgment, and they remember while in bondage. They remember in order to interpret what is going on in the world and what it means, and they remember in giving thanks and praise.[14]

This means that the commandment to remember is lived out by Israelites. Israel remembers what God has done for her in all her history. Remembrance is an important thing for Israel, whether as her covenant with the Lord, and as her identity as well. God commands Israel to teach and remember the knowledge of faith "when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deut. 11:19)." The remembrance that Israel is told to do is daily lived by her.

In the Old Testament, the word that translated with 'remember' came from the root זכר (zkr), which is a verb common masculine singular construct, and means to think (about), meditate (upon), pay attention (to); remember, remembrance, recollect; mention, declare, recite, proclaim, invoke, commemorate, accuse, confess.[15]

In six passages, *zākhar* expresses the active intellectual engagement of a person with himself (e.g. Hab. 3:2 prays to God that he will remember to have mercy; see also Lam. 3:20; Job 4:7; 7:7; 21:6; Ps. 22:28). The instances in those passages show an intellectual activity. The fact that *zākhar* often expresses the idea of the past does not automatically mean

---

[14] See Dykstra, "Memory and Truth," in *Theology Today* Vol. 44, No. 2 (1987), 159.

[15] In Georg Fohrer, *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary of The Old Testament*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 70, זכר is translated as *q.* recall, think of, remember; *ni.* be remembered, mentioned; *hi.* remind, mention, confess and praise. With vocals, it is translated as memory, mentioning, naming, and invocation. It is interesting to note that Zechariah also named after the same root of *zkr*.

to limit the meaning only to the basic meaning of the word which is *remember* in the sense of 'recall.' Easing explains that, "it would be more accurate to say that the nuance of "recollection" springs from intellectual activity with reference to the past."[16] The future can also be the subject of intellectual activity as expressed by *zākhar* (Isa. 47:7).[17] An interesting sequence can be seen in Numbers 15:39. When Israel sees the tassels in her clothing, she will remember that she is connected to God's law. This will set her obligation, to act accordingly with the Law. *Zkr* often implies an action or appears in combination with verbs or action. In the observation of the context of *zkr*, it is clear that the verbs used in parallel do not refer only to the past. The interpretation of *zkr* as 'remember' in the sense of 'to recall' can hardly represent its basic meaning.[18]

God Remembers People

The word *zkr* is used with God to form the subject for at least 73 times in the qal. They are widely distributed in the Old Testament; mostly it is used by the prophets, except Hosea and Jeremiah who seldom use it. The largest use of the word is in Psalms and Nehemiah.[19] The word is often used as in: He 'remembers' his covenant and the covenant people; that is, He will 'keep' it and them (see Gen. 9:15–16).[20]

Childs says, "By and large, the preposition maintains its basic meaning of aiming toward a goal. The emphasis falls on remembrance as an action directed toward someone rather than the psychological experience of the subject. Moreover, the preposition has strong forensic overtones which appear both in a positive and negative sense."[21] When the verb *zkr* is used with God as subject, then it is not the same with the general sense of 'remember.' It is a technical term that bears a specific

---

[16] Eising, "Zākhar, Zēkher, Zikkārôn, 'Azkārāh," in G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of The Old Testament Vol. IV*, (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1980), 66.

[17] Eising, "Zākhar," 67.

[18] See Eising, "Zākhar," 66.

[19] See Childs, *Memory*, 31–32. Childs considers Nehemiah 5:19 as the request of Nehemiah for God to remember him for good (Compare to the NIV translation who translates "remember me with favor").

[20] Childs, *Memory*, 43.

[21] Childs, *Memory*, 31–32.

judicial meaning: to credit to one's account. When God remembers, it is not merely a psychological experience; rather, it is actually an action.

There are ideas that God will not forget those who have been faithful to God. People will call on God to remember both themselves and their good work. Jeremiah 2:2 speaks of how Israel loves God in her youth, and asks God to remember and reward her. David is remembered for his hardships that he endured for the sanctuary (Ps. 132:1 cf. also Ps. 20:3). King Hezekiah is remembered because he faithfully wails before God (2 Kings 20:3; Isa. 38:3). Jeremiah asks God to remember his intercession on behalf of his enemies (Jer. 18:20).

There are some passages where God's remembrance can be punitive as well (Hos. 7:2; 9:9; 8:13; Jer. 14:10), in which God remembers iniquities and punishes them. When iniquity is threatened by God's punitive remembrance, the worshippers pray that God will not remember iniquity. Isaiah 64:9 contains the prayer, "do not remember our sins forever." The fact that iniquity can continue to affect future generations (third and fourth generations: Ex. 34:7) explains why the prayer asks God not to remember their sins.

The prophet stresses both the continuity and discontinuity in Israel history. God is the main connection of the past and the future. The discontinuity lies in Israel's failure to remember. Childs is right when he says, "Israel's memory is an active response in faith that links her to redemptive action of God's entrance into history."[22]

The idea of a forensic and specific judicial meaning is obvious. When God remembers, it is not merely a psychological action in one's brain, as we understand it in our modern language of memory. Childs says, "frequently the psychological processes involved in remembering are included along with the purely action toward someone. God remembers and forgets and this process stands parallel to a series of psychological descriptions (Jer. 31:20; 44:21)." To remember is already an action which either blesses or punishes the people of God. Further, he explains, "God's remembering has not only a psychological effect, but an ontological as well."[23] God's act of remembering is so important that the people that God does not remember have no existence at all.[24]

---

[22] Childs, *Memory*, 59.

[23] Childs, *Memory*, 33. He also says that memory is not identical with action, but it is never divorced from it. It is very important to note that Childs suggests, "There can be no dichotomy between God's thought and action," 34.

[24] See Psalm 88:5. The Psalmist says that he is like the slain who lie in the grave because he is 'remembered no more' and 'cut off from God's care'.

Childs concludes that God's act of remembering has an implication of a movement—an active movement towards the object of God's memory. He says,

> God's remembering always implies his movement toward the object of his memory. The action varies in nature, can be physical or forensic. The objective side of memory is accompanied, in differing degrees, by an internal reaction in God's part. The essence of God's remembering lies in his acting toward someone because of a previous commitment.[25]

The idea of an active remembrance of God is clear. When God remembers, it is also an action, not merely a psychological act of the mind.

However, God's memory is not always related to a past event. In the relation with 'remembering the covenant,' God's great act continues to meet Israel in their present situation. Israel places her center of praises in God's faithfulness in remembering the covenant. "He has remembered His covenant forever."[26] Psalm 111:5 notes that God remembers his covenant forever. We can find similar expression in Psalm 105:8. Therefore, God's remembering is "not conceived of as an actualization of a past event in history; rather, every event stems from the eternal purpose of God…God's memory is not a re-creating the past, but a continuation of a selfsame purpose."[27] Further, "God's memory encompasses his entire relationship with his people. His memory includes both the great deeds of the past as well as his continued concern for his people in the future."[28]

When used as God's action, the heart of remembering is more than a re-collection, to call something from the memory, or repeating something from the past. It is actually a complex psychological and ontological action. Therefore, to be remembered by God is an important thing to be able to receive his ongoing action and love. Remembrance is already about God's action. To conclude, remembrance is about God who remembers; not only in a passive meaning of remembering, but also in an active continuous manner by which God still can create our remembrance. Child states,

> God's memory is not a re-creating of the past, but a continuation of the selfsame purpose… The Old Testament witnesses a series of historical events by which God brought up the people of Israel into existence.

---

[25] Childs, *Memory*, 34.
[26] See Childs, *Memory*, 41–44. See Psalm 105:8 cf.; 106:45; 111:5; I Chron. 16:15.
[27] See Childs, *Memory*, 41–44. See Psalm 105:8 cf.; 106:45; 111:5; I Chron. 16:15.
[28] Childs, *Memory*, 42.

These events were placed in a chronological order within the tradition, and never recurred in Israel's history… Redemptive history continues. What does this mean? It means more than that later generations wrestled with the meaning of redemptive events, although this is certainly true. It means more than the influence of a past event continues to be felt in successive generations, which obvious fact no one could possibly deny. Rather, there was an immediate encounter, an actual participation in the great acts of redemption. The Old Testament maintained the dynamic, continuing character of past events without sacrificing their historical character as did the myth.[29]

God brought Israel into existence, and Israel took it as their history. How does Israel remember this covenant and identity? We shall see how Israel remembers in the following section.

People Remember God

When the word *zkr* in the qal form is used with Israel as the subject, it occurs 94 times. The distribution of its use is significant because of the concentration of the word in certain areas.[30] The objects of the verb falls into different categories, and the most important groups includes the act of God (22×), God himself (17×), the commandments (9×), sins (7×), and special days (3×).

When 'remember' is used with Israel as its subject, in most of the times the subject denotes a basic human psychological act: to recall a past event. This verb appears in narrative as this basic psychological meaning and in the legal material of the Pentateuch to remember to do the commandments. The verb plays a role within two closely allied forms, the trial and disputation. It also appears in the hymn calling forth Israel's thankful remembrance acts of the past. It is important to note that Israel's disobedience and rebelliousness was often connected because they often did not remember the great acts of God.[31] In the books of the prophets, the verb is used for different meaning.[32] However, the varied uses of the verb suggest that, as Childs interprets, "a new and highly theological usage of *zkr* emerged from Israel's attempt to

---

[29] Childs, *Memory*, 83–84.
[30] See Childs, *Memory*, 45.
[31] We will see them in Psalm 78; 106; Isa. 63:7; Neh. 9:16ff.
[32] See Childs, *Memory*, 49–50.

reinterpret the significance of her tradition."[33] The understanding of the verb is again more than that of a psychological meaning.

In reading the Old Testament, we find that there are themes that are revisited throughout the history of Israel with their own characteristics and purpose. These themes were used extensively in one book and were mentioned again in the later books. For instance, we can find the theme of Exodus mentioned again in the Book of Hosea (Hos. 11:1), Amos (Am. 9:7), Psalms (PS 78:12–16; 105:23–42; 106:6–12); and in a different context of Nehemiah (Neh. 9:9ff.). The theme of the Davidic kingdom can be found not only in the Deuteronimistic historic books, but also in Psalms. The metaphor of husband-wife in the book of the prophets is used in different ways, elaborations, and purposes.[34] The history of Israel is being told again in different ways and different purpose. Remembrance has become an important element in Israelites lives and history.

What Israel remembers is not the same as what modern language understood as history. Israel is bound to her history in a completely different way. Von Rad says, "For Israel that interest was not a thirst for knowledge that happened to be concentrated in history; for in history, as nearly every page of the Old Testament affirms, Israel encountered her God."[35] The calling Israel received is not a one-time encounter; rather, it comes about to every generation of Israel. Von Rad concludes the Old Testament in a great extent as "nothing but the literary record of a people's passionate millennium-long conversation about the meaning of its history."[36] Therefore, the command to 'remember' for Israel is always related with her encounter with God. It always changes and is renewed through generations. The Old Testament is Israel's testament of her encounter with God. She is committed to talk about this 'remembrance' in no particular method or manner. Remembrance is within the theology of Israel.

The historic acts by which Yahweh founded the community of Israel were absolute. The sharing of past events does not mean that they will attach in the past. Each event becomes actual for each subsequent generation. Von Rad says,

---

[33] Childs, *Memory*, 50.

[34] For more information on the extensive use of the theme of Exodus in the Old Testament, see C.R. North, *The Old Testament Interpretation of History*, (London: Epworth Press, 1946).

[35] Gerhard von Rad, *God At Work in Israel*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 13.

[36] Von Rad, *God at Work*, 13.

this is not just in the sense of furnishing the imagination with a vivid present picture of the past events—no, it was only the community assembled for a festival that by recitation and ritual brought Israel in the full sense of the world into being: in her own person she really and truly entered into the historic situation to which the festival in question was related.[37]

The celebrated ritual was actually an actual event of the saving God who encounters Israel through generations. The past events were taken and experienced as her history through time.

What is the idea of history in Israel? Israel sees history as the time when God accompanied her. God establishes the continuity between the various separate events and ordained their directions as they followed one another in time.[38] Israel's understanding of history is centered in God saving action. Thus, Israel always renews their history through generations in the sense of experiencing the past event in a new meaning. Each event becomes history because Israel feels the saving action of God in their terms in each subsequent generation.

The editor of Deuteronomy often pointed out Israel's history of disobedience in failing to remember (Deut. 9:7), and use it as a framework of history (Judges 8:34). The failure to remember could already be called apostasy because it was not a mere absent-mindedness; rather, it was unfaithfulness to the covenant. Therefore, the use of the verb in Deuteronomy goes beyond the general psychological term. The role of memory is also to link the present commandments as events with the covenant history of the past. It establishes the continuity between the past covenantal history and the present.[39]

While in the complain psalm, Childs concludes the use of *zkr* as,

> The use of memory arises often in terms of separation from God felt by an individual or the community…In intense struggle to relate to the tradition, Israel encounters again through the medium of her memory the God of the past. Her attention no longer focuses on specific historical events, but on the divine reality who imprinted her history. The vocabulary used to describe the wrestling process indicates the tremendous internalization which has transpired. To remember is to grasp after, to meditate upon, indeed, to pray to God.[40]

---

[37] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Vol. II: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1967), 104.

[38] See Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology II*, 110.

[39] See Deut. 7:18; 9:7; 24:9; 25:17.

[40] Childs, *Memory*, 64–65.

Through historic events in the past, the psalmist remembers God and all his grace towards Israel. The memory of the past is shared again as the experience of the new generations having the grace and love of God. This remembrance is already a prayer to God.

Memory also plays an important role in linking Israel to the future. In the post-exilic period, Israel had to establish herself by remembering her history and tradition in order to be able to move to the future. The people try to connect themselves to the former covenant history by remembering what happened to their forefathers. By relating and remembering the past in memory, Israel becomes part of the future because past and future is one in God's purpose. Therefore, the order to remember is very important in Israel's life.

Memory and Identity

To conclude, from the Old Testament we may draw a theology of remembrance as an identity for Israel to remember the covenant of the past, and to get a hold on their future as God's chosen people. To have a memory of the past, to remember the covenant, and to re-experience God's saving action is the identity of Israel. This example should teach Christians that memory is very important for our identity. As Israel's identity is re-experiencing the covenant and God's saving act, we should define what the core of Christian's identity is. This identification to memory will help us to go through challenges that arise in the ever-expanding instant world of ours.

One of the obstacles that Christian must face is that we do not have a common memory of identity as Israel did. Christianity has multiple narrations in its history. Going back to the questions I posed in the introduction, our memory and history is multi-layered and our Christian identity often challenged by our other narration. Our story has positive and negative memories, and there are also fragments of truth and multiple realities that coexist together. Thus Christian identity is evolving, yet must have the same ground in their remembrance and memory.

I would like to go back to my own questions on my identity in the first section. If I would like to add another layer to my Batak identity, which is I as being a Christian, then I should have my own remembrance and memory on this identity. To re-experience God's saving act through Jesus Christ is the most important memory that I

should hold dear in order to prevent it from being displaced by my other identities. This is the memory that makes me convinced of my own Christian identity.

In sum, what we can learn from Israel is that even when they have so many things happening throughout their history, they still remember and re-experiencing their identity as God's people and always come back to that memory. The next challenge for us is how we can have a common remembrance as our identity as God's people through Jesus Christ as the center of our theology in the midst of a plural world. This poses a challenge and an opportunity to bring forth our unity under our remembrance of God's gracious saving act as our true identity. Our layers of identity should not be more important as our identity in Christ through our remembrance of him.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN AN AGE OF DIFFERENCE

Jaco Kruger

Introduction: the Question of Identity

Philosophically, the question of identity is a well-established point of discussion. It may not even be an exaggeration to state that the concept of identity forms an integral part of the intellectual history of 'the West.' Historically, the concept of identity has been closely related to the question regarding the true nature or essence of something—a question the early Greek philosophers already occupied themselves with. 'Identity,' together with other binary terms as subjectivity-objectivity, propriety-impropriety, authenticity-inauthenticity, essence-accidents, and presence-absence form an intricate web of meanings that has played, and continues to play, a constitutive role in the theological, philosophical, sociological, and anthropological discourse of that intellectual heritage that stems from the confluence of the Jewish-Christian and Greek philosophical traditions.

In recent times, however, identity has become an increasingly problematic concept. Broadly speaking, since the second half of the twentieth century, many influential analyses tended to focus on the violence and oppression that are inflicted by the use of the concept of identity. Today scholars are cautious of, and even adverse to, using the concept of identity in an appreciative way. The focus has shifted to an awareness of the otherness of the other, and to 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' in general.

The question now is whether in today's world it is still possible to speak in an intellectually responsible way about identity, and, more specifically, about Christian identity. And if so, what would be the salient features of such a discourse?

The present paper briefly outlines the deconstruction of identity that has taken place in what has become known as post-modernity. The central proposal of this paper is, however, that a simple exchange of emphasis from identity to difference is not very helpful. It is argued that the concepts of identity and difference should both be used against the

background of the idea of *functionality*. A functional or deictic approach to our existence emphasizes that we are relational beings, and that our language and self-conceptions are formed in response to the events from the surrounding world that draw our attention. It is toward those important 'things' and 'events' that our consciousness points. Framed in theological terms, the implications of such an approach may be expressed as follows: as Christians we are in a relationship with God through Christ. Our lives consist of answering God's call in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is against this background of being *en route* that the use of the expression, 'Christian identity,' may be salvaged.

Identity from Augustine to Hegel

Identity, which derives from the Latin *idem* (same), refers to the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration. There are two aspects to this sameness. They are: self-sameness at a particular moment in time, and continuity of that sameness through time.

In the Western intellectual tradition, the concept of identity gained prominence in the thought of Augustine of Hippo. In his *Confessiones*, Augustine's sincere and persistent self-reflection leads to the presentation of a genuinely new vision of personal identity.[1] He argues that, since man is created in the image of God, the structure of selfhood must mirror the Divine. Now since God is one and transcendent of his creation, it follows that the human self must also be a self-contained, rounded-off subject. In the history of Western thought, the idea of identity developed alongside the idea of the human subject as a self-contained, rounded-off unit. These thoughts, with their origin in Augustine, were radicalized by the likes of Luther and Descartes in early modern times, and were followed through to their ultimate implications in the nineteenth century by Hegel.

Repulsed by the abstraction and universality of medieval theology, Luther directed attention to the individual believer. According to him, the individual believer can find certainty in a personal relationship with God through Christ, in the knowledge that Christ lived for him, died for him, and rose for him. The personal and subjective nature of

---

[1] Mark C. Taylor, *Erring—a postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 35.

salvation is expressed by Luther in the phrase *pro nobis* (for us). Though Luther may have never intended this, for many people the notion that Christ is *pro nobis* signaled a significant shift toward the centrality of the self—the human subject.

Paralleling these developments in philosophy is the work of René Descartes. The modern period in philosophy is generally regarded to have begun with Descartes' decisive turn to the subject. His methodical doubt, which eventually leads him to clear and distinct thoughts on which to build, is, in fact, a *reductio ad hominem*.[2] The thinking human ego comes to stand in the center and becomes the point of reference for everything else. This is the quintessential mode of being of the modern epoch. It was left to the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel to utilize this assumed centrality of the human subject in his speculative philosophy to bring to its fullest implications the notion of identity associated with it.

According to Hegel, subjectivity is pure self-recognition in absolute otherness. The subject relates itself to itself and is determinate—is other-being and being-for-itself—and in this determinateness, or in its self-externality, abides within itself; in other words, it is in and for itself.[3] The subject is therefore a set apart identity. It is completely self-enclosed, totally self-identical, and—upon completion of the dialectical detour—absolutely self-present. In Hegel's dialectical scheme, the original subject is God, who is mirrored by His dialectical opposite, finite human subjectivity, who both are then taken up in the highest unity and identity of the Spirit. What emerges from these points is Hegel's influential definition of identity as excluded otherness. Identity implies that there is no heterogeneity in the subject. At any given moment, as well as through time, it is homogenous and true to itself. Within this structure of exclusion, every entity is what it is—the outside is out and the inside in.[4]

The subject furthermore establishes its identity in a dialectical manner by distancing itself from its other, by excluding the other from itself, and even by negating the other. As stated above, these thoughts in Hegel brings to a certain climax a development that has started as early as Augustine. Taylor argues that Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "in

---

[2] Taylor, *Erring*, 22.
[3] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 14.
[4] Taylor, *Erring*, 24.

effect joins the *Confessions* and the *City of God* to form an all-inclusive *Bildungsroman* that … recapitulates the emergence of individual identity on both a personal and cultural scale…"[5] The implications of Hegel's view of identity are far reaching. In one of his other works, *The Spirit of Christianity and its fate*, the implications become visible in his discussion of the differences between the Greek, Jewish, and Christian ways of being in the world. Simplifying greatly, his view is that the Greek way presents the thesis, the Jewish way then presents the antithesis, and the Christian way presents the synthesis, which takes everything up in a rounded-off, self-contained identity. One remark suffices: in Hegel's Europe of the beginning of the nineteenth century, his views on identity would have had profound political influence. In that society, Jewish people lived side by side with Christians. To make the Jewish way of life the excluded—even negated—other of a self-enclosed Christian subjectivity, could and eventually did prove to be very dangerous.

The Deconstruction of Identity

Hegel's magisterial synthesis was and remains very important. It still proves a significant point of reference for contemporary thought.[6] Roughly speaking, since the middle of the twentieth century, the emphasis has, however, shifted toward the dangerous implications involved in Hegel's view of identity as excluded otherness. It is to these implications that we now turn.

For a self who is struggling to establish its identity, the existence of an other is disturbing. That which is not the self is experienced as a threat. The other which is an absolute other is, at the same time, an absolute horror. It presents the possibility that the identity of the self may be compromised. The subject tries to master the terror that absolute alterity provokes by negating the wholly other and enclosing the self within the secure "solitude of solidity and self-identity."[7] The self, in other words, tries to progressively purge itself of any traces of

---

[5] Taylor, *Erring*, 35.

[6] Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 142 mentions that a number of scholars interpret Hegel as being the last great Christian metaphysician.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 91.

otherness that may exist within it. This act of purging may in itself be regarded as an act of violence, albeit violence as self-mutilation in search of self-perfection.

The violent implications of identity as excluded otherness, however, reach further. The self's struggling to establish its identity also moves to eliminate the threat of the other. This is an offence that is defensive in nature, or to use a contemporary catch phrase: it is a pre-emptive strike. Before the identity of the subject can be contaminated by the other, the subject moves to negate the other. This move of negating the other is inherently violent—it only varies with regard to the degree of violence involved. The subject may, for instance, implement a strategy of oppression whereby the other is forced to exist within certain parameters. Another way of dealing with the other is by way of colonization: the other is forced to become identical with the subject, and is eventually incorporated into the subject.

The rise of modern technology has greatly increased the imperialistic powers of the subject in its quest to establish its identity. Everything is changed from its natural state into something useful or meaningful to man. The post-Enlightenment world is guided by the principle of utility. For the utilitarian, the object is neither independent, nor possesses being-in-itself. The object *is* only to the extent that it is *for* the subject. According to Taylor, this understanding of utility discloses its close relationship to consumption.[8] The neo-liberal grand-narrative of consumerism holds that the subject establishes its identity by continually and ever increasingly consuming its other. This is a form of violence in itself.

The deconstruction of identity as excluded otherness, however, reaches deeper than merely pointing to its dangerous implications. It has been argued that the idea of identity as excluded otherness is inherently flawed. For the subject to be the same at any given moment, as well as through time, the self has to compare itself with itself in order to establish whether it remained the same or not. Put in other words: for the self to be present to itself as an identity, it has to represent itself to itself in order to establish whether it is the same or not. It is in this process of representing the self to itself that identity as excluded otherness fails. Identity understood thus can never be pure because it is always mediated by an act of representation.

---

[8] Taylor, *Erring*, 26.

The awareness that identity as excluded otherness necessarily fails was developed in various forms since the time of the French post-structuralists. In the early work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, it became apparent by way of his analyses of the act of writing.[9] Writing is an act of representation. Upon trying to present itself in the medium of language, the subject always already re-presents itself. The medium of language is therefore precisely that—a medium, something that comes to stand in the middle between the subject and its self-presentation, thereby undermining its identity as excluded otherness. "Inasmuch as all presentation is representation, the subject's struggle to secure identity … inevitably fails. We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it."[10] This loss of immediacy, or loss of presence or loss of identity that is effected through representation, involves time as well as space. Upon representing itself, the subject is neither the same at a given moment (it is slightly removed in space), nor is it the same through time (it is slightly removed in time). Derrida names this *spacing* and *timing* of the subject that is effected by writing with the neologism *différance*. According to Derrida, *différance* is neither a word nor a concept; it is the nonoriginal origin of all differences and every identity.[11] *Différance* is always there. The subject always carries some 'otherness' in itself. There never was a time, nor is there a place where the subject is singularly true to itself. There is, in other words, no identity as excluded otherness.

This deconstruction of identity by emphasizing that difference is always already present has become very influential in contemporary intellectual circles. A provisional conclusion that may be drawn is that it will be necessary to speak in a careful and nuanced way about 'Christian identity.'

The question that now comes to mind is whether, and if so how, it would be possible to speak in an intellectually responsible way about identity in this culture of 'post-' and in an intellectual climate that continually tries to distance itself from all unifying so-called 'grand

---

[9] See for instance Derrida's well-know works: *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*.

[10] Taylor, *Erring*, 48 (quoting Gyatri Spivak's introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*).

[11] Mark Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 276.

narratives.' What emerges from the writings of Jacques Derrida and those who write along with him are words like 'dissemination,' 'trace,' 'lack,' and 'play.' Subjects 'are' relatively stable conglomerates that are weaved into an ever changing tapestry of meanings. Each subject is like a vessel for holding liquid, but with an indefinite number of outlets that allows its identity to flow away into other related and unrelated subjects in the tapestry. The meaning of a subject is continually disseminated towards other subjects, who are impregnated by it, and, in turn, also disseminate their identity so that there is nothing pure or absolute to be found whatsoever. Instead of trying to attain purity, unity, or identity in the sense of excluded otherness, it is suggested that we should make peace with the fact that it is never to be attained. We will always be lacking. We will always be wandering. This is not something to be disappointed about. We should rather let ourselves go in playfulness, in the creative ebb and flow of the tides of meaning that always reveals something new which is old; something old which is new. Mark Taylor formulates as follows:

> The disappearance of the self-identical individual, … is at the same time the appearance of the subject that is formed, deformed, and reformed by the eternal play of differences. The unstable players in this drama are not atomistic particulars or simple selves-in-and-for-themselves; rather, they are transitory 'points' of intersection and 'sites' of passage.[12]

Along with Derrida Taylor calls these transitory points of intersection and sites of passage *traces*. What is left of the ideal of a stable identity is but a trace. All subjects are traces. A trace is a mark of absence, not presence. A trace bears witness to an arrival and a departure: someone or something was here, but has moved on. Everything is fluid.

At a round table discussion at Villanova University in the USA that took place in 1994, Derrida was asked whether he thinks there is still place for unity and—by implication, identity—after deconstruction. Derrida answered that deconstruction does not mean that all forms of unity must be destroyed. Some unity, some gathering, is needed.[13] But he maintains that where unity and identity are privileged, responsibility, ethical decision making and politics become endangered. With this in mind, deconstruction insists on heterogeneity, difference, and disso-

---

[12] Taylor, *Altarity*, 137.
[13] The similarities and differences between the forces of gathering and the forces of dissemination at work in the symbolic world, and the forces of gathering and

ciation that is, according to it, absolutely necessary for the relation to the other.[14] Following Derrida and Levinas, among others, today the emphasis has shifted towards the recognition of the other as *other*.

The recognition of the other *as other* involves that the subject relates to the other in a non-violent way. It is a "relationless relation" in which the subject is completely open to that which comes to it from the other.[15] Derrida expounded this relationship with the other in terms of what he called the "messianic."[16] In contrast to historic 'messianisms' such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that adhere to specific beliefs, the messianic that Derrida proposes is really nothing more than an attitude of openness and waiting. It is an inviting way of being in the world; always saying "come" to the other—the new and the different.

Engaging the Question of Identity from a Post-Secular Perspective

We are now in a position to reconsider the central proposal of this paper as stated in the introduction; namely, that a simple exchange of emphasis from identity to difference is not very helpful. Identity as well as diversity/multiplicity are necessary. A state where there was to be only unity, and a state where there was to be only multiplicity would both be unthinkable. It would be synonymous with death.[17] Rather, the challenge is to find an intellectually and ethically responsible way to speak of identity *and* difference, as well as their coherence, in order to bring this to bear on the idea of Christian identity.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness among a number of theologians that the *cul de sac* in which the concept of identity seems to be trapped is related to the rise and dominance of an immanentist ontology.[18] A substantial amount of Christian thought that

---

dissemination at work in the physical world (cf. the laws of thermodynamics) may make for an interesting study.

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a nutshell*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 13.

[15] Derrida, *Nutshell*, 14.

[16] See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. Trans. P. Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), also John D. Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida* (Inidianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[17] Derrida, *Nutshell*, 13.

[18] I refer to the theologians associated with the 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement, notably John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock and David Bentley-Hart.

wishes to engage contemporary intellectual issues fails to take the secular presuppositions of modern as well as postmodern thought into account. The basic characteristic of this being a purely immanent view of reality, or—what amounts to the same thing—a belief in an absolutely transcendent God that has no relationship with the world and its affairs.

In opposition to this, it is argued that Christian thought must engage contemporary postmodern criticism from a *postsecular* perspective. The basic characteristic of this approach in its turn being the rediscovery and rethinking of a certain analogical worldview that under lied much of Christian theology until the late Middle Ages. The analogical worldview takes as its point of departure that there is a relationship between God and His creation. The whole of created being opens up to God and shows His presence.[19] There is an ontological interval between God as infinite being, and creation's finite being, that, nevertheless, allows creation to participate in the divine being. This is not a vulgar essentialist analogy that opens the door to some kind of natural theology, but is an attempt at intellectually understanding how it is that God, though always infinitely more, is nevertheless truly declared in creation.[20] Taking this analogical relation between God and His creation as its point of departure allows theology—and in fact all of human culture—to be understood as *epektasis*. This term, brought to prominence by the fourth century bishop Gregory of Nyssa, refers to the longing after and reaching out to the fullness of God and, in the process, experiencing the analogical interval between God and creation of which God Himself is the distance without, of course, epistemologically ever crossing that distance.[21] In propounding afresh such an analogical approach to reality, Bentley-Hart emphasizes that the focus should be on how analogy constitutes a true rhetorical style for Christian thought: creation in general, and human culture also in verbal form, should exist to show the beauty of God.

It is against this background that the notion of *deixis* and of a deictical interpretation of identity should be introduced, as it has a close affinity with analogy as thus understood in Christian theology.

---

[19] See Ward, *Cities*, 5 ff. for a discussion of creation as sign.
[20] David Bentley-Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 242.
[21] Bentley-Hart, *Beauty*, 301.

Introducing the Notion of 'deixis'

The word 'deixis' carries the meaning of making known by showing or pointing. Deictical terms in the English language are words like 'this,' 'that,' 'here,' 'there,' 'these,' 'those,' etc. These words are intimately connected with the speaking subject, and they situate the subject in a spatial and chronological context. In a discussion of deixis, the Dutch philosopher C.A. van Peursen mentions well-known attempts to disconnect language from the reality it refers to in order to create a perfectly logical language that would be applicable to all possible worlds.[22] Van Peursen, however, only mentions these attempts in order to distance himself from them, and to argue for the importance of the deictical dimension of language. Without explicitly mentioning it, he thus aligns himself with a postsecular approach as described in the previous section. An emphasis on deixis implies the recognition that the subject (and subjectivity in general) is inextricably entwined with its surroundings. Deixis is not something to be avoided; rather, deixis is the domain *par excellence* where 'language' and 'reality' meet. Put in other words: deixis, the act of pointing, is the domain where the self and its other meet.

Van Peursen proposes a relational approach to subjectivity and objectivity. The subject should neither logically nor ontologically be regarded as a self-contained, rounded-off unit.[23] Deconstructing identity as excluded otherness, and emphasizing difference, however, does not introduce a new way of viewing the subject—it merely reacts against a substantialized view. A relational approach—such as one emphasizing the role of deixis—proposes that subjectivity and objectivity bear upon each other in a complementary way, almost like a mold and its cast are interrelated. Subjectivity constitutes itself *within* its specific surroundings, and, conversely, the 'objective world' becomes profiled in contact with a specific subjectivity.[24]

---

[22] The best known attempt is probably that of G.W. Leibniz. Cf. C.A.van Peursen, *Verhaal en werkelijkheid—een deiktische ontologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), 61.

[23] Van Peursen talks about the dangers of substantializing subjectivity and objectivity (C.A. van Peursen, *Cultuur in stroomversnelling* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976), 71 ff.)

[24] Van Peursen here aligns himself with a certain approach of Edmund Husserl—that of disregarding questions of an independent objective reality, and focusing on the way phenomena appear to the subject.

Another way of introducing deixis would be by speaking of it as a functional approach to subjectivity.[25] Rather than to define a subject, and to establish exactly *what* it is and what it is not, the important question would be to ask *how* it exists; in other words, to be sensitive to its functioning in its surroundings. Along these lines the sometimes bizarre forms of life to be found in nature (frogs with red spots, for example, or plants with teeth) can be understood against the contexts in which they occur: functioning in such a way allows and helps them to exist within a specific ecosystem.

Van Peursen uses the metaphor of gravity in order to further describe this functional interaction between the subject and its other.[26] Gravity is the attracting force exerted by a piece of matter. The bigger the piece of matter (the bigger its mass) the bigger the attracting force exerted by it. Because the earth is much bigger than the moon, we are anchored firmly on the surface of the earth, and not pulled away towards the moon. By the same token, a subject's attention would be drawn towards the bigger or more important 'things' or 'events' in its surroundings, thereby foregoing other less important 'things' or 'events.' The subject gravitates toward the highlights in its field of experience, and functions in correspondence with it. Conversely, by looking at the way a subject manifests itself (the way it functions), certain conclusions could be drawn about its surroundings.

Let us finally try to explain the deictical approach to identity in terms of a simple geometrical example. If we assume 'identity'—in terms of excluded otherness—to be the x-axis of a Cartesian field, and 'difference' to be the y-axis, then we could say that this distinction is not enough. It remains two dimensional; it does not take into account the context of the relation between the subject and its other. What is needed is the introduction of another axis, the z-axis, which would be called 'function' or 'deixis.' It is when we introduce the notion of function that issues of identity and difference are 'pulled' into proportion.

---

[25] Van Peursen, *Cultuur*, 80 ff.
[26] Van Peursen, *Verhaal en werkelijkheid*, 163 ff.

Christian Identity from a Deictical Perspective

The above considerations may be applied fruitfully to the notion of Christian identity. The Bible, as the scriptural revelation of God, knows the identity of the people of God to be a relational identity. It is an identity born of the reconciled relation between man and God. God graciously calls—and man finds his being in answering; gravitating towards that call. From the perspective of human subjectivity, God's call forms the 'heaviest point' in our surroundings, and it is therefore towards this call that we are pulled. C.A. van Peursen speaks of the Divine Name which always breaks through the preconceived ideas about God and about ourselves as human beings.[27] The call does not well up out of ourselves—it comes from outside of us. And it is precisely because of that that we have a deictical identity—we are pointing to Someone outside of ourselves!

The history of Jacob in the book of Genesis is paradigmatic of this answering, pointing identity of the people of God.[28] Throughout his life, Jacob remains a foreigner in the land. He is never fully settled. He never finds rest in a self-enclosed comfort zone. And yet he is not a wanderer in the sense that the human condition is sometimes described today. He is not aimlessly caught up in the endless play of differences. He is always *en route*—traveling in obedience to the promise of God. He can never fully grasp this God, who will never be made into an object, but he can nevertheless follow the call—wherever it may lead. Jacob's identity lies in following the promise of God, and it is the same for Christians as the people of God today.

Is it not significant that one of the first designations of the followers of Christ in the New Testament is that they are "the people of the Way"?[29] Christians are people *en route*; they are finding their identity along the way. These last words, "along the way," of course, have a multilayered meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that Christian identity is a pointing, dynamic identity. A way/path implies some fixed parameters (the sides of the road), and yet the path is also always changing. Who knows what lies around the next bend? Traveling along a path is a dynamic activity that involves sameness as

---

[27] C.A. van Peursen, *De Naam die geschiedenis maakt* (Kampen: Kok, 1991), 41.

[28] Cf. the discussion of the history of Jacob in Walther Brueggemann, *Genesis*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 204 ff. Also: Van Peursen, *Naam*, 33.

[29] Cf. Acts 9:2 also Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

well as difference. Traveling or pilgrimage also implies a destination: we are going somewhere. This is the deictic character of our identity.

To be more specific: 'The Way' refers to Christ. As people of The Way we are pointing to God *in Christ* through the power of the Holy Spirit. The deictical gesture that shapes Christian identity is an act of listening and following. Once again: the call of God in Christ constitutes the heaviest point in our surroundings toward which our attention gravitates. Answering this call makes us pilgrims along the Way. We can never settle down in a comfort zone, and yet we are not aimless wanderers. We are not caught up in an endless play of differences. Pointing and showing does not mean grasping or appropriating. But it does enable us to move in one specific direction, and not in another direction.

Finally, it may be argued that liturgy in Christian worship is essentially a deictical gesture.[30] This is so because Christian liturgy and Christian life are inextricably bound together. It may even be stated that liturgy and life explicate each other. If the whole of life has a deictical character, pointing and gravitating towards God in Christ, then that holds the more so for liturgy as a focus and an intensifying of everyday life *coram Deo*. In liturgy, we pray to *this* God, who gives us life; we listen to *this* God, who reveals Himself; we celebrate the great deeds of *this* God. From where we are in time and space, from our context, we point to someone. This act binds us together with people all over the world who are pointing to that same God, even though the differences in context are also there. It is this pointing that pulls the sameness and the difference into proportion. It is in pointing, following, and gravitating that we find our identity.

Conclusion

In this paper I tried to show that the problematical nature of a specific philosophical conception of identity should be taken into account when speaking of Christian identity. It is the conception of identity as excluded otherness. This view of identity has been discredited in contemporary intellectual circles, or to use a more specific term, it has been deconstructed. Today many voices call for a celebration of difference:

---

[30] See also Catherine Pickstock, *After writing—on the liturgical consummation of philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

the subject does not have a stable identity; it is formed and reformed by the play of influences wherein it is caught, and this should not be cause for an unhappy consciousness. According to this view, justice demands openness to the other. While accepting the problems involved with identity as excluded otherness, and while appreciating sensitivity for difference and 'the other,' this paper nevertheless argues for another, 'analogical' view of identity. A deictical approach to identity is sensitive to the contextual situatedness of all subjectivity. It emphasizes that the subject points to that in its surroundings which draws its attention, and that it is in relation to these 'others' that its identity is formed. Applied to the notion of Christian identity, a deictical approach emphasizes the relational character of the Christian faith. Christians find their identity in following the call of God in Christ. In this posture of following, issues of sameness and difference may be pulled into appropriate proportion.

PART TWO

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND THE
IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

CONFESSIONALITY AND IDENTITY OF
THE CHURCH—A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

Conrad Wethmar

Introduction

Whenever the church is confronted by a substantial change in cultural context, the question regarding the identity of Christianity becomes urgent. It is therefore understandable that when the European Enlightenment drastically changed the traditional life and worldview in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the well-known quest for the essence of Christianity developed that found its most eloquent expression in Adolf van Harnack's, *Das Wesen des Christentums*.[1] And when the first tremors of the spiritual earthquake started registering—of which the cultural Richter Scale reading is yet undisclosed and which caused the unsettled confusion that, up to this point in time, could not be adequately described, for which reason it has to be indicated by the indistinct and open ended term postmodernism—Jürgen Moltmann launched his often quoted analysis of the identity—involvement dilemma as characteristic of the theology of the second half of the twentieth century.[2] These two examples should suffice to indicate that the question regarding the identity of Christianity and the church, which currently receives so much emphasis, is not new. It is in fact as old as the Christian church itself.

In the earliest phase of its development, the church was first confronted by the complexities and controversies generated by its relationship to Jewish orthodoxy and then by those stemming from its Greek and Roman contexts.[3] The same type of problem repeatedly reoc-

---

[1] Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (München und Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch, 1964), 8.

[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1972), 12–33.

[3] Joachim Gnilka, *Die frühen Christen. Ursprünge und Anfang der Kirche* (Freiburg–Basel-Wien: Herder, 1999), 318–341.

curred as the church moved into one unreached continent after the other.[4]

It soon became clear that in order to obtain an adequate understanding of the church a distinction should be made between the nature of the church and its historical manifestations. The development of different manifestations elicited the question as to the real nature of the church. In an attempt to answer this question, it became equally evident that nature and manifestation of the church could not be totally separated while, at the same time, it was also impossible to regard them as identical.

At the basis of all historical manifestations of the church there is an essence that does not exist as an isolated platonic idea, as it were, but which exists in and through its constantly changing historical forms. If nature and historical manifestations of the church are separated, it becomes impossible to deal with concrete and specific problems of the church as one is exclusively occupied with its abstract and theoretical nature. If however, on the other hand, essence and historical forms are equated, one lacks a criterion in terms of which the ecclesiality and identity of a particular manifestation of the church can be determined. Because of the fact that the church is made up of limited and sinful human beings as its members, no single manifestation of the church can ever be a perfect and exhaustive reflection of its essence. The identity of the church exists in its diversity.[5]

In an attempt to answer the question what this identity entails, an important dimension in the existence of the church that should be noted is that the church is an object of faith.[6] An adequate description of what the church is, therefore, cannot—in the first place—be given on the basis of empirical observation, but only in terms of one's faith in God. This is indicated by the fact that the church is included in the creeds of the church, the Apostle's Creed being an obvious case in point. One should, however, carefully take cognizance of the manner in which the church is spoken of here. The manner in which the Triune God is the object of faith differs from the manner in which the church is that. This is delicately indicated by consistently using the

---

[4] Hans Küng, *Die Kirche* (Freiburg–Basel-Wien: Herder, 1967), 17–26.

[5] Küng, *Kirche*, 13–16.

[6] Küng, *Kirche*, 44–49; C. Schwöbel, "The creature of the word: recovering the ecclesiology of the Reformers," in C.E. Gunton and D.W. Hardy (eds), *On being the church. Essays on Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1989), 131.

preposition 'in' when reference is made to God in his threefold reality as Father, Son, and Spirit, while that is not the case when the church is referred to. The implication is that the church is not, as is the case with the Triune God, the object of infinite trust and admiration. Believing the church means that Christians acknowledge the church in spite of its faults and deficiencies, and involve themselves in it as the field of activity of the Spirit of Christ.[7]

Being the object of faith does not only mean that the church is acknowledged in and through faith, but also that the church originates in and through the decision and confession of faith. Confessionality reflects the manner in which the church exists. If this is the case, one would expect to gain a deeper insight in what the identity of the church is by carefully studying the phenomenon of confessionality. In this paper I would like to do so by first investigating the earliest Christian confessions in the New Testament, and then by studying the implications that the application of the term *dogma* had for the structure of the confessionality of the church. As the term *dogma* is often associated with Roman Catholic theology, the question must also be answered what the ecclesiological implications of a Reformed conceptualization of confessionality are.

The Earliest Christian Confessions

A close study of the New Testament reveals the presence of what has been called *praesymbola* or prefigurations of doctrinal expressions. These *praesymbola* take on the form of fixed formulas that can be identified by a number of exegetical procedures. Quite often the presence of technical terms as *paralambanein, paradidonai, homologein* and *pisteuein* may be indicative of the occurrence of such formulas. In other cases, formulations that do not seem to fit well into a specific grammatical construction or even into the relevant context might reveal the presence of such a doctrinal formulation. Research on the *praesymbola* reflects a consensus on the validity of these criteria in the identification of these prefigurations of doctrinal formulations.[8]

---

[7] *Wolfhart Pannenberg, Das Glaubensbekenntnis ausgelegt und verantwortet vor den Fragen der Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch, 1972), 152.

[8] Conrad Wethmar, *Dogma en verstaanshorison. 'n Histories-sistematiese ondersoek in verband*

A further important result of this research is the insight that these *praesymbola* functioned in a variety of contexts, of which the most important were baptism, the liturgy of the worship service, situations of persecution, as well as in situations where heresies had to be opposed. A reference to the latter two will suffice to give an indication of what I have in mind.

Let me first refer to situations of persecution. The early church lived in a context of Roman imperial rule. This was a situation in which total loyalty to the Roman emperor was demanded. This loyalty had to be expressed in the formula *kurios kaisar*. Christians were unable to agree with this because they had only one final loyalty and that was to Christ. And when they were persecuted for this, as often happened, they held on to their conviction by merely expressing the confession *kurios Jesus*. Jesus is Lord and nobody else.[9]

The second instance of a context in which the earliest Christian confessions functioned was that of heresy. The first letter of John provides a clear example in this regard.[10] In the very first verse of this letter, John refers to Jesus as the One whom we have seen, whom we have heard, and whom we have touched with our hands. Why does John write in this manner? He does so because the people he is writing to are threatened by the heresy of Gnosticism. According to this heresy, everything related to human embodiment is evil. It was therefore inconceivable to the Gnosticists that Jesus could have had a human body and could have died on the cross. In order to oppose the views of the Gnosticists, John repeatedly, in a specific manner, uses the fixed doctrinal formulas that we have come to see as the earliest Christian confessions. Whenever he uses the fixed expression that Jesus is the Christ, this confession is extended with the phrase "he who came in the flesh" (1 John 4,2–3). Through this development an established confession is used to combat heresy.

We have made a few remarks about the criteria, contexts, and functions of the *praesymbola* or preliminary doctrinal formulations that can be found in the New Testament. But what do they look like? Research into this material gradually developed a consensus that, with refer-

---

met die hermeneutiese funksie van die kerklike dogma met besondere verwysing na die teologie van Gerhard Ebeling. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1977), 49–65.

[9] Vernon Neufeld, *The earliest Christian confessions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963), 63.

[10] Klaus Wengst, *Häresie und Orthodoxie im Spiegel des ersten Johannesbriefes* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1976), 64.

ence to a text like Romans 10:9, the earliest Christian confessions can be divided into two main categories.[11] To understand the distinction between these categories one should look carefully at this text which says: "If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." On the basis of this distinction between the phrases *confess* with the mouth and *believe* with the heart, scholars began distinguishing between two categories of confessions. These categories were called *homologia* and *credo*—referring to the original Greek words for confess and believe respectively. The term *homologia* is indicative not of the content of faith, but of faith as a deed or an act. This category of confession or doctrine mainly consists of ascribing a specific title to Jesus. Examples of these are calling Jesus Christ 'Lord' or 'Son of God.' In this aspect of Christian confession, the emphasis is not on the content of Christian faith, but rather on confession as an act. This dimension of Christian confession is best illustrated by referring to the first Christian confession described in Matthew 16. In this text Jesus asks his disciples who the people say that he is. They responded by mentioning the various theories that people had in this regard. This theoretical approach was obviously not the right mode of speaking about Jesus because it prompted his next question. "But what about you, who do you say I am?" The Christian faith is not merely theoretical talk without any obligation. Faith requires a commitment and a decision. And this is what happens when Peter, on behalf of the disciples, responds to the question of Jesus. Peter answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of God." Peter commits his life to the one who is not merely a prophet, but God himself. But one should realize that a commitment like this is not one without responsibility. Peter discovered this when Jesus had to appear before the high priest (Matthew 26:70). According to the gospel, a servant girl at this occasion asked Peter whether he was with Jesus. Peter denied Jesus saying that he did not know him. Denial is the exact opposite of confession. Peter discovered that confessing Jesus as Lord and Christ can be very costly. It can cost one one's life.

The first dimension of a Christian confession emphasized by Romans 10:9, therefore, is confession as enactment of Christian faith; as decision and commitment. This implies that a confession is much more than merely having a theory about Jesus or simply knowing something

---

[11] Hans Conzelman, "Was glaubte die frühe Christenheit?" in Idem, *Theologie als Schriftauslegung* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1974), 106–119, esp. 109.

about God. And as such, it is more than a mere human act. A real confession of faith is a spiritual event. Therefore the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12: 3 that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Where Jesus is confessed as Lord, there the Holy Spirit is working. And where the Holy Spirit works, there Jesus is confessed as Lord.

But the second dimension of a Christian confession that can be identified in the light of Romans 10:9 and that had been indicated above by the term *credo* is that it provides a description of the saving work of Christ as content of the Christian faith, and as the basis of a commitment to Christ.

This distinction between *homologia* and *credo*, between a statement of commitment and a statement of content that was made with reference to an interpretation of Romans 10:9, proved to be applicable not only to the preliminary doctrinal material that can be found in the New Testament, but also to later doctrinal statements. The Apostle's Creed is a good example in this regard. A close study of this creed indicates that it also reflects this combination of a statement of commitment and a statement of content.

The discovery of this basic distinction in the preliminary doctrinal material of the New Testament, as well as in subsequent doctrinal statements, was an important step in the development of the insight that doctrine or dogma is a complex and integrative concept that brings together a number of elements in a greater whole. This view was further developed and refined by the German theologian Edmund Schlink who made an influential analysis of what he calls the basic forms of theological statements.[12] He emphasizes that the way in which the Christian faith is articulated in the New Testament five basic forms or structural elements can be detected, and these are prayer, doxology, witness, doctrine, and confession. The basic thrust of his argument, in this regard, is that when the Christian faith is articulated in subsequent creeds and doctrines, all these basic forms should simultaneously be present. If one or more of these structural elements are either overemphasized or neglected, the result is that the content of faith is inadequately formulated.

---

[12] Edmund Schlink, "Die Struktur der dogmatischen Aussage als ökumenisches Problem," in Idem, *Der kommende Christus und die kirchlichen Traditionen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1961), 24–79, esp. 36.

Such an inadequate rendering of the Christian faith is a constant danger for the church. How this can happen can be clearly illustrated if one studies the application of the term 'dogma' to the confessionality of the church.

From Confession to Dogma

Dogma was originally a Greek noun derived from the verb *dokei* that in classical Greek already had the twofold meaning of opinion, on the one hand, and decision, on the other. During the Hellenistic period, each of these two connotations of the word 'dogma' developed focused technical meanings.[13]

In the first instance, dogma, in the sense of opinion, developed the further connotation of philosophical view or doctrine. Initially, it specifically referred to the philosophical doctrine of stoicism, but later was used as a term referring to a philosophical theory in general. Gradually, the early Christian apologists started using the term 'dogma' in this sense as indicative of Christian doctrine.[14] A remarkable peculiarity that can be noted in conjunction with the development that I have just referred to is that the Greek word for a theological school or tradition was *hairesis*, a word from which the word heresy in modern languages is derived. And since a philosophical school and the theories or doctrines that it represents are usually identified with each other, one faces the remarkable and ironic fact that in the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era the words 'dogma' and 'heresy' often appeared as synonyms in Greek usage.

A further dimension associated with the idea of dogma as referring to a philosophical theory or tradition, that one should take note of, is that of systematic coherence.[15] This is implied by the fact, for example, that when authors like Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea use the term

---

[13] Josef Nolte, *Dogma in Geschichte. Versuch einer Kritik des Dogmatismus in der Glaubensdarstellung* (Freiburg–Basel-Wien: Herder, 1971); Georg Söll, *Dogma und Dogmenentwicklung* (Freiburg–Basel-Wien: Herder, 1971), 25.

[14] Nolte, *Dogma in Geschichte*, 26.

[15] Martin Elze, "Der Begriff des Dogmas in der Alten Kirche," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 61 (1964): 421–438, esp. 425; Colin Gunton, "Dogma, the church and the task of theology," in Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regan (eds), *The task of theology today* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1999), 1–22, esp. 21.

'dogma' as a singular noun, they in fact intend to refer to the totality of Christian doctrines that are related to each other in a diversity of ways and impact on each other.

To give one further illustration of the complexity of the notion of dogma, one could refer to the fact that by the middle of the fourth century Basil of Caesarea uses the term dogma not to indicate the public doctrine of the church, but rather, its mystic tradition enacted in the sacramental rituals of the church.[16]

This first aspect of the word 'dogma' that refers to opinion, philosophical theory, or even mystic tradition gradually developed such a subjectivistic connotation that it was no longer regarded as suitable to give expression to the normative doctrine of the church. For this reason, the term 'dogma' was no longer used in church and theological circles since the fifth century. In its place other terms were used to describe the official doctrine of the church. Examples that can be mentioned in this regard are terms such as *regula fidei*, *articulus fidei*, or *veritas*.[17]

As I have already indicated, the Greek term 'dogma' originally had a second meaning; namely, that of decision. Perhaps one could say that apart from a subjectivistic connotation it also had an objectivistic one. During the Hellenistic period, the term 'dogma' with the meaning of decision became the technical term denoting a decision taken by the state or its representative. The implication of this development was that the term 'dogma' acquired a predominantly legal connotation. What is furthermore important to take note of is that in the New Testament the term 'dogma' functions in this way. Of the six times that the term 'dogma' appears in the New Testament, it refers three times to an official commandment of the emperor (Luke 2:1; Acts 17:7 and Heb. 11:23), twice to the regulations of the Jewish law (Eph 2:15; Col. 2:14), and once to the decisions of the meeting of apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 16:4). This tendency continued and received special emphasis when Christianity became the official state religion in the Constantinian era. This meant that the doctrinal decisions of the church were accorded the authority of the laws of the state. I shall discuss what the theological implications of this development were later in this paper.

I have already indicated that since the fifth century of the Christian era the term 'dogma' was no longer used to refer to the normative doctrine of the church. This happened because of the stigma of subjec-

---

[16] Elze, *Begriff*, 432.
[17] Wethmar, *Dogma*, 118–127.

tivism that became attached to this word. We have, on the other hand, also seen that at present the terms 'dogma' and 'dogmatics' continue to play a role in theological discussions. This raises the question how the term 'dogma' became reintroduced into the theological tradition. To answer this question, one has to refer to a small but famous book by the fifth century theologian Vincentius of Lerinum. The main achievement of this book was the clear definition of catholicity that it provided. This definition could also be regarded as giving an accurate description of what a dogma is. The famous formulation that Vincentius used in this regard was the well-known phrase, *id quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*.[18] This can be translated as meaning that a valid Christian conviction is one that has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. This implies that the criteria according to which a dogma of the church can be identified are universality, antiquity, and consensus. A conviction that complies with these criteria can be regarded as a deposit of faith that has been entrusted to the church. It was the intention of Vincentius' book to defend this deposit of faith against the innovations of heretics. In this respect, he therefore emphasized that one should say the old things in new ways, but that one is not allowed to say new things (*nove dicere sed non nova*).[19]

The book of Vincentius did not receive much attention in the fifth century when it was written. Only during the sixteenth century, when the Roman Catholic Church regarded his views as opportune in their defense against what they regarded as the impermissible innovations of the Reformation, did Vincentius' book become popular. This was the case to such an extent that during the sixteenth century alone thirty-five editions and twenty-two translations of the *Commonitorium*, as this book was called, were published. Through the increased influence of this book, as well as through the increased respect for the classical Greek language that developed during the renaissance period in Europe, the word 'dogma' started to be used more frequently in church and theological contexts. In theological controversies between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism during the post-Reformation period, the term 'dogma' gradually took on the meaning of doctrine that has officially been declared by a church as having been revealed by God. This meaning was formally endorsed by the first Vatican Council in 1870 when the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope was also promul-

---

[18] Vincentius Lerinensis, *Commonitorium* 2/3.
[19] Vincentius Lerinensis, *Commonitorium* 22/27.

gated.[20] When this notion of dogma is combined with the idea of infallibility, the result could be a legalistic and authoritarian approach to church doctrine. That this was not merely a theoretical option but was regularly applied in practice can be demonstrated with reference to the manner in which the modernist crisis was dealt with in the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907), the *théologie nouvelle* in the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), and the postmodernist crisis in documents like *Donum veritatis* (1989) and *Ad tuendam fidem* (1998). When I mention these documents, I do not imply that an authoritarian and legalistic approach is only restricted to the church in which they originated.

It can occur in any church and constitutes one of the two serious reductions in the church's response to the Word of God that gradually developed. The other, of course, was the over-exposure of the intellectual dimension of faith.

In concluding this survey of the implications that the term 'dogma' had for the development of the notion of confessionality, I would briefly like to outline these two reductions—both of which had already been suggested by the twofold meaning of theory and law that the relevant term has.

The first reduction that we took note of is the doctrinal or intellectual element overshadowing the other dimensions of faith. This development became clearly visible in the fifth century of the Christian era. This can be illustrated with reference to the introductory terminology used in various creeds. The Apostolic, Nicean, and Athanasian creeds still commenced with the words "we believe" and were regularly used in a liturgical context. By the middle of the fifth century, however, the Chalcedonian creed was introduced not with the phrase "we believe," but with the words "we teach that one should confess." These words indicate that the emphasis moved from an integral faith approach to the intellectual element. Faith now tends to be reduced to a mere theory with the result that the doxological and existential dimensions of faith became neglected.

The second reduction of the comprehensive Christian faith that one can detect in early church history is related to an overemphasis of the legal element in faith. This development became especially clear for the first time during the Constantinian era when Christianity became a state religion. This implies that the tenets of faith became propagated

---

[20] Walter Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes*, Matthias Grünewald, 1965.

with the authority of the laws of the state. When this happens, the resulting faith is no longer a comprehensive spiritual and existential event, but is being reduced to formal obedience.[21] This tendency was further strengthened and deepened by another influential development that began with the Alexandrian theology of Origen and Clement, and then dominated the medieval interpretation of Holy Scripture. This was the idea that the Bible was in itself an obscure book that could only be interpreted by church officials. Salvation could only be received by gaining access to the sacraments of the church, and the precondition for this was absolute obedience to the church. Faith was reduced and restricted to obedience, and dogma transformed to a legal obligation. And as we have seen, this is a development that persists up to this very day.

It would be obvious that these reductions would not only have a negative effect on a believer's personal life of faith as a free, joyous, and spontaneous response to the gospel, but that, in the long run, it could also jeopardize the true identity of the church as agent of the gospel. It was with a view to this kind of crisis that the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation suggested a solution—the implications of which are still worthwhile considering.

Reformation and Confession

The Reformers realized that the twofold reduction of faith, the intellectual and the legal, presupposed the basic conviction about God as being of such a metaphysically remote nature that ordinary believers do not have any access to Him. His presence had to be mediated by the speculations and sacramental practices of the church. In this context, Holy Scripture is regarded as *philosophia coelestis* and *lex Christi* and, in fact, as an obscure document.[22].

The Reformation came about through the rediscovery of the fact that humans cannot reach God of their own accord. God can only be reached because He reached them first. For the Reformers, God is not

---

[21] H.W. Rossouw, "Doksologie, ortodoksie, ekumene," in J. Bakker (ed), *Septuagesimo anno. Theologische opstellen aangeboden aan Prof Dr G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 1973), 203–212, esp. 204.

[22] Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums, Erster Band* (München: C.H. Beck, 1965), 157.

an abstract reality, a *deus absconditus*, but the Triune God who revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ, the *deus revelatus*.[23]

This insight was initiated by Luther's well-known *Turmerlebnis*, in which he dramatically became aware that the righteousness of God is not an abstract attribute with which humans had to comply in order to reach salvation, but that it is indicative of the fact that God supplied justification to us through the redemptive work of Christ.[24] If this is the basic message of scripture, it means that scripture is not, in the first place, law—but gospel, good news. And the appropriate response to good news is not abstract speculation or formal obedience, but faith.

Luther's discovery of what the righteousness of God means was an exegetical breakthrough in the interpretation of Romans 1:17 that had profound hermeneutical implications of a general theological nature. These implications were spelled out in the Reformed doctrine of the clarity of scripture that provided a succinct explanation of the well-known *particulae exclusivae sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia and solo Christo*.[25]

This doctrine distinguishes between the external and internal clarity of scripture.[26] The external clarity implies that the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ is clearly and unambiguously articulated in Holy Scripture by the proclamation of which God creates His church. As such, the biblical message does not only function as a set of propositions, but mainly as a personally directed promise and appeal. The internal clarity of scripture refers to the fact that the Holy Spirit confirms to the believer the truth of the gospel of Christ, witnessed to by the external clarity of scripture. The clarity of scripture can, therefore, be articulated by believers in clear propositions for which they can take responsibility. Scripture as Word of God has a dogmatic quality.[27] Therefore, Luther was able to admonish Erasmus that if one rejects the clearly established propositions or assertions of faith, then one, in fact, abolished Christianity as such: *tolle assertiones et Christianismum tulisti*.[28]

---

[23] J.T. Bakker, *Coram Deo. Bijdrage tot het onderzoek naar de structuur van Luthers theologie,* (Kampen: Kok, 1956), 167.

[24] Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought. An Introduction.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 95.

[25] H.W. Rossouw, *Klaarheid en Interpretasie. Enkele probleemhistoriese gesigspunte in verband met die leer van die duidelikheid van die Heilige Skrif,* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963), 159.

[26] C. Schwöbel, *Creature*, 123.

[27] Karl Gerhard Steck, *Undogmatisches Christentum?* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1955), 36.

[28] M. Luther, *De servo arbitrio* (1525), in WA 18, 603.

This view of Holy Scripture inspired the restoration of the original, biblical notion of confessionality. The appropriate response to a personally directed message and promise is not only neutral acknowledgement of the content of such a message, but personally involved and committed acceptance. A kerugmatic appeal calls for a homological response. The Word of God is only fully understood when it is confessionally and doxologically accepted as the final truth for one's own existence.

In this process, the full spectrum of morphological elements that characterized the earliest Christian confessions were revitalized, and, especially, the existential dimension restored. It furthermore became clear that a confession is not something which a church has, but that confessionality belongs to its existence. Confessionality is one of the dimensions in the life of the church as creature of the Word. Confessions are not adhered to because they are prescribed by some ecclesiastical authority. They are, in fact, the enactment of the clarity of scripture in different cultural contexts. For this reason, consensus in the church develops on the basis of a common submission to scripture and does not function as a formal authority as was suggested by Vincentius of Lerinum. The question is not whether there is agreement, but what the agreement is all about. And similarly, antiquity, as such, is not a decisive criterion for the validity of doctrine as Vincentius thought. Traditional views are only valid if they comply with biblical teaching.

Confessionality and Identity

In conclusion, we could now make an attempt to ascertain what the ecclesiological implications are of a notion of confessionality that complies with the basic motives of Reformed thinking. In order to do this, one should keep in mind that the Reformed idea of the church developed on the basis of the doctrine of the clarity of scripture.[29] In terms of this doctrine, it would be possible to identify three dimensions in which the clarity of scripture manifests itself. These could be called the dimensions of truth, promise, and fulfilment.[30] What this basically means is that in biblical proclamation people are told who God is and what He did for their salvation. This is, however, not only a communica-

---

[29] Schwöbel, *Creature*, 122.
[30] Rossouw, *Klaarheid*, 166.

tion of facts, but the expression of promises that change their lives. The Holy Spirit confirms these promises and leads them to acceptance of it and to a life of dedication to God. On this basis, believers are able to articulate their faith in definite propositions of faith. These propositions reflect three dimensions of faith that correspond to the three dimensions that had been identified in the clarity of scripture. These dimensions are knowledge, trust, and obedience. The authoritative expression of these three dimensions in the confessions of the church therefore displays orthodoxy, orthopathos, and orthopraxis. This explains why a Reformed confession such as the Heidelberg Catechism contains an exposition of the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Reformed confessionality, therefore, does not merely contain an intellectual rendering of the knowledge of faith, but also the dimensions of spirituality and morality. It is vitally important, of course, that these dimensions remain integrated with one another, and that one does not become isolated from the other.

All these dimensions together constitute the basic doxological nature of Reformed confessionality that, in the last resort, is nothing else than the expression of the praise of God as the response of faith to the Word of God in which He revealed his glory to humankind.[31] It would therefore be clear that the morphological totality and integrity that were characteristic of the earliest Christian confessions are restored and revitalized in the Reformed notion of confessionality.

This restoration of a comprehensive notion of confessionality in the Reformed tradition leads to the well-known identification of the marks of the true church as being the pure proclamation of the gospel, the faithful administration of the sacraments, and the proper application of church discipline. And to emphasize the fact that in Reformed confessionality orthodoxy should not be isolated from orthopraxis, the Belgic Confession, for example, combines the marks of the true church with the marks of the true members of the church, which include receiving Christ as the only Savior, avoiding sin, following after righteousness, loving God and neighbour, and crucifying the flesh and the works thereof. In this way, the Reformed notion of the confessionality of the church has a very definite bearing on determining the identity of the church. And I would suggest that if one had to point to a feature that is characteristic of the Reformed tradition and that could be regarded

---

[31] Rossouw, *Doksologie*, 204.

as the contribution that this tradition could make to the ecumenical church, it would probably be the balanced interaction between doctrine, spirituality, and morality.

Formulated in this way, it may all sound very triumphalistic and self-assured. Such an attitude will, however, be totally alien to the true spirit of Reformed confessionality. The basic thrust of this tradition, in fact, points in exactly the opposite direction. It therefore emphasizes that, because of the sinful nature of human beings and the limitations of their historical existence, a particular confession of faith is always both final and preliminary.[32] Final in the sense that a vital life giving relationship between the believer and God has come about. Preliminary in the sense that one is always limited by the context of time and place in which one lives. Reformed confessions are always formulated *in tempore et in loco*, and therefore are only provisional approximations of the final truth. This implies that they are in principle open to correction in the light of scripture. One of the ways in which such a correction can take place is by means of a dialectical process of dialogue between churches in which orthodoxy is established as dialogical orthodoxy.[33] The implication of this is that confessional identity in the Reformed tradition remains a dynamic reality. This remains the ever-relevant significance of the well-known adage *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.

However, the most important implication that a recovery of the often forgotten heritage of Reformed confessionality has for the at present—often heavily disputed—identity of the church is that its confessional nature emphasizes the fact that it exists in response to and as creation of the Word of God. This implies that the church should not really be so frantically preoccupied with preserving its own identity. The true identity of the church will, in every time and place, be protected and created anew by the Word of God. "The true church should find orientation and consolation in the promise that it will remain a true community of witness as long as it remains a community of true witness."[34]

---

[32] Wilfried Joest, "Endgültigkeit und Unabgeschlossenheit des Dogmas" *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 79(1954): 435–440.

[33] Walter Kasper, *Einführung in den Glauben*, (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1972), 131.

[34] C. Schwöbel, *Creature*, 154.

CONFESSING THE FAITH
AND CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

Alan P.F. Sell

To the puzzlement (real or pretended) of some of our dialogue part-
ners of other ecclesiastical traditions, the Reformed family has spawned
not one but many confessions of faith. More than sixty such docu-
ments were devised during the sixteenth century, and the high degree
of mutual consistency between them is a tribute to those theologians
who energetically commuted between the Reformed centers of Europe
and corresponded with one another in Latin, the language common
to scholars of the time. The Reformed are not alone in having pro-
duced numerous confessions of faith: the Baptists, for example, were
not dilatory in this matter.[1] It is more than likely, however, that more
such documents have emerged from Reformed circles during the past
century than from any other quarter.[2]

Confessions of faith embody doctrinal propositions that their authors
hold to be true. At their best they achieve clarity, and there is much
to be said for this. They are, moreover, corporate affirmations; they
announce the things 'commonly believed among us.' Again, they are,
in the language of J.L. Austin, performative statements, for confessing
is something that we do. Thus sentences beginning, "I/We believe
…" are in the same category as sentences beginning, "I/We promise
…" Confessions of faith also serve as doctrinal boundary-markers both
explicitly, as when they counter the claims of Rome, for example, and
implicitly, as when they do not affirm universalism or Arminianism.
We might say that, like the Chalcedonian Formula of 451 with its four
famous adverbs denying Arianism, docetism, and the like, confessions
of faith erect doctrinal road blocks against untoward doctrines. As
P.T. Forsyth observed, "There must surely be in every positive religion

---

[1] See William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959, rev. edn 1969).

[2] Some of these are to be found in Lukas Vischer, ed., *Reformed Witness Today. A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches* (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1982).

some point where it may so change as to lose its identity and become another religion."[3] At the same time, Forsyth elsewhere reminds us that "Revelation did not come in a statement, but in a person;" but he immediately adds, "Faith … must be capable of statement, else it could not be spread; for it is not an ineffable, incommunicable mysticism."[4] In all of this we see both of the importance of doctrinal affirmation and are cautioned against elevating our confessional statements that are, at most, subordinate standards, above the One to whom they bear witness. If we forget that confessions of faith are subordinate, we are on the way to idolatry; if we forget that they are standards, heresy may beckon.

Before proceeding further, I wish to state something which is so obvious that only the most hard-line and blinkered of confessional purists would overlook it: formal confessions of faith are not the only means by which the Reformed have made, and continue to make, corporate confessional affirmations. For example, I have argued that the English Congregational branch of the Reformed family probably developed more ways of corporately confessing the faith than any other strand of our tradition.[5] In addition to their Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658) and subsequent documents,[6] they sang their faith in the words of their pioneer hymns writers—Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, and others; they identified with the corporate confession when 'giving in' their experience at their local church meeting prior to their reception as communicant members; they heard rehearsals of the orthodox faith in the personal confessions their ministers were required to produce at ordination and induction services; and they signed the locally devised covenant.

---

[3] P.T. Forsyth (hereinafter referred to as PTF), *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society*, (1913), (London: Independent Press, 1952), 219. Forsyth (1848–1921) served five pastorates over a period of twenty-five years, and was Principal of Hackney [Congregational] College from 1901 until his death. Strongly emphasizing the centrality of the Cross, he was, in my opinion, the most stimulating British theologian of the twentieth century. See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), chs 7 and 8; idem, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

[4] PTF, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, (1909), (London: Independent Press, 1961), 15. Cf. idem, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, (1912), (London: Independent Press, 1955), 239.

[5] See Alan P.F. Sell, *Dissenting Thought and the Life of the Churches. Studies in an English Tradition*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), ch. 1.

[6] For which see Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, (1893), (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960); *Reformed Witness Today*, 109–161.

The phrase 'locally devised' reminds us that these covenants were frequently contextually influenced. For example, that of Angel Street Congregational Church, Worcester, the scene of my second pastorate, was written in 1687, and it is unusually strongly Trinitarian in doctrine.[7] Why? Because already in that district some of the Presbyterian brethren were flirting with 'Arianism.' A moral question, rather than a doctrinal one, was of concern to the saints at the seaside town of Ramsgate. In 1767 they wished to call the Reverend David Bradberry to be their minister. He had been converted under the preaching of George Whitefield, and he said that he would accept the pastorate only if a strictly Calvinistic covenant were devised. The Church Meeting promptly set about agreeing such a statement. It comprised nine clauses, of which the first eight were Calvinistic, while the ninth, clearly contextually-inspired, denounced "the infamous practice of smuggling" as contrary to civil law and God's word. The very next year Church Meeting gathered again to rescind clause nine because it had only served to encourage deception and hypocrisy![8] In 1786 the villagers of Bluntisham, relying upon God's grace, covenanted, among other things, "not to countenance the works of darkness such as Adultery, Fornication, Uncleanness, Murder, Drunkenness and such like. And not to frequent public places of amusement such as Horse-racing, Playhouses, Dancing, Card-playing, Gaming, nor to frequent Ale-houses …" but rather to "come out from amongst them, and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but reprove them."[9]

But if such local covenants were, to a greater or lesser degree, contextually-inspired and diverse as to their contents, so were more widely-owned Reformed confessions. This is precisely what we should expect, given that in the first instance confessions of faith are not texts for later students to ponder, they are acts of confessing by Christian communities in particular times and places. We hear the Gospel and confess the faith where God has placed us, or not at all. But this means that confessional documents are necessarily time-bound, and this can raise problems for subsequent confessors.[10] There are the related issues of method, content and use. I shall examine each of these in turn.

---

[7] See John Noake, *Worcester Sects; or A History of the Roman Catholics & Dissenters of Worcester* (London: Longman), 1861, 111–114.

[8] See Alan G. Hurd, *These Three Hundred Years* (Ramsgate, [1962]), 4.

[9] See R.W. Dixon, *A Century of Village Nonconformity … 1787 to 1887* (London: Samuel Harris, 1887), 157.

[10] See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Aspects of Christian Integrity*, (1990), (Eugene, OR: Wipf

Method

As to method, we may reflect upon the starting-points of a selection of Reformed confessions. Thus, for example, the authors of the *First Confession of Basel* (1534) set out from a strong statement of belief in the holy Trinity, as do *The Confession of the English Congregation in Geneva* (1556) and the *Scots Confession* (1560). By contrast, the *Second Basel Confession*, published in 1536, only two years after the first, begins with Holy Scripture and, when it finally comes, in its sixth clause, to God, it omits reference to the Holy Spirit. The *Geneva Confession* (1536) opens with a brief paragraph on the Bible, proceeds to God as our only Saviour, comes in paragraphs six and seven to Jesus, and in paragraph eight to the Holy Spirit as regenerator (only). All of which is to say that there is not a strong trinitarian claim here; rather, the trinitarian position is reached by a process of induction. The *French Confession* (1559) opens with a list of God's communicable and incommunicable attributes, but there follow four further paragraphs before we reach the Trinity, and a similar pattern is adopted in the *Belgic Confession* (1561, revised 1619). The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) does not begin from God as such, but from a confession of belief in the Scriptures as his Word, and comes to the Trinity in chapter three.[11] This procedure is followed in the *Westminster Confession* (1647) in which, as I have elsewhere pointed out,[12] we have to wait for the eight lines on the triune God until we have waded through ten paragraphs on the Bible, including a list of all the biblical books, and two paragraphs on the attributes of God. Clearly, the methods adopted by the authors of a number of classical Reformed confessions were influenced by medieval discussions of the divine attributes and/or by their Reformation context in which the openness to God's authoritative Word took precedence over any ecclesiastical authoritarianisms.

We may nevertheless ask whether we should necessarily remain content with a pattern in which scholastic lists of attributes, or convictions

---

& Stock), 1998, pp. 88–92; idem, *Confessing and Commending the Faith. Historic Witness and Apologetic Method* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002; rerinted Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 27–29.

[11] For the confessions so far mentioned in this paragraph see Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 1966.

[12] Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel. Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550–2000* (Carlisle: Paternoster 2005), pp. 163–164. This *Confession* has been reprinted numerous times.

concerning the Book precede convictions concerning the triune God's grace. The underlying issue is the degree to which the classical confessions are intended as testimonies of faith (*fiducia*) or as mini-systematic treatises to which we are invited to give assent (*assensus*). Are they to be construed experimentally or cerebrally? It seems to be the case that some at least of the documents referred to have mixed objectives. I shall return to this point in due course. In the meantime, I would simply note with Forsyth that "The Bible … never demands faith in itself as a preliminary of faith in Christ,"[13] and that "The triune God … is what makes Christianity Christian."[14]

Turning now to later Reformed confessions we find even greater methodological variety. The *Articles of Faith of the Presbyterian Church of England* (1890)[15] begin from the triune God and deal with the Bible in the nineteenth of twenty-four paragraphs. The Presbyterian Church of Canada's confession (1984)[16] likewise opens in a strongly trinitarian way, as do those of the United Church of Christ (1959)[17] and the Cumberland and Second Cumberland Presbyterian Churches.[18] On the other hand, the creed of the United Church of Canada (1968, revised 1980) begins and ends with the anthropocentric assertion, 'We are not alone …'[19] Can this be a product of a tendency in an affluent society towards 'feel-good' religion? Be that as it may, Forsyth's cautionary words merit attention: "[A] creed which starts from the glory of God has more power for man's welfare than one that is founded on the welfare of man alone."[20]

Before leaving the question of method, the hermeneutics of those who devised the classical confessions must be noted. I have already said that their appeal was to Scripture as authoritative, but we must also

---

[13] PTF, 'Revelation and the person of Christ,' in *Faith and Criticism. Essays by Congregationalists* (London: Sampson Low Marston, [1893]), 135.

[14] PTF, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 263.

[15] The Presbyterian Church of England was constituted in 1876 on the union of the Presbyterian Church *in* England (1842), which included Church of Scotland immigrants and the remnant of old English Presbyterianism which had not gone Congregationalist or Unitarian by the end of the eighteenth century, with the English Synod of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (1863).

[16] *Living Faith. A Statement of Christian Belief* (Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Books, 1984).

[17] *Reformed Witness Today*, 197–218.

[18] *Confession of Faith and Government*, (Memphis: Frontier Press, 1984).

[19] *Reformed Witness Today*, 193–196.

[20] PTF, *The Justification of God. Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy*, (1917), (London: Independent Press, 1957), p. 83.

take account of the fact that the authors were working on the far side
of modern biblical criticism from ourselves. They made assumptions
about the content, dating and authorship of the biblical books that
we no longer can; and they did not balk at proof-texting in a way
which has become impossible for us. For them, the Bible replaced the
ecclesiastical apparatus of Rome, but in their hands it was a quarry to
be plundered in order to devise doctrinal systems deemed orthodox, in
which the glue was supplied by the Aristotelian logic in which they had
been schooled. I do not say that they could have done anything else as
children of their times, but I do not think that we can approach the
Bible in exactly the way they did.

   Robert Mackintosh, the self-styled "refugee" from the high Calvin-
ism of the Free Church of Scotland, who found a home in the broader
streams of Congregationalism, published a provocatively entitled tract
in 1889: *The Obsoleteness of the Westminster Confession of Faith*. In this
he teased the Westminster authors for the way in which they had
responded to Parliament's request that they add biblical proof texts fol-
lowing the completion of their text. With characteristic irony he writes,

> That an oath cannot oblige to sin is proved by the example (?) of
> David in his relations with Nabal and Abigail. The "contingency of
> second causes" is proved by a man "drawing a bow at a venture," or
> by the occurrence of a fatal accident when an axehead "lights" on a
> bystander. Difficult questions on the doctrine of Providence are settled
> by the story of David and the men of Keilah. Finally—and I specially
> recommend this to the admirers of the Establishment principle—the
> proof that the civil magistrate may lawfully summon religious synods is
> found in the fact that Herod consulted the chief priests in order to plot
> more successfully how to murder the infant Jesus. Comment on these
> citations could be nothing but a feeble anti-climax. Let us treasure them
> up in our hearts.[21]

Content

I turn next to the problems raised by the content of earlier confessional
statements. It would be surprising, given the Church's obligation to
confess the faith afresh in every age, if we could simply regurgitate the
contextually-influenced confessions of the past. On the one hand, some
of them anathematize the Anabaptists and brand the Pope Antichrist,

---

[21] R. Mackintosh, *The Obsoleteness of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, bound with
Essays Towards a New Theology (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1889), 48.

and we need no longer indulge in such obsolete polemics. Again, we may with some justification feel that church practice, family life and moral duties, to which the *Second Helvetic Confession* devotes considerable attention, properly belong to the category of ecclesiastical advice and moral guidance and that when placed in a confession such matters yield overload. This practice also seems to elevate polity and ethics as then understood to the same level as the major doctrinal testimonies. More seriously, it can be argued that in the *Westminster Confession* God's eternal decrees take precedence over his grace.[22] In these ways and others we can see how questions arise for subsequent confessors by what our forebears wrote.

But questions arise equally because of what they omitted. While we can readily understand why they made so much of justification by grace through faith, their affirmations concerning creation, for example, are minimal. For my part, I should be hard put to understand a Reformed church that was drafting a confessional statement today that did not include a substantial paragraph on creation. Quite apart from the Bible's witness on the matter, with ecologists all around us we cannot be unaware of the seriousness of the challenges regarding our stewardship of the created order. Again, in face of the poor, the needy and the oppressed we today are bound to heed the call for justice; and when we ponder the life and death issues of abortion, euthanasia and genetic engineering, we should surely wish to say more than our forebears did about the sanctity of human life and the *imago dei*. In a word, classical confessions can provoke unease both by what they say and by what they fail to say.

This point was fully appreciated by Forsyth: "The life is in the body, not in the system. It must be a dogma, revisible from time to time to keep pace with the Church's growth as a living body in a living world."[23] Hence, for example, the nineteenth-century debates in Scotland over God's universal love *vis à vis* election and predestination, which yielded the Declaratory Acts of the United Presbyterians in 1879 and the Free Church in 1892, which bodies united in 1900; these Acts in turn flowed into the Church of Scotland at the union of that Church with the United Free Church in 1929. The Acts permitted liberty of opinion on matters that did not concern "the substance of the faith",

---

[22] See, for example, the remarks of James B. Torrance in Alasdair I.C. Heron, *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1982), 46.

[23] PTF, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 213.

though, whether in a mood of political realism or godly amnesia, they did not stay to define that substance.[24] Clearly, conscientious difficulties with the content of confessional documents raises the question of their status and the use to which they are put. To this issue I now turn.

The use of confessional statements

Confessional documents have been, and are, used in a variety of ways within the Reformed family. On the one hand we find Fred H. Klooster of the Christian Reformed Church upholding "the binding character of confessions," and endorsing the Formula of Subscription of his Church.[25] Over against this position is that of the Congregationalist strand of the Reformed family, to whom the formal act of confessional subscription is anathema. It is important to understand that this stance is not adopted on grounds of doctrinal laxity but, once again, as a faithful response in a particular socio-political context in England. My forebears, in peril of their lives, refused to subscribe to the words of men, especially when those words were legally enforced by governmental authorities bent on securing ecclesiastical comprehension as an aid to national cohesion in face of enemies. They upheld the Church's right and duty to submit to the Word of God alone; hence the martyrs of 1593 and surrounding dates.[26] They also had a profound sense of the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit, and felt that to elevate, or fossilize, a specific form of words might in time constrain their response to the Spirit's contemporary address to them through the Word—the very reason for the Scottish Declaratory Acts to which I referred. As I have already indicated, none of this prevented the Congregationalists from confessing the faith in a variety of ways, not least in declarations of faith. Indeed, they participated in the Westminster Assembly, and their *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* largely follows *Westminster*. Such documents were regarded by the Congregationalists not as tests of faith

---

[24] See further, Kenneth R. Ross, "The Union of 1900 and the relation of Church and creed in Scotland," *Scottish Church History Records*, XXIII pt. 2, 1988, 241–253.

[25] F.H. Klooster, "Theology, confession and the Church," in *Church and Theology in the Contemporary World* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Ecumenical Synod, 1977), 28–33.

[26] See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Commemorations. Studies in Christian Thought and History*, (1993), (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), ch. 4.

but as acts of confessing, as constituting testimony, not as having the binding force of law.[27]

Where confessional documents are elevated into tests of faith or criteria of church membership, a number of undesirable consequences can follow. First, we may subtly substitute cerebralism for faith, *assensus* for *fiducia*. It should never be forgotten that "Christianity spread not as a religion of truth, but of power, help, healing, resurrection, redemption."[28] We may feel that Forsyth here overstates his point, for the apostles had no doubt that Jesus Christ was the way, the truth and the life. But his point is that the apostles did not turn Christianity into a matter of a check-list of doctrines to be subscribed to. The emphasis of their activity was in the experimental direction. To them Jesus was Saviour before he was teacher; he had done something redemptive, not simply peddled teachings: "Christ did not come chiefly to teach truth, but to bring the reality and power of eternal life."[29] After all, "We do not review God's claims and then admit Him as we are satisfied."[30] None of this is to deny that a Church may well wish to affirm more than the individual church member feels able to do, but the latter, sincerely believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, is not to be excommunicated because some doctrines—the pre-existence of Christ, for example—are beyond his or her grasp at present. As John Owen wisely wrote in the Preface to the *Savoy Declaration*,

> The *Spirit of Christ* is in himself too *free*, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any humane arm, to whip men into belief; he drives not, but *gently leads into all truth*, and *perswades* men to *dwell in the tents* of *like precious Faith*; which would lose its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.[31]

Furthermore,

> A Christian church is not a private society, whose regulations can be modified by its members at their pleasure, but a society founded by

[27] See further, idem, *Dissenting Thought and the Life of the Churches*, 57–58; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Congregationalists and Creeds*, (London: Epworth Press, [1966]).

[28] PTF, *Missions in State and Church. Sermons and Addresses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 11.

[29] Idem, "Unity and theology," in *Towards Reunion. Being Contributions to Mutual Understanding by Church of England and Free Church Writers* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 74.

[30] Idem, *The Principle of Authority*, 146; cf. idem, "Revelation and the person of Christ," 109.

[31] A.G. Matthews, ed., *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, (London: Independent Press, 1959), 53.

> Christ Himself … Nothing, therefore, should be required of any appli-
> cant for membership but personal faith in Christ … Men come into the
> Christian church not because they have already mastered the contents of
> the Christian revelation, but to be taught them … [E]rror and ignorance
> which do not separate a man from Christ should not separate him from
> the church.[32]

Secondly, the use of confessions as tests of faith may foster the myth of
the saving *system*. At their best the drafters of our classical confessions
knew that people are saved by grace, not by doctrinal systems. The
authors of the *Scots Confession* fully understood that their work was liable
to imperfection and was hence revisible:

> [I]f any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence con-
> trary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and
> for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon
> our honour, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satis-
> faction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we
> shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.[33]

There is no confessional "fundamentalism" here. Over against the
idea of the saving system, "the sole content of Revelation, the power
and gift in it, is the love, will, presence and purpose of God for our
redemption."[34]

Thirdly, the elevation of system plays into the hands of ecclesiasti-
cal agents of a controlling disposition, who may be inclined to, and
may actually, brandish the system over the heads of those whom they
suspect of being what our present-day politicians call "off message."
Even the Congregationalists, who should have known better, fell into
this trap from time to time, as when the Puritan John Goodwin was cut
off because of his Arminianism. The Church is a fellowship of believ-
ers, called by grace, before it is a corporation bound by trust deeds.
James Moffatt once noted that the idea of the Church as "the com-
pany of those who uphold and profess saving doctrine" first appears in
the Socinian Racovian Catechism of 1604.[35] By contrast the Congrega-
tional scholar, F.J. Powicke, declared that

> [I]f the constitutive principle of a church, what makes it a church, what
> forms it and holds it together, is the abiding presence in and among its

---

[32] R.W. Dale, *A Manual of Congregational Principles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton,
1884), 186, 187.

[33] A.C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 165.

[34] PTF, "Revelation and the person of Christ," 102.

[35] So G.F. Nuttall, *Congregationalists and Creeds*, 10–11.

members of a living Spirit, whose holy task is so to inspire the love of truth and so to cleanse the inner eye as that knowledge of Christ and the things of Christ shall be growing perpetually clearer and fuller, then for a church to fancy it even possible that the sum of Christian truth has been compressed into the phrases of an ancient creed, or that its present apprehension and statement of the truth can be more than partial, is self-destructive and even sin against the Holy Ghost.[36]

It cannot, however, be denied that the Reformed have sometimes found it hard to hold themselves to this high ideal. Descents into confessional legalism are not unknown in our history,[37] as if there are saving truths in the sense of truths which save. To hold this is to dethrone Christ. Hence the protests of the Arian Presbyterian divines of the eighteenth century, who charged their orthodox brethren with "Protestant popery" because of their elevation of confessional standards into tests of faith at the expense, as they thought, of the clear teaching of Scripture. To take but one of many examples, Samuel Bourn (1689–1754) declared that to impose a Trinitarian test was "to give up *Scripture-sufficiency*, it is to return back into the Tenets of Popery … If we pay that Regard to any Body of men, tho' the most learned Assembly in the World, which is due to *Christ* only; we make a *Christ* of these Men; they are our Rabbi."[38]

Fourthly, sectarianism is the offspring of authoritarian, legalistic ecclesiasticism, and our Reformed family is replete with examples of it. If over the past eighty years it is possible that we have entered into more transconfessional unions than any other tradition, we can almost certainly outdo everyone else in the number of inner-family secessions we have spawned. Quite frequently, though not always, these have

---

[36] F.J. Powicke, "Historic Congregationalism in Britain," *Proceedings of the Third International Congregational Council* (London, 1908), 268. See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Saints: Visible, Orderly and Catholic. The Congregational Idea of the Church* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986); currently available from Wipf & Stock of Eugene, Oregon.

[37] I do not imply that confessional documents alone have on occasion been abused in such a way as to threaten the Gospel. Forsyth declared that the Gospel's "three great products—the Church, the Ministry, the Bible—have all threatened its life at some time and in some way." See *The Church, The Gospel and Society* (London: Independent Press, 1962), 89.

[38] S. Bourn, *The True Christian Way of Striving for the Faith of the Gospel*, 1728, 23. At his ordination Bourn refused to assent to the *Westminster Confession*, for which reason some Presbyterian ministers boycotted the occasion. See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Dissenting Thought and the Life of the Churches*, ch. 7; idem, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 3.

resulted from the flexing of confessional muscles in unduly rigorist ways. Confessions have been used to justify withdrawal from the faithful rather than to confess the faith.

Underlying the four points just made is a fifth: the Reformed have sometimes managed to persuade themselves that confessional documents guard the faith (rather in the way that bishops—though presumably not heretical ones—are said to do in some other Christian communions). But the Reformed should think more that twice before subscribing to this view, for our own history bears witness to the fact that notwithstanding the *Westminster Confession*, the majority of old English Presbyterians who did not become Congregationalist during the eighteenth century, became Unitarian by the end of that century.[39] This clearly demonstrates that confessions of faith can but witness to the faith if it is there. They do not create it, and it would be a usurpation of the role of God the Holy Spirit, *the* guardian of the faith, to suppose that were particular confessions to fall the Gospel would fall with them. Hence the Puritan Thomas Goodwin's words:

> If Christian judgments be well and thoroughly grounded in the doctrine of God's free grace and eternal love and redemption through Jesus Christ alone, and in the most spiritual inward operations of God's Spirit, that will fence them against all errors.[40]

Standing staunchly in this line, my late college principal, Gordon Robinson, wrote,

> [A] genuine trust in the operation of the Holy Spirit, held humbly, prayerfully and expectantly by ministers and people in their private devotion and in their gathering at worship and in the Church Meeting is not only our ultimate safeguard in matters of faith. Even to call it a safeguard is to speak on too mean a level. It is of the essence of our existence.[41]

Herein lies a caution against any confessional antiquarianism which would take our eye off our supreme task of discerning the mind of Christ by the Spirit in the here and now. However inconvenient it may sometimes be for professional ecclesiastics, God's gift of the Spirit, addressing his people through the Word may be found "quite as much

---

[39] For this complicated story see Alan P.F. Sell, *Dissenting Thought and the Life of the Churches*, ch. 5.

[40] Quoted by PTF in *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 119.

[41] W. Gordon Robinson, "Congregationalism and the historic Faith," *The Congregational Quarterly*, XXIX no. 3, July 1951, p. 213.

with the intellectual babes whom the wise and prudent of John Robinson's day nicknamed Symon the Sadler, Tomkin the Taylor, Billy the Bellows-mender, as with the wise and prudent themselves."[42] Nor should we forget the biblical rebuke addressed to those who incanted all the right things—"the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"[43]— and failed to realise that their actual practice completely undermined their verbal confession.

What constitutes Christian identity?

The upshot is that none of our confessional documents can be the guarantor of our identity as Reformed, still less as Christians. A free-wheeling, free-thinking liberalism is not, however, the only alternative to the undue elevation of such statements. Against all who thought it was, Forsyth thundered, "Too many are occupied in throwing over precious cargo; they are lightening the ship even of its fuel."[44] But if hardline confessionalism and free-wheeling liberalism will not suffice, what does constitute our identity and hold us in fellowship with Christians through the ages?

In my opinion, the only possible answer to that question, is, "The grace of God in the Gospel." By God's grace we are granted forgiveness and new life, given our new identity as adopted sons or daughters in Christ, and engrafted into the fellowship of the Church as branches of the Vine. In other words, our final authority is not our little accounts of what the mighty God has done, but God's saving act at the Cross. While the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is temporally prior to Calvary, and while his person is logically prior to his work, for he cannot do what he does unless he is who he is, it is at the Cross, not in the cradle, that the saving act is accomplished.[45] "It is from the experience

---

[42] F.J. Powicke, "The Congregational churches," in W.B. Selbie, ed., *Evangelical Christianity: Its History and Witness* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, [1911]), 118.

[43] Jeremiah 7: 4.

[44] PTF, *The Principle of Authority*, 261.

[45] Forsyth never ceased to insist upon this point. It is at the very heart of his teaching. See, for further examples, *The Justification of God*, 89–90; *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 120; *The Cruciality of the Cross*, 39, 50 n.; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 216; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 10; *God the Holy Father*, 40, 41. He deeply regretted that the Church's early "ecumenical symbols not only do not start from the real source of authority in Christianity, but scarcely allude to it. I mean, of course, redeeming grace. … There is far too much said, even among ourselves, about the creeds and their

of Christ's salvation," insisted Forsyth, "that the Church proceeds to the interpretation of the Saviour's person."[46] This was the historical order: this is what Jesus Christ has done; then who must he be? As Forsyth more fully explained:

> Christ came not to *say* something, but to *do* something. His revelation was action more than instruction. … The thing He did was not simply to make us aware of God's disposition in an impressive way. It was not to *declare* forgiveness. And it was not even to *bestow* forgiveness. It was certainly not to *explain* forgiveness. It was to *effect* forgiveness, to set up the relation of forgiveness both in God and man.[47]

To God's saving deed the Bible actually bears witness. The compilers of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s *Confession of 1967* rightly declared that "The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ."[48] Our confessional documents inadequately testify to the same thing; and the consciences of the Lord's individual saints, his adopted sons and daughters, concur as they are enabled by the Holy Spirit. "In a word," wrote Forsyth, "that is over the Bible which is over the Church and the Creeds. It is the Gospel of Grace, which produced Bible, Creed and Church alike."[49] Zwingli said it much earlier: "The sum of the Gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, has made known to us the will of His heavenly Father, and by his innocence has redeemed us from death and reconciled us to God."[50]

In view of this, it seems to me that the ideal Reformed confession of faith would set out from an assertion of the Good News that by

---

simplicity and the way they keep to the Christian facts. Yes, and all but ignore the one fact on which Christianity rests—the fact of redemption by grace alone through faith." See *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 124. See further on the idea that "the rationale of the incarnation is in the atonement," (James Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917], 65) in Alan P.F. Sell, *Aspects of Christian Integrity*, ch. 2.

[46] PTF, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 332.

[47] Idem, *God the Holy Father* (London: Independent Press, 1957), 19.

[48] *Reformed Witness Today*, 210.

[49] PTF, *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, 67. Cf. idem, *The Principle of Authority*, 53. Interestingly, the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle of 1904 reads, "The basis of this Union is that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice as revealed in the Holy Scriptures …" Quoted by Roger Hayden, "The Particular Baptist Confession of 1689," *The Baptist Quarterly*, XXXII no. 8, October 1988,407.

[50] *Zwingli's Sixty-seven Articles of 1523*, in A.C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confession of the 16th Century*, 36.

the victory of the Cross God the Father's holiness is satisfied, Christ the Son's Saviourhood confirmed, and God the Holy Spirit's work of engrafting believers into the Church as branches of the Vine is under way, and will continue until he come. Such an assertion sets out from God's saving act; it is deliberately couched in trinitarian terms; it includes an ecclesiological element over against any individualism whether "evangelical" or "liberal;" and the reference to the Spirit's continuing work covers the eschatological dimension. Such a confession stimulates the brain; but above all it stands as the joyous testimony of the heart on the part of those who have been saved by grace through faith. The first paragraph of the 1967 *Confession* of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. comes as close as any such document to what I have in mind:

> In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another.

No doubt any Reformed church would wish to say more than this. My concern is that they do not say less. Such a primary confession can be filled out in many ways for purposes of exposition, teaching and the like. It can have polity clauses appended and ethical guidance attached. But no confessional document, however long, will be adequate if it is not rooted in the primary testimony to God's Good News.

Our primary confession

The implications of such a starting-point are manifold. The first is that the truth is underscored that the Church is God's creation by the Holy Spirit on the ground of the Son's finished work. It is not a human invention. Secondly, the ecumenical point follows that any doctrine or practice which would exclude those called by grace from fellowship at the Lord's table is inherently sectarian, and a denial of the Spirit's work.[51] For "The unity of the Church rests on the evangelical succession

---

[51] See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 11.

and not on the canonical … which ties up the Church more than it unites it."[52] Thirdly, this primary act of confessing has implications for our worship. It stands as a corrective to any anthropocentric coddling of the saints; it does not permit a subjective, sentimental, wallowing in God's love, because it understands that "Faith … is more concerned with the nature of the object than with the mood of the subject",[53] that God's love is holy love, and that "love is not holy without judgment."[54] Centring as it does in the Cross, it forbids the kind of incarnationalism which becomes indistinguishable from benign, ahistorical, immanentist process.[55] Above all, it encourages heartfelt rejoicing in God's *act* of redeeming grace, apart from which we should have no forgiveness, no new life in Christ, no identity in him, no communion of saints. Such a confession will revive our preaching, for we shall not merit the stricture which Forsyth levelled against some of the preaching of his day: "It wrestles with many problems between man and man, class and class, nation and nation; but it does not face the moral problem between the guilty soul and God."[56] Neither shall we fall for precisely the kind of crowd-pulling antics which Jesus steadfastly repudiated during his temptations in the wilderness: "[W]e must not empty the Gospel in order quickly to fill the Church."[57] Rather, our outreach will be informed by the manner of him who is the Good News, and our ethics will be motivated by gratitude for all that God has done for us and for the world.

But some would raise the question, "Can we any longer confess in the terms presented above?" I have heard some theologians say that we could not nowadays write an account of the things commonly agreed among us because we do not share enough of a common language. There are those who do not wish to use Fatherhood language of God; there are those who wish to substitute functional terms for trinitarian

---

[52] PTF, "Unity and theology," 77. Cf. idem, *Congregationalism and Reunion* (London: Independent Press, 1952), 21–22.

[53] Ibid., 60.

[54] Idem, *The Work of Christ*, 84.

[55] See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995; reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), ch. 5; *Confessing and Commending the Faith*, ch. 5.

[56] PTF, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 24. Cf. *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 5, 89: "We must all preach *to* our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up the mirror to the time. … We must, of course, go some way to meet the world, but when we do meet we must do more than greet."

[57] Idem, *Theology in Church and State* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 25.

persons;[58] and within the Reformed family worldwide there is a wide diversity of belief. In such a situation the only recourse, I believe, is to return to the Cross, which puts all our ideologies and sectarianisms in perspective, and gives us a Gospel which it should be our greatest joy to proclaim. Has God saved? Has God brought us into his one Church? If we own a common Saviour we shall think more than twice before unchurching one another over differences of linguistic expression. "I am sure," wrote Forsyth, "that, if we had a theology brought entirely up to date in regard to current thought, we should not then have the great condition for the Kingdom of God. It is the wills of men, and not their views, that are the great obstacle to the Gospel, and the things most intractable."[59] Hence the Cross. Thence the Gospel.

---

[58] See further, Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 365–375.
[59] PTF, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 197.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND CHURCH UNITY

Callie Coetzee

Introduction

It is significant that, after centuries of Christianity, as well as considerable research and discussion on the issue of Christian identity, the final word has not been spoken?[1] Naudé makes the statement that it seems an almost typical Reformed feature to constantly ask 'identity questions.' Is this because Christianity experiences an identity crisis? Almost twenty years ago it was stated that "Christians are uncertain about their identity."[2] Duquoc continues: "This is not an easy problem. Should one opt for perfect integration in a group with structure, ideology and dynamics which decide what one is; or should one opt for self-definition, only to risk uncertainty about what enables one to say one is a Christian anyway?"[3]

The theme of Christian identity cannot only be discussed from many angles, but it also has many facets.[4] It is the aim of this article to look at the theme from a Reformed perspective and, furthermore, to focus on a specific ecclesiological facet; namely, that of church unity.[5]

---

[1] P.J. Naudé, "*Identity* and ecumenicity: how we deal theologically with so-called "non-theological" factors?" in W.M. Alston & M. Welker, eds. *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 437.

[2] C. Duquoc, "Editorial," translated by J.G. Cumming in C. Duquoc & C. Floristan, eds., J.A. Gardiner, language ed., *Christian Identity* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1988) (Concilium, Vol. 196. Special column, 1988), Xix—xx.

[3] Duquoc, "Editorial," Xix—xx.

[4] Cf. the article of J.H. van Wyk, "Christelike identiteit: Augustinus oor geloof, hoop en liefde," *In die Skriflig* 38(4) Des. 2004; R.W. Holder, *Calvin's heritage*, in D.K. McKim, ed. *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 265 mentions the fact that within Calvinism, transported to America through the Puritans, there are found generosity, liberality, morality, and a basic humility that was reflected in the doctrine of total depravity. He continues to refer to another aspect of "Calvinian legacy," "… that pursuit of the godly commonwealth encompassing every dimension of a community's life that in Calvin's mind gave the highest dignity to the vocation of councilors …" Here we have a specific identity that reflects in the community, the state, etc.

[5] If Christian identity is understood as the Calvinistic-Reformed tradition as it

Defining Christian Identity

As Reformed churches we confess that we are called Christians because we are members of Christ by faith. Thus we partake of His anointing with the Holy Spirit because we may confess His Name, because we may present ourselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness to Him, because we may fight against sin and the devil in this life with a free and good conscience, and because hereafter we shall reign with Him eternally over all creatures.[6] But in spite of this clear definition, many people who call themselves Christians do not live according to this confession. The name 'Christian' today has many meanings and is broadly defined.

The same is true for the ecclesiological definition of Christianity. Christianity has many faces. From an ecclesiastical point of view, there is the identity of the mainline churches, the charismatic movement, Roman Catholicism, as well as new identities being formed, such as the new church formation in the Netherlands called the *Protestantse Kerk Nederland*,[7] to name just a few. Some people would say that diversity, pluriformity, and dissension are essential parts of Christianity. Berkouwer[8] focuses on the unity and division of the church in the same chapter. I shall return to this issue later in this article. On the one hand, we can therefore agree with Blei[9] that we should not try to identify a special Protestant or even Reformed identity: Not Reformed identity but 'Christian identity' should be our main concern. On the other hand, it is necessary to qualify the term.

From a biblical point of view the identity of a Christian cannot be separated from his/her faith in Christ. "Christian identity is the adventure of a meeting with Jesus Christ, of a life shared with Him on the

---

culminated in the confessions of the Reformed churches, it has implications for all aspects of being church such as liturgy, church government, etc., as well as for the implementation of a specific identity in the community, cf. D.F. Wright, "Calvin's role in church history," in D.K. McKim ed., *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 288.

[6] Heidelberg Catechism, answer 32.

[7] Cf. J.H. van Wyk. "Die kerk in Nederland," *Die Kerkblad*. 108(3176) (Jun. 2005), 4.

[8] G.C. Berkouwer, *De kerk: eenheid en Katholiciteit* (Kampen: Kok, 1970), 31.

[9] K. Blei, "Some Dutch reflections on reformed identity," in M. Opocensky, S. Stephens, H. Wilson, eds., *The reformed world. Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1993), 3.

path which leads Him to the Cross."[10] It also has to do with one's view of scripture. "If something exists like a 'Reformation identity', then it consists of the unconditional recognition of God's Word that through scripture creates communities and in these addresses individuals to guide and redeem them."[11] An essential part of the identity of a Calvinist is the acceptance of *Scriptura tota* as well as *Scriptura sola*.[12] Naudé also emphasizes this when he says: "one does not have to argue the point that the heart of our Reformed identity is the centrality of the Word of God in its various manifestations."[13]

Ultimately, Christian identity as seen and qualified from a Reformed perspective is manifested in confessional unity. In this regard, it is important to note the following statement by Trueman:

> … it is too often assumed that Calvin's theology has, or had at some point in the past, some kind of normative status within the Reformed tradition. This is historically and ecclesiastically not so…. The historic identity of Reformed Theology has always been expressed through public confessional documents such as the First and Second Helvetic Confessions, the Consensus Tigurinus, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Standards.[14]

There is the view that in the current postmodern age, something like 'Reformed identity' is neither intelligible nor defensible.[15] There is also a view that we must strive for a 'collective identity' where 'conservatives' and 'liberals' with radically different viewpoints on the authority of scripture, the historical Jesus, and other central doctrines can make room for each other.[16] There is even a viewpoint that Christianity "has

---

[10] P. Buhler, "Christian identity: between objectivity and subjectivity," in Duquoc & Floristan, *Christian identity* (Concilium, vol. 196, pt. 1. Special column), 26.

[11] P. Eicher, "The burning bush: Holy Scripture and the reformation question of identity," in Duquoc & Floristan, *Christian identity* (Concilium, vol. 196. pt. 3 Special column.), 88.

[12] E.H. Palmer, *The five points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980). Cf. also J.H. van Wyk, "Die relevansie van die gereformeerde teologie vir vandag," *In die Skriflig* 29 (1–2) (Mrt/Jun 1995), 248.

[13] Naudé, *Identity*, 446.

[14] C.R. Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," in D.K. McKim, ed. *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 225.

[15] G.W. Stroup, *Reformed identity in an ecumenical world*, in W.M. Alston & M. Welker, eds. *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 258.

[16] C. Landman, "Nuwe speelveld is in kerk moontlik: liberale behoudendes deel van mekaar se verhaal," *Beeld*, 12 Junie 2005, 13.

to vanish as an external phenomenon, as indeed a church."[17] And then there is the viewpoint that "doctrine divides, service unites."[18] But from a Reformed point of view, it can be stated that identity and doctrine, or identity and confession, cannot be separated.

In this regard, there are scholars who are of the opinion that it is actually impossible "to define a common Reformed identity by means of the confessional tradition of Reformed Churches."[19] Ernst also refers to the many new confessions that are currently written.[20] Stroup also refers to the many new confessions.[21]

Against the viewpoint of Ernst, it can be argued that it is not the number of confessions that matters. In the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation, many confessions were written. The decisive question is whether the different confessions contradict each other or whether every confession is in accordance with scripture.

A number of scholars emphasize the necessity of confessional unity in order to establish a specific Christian identity. Stroup makes the statement: "The confessions are the church's identity documents."[22] Ernst[23] admits that theologians, Reformed churches, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches have struggled for quite some time to define what it is that makes us 'Reformed,' and what it is that distinguishes the Reformed tradition from other Christian traditions. And in this regard, confessions hold a special authority.[24] "All other expressions of the faith and life of Reformed Churches can also be considered and fully understood in their relation to the insights of faith that are expressed in confessional statements."[25] In a distinctive way, confessions articulate the living faith of a church, and they are guidelines for that church's faith and life. In this respect, confessions also have an apologetic function. Their purpose is to clearly draw the line between scriptural truth and the heresy.

---

[17] C. Duquoc, *Church membership and Christian identification*, in Duquoc & Floristan, *Christian identity* (Concilium, vol. 196, pt. 4. Special column), 117.

[18] N.A. Jesson, *Doctrine divides, service unites: towards a vital and coherent theology* (Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 2003), 1.

[19] M. Ernst, "We believe the One Holy and Catholic Church, reformed identity and the unity of the Church" in Alston & Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 86.

[20] Ernst, "We believe," 86.

[21] Stroup, *Reformed identity*, 258.

[22] Stroup, *Reformed identity*, 260.

[23] Ernst, "We believe," 87.

[24] Ernst, "We believe," 88.

[25] Ernst, "We believe," 88.

It may therefore happen, and indeed it happens, that confessions play a role in keeping Christians and Christian groups apart. This is, to a certain extent, the case with the Belhar Confession in the family of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.[26] De Gruchy also argues that an orthodox Calvinist insistence on a creed as a basis for the unity of the church usually results in the disunity of the church.[27] Nevertheless, from a Reformed perspective it must be clear that a true biblical Christian identity cannot be defined without taking into consideration the confessions of the family of Reformed churches.

The Unity of the Church

This brings us to the unity of the church. The sixteenth century Reformer Martin Bucer called this unity "the most necessary thing."[28] Bucer said this in the midst of the controversy regarding Holy Communion. In the Nicene creed (A.D. 381) we confess that we believe the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (*unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam*). After all the centuries, this creed still forms the basis for discussions on the unity of the church and the founding of ecumenical movements.[29] Naudé points out that the important issue of some agreement on the "essentials" of the Christian faith have been part of the modern ecumenical movement from its beginning.[30] "With the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam, 'the visible unity of the church *in one faith* and in one eucharistic fellowship', emerged as the ultimate aim of the new organization." It is evident that Naudé has the Nicean Creed in mind as part of the "essentials" of the Christian faith, since he continues to draw a comparison between Nicea and Belhar.

---

[26] cf N. Jackson, "Sny bande met VGK, vra NG gemeente: weg met Belhar en ander wat dit aanvaar, lui besluit," *Beeld* (31 Mei 2005).

[27] S. De Gruchy, "Dissenting Calvinism: reflections on the congregational witness in South Africa as part of the wider reformed tradition," *Theologia viatorum: journal of theology and religion in Africa* 28(1) (Dec. 2004), 17.

[28] cf J.R. Payton, "On unity and truth: Martin Bucer's sermon on John 17," *Calvin theological journal* 27(1)(Apr. 1992), 38.

[29] Jesson, *Doctrine divides*, 8, 12, 13, 19, 20.

[30] P.J. Naudé, "Confessing the one faith: theological resonance between the Creed of Nicea (325) and the confession of Belhar (1982)," (Unpublished paper read at the fifth Ecumenical Forum, Ecumenical Institute at the University of Heidelberg on 11 January 2003), 1.

He also points out that it is significant how the emphasis is on unity in
the Nicene Creed.[31]

The confession of the unity of the church is a formulation of the
truth of scripture. That there is only one church is a very clear teaching
of scripture. Berkouwer points out that the issue of the unity of the
church has been debated many times.[32] But the truth of the unity of the
church is more than clear from the whole of the New Testament.[33] The
phrase "the one church" is not found in scripture because it would, in
fact, be a pleonasm.[34] This fact, that there can be only one ecclesia,
excludes the plural by definition.[35]

Scouteris points out that the fathers of the early church also under-
stood the unity in purely biblical and theological terms.[36] And the cause
or source of this unity is Jesus Christ.[37] "There can be unity of the peo-
ple because there is Christ."[38] The "in Christ" is therefore the necessary
presupposition for the unity of human persons in the one body of the
church.[39] The view of the Lord of the church determines the fact that it
is absolutely impossible to replace the singular with the plural.[40]

The truth that there is only one church also becomes clear from the
metaphors used in scripture to picture the relationship between Christ
and his church. There can be only one house, as there can be only
one bride, one temple, one flock, and one body.[41] The great Reformer
John Calvin said in this regard that "two or three (churches) cannot be
invented without dividing Christ; and this is impossible."[42]

The unity of the church must be seen simultaneously from the per-
spective of the oneness of the triune God. "The Divine oneness is the

---

[31] Naudé, "Confessing the one faith," 11.

[32] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 34.

[33] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 32/3.

[34] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 33.

[35] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 34.

[36] C. Scouteris, "The people of God, its unity and its glory: a discussion of John
17:17–24 in the light of patristic thought," *Greek Orthodox theological review* 30(4)(1985), 401.

[37] J.E. Staton, "A vision of unity: Christian unity in the fourth Gospel," *Evangelical
quarterly* 69(4)(4 Oct. 1997), 291.

[38] Scouteris, "The people of God," 406.

[39] Scouteris, "The people of God," 414.

[40] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 47.

[41] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 47.

[42] *quia non duas aut tres invenire liceat quin discerpatur Christus: quod fieri non potest* (Inst.
4.1.2; O S II, 747).

model for the oneness of the people."[43] According to Naudé, the focal point of the unity in the Nicene Creed is the Trinity as one God where Father, Son, and Spirit are equally divine and from whose grace the church as one church is established.[44]

In this regard, many scholars refer to the prayer of Christ in John 17 (also called his "last will," cf., E. Käsemann, *Jesu letzter Wille*).[45] With reference to John 17:21–24, it is emphasized that the unity of the church is a unity modeled on the unity (union) between the Father and the Son.[46] The unity is analogical of the unity between the Father and the Son.[47] A more touching indication of unity does not exist. The unity between Father and Son forms the deepest foundation for what belongs to the essence of the church.[48]

What is also very important and significant is that the unity of the church is not an isolated matter, but that the whole world comes into the picture in John 17:21: "May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me," and also in verse 23: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."[49] In these verses not only the missiological calling of the church, but also the whole issue of identity comes to the fore. The unity must be seen. The world must see the church in her unity as a letter of Christ (1 Co. 3:2).[50]

And then, the unity of the church must and can only be a unity in truth. Christ also prays that his church may be protected from the evil one and may be sanctified in the truth of his Word (Jn. 17:15, 17). This truth is also confessed in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's day 21, that Christ gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself a church, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith. The implication of this prayer is that any search for unity that conceals the truth is not

---

[43] Scouteris, "The people of God," 405; cf., also Staton, "A vision of unity," 291.

[44] Naudé, *Confessing the one faith*, 11.

[45] Cf. Scouteris, "The people of God"; T.E. Pollard, "'That they all may be one': John xvii.21 and the unity of the church," *Expository times*, 17, Oct–Sept, 1958–1959; Staton, "A vision of unity"; J.R. Payton, "On unity and truth: Martin Bucer's sermon on John 17," *Calvin theological journal* 27 (1)(Apr. 1992); J.D. du Toit, *Die Kerk*, in Totius versamelde werke, vol. 2, 1977, 101; Berkouwer, *De Kerk*.

[46] Staton, "A vision of unity," 294.

[47] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 56.

[48] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 57.

[49] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 51.

[50] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 51.

in accordance with the prayer of the Lord.[51] Those who do not love
the truth above all, cannot make an appeal to John 17.[52] What really
matters, when it comes to the unity as mentioned in John 17, is the
Word (Jn. 17:13), the Truth (Jn. 17:19), and the Name (Jn. 17:26).[53]

The unity of the church is a unity in diversity. But the diversity must be
a diversity of what Naudé calls "non-theological factors," such as lan-
guage, culture, and so on.[54] It must not be diversity in regard to matters
like homosexuality.[55] I refer to the issue of homosexuality because it
clearly illustrates that different viewpoints even on ethical issues, based
on different views of scripture and different hermeneutical approachs,
can be a stumbling block on the way to church unity. In South Africa
we have, for example, the viewpoint of Müller, a theologian of the
Dutch Reformed Church, that scripture must be reinterpreted in the
light of the confessions or witnesses of gay people.[56] He also states that
the apostle Paul was a child of his time and had his own frame of ref-
erence that radically differs from ours. Du Plooy, a theologian of the
Reformed Churches in South Africa, clearly points out that Müller's
viewpoint contradicts the Reformed view on the authority of scrip-
ture and the inspiration of scripture (cf., inter alia Belgic Confession,
article 7).[57] If the viewpoint of Müller should be tolerated, it would
therefore seriously hamper the discussions on church unity between the
Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in South Africa,
which is mentioned later in this article. We must therefore agree with
Jesson that the marks of the church also have ethical dimensions.[58]

   Furthermore, it must not be a diversity in doctrinal or confessional
matters. Unity in truth implies a unity in doctrine and confession.
When Calvin was accused of heresy and schism by the Roman Catho-
lics, he answered as follows:

> As to their charge of heresy and schism, because we preach a different
> doctrine, ….it is indeed a very serious accusation, but one which needs

---

[51] Du Toit, *Die Kerk*, 101.
[52] Du Toit, *Die Kerk*, 101.
[53] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 56.
[54] Naudé, *Identity and ecumenicity*, 436/7.
[55] De Gruchy, "Dissenting Calvinism," 20.
[56] J. Müller, "Die Bybel as slaansak," *Beeld*, 13 Maart 2007, 15.
[57] D. Du Plooy, "Gehoorsaam eerder Woord van God as mense se menings," *Beeld*,
21 Maart 2007, 11.
[58] Jesson, *Doctrine divides*, 13.

not a long and laboured defence. The name of heretics and schismatics is applied to those who, by dissenting from the Church, destroy its communion. This communion is held together by two chains—viz. consent in sound doctrine and brotherly charity. …But the thing to be observed is, that this union of charity so depends on unity in faith, as to have in it its beginning, its end, in fine, its only rule.[59]

It is well known that Calvin strived for the unity of the church more than anyone else. Wendel calls him a "champion of church unity."[60] Calvin himself said: "Always, both by word and deed, have I protested how eager I was for unity."[61]

In the context of this article, it is worth mentioning that Calvin placed the primary emphasis on the Word of God. "…the only thing I asked was that all controversies should be decided by thy Word…"[62] Obviously, Calvin was not interested in a unity that was not a unity in the truth.[63] It is, however, also important to note that Calvin was opposed to any confessionalism.[64] He distinguished between matters of fundamental nature and matters of mediocre nature, although this did not lead to confessional indifferentism.[65] Furthermore, it must be noted that Calvin allocated a secondary role to liturgy and church order when it came to ecumenicity, as long as there was doctrinal unity.[66]

I have already referred to the fact that, according to John 17: 21,23, the matters of identity and unity are closely related. Christ prays for the unity as a "window"; He prays for the transparency of this unity.[67]

---

[59] "Haec porro duobus vinculis continetur, sanae doctrinae consensione et fraterna caritate … Verum id quoque notandum est, hanc caritatis coniunctionem sic a fidei unitate pendere, ut haec illius initium, finis, unica denique regula esse debeat" (Inst. 4.2.5; O S II, 771/2).

[60] F. Wendel, *Calvin. The origins and development of his religious thought*. P. Mairet, trans. (London: Collins. The Fontana library theology and philosophy, 1969), 311.

[61] J. Calvin & J. Sadoleto. *A reformation debate. Sadoleto's letter to the Genevans and Calvin's reply*. J.C. Olin, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 85.

[62] Calvin & Sadoleto, *A reformation debate*, 86.

[63] J. Calvin, *Om de eenheid en vrede der kerk. Johannes Calvijns geschrift. Vera Christianae pacificationis et ecclesiae reformandae ratio*. Vertaald naar de Latijnse uitgave van Baum, Cunitz en Reuss door D.J. de Groot (Amsterdam: Van Bottenburg, 1953), 58; W. Nijenhuis, *Calvinus oecumenicus. Calvijn en de eenheid der kerk in het licht van zijn briefwisseling* (s'Gravehage: Martinus Nijhoff. Kerkhistorische studien 8, 1959), 302.

[64] Nijenhuis, *Calvinus oecumenicus*, 298/9.

[65] Cf., A.D. Pont, "Enkele opmerkings oor Johannes Calvyn se stellings oor die capita doctrina necessaria," *Skrif en Kerk* 16(2) (1995), 390–393; J.H. van Wyk, "Die gereformeerd-wees van die Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika," *In die Skriflig* 39(1) (April 2005), 188.

[66] Nijenhuis, *Calvinus oecumenicus*, 303.

[67] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 53.

What is this other than identity? Naudé quotes Geoffrey Wainwright on this relationship: "At stake in the understanding of unity and schism, of continuity and discontinuity, of integrity and fragmentation, is precisely the identity of the church and therewith the nature and substance of truth and the conditions of its authoritative expression."[68]

Concluding Remarks

It is argued in this paper that, from a Reformed perspective, the issue of Christian identity as well as the issue of church unity cannot be focused upon without taking one's presupposition from the scripture and the Reformed confessions into account. True Christian identity is determined by one's confessional foundation. And true church unity can only be established in the truth of scripture as formulated in the Reformed confessions. Although the Reformed tradition is the only tradition where confessions are found,[69] this principled viewpoint cannot be compromised, not even in our postmodern age.

Having said this, it must, at the same time, be admitted that this point of departure does not make a difference to the reality that the church of our day is both one and divided.[70] In the year 2003 there were 33800 'denominations,' and that number increases every day.[71] We experience the unity as well as the disunity. Van Wyk also points out that the church of all ages struggles with a very difficult dilemma in the ecclesiology: unity or holiness, catholicity or apostolicity.[72]

We experience the disunity between churches, religious groups, and ecumenical movements coming from different theological traditions. But we also experience the lack of real unity between church communities in the same Reformed tradition. The Belhar Confession plays a significant role in delaying or even preventing the process of unification in the family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa.[73] Also in South Africa, the three Reformed Church communities with the same culture and language (Afrikaans-speaking)—namely, the Dutch

---

[68] Naudé, *Identity and ecumenicity*, 436.

[69] Piet Naudé, "10 Stellings oor gereformeerde identiteit," *Die Kerkbode* 174(9) (10 Junie 2005), 11.

[70] Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, 31.

[71] Van Wyk, "Christelike identiteit," 532.

[72] Van Wyk, "Christelike identiteit," 532.

[73] Jackson, "Sny bande met VGK."

Reformed Church, the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk* and the Reformed Churches in South Africa—have been in constant discussions since 1958 on those matters that keep them apart; and still real unity could not be restored. To my mind, one of the main reasons for this tragic situation is the fact that—although these churches adhere (formally?) to the same Reformed confessions (the three ecumenical creeds and the three formulas of unity)—they differ, to a smaller or larger extent, when it comes to their functioning, implementation, and interpretation.

Even an ecumenical movement, such as the World Council of Churches with its very broad confessional basis, experiences something of a separation among its member churches, as Jesson points out.[74]

Is there a solution to this tragic phenomenon of separation or division in the church of Christ? Can we just accept that the disunity of the church will be part of this sinful dispensation?

In the Reformed churches, the viewpoint that this phenomenon only demonstrates the pluriformity of the church has long been rejected.

The solution does not lie in the viewpoint that Christianity is "one way among others."[75] The solution that Berkhof proposes, that there must be a radical return to the preconfessional and pre-denominationalist stage of Reformed ecclesiology, is also not the answer.[76] The solution does not lie in the forming of a "collective identity."[77] Blei's plea for a "pilgrim identity" is also not the answer.[78] Service alone, without doctrine, will not lead to unity.

We agree with Van Wyk that we must never stop striving and praying for the unity of the church in accordance with the prayer of our Lord.[79] We also agree with his statementthat we should have a passion for unity, and then a passion alive with love, keeping in mind what Calvin said about the priority of the unity in faith.[80]

Snyman speaks of the unity of the church *in* its separation or division.[81] He means that churches that are separated should not stop talk-

---

[74] Jesson, *Doctrine divides*, 3, 4.
[75] Duquoc, *Church membership and Christian identification*, 122/3.
[76] Cf., Ernst, *We believe the One Holy and Catholic Church*, 95.
[77] Landman, "Nuwe speelveld is in kerk moontlik," 12.
[78] Blei, *Some Dutch reflections on reformed identity*, 5.
[79] Van Wyk, "Christelike identiteit," 532.
[80] Van Wyk, "Christelike identiteit," 533.
[81] W.J. Snyman, *Nuwe en ou dinge: uit die skat van die Koninkryk*. Versamel en aan hom opgedra deur sy oud-studente by geleentheid van sy sewentigste verjaardag. P.C. Snyman, red. (Potchefstroom: Pro Rege, 1977), 110/1.

ing to each other. They should come together in some fellowship where
they seriously discuss the matters that separate them on the basis of
scripture and the confessions.

In this regard, the three Afrikaans-speaking Reformed church com-
munities recently formed a more formal fellowship, after years of dis-
cussion, in a so-called interchurch council. This council meets twice a
year. On the agenda there are mainly three points; namely, the joint
witness of the churches to the community and the state, the coopera-
tion of the churches in matters such as education, combating of poverty,
et cetera, and the critical discussion of doctrinal and other matters that
separate the churches. Some of these matters are as follows: the ordain-
ing of women in the offices of minister and elder, the administering of
the Lord's Supper to children, the church's viewpoint on homosexual-
ity, liturgical matters, the government of the church, the Belhar confes-
sion, et cetera. These talks are of the utmost importance in the process
of unification.

If we are serious about our calling to strive and pray for unity, the
following factors are fundamental:

1. The Confessions must function as the living belief of the churches.
2. There should be a clear distinction between mediocre and essen-
   tial matters. In this regard, it is worthwhile to note the viewpoint
   of Calvin in his advice to the members of the Stranger Church
   in London, who experienced different circumstances from that of
   Geneva, as well as Calvin's other viewpoints referred to above.[82]
3. The untiring continuation of talks on an ecumenical level.

Matthew 12:25 clearly states that a household divided against itself will
not remain standing. The unity of his church was an essential part of
the 'last will' of our Lord. The salvation of so many people in the world
is at stake (Jn. 17:21). We have a calling to fulfill this in obedience, and
in the surety of the will of Jesus Christ.

---

[82] Andrew Pettegree, "The spread of Calvin's thought," in D.K. McKim, ed. *The
Cambridge companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 207.

TRANSFORMING IDENTITIES: REFORMED CHURCHES AND THE PETRINE DIALOGUE

CLINT LE BRUYNS

FROM IDENTITY TO STRUGGLE

In his insightful discussion of identity, the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to identity as a struggle issue. "Whenever you hear that word," he suggests, "you can be sure that there is a battle going on. A battlefield is identity's natural home. Identity comes to life only in the tumult of battle; it falls asleep and silent the moment the noise of the battle dies down."[1] It "is a simultaneous struggle against dissolution and fragmentation; an intention to devour and at the same time a stout refusal to be eaten…"[2]

Historically, the Reformed tradition emerged through the dominant influence of John Calvin (1509–1564) during the sixteenth century Genevan Reformation at a time of religious unrest that was directed at attempts to reform the church.[3] As J.D. Douglass points out, "Calvin was deeply shaped by participation during his student days in the Catholic humanist and biblical reforming movement represented by Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Etaples, as well as by the writings of Luther and Bucer, the chief reformer in Strasbourg."[4] During this time, the lines between the Roman Catholic Church and various reform movements hardened, with Calvin's teaching becoming extremely influential for those in Geneva and abroad, which progressively led to the dividing

---

[1] Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Malden: Polity, 2004), 77.

[2] Bauman, *Identity*, 77.

[3] Cf., David Steinmetz, "Reformation," in Nicholas Lossky et. al. (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: WCC, 2002), 963–966.

[4] Jane Dempsey Douglass, "A Reformed Perspective on the Ecumenical Movement," Ecumenical Convocation Address at Princeton Theological Seminary (30 September 1996), in *Religion Online* (1999) at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=421. Accessed 20/08/2004.

line becoming permanent. For the record, as L. Vischer makes clear, the formation of "separate Reformed churches occurred against the will and hope of the Reformers"[5] since it was by no means their intention "to set up a new church."[6] On the contrary, what was aimed for was "a movement to renew the whole church according to God's Word, but separate Reformed churches came into existence because the program of reform was rejected by the Roman church."[7]

The medieval church authorities resisted attempts at reform on the grounds that the authority of the church, as it was, was based on perpetuity or antiquity as enumerated by the opposing Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, i.e., that it was what it was because of general consent, longstanding beliefs, and beliefs enjoying universal reception.[8] In direct

---

[5] Lukas Vischer, "The Reformed Tradition and Its Multiple Facets," in Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Vischer (eds), *The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools, and International Organisations. A project of the International Reformed Centre John Knox, Geneva, Switzerland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1.

[6] Vischer, "Reformed Tradition," 1. See also, Martin H. Cressey, "Reformed/Presbyterian Churches," in Lossky et al (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 967.

[7] Vischer, "Reformed Tradition," 1. Vischer describes various stages in the history of the Reformed churches: The first stage involved "the struggle to introduce the new order of the Reformation: to give room to the demands of the Word of God; to replace the celebration of the mass with regular preaching and the common celebration of the Lord's Supper; to simplify the spiritual life and the activities of the church, and so on" (8). This included, *inter alia*, the first Reformed confessions out of the need "to explain and to defend the Reformation both to the population and to the outside world, in particular to the authorities of the Empire," in order to show "that the Reformation corresponded to the true Tradition over against the deviations in the medieval church" (8). Thereafter, another stage emerged in the mid-sixteenth-century in response to the need "to give a coherent account of the Christian faith as it was taught by the Reformed churches" (8). Several summaries of faith were penned to serve as both "the source and the criterion of the correct teaching of the church" (8). Hereafter, the rise of a Reformed Orthodoxy emerged, in the light of how Calvin's teaching had developed a distinctive and systematic character in contrast to Luther and other Reformers, with Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536 as the obvious case in point. Following Calvin's death, "Reformed doctrine took a more definite form" (9) as it was increasingly "organised into a coherent system" (9). Since then, numerous controversies and questions down the theological ages have enriched the original impulse of Reformed churches through new experiences, movements, horizons, and insights. In this regard, Dempsey describes Reformed churches as broadly as possible: "The Reformed family is not a single church but rather a family of Reformed churches that are historically and theologically related to the sixteenth-century Genevan reformation, whose principal teacher was the French theologian John Calvin." See Jane Dempsey Douglass, "A Reformed Perspective," 2. See also Cressey, "Reformed/Presbyterian Churches," in Lossky et al (Eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 966–968.

[8] See John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 14. Cited in Ross Mackenzie, "Authority in the Reformed

reaction to Sadoleto's argument, Calvin presented the "Word-of-God principle" for understanding the legitimacy and authority of the church and its activities and structures: "When you describe it as that which in all parts, as well as at the present time, in every region of the earth, being united and consenting in Christ, has been always and everywhere directed by the one Spirit of Christ, what comes of the Word of the Lord, that clearest of all marks?"[9] In this regard, the real reason for the Reformation, according to Calvin, was to protest against the manner in which the Word of God had been veiled or subverted in the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, especially vis-à-vis the doctrine and praxis of the papal office.

The ethos of the Reformed tradition since Calvin revolves primarily around the authority of the Word of God principle, characterized by a pre-eminent and reforming quality and role in the life and affairs of the churches. For, as M.H. Cressey notes, these churches have been "convinced that a reformed church is … *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed) in accordance with the divine purpose."[10]

Theologically, Reformed churches are critical of what I would refer to as a formalistic ecclesiology, an individualistic ecclesiology, and a conservative ecclesiology, in which the doctrine of the papacy has been encased.[11]

Commenting on the ecclesiological emphases of the second round of Roman Catholic-Reformed discussions, A. Blancy concludes: "Difficulties reside largely in different understandings of the relationship between what is confessed concerning the church and the concrete

---

Tradition," in Peter J. McCord (ed.), *A Pope for All Christians? An Inquiry into the Role of Peter in the Modern Church* (New York: Paulist, 1976), 94. Cf. James Torrance, "Interpreting the Word by the Light of Christ or the Light of Nature? Calvin, Calvinism, and Barth," in Robert V. Schnucker (ed.), *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, Vol. X, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 255 ff.

[9] See Mackenzie, "Authority in the Reformed Tradition," in McCord (ed.), *A Pope for All Christians?*, 95.

[10] Cressey, "Reformed/Presbyterian Churches," in Lossky et al (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 966.

[11] The bilateral dialogue has, in general, revealed both problematic and promising aspects of the Petrine ministry. The former concerns the following: the claims of papal infallibility and papal centrism; the nature of papal authority; the scandalous track record of certain popes in earlier times; and the question of papal primacy as transcending mere honor. The latter concerns the following: the affirmation of the potential legitimacy of a Petrine function of unity; that such popes as John XXIII and John Paul II fulfilled a profoundly pastoral and ecumenical role for both churches; that

forms of its historical existence."[12] In this way, Blancy draws attention to the pivotal nature of form in the ecclesiological frameworks of these two communions. While Reformed churches are cognizant of the reality and importance of form as applied to church ministry and its structures, they find the status of form within Roman Catholicism extremely problematic, especially in reference to the institutional character and outworking of the papacy.

One reservation concerns how the longstanding issue of ecclesiality remains out of reach for Reformed (and other) churches on formalistic grounds, i.e., on the basis that these non-Roman Catholic churches do not embrace the Roman Catholic form of ministry, which serves as an apt case in point of how ecumenically scandalous the papal office continues to be at present. Communion with the Roman Catholic Church through, and only through, communion with the Roman See is repudiated by Reformed ecclesiology, which would rather identify the church's ecclesiality, *inter alia*, with reference to the faithful administration and reforming work of the Word in the faith and life of the church.[13] Moreover, Reformed believers continue to question the biblical warrant for the papal institution in the form in which it presently exists.

In this regard, a second reservation rests with how the specific form of episcopacy has challenged Roman Catholics and Reformed churches.[14] Case-Winters and Mudge acknowledge that "for much of our

---

such Reformers as Zwingli and Calvin have received renewed consideration by Roman Catholics as praiseworthy figures; that recent popes have been earnestly concerned with reform in the church; that various issues of contention between the churches have been explored as past misunderstandings; that the primacy of the pope may at least be embraced as a primacy of honor; that the doctrine of the papacy is being explored anew by Roman Catholics within an ecclesiology of communion; and that former Pope John Paul II had made an important contribution toward ecclesial reconciliation. See Clint Le Bruyns, *The Papacy as Ecumenical Challenge: Contemporary Anglican and Protestant Perspectives on the Petrine Ministry*. DTh dissertation (unpublished), Stellenbosch University, 2004, at http://ir.sun.ac.za/dspace/handle/10019/313, esp. chapter 5.

[12] Blancy, "Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue," in Lossky et al (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 970.

[13] Cf. Stuart Louden, *The True Face of the Kirk* (London: Oxford University, 1963), 12; Mackenzie, "Authority in the Reformed Tradition," in McCord (ed.), *A Pope for All Christians?*, 95 ff. passim; Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 88–89. It is necessary to note that Reformed thinkers have indeed been tempted at different times toward labeling their particular church polity as *iure divino*, as the only form permitted by scripture, but most have regarded it better as finding agreement with the Word of God.

[14] See, for example, David N. Power, "Episcopacy," in Lossky et al (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 400–403, esp. 401.

history episcopacy has been associated in our minds with ecclesiastical establishment and sacral monarchy."[15] In no small measure, such an "antipathy to episcopacy"[16] remains in the Reformed ethos, even though others in the wider Reformed family have entertained and lived a different history.[17] Reformed churches hold rather to a primacy and authority of the Word of God, as opposed to the status attributed to a specific historical form of office.[18] For this reason, they bear an appreciation for apostolic succession as applied to faithfulness in the practice of God's revealed and reforming Word, but reflect serious reservations about limiting apostolic succession to episcopacy.[19] This understanding rests, *inter alia*, upon the fact that Calvin and the other Reformers "placed strong emphasis on Christ's presence in the local community,"[20] leading to the affirmation that "God's gifts do not require mediation by a hierarchical order"[21] since "Christ is present wherever God's Word is proclaimed and the sacraments administered."[22]

A third major reservation concerns how the cultural face and form of the papacy perpetuates the ecumenical distance between Roman Catholics and Reformed believers. The pope is stereotypically associated with a Roman (geographical form), Italian (conversational form), male (gender form), and jurisdictional (relational form) face. This cultural garb of the Petrine office, which is substantiated and preserved on biblical and ecclesiological grounds, does not contribute to overcoming the ecumenical impasse around the papal question.[23] Reformed ecclesiology would not restrict an office of ministry to a particular form of

---

[15] Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 89.

[16] Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 89. See, however, A. Helleman's remarks on episcopacy in the Reformed tradition, especially his comments on Calvin's practice of "a functional episcopacy in Geneva." Adrian Helleman, "The Contribution of John Calvin to an Ecumenical Dialogue on Papal Primacy," in *One in Christ*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1994), 340.

[17] See Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 89.

[18] See especially E.A.J.G. Van der Borght, *Het ambt her-dacht: Die gereformeerde ambtstheologie in het licht van het rapport* Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry *(Lima, 1982) van de theologische commissie* Faith and Order *van de Wereldraad van Kerken* (Amsterdam: Meinema, 2000), 484–485.

[19] See Van der Borght, *Het Ambt*, 489–491.

[20] Vischer, "Reformed Tradition," 30.

[21] Vischer, "Reformed Tradition," 30.

[22] Vischer, "Reformed Tradition," 30.

[23] In a helpful and insightful manner, P. Granfield identifies several key factors that count against the papacy as it has and continues to exist. See Patrick Granfield, *The Papacy in Transition* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981), 17–33.

culture, language, gender, symbolism, or operational framework. More-
over, it would find great offence with such limitations imposed on or
reflected in church structures of ministry.

Furthermore, Reformed churches find much difficulty in accepting
what could be viewed as imbalanced emphases applied to the offices
of ministry,[24] especially in respect of the papal office. As Vischer points
out, "Reformed churches have generally a deep, sometimes even an
excessive, mistrust of all forms of personal authority."[25] "Again and
again," he underlines, "Reformed statements of faith emphasise that
there is no hierarchical order in the Church but that all ministries are
of equal importance. Again and again they maintain that no congre-
gation has more rights than any other."[26] The Bishop of Rome, as well
as other participants in the hierarchy of leadership, are criticized for
the overemphasis on their roles at the expense of the vital roles carried
out by those on the lower rungs of the ministerial ladder.[27] Such dispar-
ity arguably paves the way for an exclusivist character and function of
leadership, which places too much distance and isolation between the
pope and the laity, but also readies the papal office for potential author-
itarianism, disputable claims of infallibility and jurisdiction, and similar
problems for the Reformed and broader ecumenical community.[28]

---

[24] For an insightful discussion concerning this tension between balance and imbal-
ance within the church, especially from a Reformed perspective, see Edmund P.
Clowney, *The Church* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), passim.

[25] Lukas Vischer, "The Ministry of Unity and the Common Witness of the Churches
Today," in James F. Puglisi (ed.), *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: "Toward a
Patient and Fraternal Dialogue". A Symposium Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Foundation
of the Society of the Atonement* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 139–140.

[26] Vischer, "The Ministry of Unity," 140. Helleman explains: "In the Church there
are different responsibilities, each with its corresponding authority. To state the obvious:
in Reformed polity a deacon is not an elder and an elder is not a pastor. But because
each office receives its authority directly from Christ, none may lord it over the other,
although this certainly does not mean that one minister cannot preside over others.
Authority belongs to the ministry and it never becomes the personal property of
the holder of the office, even though it is exercised by persons. Thus equality is not
demanded, but each office must respect the authority of the other offices." Helleman,
"The Contribution of John Calvin to an Ecumenical Dialogue on Papal Primacy," *One
in Christ*, 337.

[27] See Van der Borght, *Het ambt*, 492–496.

[28] See Van der Borght, *Het ambt*, 159–161. In his telling discussion of the ministerial
office in the thinking and teaching of John Calvin, Van der Borght refers to the
grounding and history of the primacy of the pope as treated in Calvin's *Institutes* (IV, VI
and VII). He highlights some of Calvin's primary reservations of the Roman Catholic
substantiation and theological position on the papacy. In the first place, there is the
issue of how Calvin reads Scripture and his understanding of Christ's intention. In the

According to C.H. Higgins in his identification of various primary ecclesiological strands in his Reformed tradition, "the conviction that the Church is to be governed in a *conciliar* fashion, with governing councils existing on local, regional, national, and (sometimes) international levels,"[29] is indeed a central facet of Reformed ecclesiology. Furthermore, "Reformed ecclesiology has also stressed the 'parity of the ministry,' teaching that all those ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament share the same sacramental office. Yet we also recognise, within the one order of ministry, many roles of commissioning and authority."[30] Reformed churches, given these methodological assumptions, fulfill a more corporate or collective type of episcope that is directed at a more pastoral episcopacy,[31] which inevitably imposes impediments on the way of the Petrine dialogue. While recognizing other forms of church government as potentially legitimate, their suspicion or caution regarding a less collective approach is substantiated in large measure in reference to "the seriousness of the human condition with respect to sin and evil."[32] Therefore, the responsibility of the individual leader or representative, such as the pope, would be "embedded

---

second place, there is the issue of Christ's authority, given for the sake of the church's unity. For Calvin, the grounding of papal primacy is flawed. Van der Borght then shows how this ecclesiologically-flawed point of departure paved the way for a papal history papered with controversy, scandal, and division—so much so that Calvin eventually employed radical terminology, such as 'the antichrist,' to refer to the nature of the pope. Given this background, Van der Borght argues: "Calvijn verwerpt het pausdom, omdat de pausen hun taak niet opnemen als herders die hun kudde weiden met Woord, sacrament en tuchtuitoefening. …Zij hebben zichzelf uitgeroepen tot hoofd van de kerk en verwisselden de collegiale ambtsuitoefening voor een tirannieke alleenheerschappij. Het resultaat is dat zij zo vervreemd zijn van het gelovige volk, dat zij niet langer in staat zijn om namens hen te spreken" (160–161). See also, Vischer, "The Ministry of Unity" 140–141.

[29] Higgins, "Plausible Ecumenism," *Touchstone Magazine*.

[30] Higgins, "Plausible Ecumenism." This understanding is reinforced by Cressey in his discussion of the polity of Reformed/Presbyterian churches, as he succinctly asserts: "The polities of the Reformed churches were consciously developed to enable a return to what was held to be the discipleship of the early church", of which the main features were "the parity of ministers, the participation of all members in church government and the authority of councils." See Cressey, "Reformed/Presbyterian Churches," 967.

[31] See Higgins, "Plausible Ecumenism," 3.

[32] Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 88. They elaborate: "The conviction that our condition is fallen, fallible and fragile has caused us to place limitations on the power and position to be accorded to any individual in matters of doctrine or practice. We have therefore tended to lodge authority in corporate or conciliar bodies of duly elected persons."

in the shared responsibility of an elected representative college"[33] in the Reformed tradition.

Reformed churches also experience ecclesiological difficulty with Roman Catholicism concerning the tension between stability and change or maintenance and reform. It is noteworthy that the origins of their embittered relationship lie in this same tension, where Reformed churches were born as part of their concern for church renewal in conformity with the Word of God, and in the face of the Roman church's rejection of such a campaign for reform.[34] More specifically, the papal office is repudiated at present for an array of problematic aspects that are conserved and maintained, rather than confronted and transformed.

In their critical remarks on the reception of tradition, Case-Winters and Mudge underline the reformational ecclesiology within the Reformed tradition, as they assert: "In general, we assume that tradition is a living, growing, human thing: dynamic, not static. It cannot simply be passed on unchanged, like a family heirloom. Consistent with our conviction of human fallibility is our recognition of many false starts and wrong turns along the way."[35] In this way, they highlight the dynamic character of the Reformed tradition vis-à-vis matters ecclesiological; at the same time, these remarks serve as a critique of the papacy with its historical teachings and practices.

Proceeding further, they concede that in both communions, "There are times when we confuse local customs, parochialisms, or special interests with what is central to the tradition."[36] This should challenge the churches and their structures of ministry with the authority of the Word of God to responsibly reform all that the church is and does, as they remark: "Careful and faithful 'passing on' requires open, self-critical, reflection. Tradition lives by the continuing reconstruction of its symbolic world as we seek to clarify historically given meanings in ever-changing circumstances."[37] Applied to the papal institution, Case-Winters and Mudge draw attention to what Reformed churches may see as a static or conservative ecclesiology and office, which demands urgent consideration as to its much-needed program toward dynamic reform.

---

[33] Vischer, "The Ministry of Unity," 141.
[34] See also (and again), Vischer, "Reformed Tradition," 1–2.
[35] Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 87–88.
[36] Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 88.
[37] Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 88.

From Struggle to Dialogue

Given the struggle dynamics insofar as Christian identity is concerned, concerns about ecclesial identity can either give way to further and perpetual hostility and separation or it can fuel a renewed concern for a new relationship through dialogue. It is important that churches wrestle with issues of identity, but they must eventually proceed to the second mode, that of engaging in ecumenical conversation whereby acknowledgement is made of aspects of struggle as well as how to overcome their past divisions and hostilities toward mutual recognition and witness.

To attempt to engage public life through common witness apart from dialogue is not uncommon among many in the ecumenical churches, but it is risky. Nissiotis contends:

> We should not deceive ourselves. There is no authentic, stable and permanent church unity possible without doctrinal agreement. All other enthusiastic approaches have only a limited value and, even risk creating further confusion, however effective they may appear for the moment.[38]

D. Hollenbach, like Nissiotis, underlines the value of dialogue for the substance it offers ecumenical pursuits:

> The challenge of today's pluralistic and interdependent world … leads to a new way of conceiving the ancient question of the relationship between faith and reason in the development of an ethic that can guide the church's action in society. … Dialogue—the active engagement of listening and speaking with others whose beliefs and traditions are different— is the key to such dynamism. Where such dialogue is absent, the chances of obtaining a vision of the common good of the world we are entering will be small to the point of vanishing.[39]

From Dialogue to Resources

Dialogues easily and notoriously get 'stuck,' but one of the important dynamics within these conversations should include a frank recognition of what resourcefulness or values are embedded within different

---

[38] Nissiotis, "Preface," in Thurian, *Ecumenical Perspectives*, viii.
[39] David Hollenbach, *The Global Face of Public Faith: Politics, Human Rights, and Christian Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2003), 15.

churches and their particular structures of ministry.[40] The following areas deserve engagement and attention for their prospective ecumenical import:[41] In the first round of bilateral discussions, while the participants refer to the essential characteristics and norms of the church that "are *de rigueur* for every period and culture,"[42] they also acknowledge that "the Church assumes different forms depending on the historical heritage it carries with it and the social and cultural situation in which it is set and in which it grows."[43] In this regard, they concede to the reality of development in the forms that the church assumes in history, which may or may not correspond to the normative character of the church under the authority of the New Testament witness.[44] The proprium of theology, therefore, includes "the difficult task of seeking the normative within the relative, and of applying what is thereby found to the concrete realisation of the Church in different historical situations."[45]

---

[40] According to Case-Winters and Mudge, "We must draw upon our knowledge of the Presbyterian ethos and our judgement of what sorts of understandings Presbyterians may be expected to accept. We must use our judgement of what is relevant." Case-Winters and Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," 86. Bauman aptly likens identity to a jigsaw puzzle as follows: "We may say that the solving of jigsaw puzzles bought in a shop is *goal-oriented*: you start, so to speak, from the finishing line, from the final image known to you beforehand, and then pick up from the box one piece after another and try to fit them together. You are confident all along that eventually, with due effort, the right place for each piece and the right piece for each place will be found. The mutual fit of pieces and the completeness of their set are assured before you start. In the case of identity it is not like that at all: the whole labour is *means-oriented*. You do not start from the final image, but from a number of bits which you have already obtained or which seem to be worthy of having, and then you try to find out how you can order and reorder them to get some (how many?) pleasing pictures. You are *experimenting with what you have*. Your problem is not what you need in order to 'get there', to arrive at the point you want to reach, but what are the points that can be reached given the resources already in your possession, and which ones are worthy of your efforts to obtain them" (48–49).

[41] Also see, Kasper, "Reactions of Walter Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Paper 'The Successor to Peter'," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, §§7–9, §§107–109.

[42] "The Presence of Christ in Church and World. Final Report of the Dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, 1977," in Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (eds), *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (Geneva: WCC, 1984). Hereafter referred to as FR 1977. See FR 1977, §18.

FR 1977, §18.

[43] FR 1977, §18.

[44] FR 1977, §18.

[45] FR 1977, §19.

These remarks are resourceful for furthering the Petrine dialogue in several ways. First, it highlights the papal office as representing a specific form of the church for Roman Catholics, which has passed on the historical heritage of their tradition through countless generations, as well as having been influenced and shaped by numerous social and cultural situations in its historical sojourn. The difficulty for the Reformed tradition, however, resided particularly with the question concerning the extent to which this distinctive form of the sixteenth century church reflected a genuine development out of the New Testament witness. Second, it draws attention to the challenging task in ecumenical theology of finding that which is normative within this relative form of a large section of the church.

In other words, the Reformed churches are possibly confronted with the papal office as a potentially legitimate, albeit different, form of the one church. Reformed churches could do well to reflect seriously on such questions as the following: To what extent, if any, has the Petrine office contributed to the transmission of God's Word and the one faith through the centuries, over and above its checkered history? What aspects of the Petrine ministry, if any, could be recognized as reflecting various essential norms and characteristics of the church in its historical outworking?

The participants underline the fallibility of these relative forms of the church in history, which must also include the office of the pope. While the church should ensure that its structures and its life correspond to its calling and essential character,[46] its servants are imperfect agents of God's Word in reality.[47] The church, as *creatura Verbi*, and its ministers, do not always, in experience, stand "under the living Word of God" as servants of the Word.[48] In this light, the participants draw attention to the church's ongoing need for reform and renewal,[49] since it should never "become set in immobility on the plea that it is immutable, but must above all be listening to the Word of God in which it will discern … the transformations required of it precisely in virtue of its fidelity to this Word."[50] In this way, the participants reflect a fertile area for

---

[46] FR 1977, §55.

[47] FR 1977, §93. See especially Van der Borght, *Het ambt*, 474–478, cf. 501–503.

[48] FR 1977, §26.

[49] FR 1977, §56. Cf. Douglass, "A Reformed Perspective on the Ecumenical Movement," *Religion Online*, 14–15.

[50] FR 1977, §61.

growing a deeper communion between Roman Catholic and Reformed churches through the dialogue on the papal office.

The participants concede that all historical forms of the church, including that of the papacy, are fallible in practice and experience, and *ipso facto* in need of the reforming Word of God. This places emphasis on the papal office as a human structure with noble and biblical intentions—yet still human. It therefore provides Reformed churches with an opportunity to faithfully continue their tradition of reform within the church, according to the Word of God, for the benefit of the Petrine office. Roman Catholics would need to be open to the Reformed contributions in this regard as a valuable, legitimate, and propitious gift to the office of the pope for better reflecting that which forms part of the normative church.

In the first round of discussions, the participants also refer to the important role that official church authorities fulfill in society. As representatives of their communities, they "have to pay careful attention to whether and in what respects they are obliged by their Lord to speak a prophetic and pastoral word to the general public."[51] The participants underline the need for the church's structures, which must include the papal office, to essentially and experientially contradict "the structures of the various sectors of the life of modern secular society: opposing exploitation, oppression, manipulation, intellectual and political pressures of all kinds."[52] It behoves churches, therefore, to seek the ongoing renewal of congregations as vital life forms that also influence the wider social and political milieu.[53] Given the crises confronting the churches and their credibility and witness, the participants acknowledge the urgent need for much expertise in dealing with these manifold problems in society.[54]

These remarks are resourceful for both churches and their dialogue on the Petrine office. In the first place, the participants confront Roman Catholics with the need to review the papal structure. Roman Catholics should reflect on to what extent, if any, the papal structure coincides with or contradicts the problematic structural realities in society. Does the way in which the pope functions in his office oppose or exude exploitation, oppression, manipulation, or different kinds of intellectual

---

[51] FR 1977, §58.
[52] FR 1977, §56.
[53] FR 1977, §56.
[54] FR 1977, §57.

and political pressures? Reformed churches have historically and cur-
rently maintained a veritable criticism of the papacy on these fronts,
which should be listened to by Roman Catholics as a gift to the church
at large. Issues requiring further exploration, in this regard, include
that of authority and service,[55] communality,[56] collegiality,[57] and various
papal claims.[58]

In the second place, the participants confront Reformed churches
with the possible value of the pope and his work as a potentially legiti-
mate and propitious ministry of expertise. There is already a rich papal
tradition that consistently and actively engages Roman Catholic believ-
ers in understanding, interpreting, and responding to a vast array of
critical issues in society. The theological and social expertise of the pope
in the past century especially reflects the ecumenical import of such
a role. The Reformed tradition could potentially be better enhanced,
equipped, and strengthened as the papal expertise on various societal
issues is received as a possible gift to the church at large. Moreover,
the potential import of an office of a ministerial president—not merely
as a title of honor, but also "as a ministry for the upbuilding of the
Church: as leadership, proclamation"[59]—is also discussed by the partic-
ipants and could be evidence of another sign of promise for the papal
dialogue.

In the second round of discussions, the participants refer to the legit-
imate concerns behind both communions' actions at the Reformation.
They point out that "The established leadership of the western church
was not generally prepared to agree to the amendments of doctrine,
church order, and practice which the Reformers sought."[60] The Roman
Catholics concede to the logic of reform in the period after the Council
of Trent (1545–1563) as they readily admit that all was not always well
with the medieval church:

---

[55] Cf. FR 1977, §§ 93 ff., § 109.
[56] Cf. FR 1977, §§ 94–96.
[57] Cf. FR 1977, § 102, § 109.
[58] Cf. FR 1977, §§ 39–42.
[59] FR 1977, § 109. See also Van der Borght, *Het ambt*, 487–489.
[60] "Towards a Common Understanding of the Church. Second Phase, 1984–1990,"
in Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G. Rusch (eds), *Growth in Agreement II:
Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982–1998* (Geneva:
WCC, 2000). Hereafter referred to as FR 1990. See FR 1990, § 21.

> Especially denounced at that time were the venality and political and
> military involvements of some of the popes and members of the curia;
> the absence of bishops from their dioceses; their often ostentatious wealth
> and neglect of pastoral duties; the ignorance of many of the lower clergy;
> the often scandalous lives of clergy, including bishops and certain popes;
> the disedifying rivalry among the religious orders; pastoral malpractice
> through misleading teaching about the efficacy of certain rites and ritu-
> als; the irrelevance and aridity of theological speculation in the universi-
> ties and the presence of these same defects in the pulpit; the lack of any
> organised catechesis for the laity; and a popular piety based to a large
> extent on superstitious practices.[61]

Roman Catholics point out that while both were interested in reform,
the Reformers based their agenda of reform on doctrine, against which
Roman Catholics instinctively retaliated for what it seemed to imply,
viz., that the church had nurtured an erroneous faith over time.[62] While
Calvin and others appeared utterly convinced that Rome was unwilling
to undertake the profound reform they wanted, the Reformers' pro-
posals on church order were attacked and resisted by the church and its
popes for its apparent assault on the apostolic foundation of the church.
Their doctrinal disputes seemed to call into question the very work of
the Spirit, as well as other similar concerns.[63]

In this way, the participants draw attention to their common desire
for the integrity of the church, even though the path each communion
took in defending this integrity of the church differed from the other
and, tragically, forced their separation in history. This is important
for wrestling with the theological and ecclesial baggage of the past
and for seeking to reconcile both communions in the light of painful
memories.[64] The participants, in this regard, provide a methodological
and theological key for seeking to potentially unlock the deadlock on

---

[61] FR 1977, §34.

[62] FR 1977, §§36–37.

[63] FR 1977, §39.

[64] Roman Catholics also attempt to clear up some misunderstandings on certain
problematic points between Roman Catholics and Reformed churches. For instance,
on the matter of infallibility, they point out: "Vatican I did not teach that 'the pope
is infallible,' as is popularly imagined. Rather it taught that the pope can, under
carefully specified and limited circumstances, officially exercise the infallibility divinely
given to the church as a whole, in order to decide questions of faith and morals for
the universal church" (FR 1977, §51). Nevertheless, the Reformed churches would still
struggle with other concerns about the infallibility doctrine. Roman Catholics have
often been offended by the Reformed rejection of the episcopacy and papacy, coupled
with its pejorative talk (§56), but are also more cognizant nowadays about what factors
were fueling the Reformers in their actions.

the papal office, i.e., the motif of reform. This demands, therefore, that the papal office not only be perceived as a structure open to as well as supportive of reform, but that it indeed be shaped by a process of reform. Furthermore, it also demands that the Reformed tradition and its structures not only be open to and supportive of reform, but that it be shaped by a reforming program, too. It also demands that the Reformed churches contribute to the dialogue on the Petrine office as a dialogue on its future shape and form that reflects and coincides with the Word of God.[65]

In the second round of discussions, the participants also give attention to the difficulties their different forms of historical existence have caused between the two communions: "Our two communions regard themselves as belonging to the *una sancta* but differ in their understanding of that belonging."[66] When it comes to the continuity of the church through the ages, they are concerned with how the church has remained one from generation to generation. They appeal to their common regard for the apostolicity of the church as "a living reality which simultaneously keeps the church in communion with its living source and allows it to renew its youth continually so as to reach the kingdom."[67] For the Reformed tradition, it is linked to "continuity in the confession of faith and in the teaching of gospel doctrine,"[68] whereas for Roman Catholics, it is "linked to a certain number of visible signs through which the Spirit works, in particular to the apostolic succession of bishops."[69]

On the visibility and the ministerial order of the church, they typically differ on "the role of visible structure, particularly in relation to mission and ministry,"[70] but nevertheless together appreciate the broader significance of visibility for missiological ends: "The visible/invisible church lives in the world as a structured community. … Its visible structure is intended to enable the community to serve as an instrument of Christ for the salvation of the world. … In all its visible activity,

---

[65] Cf. Douglass, "A Reformed Perspective," 14–15.

[66] FR 1990, §89.

[67] FR 1977, §116.

[68] FR 1977, §120. See especially Van der Borght, *Het ambt*, 489–491.

[69] FR 1990, §120. This notion of apostolic succession features as an ongoing bone of contention in their relationship, which, therefore, poses a challenge for the Reformed to incorporate the pope in their system of ecclesiological beliefs.

[70] FR 1977, §125.

its goal is *soli Deo Gloria, ad maiorem Dei gloriam.*"[71] They agree, moreover, that visible order entails "a ministry of word, sacrament, and oversight given by Christ to the church to be carried out by some of its members for the good of all. This triple function of the ministry equips the church for its mission in the world."[72]

The ministry of oversight (*episkopè*) is included in this order, "exercised by church members for the fidelity, unity, harmony, growth, and discipline of the wayfaring people of God under Christ."[73] They "agree on the need for *episkopè* in the church, on the local level (for pastoral care in each congregation), on the regional level (for the link of congregations among themselves), and on the universal level (for the guidance of the supranational communion of churches)."[74]

The participants' remarks are resourceful for the papal dialogue. At the very least it shows that while there are important differences between the communions vis-à-vis apostolic succession and episkope, they recognize the need for a ministry that protects, preserves, and promotes the integrity and transmission of the church's mission in historical existence.[75] They recognize, therefore, the necessity and value of a structure of ministry that reflects these dynamics in a faithful and effective way. Such a role is already assumed by the office and work of the pope, even though certain difficulties exist around the nature of his office. Reformed churches, insofar as such a ministry is required, would do well to further explore the import of the papal office for these ends, albeit not without modification in how it presently exists and operates.[76]

---

[71] FR 1977, §128. See also Higgins, "Plausible Ecumenism," 4–5.

[72] Cf. FR 1990, §§130 ff., especially §132.

[73] FR 1977, §135. Placing it in its biblical context, they agree: "From the various forms of leadership mentioned in the pastorals there emerged a pattern of *episcopoi*, presbyters, and deacons, which became established by the end of the second century" (§136). The ministry of oversight is hereby recognised as indispensable as they strive to model faithfulness and obedience in the world. Disagreement still exists, however, on who is regarded as episkopos at these different levels and what these functions entail (§142).

[74] FR 1977, §142. See Van der Borght, *Het ambt*, 499–501.

[75] See FR 1977, 482–483 and 489–491.

[76] In this regard, see Helleman, "The Contribution of John Calvin to an Ecumenical Dialogue on Papal Primacy", *One in Christ*, 329–332.

From Resources to Transformation

The ecumenical struggle and the new dialogue in which creative avenues are explored for its strategic import must give way to transformation and service in the church and society through the new witness by these two churches as they grapple with the problems and prospects of the Petrine office. Already in the seventies, R. McAfee Brown contended that the papal ministry (as well as the overall ministry of the church) must find connectedness in application with the burning issues of the human family, instead of only wrestling with intra-church matters. He states:

> We do not live in the 'Christendom' era any more, but in the time of the *diaspora*, the dispersion, of the church… We live in a time when the burning issues for the human family *and for the church* are going to be centred much more on questions of poverty, hunger, war and racism, than on the subtleties of 'real presence,' multiple sources of revelation, or fresh nuances on Mary's role in the economy of salvation. … [So] even in our most intricate theological exchanges about the role of the papacy, we are obligated to relate the implications of such discussions to the human realities of the great majority of the human family today … who, if they are to be persuaded that theological refinements may contribute to the salvation of the human race, would like to see some tangible evidence of that likelihood.[77]

J. de Santa Ana reflects this same perspective in his critique of church structures within a context of poverty. He posits: "The search for a Christian Church which is really representative of the poor and shares in their struggles and expectations, their sorrows and hopes, must inevitably include the issue of Church order and Church structures."[78] He maintains that the organization of the churches often reflects similar problematic dynamics as various structures within broader society, which results in the poor feeling "that Church structures are foreign to them."[79] He underlines the call for structural renewal and transformation as he asserts: "The poor bring new insights and give fresh impetus to the work of the Church and call the institutional churches to change their organisation and reform their structures."[80]

---

[77] See Brown, "Introduction," in McCord, *A Pope for All Christians?*, 2–3.

[78] Julio de Santa Ana (ed.), *Towards a Church of the Poor: The Work of an Ecumenical Group on the Church and the Poor* (Geneva: WCC, 1979), 173.

[79] De Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor*, 173.

[80] De Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor*, 174.

Highlighting concerns around the non-involvement of those in the lowest sectors of society, De Santa Ana suggests that "Churches which are trying to respond positively to the challenge of the poor feel that their structures must correspond to those of the community life of the people they are trying to serve."[81] In other words, he continues, "church structures must be adapted to people, they must be flexible enough to accept their challenges, their ideas."[82] Finally, he also asks: "Who takes care of the whole, who ensures order and harmony between the different charismas so that everything works together for the edification of the same body?"[83]

Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians readily discern various problematic aspects within the Petrine office, then and now. This notwithstanding, the Petrine office as a church structure is a public structure of society that impacts public life by virtue of the reality that those within the churches are also members scattered throughout public life. Reformed churches, therefore, could assist in providing a ministry of accountability by participating in the *Ut Unum Sint* dialogue on the reform of the papacy for the purpose of renewing its public import. In the light of the WARC's determined efforts in public life, they have much to contribute to the dialogue in the context of their ecclesiological conversations around the Petrine ministry.

Conclusion

It is my hope that Reformed and other Christians, on the basis that these traditional matters of ecclesiology matter, embrace the invitation by former Pope John Paul II to engage "in a patient and fraternal dialogue" on the Petrine ministry, "a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea 'that they may all be one … so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (Jn 17:21)?"[84] Precisely how we participate in this dialogue in order to strengthen our public engagement

---

[81] De Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor*, 175.
[82] De Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor*, 175.
[83] De Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor*, 176.
[84] John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1995), §96. See also Le Bruyns, *The Papacy as Ecumenical Challenge*, chapter 1.

is a question that begs further reflection and discussion. And only then might traditional ecclesiological matters, such as the Petrine ministry, as discussed in ecumenical dialogues, such as the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue, be appreciated anew for its service in the world.

IDENTITY AND MINISTRY

Eduardus Van der Borght

Introduction: Church and Identity

It is well known that Karl Barth, when publishing the first volume of his opus magnum, changed the title from 'Christian' to 'Church' dogmatics. In the preface that he wrote in the summer of 1932, he explained this substitution in the following way: "…, I have tried to set a good example of restraint in the lighthearted use of the great word 'Christian' against which I have protested. But materially I have also tried to show that from the very outset dogmatics is not a free science. It is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful."[1] The protest he referred to was the 1929 lecture on 'the Holy Spirit and the Christian Life' in which he had criticized the use of the word 'Christian' as an adjective applied to art, worldviews, parties, newspaper, and societies, etc.[2] The words of Barth help us to remember the strong links between Christian identity and the teachings of the church. To paraphrase Barth, theology is not a free science. Christian identity is linked to the identity of the church. I think most Reformed theologians will agree with this opinion.

This causes us to question what we are referring to when we discuss Christian identity. Can we be more specific than Barth with his vague indication on 'the sphere of the church'? If our theology is linked to the teachings of the church then which church are we referring to? Traditionally, Reformed theology has not been satisfied with the normative status of the early church of the seven ecumenical councils within the Orthodox tradition. Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has redefined its identification with the *una sancta* with the formulation: "This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society,

---

[1] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatic Vol I The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980²), xii–xiii.

[2] T.J. Gorringe, *Karl Barth against Hegemony—Christian Theology in Context* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 123.

subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor
of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many
elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible
structure."[3] Still this more nuanced formulation scares most Reformed
churches because it accents the hierarchical structure with the pope and
the bishops at the top. During the Reformation era, two marks were
applied to local congregations and used to differentiate between the
true and the false church—the pure ministry of the Word and the pure
administration of the sacraments. Some might be satisfied to identify
the *una sancta* with the sum of local congregations to which this double
criterion applies, but other Reformed theologians will judge that the
reduction of the church to the level of the local congregation is defi-
cient. Another non-viable option is the identification of the church with
denominations. The organization of congregations in denominational
structures has the tendency of a continued repetition of schisms. Often
baptisms and ministries are not mutually recognized and Eucharistic
hospitality is refused to those who do not belong to their church. So the
question that remains is how we can identify the one, holy, catholic and
apostolic church?

The impossiblity of giving an answer to this question reveals the dan-
ger of a situation in which church unity is broken and scattered into
many denominations and congregations who are often not on speak-
ing terms with one another. If Christian identity is a churchly identity,
then Reformed theologians face a major problem. To understand our
Christian identity can only be a communal exercise, but the commu-
nion is broken. Unity and identity are two sides of one coin. The need
for ecumenical dialogue and calls for unity are often explained on the
basis of the need to give a reliable witness of the Christian faith to out-
siders. But the internal necessity is even more urgent. The absence of
Christian unity threatens the ability to give a trustworthy account of
the Christian faith because we need the brothers and sisters in Christ
to help us to uncover our own one-sidedness. The broken unity is a
problem for all churches with roots in the Reformation, but among
the traditions stemming from the magisterial Reformation the situation
among the Reformed churches is most problematic.

This brings us to the following question. Is there something in the
theology of the churches stemming from the Reformation, and espe-

---

[3] *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

cially among the Reformed churches, that makes them more vulnerable for schisms than the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church families? Should we remove a specific element that is causing schisms, or is an element lacking that is able to resist the pressure to break the communion with other Christian faith communities? Are the traditional elements that express Christian faith and support Christian unity within the Reformed tradition not strong enough? In order to find an answer to these questions, I will first of all concentrate on the last question: the traditional unifying elements within the Reformed tradition.

Confessions and Identity

The (almost) universal way for Reformed churches to express their faith is by confessions. Just as the United Protestant Church in Belgium (the denomination of which I am a member) starts its constitution with articles on the faith and the calling of the church, and refers on this occasion to the confessions it adheres to, most Reformed churches identify their faith with reference to one or more confessions of faith.[4] The topics of some keynote lectures and the titles of some of the workshops at this conference on Christian identity reveal a strong interest in the confessions of faith as well. Not surprisingly in the 2003 volume *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*,[5] we find some contributions that concentrate on the Reformed confessions.

In this volume the Barth biographer and Göttingen theologian, Eberhard Bush, is not impressed by the denominational weakness within the Reformed tradition. Instead, he emphasizes its confessional strength.[6] The many Reformed confessions prevent a monolithic confessionalism, underpin the primacy of scripture, and express the actual confessing of the faith of God's people on their pilgrimage. With their local confessions, the Reformed churches do not demarcate their

---

[4] Article 1.2 of the Constitution of the United Protestant Church: "In communion with the general Church, she recognizes to be heir of those who confessed their faith in the Apostolic Creed, etc." Article 1.4 of the Church Order of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands states: "The confession of the church is in communion with the confession of our ancestors, such as formulated in the Apostolic Creed, etc."

[5] W.M. Alston Jr. and M. Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

[6] E. Busch, "Reformed Strength in Its Denominational Weakness," in Alston Jr. and Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 20–33.

confessional distinctiveness, but confess a universal church at a specific moment in time and at a certain place. Busch does not only defend the contextual approach of Reformed confessions against potential (Lutheran) critique, he combines it with a confirmation of the anti-hierarchical and democratic element of Reformed ecclesiology. Reformed confessions are anti-pagan with their emphasis on one God alone, on God's claim on our own life, and on the communal form of the Christian life under One Head. Membership of a congregation is not primarily an issue of human choice, but of divine calling. It is God's work, and God is also the real office-bearer, who gathers, protects, and keeps the congregation. For this reason, all human leadership of the congregation is only derived from the actual congregation. National and international church structures can only be confederations of local congregations.

In another contibution in the same volume, Margit Ernst pleads for concentration on Christian identity instead of Reformed identity.[7] A quest for Reformed identity might lead to introverted denominationalism. She considers her appeal to be in line with the intention of the Reformed churches to represent the one catholic church. The contextual element of Reformed confessions does not threaten the unity of the church if these confessions are intended to be expression of the faith of the one church, the universal church, or the *una sancta catholica ecclesia* in a specific situation. And the sixteenth century Reformers of the church wanted to reform the existing church and not to found a separate denomination. She fears what a quest for Reformed identity will lead to and pleads instead for a focus on Christian identity.

Both authors remind us of the strength of the combination of catholic intentions and a contextual approach in the Reformed tradition of expressing the faith in confessions *in tempore et in loco*. In reality, however, it is too often the case that the contextuality tends to be the expression of the faith of a local group of believers and not the faith of the one church. Apparently, the catholic intentions of the confessions are not enough to counter-balance the accent on the local. In reality, the history of the Reformed tradition is one of continued schisms in which confessions have marked demarcation lines between denominations.

Another article reveals the disastrous consequences of the lack of unity within the Reformed tradition. Dirk Smit, one of the drafting fathers of a recent, successful, Reformed confession—the Belhar con-

---

[7] M. Ernst, "We Believe in One, Holy and Catholic Church …: Reformed Identity and the Unity of the Church," in Alston Jr. and Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 85–96.

fession—analyses why Reformed Christians in South Africa, in spite
of their own faith and in spite of their numbers, seem to shy away
from calls to participate in public reconstruction after the end of the
apartheid era.[8] One of the reasons Smit mentions for this doubt is
the total lack of unity. Who will speak God's Word for public life on
behalf of these radically divided churches? He points to the loss of loy-
alty to the broader structures of the church and to their denomination
among members and ministers. Ecclesial isolationism is on the increase
in Reformed churches. Enthusiasm for church unity and ecumenism
is declining and being replaced by arbitrary cooperaton on specific
projects with like-minded believers and congregations. Ministers restyle
their ministries around small groups of families and friends. Smit ana-
lyzes this reluctance to engage in the public domain not merely as a
moral, but also as a theological problem. The integrity of the identity
of the Reformed Christians in South Africa is at stake as is the credi-
bility of their life and witness. If a serious theological answer has to be
found, one of the alienations that must be overcome is the one between
theological scholarship and every day life in church and society. "It will
be of no use … if we share exciting knowledge about the nature and
role of the church and congregations are organized according to ad
hoc recipies for success and entertainment…"[9] The last sentence of his
article summarizes his message: "Reformed theology should be both
serious scholarly theology *and* churchly reflection."[10]

In contrast to Busch, who affirmed the traditional low-key perfor-
mance of offices in the church, Smit points to other elements in the
dysfunction of ministry in the church. Can we identify this as one of
the major elements why the Reformed tradition is not able to combine
scholarly theology and churchly reflection?

Bruce McCormack tries to answer that question.[11] The American
theologian contrasts the position of the 'doctors of the church' to the
Evangelical-Reformed churches of the sixteenth century (who owed a
relative but, nonetheless, real obedience to their churches) and to the

---

[8] D. Smit, "Can We Still Be Reformed? Questions from a South African Perspec-
tive," in Alston Jr. and Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 233–253.

[9] Smit, "Can We Still Be Reformed? Questions from a South African Perspective,"
252.

[10] Smit, "Can We Still Be Reformed? Questions from a South African Perspective,"
253.

[11] B.L. McCormack, "The End of Reformed Theology? The voice of Karl Barth in
the Doctrinal Chaos of the Present," in Alston Jr. and Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 46–64.

position of the Reformed theologians of today, who—with the slogan 'Academic Freedom'—have in reality become independent theologians. Earlier the subject of church doctrine in the Reformed churches meant that it should be a church that exercises its teaching office through the public promulgation of a confession, but now we are only left with individual theologians. On the right, we find those who subscribe to the letter of a confession as an obligation for faith. In the middle, the orthodox party lacks a concrete relationship to an existing church body. And on the left, theologians try to completely free themselves from confessions. For McCormack, the affirmation by Reformed theologians of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the absence of any discernible connection to the theology of the confession in his/her own church is the sheerest ecclesial idealism. So in his opinion, the Reformed tradition will pass away if its theologians do not submit themselves to churchly authority, even when the churches are not actively excercising it. He has learned from Barth that ecclesial authority is not immediate and absolute, but temporal, relative, and formal. Nonetheless, it is real through four mediating factors: 1. canon and text of the Bible, 2. the creeds, 3. the 'Fathers' or 'Doctors of the Church,' and 4. command of the hour. The author stresses the ecclesial nature of Christian identity and focuses on the status of Reformed theology in relationship to the churches. He wants the actual academic theologians to be restyled towards the fourth office of Calvin, the Doctors of the Church. I have two remarks. First, the problematic description of academic Reformed theologians, who have lost their identity as a ministry of the church to develop the teaching of the church, is in reality a problem for all ministerial offices within the church. Ministry in the church is not understood fundamentally as safeguarding the Christian identity of the church. Second, Karl Barth might not the best guide in this issue. Barth did not understand the ministry in the church as one of the mediating factors of ecclesial authority. Calvin, who understood offices in the church in this way, might be a better guide.

Ministry and Identity

In order to safeguard the identity of the church, its nature, and its mission, the early church came to the insight that it needed some structural security devices in order to protect its integrity. Traditionally, reference

is made to the fixation of the canon of books of scripture, the under-
standing of Christology and Trinity as expressed in the confessions,
and the ministerial structuring of the church. During the Reforma-
tion these decisions were more or less endorsed. The canon was not
a real point of discussion within the Reformed tradition, and, as we
have seen, confessions became the element *par excellence* to protect the
identity of the church. But the third element, the ministerial structure,
became an element of much disagreement—especially in the Anglo-
Saxon world.

When discussing ministerial offices, the historical background was
formed by the horror at the misuse of power by office bearers in the
church—in particular, doctors in theology, bishops, and the pope—
who attempted to place and keep the free Word of God under their
own authority. For this reason, the Reformers wanted to develop a new
theology and structure of ministry. So Luther restricted the power of
office bearers in the church by subjugating their authority to the power
of the Word and by pointing to the authority of the congregation as
a community of baptized and pneumatologically-instructed believers.
The Calvinist tradition restricted the power of the individual minister
even further by giving presbytery and synod, collegial governing bodies
within the church, much more decision making authority. This restric-
tion of power revolved around the meaning of ministry in the church:
ordained ministry is service to the Word. This meant that ministry was
given its correct place in the church. Ministry in the church does not
exist for the sake of power in itself. Its sole purpose is to create the
right conditions for God to come to his people through his living Word.
Another important change took place with regard to the form of min-
istry. It was no longer laid down in ontological, but in functional terms.
As a result, the risk that ministry would develop its own importance
unconnected to the Word diminished.

The Reformers soon discovered, however, that this did not elimi-
nate the problem of power in the church because giving leadership and
the exercising power by ministers remained a necessity. Just like the
churches of the first centuries, the Reformed congregations were faced
by internal and external threats. On the one hand, they wanted to
avoid the dangers of doctrinal confusion—heresy and fragmentation—
which were threats posed by the Roman Catholic Church and the
Anabaptist movement. On the other hand, they wanted to prevent
the church from being robbed of its fundamental freedom by interfer-
ence by the government. During the Reformation it became clear that

spiritual leadership by ministers was essential if the freedom of the church under the Word was to be safeguarded. Misuse of power by ministers had to be avoided, but it was not possible to do without ministerial authority. For this reason, the Reformers came to the conclusion that ministry in the church as service to the Word was a necessity and that proclamation by ministers was necessary for the salvation of the people.

A certain ambivalence towards ministry in the church developed in the Reformed tradition: on the one hand, a constant alertness, reticence, and critical attitude towards ministry as a potential instrument of power misuse; on the other hand, the realization that ministerial leadership was needed in the church. The first attitude (historically the first one to develop) very often determines how the debate about ministry develops. A strong fear of ministerial manipulation is dominant. As a consequence, Reformed theology for ministry tends to reduce the issue of ministry to a power problem. The gratitude for the minister's service is overshadowed by the fear of misuse of power. A bishop in the church is suspect by definition. Apostolic succession is seen only as a clever way to make the minister's power legitimate. The representation of Christ is a temptation. Practical suggestions for the refinement of the ministerial structure are mainly related to setting a time limit to the minister's period of service and by seeing their relationships with other office bearers in terms of control and monitoring. In this way the most fundamental question about ministry threatens to be obscured.

I discern a second reason for the mistrust that is specifically linked to the Reformed tradition. It is the fear to identify God with human elements. The temptation of deification of any created thing is to be resisted in all circumstances.[12] The discussion with the Lutherans on the Eucharistic presence of the Lord is an expression of this reticence to link God to created things. The refusal to stick to one lasting confession, such as the *Confessio Augustana* in the Lutheran tradition, is another indication. The *sursum corda* seems never far away when an office-bearer pretends to have special authority.

---

[12] See on this sensitivity, G. Fackre, "Sovereignty and Sanctification: Reformed Accents in Ecumenics," in Alston Jr. and Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 271–280.

Unity and Apostolicity

In ecumenical dialogues, it is especially the Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians who have pressed for more attention over the issue of ministry. Their ultimate aim is to reach a mutual recognition of ministries. Protestant partners in the dialogue have often entered into these discussions less than motivated. The perception was that this was only an issue for the other discussion partners. The official reaction of many Reformed churches to the famous *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document of 1982 revealed much reservation about the suggestion for a unified structure of bishop-presbyter and deacon and for a ministerial—preferably episcopalian—succession in the apostolic tradition. Some were plainly negative, while others seemed willing to consider this alternative although from more of a diplomatic strategy than real conviction.[13]

Research on the ecumenical theology of ministry has convinced me that the structure of the ministerial office is an important instrument to express and safeguard the unity and the apostolicity of the church. It is precisely these two elements—unity and apostolicity—that are most relevant to the identity of the church. The central office of the ministry of the Word and sacraments is a reflection of the traditional Protestant marks of the church, purity of the Word and purity of the ministry of the sacraments. In isolation they lead to good exegisis and liturgis, but not automatically to people who safeguard the unity and the apostolicity of the church. During the Reformation era, the initial aim of the magisterial Reformation was the Reformation of the church, e.g., Calvin's greatest aspiration was the reformation of the Church of France (that is the acceptance of the Reformation by its leaders— remember the letter to the king of France at the beginning of the *Institutes*—and its people.) But the continued persecutions in many regions led to a change in strategy. The reformation of the one church in an area was no longer the aim, but the existence as a denomination next to another recognized church. Often the Roman Catholic Church was the recognized church and sometimes it was a Lutheran church. This led to a reduced *sensus unitatis*. Ministers were, in reality, no longer accountable towards the *una sancta*, but towards their own denomination. So

---

[13] E. Van der Borght, *Theology of Ministry. A Reformed Contribution to an Ecumenical Dialogue*, Studies in Reformed Theology Vol. 15 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007).

purity of Word and sacraments was in the context of one's own denom-
ination. The horizon of safeguarding unity, catholicity, and apostolicity
in the ministry of Word and sacraments receded. The awareness that
ministry in the church is an instrument to keep the local church focused
on Jesus Christ through the ministry of Word and sacraments in the
context of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church was lost. How
many times have schisms happened within our tradition because min-
isters and synods in isolation thought they had sufficient reason to start
a new church or to force some believers to leave the denomination on
the basis of specific interpretations of the scriptures without having this
broader awareness of the calling to represent the *una sancta*?

All too often the battle for the pure proclamation of the Word and
pure administration of the sacraments is fought at the cost of the unity
of the church. For this reason, the Reformed tradition would do well to
not ignore the ecumenical plea for the value of ordained ministry as a
focus of unity. Correct proclamation, administration of the sacraments,
and exercising of discipline should not be understood in isolation, but
in the context of safeguarding and renewing the unity of the church—
personal and collegial, and on the local and the supra-local level. If we
are convinced that the ministerial offices are instrumental in preserving
the unity of the church, then we have all reasons to engage wholeheart-
edly in the ecumenical dialogues on the function and structure of the
ministry in the church.

The ministry of the church is not only instrumental for the unity but
also for the apostolicity of the church. Ministry is service to the Word
and, consequently, service to unity and continuity with the salvation-
bringing words of the Lord. This readiness to maintain continuity
with the church of the apostles is expressed among other things in
the continuing willingness to listen to all books of the canon and not
just to the ones that at any particular time are in harmony with the
spirit of the age. It also ensures that we do not attempt to understand
the scriptures' witness in isolation from, but in harmony with, those
who have gone before us in their authoritative interpretation. They
were not only familiar with the text of the scriptures but also with
the writings of the church fathers and tried to understand scripture in
their time in dialogue with the church fathers. Therefore, we argue
that in the Reformed tradition the care for the continuity with the
church of the apostles must be emphatically formulated as one of the
tasks of the ordained ministry. The minister as servant of the Word
tries to understand the Word of the Lord as it comes to us today

by listening carefully to the words of scripture and, in doing so, he knows that he is not the first one, but that he walks in the footsteps of many who, like him, tried to do just that in their own time and place. Ordained ministry should be understood as instrument and symbol of that continuity.

Continuity with Traditional Reformed Teaching

Is focus on ministry as an instrument of unity and apostolicity or as an instrument to safeguard the Christian identity not too catholic, or to put it more antagonistically, not in contradiction with traditional Reformed understanding of ministry? In my opinion it is not for two reasons.

In the first place, Reformed theologians can build on the work of John Calvin if they want to renew the theology of ministry in order to strengthen Christian unity and identity. By far the largest book of his *Institutes*, book four, is devoted to the church, its ministry, and its sacraments. Ten of the twenty chapters of this book analyze elements of the theology of ministry. So in my opinion, John Calvin—not Karl Barth—will be most helpful in building an actualized theology of ministry within the Reformed tradition. In the 1960s, the Roman Catholic researcher, Alexander Ganoczy, revealed the ecumenical potential of Calvin's theology of church and ministry.[14] The fact that ecclesiology takes most pages in his *Institutes* indicates that, for him, ecclesiology was much more central than in the later Reformed tradition. Calvin considered ministry of the Word to be a central instrument used by the Spirit to establish the rule of Christ in his church. The third reason Calvin gives as to why God makes use of the service of humans in the leadership of the church is that a human being can function as a unifying sign of unity.[15] It is well-known that his judgement about the performance of pope and bishops was extremely negative. It is less known that he was not negative about the offices of a pope and bishop as instruments of unity. The second reason why I am of the opinion that a renewed theology of ministry as instrument of safeguarding Christian identity is not in contrast to Reformed tradition is the Reformed principle, *ecclesia*

---

[14] A. Ganoczy, *Ecclesia Ministrans. Dienende Kirche und kirchlicher Dienst bei Calvin* (Freiburg–Basel–Wien: Herder, 1968).

[15] *Institutes* IV.III.1.

reformata semper reformanda. It was difficult for the early Reformed theologians and even Protestant theologians, in general, to develop a theology that focused on unity and apostolicity in relationship to ministry. The Roman Catholic theologians and hierarchy were criticizing them precisely over this issue. They claimed that the Reformed churches had broken the unity and the apostolicity of the church. So for historical reasons the Reformed tradition never developed this issue in relation to ministry. When the *sensus unitatis* was later lost, the need was less felt. But this historical explanation does not make it justifiable. I conclude that the Reformed tradition and its theologians in particular have the task to renew the theology of ministry in order that it can function better as instrument of safeguarding the identity of the Christian church. In my opinion, it has to take care of a task now that it could not suitably develop under specific historic circumstances.

THE CHURCH'S CORPORATE
CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Johan Buitendag

The Form and Essence of the Church

Hans Küng's work on the church, which at the time was an epoch-making work, provides in its opening chapter an important qualification of the concepts of the form and the essence of the church.[1] Because church is an event, its essence can only be expressed in historical terms, but can never be absorbed by it. The essence of the church is not a matter of metaphysical stasis, but exists only in constantly changing historical forms. The 'essential nature' of the church is thus not to be found in some unchanging Platonic world of ideas, but only in the *history* of the church.

Criticism (or even admiration!) of the church—however justified it may be—only applies to the exterior—the façade of the church. The essence of the church indeed remains a matter of faith. Making positive assertions or negative utterances of this kind amount to dealing with someone's shadow—it is real, but it is not the real being. It is not a matter of being there, but at most, a matter of *also* being there! A man's shadow may be real, but it is not yet the man himself. To attack the 'un-nature' of the church is to attack the real church, but not its real nature. The essence of the church thus can only be distinguished from the external form of the church, but never be separated from it. Moreover, because sin runs through the heart of every believer, the distortion between what is and what should be will always be present. Contrary to what Origen said on the church and salvation,[2] it would perhaps even be possible to say that we do not believe in and through the church, but rather *in spite* of the church.

---

[1] Hans Küng, *The Church* (London: Search Press, 1968), 3–14.
[2] "Let no one therefore be persuaded or deceived: outside this house, that is, outside the Church, no one is saved," Alister McGrath (ed), *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 260.

Like few theologians of his time, Paul Tillich was able to blur the lines between the sacred and secular because such separation implies there are areas of life that do not stand under God's claim. "The sacred does not lie beside the secular, but in its depths. The sacred is the creative ground and at the same time a critical judgement of the secular."[3] Tillich assumes coherence between culture and the Christian story that enables the translation of Christian claims into culturally accessible idioms. Creation does not represent an odd sojourn for Christians, but the place where we meet God. The church remains therefore the space of the community of believers, the home of faith. By being visible, the church is composed of human beings and exists for human beings. By being visible, the church is being true, not false, to its essential nature. The fellowship of the believers exists in space and time and must therefore exist visibly in order to fulfil its vocation. Only a visible church can be the home for human beings, a place where they can join in, give assistance, and build.

The difference between the essence and the form of the church is not only the result of sin, but also of perception. The Catholic Tridentine Catechism says that the vital element in the church is hidden and recognizable only with the eye of faith.[4] The world's perception of the church, however, will always be different to what believers would want it to be. Therefore, the issue is not whether a particular view is right or wrong.

The fact is, it exists and therefore is a given. However, how a message is received is what is crucial.[5] According to Ind,[6] corporate image is in the eye of the beholder. It is only for the past two to four decades that companies are beginning to pay attention to the image they are projecting. Obviously, the existing image needs to be researched and should be measured against the intended image. For this reason, the church needs to pay attention to its image and should ensure that it conveys as accurately as possible the message it holds dear.

---

[3] Cited by David Jensen, "Whose Conversation? Theology and Its Audience," *Theology That Matters. Ecology, Economy, and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 16.

[4] Tridentine Catechism, l, 10,19.

[5] The classic example would be that of the three different makes of videocassettes (Philips V2000, Sony Betamax, and JVC VHS). Of the three, the one that is technologically inferior has taken the market by storm and the others simply had to follow suit. It was the image of the product and not its technology that was the determining factor.

[6] Nicholas Ind, *The Corporate Image* (London: Kogan Page, 1990), 12.

I shall limit myself to these cursory remarks from ecclesiology in dealing with the dissonance that exists with regard to the image of the church. In dealing with how this dissonance between the intended and the perceived image of the church can be identified and eliminated to some extent at least, I believe, much can be learned from the science of *business management*. Moreover, I am of the opinion that today's congregation is a particular form of enterprise or business. It is rather surprising to see how clearly and with what ease certain business principles do apply to the church. After all, the congregation is an autonomous system that has to be in equilibrium with its environment to survive in society. In essence, the basic premise of any enterprise—namely, that it operates as an *open system* in a given situation and that there is a mutual interdependence between it and its environment—also applies to the church. Cronjé *et al* list the main objectives of an enterprise in order of priority as follows:[7]

- Profitability
- Growth
- Market share
- Social responsibility
- Well being of employees
- Productivity
- Service to the consumer

This list, with the exception of 'profitability,' can *mutatis mutandis* very well be applied to the church. Perhaps then, a church could be compared to a non-profit organization. Many church projects, such as old age homes and children's homes, are indeed registered as such. The match with a business enterprise is therefore obvious. A church, however, remains different, (although not totally different). The church believes that it exists by the grace of God, and that it is called into existence by the living God.[8] Thus, it finds its foundation not in nature, but in supernature; not through birth, but through rebirth. Moreover, because it is *God* who calls a people for himself from among the entire human race, the church does not merely deal with earthly matters. The principle of the flow in macro-economy, i.e., the delicate balance between supply and demand, will thus not easily fit the church. The

---

[7] G.J. de J. Cronjé et al, *Inleiding tot die Bestuurswese* (Halfway House: Southern Boekuitgewers, 1991), 31.

[8] Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 54.

church should *not* be solely inclined to determine man's needs and, in response to it, offer a product that would satisfy that need.[9] It receives its 'product' through the revelation of God and then 'sells' it to a humanity that does not want it! Therefore, the need of humanity is not only to be fulfilled, it first needs to be established!

In any event, the church renders a *service* rather than offering a product.[10] Towards the end of the previous century, service organizations made up 75 % of the American economy and have grown by approximately 4 % per decade.[11] Service can be regarded as "any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and that does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not [be] tied to a physical product."[12] The service the church renders is *in*tangible and thus fragile. It can easily be destroyed because such service is based on promises and assurances that cannot really be quantified. It is of vital importance that service organizations, in particular, link their services to tangible symbols, artefacts, physical products, and people, as symbols of quality and integrity.

Strategic Management

It goes without saying that what needs to be determined first and foremost is what the enterprise wants to achieve. Strategy, therefore, is always of primary importance and is always prior to the structure. Visionary management implies that an organization is managed in such a way that a dream will be realized.[13] The vision clearly needs to be truly future-orientated. It should not be a mere extrapolation of the past. Should that be the case, one gets caught up in the myth of 'perpetual return.' Vision occupies itself with the destination and not with the point of departure. At the same time, vision cannot be egotistical dreams either. Often a business' dream, in particular, emanates from

---

[9] For example, Schleiermacher's *Bedürfnistheologie*.

[10] Orville Walker, Harper Boyd, & Jean-Claude Larréché, *Marketing Strategy: Planning and Implementation* (Boston: Richard Irwin, 1992), 99.

[11] Richard Chase & Nicholas Aquilano, *Production and Operations Management: A Life Cycle Approach* (Boston: Richard Irwin, 1992), 113.

[12] Walker et al, *Marketing strategy*, 99.

[13] Thomas Bateman & Carl Zeithaml, *Management: Function & Strategy* (Boston: Irwin, 1993), 412.

the charismatic leader, says Guy Charlton,[14] "The challenge then facing every leader is to create a vision of the future that beckons each person in the organisation to commit themselves to action."

In theology, the vision of the future is the vision of faith. The future is God's future and God is the world's future.[15] God makes all things new (Rev 21:5). Isaiah 65:13–25 is an example of a pericope in which a prophet's dream of faith features. The future, in contrast to the present, is described in metaphoric and hyperbolic language. The mystery of the future lies therein that it is different to the present world. In contrast to the present state of affairs, no one will be harmed. Dialectically seen, the present need creates the vista of the future. The future messianic kingdom is not only an idyllic state of peace in which the wolf and the lamb will eat together, but also has an unmistakeable ethical appeal to it. Hebrews 11 is such a biblical example that deals with the vision that guided Abraham in his life: "It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him. He left his own country without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who received the same promise from God. For Abraham was waiting for the city which God has designed and built, the city with permanent foundations."

Vision ensures that the *here* and the *now* are transcended. Therefore, the approach of Thompson & Strickland which not only enquires about "what our business is," but adds to it the question, "What is it going to be?" is correct.[16] According to them, today's answers will eventually become obsolete. Because strategy precedes and therefore determines corporate identity, it follows that the church should always enquire what its actual business is, or more precisely, what it *ought to be*. This ensures that an enterprise deals with reality in a proactive and especially creative manner. In *Life Abundant*, Sally McFague turns toward ecological anthropology as she seeks out the theological and economic roots of the First-Worlders' sense of entitlement.[17] She offers theological

---

[14] Guy Charlton, *Leadership: The Human Race* (Kenwyn: Juta, 1992), 49.

[15] Ted Peters, *GOD—The World's Future. Systematic Theology for a New Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

[16] Arthur Thompson & Alonzo Strickland, *Strategic Management: Concepts and Cases* (Texas: McGraw Hill, 1987), 28.

[17] Sally McFague, *Life Abundant. Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

justification for sacrificial changes to the materially abundant life that
we pursue, largely without thinking, to create a truly abundant life for
all.

Alessandri & Alessandri are of the opinion that corporate identity
refers to a firm's strategically planned and purposeful presentation of
itself in order to gain positive corporate image in the minds of the
public.[18] Corporate identity, therefore, must be able to communicate
aspects such as the enterprise's particular nature, style, its competitive
edge, the outline of its structure, as well as the path and direction it is
taking. It is therefore very much similar to branding. Identity becomes
the frame of reference in terms of which all the enterprise's activities
are evaluated. It is therefore also implied that identity precedes cor-
porate image. In other words, the function of corporate identity is to
develop those physical manifestations in terms of which clients form *and*
retain an image of the enterprise. Visual signals must make a statement
to the environment about the enterprise itself. In this regard, one could
say that corporate identity is a visual statement of who and what a com-
pany is. One could, therefore, say that corporate identity deals with the
organization's product or service, as well as the marketing thereof in its
corporate identity, i.e., the total package.

Each church should pertinently ask itself what its particular *competitive
edge* is. That is what needs to be marketed vigorously. Kotler refers to
it as an enterprise's "unique selling proposition" (USP).[19] According to
Rowden, it is this difference that makes one visible and separates one's
personality form that of others.[20] If this question remains unanswered,
differentiation cannot take place and the real corporate identity and
image of the church cannot be profiled, let alone be communicated.
For this reason, strategic management always needs to be cognizant
of *competition*. William Porter's model of competition is still regarded
as the standard in many text books on management. It implies that
an enterprise's competition primarily lies in the threat from direct
competitors, but also from the threat that encompasses four other
forces; namely, *potential entrants*, *substitute products or services*, *customers*, and

---

[18] Sue W. Alessandri & Todd Alessandri, "Promoting And Protecting Corporate
Identity: The Importance of Organizational and Industry Context," *Corporate Reputation
Review* 7/3 (2004), 3.

[19] Philip Kotler & Gary Armstrong, *Principles of Marketing* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall,
1991), 240.

[20] Mark Rowden, *The Art of Identity. Creating and Managing a Successful Corporate Identity*
(Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 1.

suppliers. The value of competitor analysis is that the industry standards are benchmarked, whereby the individual enterprise can easily identify its own niche.

It is with a fair degree of hesitation that the concept of competition, if at all, is raised within the context of the church. According to the traditional argument, believers are one in Jesus Christ (Eph 4) and therefore do not compete with one another, but act as partners—for example, against the rise of the supernatural.[21] The matter is not that simple though. It quite often happens that members leave one church for another as standard practice. It is rather rare for the conventional churches to grow by converting people. One church quite simply acts as a feeder for another. In other words, competition does occur among churches, but in disguise. This reluctance to recognize competition in church circles could be described as *strategic inertia*. It is up to us to build our destiny. It belongs to the church, and not to the market, the corporations, or financial capital.

In this regard, the church would be well advised to contemplate Edward de Bono's concept of *sur/petition*.[22] Etymologically, com-petition means to 'strive together,' while sur/petition means to transcend the striving and to reach a point 'beyond' the line of contest. What needs to happen is to move away from the obvious, such as to 'gain members.' A serious mistake that many make is to believe that competition is the key to success. It is not. Competition is merely a part of the baseline of survival. Success requires going beyond competition to sur/petition. The evolution of marketing therefore is that of *production → competition → integrated values*. It moves away from the quantitative in favor of the qualitative. Integrated values take the process a step further. By designing and offering integrated values, the producer integrates not just with the customer, but also with all the complex values of the customer's lifestyle. We all live in a complex world with many values. Each church's own and particular competitive edge must thus come into the equation. However, as was already indicated, it will require careful creativity and consideration.

In a most readable book, *Merchants of Vision*, the editor collated interviews with 70 highly successful businessmen from all over the

---

[21] Pat Robertson, *The New Millennium* (Dallas: World Publishing, 1990), 71–99.

[22] Eduard De Bono, *Sur/petition: Going beyond Competition* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

world.[23] He refers to these leaders as "visionaries." What they appear to have in common, according to the findings, is their holistic view of reality. Therefore, a spiritual understanding of reality also appears to be constituent of any enterprise and thus of society. Moreover, in the future this will constitute the challenge for every congregation as well. The church needs to establish what *value it can add* to humanity and to nature within a pertinent context. Riccardo Petrella is of the opinion that one of the fundamental tasks for a world of knowledge, science, politics, and creativity is precisely to support the efforts being made in this direction.[24] In this way we can celebrate and approve of the new concept of the knowledge of society.

Corporate Culture and Identity

The manner, in which an enterprise's strategy takes corporate shape is described as the culture of such an enterprise. It is therefore a form of pretence. Culture is a specific behavior within a given environment and is influenced by the values, norms, and roles of the individuals within that environment. Culture in organizations or enterprises is not any different to culture in society. Bateman & Zeithaml provide a definition that is in line with such thinking: "Organization culture is the set of important assumptions about the organization and its goals and practices, which members of the company share. It is a system of *shared values* about what is important and *beliefs* about how the world works."[25] From this it should be clear that culture in an organization or enterprise does not differ much from a framework organizing and directing the conduct of those involved in the workplace. Culture in terms of an organization is to be understood in the same way as personality is to be understood in terms of the individual—it is largely invisible, but is nonetheless an underlying framework configuring meaning, direction, and activity. Similarly, the place of symbols, language, ideology, rite, and myth is also of great importance.

---

[23] James Liebig (ed), *Merchants Of Visions: People Bringing New Purpose and Values To Business* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1994).

[24] Riccardo Petrella, "Towards a 'Sustainable' Global Welfare Society," *Democratic Contracts for Sustainable and Caring Societies. What Can Churches and Christian Communities Do?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 66.

[25] Bateman & Zeithaml, *Management*, 324.

Culture can be effectively explained in terms of Edgar Schein's *Three-Layer* Organizational Model.[26] He sees it on three levels: *Level 1* includes aspects such as artefacts and other creations which, although visible, are mostly unintelligible. Circulars, decorations, exhibitions, office layout, etc. would serve as examples of such. *Level 2* deals with those values that matter to those involved. What makes them act in a specific way? It deals with their conscious, affective needs and desires. *Level 3*, on the other hand, reflects the basic assumptions people make, which in turn determine their behavior. Also assumed are those factors that play a role in people's perceptions, opinions, and attitudes. Thus, successful enterprises tend to reveal a strong corporate culture that is based on a central set of values that runs through every aspect of the enterprise. Ind quotes David Mercer whose research on IBM has revealed that that which ensures this powerful organization's survival in an ever-changing society, interestingly, is not its technology, but its particular ethos and culture.[27] For this reason, the realization that corporate image needs to be managed and always has to give expression to strategic vision is of the utmost importance. It is only in this way that strategic vision, underpinned by shared values, can take meaningful shape in an enterprise.

Corporate culture can also be managed, i.e., *changed*. However, it has to be borne in mind that, "[C]ulture controls you more than you control culture."[28] Naturally, a well established culture will not change overnight. Those factors which fall within management's control, such as appointments and the managerial process (planning, organization, leading, and control), must continuously be used as instruments to create or reinforce a culture. Many researchers understand management of culture in terms of the employees' *dedication*, *competence*, and *consistency*. Change in corporate culture means a gradual shift in one of these factors. The external manifestation of the underlying culture is thus not only indicator, but also *instrument* of the managerial process. But then the focus of the organization needs to be well defined. Corporate identity is thus a powerful tool in the corporate tool kit, which enables you to communicate change. It enables you to communicate direction, and it enables you to communicate your point of difference.

---

[26] Edgar H. Schein, *The Corporate Culture: Survival Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 15–20.
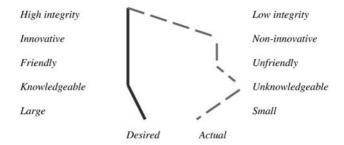
[27] Ind, *The Corporate Image*, 12.

[28] Schein, *Corporate Culture*, 25.

FINDINGS

It follows that even if an enterprise does not consciously set out to establish its own identity, it develops *nevertheless*. Corporate image indeed vests in the eye of the client.[29] Thus corporate image is about how the message is received. For this reason, corporate image is not just an expression of identity, but is especially about identifying and rectifying the communicative dissonance thereof. Such dissonance also requires empirical research. It is therefore correct to postulate that corporate communication is the process by which corporate identity is translated into a corporate image. For this reason, an audit of communication needs to take place as a matter of routine.

Kotler provides a simple, yet effective graphic illustration by presenting the assessment of the attributes of corporate image, with the accompanying gaps, as follows:[30]

High integrity		Low integrity
Innovative		Non-innovative
Friendly		Unfriendly
Knowledgeable		Unknowledgeable
Large		Small
	Desired Actual	

Some of the most important characteristics of corporate identity would undoubtedly be the name, slogan, logo, graphics, and language of an enterprise. Caution needs to be exercised with regard to the name, and, if at all effective, it is advisable to retain it.[31] For their part, slogans are the product of a certain time and place and must be constantly revised and created to fit in with a certain era. The logo, on the other hand, must encapsulate an enterprise's focus and is therefore of key importance. It should not only reflect the *what* of an organization, but also *how* it is achieved. The target audience obviously also needs to be determined so that the appropriate signals can be communicated.

---

[29] Rowden, *Identity*, 20.
[30] Kotler, *Marketing*, 612.
[31] Perry A Trunick, "What's In A Name?," *Logistics Today*, 45/9 (2004), 62.

It goes without saying that color plays a key role in this process.[32] Graphics and language are often underestimated. Even the font used in correspondence is of importance. In practice, the corporate identity refers to the entire observable and measurable elements manifest in a firm's visual presentation.

It has already been mentioned that in the corporate communication audit an enterprise should also undertake an empirical investigation to determine (the dissonance in) its corporate image. In my view, the church should do the same and with a fair degree of urgency. After all, we are all dealing with perceptions in the first instance and not with facts. (Küng would have replied that it only concerns the form of the church and not the essence). Be that as it may, it does not detract from the seriousness of the matter, nor from the church's fallibility. The world of business also has to continuously deal with perceptions.

The church must begin to dream again. A vision shared by all needs to be created. In this way, an identity will be profiled which should be developed and expanded upon by vigorous corporate communication. The church needs a corporate image that would convey that which we consider important from a biblical point of view. A church's ministries must, severally and collectively, convey this corporate image—an image which can only be founded on the risen Lord.

The church will not be able to escape the demand to determine a vision and a mission relative to time and place and which not only expresses the shared dream, but also the desired direction and values, the style, and the culture for much longer. Within such a 'cultural-linguistic framework' *everyone* will be able to make a contribution, and the divide between pew and pulpit will diminish. Such matrix (etymologically: *mater*) will also form the interpretative framework when the story of Gilgal, for example, is related: "In the future, when your children ask what these stones mean, you will tell them about the time when Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground" (Josh 4:21). The church must find its story in the Bible, must conceive its task in the here and

---

[32] Wynand Pienaar & Manie Spoelstra, *Negotiations: Theories, Strategies And Skills* (Cape Town: Juta, 1991), 65–66, identified the following associations with color: blue conveys a calm, yet authoritative image; yellow is associated with losing; cream is neutral; grey and brown are depressing colors; and red, used in moderation, conveys excitement (but sometimes also fear). They are, however, of the opinion that in South Africa, yellow is associated with the sun and for marketing purposes conveys a certain vitality; green, on the other hand, evokes associations with vegetation and nature, and red with excitement and love, but also anger.

the now, and must narrate and depict it in a way that is relevant. In conclusion, culture actually begins with the organization's vision, which inspires and takes members along. The following quotation from Lindbeck, in a way, coincides with this approach: "In the construction of such scenarios, the crucial difference between liberals and postliberals is in the way they correlate their visions of the future and of the present situations. Liberals start with; experience, with an account of the present, and then adjust their vision of the kingdom of God accordingly, while postliberals are in principle committed to doing the reverse."[33]

No, I am not making a case for the use of professional spin-doctors to polish the image of the church. On the contrary. I am putting a case forward for visionary management in the church that would manifest itself strategically in its identity and that would be effectively communicated by a corporate image. Market sensitivity is what it is all about! Truly effective corporate identity thus manages the 'reality gap' and promotes a set of deliberate messages for the identity to develop. Ecclesiology can never simply take the *status quo* of the church as its yardstick, still less seek to justify it. On the contrary, taking once again the original message, the gospel, as its starting point, it will do all it can to make critical evaluations—as a foundation for the reforms and renewal which the church will always need.

---

[33] George A Lindbeck, *The Nature Of Doctrine: Religion And Theology In A Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 125–126.

WHY ARE YOU CALLED A CHRISTIAN?
QUESTION 32 OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Willem Verboom

Introduction

In connection with the question of the identity of a Christian in the context of society, it seems useful to me to consider what one of the Reformed confessions says about this subject. I am speaking about the *Heidelberg Catechism (HC)* as one of the sources from which we may get information for our reflection.

For this purpose, in this article I will reflect on question and answer 32, in which the point arises: Why are you called a Christian? It is remarkable that the *HC* places the question of the identity of a Christian in an Christological perspective. The *HC* discusses Christology on Sundays 11 through 19. The present question surfaces on Sunday 12, when the name of Christ is discussed. As a theme directly derived from this, the question about the Christian is asked. In the course of this article, it will, I hope, become clear why it is important that we do not place the question about the identity of a Christian in a pneumatological perspective that is distinct from Christology; but rather, in a Christological frame.

> *Question 32 reads as follows*:
>
> '*But why are you called a Christian?*' *The answer is*:
>
> '*Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself as a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life, and hereafter rule with Him in eternity over all creatures.*'

This answer points to the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of a Christian as a derivation of the triple office of Christ.

H. Kraemer once wrote a book called *A theology of the laity* that became well-known and was translated into Dutch under the expres-

sive title, *Het vergeten ambt in de kerk*.[1] In this book he pleaded for more-attention to the common parishioners in church rather than for the official office-holders. What the *HC* says in question 32 is in line with what Kraemer said. At the same time, with the specific term 'Christian,' the *HC* raises the office above the difference between what the Dutch theologian Van Ruler called the 'particular' and 'general' office.[2] The Christian offices of prophet, priest, and king take shape in both the official general, and in the particular office. They need each other. They complement each other, as I will try to illustrate in this article.

What I want to do is first to see what the text in *HC* 32 exactly says, and look for its deeper theological meaning. Next, I will ask what this means for the question of the identity of a Christian today. This article consists of the following sections:

1. Christians and Christ
2. The *anointing* of the Christian
3. The Christian as prophet
4. The Christian as priest
5. The Christian as king
6. The relationship between the three offices
7. Some conclusions.

Christians and Christ

A Christian is a human being who belongs to Christ. That is the essence of his identity. The relation between us and Christ is essential. The point in our identity is not that we have a Christian worldview or philosophy of life in the same way as other people have other ideologies or outlooks on life. Rather, the point is that our identity is qualified by the relationship and unity with a *person*, Jesus Christ. Here we already note the importance of the Christological perspective on the identity of a Christian. This is in line with the earliest information about Christians in the congregation of Antioch in Acts, chapter 11. In that city, the term 'Christians' does not refer to a specific political or social group, but to people who, in spite of all kinds of internal differences, had one similarity; namely, that they believed in Jesus Christ and lived in relation to Him.

---

[1] H. Kraemer, *Het vergeten ambt in de kerk: een theologische fundering*, derde druk ('s-Gravenhage: Daamen, 1962). [The forgotten office in the church].

[2] A.A. van Ruler, *Bijzonder en algemeen ambt* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1952).

In article 32 the *HC* explains the characteristics of a Christian with the help of the triple office, as derived from Christ. It is not the moment now to explore the meaning of a spiritual office at length. I think it is enough to say in this respect that an office is a task in this life and world that we receive from God. So a Christian has the triple task or office of prophet, priest, and king. As we have seen, these offices are derived from the triple offices of Christ Himself. In the theology of the early church, Christ's priestly and regal offices were already recognized. Since Calvin introduced the prophetic office in the second edition of the *Institution* (1539),[3] the Reformed tradition has spoken about this triple office. It concerns tasks that were already known in Israel during the Old Testament period, and which in Christ became a fulfilment, concentration, and radicalization.[4] The prophet in Israel received a revelation from God in order to proclaim this Word of God to the people. In the same way, the *HC* says, Christ as the chief prophet fully revealed to us the secret purpose and will of God. It was the task of a priest in Israel to offer sacrifices, pray for, and bless the people. In the same way, the *HC* says, Christ is the only high priest who redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and intercedes for us with the Father. Third, the king in Israel was expected to govern the nation and fight against the enemies. In the same way, the *HC* says, Christ is the eternal king, who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and defends and sustains us by the redemption he has won for us. The *HC* makes it clear that Christ is not just one of the many prophets, priests, and kings, but the *chief* prophet, the *only* high priest and the *eternal* king. In his office the three offices are truly fulfilled.

As we know, priests and kings in Israel were anointed with oil when they acceded to their office. Similarly, there are also examples of prophets being anointed; for instance, the prophet Elisha, who succeeded Elijah (1 Kings 19:16). The oil was a symbol of the empowerment by the Holy Spirit of God. Thus Christ was also anointed, not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit Himself. In this respect, we usually think of the moment when He was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist, and the Spirit of God descended upon Him in the shape of a dove. (Matt. 3: 13–17) By his anointing, Jesus was called and equipped to perform

---

[3] The first edition of the *Institutions* (1536) speaks only about the regal and priestly office of Christ.

[4] E. Busch, *Der Freiheit zugetan. Christlicher Glaube heute—im Gespräch mit dem Heidelberger Katechismus* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998), 149.

his office. The life and task of a Christian is a reflection of this task of Christ. Christians are also anointed and, in this way, called to and equipped for their office.

The Anointing of the Christian

With some emphasis, the *HC* says that a Christian is a Christian because he shares in the anointing of Christ. Therefore, the *HC* not only says "a Christian is anointed," but "a Christian *shares in* the anointing of Christ." In this way the *HC* wants to underline the close relationship of a Christian with Christ. Without this relationship a Christian is not a Christian at all—not a prophet, not a priest, not a king. The catechism formulates it literally as follows: I am a Christian because 'through faith I share in Christ.' At the time of the Reformation, Lutheran catechists mostly said that *baptism* is the mark of a Christian. I am a Christian because I have been baptized.[5] On this point the Reformed tradition does not mention baptism, but faith. By this it wants to underline the importance of the membership of Christ through faith. This relationship is not only a passive, objective event that takes place in baptism, but also an active, subjective event in the life of a Christian. By an active deed the Christian believes in Christ, in whose name he/ she has been (passively) baptized. The connection 'through faith' has many implications. One of these implications is the anointing—the sharing in the anointing of Christ. This term not only expresses the fact that Christ is an example to the Christian; in that case there could be a distance between Christ and Christian, and it could even be supposed that a Christian is actually capable of following Christ's example. The term 'to share in the anointing' says much more. 'Sharing' in the anointing of Christ means that there must be a very close connection with Christ—an engrafting in Christ, an *unio mystica* with Christ through faith. The Holy Spirit with whom Christ was anointed flows over from Christ to the faithful, and in this way, only in this way, can they be Christians. To be anointed means to be given a task, and at the same time this is a calling for a task in public life. But this is only possible when the Christian lives in a spiritual way

---

[5] Cf. J. Brenz, *Fragestücke* (1528/1535): "1. Frag. Was bistu? Antwort: Der ersten geburt nach bin ich ain vernünfftige creatur oder mensch von Got erschaffen. Aber der newen geburt nach bin ich ain Christ. 2. Frag. Warumb bistu ain Christ? Antwort. Darumb, das ich in dem namen Christi getauft bin, und glaub in Jesum Christum."

with Christ. When Christians lose this connection, they immediately lose their identity, their office, and the possibility to fulfill this.

The term 'anointing' has another aspect: there is also a *critical* element in relation to the believers themselves. The expression emphasizes that Christian identity is not within the control of the Christian. It is Christ himself who grants it. In this respect, I certainly think it is important that the *HC* places the *pneumatological* categories in a Christological framework. To be a Christian can never be an independent theme, separated from Christ, but is always derived from Christ. To be a Christian is not our own choice, but much more a matter of being chosen by God in Christ. This is a very sensitive point. If a Christian thinks that in some way he can be independent from Christ, we realize the truth of the saying that "any flaw in what is best immediately turns it into the worst." I think we have to admit that in practice this is not so easy to avoid. It is not for nothing that Christians in our society have a negative image. In the novel *The last of the Just* by André Schwartz-Bart, two Jews who are to die soon say to each other [I'm giving my own English translation:] "The Christians say that they love Jesus, but I believe that they hate Him, without they know this. Therefore they turn the cross upside down, and make it into a sword, and beat us with this sword. Poor Jesus, if He came back on earth and saw how the heathens made a sword from his cross in order to kill his own sisters and brothers, He would be very sad."[6] Therefore, it is not enough when H. Berkhof says, that the humanity of Christ is a source of inspiration for the Christians.[7] Christ is much more than a source of inspiration. He is the source of our faith itself. It is a question of to be or not to be. Let me illustrate this with the metaphor of the vine and the branches: only when the branch gets the saps of the vine through its connection with the vine can it be a true branch and bear fruit. (John. 15) The Christian, who in essence is ungodly, can only attain his identity as a completely new identity through the connection of faith—through the anointing with the Holy Spirit of Christ. This means that this identity is a granted, imputed identity. This makes the Christian very *dependent* on Christ, but—paradoxically—he is granted *independence* at the same time. Only in this way can he exercise the offices of prophet, priest, and king.

---

[6] J.H. van de Bank a.o. (ed.), *Kennen en vertrouwen. Handreiking bij de prediking van de Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), 103.

[7] H. Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof*, zesde druk (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1990), §34.

The Christian as Prophet

We will now see how the *HC* elaborates on the triple office of the Christian. In the first place, the prophetic task is mentioned. The *HC* explains the aim of this office as: *to confess the name of Christ.* The entire life of a Christian is a confession of the name of Christ and is transparent all the way up to Christ. In the life of the Christian one should see Christ himself. Not as a product of the Christian himself, but as a gift of Christ. Thus, the confession of a prophet opens the life of the Christian to other people, so that they can indirectly meet Christ.

In the scriptures of the New Testament the term 'to confess someone' (*homologein*) means, among other things, "to declare publicly to whom one belongs."[8] So, to confess the name of Jesus Christ means a public declaration that you belong to him. That was often very dangerous in a world that was full of gods and powers. To confess that Jesus is the *Kurios* of the world immediately placed you in opposition to those who believed in these gods and powers. Hence, to confess the name of the *Kurios* meant a direct confrontation with the surrounding world. Whoever confessed "Jesus is the *Kurios*, his commands are the norms for personal and public life" showed his colors. A neutral position was impossible. You had to choose, for instance, to define your position regarding the worship of the emperor. As the crucified and resurrected Lord Christ is the only *Kurios*, to belong to Him, to confess Him, implicitly accused others of idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14; Gal. 5:20). Therefore, this Christian way of life irrevocably led to a life of conflict. This was the reality for the first generation of Christians. And so it has been throughout history until today. When the prophetic office flourishes in the church, the church is at its best. As examples I mention, for instance, the *sermon* and, linked with it, the *prayer* of intercession. The prophetic office here becomes manifest when the preacher allows the light of the Word of God to shine through history. This can be very confrontational. H. Jonker, one of my teachers at the university, worked as a young minister in Molenaarsgraaf, a small congregation in the Netherlands, during the Second World War. One Sunday as he stood in the pulpit, he saw a German officer sitting in the church. At that moment he knew that he had to make a choice. In the service he always prayed for the Queen of the Netherlands, Queen Wil-

---

[8] Michel in *ThWzNT*, V, 206–213.

helmina. Now he had to decide whether or not to pray for her. The Germans had forbidden it, but Jonker was convinced that to belong to Christ implied praying for the queen. However, if he did that, he would transgress the law of the enemy, the German government. Prof. Jonker made his choice. He did pray for the queen. That was a very courageous, and a very dangerous confession of the name. Here we have an example of the prophetic office. The prophet Jonker showed his colors. I am also thinking here of the calling of the church to speak out in public, if circumstances demand it. In Germany in 1934, Barmen was a clear and courageous example of the prophetic office of the church. At the present moment, unfortunately, the church in the Netherlands is paralyzed by inner discord and is hardly able to speak with one mouth. Yet the calling of the church to speak theocratically is still part of its prophetic office. The church's failure to speak is not only a matter of powerlessness, but also of guilt. The identity of the Christian is what is at stake here. But there is more to say. The prophetic office is primarily a *personal* calling to the Christian. If individual Christians are to be prophets, it implies that in crucial situations they confess to belonging to Christ. The confession implicates a clear position. I am always impressed by the manner in which Frederick III—the man of the *HC*, at the diet (*Reichstag*) of Augsburg (1566)—confessed the name of Christ in the presence of the German princes. That was when it mattered most. It was very dangerous for him and his people, but he did it. In an impressive speech he confessed his personal faith in his savior, Jesus Christ. So, as Christian elector, he was a prophet in Augsburg.[9] It is instructive that Olevianus, one of the collaborators on the *HC*, emphasized that the prophetic office also means that parents teach their children the Word of God in order to equip them to be new, young prophets.[10]

The Christian as Priest

The second aspect of the triple office of a Christian is the priesthood. The *HC* explains this office as especially a life of sacrifice. I quote: "To offer myself as a living sacrifice of gratitude to Him." In order to

[9] A. Kluckhohn, *Friedrich der Fromme. Kurfürst von der Pfalz. Der Schützer der reformirten Kirche, 1559–1576* (Nördlingen: Beck'sen Buchhandlung, 1879), 220–260.

[10] J. van Sliedregt, *Uw enige troost. Prediking van de Heidelbergse Catechismus*, deel 2, zondag 8–16 (Houten/Utrecht: Bout & Zonen, 1983), 162.

show that this offering has no meritorious value and, therefore, differs fundamentally from the sacrifice of Christ, the *HC* speaks of a sacrifice of *gratitude*. In this way it places the life of the Christian within the realm of the sanctification—as the answer to the sacrifice of Christ. For that matter, the same also applies to both other tasks—the prophetic and regal offices of a Christian. The priestly office simply means to live purposively, that is, orientated towards Christ and his coming kingdom. One should dedicate oneself to him. In other words, live for one's fellow man and so fulfill what Christ commanded: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–39). This commandment lends structure and a great simplicity to our life. In more concrete terms, a priestly life is in many respects diametrically opposed to the corrupt, egocentric culture of our society. It is clear that to live purposively in this way does not correspond to our own desires that are affected by evil. Is there one human being who does not strive after status, career, power, and a life of ease? From this perspective, the exercise of the priestly office means a complete conversion, and a daily conversion. A priest knows other goals in life than what scores points in this world. A priest cannot be directed towards himself, but is orientated towards his fellow men. Hence the expression, *sacrifice* for the life of a Christian. To live is to give. A Christian does not give a mere *something* of himself, but *all of* himself. His life is not a goal in itself, but a means towards the well-being of his fellow men; well-being in the sense of freedom, peace, and justice. It is important to make the right distinctions here. Opting for sacrifice can come close to opting for the role of victim. This happens, for instance, when all we do is complain because we are under such pressures as Christians in a secularized society. This attitude can be strongly egocentric. The choice for the priestly task of sacrifice is in opposition to the choice for the role of the victim. Not I, but my neighbor is so often the victim of injustice, and I have to take care that I am not guilty of the same injustice. I have to take his side. The priestly task of the Christian becomes visible in his imitation of Christ. This *imitatio Christi* is part of the identity of a Christian. Christians cannot make a different choice than Christ did. He chose weak and fragile people—people who lived in the margins of life and society. A Christian cannot make any other choice. The right choice is a choice against himself and for a life of self-denial. Many examples could be given of this. The priest is the deacon who only serves. He is the Good Samaritan who

saves his nearly-dead enemy. The Christian is Mother Theresa, who in the alleyways of India offered herself as a living sacrifice. But no less a Christian is the wife of a very strict Calvinist in a new Dutch novel by Jan Siebelink, which, translated literally, is called *Kneeling on a bed of violets* (2005).[11] Her life is a daily life of continuous self-denial. Following the Priest Jesus Christ bears the characteristics of the cross. That again is the identity of a Christian. We, I mean Christians in West Europe, have largely forgotten this. Books from China and North Korea, which tell us of the priestly sacrifices of the Christians there, are painful eye-openers for us with regard to the priestly office. It is time for us in the Netherlands to wake from the sleep of a majority-position and a life of compromises, and stand up. It is going to cost something to be a Christian. The Dutch theologian Sam Gerssen, once said: "Our confession can only be pure, if we do not shun the Messianic suffering."[12]

The Christian as King

We will now focus on the kingly office of the Christian, which in the *HC* is described as follows: "That I may fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with Christ in eternity over all creatures." In order to understand the meaning of this office, it is necessary to realize what kind of kingship is implied in the regal office of Christ himself. Here I refer to the word of Jesus: "The kings of the gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. (…) But I am among you as he that serves" (Luk. 22:25–27). Christ is the King of the Cross. He governs from the Cross. He serves as a slave. He is the humiliated one and at the same time the risen one, so that he bears marks of his conquered humiliation. Christians share in this kingly office of Christ through their sharing in the anointing of Christ.

What strikes me is that the *HC* says here that as a king, a Christian fights with a *free* and *good* conscience. In the original text it said only: a *free* conscience. The Dutch *Schilders* Edition (1611) used the term '*good*

---

[11] Jan Siebelink, *Knielen op een bed violen. Roman*, zevende druk (Amsterdam: De bezige bij, 2005).

[12] S. Gerssen, *Grensverkeer tussen kerk en Israël* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), 35.

conscience' here and left out the 'free' conscience.[13] It seems important to me that the term 'free' conscience has [in some way at some time] returned in the text. In my opinion, to exercise the regal office is, in the first place, a matter of a freed conscience. By using this phrase, the *HC* moves the Christian out of the tutelage of the hierarchical church. Now, the Christian is answerable to God about his deeds. This is the maturity that the Reformation brought to the Christians. It is not the same as the autonomy of the human being propagated by the Enlightenment. The emancipation that is heard in the *HC* is the emancipation of which Luther spoke in *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (1520). A Christian is a free master over all things and subject to no one. At the same time, a Christian is a willing servant of everybody and subject to everybody.[14] Thus, the kingly office brings a Christian to the Cross instead of the throne. It is exactly on this point that the Christian has to fight against sin and the devil. The Christian's ego wants to govern and to rule; the ego of Christ wants to serve. This causes an inner battle, about which Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, chapter 7. Anybody who thinks that the fight has already been fought will end up in a dangerous triumphalism, in which the Christian sets out on a mission of conquest. He is convinced that he is able to establish the kingdom of God in this world. In the church and theology in the Netherlands, in the second half of the twentieth century, there were many Christians who thought they could do so—as if Christians have the kingdom of God at their disposal. But the shock of secularization brought an abrupt and definitive end to this illusion.

An essential element in the regal office of a Christian is that Christians are orientated towards the eschaton. They live in the tension between 'already' and 'not yet.' Looking forward to the coming kingdom, a Christian is a hopeful human being. The eternal king shall come. He shall reign over all creatures. The *HC* says that also means that the Christian shall reign over all creatures. I wonder if this saying does not give too much honor to Christians. Let us just limit ourselves to saying that one day the Christian will reign over the devil. That is already a breathtaking perspective.

---

[13] J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, tweede druk (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976), 169.

[14] *Luther Deutsch*, Band 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 251.

The Relationship between the Three Offices

In the Reformed doctrine of the offices, the principle applies that one office shall not take precedence over another. The same can also be said of the three offices of a Christian. All three belong equally to the identity of a Christian. Anyone who believes in Christ, and who shares in his anointing, is called and empowered to be prophet, priest, and king at the same time. In the same way as we speak of the triple office of Christ, instead of three separate offices, this may also be said of the Christians. Nobody can be a prophet without also being priest and king. Nobody can be a priest without also being prophet and king. Nobody can be a king without also being prophet and priest. The best way to imagine this triple office is as the three sides of a triangle. All three exist either together or not at all. This mutual coherence means, in particular, that the prophet's confessing is directly connected with the priest's suffering and the king's fighting—in exactly the same way as they were during Jesus' existence on earth. The prophetic confession of the name always raises resistance, just as in the life of Christ. Therefore, it is especially the prophet who knows what suffering is. When the deacon/ prophet Stephen spoke to the leaders of Israel, he said about the prophets of Israel: "Who of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted" (Acts 7:52)? They were prophets who offered their sacrifices as priests, and in doing so they were, as kings, "more than conquerors" (Rom. 8: 37). The same happened in the case of Stephen. He had scarcely finished his prophetic sermon when, as a priest, he gave his life, and he triumphed as a king when, during his stoning, he saw King Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55).

Now, it is true that sometimes the prophetic, sometimes the priestly, and sometimes the regal office is exercised most. This depends on the circumstances. Perhaps which of the three offices takes precedence is connected with one's personality. But that does not alter the fact that all three offices are inseparably connected to each other. The Dutch theologian E.L. Smelik says this well when he says: "The prophetic office belongs especially to human beings in whom the rational factor dominates. The priestly office to human beings in whom the heart, the feelings dominate. The regal office to human beings in whom the hand, the will dominates."[15] That would be an argument against thinking

---

[15] E.L. Smelik in J.D. Dozy, E.L. Smelik, J. Koopmans, *Het ambt van Christus* ('s-Gravenhage: Daamen, 1942), 15.

about the Christian as an office-holder in a purely individual sense. The prophet needs both the priest and the king; the priest needs both the prophet and the king; the king needs both the prophet and the priest. So it is not only a matter of the individual identity of a Christian, but also of a collective identity of Christians. It may also be possible that the answer to the question which of the three offices is most necessary depends on the cultural and social circumstances. Also, in different cultures the three offices have their own characteristics. Therefore, the meeting of Christians from different cultures can be very instructive and fruitful. This is a good argument in favor of the 'communion of saints' from different cultures. One thing is clear; we must be daily converted through the belief in Jesus Christ in order to exercise this triple office in concrete situations.

Some Conclusions

At the end of this article I will mention some points that I learned from question and answer 32 of the *HC*.

1. To be a Christian without Christ is impossible. Every pretension to be prophet, priest, or king separate from Christ and His Spirit leads to idolatry. This makes me very modest.
2. The content of my identity as a Christian is only determined by Christ. I share in his anointing.
3. I need a complete and daily conversion in order to be able to exercise the triple office of prophet, priest, and king.
4. The three offices are connected with each other in the sense that to confess, to suffer, and to fight are closely linked. Christians in the Netherlands generally have to learn that again.
5. To exercise the Christian office means, in practice, that Christ as the *ganz Andere* (the wholly other) makes Christians strangers in this world. They are pilgrims.
6. Nevertheless, the triple office places us in the midst of public life. It is there that we are called to be Christians.
7. Because in each culture each of the offices has a content and form of its own, and hence a significance of its own, a meeting of Christians from different cultures can be a fruitful learning process.
8. The fact that a Christian can only be prophet, priest, and king through the Spirit of Christ, and not on account of his own capacities, prevents an exclusive attitude in relation to non-Christians.

9. Everyone who sees all people as creatures of God is open to dialogue with non- Christians. Such encounters may be helpful for the discovery of one's own identity.

10. What I find striking is the expression 'free conscience' used in relation to the regal office. It is surely a kingly gift for every Christian to be independent and responsible. In practice this means, for instance, that the Dutch Minister of Justice in the Netherlands, who is a Christian, dedicates himself to reviving an old article in the constitution that makes blasphemy a punishable offence, which goes against the opinion of the majority of the people. It happened in 2004. This is implied in the freedom of conscience of a Christian. But at the same time, this freedom of conscience also makes it possible that individual Christians in the Netherlands says 'no' to the new constitution of Europe in a referendum, against the opinion and passionate appeal of the government, including the same Minister of Justice.

"Why are you called a Christian? Because I share in the anointing of Christ."

PART THREE

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

SALT, YEAST, LAMPS, AND GADFLIES: BIBLICAL GUIDES FOR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Carol M. Bechtel

Words that Paint a Thousand Pictures

Metaphors allow us to say what we mean—only more so. Allow me to elaborate. Perhaps you have heard the expression: A picture paints a thousand words. Well, a metaphor does just the opposite. A metaphor is a word that paints a thousand pictures.

One of my favorite illustrations of this comes from Psalm 22 where the psalmist laments, "I am a worm, and not human" (Ps. 22:6a).[1] Now, the psalmist could well have said, "I am suffering from low self-esteem and am having trouble reaching my full human potential," and we would have gotten the point. But I think we would not have gotten it so powerfully. When the psalmist asserts, instead, "*I am a worm*," we automatically compare two things that we do not normally expect to go together: the psalmist and a worm. Without being told, we instinctively apply all that we know and feel about worms to our poor, miserable psalmist. For most of us, those associations are negative. (I say most of us because in every crowd there are the enthusiastic fishermen and gardeners who have positive associations with worms. I suspect, however, that they are the exceptions, and for the purposes of this illustration, we will bracket them into a separate category.) If I say 'worm,' you will very probably *think* 'slime,' or 'ugly,' or 'dirty.' If I say 'worm,' you will probably *feel* disgust, distaste, and aversion. So with the deft application of a one-word metaphor, the psalmist conjures up a whole host of thoughts and feelings, evoked like magic from the minds of his/her readers. It is, among other things, a brilliant stroke of rhetoric, accomplishing both the element of surprise and inviting the emotional and mental participation of the listener/reader. But above

---

[1] All biblical quotes in this address are from the New Revised Standard Version.

all else, it is a masterfully succinct way of offering up a word that paints a thousand pictures…pictures that are as multi-valent as our own experiences and imaginations. And so I submit again: *metaphors allow us to say what we mean—only more so*.

In the title of this address I have highlighted several biblical metaphors that I think are relevant for our consideration of "Christian Identity and Civil Society." All of them are powerfully suggestive precisely for the reasons we have just explored. They all invite us to participate in an imaginative project, supplying our own experiences of salt, yeast, lamps, and yes, even gadflies, to the task of understanding what it means for us as Christians to interact in meaningful and faithful ways in and within civil society.

'Salt,' of course, is one of the metaphors that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. "You are the salt of the earth," he says in verse 13. This must have struck his listeners as quite a compliment, since in an age with no refrigeration, salt was valued not only as a flavoring agent, but as an important preservative. Yet, the compliment is followed by a caution. "…if the salt has lost its taste," Jesus asks ominously, "how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

In the very next verse, Jesus shifts to another metaphor. "You are the light of the world," he asserts.

> A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts in under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven.[2]

Notice that this metaphor of the 'lamp' has something in common with the previous image of 'salt.' Both call our attention to a quality of 'infiltration.' This is also true of our third New Testament metaphor: 'yeast.' Except in this case, the infiltration is characterized in both negative and positive ways. "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy," Jesus warns the disciples in Luke 12:1. Yet, in the very next chapter, he asks, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God?" and answers his own question with this very positive picture of the effects of yeast. "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."[3]

---

[2] Mt. 5:14–15.
[3] Lk. 13: 21.

The fourth metaphor highlighted in the title hails from the Old Testament and is easily the most obscure of the set, that is, the gadfly. It comes from a passage in Jeremiah where the prophet is delivering a word from the Lord against Egypt—that ancient enemy of Israel who was then being soundly beaten by another of Israel's enemies: Babylon. It is hard for the prophet to disguise his satisfaction at this comeuppance, but it is important to remember that Jeremiah's personal feelings are not what are at issue. The oracle's point is that the foe from the north (that is, the Babylonians) is, in fact, the instrument of God's judgment against Egypt. This leads us to the metaphor in Jeremiah 46:20: "A beautiful heifer is Egypt—a gadfly from the north lights upon her."

Having grown up on a farm, I am perhaps better prepared to picture this than most modern readers. Imagine a sleek, self-satisfied heifer, chewing her cud in the shade in a lush pasture beside a flowing stream. Her tail swishes lazily and her ears twitch occasionally to ward off the inevitable insects that are the only 'fly in the ointment' of her idyllic abode. They barely merit her attention, however, until a very special fly visits the back of her neck—just out of reach of both tail and ears. Suddenly the peace of our picture is shattered as the bite of the gadfly makes our happy heifer do a very undignified dance, complete with indignant moos and desperate kicks. She cannot seem to shake the invader away, and one small, biting insect sends 1200 pounds of bovine beauty screaming away.

This metaphor shares that 'infiltrative' element we observed in the earlier three metaphors. And though it is more negative and narrower in its application than the others, *it captures something of the prophets' own role in God's interactions with both the people of God and society in general.* Though the metaphor in the passage quoted was used to describe Babylon, it seems to me that it could often be applied to the prophets themselves. This is not to say that it is the only metaphor that could be used to describe the prophetic role; prophets comforted as well as cajoled. Yet, for the purposes of this text, I would like to focus on this unsettling dimension of the prophetic job description. So, here is the comparison in which I would like us to luxuriate and from which I would like us to learn: *The prophets were, among other things, like the gadflies of God—landing relentlessly on the necks of the self-satisfied and arrogant, biting with a word from the Lord that refused to be ignored and refused to be shaken.*

As an Old Testament professor I offer an Old Testament scholar's perspective on several passages that I think are relevant for this discussion.

They are all from the prophets, but they are not necessarily the most familiar passages from the prophets. What good would I be to you, after all, if I picked only what was obvious? So instead, I offer for your consideration three gadflies of God: Isaiah of Jerusalem, Micaiah ben Imlah, and Elijah at Mt. Horeb.

Isaiah of Jerusalem: Bloody Hands and Snow-White Wool

Sometimes God's gadflies land squarely on the neck of the people of God. That is certainly the case in Isaiah chapter one. In this case, the sleek, self-confident heifer is Judah itself, so secure in her own religiosity that she thinks herself invulnerable to the harsh judgments of God. But listen to what Isaiah says to her—and quite possibly to us:

> Hear the word of the LORD,
>   you rulers of Sodom!
> Listen to the teaching of our God,
>   you people of Gomorrah!
> What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
>   says the LORD;
> I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
>   and the fat of fed beasts;
> I do not delight in the blood of bulls
>   or of lambs, or of goats.
>
> When you come to appear before me,
>   who asked this from your hand?
>   Trample my courts no more;
> bringing offerings is futile;
>   incense is an abomination to me.
> New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
>   I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
> Your new moons and your appointed festivals
>   my soul hates;
> they have become a burden to me,
>   I am weary of bearing them.
> When you stretch out your hands,
>   I will hide my eyes from you;
> even though you make many prayers,
>   I will not listen;
>   your hands are full of blood.
> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
>   remove the evil of your doings
>   from before my eyes;

cease to do evil;
 learn to do good;
seek justice,
 rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
 plead for the widow.
Come now, let us argue it out,
 says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
 they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
 they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
 you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
 you shall be devoured by the sword;
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.[4]

One of the most frequent mistakes that Christians make in interpreting this passage is to assume that it is a general indictment of the Old Testament's sacrificial system. But that is both too easy and too Marcionite. It is not, you will note, the sacrifices *per se* that God hates, but sacrifices and solemn assemblies *with iniquity*. The reason God says "I will hide my eyes" when we stretch out our hands is because our "hands are full of blood."[5] God's almost visceral objection here is to our tendency to go through the motions of religion even as we ignore glaring issues of social injustice. If we would have hands that are unstained as snow or wool, then we must "learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow."[6]

Isaiah is obviously not alone in this insistence. All of God's prophetic gadflies bite in the same spot on this subject. Amos registers God's aversion for solemn assemblies that serve as smoke-screens for social irresponsibility as well, and summarizes his stinging indictment with this call to new obedience: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."[7] Micah asks in a similar vein,

With what shall I come before the LORD,
 and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
 with calves a year old?

---

[4] Isaiah 1: 10–20.
[5] Isaiah 1: 15.
[6] Isaiah 1: 17.
[7] Amos 5: 21–24.

> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
>   with ten thousand of rivers of oil?
> Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
>   the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

But the answer is unequivocal:

> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good;
>   and what does the LORD require of you
>   but to do justice, and to love kindness,
>   and to walk humbly with your God?[8]

God, evidently, is not as easily fooled by religious and patriotic rhetoric as, say, many American Christians seem to be. And here, I admit I am bringing my own individual perspective as a Christian US citizen to bear. And I offer the following as an example of how this prophetic caution against going through the motions of religion without seeing to the substance of social justice made it into one unusual moment in our national media.

It was with profound relief and considerable excitement that I heard an interview with Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine and author of *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* on *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* (January 18, 2005). First, I should explain that although Stewart's show touts itself as 'fake news,' it offers some of the most insightful commentary on current events available on American television. And in this interview, conducted shortly after the 2004 presidential election, both Stewart and his guest were in top form. The first indication that we were about to witness an unusual moment in the public media was when the evangelical Christian Wallis thanked the Jewish host Stewart for being a "prophet." Stewart denied it, of course, but Wallis countered with the observation that all of the prophets were reluctant, and that the Hebrew prophets often used "humor and truth-telling to make their points."

But then, the interview took an even more biblical turn. Stewart and Wallis were discussing the 'moral values' on which George W. Bush had surfed into his second term: abortion and gay marriage. Wallis then asked what to me were patently obvious—but appallingly rare—questions: "Is [the fight against] poverty not a moral value? Is protecting the environment (God's creation) not a moral value? Is how and when we go to war and whether we tell the truth about it not a moral value? Is [questioning the use of] torture not a moral value?"

---

[8] Micah 6:6–8.

I hope you hear in this illustration an example of at least a part of the church in the US that is aghast at the blood on our hands and knows that God is not fooled by our attempts to cloak injustice with religiosity. Perhaps you can cite similar examples from your own contexts, but I hope not. And yet, this is one of the ways that sincere Christians of all stripes are called to search for a faithful path in their interactions with civil society.

It occurs to me that what this example demonstrates in honesty it lacks in humility. So perhaps it would be a good time to turn to another prophetic gadfly who has something to teach us about humility, and how to proceed in situations of moral uncertainty: Micaiah ben Imlah.

Micaiah ben Imlah: Horns of Iron or a Humble Shrug

The story of Micaiah is found in 1 Kings 22. It begins when Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, proposes an alliance with Ahab, king of Israel, against a common enemy—Aram (or Syria). Listen to the first part of the story.

> For three years Aram and Israel continued without war. But in the third year King Jehoshaphat of Judah came down to the king of Israel. The king of Israel said to his servants, 'Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, yet we are doing nothing to take it out of the hand of the king of Aram?' He said to Jehoshaphat, 'Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?' Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, 'I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses.'
>
> But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, 'Inquire first for the word of the LORD.' Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, 'Shall I go to battle against Ramoth- gilead, or shall I refrain?' They said, 'Go up; for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.' But Jehoshaphat said, 'Is there no other prophet of the LORD here of whom we may inquire?' The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, 'There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster.' Jehoshaphat said, 'Let the King not say such a thing.' Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, 'Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah.' Now the king of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them. Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron, and he said, 'Thus says the LORD:

With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.' All the prophets were prophesying the same and saying, 'Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.'

The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, 'Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.' But Micaiah said, 'As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.'

When he had come to the king, the king said to him, 'Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain' He answered him, 'Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.' But the king said to him, 'How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?' The Micaiah said, 'I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, 'These have no master; let each one go home in peace.'' The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, 'Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favor- able about me, but only disaster?'

Then Micaiah said, 'Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' 'How?' the LORD asked him. He replied, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' Then the LORD said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.' So you see, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has decreed disaster for you.'

Then Zedekiah son of Chenaanah came up to Micaiah, slapped him on the cheek, and said, 'Which way did the spirit of the LORD pass from me to speak to you?' Micaiah replied, 'You will find out on that day when you go in to hide in an inner chamber.' The king of Israel then ordered, 'Take Micaiah, and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king's son, and say, 'Thus says the king: Put this fellow in prison, and feed him on reduced rations of bread and water until I come in peace." Micaiah said, 'If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me.' And he said, 'Hear, you peoples, all of you!'[9]

One of the questions raised by this story is: How does one distinguish between true and false prophecy? How do we know whether to believe Zedekiah, the court prophet, or Micaiah ben Imlah, the 'free-lance' prophet?

---

[9] I Kings 22: 1–28.

Now, one might naturally be suspicious of court prophets. There is tremendous pressure, for instance, on the court prophet to tell the king who signs his pay-check what he wants to hear. But we should not automatically assume that he is a 'yes man.' The prophet Nathan, for instance, was a court prophet, but did not mince words when it was time to tell David, "You are the man."[10] So we cannot solve this prophetic disagreement simply on the basis of who is most likely to have a genuine word from the Lord. The truth is, either of them might.

There is another test for prophetic truth, however, that hails from the book of Deuteronomy. In a passage that emphasizes the importance of paying attention to true prophets and ignoring false ones, Deuteronomy 18: 21–22 suggests the following litmus test for a genuine word from the Lord:

> You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?" If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously….

My students are always quick to point out the impracticality of this test, especially in the context of the crisis in 1 Kings 22. Ahab and Jehoshaphat have to make a decision *now*, after all, and cannot really wait to see which prophet's words come true. Micaiah's own words seem to allude to this classic test, for all the good it does the two kings. "If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me," he says matter-of-factly in verse 28. And you can imagine Jehoshaphat thinking at that point, "Oh, fine—and if I go out and get myself killed I can at least die with the mystery of the dueling prophets solved!"

To make a long story short, Ahab puts his money on Zedekiah's word from the Lord—and pays with his life. Even though he disguises himself in battle, a 'random' arrow finds him and strikes him in exactly the spot where it could do deadly damage.

Yet, for our purposes, it is not the end of the story that is the most interesting—or the most pertinent. It is the middle of the story that is the most instructive, I think, for Christians seeking the will of God in relation to civil society. Put yourself in Micaiah's sandals for a moment. He has what he knows to be a genuine word from the Lord. He resists considerable peer pressure and political pressure to deliver it as he has

---

[10] 2 Sam. 12:7.

received it. And then, another prophet shows up with a word from the Lord that says just the opposite of the one he has received. To make matters worse, Zedekiah comes bearing visual aids: horns of iron—a symbol of both immanent victory and prophetic certainty.

Micaiah does not waiver from the word he has received. He even gives a vision report that explains the 'lying spirit' in the mouths of the court prophets. But when Zedekiah steps up and slaps him and asks the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: "Which way did the spirit of the LORD pass from me to you?" Micaiah seems to shrug and go rather meekly to his dungeon and his diet of bread and water. "Wait and see," he says, essentially. "Wait and see."

There is a word from the Lord in this story, I think, for Christians who are wrestling with what their witness and their demeanor ought to be in situations of moral uncertainty.

I just returned from the General Synod meeting of the Reformed Church in America. As a rule, I have observed that it is generally *not* a good sign when your national denomination meeting makes the *New York Times*. This year, alas, we did. We made news when we put the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, a General Synod professor, a Minister of Word and Sacrament, and the former president of one of our seminaries on trial for performing a marriage ceremony for his daughter and another woman. We found him guilty of several things, and then we suspended him from his office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

I had many thoughts and feelings as I watched the trial unfold. One of them was that the charges were incomplete. We forgot to charge him with being a brave and loving father. He was certainly guilty of that. But be that as it may, I could not help thinking of the story of Micaiah as I watched Christians arguing with equal passion and conviction for diametrically opposed views. Both appealed to the Bible. But part of the group considered homosexuality a sin and Kansfield's performance of a marriage between two women as a violation both of his ordination vows and God's design for marriage. The other part of the body stressed that God is a God of steadfast love and who recognizes commitments between people of whatever gender as expressions of that same steadfast love. "Who," I wondered as I weighed their anguished arguments, "has a genuine word from the Lord?"

According to Deuteronomy, we must wait and see. The answer may only appear in the rear-view mirror. In the meantime, we may have to take our cue from Micaiah. Speak the word that God has given you with courage, passion, and conviction. But if a brother or sister

comes with a word that conflicts with the one you have been given, remember that *you could be wrong.* You probably are not—but only time will tell. And knowing that, what course can we follow but one marked by humility, patience, and prayer?

Elijah at Mt. Horeb: The Sound of a Faint Whisper

Our last prophetic gadfly is Elijah. The story of his encounter with God in the "still small voice" is a famous one, yet just because it is well-known does not mean that it is well-understood. And it has particular relevance for the topic of Christian identity in civil society. I think you will see why, especially if you have ever felt like you are the lone voice crying out in a wilderness, or that the church is such a voice.

First Kings 19 finds the prophet Elijah fresh from God's triumph over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. Note that I characterized it as God's victory. But it could not have felt bad for God's prophet, either, when the fire fell from heaven and licked up even the water that ran around the altar. Elijah should have been riding high. And perhaps he would have been if it were not for that fact that Queen Jezebel was not amused. 1 Kings 19 begins with her reaction.

> Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

> Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown

down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazel, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'[11]

How do I love this passage? Let me count the ways…. One of the reasons I love it is because it depicts God as a frustrated teacher. (Since I am often in that role, I take particular comfort in it!) Did you notice the trouble God goes to with visual aids? First, there is the great, rock-splitting wind. Then there is the earthquake. Then the fire. But these are all negative illustrations, and in spite of the fact that wind, earthquake, and fire are all fairly common symptoms of theophany, God is not "in" any of the usual special effects. Instead, in this story, God is manifest in what the NRSV translates *a sound of sheer silence*. First, I would like to register my displeasure with this phrase. I can only conclude that it is 'under the influence' of Simon and Garfunkel because it bears only a tenuous relationship to the Hebrew behind it. The older translations were perhaps closer with their rendering, *still small voice*. But I would like to suggest something even more literal: *the sound of a faint whisper*.

   Why is the translation of this phrase so important, you may ask? Simply because the point of the passage rests squarely upon it.

---

[11] 1 Kings 19: 1–18.

Let us go back to God as a frustrated teacher. In the verses just before the special effects, God asks Elijah a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"[12] Elijah's response is self-absorbed, pessimistic, and arguably melodramatic. (But then, who of us would not be under those circumstances?)

> I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.[13]

This is the point at which God trots out the visual aids. The point is pretty obvious—or at least it is if you translate the phrase in verse 12 well. This time, God seems to be saying to the depressed prophet, I am not manifesting myself in the usual manners. This time, I am not in the big, the flashy, the spectacular earthquake, wind, and fire. This time I am making myself known in the sound of a faint whisper—a voice not unlike your own, Elijah…

But does Elijah get it? No. Look what happens after all God's efforts. God asks Elijah the same question (What are you doing here?) and gets exactly the same answer as before (I alone am left, etc.). Elijah has completely missed the point. So God—perhaps in exasperation—switches to behavior modification, giving Elijah his marching orders. Even if he does not yet understand, God sends him out to take some specific steps. Perhaps God hopes that understanding will come along later, and Elijah will know later rather than sooner two important things: First, that God can speak even through faint whispers, and second, that Elijah is not as alone as he thinks he is.

Last March I was privileged to attend the *Festival of Arts and Reconciliation* in South Africa. This was a rich and prayerful celebration of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—that body that did so much toward helping the people of South Africa process the pain and injustice of apartheid.

It strikes me that there must have been a lot of "I alone am left" moments for people like Desmond Tutu—or for Nelson Mandela cooped up on Robin Island—or for the thousands of anonymous victims of hatred who died lonely deaths and still lie in unmarked graves. And yet—and yet—how thunderously God has spoken through those

---

[12] 1 Kings 19: 9.
[13] 1 Kings 19: 10.

faint whispers. And how eloquently God speaks even now—to all the nations of the world—through the experience of little South Africa.

When Archbishop Tutu gave the opening address at the festival last March, he talked about this very thing under the heading of "God's sense of humor." Who would have thought, he asked, that South Africa would someday have something to offer the world in terms of a "more excellent way"? Who would have thought that South Africa might be a lamp? A cake of yeast? A lump of salt?

"Give them a week," he quoted the skeptics as saying. "Give them a week and it will end in an orgy of blood and hate." But a week went by and the orgy did not materialize. So the skeptics moved the goal-posts. "Give them a month." Still no orgy. "Give them six months…" and so on. And Tutu, in his little squeaky voice, says he still wakes up every morning and prays, "Daddy, don't wake me…I like this dream!"

In the story of Elijah at Mt. Horeb, God reminds us that even squeaky little voices can cry out mightily for justice. In the story of Elijah at Mt. Horeb, God reminds us that God's voice is not always heard in the powerful places we expect. In the story of Elijah at Mt. Horeb, God reminds us that we are not as alone as we think we are. And in the story of Elijah at Mt. Horeb, God reminds us that sometimes even when we do not fully understand, we need to step out in faith and do what God asks us to do. By the grace of God, we may understand later.

Conclusion

Thank you for indulging me in these three stories of God's prophetic 'gadflies.' If at some point they have landed on your neck and made you do an undignified dance, then I have perhaps done them justice. If at some point they inspire you to worship God through acts of justice, or to proclaim God's word with both passion and humility, or to listen for God in faint whispers—then I give God the praise. And if at some point you think of your role in civil society in terms of salt, yeast, lamps, or gadflies—then I will know that I have said what I meant—only more so.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL-ECONOMIC TENSIONS

Osni Ferreira

Introduction

I am a pastor of a Presbyterian church in Brazil and also a professor of urban theology in the Divinity School at Philadelphia University-UniFil. It should be clear that I do not come to this important subject as a scholar-economist, but as one who has labored within the context of the church with a commitment to the historic Christian faith. Added to this place of service and commitment, I come with a special interest in urban ministry, especially the planting of new churches in the large cities of Brazil.

In spite of the lively debates and scholarly works, the subject of a Christian identity within the context of the socio-economic tensions of our time remains a major challenge. This is true of those who approach it from a scholarly vantage point, as well as by those who would even consider it irrelevant to the task of carrying on the traditional mission of the church. Almost no one comes to this subject without some opinion. However, we know that the church as an institution should not view itself as having any privileged competence over the economic sciences or economic practices. Nevertheless, since we believe that Christian truth must penetrate all of life, it should be expected that God's people need to know how to live Christianly as they relate truth and experience to the world of work and economics and, above all, how to obey the second great command, to "love your neighbor as yourself."[1] Therefore, it is useful to keep before us the foundational truth of the Christian faith regarding God, man, the human society, Christian social responsibility, and the dialogue between faith and the

---

[1] Lk 10:27.

political and socio-economic ideological systems. The church's constant challenge is to re-evaluate these ideas and theories in the light of Holy Scripture.

THE LATIN-AMERICAN CONTEXT

Latin America is a rich and fascinating continent. It is rich in its cultural and historical diversity, in its natural and mineral resources, and in its widely divergent religions and world views. Yet, in the life of Latin-American people, there is tension and unrest due to the instability caused by constant changes in the political sphere and by economic unbalance. There are poor people who do not have a place to sleep, and, in contrast, there are wealthy people who cannot sleep because of economic worries. Meanwhile, the middle class is immersed in debt, and suffers the worst part of the whole bargain. Latin America is a continent of extreme contradictions, where one finds wealth and well-being next to misery and exploitation. In the 20th century, urbanization revealed the extreme poverty of *favelas* (shanty towns) next to the luxurious neighborhoods of the rich. The process of globalization associated with neo-liberal principles began to characterize this new phase of capitalism at the end of the 20th century. We can date its beginnings, more or less, at the time of the election of Carlos Salinas as president in Mexico (1988), followed by the election of Carlos Menen in Argentina (1989), Carlos Andrez Perez in Venezuela (1989), Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990), and Fernando Collor de Melo (1990) followed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994) in Brazil.

One should take a look, as an example, to the question of the external debt of Latin-American countries, which is approximately 792 billion dollars, and the difficult situation created by the payment of interest upon that debt, as well as the tough economic programs imposed by international organizations. In 1999, there were five countries in Latin America whose interest payments of their external debt were superior to 30 % of the total value of their exportation: Argentina with 75.93 %, Bolivia with 32.05 %, Brazil with 110.94 %, Colombia with 42.86 %, and Peru with 32.65 %.[2]

---

[2] T.R. Bahry, *Os Ciclos de Endividamento da Economia Brasileira no Período de 1968 a 1999,* Material available at www.ie.ufrj.br/publicacoes/discussao/abertura_financeira_e_ vulnerabilidade_externa_na_america _latina.pdf. Source verified in 20/06/2005.

Rene Padilla affirms "there is no solution for the poor countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America unless wealthy nations see that economic growth as not an end in itself, and that economic life only has any meaning within the context of solidarity, stewardship, and human responsibility."[3]

In consequence of these payments, the poor and emerging countries stopped investing in the nation's social and economic restructuring. Some initiatives were taken, such as the World International Forum,[4] which did not became a political force able to act on an international scale because the world financial powers are well-organized and exert unbeatable pressures upon governments. These social movements do not constitute forces that can effectively press upon the government of wealthy nations.[5] Therefore, it is imperative that countries such as Brazil make clear to all world governments and international organizations, and especially to the governments of wealthy nations, its appeal to solidarity and cooperation. Leonardo Boff affirms "there is no future to the rich nations while they go against justice and multiply their wealth at the expense of poor nations. Also, there will be no future to oppressed countries while they accept oppression and dependence, without looking after alternatives."[6]

On the other hand, the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, has said in Brazil that:

> Brazil, with its vast natural resources and growing work force, will be able to achieve economic progress and international influence on a bigger scale. Brazil has all that it needs to become a new big power of a new big continent. But it does not need to look after new solutions to the old question regarding what a country has to do to obtain economic success. We know the formula. The challenge is to apply it.[7]

---

[3] R.C. Padilla, *Missión Integral* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación, 1986), 133.

[4] *Fórum Social Mundial*. This is a space for the democratic debate of ideas that meets in different countries for in depth reflection, formulation of proposals, and the exchange of experiences and the articulation of social movements and non-governmental organizations, including other groups of civil society that oppose neo-liberalism and the world domination by capital power and any form of imperialism. Electronic material available at www.forumsocialmundial.org.br, source collected on 22/04/2005.

[5] J. Comblin, *O Terror e o Império*, Electronic Material available at http://latinoamericana.org/2005/ textos/portugues/Comblin.htm. Source collected in 22/04/2005.

[6] L. Boff, *Igreja, Entre Norte e Sul* (São Paulo: Editora Àtica, 1995), 21.

[7] M. Tatcher, *Idéias Liberais* (in paper), I.G. Martins. *Desafios do Séc. XXI.* (São Paulo: Ed. Pioneira, 1997), 101.

Similarly, the U.S. State Secretary, Condolezza Rice, in her visit to Brazil, affirmed:

> I believe that within ten years we could see a country making real progress in the internal sphere. This would mean to make possible real access to education and health for Brazilians that live marginalized today. With this democratic basis consolidated, we would see a Brazil with true weight in the region, helping to disseminate democracy, prosperity, and a free market. And from this basis it would become a truly important global actor, a promoter of democracy and of social justice to the entire world.[8]

These examples of neo-liberal and capitalist ideologies demonstrate that we should not expect the governments of current world powers to understand the meaning of economic solidarity because one can presume that solidarity among the peoples of the world means breaking off from individualism and indifference between persons, the interchange and sharing of goods and of information, mutual help, and political and economic cooperation. Like Padilla said, "the answer to this challenge cannot be given merely in terms of creative ideas and help programs; it has to be given in terms of redistribution of wealth that responds to the demands of social justice."[9] In the face of the data, here presented with such huge challenges, the Latin-American church should not remain quiet. On the contrary, it should fight with Christ against injustices in the city and in the fields, against the inequalities that oppress the poor, and that marginalize a big part of our population without offering it any possibility of improvement.

The Role of the Latin-American Church in the Face of Socio-Economic Challenges

Without a deeper understanding of the problem and the more comprehensive solution, found in part in a more fully expanding gospel mentioned in the sacred scriptures, there can be no lasting change in the problems of Latin America—especially those related to the poor and marginalized.

---

[8] C. Rice, Interview given to Vilma Gryzinski. *Revista Veja*, 04/05/2005, 15.
[9] Padilla, *Missión Integral*, 133.

A Deeper Understanding of the Kingdom

It does not seem appropriate, at this time, to expand on the church's historic understanding of the kingdom of God. However, a few preliminary and fundamental ideas would be helpful. At the center of the this new kingdom is Christ; Christ preaching repentance and faith, teaching ethics of the highest order, training leaders to be change agents in a world of rebellion and evil, feeding the poor—even though some of his own followers did not understand, healing the sick—not just to show his divinity, but for the fundamental good of mankind, dying on a cross for the deep spiritual needs of his people, and rising from the dead to become the powerful conqueror of all that has brought ruin and misery to mankind. The kingdom has truth and power. It has hope, but it faces reality as it really is.

Only the gospel, the good news, of the kingdom, with its rich and nuanced dimensions, can save Latin American countries, their cities, their inhabitants, and their socio-economic systems and structures. The world desperately needs kingdom citizens living in communities that are truly counter-cultural. Some of this thinking, which is not actually new, has been in the mixing pot since the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910), although most of the best and even critical thinking has been the product of dialogue within the last 45 years. Many meetings, conferences, and councils have taken place, such as those of the *Comissão Econômica para a América Latina e Caribe*—CELA (Economic Committee for Latin America and Caribe), the *Conselho Latino Americano de Igrejas*—CLAI /1982 (Latin American Council of Churches),[10] and the *Congressos Latino-Americanos de Evangelização*—CLADE (Latin American Committee for Evangelism). These studies would fill many pages, but at the heart of each one is the understanding that the church, especially the evangelical church, must go beyond a gospel that merely saves souls. The church must incarnate the reality in which it exists and lives, and it must participate in the social, economic, and moral recovery of the many lives that have been marginalized by the political and economic system. In this sense, the Augsburg Confession declares the wholeness of the gospel of the kingdom:

> The gospel does not teach exterior and temporal forms of life and justice, but rather an interior and eternal justice of the heart, one that does not abolish civil government, the political order, and marriage, wanting, on

---

[10] To obtain more information visit: http://*www.clai.org.ec*/.

the contrary, that all this be kept within a genuinely divine order, and
that each one, according to personal vocation, show in these ordinations
Christian love and truly good works.[11]

Orlando Costas said that "the church is not simply sent to the world,
but rather is within the world, and therefore it needs to make the gospel
known and also be like yeast to the world, and thus participate in its
transformation."[12] The church will be merely a human institution if it
does not have the vision of Jesus Christ in the context and the histori-
cal reality in which it is inserted. Karl Barth said that the church was
created in the world, and thus it "exists for men and for the world, just
as it exists for itself."[13] Therefore, we see that the evangelical church
will be relevant to the world only if it becomes more contextualized
and less ritualistic, and only if it becomes more informal and less eccle-
siastical. A truly mission-motivated church has no fear of surpassing
barriers, of breaking paradigms, of rupturing frontiers, and of open-
ing up new horizons. Similarly, Charles Van Engen points out that the
church needs to be "highly contextual, radically transformational, and
powerfully hopeful, living with eternity in mind. This implies a process
by which the church becomes itself and starts to be itself."[14]

The church is, therefore, an agent of transformation in a world
that is struggling with the secularism of hyper-modernity. The church
should be concerned to the point of action about its members that are
unemployed, and who suffer the consequences of an unjust economic
system, and social and racial discrimination. The church, as an agent of
transformation, should give witness, by word and by action in the form
of a servant, regarding unbelief, exploitation, discrimination, and vio-
lence, as well as regarding salvation, healing, liberation, reconciliation,
and righteousness.

Latin American theologians are aware of this cluster of problems.
Since the 1960s, in Latin America one finds a solid theological reflec-
tion that is biblically-oriented but shows a distinct methodology. Re-
nouncing the old dualistic categories of the classic theological man-
uals that were produced by the end of the 19th century and begin-
ning of the 20th century, Latin American theologians began to trudge

---

[11] *Confissão de Augsburgo*, Artigo XVI, Concórdia, Concórdia e Sinodal, 35.

[12] O. Costas, *Compromiso y Misión* (Costa Rica: Editorial Caribe, CELEP, 1979), 78–79.

[13] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), v 4, part 3, 2nd half, 72.

[14] C. Van Engen, *Povo Missionário, Povo de Deus* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1996), 49.

new hermeneutic paths. Emphasizing key moments of God's revelation in the Bible (the Exodus, the prophetic books, the preaching of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry), Latin American theology began to ask for the implications that this should bring the witnessing of the church in a time of oppression. The consequence was a fertile dialogue of Latin American theology with politics, sociology, and economy. It is important to underline that this was not merely a vague academic exercise because one of the characteristics of Latin American theology is its commitment to practice. It is said that the most decisive element in Latin American theological reflection is not orthodoxy; but rather, orthopraxy. At first, to be sure, there were moments of extremism by some theologians, but currently Latin America is one of main sources of contextualized theological production. This can be illustrated by some examples. Economy was never privileged in the theological reflection that appeared around the Northern Atlantic. It was Latin American theology that brought the economic questions to the front of debates in seminaries and churches. It began with Franz Hinkelammert's classic work, *The ideological Weapons of Death*, and proceeded with a serious production of Júlio de Santa Ana, Hugo Assmann, and Jung Mo Sung. The consequence of this insistence upon the idea that socio-economic problems cannot be solved only through preaching and prayer, but demand effective actions within the political sphere, resulted in the creation of specific departments dealing with faith and economy at the CLAI (*Conselho Latino-Americano de Igrejas*—Latin American Council of Churches) and at the CONIC (*Conselho Nacional de Igrejas Cristãs do Brasil*—National Council of Christian Churches in Brazil).

A New, More Biblically-Oriented Leader

In spite of the myriad of books written and tapes produced on leadership in the church, there are still great benefits and unique insights in reflecting on the historic description of Christ's three-fold role in his church. He was and remains prophet, priest, and king. As leaders it would behoove us to reflect on those roles as they pertain to our ministries—not just in the traditional functions of the church, but in the wider implied tasks and challenges we face in mobilizing God's people for kingdom change. No place in the church is this more needed than in mobilizing God's people to be both light and salt in the world.

A. *The Role of Prophet—Powerful and Relevant Preaching*

In this role, Jesus skillfully and yet powerfully communicated God's truth to man and uniquely to the leaders of religion, culture, business, and politics. The Disciples of Christ expounded the Word of God with conviction, and therefore became instruments of transformation.[15] Their words were not their own; their power was not of themselves, but came in unique manifestations and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.[16] The Word of God, given and understood by the Holy Spirit, is the transforming agent in all aspects of life of all human beings. Preaching cannot depend fundamentally upon the effectiveness of the natural abilities or the capacities of the preacher. Bryan Chapell says, "We do not need to inject our authority in the Word to make it effective."[17]

Lloyd-Jones affirms that a minister must understand that, after he has prepared his sermons, in spite of how perfect they seem, all is useless and meaningless unless the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon him and upon his word. And he must pray for that.[18]

In the light of what has been said above, we understand that preaching must be, besides being contextual and transformational, sensitive to the complexities of the spiritual, political, social, and economical realities of Latin America. It is worth remembering that a similar approach to preaching can be found in the times of the religious Reformation of the 16th century, which condemned exploitation and the lucrative activities that oppressed the poor. A socio-economic and political analysis certainly will reveal that preaching in Latin America must be offered to a people who suffer from hunger, are politically oppressed, and who do not have basic rights and are not respected as citizens. The preacher has to reach the necessities of the contemporary world and try to present a solution to the physical, material, spiritual, and social needs of those who listen to the Word. The preaching that impacts the listener is the one that touches his and her heart because it speaks of his or her reality. Padilla says, "Without a contextualization of the gospel there is no real communication of the Word of God."[19] There is a hunger for meaning, and a need to make contemporary reality mean-

---

[15] M. Green, *Evangelização na Igreja Primitiva* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1984), 227–228.

[16] 1 Co 2:4; Lk 24:49.

[17] B. Chapell, *Pregação Cristocêntrica* (São Paulo: Ed. Cultura Cristã, 2002), 99.

[18] M. Lloyd-Jones, *Avivamento* (São Paulo: Ed. PES (1ª Edição), 1992), 129.

[19] Padilla, *Missión Integral*, 90.

ingful to people, taking into consideration the actual needs of persons, families, churches, nations, and so on. John Knox said "the preacher that is not sensitive to social injustice, to commitment with the non-privileged, in each example of inhumanity of man against man […] is not a preacher in the real sense of the word."[20] The preacher needs to confront the insufficiencies observed in the community with the biblical text.

This kind of balanced, nuanced, and biblically comprehensive preaching is extremely difficult to do with excellence. The challenge is to proclaim the greatness of God that leads to true worship, apply the gospel of grace instead of some moralistic formula by which we gain favor with God, teach about the great commands in such a way that they are applied upon the heart, preach how the church can become a welcoming community to all, and show that the way of the cross is not to get but to give, not to gain power but to give up power, and in some mysterious sense not to live but to die. And in this self-denying death, we truly begin to live, serve, and sacrifice for others. This kind of preaching will take study and thought, and it will reflect a life immersed in the needs of the people and community.

B. *The Role as Priest—Spiritual Dynamics and Community Building*

The priest stands between God and the people, interceding for them, seeking them out as lost sheep, and nurturing and caring for them in all of life's circumstances. In this role we are seen as pastors. The new pastor/leader needs greater access to people, not just the pulpit. It is here in close proximity to our people that we demonstrate compassion. It is here that we intercede on their behalf in prayer. It is here that we take them with us in real ministry, to real people in real need.

At the very heart of this ministry is prayer—bold kingdom prayer.[21] Praying consists not only of a privilege, but also of a need because in it one learns to have intimacy with the Lord.[22] David Eby says that "it is praying that makes the preacher, and it is praying that makes the pastor."[23] The tendency in our ministries is to become pietistic or

---

[20] J. Knox, *A Integridade da Pregação* (São Paulo: ASTE, 1964), 74.
[21] Ps. 25:14; Php 4.6.
[22] H. Lockyer, *All The Doctrines Of The Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 225.
[23] D. Eby, Pregação Poderosa para o Crescimento da Igreja (São Paulo: Candeia, 2001), 144.

activistic. Pietism can lose contact with the real world of need and
needy people. Activists can lose contact with truth that transforms and
with the power that brings true transformation.

The labor of prayer is the pre-requisite of the entire operation in
the kingdom of God for the bringing about of miracles. Many lead-
ers in the Latin American church would say that prayer has been the
most effective instrument to bring about change—not just in the spir-
itual, but also in the social and economic spheres of life. Prayer is the
main instrument to actually see God change what seems hopeless and
impossible, and this is why it is believed that a preacher "distinguishes
himself from others if he is a man of prayer. He must pray like any com-
mon Christian, otherwise he is a hypocrite."[24] Referring to the labor of
prayer, Eby says, "We should have in mind that we will waste the work
of ploughing, sowing and watering the soil, unless the growth comes
from heaven."[25] Prayer opens up perspectives and "it is the way by
which we obtain the vision of God to our churches, and also it should
be one of the main weapons in the war against the powers that obstruct
church growth."[26]

We recognize, nevertheless, that prayer must have its complement
in coherent and committed action with the God to whom we pray
and the people for whom we pray. This commitment is demonstrated
in the formation of socio-political agents that may be inserted in the
organisms that effectively act upon the instances of power in society.
It is the old problem of historical mediations. We pray, we ask, and we
preach, but sometimes it seems that there is a lack of concrete, historical
mechanisms that can establish the necessary bridges of mediation for
changes in the society. In general, churches stay at the symbolic level
of the 'March for Jesus,' for instance. They mobilize great numbers
of people, but they cannot create an ecumenical, corporative spirit, or
to use a theological concept, a "Koinonic Spirit" that could change
something in the community. The old *Confederação Evangélica Brasileira*—
The Brazilian Evangelical Confederation—promoted a big event in the
northeast of Brazil in 1961, but the political developments that led to
the military coup in 1964 made any further development impossible.
Since then, no other effort of evangelical coalition was successful, due
to the personalities of the evangelical leaders.

---

[24] C.H. Spurgeon, *Lições aos Meus Alunos* (São Paulo: PES, 1990), 48–50.
[25] Eby, Pregação Poderosa para o Crescimento da Igreja, 153.
[26] T.S. Rainer, *The Book of the Church Growth* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 179.

Today, however, the Brazilian church seems to be more mature, and little by little it is freeing itself from this kind of evangelical codling that paralyzes all communitarian initiatives due to the veneration of leaders. The necessity to put into practice what is expressed through prayer is understood more clearly now. This reminds us of the old medieval motto, *ora et labora*. In other words, it is not enough to pray for the coming of the kingdom or for the relief of the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. It is necessary to work for change as well.

C. *The Role of King or Leader*

The prophet communicates God's truth to the church and to the world. The priest meets people where they are, in the multiplicity of their needs. The king comes alongside and says, "this is the way, follow me." In this role, the pastor must become more skillful in strategies and structures, in organizing, in communicating, in training, and in building vision—especially in regard to how a community or city can reflect kingdom values. This role is still not generally understood in the church, and seminaries still do not fully appreciate the necessity of training pastors and other church servants to labor with this appreciation and these skills. Quite possibly, this is why we know the values of the kingdom—especially related to social concerns and actions, and also that we pray diligently for their success. But in reality, we do not see much real difference in neighborhoods, in institutions, in government, in education, or in medicine. It seems perfectly obvious that the movements that have affected social change in Latin America have come through well-structured organizations, even though from the outside they may not seem like well-oiled machines. Often they are financed, with little recognition, from large structures inside or outside the church, but are effective in gaining public support and pressuring on the power structures of the culture. In the midst of many of these, we often find smart, passionate, intuitive leaders.

The Importance of the Charismatic Movement

When we review Latin American history, we cannot disregard the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches. In Brazil, according to recent research, Evangelicals represent 15.41 % of the Brazilian population, and of these,

10.37 % are of Pentecostal origin.[27] José Miguéz Bonino suggests that Pentecostalism is an alternative, saying, "It works as an exit route or a manner in which a person can respond to a collective and personal crisis."[28] In the same sense, Peter Wagner wrote: "the main reason for the dawn of a new day was the unprecedented liberation of spiritual power through the Pentecostal and charismatic movements."[29] It is clear that they reproduce very quickly, and this is why the Pentecostal churches challenge historical Protestant churches. The proportional lack of growth of historical churches in comparison to the Pentecostal denominations denotes the necessity "to rethink our heritage, our strategies, and the way of being the church in our pluralistic society, full of secular and religious alternatives."[30] However, it is not a matter of "pentecostalizing the church, so that it can grow more holistically, but of renewing it spiritually, in the light of the universal experience of Pentecost, in the vocation of church unity and the unity of humanity for whom Christ died and resurrected."[31]

In spite of its undeniable potential, Pentecostalism lacks a bigger interest regarding social problems. Pentecostalism eventually dilutes itself in many different groups, and it loses the great historical opportunity to force changes by means of lobbies directed to the city governments, as well as state and federal governments. It is due to this lack of intellectual discernment of the majority of the Pentecostals that they become easy prey to unscrupulous and populists politicians. This is why it is necessary to reinforce initiatives of popular theological education in Pentecostal groups. There is no other way to achieve significant social changes in Brazilian and Latin America social realities outside of inter-ecclesiastic cooperation. Today, each denomination isolates itself in its own programs that reach only a small part of the population, no matter how big and successful they are. The path to achievement would be the

---

[27] Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica (IBGE). Resident population by gender, domiciliary and religion. Electronic material available at *www.ibge.gov.br/home/ estatistica/populacao/censo2000/populacao/religiao_Censo2000.pdf*. Source collected in 23/04/ 2005.

[28] J.M. Bonino, *Rostros del Protestantismo Latino Americano* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación, 1995), 62.

[29] P. Wagner, *How to Have a Healing Ministry Without Making Your Church Sick* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1988), 13.

[30] B.F. Gutiérrez, e L.S. Campos, *Na Força do Espírito: Os Pentecostais na América Latina: Um desafio as Igreja Históricas* (São Paulo: Associação Literária Pendão Real, 1996), 109.

[31] Gutiérrez, e Campos, *Na Força do Espírito*, 138–145, 60.

strengthening of the Reformed identity in a conjoined evangelical effort without ignoring the contribution of Pentecostals.

Latin American Results—Case Studies

Positive results have been obtained in the midst of churches and organizations of Latin American countries. These churches and organizations were called to preach the gospel in the likeness of Christ—a gospel that supplies both the spiritual and the physical needs of the people. In the city of Londrina, Brazil, there is a ministry called *Ministério Evangélico Pró Vida*—MEPROVI (Evangelical Ministry Pro Life) that began in 1988 and received, from the federal government, the official recognition as a philanthropic organization. This ministry was supported from its very beginning by the Central Presbyterian Church of Londrina (*Igreja Presbiteriana Central de Londrina*). This institution aims for the recovery of drug addicts that have been rejected by family and society. The church recruited psychologists, doctors, dentists, social workers, and pastors to invest in the spiritual and physical recovery of these persons. This team of professionals also assists and supports their families, giving them substantial assistance over a substantial period of time. The results of healing, both in mind and body, in individuals and families have been remarkable. Many lives have been reintegrated into society and the job market. Individuals and families have been accepted as true brothers and sisters in the Christian community.

Meanwhile, another ministry was developed parallel to the one described above, which is called *MEPROVI INFANTIL* (Children Ministry). It is a children's ministry that offers support for the social problems of deprived children—giving them nutrition, psychological help, social assistance, school assistance, and the teaching of the Word of God. Ministries that show social commitment, such as these, are always followed by contextualized preaching and biblical teaching.

From Colombia, Rosa Camargo shares with us the news of the establishment in 1990 of an office for the promotion of social development, *Escritório de Promoção e Desenvolvimento Social*—EPDS (Office For The Promotion of Social Development). It is a ministry that works by means of the concession of credits to small businesses of new entrepreneurs. Juan Delgado and David Evans have talked about their work in Juntavi, a rural community in Colombia, that has developed a socioeconomic program of agricultural production and the harvesting of

natural resources. The power of the gospel has changed the life of that community, which was despised before by other towns of that region. The community of Juntavi became known for its food production—a fact that made possible the construction of a water system and of irrigation, due to the abundant supply of natural drinkable water that exists in the region. Atílio Quintanilla Acosta, from Peru, tells us about the extreme poverty he found in the bamboo *favelas* (shantytowns) where people experience a socially marginalized life due to their chaotic social situation. Acosta affirmed that the solution he found was to start a set of small groups or cells in which a holistic ministry was developed.[32]

Human Rights, Justice, Social Responsibility, and Preference for the Poor

The church is sent to fulfill its double vocation of being the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."[33] John Stott says, "The world is the place in which we have to live and love, witness and serve, suffer and die for Christ." And he says that the church is "wherever the people of God has acted effectively as salt and light of the community, where one witnesses the existence of less decay and more social promotion."[34] The church needs to take care of the poor as Jesus did, struggling against those who oppressed the people by utilizing the religious system, as well as the socio-economic system. In the likeness of their master, the apostles—Peter, James, and John—recommended to Paul and Barnabas that they do not forget the poor,[35] and there are other similar New Testament recommendations written with the purpose that the preaching of the gospel must be followed by good works.[36] This is why the Lausanne Covenant, 1974, based upon the teachings of the New Testament, affirmed that evangelization and social responsi-

---

[32] T. Yamamori, C.R. Padilha, & G. Rake, *Servindo Com os Pobres na América Latina: Modelos de Ministério Integral* (Curitiba: Descoberta, 1998), 95–112;123–150.

[33] Mt 5:13,14; Lk 4:18,19; Mt 9:35.

[34] J.R.W. Stott, *O Cristão em Uma Sociedade Não Cristã* (Niteroi: Vinde, 1991), 48, 66.

[35] Gal 2:10.

[36] Jas 2:14–26.

bility are the two arms of the church's mission.[37] Stott also affirms that social action is like a partner to evangelism.[38]

The dignity of the human person can be translated in his or her rights and duties that are universal and inviolable. They are: nutrition, health, clothing, housing, freedom, education, information, and safety, among others. The social life of human beings must be kept, and this demands that all adults receive a minimum wage so that the poor do not live oppressed. It is unlikely that the current economic practices and models can abolish all poverty, and this is why it is necessary that we plead for justice and that each one receives what is his or her rights—that which rightly belongs to each person. In face of that, Jean-Yves Calvez suggests, "it is not a question of quantitative balances or unbalances, but of human relations, which may be right or not, in accordance with human rights or not." And also, "whether the fundamental social dimension of economic life is respected or not."[39] The problems that have their source in economic instability impoverish Latin American countries, as well as those which are a consequence of social problems associated with political matters, particularly corruption. The poor will have their place in Latin American churches only when these churches react against the social injustices and become "society's conscience."[40] Regarding this matter, Valdir Steuernagel says:

> In the face of all the injustices that we live daily, we should look after God's justice in all its forms, and fight for it, support those that look after it. In the face of all violence in all its forms, our call is to become pacifiers, people that already live and nonetheless still wait the "shalom" of God. Above all, we should associate in solidarity with the destitute, the poor, and the marginalized. We should build up the hope of a new and better day, conscious that we are steadily walking towards it.[41]

Steuernagel again writes, "not only the church helps the poor, but the poor are within the church," and thus what is said must be translated into action because we should not despise the very religion that was

---

[37] J. Stott, Lausanne, *Evangelização e Responsabilidade Social* (São Paulo: ABU e Visão Mundial, 1983).

[38] J. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Illinois: InterVarsity, 1975), 27.

[39] J. Calvez, *A Economia o Homem a Sociedade* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1995), 71.

[40] Costas, *Compromiso y Misión*, 102.

[41] V. Steuernagel, *E o Verbo Se Fez Carne Desde a América Latina—Clade III* (Curitiba: Encontrão Editora, 1995), 22.

chosen by the poor.[42] David Barret says, "Approximately half of all Pentecostals, that is, two-hundred-million people, live in favelas (shanty-towns), in the most extreme poverty."[43] It is worth remembering that the Roman Catholic Church defended the "preferential option for the poor."[44] However, as the years passed by, it was easier to affirm, "the Catholic Church opted for the poor, but the poor opted for the Pentecostal Evangelicals."[45] Ricardo Gondim affirms, "the evangelization of Brazil has been made by the poor and for the poor. The biggest advances of the church in Brazil happen among the poor, among the ones who are socially and culturally alienated."[46] These matters, whether we approach them theologically or sociologically, will fatally make us ponder about hints regarding the future action of the Latin American Evangelical church.

Regarding what may be more properly called a Reformed theology in Brazil, it is understood today that Calvinism has immense potential for the renovation of society in an effort that goes beyond the mere evangelization of souls. We must simply remember the profound cultural and socio-economic reform promoted by John Calvin in Geneva, which changed the history of that city and projected it as one of the most advanced cities in Europe in many spheres: education, public heath, social welfare, etc. Naturally this did not happen overnight, but was the result of a long educational and spiritual process solidified in the understanding that the Word of God is capable to change the world. Calvin and other Reformers were very much involved in socio-economic tensions—to the point of Zwingli dying in a battle, and Luther spending much time trying to find a solution to the conflicts between princes and field-works. Later Calvinism promoted the Puritan Revolution in England. Those men did not want to merely reform the Church of England, but all the country, and they did for a while. Unfortunately, they failed to remain united.[47] Nonetheless, their

---

[42] V. Steuernagel, *Obediência Missionária e Prática Histórica—Em Busca de Modelos* (São Paulo: ABU, 1993), 51.

[43] W. Cesar, & R. Shaull, *Pentecostalismo e Futuro das Igrejas Cristãs* (Petrópolis: Vozes e Sinodal, 1999), 161.

[44] Conselho Episcopal Latino Americano (CELAM). Electronic material available at *www.celam.org/* source collected in 25/05/2005.

[45] K.G. O'Brien, *El Rol del Ecumenismo Protestante Como Possible Solución al Inpasse en Las Relaciones Entre la Iglesia Católica y la Comunidad Pentecosta* (Santiago: CISOC, 1992), 4.

[46] Cesar, & Shaull, *Pentecostalismo e Futuro das Igrejas Cristãs*, 162.

[47] André Biéler, *O Pensamento Econômico e Social de Calvino* (São Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1990), 205–250.

experience helped them to give space for new initiatives in the American Colonies and the results are visible today. Christian identity in the context of socio-economic tension in Latin America is still in a molding phase, and certainly will eventually discover that in the origins of Reformed thought the gospel is not purely a spiritual matter. The classic text of André Biéler, *The Economic and Social Thinking of Calvin*, has greatly contributed because Brazilian Calvinists recognize the importance of offering prophetic witness to powerful economic groups and prioritize the people's welfare, just as Calvin did.

Conclusion

The subject we have approached here is truly inexhaustible. In the church we are still not on the frontier of new, creative, and bold initiatives to bring the kingdom of God to bear on those who suffer and are marginalized. We need to repent for turning inward and pray for faith and boldness to turn outward. We are thankful for the extensive transformations that are occurring daily in the world, and the many challenges that are emerging from the Latin American context such as the issue of a black theological formation, the matter of space given to unremunerated missionaries, the advance of Islam and of pagan religions that create new problems or accentuate old ones, and that demand specific methods and strategies of training for evangelism. Considering these challenges, Steuernagel presents the following suggestions:

> a) It is important to better understand the Latin American religious soul; b) it helps to understand and live the Christian faith from the perspective of the anxieties, fears, and necessities that strongly co-determine the search for the Latin American religious practice; c) it is necessary to discern, in missionary terms, the impact of a bigger presence and expansion of non-Christian churches in Latin America; d) It is necessary to know how to prepare Latin American missionaries that God is calling to live and act in countries where other religious expressions are predominant and/or dominant.[48]

We should still consider the creative, new openings and openness for creative alliances in the midst of Christian diversity, not forgetting the

---

[48] Steuernagel, *Obediência Missionária e Prática Histórica*, 147,161.

missiological "reality of Roman Catholicism in our continent."[49] It is a
new era that demands a review of dated missionary models; a critical
evaluation should be made that makes ministries economically more
viable and adequate to Latin American social reality. It is worth saying
that it is necessary to fight for the establishment of an authentic and just
economic order, in which the appetite for excessive international gains
is abolished, and ambitions and political control, as well as maneuvers
to propagate and impose ideologies, are diminished. Meanwhile, we
must participate in the socio-economic system, and establish a dialogue
with wealthy nations to debate the common basis for a healthy world
market system, as well as to fight for the establishment of international
cooperation. It is necessary and urgent to support education and the
modernization of agricultural industry because this will provide a bet-
ter and more just land distribution. Padilla said that it is a duty of
third-world countries and developing countries "to create mission mod-
els centered in a prophetic lifestyle, models that point towards Jesus
Christ as Lord of the totality of life, the church in its universality, and
the interdependence of human beings in the world."[50] In face of the
immense disgrace that, even today, torture the biggest part of human-
ity, and, especially in Latin America, it is necessary that evangelicals
contextualize their discourse and practice. It is necessary also to foment
justice everywhere and, at the same time, the love of Christ for the
poor, the promotion of progress in deprived regions, and social justice
among nations—knowing that this day demands creativity in making
missions without forgetting these words of Jesus: "apart from me you
can do nothing."[51] To be a Christian in the context of socio-economic
tension becomes a big challenge. It certainly requires, of all that are
separated and called to follow Christ, a firm and strong conviction of
the message left by Christ: "I have told you these things so that in me
you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart,
for I have overcome the world."[52]

---

[49] S. Escobar, *Desafios da Igreja na América Latina—História, Estratégia e Teologia de Missões*
(Viçosa: Ultimato, 1997), 26.
[50] Padilla, *Missión Integral*, 135.
[51] Jn 15:5.
[52] Jn 16:33.

STRANGER IN A FAMILIAR LAND: LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN IN CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Annette Mosher

To Be an American

Americans[1] do not need an excuse to be patriotic. It is one of our civil virtues, and every American knows the phrase, "God bless America." But contrary to international opinion, we do not normally wake up each day and tell ourselves that life is good because we are Americans. American citizens are like every other citizen of any other country. When we wake up in the morning, our thoughts turn to caring for our families, working, social obligations, and all the other things that people concern themselves with. Our patriotism, or nationalism, is present in many of our citizens, but for the most part it is a dormant seed. That is, it was dormant until September 11, 2001.

With the occurrence of 9–11, the United States entered into a phase that it had not experienced since the Second World War. With terrorists attacking on her own soil, Americans responded with a new furor in support of their country. It seemed that the American flag began flying before each and every home. Paper flags were published in the newspaper in order to be placed in the front window of homes that had no flag poles. The same flag seemed to be placed on every space available—handbags, t-shirts, watches, hats, etc. Patriotism was at a level even higher than the patriotism present during the Gulf War of 1991. Our Congress stood on the Capitol steps, waving American flags and singing "God Bless America." The love of country became a bond that united America and brought comfort to millions of traumatized citizens.

---

[1] Within this paper I will use the term 'American' and 'America' to refer to citizens of the United States and the United States. It means no disrespect to South Americans, but is a contextual term.

Statistics show that (for a brief time) people began attending church once again.[2] Religious sentiment became in vogue and people that would previously not have considered faith as a necessary part of their lives began to seek for a faith base.

Perhaps most notable was the change in America's president. George W. Bush had become America's 43rd president by a narrow and contested margin. His presidency had been denigrated by rumors, errors, and accusations concerning vote counting in the State of Florida where his brother, Jeb Bush, was governor. Comedians made joke after joke about the president being stupid based on his good-natured, easy-going, Texas personality. The economy was floundering, and his presidency appeared directionless.

That was before 9–11. On that morning George Bush responded to a crisis that no other American president has ever responded to and changed not only the history, but also the face of religion in America. He began couching his terminology and phrases in a manner that was natural to him as an evangelical Christian. The battle that *he* was fighting was not against an individual or a group that had become disillusioned with America's foreign or economic decisions. He was fighting the war on evil. Those that agreed with him were partners in the battle against evil and those that disagreed were—at the least—ignorant, or—at the worst—un-American.

While anyone who has a passing awareness of America's political environment and campaigning knows that 'spinning the facts' is a given part of that process, this situation was different. For the first time in modernity, conservative evangelicals had a president in the White House that was 'one of their own,' and whom they trusted. In addition to their trust, President Bush spoke their language. He spoke about evil versus good. He declared that the political philosopher that he admired most was Jesus Christ.[3] Evangelical Christians loved it and threw their weight behind his presidency and his battle against the forces of evil. Prayers were lifted up for the blessing of George Bush.

---

[2] "What ever happened to…: Our Religious Fervor?" *Saint Petersburg Times, Special Report*, September 9, 2002. Found on http://www.sptimes.com/2002/09/09/911/What _ever_happened_to.shtml, June 14, 2005.

[3] http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030211–3.html.

A Strange Land

So began the right-wing re-politicization of many evangelical churches.[4] Somehow through the rhetoric and joint feeling of victimization, patriotism began seeping into evangelical churches. Many evangelicals became the patriots of the patriots and began proselytizing their fellow congregants into the Republican party. The phrase 'family values' became associated with the Bush administration so that Christians who opposed Bush's international or military policies were hesitant to criticize the administration. After all, what serious Christian wanted to oppose a president that supported their stance for the sanctity of marriage and the right to life in order to agree with Bush's opposition who often support homosexual marriage and abortion? Bush, therefore, gained much support in churches, and the line between his military policy and moral policies diminished. Accepting the hawking of family values included a side dish of patriotism.

With this political blurring of the distinctions, the confusion over Christian identity began. For many American Christians the love of God necessitates the love of country. While the physical land is not so very important, the ideals of America—freedom, strength, material wealth—are often given a reverence similar to the reverence given to scriptural principles.

Additionally, the myth that America was founded for religious freedom further tied patriotism into Christian identity. To be an American means to have been given a gift from God. It also means that a result of the 'gift' means that to disagree with American principles means that one disagrees with God. If God was with the Pilgrims in their trip across the Atlantic, then the establishment of America and her ideology is the tangible blessing for their quest. This ideology is so strong that the truth about America's religious freedom (i.e., that the Pilgrims had already found religious freedom in the Netherlands) has been submerged in order to promote the myth of conquest.[5]

---

[4] Evangelicals have been closely connected to Republicans for a number of years. Even with the demise of the *Moral Majority*—a fundamentalistic, political movement— many Christians maintained their politically conservative views, but lacked the organization to be a singular voting or political bloc.

[5] The Pilgrims (or Puritans) were a group of English separatists who left England because they were being ostracized for their separatist stand. They settled for a period in Leiden, the Netherlands, where they found tolerance and freedom to worship. As their children matured and began assimilating into Dutch culture, the Puritans chose to

That is the problem with ideology. To sustain ideology, truth must be suppressed. Any fact or circumstance that does not fit in with the story of the people must be changed (for example, as Hitler did during the Third Reich)[6] or the story must be completely ignored (as is the story of Roger Williams.)[7]

Two other serious problems result from this type of ideology as well: idolatry and fracture of community. I will deal with the idolatrous aspects in the latter half of the paper and will now turn to the fracturing of community.

---

move to the 'new world' in order to maintain their separatist stance. They arrived in New England on December 11, 1669 and became the first successful colony in America. Their quest for religious purity provided the basis for the belief that America was founded for religious freedom. See: *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, Trevor A. Hart, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 441–443, and Joke Kardux and Eduard van de Bilt, *Newcomers in an Old City: The American Pilgrims in Leiden* (Leiden: Uitgeverij Burgersdijk & Niermans, 2001), 46–47.

[6] Part of Hitler's propaganda was a desire to change the facts of the post-WWI economic disasters from a result of Germany's failure to win the war into a myth of a Jewish plot to destroy the German nation for their own economic gain. In addition to his hatred for the Jews, Hitler did this to help promote the idea of German superiority. See: Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wipperman, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44–112.

[7] Another reason that the myth of religious freedom is so prevalent in the United States is that many people are ignorant of the Puritans real desires. They planned to build their own version of a theocracy that had no room for dissenters with different religious beliefs or views. Edmund S. Morgan describes their plans in his book, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1966, 3) "…the Puritans came to New England not merely to save their souls but to establish a 'visible' kingdom of God, a society where outward conduct would be according to God's laws, a society where a smooth, honest, civil life would prevail in family, church, and state." One dissenter who discovered the communities lack of tolerance for differing religious opinion was Roger Williams, the founder of the state of Rhode Island, was an English Puritan who was called to a pastorate in Salem, Massachusetts (USA) in 1630. He fell into disagreement with the Puritan colony over the Reformed formulation of baptism (among other issues.) He was convicted of sedition and banished by the Puritans into the New Englad wilderness during a bitter winter. This was, in effect, a death sentence. But Roger Williams had befriended the local Indians who allowed him to live with them and saved his life. They later sold him the land where he founded Rhode Island as a place where all religious dissenters and people of different faiths could live and worship. For further information, see: Edwin Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America.* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1999).

Creating Strangers

In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson argues that the creation of maps played an instigating role in the rise of nationalism.[8] This is an interesting concept because it is true that one would have no indication of leaving South Korea and entering North Korea, for example, if the political, physical barriers did not alert them. The ground does not have a delineating line that announces the change in values and ideology. It is through human mapping that a nation is created. Through borders made by humans, national identity is defined.

The problem with these defined barriers is that Christ has erased these human distinctions. Ephesians 3 tells us that we are now "clothed with Christ." There are no longer identities outside of one identity in Christ. In Christ we move beyond American versus Iraqi or Dutch versus Moroccan. Our identity lies in the fact that we have one Savior and one nationality in heaven. In order to maintain the unity of oneness between us that Christ has established, we can no longer depend upon human definitions for our identity.

In fact, clinging to our national identity fractures our ability to live in community with other Christians throughout the world *based on our nationalistic principles*. For example, a patriotic, American Christian can easily fellowship with a Christian from another land that shares the same political goals. But how can that same patriotic, American Christian fellowship with a Palestinian Christian living in Jerusalem? This causes a break in the American's belief structure. They are unable to criticize American policies because of their loyalty to American ideals that they believe are God-ordained, and, at the same time, they have a bond created through Christ with the Palestinian Christian. Unfortunately, it is usually the Christian bond that suffers, and Christian citizenship is replaced by national citizenship. The fellow believer is sacrificed in order to maintain patriotic identity.

It is not only in international relations that nationalism can break community. History has shown us that even within one nation patriotism can destroy the community of God. Two examples of this is the Confessing Church in WWII Germany and Beyers Naudé of Apartheid

---

[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2003) and quoted in Eddy Van der Borght, *Nationalism and Land: a Protestant Theolougenom?* Unpublished paper.

era South Africa. One must only read the historical account of German pastors in the Confessing Church that were expelled from their office—not because they had betrayed their calling, but because they maintained their commitment to their heavenly citizenship over loyalty to the *Führer*—in order to see the result of patriotism on the bond of fellowship.

Beyers Naudé is another example of broken community as a result of nationalism. Forced to choose between his government and his understanding of God's will for his life, Naudé was stripped of his God-given call of pastor and his church congregation. His commitment to obey God caused him to be banned and reviled publicly by theologians and other leading church members.

As theologians we understand the importance and value of Christian community to the will and mission of God. Further, Paul deals harshly with divisions that occur among believers due to false loyalties. In the Corinthian church, the natural, human tendency to try and define one's identity through outside sources had already begun in the young congregation. As the believers began dividing their loyalties and following human leaders, they actually were attempting to divide the community. Paul responded with a direct, pointed reply— "Has Christ been divided?"[9] In this section he is discussing baptism and that is exactly the point. We are baptized into one body and one faith. It is this one body where we must gain our identity. To continue to define ourselves through patriotism attempts to return us to a state before our inclusion into the body of Christ. Attempting to define our identity based on human borders is an attempt to divide that which Christ has made whole.

An Unfamiliar God

Perhaps the most dangerous need in nationalistic movements is the need to replace God with the nation as sovereign. A good example is a line from the song that I referred to in the first paragraph of this paper, *God Bless America*. It reads as follows:

---

[9] 1 Cor. 1:13.

> God Bless America,
> Land that I love.
> Stand beside her, and guide her
> Thru the night with a light from above.

What is interesting in this stanza (beside the exclusionary aspect of asking God to bless America) is that God is to stand *beside* America instead of *over* America. This song does not ask God to rule America or to correct her when she violates God's will, but instead it directs God to guide her in *her* desires, *her* will, and *her* ways. It places America destiny as the primary motivator with God as the benevolent power-giver that fulfills American desires. But scripture fights this idea of God in a secondary position.

Deuteronomy is very clear about the jealousy of God.[10] God commanded Moses that the people were to have no other gods. He is a jealous God who called Israel to himself and gave them their identity *in him*. This idea of a God-given identity is continued in the new covenant when Christ purchases us through his blood. We are then given a new identity in Christ, and former distinctions are no longer valid.

But nationalism endangers our new identity through a form of parasitism. In the Netherlands, there is a bird that models this kind of parasitism. The Cuckoo bird enters the nest of another bird, lays a different egg within the nest, and allows the host bird to hatch and feed its young—often at the cost of the offspring of the host. Nationalism follows the same program of parasitism. It lays a different egg within the Christian nest and introduces a false value system in place of whole-hearted love for God. But the replacement is a subtle replacement, and therefore is all the more dangerous. In replacing God as sovereign, a new set of 'noble' ideals are introduced. Many times the ideals are very similar to Godly principles and become accepted without question. The ideals are fed with the loyalty and commitment that belongs only to God and should be used to feed the Christian identity. Allegiance switches from allegiance to God to allegiance to the ideal. For example, consider the "Pledge of Allegiance" that Americans learn in grade school.

> I pledge allegiance to the flag
> of the United States of America
> And to the Republic
> For which it stands

---

[10] Deut. 5:9.

> One Nation under God
> Indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

It is noble to hear that America is under God, offers liberty and justice
for all, and declares unity among her people. It is so noble that the first
section of the pledge is often not questioned—not even by Christians.
In the first line, the American that cites the pledge is declaring the
Republic as their sovereign. One must ask what a Christian who has
declared their allegiance to America would do if America violated
God's commandments?

The South African *Cottesloe Consultation Statement* of 1961 highlights
the difficulties that come with nationalism, and its desire to become the
sovereign. They addressed the issue of replacing God with nation, but
at the same time the delegates indirectly approached the problem of
Christian identity.

> *In so far as nationalism grows out of a desire for self-realization, Christians should
> understand and respect it.* The danger of nationalism is, however, that it may
> seek to fulfill its aim at the expense of others and that it can make the
> nation an absolute value which takes the place of God. The role of the
> church must therefore be to help to direct national movements towards
> just and worthy ends.[11]

In this we see another subtlety in nationalism. Ultimitely, nationalism
defines who we are over and against our Christian citizenship. We
should not fault the delegates for not realizing the problem they were
approving because they were addressing a separate problem. But is not
self-realization through nationalism just as idolatrous as replacing God
with ideals? Paul wrote that "…our citizenship is in heaven and it is
from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."[12]

The Apostles modeled a new identity. In his epistles, Paul did not
define himself as "Paul, a Roman Citizen." Instead he, like Peter and
James, provided their identity and introduction as found in Jesus Christ
by using titles such as "an apostle of Christ Jesus"[13] or "a servant
of Jesus Christ."[14] He realized that to name himself in this manner
declared his allegiance, his personhood, and his value in one definition.

---

[11] Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986),
213. Italics mine.

[12] Phil. 3:20.

[13] 1 Cor. 1:1, 2 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:1, Eph. 1:1, Col. 1:1, 1 Ti. 1:1, 2 Tim. 1:1, 1 Pet. 1:1.

[14] Rom. 1:1, Phil. 1:1, James 1:1, 2 Pet. 1:1.

He rejected the human standards of power and prestige that his Roman citizenship offered in favor for his true—albeit, humble—identity in Christ.

Perhaps it is the power of nationalism versus the humility of Christ that makes nationalism such a seductive idol. For nationalistic Americans there is comfort in the size and force of the joint military forces. This was why the country was shocked by the 9–11 attacks. There had been an amount of security that Americans felt because they were protected by the military power. This security was shattered because Americans were attacked through methods that the military could not combat.

This shock should have been a sign that what was providing security was something other than God and, therefore, was idolatrous. Security comes—for the Christian—not from military force, but from God. Identity does not come through a false nationality; identity comes from God in Jesus Christ.

Remaining a Stranger

I realize that it is impossible to live without recognizing national boundaries. We can realize that by simply attending this conference. Many had to obtain visas in order to fly to the conference. It is also impossible to ignore the other trappings of nationalism. I am sure that my government will not reduce the military due to my sensitivities regarding the misuse of power. The promotion of nationalism is a powerful force within our surroundings, so how do we formulate and maintain our Christian identity in the face of nationalism?

Jesus defined how to handle the problem of living within our governmental obligations as a Christian. When baited by the Pharisees and Herodians over whether taxes should be paid to the emperor, Jesus responded simply. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."[15] Many civil obligations belong to civil authorities, but Christian identity is not one of them.

For example, I am currently living in the Netherlands. I am an expat. This does not mean that I am an anarchist. The debt that I owe the

---

[15] Mark 12: 17.

Dutch government is to obey the rules of the country, pay my taxes, and comply with all the country's regulations. But I am reminded each time that I speak Dutch and receive an English answer in return that I am not a Dutchwoman. Regardless of my location, I remain an American in my civil nationality and personality.

It is the same for our Christian identity. We are placed in various locations within the world and must comply with the laws and governments in those places. But there is only one sovereign to whom we owe allegiance; one sovereign in whom we must trust for our freedom, security, and well-being; one sovereign who calls us into fellowship; one sovereign demands our loyalty, obedience, and devotion. Any other authority that attempts to replace that sovereign by demanding the trust, loyalty, obedience, or devotion that is due only to God must be rejected. Because of our Christian identity, we will always remain strangers in a familiar land.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE —KARL BARTH ON THE BEYERS NAUDÉ CENTRE FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Martin Laubscher

Introduction

This paper wishes to go into the heart of a need for a public ecclesiology. Is it really necessary and important for Christians and the church to have an essential ever-present public witness in society? Is our Christian identity necessarily linked to the public square? Is a public ecclesiology essential for our Christian identity? In short, we are interested in the terms and conditions of our Christian identity in the public square.

These questions are of the utmost importance for the current theological debate in post-apartheid South Africa. The founding of the *Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology* (hereafter referred to as the BNC) in 2001 at the University of Stellenbosch illustrates how serious these questions are taken in the South African context. To stimulate further thought and discussion on the matter, we suggest, therefore, setting up a dialogue in this paper between the BNC and Karl Barth's theological framework. For instance, we know that in the past Barth's political theology was used by some of the anti-apartheid theologians in their struggle against apartheid,[1] which makes one wonder whether, and to what extent, Barth's first decade of post-World War II theology might contribute to theology in the public domain of post-apartheid South African society.

Thus, we shall first start by looking closer into the particular nature and extent of Barth as a public theologian in that particular timeframe. Thereafter, we shall shift our reflection towards the theological framework of the BNC. Finally, after comparing these two theological frameworks to each other, we shall conclude our discussion with some critical

---

[1] See, Charles Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

remarks on the current efforts towards a public ecclesiology for Christian identity in the public square of post-apartheid South Africa.

In Search of Karl Barth's 'Public' Theology: Reading Barth in the Post-World War II Years of 1945–1956

There are several reasons why we specifically turn our attention towards Karl Barth's first decade of post-Word War II theology. We know that Barth had a lively interest in public life. He is known for the famous one-liner that one is suppose to read the Bible in tandem with the daily newspaper. Moreover, Barth's influence was especially felt during the time of apartheid regarding the formation of most of the confessional theologians.[2] As it was his earlier theology in the struggle and resistance context of the 1930s in Germany that was of potent relevancy for the South African context during the time of apartheid, we are curious about what significance Barth's post-war theology might have as a possible impetus with regard to the future of the BNC in post-apartheid South Africa.

There is much that comes to the fore regarding the public *intention* of Barth's theology in the post-war context. Looking into various, different, distinctive elements of his theology in this period, we see that all the main elements inherently have a driving force towards and into the public domain. Investigations with regard to elements concerning 'Germany's reconstruction' and 'The East–West Drama' show Barth's public interest towards political and socio-economic issues. Although he clearly distinguishes between the divine and secular realms, he does it in such a way that negates any stark separation between the two. In fact, he states the impossibility thereof because both spheres have at their core Jesus Christ.[3] Characteristically, he often refers to the 'joint responsibility' the Christian community has towards the secular realm.[4] More importantly is how subjacent it is in his more dogmatical writings with the particular assumption in the post-war context that if we

---

[2] See, Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*.

[3] Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," *Against the Stream. Shorter post-war writings 1946–1952* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 21.

[4] Barth, *Against the stream*, 25. See also Barth's "The Christian Message in Europe Today," *Against the Stream*, 170, in which he realizes that the emergence of communism in the east was actually telling western Europe something essential about themselves.

get God wrong, we shall get everything else wrong.[5] He always looks at and thinks about the world from the position of how it actually *is* in Jesus Christ.[6] Therefore, he often says that all changes stand in the light of the great change that has happened in Jesus Christ.[7] The state, the secular, and the public all have a place solidly within soteriology, and not in an isolated manner rooted in the doctrine of creation.[8] For Barth the entire creation is epistemologically rooted in Christology, and with a particular teleological element between the two. In Christ Barth sees the whole of the ethical reality claimed—a truth that summons—and which inevitably has and wants public interest and consequences. The debate with Bultmann on the project of demythologizing shows how Barth sees Christology as concrete and in no need of translation.[9] As elsewhere, Barth's motivation is that the whole of our present reality lies within Christ's presence. His famous 'The Humanity of God' lecture of 1956 also has the aim of showing that God is a 'God *for us*.' God and theology has a particular interest in man and his life, and to talk about God we should inevitably address man and his life.[10] The public intention of his entire theological framework is also evident in the specific interest he shows towards the concrete, visible, Christian community (congregation) over against the institutional church.[11] Christianity for him is about being visible and concrete in the world. We also see that he emphatically argues against any forced option between the political decisions and the unity of the Christian faith, and that the tension

---

[5] Noteworthy is to see how Barth, in his open lectures in Bonn during 1946 and 47, addressed the question regarding Germany's reconstruction each time with in-depth analysis and commentary on the classics of the Credo—*Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Press, 1966)—and the Heidelberg Catechism—*The Heidelberg Catechism for Today* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964).

[6] John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 122. Webster makes this point about Barth's moral ontology with an indepth study and analysis of his lecture, "The Gift of Freedom," *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), 71.

[7] Barth, *Against the Stream*, 79.

[8] This particular point is not only evident from the "Christian community and civil community" lecture, but also from Barth's *Church Dogmatics on Creation* where it is not about creation *per se*, but specifically orientated to come to know God's heart as revealed in the particular revelation of Jesus Christ.

[9] Rudolf Bultmann, *Karl Barth–Rudolf Bultmann Letters 1922–1966* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 88; as well as Karl Barth, "Barth on Bultmann and Demythologizing," *Modern Theology: 1—Karl Barth. Selections from twentieth-century theologians edited with an introduction and notes by E.J. Tinsley*, (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 85.

[10] Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 45.

[11] Karl Barth, "The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ," *Routledge Classics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 82–83.

between the two is of a creative kind that inherently belongs within the Christian faith.[12] For Barth the church is not a state but an event with a specific teleological aim that can never be indifferent to what happens in the public domain. In short, a survey into the first decade of Barth's post-World War II theology inherits a clear and definite public intention. His theology cannot be but public because he sees everything from the viewpoint of how it *is* in Jesus Christ.

However, to be clear and certain about this, we need to comment on one specific question that the above brings to the fore; namely, the particular nuance there is between Barth's public intention and his theology in general. Or to phrase it slightly different: Is Barth not more of a public commentator who happens to be a theologian—or is he, rather, a theologian who happens to be deeply interested in public matters? Let us address this important question by first saying that for Barth (following from the above) there is a close and intimate bond between public and theology. In fact, following from the definite public intention his theology has, any forced option between the two would be a false one. Thus, it is not a matter of choosing between the two. For Barth they belong inherently together. Yet we need to proceed by discerning where the primary emphasis is in the nuanced relation between the two concepts. It seems quite clear that for Barth there is only one-way traffic from the theological to the public, and not the other way around. In his views on the reconstruction challenge, he deliberately began with God because if we get God wrong, we will surely get it wrong elsewhere. Characteristically, he approaches the problem of poverty by specifically taking the line of divine reconstruction that he describes in terms of grace rather than oppression.[13] Barth was also quite clear to emphasize that the Christian community should have their own mission—a third way between the power blocs[14]—where they are living from their own sources (the Word of God only) and speak the language Canaan from a critical distance in the public domain.[15] Their participation is not an end in itself, but should always be stamped by its own mission. Another aspect that accentuates this argument further is the manner in which

---

[12] Barth, *Against the Stream*, 159.

[13] See George Hunsinger's discussion of "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 42–59. Hunsinger is commenting on Barth's essay "Poverty," *Against the Stream*, 244–245, in which Barth explores the idea that "God is on the side of the poor."

[14] Barth, *Against the Stream*, 143.

[15] Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 31.

everything Barth has to say is derived from Christ's worldly presence. It is only from the centrality of Christ that other secular truths may be affirmed, and not the other way around.[16] Anthropology does not have its own foundational grounds against Christ, but is derived from Christology.[17] Human freedom has no axiomatic status, but is corollary only from Christ.[18] The movement in his thought is characteristically always from the particular (Jesus Christ) to the general (public life), and not vice versa. He is clearly not interested in providing objectified theories about how a Christian should live in the public domain, but wants to give a spiritual description of how he sees reality in Christ instead. Barth is a theologian who believes one should have a definite intention towards public life, rather than being a public commentator who happens to be a theologian.

Nevertheless, concluding with this, it begs the question whether Barth is not actually 'too public'? Or, phrased differently, is Barth not, despite all the above reasons, actually manipulating and reducing theology to serve public interest? Once again it seems not to be the case because from his theological point of departure—how reality *is* in Christ—he cannot be anything other than interested in public life. Moreover, the intention of Barth's theological framework is not in terms of a theology 'for' public life; but rather, one that 'is' public theology. Barth does not want to reduce or manipulate theology 'for' public interest, but sees theology as being inherently public. Therefore, he also clearly argues—as with the method of analogy—for the need that Christians should participate unconsciously and anonymously in public

---

[16] What Barth is actually doing in this particular instance is reconfiguring humanism by subjecting it to Christ, than rather subjecting theology to any form of humanism. "We shall not be able to conceal the fact that with the Christian message it is not the case of a classical humanism nor of a new humanism which is to be rediscovered today, but rather of the humanism of God. Further, we shall not be able to conceal the fact that this divine humanism on the one hand only exists and can only be comprehended in a definite historical form, and yet in this form it is the same yesterday and today, and thus has not only a temporal but also an eternal validity." See Barth, *Against the Stream*, 184.

[17] John Webster, *Barth*, (London: Continuum, 2004), 101. We are much in debt to John Webster who shows that this concept of 'derivation' is of fundamental significance for not only understanding Barth's anthropology, but also his dogmatics as a whole—because we see in Barth's thought the particular conviction that as creator and creature God and humanity are neither identical nor absolutely unrelated but rather realities which exist in an ordered relation of giver and recipient of life and grace.

[18] Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 122.

life.[19] The moment one is not anonymous and unconscious in public life, one sees that public interest and participation will become an end in itself, and that the theologian gets more driven by public issues than to speak theology in and towards public life. In sum, it is definitely first and foremost the theological label, and only thereafter the public label, for Karl Barth.

Thus appreciating the public *intention* in Barth's theology, there is, however, serious and critical questions that we need to raise regarding Barth's *manner* of being public. For one, Barth does not provide descriptive concretion in his ethical thought, and nowhere does he use normative ethics, casuistry, or rationality as moral aids in terms of theology's public intention.[20] We see this in the method of analogy that he proposes, which has no concrete guidelines and alternatives to discern what the correct analogical results would be.[21]

However, what really needs our attention is the prophetic manner that Barth suggests in being Christian in this world. Surely one agrees that the prophetic manner has it time and place,[22] but whether theology should always function in this particular mode is questionable. Is Barth's proposed manner of 'ever being against the stream' not also another form of natural theology?[23] Are there not some instances in which the church should be priestlier orientated in listening and working together with others in the public domain? In addition to that, this particular approach finally reveals that he drew the wrong conclusions

---

[19] Barth, *Against the Stream*, 42, 49.

[20] Nigel Biggar, "Hearing God's Command and Thinking about What's Right: With and Beyond Barth," in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning with Barth* (London: Mombray, 1988), 117.

[21] For the critique on Barth's method of analogy, see the following works: Will Herberg, "The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth," *Community, State and Church* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968), 35; John Howard Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 100; John Howard Yoder, "Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing," in D.K. McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth has Changed My Mind* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1986), 170; Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits. Karl Barth's Ethics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 182.

[22] Nico Koopman, "Freedom of religion and the prophetic role of the church," *NGTT*, 43 (2002), 240–241; "Some comments on Public Theology Today," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 117 (2003), 10–15; "Let the plight of the voiceless be heard. Prophetic speaking about poverty today," *NGTT*, 45 (2004), 441–445; as well as his "Defence in a democracy. A church perspective on the post-apartheid defence review process," *NGTT*, 45 (2004), 612–614.

[23] P.L. Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture. Sacred and Secular through the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 193.

in the East-West drama.[24] It also asks the question whether the church in democratic context can really 'separate' them from other role players in civil society with their language that is always against and in opposition towards others. Is the danger not that the church thinks she is the only one who knows what good is? Is it not a too authoritarian way for the church to participate with others who also want to cooperate in the public domain? Will a prophetic manner really assure others (non-Christians) that Christians take their views seriously? Moreover, is a prophetic language as Barth's—whose primary aim is confession rather than explaining—really accessible and understandable to the others who do not share the same point of departure? Is he not making the distinction between ecclesiology and democracy too closely—seeing the democracy actually as an ecclesiocracy?[25] And finally, with regard to the polemical nature in many of his writings, one wonders whether Barth's theology, and the way he embodied it, is really helpful for fruitful dialogue?[26] Thus, there are some serious questions for Barth's prophetic manner in the public domain.

The Beyers Naudé Centre and Public Theology

Since the dawn of the new era in 1994 in South Africa, the playground and its rules regarding theology in the public domain has changed considerably. Therefore, Reformed theologians Russel Botman, Nico Koopman, and Dirkie Smit, who were active in the struggle against

---

[24] Barth was right in pointing out that Brunner and Niebuhr were not critical enough on the West's position, but he also did not hear their critique on the East when he said the following: "It would be quite absurd to mention in the same breath the philosophy of Marxism and the 'ideology' of the Third Reich, to mention a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as charlatans as Hitler, Göring, Hess, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, etc." (See Barth, *Against the Stream*, 139). Moreover, Barth is wrong in arguing that the atheistic state of communism (over against Nazism) did not use religion for camouflaging its own ends because "atheism itself is a form of belief, namely the belief in no God. Moreover, when the atheistic state disowns the church or institutional church, it is only a matter of time before it replaces the church, becoming itself a religious institution." (See Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture*, 186–187.)

[25] See G.G. de Kruijf, *Waaksaam en Nuchter. Over Christelijke Etiek in een Democratie* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1994), 40–52.

[26] For a critical view on the polemical element in Barth's theology, see the work of Dietrich Ritschl, "How to be most grateful to Karl Barth," in D.K. McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 90.

apartheid, personally experienced the challenges and indifferent developments, and initiated a process for the founding of the BNC that could "assist Christians in fulfilling their public responsibility in society … by Beyers Naudé's example of responsible citizenship and involvement in society on the basis of Christian theological convictions …"[27]

Reformed theology in South Africa has a history in which it was very active in the public domain during the time of the apartheid political rule—whether it was used to give the system theological sanction and support, or to strengthen the struggle's cause of resistance and opposition against it. On the one hand, the stories of Beyers Naudé,[28] the *Christian Institute* (CI),[29] *The Message of Message to the People of South Africa*,[30] the *Belhar Confession*,[31] and *Kairos Document*[32] are all very important markers along the way that show the particular, important role theology has played in the public domain—contributing to end the apartheid government's rule. On the other hand, it was especially the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the route it took after Cottesloe that represents the other opposite role theology fulfilled in the public domain by their official support and sanctioning of the apartheid system.[33] Thus,

---

[27] The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, *Background Information*, 2002, Stellenbosch (unpublished), 3.

[28] To view the personal story of Beyers Naudé, see his autobiography, C.F.B. Naudé, *My Land van Hoop* (Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 1995).

[29] The CI was founded by Beyers Naudé in August 1963. In many respects, the theology in the struggle context of the 1960s evolved around the CI. Initially it started out only to provide ecumenical support for dissident DRC members in opposing apartheid and furthering the Cottesloe resolutions, but its agenda soon broadened in scope, making itself a nationwide movement of ecumenically committed Christians engaged in the struggle against apartheid. See John W de Gruchy, "Political Landmarks and the Response of Churches in South Africa, 1036–1994," *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, 118 (2004), 12.

[30] Issued by the CI (in collaboration with the South African Council of Churches) in 1968. To view the 'authorised summary' of this text: see Naudé, *My Land van Hoop*, 167–169.

[31] The *Belhar Confession's* public significance lies in its confession for living unity, real reconciliation, and caring justice.

[32] The *Kairos Document* of 1985 brought a new distinctive prophetic flavor to the political theology of the mid 1980s in the struggle context. Although not Reformed in origin, it is an important marker of the public role that theology had fulfilled in this particular period and setting. See John W. de Gruchy, "From Political to Public Theologies: The Role of Theology in Public Life in South Africa," *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, edited by William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton, (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 51–52.

[33] Since Cottesloe (December 1960) the DRC fully withdrew from other ecumenical circles and structures, and sided with the apartheid government. The 1974 report *Ras,*

on the side of theology there were both *opponents* as well as *agents* with regard to the functioning of the political system of apartheid in the public domain.

In fact, what we realize from this history is that although theology was very much public during the rule of the apartheid government, it was primarily defined as a political theology because of the central place apartheid had on the agenda with regard to the public domain. Despite the fact that the term 'public theology' was first introduced in the latter part of the previous century,[34] it was not necessary to coin it as such because of the generally accepted kind of 'political theology' that was practiced. That theology was public in this era was somehow a given, and people were much more concerned about the specific political functions and roles it was fulfilling—as it varied in the struggle context from either the 'confessional theology' (like in *The Message* or in the *Belhar Confession*), or African 'black theology' (consequently with the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in the late 1960s whose influence was felt in the CI during the 1970s) and 'prophetic theology' (of the *Kairos Document*).[35] In sum, on a primary and conscious level, the theology in the public domain during this period was a political theology, and on a secondary-unconscious level, it was presupposed that theology was public.

The end of apartheid in the early 1990s and the dawn of the first democratic elected government and liberal constitution in 1994 inevitably also meant there were influential challenges ahead regarding theology's identity, positioning, and approach in and towards the public domain. The first challenge that immediately came to mind was regarding the *necessity* of theology in the public domain, as the main defining element of apartheid was no longer present. The struggle to overthrow or to support was clearly a thing of the past. It was not clear on either side of the previous 'public theology' whether it was still necessary to be active in the public domain because, on the one hand, the struggle theologians had successfully completed their primary aim, and,

---

Volk and Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif (RVN) is a classical document that illustrates how influential theology was for the general sanctioning of the ideology of apartheid.

[34] The term 'Public theology' was only coined for the first time in 1974 when it was used in the USA by Marty Martin to describe the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. See Marty Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *Journal of Religion*, 54 (1974), 332–359.

[35] De Gruchy, *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, 51.

on the other hand, the majority of the DRC theologians had learned a costly lesson—that of not being too closely involved with politics in the public domain.

Moreover, besides the necessity-question, the *possibility* to do so was also questioned. One immediate consequence of the new, liberal, democratic dispensation was that it immediately set a process in motion of introducing the values and features of modernity into South Africa.[36] All of a sudden they had to consider the idea that one is not supposed to bring one's own religious convictions into the public domain.[37]

What complicated matters even further, were that there were some influential changes concerning the content and method of theology in the public sphere. Concerning the *content*, it was clear that theology could no longer only think in terms of positioning itself over against the public of politics (government). There were also other publics; namely, those of the economy, civil society, and public opinion, who were playing an increasingly more important role concerning life in general in the new liberal democratic context.[38] The scope of theology in the public sphere was now broadened and more diverse.[39]

Also with regard to the *method* and approach of theology in the public sphere (now towards more than just one public), there were influential changes on the verge. Whereas previously it was about protest and resistance, or support and upholding of the political system of apartheid in the public sphere, it now had to change towards *critical solidarity* with the government's agenda of national reconstruction and democratic transformation.[40] As South African theologian Piet Naudé argues:

---

[36] See Jaap Durand, *Ontluisterde wêreld. Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika*, (Wellington: Lux Verbi Bm, 2002). See also D.E. De Villiers, "Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk en die nuwe situasie in die samelewing," *NGTT*, 37 (1995), 558–567.

[37] See Dirkie Smit, "Openbare getuienis en Publieke Teologie vandag? Vrae oor verskeie vanselfsprekende voorveronderstellings," in: *Scriptura*, 82 (2003), 39–42.

[38] See Nico Koopman, "Some comments on Public Theology Today," *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, 117 (2003), 9–10, 15–19.

[39] To complicate the matter even further, there was now the influence of globalization. "Suddenly South Africa has been swept into the mainstream of globalisation with all its pitfalls and promises, became a major player in African and regional politics and a significant one in international affairs." See de Gruchy, *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, 56; as well as Russel Botman, "Human dignity and economic globalisation," *NGTT* 45 (2004), 317–327.

[40] See Nico Koopman, "Tussen die duiwel van Konstantinisme en die diep blou see van sektarisme—kerk-staat-verhoudings in die teologie van Stanley Hauerwas," *NGTT*, 42 (2001), 135–146.

> … the rules for "being heard on the public square" have irrevocably changed as they shifted from an assumed prophetic role for theology and the churches to one where "prophecy"—if not replaced by a more "priestly" mode—is tied up with the art of democratic processes and lobbying at all levels of government, often in the context of inter-religious rather than exclusively Christian negotiations.[41]

Whereas Reformed theology was previously very much political theology and unconsciously public, within a few years, in post-apartheid Africa, it had reached a stage of believing there was necessity to consciously show the inherent public nature of Reformed theology. There is a constant need for new creative arguments concerning the necessity, possibility, content, and approach of theology and the new public domain of the South African society.

A Discussion on Christian Identity in the Public Square

That there is a great emphasis towards a public ecclesiology is evidently clear. In both comparative theological frameworks we have seen the emphasis on our Christian identity in the public square. For Barth theology, intention *is* inherently public—and even more so for the BNC in post-apartheid South Africa, where they consciously try to show the public nature of theology. Not only in and towards the political public square, but also into a much wider, differentiated public square.

However this does not mean that there is no interesting disagreements or different emphasis in the discussion between the two. For instance, concerning the title of a 'centre *for* public theology,' we can imagine that Barth would ask whether by phrasing it in this manner they are doing their own legacy—as well as theology and church—any good. The BNC's legacy is one in which they were primarily public in an unconscious manner—being explicitly more interested in the practice than the methodology of public theology. To say we have a center 'for' public theology might create the impression that the primary interest is more towards the methodology of public theology than in the actual practice of being public. A center 'for' public theology may easily create the idea that the center is more interested in creating and facilitating dialogue between various different public voices

---

[41] Piet Naudé, "Constructing a coherent theological discourse: The main challenges facing the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa today," *Scriptura*, 83 (2003), 200.

as the primary motive, and thus actually neglecting a historical legacy where its primary motivation was to confess Jesus Christ's significance in the public domain in the process. There seems to be a definite tension between the prophetic-confessional past, and the current priestly-apologetic mode of theology in the public domain.

Moreover, a center 'for' public theology too strongly indicates a loss, to some extent, of the critical space that is so essential for theology to actually really be public. We know the center wants to assist Christians in the various manifestations of their lives in the public, but does the preposition 'for' not reveal something of a functionalism and instrumentalism in their identity? Is the preposition 'for' not too strong an indication of 'the conscious public theology *through* the church,' and thus a devaluation of 'the unconscious public theology *in* the church?'[42] Is a center 'for' public theology not creating an idea that faith is used for specific reasons (like its correlation with the general spirit and faith of the new South Africa), and thus loses an essential critical distance in and towards the public domain? Is it not eventually opting more towards the solidarity element, and moving away from the critical element it proposed in the critical-solidarity approach? In sum, is a 'centre *for* public theology' not (still) leaving the door open for theology to be trapped in the legitimate role of certain undercover ideologies in the public sphere?

Why not rather just name it 'The Beyers Naudé Public Theology Centre'? Of course, it is not just about changing the name, but also changing its mode of functioning and orientation in this way. By doing so, the implication is that they may regain the necessary critical distance from the different power blocs in order to speak their own unique confessional language. For the sake of solidarity, the nonconformity ethic of Barth may just be what a young developing democracy needs from theology in order to serve not only the public interest as good as

---

[42] See Nico Koopman, "After ten years. Public theology in post-apartheid South Africa—lessons from a debate in the USA," *NGTT*, 46 (2005), 149–164. In this article Koopman makes the distinction between public theology 'in' and 'through' the church. Concerning the first, he draws on the work of Stanley Hauerwas that assists churches in discerning what the meaning of their identity and formative narratives are for the society in which they are called to be church. Concerning the latter, he draws on the work of Max. L. Stackhouse who believes the first will not suffice alone, but that we also need to make our narrative based convictions rationally accessible and engage in dialogue with people of other disciplines, religious, and nonreligious traditions. Koopman believes South African churches can learn from both.

possible, but also to witness to the unique otherness of Christ in our midst. In a time and context when people are questioning theology's usefulness and relevancy for the public domain, theology should not respond in an anxious manner to prove the opposite, but rather stay calm in a free and joyful manner by spelling out the implications of their confession that Christ is actually present in our midst.

Second, and inevitably following from his objections of the preposition 'for' in the title of the BNC, Barth would object if the BNC became more interested in being primarily the facilitator of dialogue than actually taking specific positions and confessing clearly to others in the public domain. The greatest contribution the church and theology has to offer is not only to provide space and being open towards other, but also by particularly speaking from their own unique point of departure. It is good to bring different groups together and to participate in dialogue, but it should always be clear that their point of departure is firmly rooted in Christology. Jesus Christ has foundational status, and therefore the center's work should, in all regards, be rooted in the primary rubric of Christology, and not in morals and ethics. In sum, Barth's concern is that the center should be confessional rather than apologetic in and towards the public domain, and assure that Christ's presence is made clear and not pushed into the background.

Third, because both are interested in having an ecclesiological public theology, Barth would agree if they could assist the public *in* the church, but object to the approach that public theology should also be *through* the church. In this regard, Barth's objection lies in the fact that he believes Jesus Christ has set the church free from being imprisoned from all the dominating forms of imagination in order that an ecclesiological public theology should be interested in giving a clear theological reading of the social and political reality, and not to play a mediating role within the given social-cultural forms of imagination. The only basic reality is the church, and it should only speak as it is formed and shaped by the Christian imagination. The danger in a public theology through the church—over against a public theology solely in the church—is that the current South African political project may become part of the starting point that is meant to be exclusively Christological. Being church will inevitably affect life in the public domain, and therefore it is not necessary to give the church and Christians the self-described and conscious role of being public theologians. A public theology through the church not only provides space for the wrong starting points and motivations to express the inherent public intention

of theology, but it will also assure the wrong results for both theology and public life. The church's participation in public life should never become an end in itself—and a public theology through the church creates that idea.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND CALLING IN A .COM WORLD

Frank Sawyer

Purpose

When we think about our identity, perhaps things like family, work, nation, church, or some psychological feelings come to mind. In today's world identity involves more than our roots; it involves our great latitude of experiences, even if this takes place for many people mainly in front of the t.v. and internet. In this essay we shall listen to a number of comments by sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and a variety of Christian thinkers who are concerned about the negative influences of the mass media. I assume that parents, teachers, pastors, and Christians in general have a calling to test the spirit of the times, also in relation to the .com influences of today. I hope to illustrate some concerns; at the same time, I hope not to give the impression that the negative forces of the media are the only ones. It turns out that the question of the use or misuse of t.v., videos, DVDs, the internet, and mobile phones is largely our own choice. One type of misuse is when we allow these 'channels' to over- dominate our time and even our personality. Another form of misuse is allowing the entertainment world to trivialize our hearts and minds. When we become addicted zappers, jumping from one channel or video or internet site to another without much coherence of purpose, we may be heading for a disintegration of our life.

So there are questions worth asking: what are the apparent or half hidden dangers, and what then is our calling as Christians in a .com world?

Globalization of the Media and the Loss of the Self

Hans Küng has stated:

> Only a few people—of this we can be quite certain—are capable of using
> the many modern opportunities of information and communication in
> such a way as to be able to adopt a completely independent, critical
> attitude in society. And even the most critical and independent person
> is not guided simply by the norms which he has himself discovered
> and substantiated by reason. For no one begins at zero. Nor is this
> only because he is determined by his environment, pre-programmed and
> driven by instinct. He belongs to a community, to a tradition.[1]

I recently read that about a billion people are surfing the www. Well,
how many of those surfers are drowning? Probably more than we often
realize. But is that the fault of the 'technological surf'? Technology, it
has been said, is a good servant, but an autocratic master. Today, it
seems that many people are suffering from 'techno-stress.' Machines
lead to more efficiency, but they do not return love and friendship
the way people do. So if our life is surrounded by machines, we may
find some other dimensions shrinking. Technology has solved many
problems and increased the power of work, travel, and communication.
It has also provided a comfortable environment for the modern world.
But we sometimes forget that technology will not solve our ethical
problems, nor compensate for the sinfulness of the human heart. Wars,
greed, prejudice, theft, and other kinds of human deviance also use
technology for their evil ends. Society seems more and more driven by
economics and technology, while justice and ethics are often pushed
aside. It has been said: "The technical ability to do something is not
the same as a moral imperative to do it. …Though scientists may
possess the technological ability to be gods, they nevertheless lack the
wisdom to act as God."[2] Some say that technology and secularization
together guarantee the de-personalization and the de-moralization of
our modern/postmodern culture.[3]

At first, radio and television had a predominantly unifying effect
because people in the same country would be listening to and viewing
the same programs, with little choice. This is, of course, convenient for

---

[1] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 540.

[2] J. Kerby Anderson, *Moral Dilemmas: Biblical Perspectives on Contemporary Ethical Issues*
(Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 181.

[3] Bryan Wilson, "Salvation, Secularization, and De-moralization" in Richard K.
Fenn, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 39 ff.

dictatorships that exercise strict control over what people may hear and see. But today, where it has developed the most, the media has become extremely diversified. Rather than unifying people's views, today the extensive choices of programs, channels, videos, and the internet offer an opportunity for selective viewing.

We enjoy great freedoms. However, what has this done to the present generation? According to a report I read on youth, it is said that "the average American child has spent more time watching television, videotapes, and motion pictures than the time he/she will spend talking to their father in his or her entire lifetime."[4] In England it is said:

> Contemporary communications are instant, ephemeral, global, and largely disembodied. Sitting together around a meal table, having an extended conversation is not how most families now spend their evenings. Even if at home, they are more likely to eat individually, moving food from the fridge to the microwave to suit individual tastes, and spend the evening in front of several screens—the television, the computer, or the internet. It has been estimated in Britain that a child born in the 1980s will spend more time watching television and playing computer games than he will spend at school, talking to parents and in all other forms of leisure. Around eight solid years of his total life span will be spent in front of a television screen.[5]

Since we cannot ignore the electronic media, we must learn to use it well and to teach children this skill, also.[6] The result of the media maze is that today some, perhaps many, people do so much viewing that they become confused about their own views. In some ways we hold a view from nowhere because we are merely located at the center of our own media web. At the same time, we hold a view from everywhere because we process global information as easily as we talk to our next door neighbor. Many sociology studies during the past decades have pointed out this loss of a sense of place in urban society. Ever since Friedrich Nietzsche and others who explored the relativity and historicity of all values, the theme of a loss of identity and the assumption of multiple identities has grown. What we see and how we see it, what we know

---

[4] "Critical Youth and Christian Nurture Issues on the Road to REC Assembly 2005," *Reformed Ecumenical Council Focus Journal* (Grand Rapids, REC, September 2004), 46.

[5] Elaine Storkey, "The Family and Cultural Change—Some Christian Reflections," workshop presented at the *International Symposium of the Association for Reformational Philosophy: Cultures and Christianity*, Hoeven, the Netherlands, Aug. 2000.

[6] Bob Hodge & David Tripp, "Ten Theses on Children and Television" in *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory* (Oxford, Polity Press, 1994), 174 ff.

and how we know it, has led to deep philosophical discussions about the view from 'here,' from 'there,' from 'nowhere,' and from 'everywhere.'[7]

Meanwhile, we discover that we live in a 'golden cage' created by our technical society.[8] It is not surprising that a recent philosophical study on the modern understanding of the problem of evil ends with a chapter on the homelessness of postmodern people.[9] Other thinkers have also provided intriguing information on this point.[10] Even at home we are in the middle of the global net. Or, the danger is that we do not really have a home identity, but now only a networking identity. Our 'home page' becomes our home. The shrinking of geography by means of the mass media, fast travel, and the net now may mean that we are in many places, but have lost our 'own place.'[11] There is a rapid shift in cultural paradigms due to the mass media. Some sociologists speak of the problem of the empty self in relation to extreme plurality, as well as in relation to a growing apathy of individualism.[12]

The Path Downward

Christians have long spoken of life as a pilgrim's progress; while C.S. Lewis reminds us that there is also the danger of a pilgrim's regress. In relation to our theme, the ethical question is double-sided: what do television, videos, and the internet do to us; and what do we do with them? Even when we often do not specifically choose to watch a certain program, but merely happen to watch what comes along, we still are

---

[7] Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-modern Mind* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), ch. 2: "The View from Everywhere—Metaphysics and the Post-Nietzschean Deconstruction Thereof."

[8] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991), Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), Stuart Hall, David Held & Tony McGrew, eds., *Modernity and its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

[9] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2002).

[10] Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, & Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1974).

[11] Oliver O'Donovan & Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 296 ff.: "The Loss of a Sense of Place."

[12] Rob Weatherill, *Cultural Collapse* (London: Free Association Books, 1994); See also, Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), and Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Avon Books, 1965).

selective about what we think of it and how it influences us.[13] There is no doubt today that our 'personal psychology'[14] and what the Bible calls the direction of our heart can be greatly influenced by our use of the mass media. Several complaints may be made about the influence of television and the internet. We shall review them in the following paragraphs.

Passivity

It has long been said that the passivity the media tends to encourage is not healthy. Children can be very creative, but if they spend hours in front of the television, they are not developing other skills, such as music lessons, sports, or interaction with other children. In fact, the problem is not merely that of passivity, but of entering the 'virtual reality' of screened programming, and not always knowing how to relate this to real life. Actually, the media has replaced the home as the main socializing factor today. More and more people are learning their primary values from the media. If we watch cheap and sensationalist programs, this is how our mind will more and more become. If we watch and listen to better quality programs and discussions, we may as yet discover our own better values.

Consumed by entertainment

Second, there is also the danger that the computer games and the .com world teaches us that life is only a game. We are here to be entertained and have fun. We are surfing. Even as adults, then, we are just big kids enjoying our toys. A recent article says that even though the population in Western society is aging, society has become more juvenile.[15] The problem, of course, is not that we need and also enjoy many kinds of play, whether sports, hobbies, or whatever we do to relax. The danger enters when we shut out the real world, and when we make the entertainment mode and the consumer mode our only modus vivendi. Today our modern society is characterized by consumerism and a

---

[13] See Okke Jager, *Baas boven buis: de televisie in theorie en praktijk* (Kampen: Kok, 1974).

[14] Frank J. Bruno, *Psychological Symptoms* (Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), Cf. also Thomas M. Brinthaupt & Richard P. Lipka, eds., *Changing the Self: Philosophies, Techniques, and Experiences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[15] Martin Jacques, "We're all teenagers," *Guardian Weekly* Dec. 10–16, 2004, 5.

frivolous lifestyle. In wealthy countries most Christians spend more on eating out, sports, holidays, etc. than they would dream of giving to the church and to relief projects to help the poor.[16] Consumerism brings us in conflict with the tenth commandment ("you shall not covet"). As Ellul says:

> 'You shall not covet' (Exodus 20:17) is the last of the commandments because it summarizes *everything*—all the other sins. Humanity searches for other gods because it covets power; it makes idols for itself because it covets religion. Murder, adultery, and theft are always expressions of covetousness. Covetousness is equivalent to the spirit of power or domination. It is not just a simple moral question, but utterly basic.[17]

Consumerism leads to ever greater needs for oil and gasoline. Not only because more people are acquiring cars, but also because fresh food and manufactured products are flown, shipped, and trucked all around the world. More and more voices are questioning the link between this kind of consumptive society and contemporary ecological problems (global warming, and endangered animal and plant species) as well as the link between the consumer society and wars (economic and military) fought for oil.

The message of advertising via the media is that we can have everything easily and instantly. But in a sinful world, trying to achieve 'heaven on earth' is a great danger. 'Heaven' is a gift of grace, not an achievement on our part. This principle has its own dialectic within daily life also. 'The good' is achieved through a struggle, but not always in the way or means that we think it will be. As Konrad Lorenz says, "Pleasure may be achieved without paying the price of strenuous effort, but joy cannot."[18] In other words, we no longer know how to choose quality above quantity. It used to be that in a family there were few toys and many children. The children learned to share the toys and became 'socialized.' Today there are one or two children surrounded by a mountain of toys. Socialization is difficult in our consumer society because we cannot see the people behind our mountain of toys, machines, mass media, and programmed agendas.

---

[16] "Consumerism: a subtle corroder of virtue," interview with Ray Guarendi, in *Christian Courier* (Sept. 27, 2004), 10. See also, Bert Hielema, "On the vanity of war, credit, consumerism and America" in *Christian Courier* (Jan. 24, 2005), 18.

[17] Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 101.

[18] Konrad Lorenz, *Civilized Man's Eight Deadly Sins* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974), 39.

One would think we Christians might be different, but as one of my professors wrote, "Calvinists are clock watchers."[19] So, of course, we do not say that life is only a game. Rather, we end up thinking that life is only work. Or, if pushed on this a little, we add: "ora et labora." But it often turns out that we Protestants have fulfilled the Max Weber thesis rather well, turning our piety and work ethic into a business project—largely in our own self-interest.

Propaganda

In the third place, there is the problem of propaganda. We began our paper quoting from Küng, who notes that only a few people know how to critically sift the information that surrounds them in the techno-informatica society. Suppose we apply this to politics: if we look at the military politics of President Bush, we see how prophetic were the words of Reinhold Niebuhr written more than fifty years ago, speaking of American history:

> …we are drawn into an historic situation in which the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity. …we have thus far sought to solve all our problems by the expansion of our economy. This expansion cannot go on forever and ultimately we must face some vexatious issues of social justice.[20]

The propaganda aspect of the mass media means that many kinds of ideological systems may manipulate public opinion. Manipulation is done both by what is presented and what is excluded from mass media programming. For example, during the last USA elections, television propaganda showed Iraqi-Americans personally thanking President Bush for causing the fall of Baghdad in 2003. But it turned out that these short propaganda features of about a minute and a half were seemingly produced by and for the Pentagon.[21] That is, the viewer neither knows if the pictures shown have left out significant parts of a fuller event (with a different message), or indeed, if the pictures themselves were merely acted out to make propaganda messages! It is not easy to separate reality and 'virtual reality' in an age of mass propaganda.

---

[19] Okke Jager, *Schrale troost in magere jaren: theologische kritiek in maatschappelijke krises* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1976), 105.

[20] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 7 and 29.

[21] Julian Borger, "Bush wages war on the enemy within" in *Guardian Weekly*, March 18–24, 2005, 6.

Vitual reality: who am I?

The web is the ultimate expression of postmodernism. Postmodernism is characterized by individual choices and web networks that have no other center than ourselves. By typing in www and networking across the endless possibilities, we have reached an ultimate pluralism, unthinkable a generation ago. It is true that media technology seems at times to depersonalize people—if they use these as a way of escaping from interpersonal contacts. But the same media, especially e-mail and mobile phones, can be used for more contact with people. However, the quality of this contact sometimes seems like that of the advertising world: short messages, bombarded back and forth. Today it is a serious question as to how the media has changed our identity. Who we are has always been a philosophical and religious question, with ethical results, and the question is again wide open in a global context.[22]

"In the field of personal values, pluralism reigns."[23] This can be very positive, but it is not only positive. The question for many today is how to avoid the nihilism of permitting everything to count equally, which leads to "the nihilistic tolerance of anything and everything"?[24] The turn to ethical relativism (subjectivism) is a downward path. For if ethics is basically subjective, then one moral code is not better than another, and moral reform cannot be defined.[25] So it also turns out that the question involves the questioner: are we not becoming more skillful at self-development, but less skillful at finding our own identity?[26]

People go on-line and become involved in pornography, sex chat groups, slanderous e-mails, gambling, and so forth without fear of being discovered (they think). But in many ways, this virtual reality is also linked to actual reality. Young teenagers have fallen in love on-line with some ideal friend, set a date to actually meet this person—who turns out to be an older person, perhaps a homosexual or perhaps a child molester. Online casinos have led many people into gambling and hopeless debt, not just on the screen, but in real life as they empty their

---

[22] Leslie Stevenson & David L. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998).

[23] Lesslie Newbegin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 19.

[24] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 536.

[25] cf. Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), ch. 16, "Ethics I: The Downward Path," and ch. 17: "Ethics II: The Upward Path."

[26] Cf. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

credit cards and bank accounts. Another example: students browse the net wasting many hours, then at the end of the semester they turn to the net to download a term paper—to which they sign their own name.

So the relation between the virtual reality of the net and the daily reality of our lives is not just a 'virtual reality,' but is a form of reality we experience with real results in our lives.

Violence

A fifth problem is that of violence in today's programming that tempts people to lower their standards of what is good and right. Since people seem to become used to viewing violence and sex, the tendency is to increase these—so that many movies, videos, and the internet are sensationalist in their exploitation of human emotions. A comparison of movies and videos shows that the level of violence has risen dramatically, that is: very visually. In the old cowboy movies a man was shot from his horse in a puff of smoke, and he tumbled to the ground. But today, slow motion close up filming specializes in portraying blood and agony with as much psychological trauma as possible. More than that, many films specialize in psychotic horror and demonic influences. All these things are now available even to children via cable t.v. and videos left around the home. Many children's games are high on violent thrills. Over the decades reports have linked aggressive behavior in children, teens, and adults to t.v. and videos.[27]

Pornography

There is also the problem of pornography, which has become a business worth billions of dollars (euros, etc.) every year. Pornography has greatly increased the last few decades by means of cable TV, videos people can rent or buy, and now—especially—via the internet. Over the decades the definitions law-makers have made concerning pornography and obscenity has become more and more liberal. There seems to be no stopping of the number of pornographic videos, internet sites, and the like that show sex acts of every imaginable kind. Part of the pornographic industry includes the sexual exploitation of children. While there are laws against this, they are not always easy to apply, nor

---

[27] Marian I. Tulloch & John C. Tulloch, "Violence in Films and Television," article in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (London: Academic Press, 1998), vol. 4, 477 ff.

can the applications of the law always keep up with illegal activities—
especially on the super freeway of the net. Interviews and statistics show
that those who rape others often watch a lot of pornography. One way
of describing this link is to say that for both pornography and rape,
sexual actions are separated from positive caring emotions and from
commitment to a person. Some psychologists speak of a five step pat-
tern to pornographic addiction:[28]

   i. *Exposure*: might begin in a child's life through abuse, or by looking
      at magazines and surfing the net.
  ii. *Addiction*: a person begins to rely on pornography for sexual excite-
      ment.
 iii. *Escalation*: normal nudity is no longer enough, people want to see
      something more thrilling.
  iv. *Desensitization*: what was at first shocking now becomes common
      place. At this stage a person seeks out more and more deviant
      pornography.
   v. *Imitating actions*: Sexual fantasies are pursued in the real world by
      means of sexual abuse of others, rape, child molestation, violence
      against women, and so forth.

Of course, we must also keep in mind that there is a right way of
referring to sex in the media, on the screen, in novels, poetry, and
so forth. The right way would enoble sex and not cheapen it. When
literature and the media talk about the problematic side of sex (abuse,
rape, unreturned love, and so forth), the ethical rule is that the sinful
distortions of sex must be shown to have the negative results they, in
fact, do have. It is therefore wrong to praise lust and abuse, while
cheapening the trust of loyal sex and the joy of such a relationship.
There should be no doubt that pornography (defined as a harmful and
lustful way of creating addiction to sexual images) does harm human
relationships, degrade sexuality, encourage exploitation of women, and
creates a cheap view of sexuality rather than one of respect.[29] Here, as
with other aspects of the arts, there is a need for a normative approach
to both aesthetics and the ethical aspect that is also present.[30]

---

[28] Anderson, *op.cit.*, 148.
[29] John Weckert, "Sexual Content in Films and Television," *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (London: Academic Press, 1998), vol. 4, 75 ff.
[30] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), Ch. Four, "Norms in Art: Artistic and Aesthetic Responsibility."

Christian Opportunities

Those who wonder what will come now that Western style democratic society is largely postchristian, admit that "The West, indeed, is a synonym for consumerism, hedonism, a Babel-like pluralism of cultures, loss of center, and obliviousness to any reference to 'natural' law."[31] But there is still an on-going debate about both the good gifts and the evil tendencies of secularized society. The problem is that religious societies often have their own evils, so the question is not merely a simple choice. The question is whether Christians have a sufficient sociological understanding of our times[32] and a positive contribution to make. Meanwhile, the coming of a global world has also helped the increase of a global Christianity.[33] The mass media can be used for the service of God's kingdom. I do not want to split things into a compartmentalization of sacred and secular. The Christian shall also use the media of today for a whole range of cultural and educational possibilities that are not particularly 'Christian.' We should not desire to Christianize everything. Rather, as Christian persons we do consider how we live in the world. Yet, we may also keep in mind that there is a need for good Christian programming, which has often been developed for radio, television, videos, and the internet. The new on-line generation can find Christian videos, magazines, journals, chat groups, and other varieties of Christian information. For example, a friend of mine was a pastor for many years and also has taught numerous courses in theological seminaries and Bible schools. He is now the director of CrossRoads Prison Ministry, which offers thousands of Bible study courses to prisoners by means of regular post and e-mail. This, of course, is also true for Christian conferences, colleges, Bible schools, seminaries, and so forth that offer distant learning by means of internet sites and e-mail contact. Those, including Christians, who are developing critiques of the postmodern mind[34] are able, at the same time, to benefit from the postmodern opportunities of internet communications. Obviously, the same opportunities are available for all religions, sects, philosophies,

---

[31] Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 2002), 70.

[32] David A. Fraser & Tony Campolo, *Sociology Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

[33] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), Michael Collins & Matthew A. Price, *The Story of Christianity: A Celebration of 2,000 Years of Faith* (London: DK Publishing, 1999).

[34] Huston Smith, *Beyond the Postmodern Mind* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989).

and lifeviews. For that reason, we may not choose to ignore our calling in this matter. Christian musicians can post their music, pastors post sermons, churches post their weekly programs, and other Christian organizations, such as relief work, think tanks, and so forth, can post their projects.

In theory, the world-wide web means everyone can communicate with everyone; but because we are very limited in practice, we tend to follow our own priorities. A Christian identity will help us screen out much that is negative and promote that which is positive. The commandment that we should not make false images of God also includes the thought that we should not make false gods of our images. This is all the more relevant when we live in a culture that is media image oriented. To rediscover our best use of our plurality of freedoms today, we need to continue to explore the meaning of Christian freedom—which is not only freedom from sin, but also freedom for our positive calling in life.[35] Said in another way, we need to be able to critique the 'worldly self.'[36] It is not enough to only live by the media without further thought to the undertow currents below the surf.[37] The wonderful opportunity today is that we have the possibility to be our own program directors, our own editors, and censors—choosing what we want to see, filtering out unwanted spam, and searching out videos and internet sites on specific themes we want to follow.[38] Great choices are present. That is the point in a poem written by a Hungarian poet of Transylvania:[39]

ELECTRONIC BOOMERANG

the microprocessor
created from grey silicon
sand by busy scientists
not unlike the way
the lord had created adam
the microprocessor is trying its strength

---

[35] See Helmut Thielicke, *The Freedom of the Christian Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), ch. 1: "What is Freedom?"

[36] Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Ch. Four: "The Worldly Self at the Heart of Modern Culture."

[37] Howard A. Snyder, *Earth Currents: The Struggle for the World's Soul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[38] See Gene Edward Veith & Christopher L. Stamper, *Christians in a .com World: Getting Connected Without Being Consumed* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000).

[39] Sándor Kányádi wrote this in Hungarian in 1985. The English text is found in Peter Zollman's selection and translation, *There is a Land* (Budapest: Corvina, 2000).

hesitating between
power and compassion
should it play at soldiers
or rather at kindergarten
and at school
should it blast off
all the ammunition in the world
should it launch
all the rockets in the world
or should it rather teach
all the languages of the world
in all the languages of the world
to those in need
should it clothe the unclad
should it feed the hungry
in other words should it take
a part in the cares of christ
or else

The plurality of the www situation today illustrates the idea that …
"for Christ to be seen clearly as the light of the world, every possibility
of moral, religious, and aesthetic creativity must be passed through by
humanity as a whole."[40] We may conclude this essay by saying that
the dangers and the positive possibilities and joys of the .com world
are indeed that of surfing. The waves are high and the cross currents
strong. Some surfers of the net also drown—in a social and moral
sense of drowning. But the joys and cultural possibilities are also great
today, and there is every reason for the Christian person to use these.
There are also good reasons for the Christian community to present a
Christian awareness via all the media and arts. Here, as everywhere, we
are called to appropriate expressions of our Christian identity.

---

[40] Mentioned in the foreword by David Bentley Hart, in Vladimir Solovyov, *The
Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

CHRISTIANS AND THE RELIGIONS: TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Hendrick M. Vroom

Introduction

In most parts of the world, Christians live among people of other religions. In the Americas, or rather in North America, and Europe the situation has been different, and society has been less pluralistic. In some European countries, secularization has been very strong and the very visible presence of Muslims is an especially new factor that is at the center of public debate. Religious pluralism takes different forms, depending on the context of the other religious traditions that are present and on the constitutional arrangements made by the state.

The radicalization of pluralism and the conflictive relations between traditions profoundly affect the theology of religions. I will cite two developments.

The *first* is that, as Christians, we cannot only think about other traditions and not converse with their adherents. The only way to develop a theology of religions is to study other traditions first and only then evaluate them theologically. A theology of religions cannot be *a priori*. That is, we cannot sit down and say to ourselves, "there are other people with different beliefs from mine that I do not understand—what do I think about them?" On the contrary, if we respect our neighbors we will want to know what they think, how they view life, and learn from them. Moreover, if we take them seriously, we will discuss views that we consider strange or not true—and perhaps dangerous—and listen to them when they question our faith and practices. To speak about faith and to give account of one's faith is always a dialogue and not a monologue. We do not have the truth: all we can do is testify to the truth. We do not have the whole truth, and therefore we can learn from other traditions. Even with respect to our own Christian beliefs, we are often mistaken and need others to question our understanding of our own tradition. The norm in every conversation in which we take

one another seriously is the truth and nothing but the truth.[1] Therefore, partners in dialogue have to be committed to what they think to be true and have to be open to what others have seen of the truth. In dialogue our very convictions are at stake. Nothing is more boring than a dialogue between agnostics and people who do not stand up for their faith. Strong liberalism is the end of all dialogue. The opposite position, a Christian exclusivism that does not listen to what other people have discovered in their lives, is the end of dialogue as well: those who hold this position have the truth (and no longer testify to it). That stance is contrary to the commandment to love one's neighbor (and not just those of one's own kind). Therefore, in the theology of religions we have to specify and know those with whom we are talking. We have to learn how they, from their perspective, judge our religion: theologies of religions in reverse.[2]

The *second development* is even more complicated. It is a *contextual theology of religion*. On the most abstract level we can ask ourselves how we think about other religions, but a more specific approach is—how do we think about Islam, about Shamanism, etc.? However, even more specific is how we think about Islam in our country, how Christianity relates to African religions or to Shamanism, and how the Indonesian church has to approach the mosque and Muslims in Ambon; Syrian Christians Muslims in Syria; and Dutch churches Moroccan-Dutch Muslims in Amsterdam. A few years ago, during the conflicts in the Moluccas, a well-known Dutch missiologist argued that the Dutch government should close a mosque every time that Muslims set a church on fire. Our world is a global village; world religions are international phenomena. At the same time, we live locally and try to improve relations locally. Christians in Seoul are not responsible for fanatic Christians in Northern Ireland, nor are Muslim leaders in Amsterdam responsible for Muslim attacks on Christians in Nigeria or Indonesia.

---

[1] More on the idea of truth, its existential depth, and conceptions of 'truth' in five religious traditions are in my *Religions and the Truth*, (Currents of Encounter 2, trans. Johan Rebel), (Amsterdam: Rodopi/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[2] See the collection: *Religions View Religions*, Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, Hendrick M. Vroom (eds.) (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006) (rodopi.nl: in the series Currents of Encounter) with 'theologies of religion' by authors from various religions, views in general, and more specific views, more locally (see the second part of this contribution). This volume makes it clear that each 'theology of religion' is derived from the perspective of each tradition, and that their 'structures' and basic insights vary widely.

I think that these two developments entail difficult questions that we have to rethink and to discuss as people that stem from different parts of the world. In this paper I will first state how I, as a Christian, think about other traditions. Second, we will discuss how we sincerely deal with the dilemma that world religions are global as well as local and are themselves pluralistic.

Appreciations of Other Traditions

In our appreciation of other traditions, we face serious dilemmas that cannot be solved. They arise from our double loyalty: love God above all and your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, we should listen to God's revelation and serve Christ, and we should respect other people. If we cannot solve this dilemma, we have to live with it. The best way is to take truth seriously. If what I say is not true, then you had better tell me. If you do not, then you do not take me seriously. I hope that we can discuss with mutual respect for each other, but—for that very reason—respect requires that we acknowledge the possibility that we can learn from each other, that we do not possess the whole truth, and that we can be mistaken as well. Christians do not have the complete truth: there are a great many books that could have been written about the words and deeds of Jesus in Israel, but we do not have them. What we do have, however, is sufficient for our faith.[3] The gospel says that we do not know how many people will be saved by God; Jesus told his disciples to make every effort to enter the kingdom of heaven and to leave the question of who are to be saved to God. The gospel also says that we should try to discover what is true and expose what is false. We have to be critical, but we should be critical of our own understanding of the gospel as well as of others. Such an approach of openness, respect, a critical attitude, and the acknowledgment of our limitations in understanding the truth opens a viable way for our double loyalty: to honor God and to respect our neighbors.

This requires that we *acknowledge that other people have insights that are valuable* and true.[4] With a few exceptions the church has done so for

---

[3] I may refer to the 7th article of the Belgic Confession—the 'claritas/clarity' of scripture—what is sufficient for our salvation is clear enough.

[4] For an analysis and argument, see my "Judging and Repecting the Beliefs of Others," in Vincent Brümmer and Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Revelation and Experience*, (Utrechtse

as long as she has existed. Augustine thought that Plato derived his ideas about the One Divine from Moses in the book of Exodus. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher, learned a great deal from Aristotle. Sometimes theologians did not even mention his name, but simply state: "As the philosopher says…" In some schools of liberation theology, people learned from Karl Marx to be attentive to how our ideas can converge with our interests. Those people acknowledged truth in the theories of non-Christian philosophers, but they did not agree fully with their ideas about God. Platonism colored the Christian idea of God for centuries—which had to be corrected indeed! So one has to be aware of differences, as Christians in the former German Federal Republic were when they read on a banner on the street corner: "Karl Marx is God because what he said is the truth." Nevertheless, people have learned from Marx and Marxists to take the lessons of the prophets seriously. How did they explain how they could learn from non-Christians? A century ago, somebody like Abraham Kuyper spoke about common grace. God does not abandon his creation to itself, but helps sinners and unbelievers to realize their moral rules and discover truth about the world and about their lives. We have to resist the untruth in this: in that vein Kuyper rejected the ideas of the French Revolution—they were secular and anti-Christian.[5] He objected to human autonomy. In his approach to cultures in general, Kuyper was more open than in his approach to religions, all of which he thought to be false. I think his dependence on scholasticism and nineteenth century Romantic philosophies played a large role here: he derives each worldview tradition from separate roots and constructed a total opposition between such roots.[6] The root of socialism and commu-

---

Theologische Reeks, nr. 33) (Utrecht: Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid, Universiteit Utrecht, 1996), 109–130; for a fuller exposition on theology of religions, see my *No other Gods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

[5] For a nice description and discussion, see Aad van Egmond, "Calvinist Thought and Human Rights," in Abd. An-Na'im et al (eds.), *Human Rights and Religious Values* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Amsterdam: Rodopi 1995, reprint 2004), 192–202, for a discussion of Calvin, Kuyper (esp. his three volume work on Common Grace) and Anema, on general grace and their critique of human rights. I would formulate the critique as follows: the problem with human beings declaring the dignity of all human beings and declare their rights, is that its basis is weak in this sense that humans declare themselves to have dignity.

[6] For a broader exposition of Kuyper's view of other religions and later developments in the theology of religions at the Faculty of Theology of the Vrije Univesiteit, see my "From Antithesis to Encounter and Dialogue: Changes in Reformational Epistemology," in: Ronald A. Kuipers and Janet Catharina Wesselius (eds.), *Philosophy as*

nism is secular, and therefore not religious, and therefore mistaken—
and fully mistaken. The root of Islam is belief in the Koran and Allah,
and therefore not a rebirth in the grace of Christ. Roots exclude each
other, as in the 1970s William Christian defended the idea that each
tradition has its own highest idea. Religions are therefore antithetical to
each other because there can only be one truly highest idea.

I would like to stress two points. *First*, many of us who have studied
those issues know by heart the biblical texts that speak of the *work of
God outside Israel*. The best, ironic biblical story is the book of Jonah,
the disobedient messenger of God Himself, who complained that God
accepted the inhabitants of Nineveh as his creatures, and that after
repentance they could live a good life. We know the name *Melchizedek*
and the God-fearing Gentile officer, Cornelius. I think those stories say
that God works among all nations, and that we do not have to try to
determine those whom God has a relationship with and whom God
wants to save if we do not reach them with our mission. *Second*, it
is clear as well that Christians have a message about the equality of
all humankind, about freedom and solidarity, justice and mercy, about
Christ and the Cross, the Resurrection of Christ at Easter, and a new
world in which God will give full share to all who have missed much in
this worldly life and will restore his reign over all.

Against this background, it is clear that I would *reject the liberal view
that all religions are equally true* on a deeper level, and that differences are
superficial. The same applies to the popular view that the moralities
of all traditions are equal, and that in the public domain we should
stick to the equalities. The defenders of this view usually have in mind
the commonalities they already believe, forgetting about other moral
insights in their tradition (the Sermon on the Mount, the Cross of
Christ, the purity laws of the Jews and Brahman Hindus, the respect
for all life in Buddhism, etc.). Therefore, I think that the view that all
religions are 'the same' is contrary to the facts on a deeper level, nor
are they all equally valid ways to the 'same' divine reality. Ideas and
practices that contradict one another cannot be equally true or equally
valid.

The *opposite theology of religions states that Christianity is true and all other
religions are false*—100% false. That also is a philosophical construct

that is dependent on non-Christian philosophical principles: either the scholastic and Romantic roots of Abraham Kuyper's ideas or an idea found in former cultural anthropological schools that understood cultures as closed entities. Such holism has been left behind for good reasons. Cultures and religious traditions are contextual; therefore, pluralistic in themselves and dynamically in exchange and confrontation with one another.[7]

Therefore, the merit of a so-called *theocentric theology* of religion is the acknowledgement that God has a relationship with all humankind and follows his own path. However, this approach also entails the danger of forgetting that in Christ we have the most profound image of God. *The merit of a Christocentric theology of religions* is that it takes sin and forgiveness seriously and is clear about the revelation of God in Christ. It could, however, easily forget about the sheep of other stables and the work of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the Father and of the Son—among all humankind. The merit of a *pneumatic theology of religions* is that it acknowledges that the Spirit works where she wills, but we would like to stress, again, that the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Therefore, the whole distinction between theocentric, Christocentric, and pneumatic theologies of religion is an unhappy exercise. Christians cannot think about God without thinking about Christ; nor can they think of Christ without the Creator, or of the Holy Spirit without the image of God in Christ. Therefore, I think if we drop the dogma that there is no salvation outside the church,[8] we can acknowledge truths and a good life outside the church—inspired by the Spirit and given in grace.

This implies that *there will be truth in other traditions* that can truly help people to live a genuinely human life. The peace of mind of Buddhist sects, the *zakat* of Muslims and their stress on the equality of humankind before the Creator, Gandhi's *ahimsa*, the loving-kindness of the Dalai Lama, and the practical wisdom of healers in traditional religions—all things good and valuable can be appreciated. The criterion is whether they are 'with us' and help in life. What is not against us is with us. We can learn from other traditions and, if I may say so,

---

[7] See e.g. André F. Droogers, "Changing Culture and the Missiological Mission," in: Inus Daneel, Charles van Engen, Hendrik Vroom (eds.), *Fullness of Life for All. Challenges for Mission in Early 21st Century* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003), 73–87.

[8] That was Karl Rahner's point and the background of his "anonymous Christians." See *my Religions and the Truth*, 190–194.

be more open than those who tend to say that the Christian tradition itself has so many treasures that have been forgotten and that we do not need to get them from other faith traditions. Let us be more grateful than that, and if we learn lessons from others, acknowledge that and be thankful. Perhaps it is a person in whom God meets us and teaches us a lesson. So let us abandon the unjust claim "I have the truth and I do not need you" and receive wisdom where we find it, as at one time the wise people of Israel found it in Egypt. Moreover, let us take care that we do not mix up truth and falsity.

The Contextualization of Interreligious Relations

The theology of religions is a relatively new and rich field of theological study. During the last decades, the field has quickly become an area of specialization. People are involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and in dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, African religious traditions, etc. This is one development, and the reasons why are easy to understand. Another development is much more difficult. We could call it the contextualization of interreligious dialogue and encounter. Above, I have quoted the missiologist who said that the Dutch government should close a mosque for every Moluccan church that was burned. In the same way some (not all!) Islamologists with expertise in the Middle East contrast the freedom that Muslims experience in the Netherlands with the discrimination against Christians practiced in many Arabic countries. "Ask a Syrian Christian how to think about Islam—they know what it is like!" From ecumenical meetings I know some of the stories of discrimination. In Cairo, when an evangelical church was on fire; the minister reported that it took the fire brigade an hour to arrive—on purpose: there was almost nothing left of the church. The main question is whether Christianity has one comprehensive approach to Islam and to Buddhism, indigenous traditional religions, etc., or whether our approach to each is contextual.

This main question has a number of aspects that we can formulate as more specific questions. We have to deal with them and, in the end, return to the main question. In the theology of religions I have found my way and formed an opinion, but in these questions I am just looking around and cutting a path through a thick forest.

The first question that we have to consider is *our attitude in encounters*. Allow me to begin with an illustrative story. In 1992 a minister from

central Nigeria told me that in the north Muslim groups had started to attack Christian churches and institutions. The Christians did not overreact; they simply complained, but did not defend themselves in any way. They thought that the Sermon on the Mount had taught them not to answer evil with evil, but with love. After a period the violence became more critical; some Muslims started to rape Christian girls. And then the Christians began to think that they should defend their daughters against violence. If the police could or would not guarantee safety, they had to do that themselves.

In this example we find *three points. First*, our attitude should not be governed by the normal procedure of the powers of this world. Rather, we *should look into the eyes of our neighbors*. To put it briefly, you have your Muslims and we ours. We cannot blame 'our Muslims' for the violence in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the discrimination of Christians in Arabia and Oman. I do not want to be blamed for the violence in Northern Ireland, and I can confidently declare that Dutch Muslims do not want to be blamed for the misconduct of Muslims in Bali, New York, Nairobi, Madrid, or London. An inimical attitude will bring the youth more into solidarity with 'political Islam' than a sympathetic approach will. The encounter may be an approach with understanding and love. *Second*, if people cross the line between harm and damage, on the one hand, and sheer violence, on the other, then the government has to punish criminals. If the government does not take action, Christians have a right to defend themselves, knowing the line between defense and revenge. *Third*, the local theology of religion is not fully private: in ecumenical relations people from one area give account to people in other areas.[9] For now, we will conclude that the Christian attitude to other religions has to be local and contextual and has to meet people where they are and as they are, not as 'Islam'[10] or 'Tribal Religions,' etc., but as Ahmed and as Masao.

The second aspect is closely related to that of encounter because it is local as well. As Christians, we want to contribute to a just and peaceful humane society. Therefore, we take part in interreligious meetings and try to discuss discrimination, the emancipation of women, abor-

---

[9] See, e.g., the contributions in *One Gospel—Many Cultures*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye & Hendrik Vroom (eds), (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003), with case studies on contextual theologies and the need for mutual ecumenical, reciprocal criticisms.

[10] See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor Books, 1964), for a thorough critique of 'reification' of broad traditions with much internal variety.

tion, euthanasia, and other subjects in which we think that people should change their minds towards more openness and/or more careful approaches. Therefore, in Korea there are Korean Buddhists and not Sri Lankan Buddhists. If, as Andreas D'Souza in Hyderabad in India and Desmond Tutu in South Africa and theologians like Piet Meiring and Robert Schreiter tell us, reconciliation is a primary task in the church's mission, then our local efforts in relation to other religious traditions will be directed to establishing good relations and working together in the building of a peaceful and just society.[11]

Now, we encounter a *third consideration next to the personal and the societal aspects, and that is global relations*. Young Muslims and young Christians are already reading the texts of the other's religions on the internet. Sects do spread themselves via websites. Secularized Dutch schoolboys read fundamentalist American websites. Most of us will have visited some fundamentalist Muslim websites a few times. Texts of the Buddhist scriptures and of the Christian fathers are available in translation on the internet. In one minute one can find Thomas Aquinas on love and the Heart Sutra of Mahayana Buddhists. The local is not purely local any more. The hate of one group over against other groups can jump across oceans from one continent to another. The very moment that I have discovered a Muslim with an idea of God that comes very close indeed to a Christian view, a member of his family may become radicalized and develop a very different Muslim position. We cannot shut our eyes to what happens to our neighbors—the world is local, global, and a global village.

Based on these perspectives, I can offer some reflections concerning the main question: whether Christianity has one comprehensive approach for Islam, Buddhism, indigenous traditional religions, etc., or whether our approach to each is contextual. I think that the solution lies in the distinction between various aspects of encounter. In the discussion on the ends of dialogue and the practices of encounter and dialogue, we may distinguish *between four layers of dialogue: the personal dia-*

---

[11] Andreas D'Souza began working on reconciliation after clashes between Muslims and Hindus in Hyderabad, see Dorothy Yoder Nyce, "Seeing is Believing: The Henry Martyn Institute Hyderabad, India," in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 14 (2004), pp. 160–176; cf. Piet Meiring's writings on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, "Reconciliation in South Africa: Women's Voices at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," and Robert Schreiter, "Reconciliation and Forgiveness in Twenty-First Century Mission," in *Fullness of Life for All. Challenges for Mission in Early 21st Century* (see footnote 7), resp. pp. 201–216 and pp. 191–200.

logue of the heart, the encounter between various religious groups on the grassroots level, societal dialogue on common issues, and theological dialogue.

On the *local level, the first two kinds of encounter are the most important. Neighbors* will speak with one another and, if possible, establish good relations across religious boundaries. Often they do not speak about differences and contradictions, but about commonalities. Not infrequently they will conclude that they have more or less the same beliefs, neglecting differences that they do not want to stress. Encounter between *groups* is very important. After September 11, 2001, many congregations and mosques in the Netherlands organized visits to each others' buildings. A group of Dutch Moluccan women—Muslim and Christian—visited the Moluccas last Christmas. Sometimes mosques opened their doors for a day to let people see what they do and to provide information about their lives. Congregations invite an *imam* or Zen master for an evening in order to come to know more about each other. This is going on in Europe and in many places in North America, not only among the very liberal Christians, but among more orthodox as well: encounters between people of different religious traditions. They speak about faith, prayer and meditation, ethics, and communal life. They do this simply to become reconciled, to come to know each other, and to help lessen the tension in the cities.

The *third level of dialogue* is the discussion on societal questions: religions in the public domain, religions in a secular state, the role of religion in the school system, medical ethical issues, solidarity with the poor and people who are unable to care for themselves, and so forth. That dialogue is half-political and half-academic, and done by church leadership, politically involved people, and theologians.

The fourth level is theological dialogue. Here we may ask what is truly Christian and what is truly Muslim, Buddhist, etc. If, in a personal conversation, a Muslim states what his or her own belief is, I may respect that but it is not decisive nationwide nor worldwide. My experience in interreligious dialogue is that partners expect me to be Christian and have a plausible form of Christian belief. In my turn I expect a Buddhist to take some central Buddhists insights and values seriously. That is the precondition: take each other seriously. Academic dialogue centers on the question of truth. Therefore, it has a real impact on local dialogues. It should do so because it can stress the importance of difficult issues, and show other aspects and possibilities for coming closer to each other. It is very important to explore differences and not simply accentuate commonalities because we can learn from differences. The

neglect of differences is one of the main causes of conflict and failure. Bush won the war in Iraq, but he might lose the peace because he has forgotten that cultural and religious traditions do differ.

From a Christian point of view, the *truth is not just doctrine*. The truth is a person: I am the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, the personal encounter must not be played off against the theological discussion. Theological and ethical discussions about doctrine and life issues cannot succeed without spirituality. The real discussion about Christ and the kingdom of God and the value of humankind cannot just be an intellectual, scholastic discussion, but needs a dialogue of the heart. I can say a thousand times that Christ is the true image of God—but in order to explain that truthfully, I have to broaden it from a survey of doctrinal history or a Christological analysis to the crosses of this world—the hunger, poverty, troublesome loneliness of some people in mass cities, neglect of the elderly, and the criminality of young people who do not have anything higher and better to live for. We betray the Cross if we do not speak about those who hunger and thirst for peace and justice, and if we circumvent betrayal, selfishness, and sin. For only in the midst of those human realities can we understand the gospel of resurrection. Therefore, it is very important that interreligious dialogue not be a hobby for liberal theology, and that theological studies truly feed the dialogue in the streets and in congregations. We have been sent to be open and to listen, and to investigate everything and keep that which is worthwhile and edifying. The criterion is the Cross. We may acknowledge that Muslims and some schools of Hindus direct themselves in their worship to the only God there is—but we know the Lamb that is in the middle of the throne: that is the heart of God.[12] Who of us would dare to turn that Lamb into a weapon? He who was oppressed and afflicted and did not open his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before his shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth—how could we testify to the truth other than being servants of His peace and righteousness?

---

[12] Cf. Rev. 7:17; Jes. 53.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: THE CHALLENGE OF HANS KÜNG'S STRATEGY

Paul Kruger

That is my hope. No, not a single religion, a religious stew or syncretic (sic!) mishmash. But an ecumenical peace among world religions! And that means peaceful coexistence, a growing convergence, and a creative proexistence of religions in the common search for the always greater truth and the mystery of the one and true God which will be fully revealed only in the eschaton. *An empty utopia? No, a realistic vision, whose realization has already begun at the religious grassroots.*[1]

Addressing a Contemporary Provocation

"Is it not at least provocative," asks John Douglas Hall in an analysis of the contemporary situation of inter-religious dialogue, "that after a long historical parenthesis during which *confession* of the faith was replaced, largely, by faith's *profession*, Christians again find themselves in a pluralistic situation not unlike that of their earliest progenitors?"[2]

The *purpose* of this paper is to probe the possible challenge—to a reformed theology—of Hans Küng's strategy, as he conducts an inter-religious dialogue in the same type of *provocative* contemporary environment that this quotation of Douglas Hall has in view; namely, "in our new, post-colonialist, polycentric age, in postmodernity," as Küng himself describes it.[3]

Within the parameters of this presentation only the main points can receive attention. It will be necessary to sideline many important issues. Even some of Küng's specific work on dialogue; such as his discussion of those positions in inter-religious dialogue that are unacceptable to

---

[1] H. Küng, *Reforming the Church today*. trans. P. Heinegg (Edinburgh: Clark, 1990), 172.

[2] Douglas John Hall, "Confessing Christ in the Religiously Pluralistic Context," in Walter Brueggemann & J.W. Stroup, eds. *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 70, italics in original.

[3] H. Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1991), 104.

him (*e.g.*, the atheistic, the relativistic or pluralistic, the absolutistic or exclusivist, and the inclusivist approaches) will have to be bypassed.[4] Furthermore, whereas Küng's considerable theological output[5] includes a variety of dialogical encounters,[6] this paper can only deal with a limited aspect of *the 'later' Küng's inter-religious*[7] dialogical phase. The era of inter-religious dialogue, to be sure, can be regarded as a very important stage in Küng's theological life work Indeed, he could state that his "whole life has found its way"[8] into his most recent book on world religions. Unfortunately, this intensive quest cannot be followed here *in extenso*—how fascinating it might be. The following aspects will be treated: the question as to the complementarity of dialogability and steadfastness; the specifically Christian in the dialogue, and the *humanum* as general ethical criterion in inter-religious dialogue. Finally, some concluding comments on the possible challenge—to a reformed theology—of Küng's strategy will round off the discussion.

---

[4] Cf. Volker Kuestner, "Who, with whom, about what? Exploring the landscape of inter-religious dialogue," *Exchange* 33/1 (2004), 73–92; H. Küng, "Zu einer ökumenischen Theologie der Religionen," *Concilium* 22 (1986), 76–80; H. Küng, "What is the True Religion? Toward an Ecumenical Criteriology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 56 (1986), 6–23; Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility. In Search of a New World Ethic*; A van de Beek, *Jezus Kurios. De Christologie als Hart van de Theologie*, 3e druk (Kampen: Kok, 1998), 258–265; cf. further: Hall, *Confessing*, 70–74; Anton Houtepen, *God, een Open Vraag. Theologische Perspectieven in een Cultuur van Agnosme*, 2e druk (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1997), 299–325.

[5] Cf. H. Häring, *Hans Küng, Breaking through*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1998), 371–374; H. Häring & K J. Küschel (eds), *Hans Küng. New Horizons for Faith and Thought*. Trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1993): for bibliographical detail on Küng's publications up to the late 1990s.

[6] Cf. P.P. Kruger, *Die Herontdekking van die Charismata as Bydrae tot Roomse Kerkvernuwing volgens Hans Küng. 'n Gereformeerd-apologetiese studie* (D. Th. Diss., Potchefstroom University, 1982), 7–8 on the significance of the 'early' Küng's work; cf. also R. Nowell, *A passion for truth. Hans Küng: A biography* (London: Collins, 1981), 11–244; H. Küng, *Bevochten vrijheid. Memoirs Part One*. trans. H.P.M. van den Bogaard & L.W. Lagendijk, (Kampen: Kok, 2003), *passim*.

[7] Cf. K.-J. Küschel, "Theology in freedom," in W. Jens et al, *Dialogue with Hans Küng*. trans. J. Bowden. (London: SCM, 1997), 35–39. He discusses Küng's involvement in inter-religious dialogue as "dimension 5" of his total work. Küschel comments insightfully that the dialogue of Küng between the confessions and that between the religions are "two sides of the same coin."

[8] H. Küng, *Tracing the way. Spiritual dimensions of the world religions*. trans. J. Bowden (London: Continuum, 2002), xiv.

Dialogability and Steadfastness—Complementary Virtues[9]

Dialogability

According to Küng, the capacity for dialogue or dialogability should be regarded as one of the virtues that existed incognito for many centuries among the more celebrated virtues. With the advent of modern democracy and its ideals of freedom and tolerance, dialogue became an honored vehicle in establishing communication that strived to be free from authoritarianism and paternalism. It created an exchange of ideas without the element of threat or competition between the partners. It relativizes any semblance of absoluteness in one's own point of view and sees elements of truth in the other's.[10]

Steadfastness

Although steadfastness is sometimes viewed as a staunch, headstrong clinging to one's own insight, it is more related to concepts such as courage to persevere in good causes, especially against opposition. It denotes a dynamic virtue, not a static, reactive posture. It refers to the upholding of a valuable identity. As such it entails, according to Küng's somewhat laconic comment, the encouragement "to be a Christian even today."[11]

Compatible Steadfastness?

Küng grapples with the existential question of whether he can find truth in other religions without forfeiting the truth and identity which his own religion provides. Explicitly he affirms that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.[12] Yet, he agrees[13] with the later Barth that there

---

[9] This sub-section rests mainly on H. Küng, "Dialogfähigkeit und Standfestigkeit.—über zwei komplementäre Tugenden," in: *Evangelische Theologie* 49/6 (1989), 492–504, and H. Küng, *Global responsibility*, 94–105.

[10] Cf. D. Lochead, *The Dialogical Imperative. A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (New York: Orbis, 1988), 18–22 on the attitude of *competition* in inter-religious encounters.

[11] H. Küng, *A Global ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1997), 153.

[12] H. Küng, *Christianity: Its Essence and History*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1995), 27.

[13] H. Küng, *Global Ethic*, 154.

are "auch andere, in ihrer Weise auch bemerkenswerte Worte—andere, in ihrer Weise auch helle Lichter—andere, in ihrer Weise auch reale Offenbarungen."[14] Is it possible for a Christian to appreciate—in open dialogue—that there are "lights" in Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and other religions; and yet remain steadfast in the conviction that Christ is *The Light*?[15] This is the question that fascinates Küng, and in the pursuit of which he devises a specific strategy. A central position in this strategy is occupied by Küng's understanding of the specifically Christian as criterion for such a dialogue. To this the focus of the paper will now turn.

The Specifically Christian as Main Criterion for the Dialogue

Seeking the "Specific and Essential" Elements of the Christian, and Other, Religions

Already the early Küng differentiated between the *essential* and the *unessential* elements in the Christian church.[16] Not everything in Christianity belongs to the real or *specifically Christian essence* of Christianity. Many *unchristian elements* gathered around the specifically Christian essence during the long history of Christianity. "Granted: an infinite amount of debris, flotsam, silt and rubbish has been collected on the long way through the centuries."[17] In his reflection on a steadfast but open dialogue with other world religions, this distinction between essential and unessential elements in a given religion becomes *very important*.

---

[14] K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik: Ausgewählt und Eingeleitet von Helmut Gollwitzer* (München: Siebenstern, 1965),159.

[15] H. Küng, *Global Ethic*, 152–156. The "*Lichterlehre*" of Barth has caused considerable discussion; cf. C. van der Kooi, *Als in een spiegel. God kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth.* 3e druk (Kampen: Kok, 2002), 352. Van der Kooi acknowledges in these utterances of the later Barth, not so much a church-critical accent than a playing on "the piano of Christ's sovereignty and of hope… *Christ as the Living remains in front of us and leads us.*" (emphasis original).

[16] Cf. H. Küng, *Die Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 13–16; H. Küng, *Was in der Kirche bleiben muss* (Zürich: Benziger, 1973), 25; P P. Kruger, "Kerkvernuwing volgens Hans Küng," in: *Waar die paaie saamwoon. Feesbundel vir P.W. Buys*, red. P.J. de Bruyn (Potchefstroom: PTP, 1988), 120.

[17] H. Küng, *Christianity: Its essence and history*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1995), 795.

What is not specifically and essentially Christian in Christianity should be acknowledged as such. Very strongly, Küng insists on the application of this prerequisite to the inner-Christian discussion of what Christianity *really and specifically is* (its identity).[18] Also, however, he is adamant that in the encounter with other religions this distinction of essential over against unessential elements within those religions themselves should be applied truthfully. A truly meaningful dialogue should bring the *specific and essential* elements of one religion in conversation with the *specific and essential* elements of its discussion partners.[19] Through the years this energetic theologian untiringly worked to do just that. Painstakingly,[20] he endeavored to distinguish the essential (or the true) facets from the untrue, accidental aspects of the religions in the three great river systems of the world—and, at the same time, to present *to them* the essential and specific, as opposed to the unessential, elements of Christianity itself.[21] Küng's 'nearest' dialogue entails the Abrahamic religions;[22] then the religions of the Indian River system (Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism); and, finally, the faiths of the Chinese river system (Confucianism, Taoism, and another development of Buddhism).[23] In the latest phase of his dialogical quest, Küng also concentrates on the indigenous religions.[24]

---

[18] Küng, *Christianity*, 1–11.

[19] Küng. *What is the true religion?*, 11–12.

[20] Cf. H. Küng, "Gotthold Ephraim Lessing," in *Dichtung und Religion*, ed. W. Jens & H. Küng (München: Kindler, 1985), 99. He points out the unfulfilled necessity, since Lessing's time, of a "mehrschichtigen religiösen Kriteriologie…die aber nur entwickelt werden kann, wenn man… sich der unendlichen Mühe der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Grob- unfd Feinstrukturen jeder einzelnen Religion unterzieht."

[21] H. Küng, *Christendom en Wereldgodsdiensten: Wegbereiding tot de Dialoog met de Islam, het Hindoeïsme en het Boeddhisme*. Deel 1: Islam. Vertaling: Ger Groot (Hilversum: Gooi & Sticht, 1986), 9–18.

[22] Cf. H. Küng, *Judaism*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1992), 3–18: especially also on a "trialogue" between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity; cf. also K.-J. Küschel, "One in Abraham? The significance of Abraham for Jews, Christians and Muslims today," in *Memory and history in Christianity and Judaism*, ed. M.A. Signer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 183–203; further, specifically in the South African context: J.W.de Gruchy, "Reconciliation and the household of Abraham," in: *Reconciliation, Restoring justice* (London; SCM, 2002), 113–180; specifically on Israel, cf. the challenging book of: A. van de Beek, *De kring om de Messias. Israel als volk van de lijdende Heer*, 2e druk, (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004).

[23] Cf. H. Häring, *Hans Küng*, 242–243.

[24] H. Küng, *Tracing the way*, 1–36.

Direct and Indirect Application of the Specifically Christian Criterion

Concerning the specifically Christian criterion, it should be noted that this criterion *can only be applied directly to Christianity itself*. To all other religions it must be applied *indirectly*—but, nevertheless, *truly applied as a criterion* in inter-religious dialogue. This specifically Christian criterion as it is applied directly and from inside Christianity will now receive attention. Then the indirect and external application will be analyzed.

Contents of the Specifically Christian Criterion—Direct and from Inside

In his quest for what he calls, "religiosity with religious identity, but without exclusivity,"[25] Küng is adamant that the *specific Christian identity* in Christianity (the essence or truth of it) does not inhere in correct formulae, propositional statements, ecclesiastical pronouncements, or liturgical ritual or ethical codices. Poignantly, Küng summarizes what he believes to be the *essence of Christianity*—a confession that echoes through his whole life work:

> What distinguishes Christianity from the old world religions and from modern humanisms, the ultimate distinguishing mark of Christianity, is quite literally, according to Paul, 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' … So what makes a person a Christian? Not simply being human, social or religious, but attempting to live out one's humanity, social life and religion by the criterion or in the spirit of this Christ—for better or worse, as is the case with human nature.[26]

Admittedly, that is a perspective *from inside*, applied in a direct way only to Christianity itself.[27] After all, this perspective is only gained by *believing* Christians from a New Testament orientation. Therefore, says Küng, "for me as someone who is affected and challenged, there is only one true religion: Christianity, insofar as it bears witness to the one true God as he has made himself known in Jesus Christ."[28] This stress on Christ being the *norma normans in a direct sense* only for Christians, constitutes a shift in Küng's thinking—at least, according to Brewer. In

---

[25] H. Küng, "Global ethics and education," in M. Volf et al, *The future of theology. Essays in honour of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 283.

[26] Küng, *Christianity*, 46—emphasis by Küng himself; cf. H. Küng, *Christ sein* (München: Herder, 1974), 399; Nowell, *A Passion for Truth*, 274.

[27] H. Küng, "The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation," in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed. Josef Neuner (London: Burnes & Oates, 1965), 51–53.

[28] H. Küng, *Global responsibility*, 99.

an earlier stage, Küng maintained that Christ is the *norma normans* of *all* religions. This shift, however, does not appear to mean that he has later become a pluralist.[29]

Contents of the Specific Christian Criterion—from Outside and Indirect

Seen from outside, Christianity, the one true religion—for Christians, that is—manifests itself *alongside* other religions.

"The world of religions," according to Küng, "can be looked at as it were *from outside*: in this perspective (like that of religious studies), there are different ways of salvation leading to the one goal, *many* true religions that can mutually supplement and enrich each other…"[30] Küng, however, also adds the qualification that these other religions can only be seen as true "in so do not directly contradict the Christian message."[31] With this condition in mind, Christians may humbly search for *traces of* "*that spirit which we would designate as Christian*"[32] The hidden God, who is *extraordinarily* revealed in the Crucified Christ, already finds a person in an *ordinary* way in the religious institution that is made available to him or her in a given historical situation. This must be acknowledged by Christians as a *general or more common way* of salvation in which traces of the Crucified can already, in a hidden way, be encountered.[33] For all that, however, it is still an *interim* way— only valid until a person comes in an existential confrontation with the Christian gospel. Even though world religions might have *some* way to light and truth, they are estranged from Christ who is "*the* Light [and] …*the* Truth."[34] From outside, Christians, therefore, should appreciate that God can also save people while they are still *in* the world religions, but in a sympathetic way they should, at the same time, point out that *salvation* and *truth* are not the same. Only Christ is *the* unique truth— for all people. Elements of truth which are perhaps—in a sporadic or fragmentary, or even in a darkened and deformed way—present in

---

[29] K.W. Brewer, "The uniqueness of Christ and the challenge of the pluralistic theology of religion," in *Hans Küng. New horizons for faith and thought*, ed. K-J. Kuschel (London: SCM, 1993), 206: pluralists deny any *unique identity* for Christians.

[30] Küng, *Christianity*, 789.

[31] Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 99–100.

[32] H. Küng, *What is the true religion?*, 18; emphasis added (P.K.).

[33] Küng, *World Religions*, 53.

[34] Küng, *World Religions*, 51–53.

the world religions, might thus, creatively and critically but also non-exclusively, be brought into a situation where, against the foil of a self-critical Christianity, *they can be manifested in a fully valid way*.[35]

Küng does not believe in some form of anonomous *Christianity*. On the contrary, he is very adamant in rejecting such a notion as being, in his words, a "methodical trick"[36] to salvage the traditional doctrine of "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*." Such covert loyalties to obsolete, ecclesiastical formulae would only jeopardize the genuine openness of the dialogue he strives for.[37] Pitchers interprets Küng fairly on this point: "It is not the church which has priority for Küng, but Jesus Christ as the final vehicle of God's redemption."[38]

The Decisive Christological Differential

It is vital for this discussion to closer analyze Küng's insistence on Jesus Christ as the specifically Christian criterion. When Küng confesses Christ, the Crucified, as that specifically Christian criterion, he means that Christ is to be regarded as the ultimate, definite criterion *for being human* in its various dimensions.[39] Quite correctly, Kettler characterizes this decisive differential within Küng's Christology as follows: "Jesus as the archetype of the new humanity."[40] Jesus is the man against whom all other human beings have to measure themselves in order to become truly human. In a distinct Christology *from below*,[41] Küng affirms the total uniqueness of Jesus as the face in which God shows himself and as the Son of God. He, however, stops short of affirming the *vere deus* in the specific formulation of Chalcedon.[42] He deems the Chalcedonian formulation as being too *ontological* and prefers to speak of the divinity of our Lord more in *functional* terms. Christology should

---

[35] Küng, *Christ sein*, 96, 106.

[36] Küng, *Christ sein*, 90.

[37] Küng, *Christ sein*, 90: cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *De Kerk 1: Eenheid en Katholiciteit* (Kampen: Kok, 1970), 190–195: on Rahner's view and Von Balthasar's criticism of his view.

[38] Alrah Pitchers, *The Christology of Hans Küng: A critical Examination* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997), 61.

[39] Kung, *Christ sein*, 115.

[40] C.D. Kettler, *The vicarious humanity of Christ and the reality of salvation* (London: University Press of America, 1991), 74.

[41] H. de Leede, *Waarachtig mens-zijn: sterven of streven. In gesprek met Hans Küng over de verhouding tussen christen-zijn en mens-zijn* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2000), 129.

[42] Küng, *Christ sein*, 434–440.

move *beyond* the affirmations of Chalcedon, avoiding any semblance of confessing an *abstract* divine nature of Christ. "So also erscheint Gott, wenn er sich mit den Menschen identifiziert, Also nicht an sich, aber wie Kyrill von Alexandrien immer wieder sagte—*sarki*, durch das Fleisch im Menschen. Aber er, er selber."[43] Furthermore, it is clear that Küng's preference lies with an *exaltation* Christology starting with the man, Jesus of Nazareth (tailored according to a more *Antiochene* model). "Our problem today is not so much the deification, but the humanization op man"[44]

The Identity of a Christian as Radical Humanness

For anybody who in faith gets involved in Him, Jesus Christ is the *basic model* for being human in this world.

> The Christian dimension is, therefore, neither a superstructure nor a substructure of the human, but in the best sense of the word—maintaining, negating and transcending—the *'Aufhebung' of the human*. Being a Christian, therefore, means an '*Aufhebung*' of the other humanisms: they are affirmed, in so far as they affirm the human; they are negated, in so far as negate the Christian dimension, the Christ Himself; they are transcended, in so far as being a Christian can include the human—too—human fully, even in all its negativity.[45]

In the light of this key insight, Christians should follow Jesus in promoting human dignity, political freedom from unjust oppression, freedom from consumer pressure, human rights and human responsibility, and many other similar causes. In the global success society, which is more and more threatening the humanness of man, followers of the Crucified should urge people to live a life not haunted by the necessity to prove themselves. This action of Christians would be a concrete application of the conviction that Christ justifies human beings without any contribution on their part.[46]

---

[43] H. Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes: Eine Einführung in Hegels theologisches Denken als Prolegomena zu einer künftigen Christologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1970), 544.

[44] Küng, *Christ sein*, 33; Pitchers, *Christology*, 63; cf. A. van de Beek, "Antiochië en Alexandrië in Leiden," in *Waar is God in Deze Tijd? De Betekenis van de Geschiedenis in deTtheologie van H. Berkhof*, red. A. van de Beek et al(Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1994), 11–27.

[45] Küng, *Christ sein*, 594 (emphasis original).

[46] Küng, *Christ sein*, 545–594.

Küng admits that a very central question in his life—and so it should be in any Christian's—is related to Dostoevsky's story of the *Grand Inquisitor*. If Christ should return among us today, what would his attitude be towards the situation in our world? Küng himself is convinced that Jesus would urge us to meet people from other religions—and in these inter-religious dialogues be "rediscovering Christian responsibility for the world."[47] This would not exclude critical comparisons with *other leading sages* in world religions (e.g, Moses, Buddha).[48] Comparing Christ—in practical inter-religious dialogue—with other pioneering religious geniuses, Christians should be able to demonstrate unpretentiously, but *in a concrete way*, "from this person (Christ) and his message and life's praxis and fate why they are Christians."[49] The Church of Christ has an urgent *mission* in this regard. At this very point, the church should take Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great Christian humanist of the 16th century, as an example of an inter-religious dialogue. His was a Christianity of practical living, "committing oneself not to a lofty Christology, to which the lofty hierarchy could then quite easily appeal, but to the human, humiliated Jesus of the gospels…who has overcome the world not with syllogisms, money and war, but with his willingness to serve and love."[50]

THE HUMANUM AS GENERAL ETHICAL CRITERION IN INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

According to Moltmann, Küng's plea for a global ethic, aimed at promoting the truly *humanum* in and through all religions, can be seen as "a call to a general, indirect dialogue of the religions about an ethic which will preserve the world from devastation and ruin."[51] An ethical

---

[47] Küng, *A global ethic for a global world*, 155.

[48] Cf. H. Küng, *Credo. The Apostles' Creed explained for today*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1993), 49–56: Gautama and Jesus are compared.

[49] Küng, *True Religion*, 21.

[50] H. Küng, *Theology for the Third Millenium: An Ecumenical View*. trans. P. Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 25, 46. Küng also voices his strong criticism of Erasmus' indecisiveness and lack of commitment in dialogical encounters—which should not be followed today.

[51] J. Moltmann, *God In a secular society. The public relevance of theology*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 237.

consensus on values that are binding and can be underwritten by all religions is required. On that basis, a dialogue can be conducted, not mainly about the religions themselves, but about their joint responsibilities regarding the quest for the *humanum* in this world. Despite all dogmatisms, this is an urgent calling to all religions. It should constitute the agenda of an inter-religious dialogue. Indeed, on that basis—and mainly through Küng's inspiration—the *Declaration* of the Parliament of the World's Religions was affirmed in 1993.[52] This *Declaration* can, indeed, be characterized as "a remarkable text, a social manifesto in its own right."[53] Its clear goal is to simply bring knowledge of already existing commonalities among religions around the globe—beyond the dogmatisms and "intolerable self-opinionatedness"[54] that time and again tend to eclipse what religions have in common.

Christianity can, then, be regarded as a kind of "catalyst"[55] to bring out *the best in humanness* that the other religions have gathered during centuries. By engaging in an open and steadfast dialogue, *traces of the true humanum*—as archetypically found in Christ—can be identified within these other religions—*indirectly and without any form of triumphalism*. In this process, Christians must also humbly and patiently learn from other religions about forgotten or neglected aspects of this true *humanum*.

In Conclusion

In conclusion a few remarks and questions are in order:

– *Appreciation* for Küng's courageous *dialogical way* (intra-Roman Catholic, inter-confessional, inter-religious, and inter-disciplinary) should be expressed. As is well known, this way ("going my way")[56] brought him into serious conflict with the Roman Curia and two popes. It

---

[52] H. Küng & K.-J. Küschel eds, *A global ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, 1993.

[53] I. Swart & D. Venter, "Reading the Parliament of World's Religions' *Declaration towards a Global Ethic* as a developmental text," *Scriptura* 88/1 (2005), 216.

[54] H. Küng, "Will a global ethic prevail?" in *Yes to a global ethic*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1996), 2.

[55] Küng, *Christ sein*, 102–103; cf. A. Houtepen, *God, een open vraag*, 316.

[56] H. Küng, "Farewell Lecture," in W. Jens et al *Dialogue with Hans Küng*. trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1997), 105.

also meant for him the parting of the ways with a former friend and colleague, Joseph Ratzinger—the present Pope Benedict XVI.[57]

– *Appreciation* should also be expressed for the passionate and truthful way Küng is attempting to translate the Christian truth into the contemporary world—especially his attempts at *contextualizing and concretizing* the gospel in a postmodern era. Jeanrond's praise can be echoed with acclamation:

> Küng's most significant contribution to the discussion of the central articles of Christian faith lies in his effort to demonstrate the rationality of this faith and to reflect upon the implications of this faith for human praxis today… Even though Küng has not yet clarified all the philosophical presuppositions of his work, he has already contributed a lot to the radical transformation of the nature of theology in the twentieth century.[58]

Especially regarding the question of the *rationality of faith* and the *task of theology* to demonstrate this rationality, more clarification as to the Küng's presuppositions are indeed required. He seeks an answer to the question of ultimate and fundamental certainty—the great question of modernity—not in the *cogito* of Descartes nor in the *credo* of Pascal, but beyond that bifurcation in the *fundamental trust* in reality.[59]

Thus, he does not opt for *natural theology*, in any case not for natural theology in the traditional Roman Catholic sense of the term (cf. his strong opposition to the pronouncements of Vatican i). He also does not assume an autonomous reason that has the ability to show the basis upon which faith *logically must* arise (cf. his opposition to the *traditional* proofs for the existence of God). He rather opts for a rationality *based on fundamental trust*—but a trust, not without reason nor unreasonable nor as *sacrificium intellectus*.[60] In this regard, he clearly builds on the understanding of nature in its relation to grace, as it was propounded

---

[57] Cf. H. Küng, *Bevochten vrijheid. passim*; cf. J. Ratzinger, *Many religions—one covenant: Israel, the church and the world*. trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 94: for the later pope's reference to the problematic involved in Küng's approach.

[58] W. Jeanrond, "Hans Küng," in: *The modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the 20th century*. 2nd edition., ed. D. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 179.

[59] Küng, *Does God exist?*, 509.

[60] Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift, Deel 2* (Kampen: Kok, 1967), 421, on the difference between *blind* obedience and *true* obedience, and the former as being a caricature of Christian faith.

by the theologians of the *theologie nouvelle* in France, as well as on the views of Karl Rahner.[61] Küng, therefore, does not affirm 'pure reason' as a kind of *praeambula fidei*. Yet, he attaches great significance to a rational discussion with people of other faiths in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of a choice for the Christian God.[62]

– Further, one should *appreciate* his *practical initiatives* in seeking peace through open and steadfast dialogue with other religions, in this way searching for common ground in a common *human identity within our own identities*. Perhaps O'Donovan's remark about the Good Samaritan in Christ's well-known parable points to the same concern for a common *humanum* in a global society of identities-in-proximity:

> The Good Samaritan exemplifies a kind of uncluttered common sense about community relations. He reacted to the simple fact of proximity. But such common sense is manifestly uncommon, since it requires a critical *ascesis*, stripping away the false social representations which constitute unreal but highly believable barriers… But *ascesis* requires the disclosure of a universal society, a Kingdom of Heaven, a new identity capable of weaning us from dependence upon our varied identities. Without it we cannot envisage those identities in sober clarity, as grounds neither of boasting nor shame.[63]

– With De Leede[64] one can also—in a reformed sense—*affirm* Küng's key notion that *being a Christian is being radically human*. The one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is indeed 'the new humanity.' It was Bavinck who gave this magnificent description of a Christian believer's identity: "*Because he is a Christian, he is human in the full, true sense.*"[65]

– The *question* should, however, be raised whether Küng's strategy for inter-religious dialogue leaves enough scope for the very important role

---

[61] Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, 577; cf. G.E. Meuleman, "Natuur en genade," in *Protestantse verkenningen na Vaticanum Twee*, red H. Berkhof et al ('s-Gravenhage: Boeken-centrum, 1967), 65–88.

[62] Küng, *Does God exist?*, 611.

[63] O. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 44.

[64] H. de Leede, *Waarachtig Mens-zijn*, 274; Cf. also J.W. de Gruchy, *Being human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (London: SCM, 2006), 142–172. He pleads for the retrieval of a Christian humanism in line with Erasmus, Küng, and others.

[65] H. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. H. der Nederlanden (Potchefstroom: IRS, 1998), 46.

of the *Holy Spirit* in such dialogue. Should much stronger emphasis
not be placed on *both "hands of God" (The Son and the Holy Spirit)*?[66]
Taking one's cue from Calvin, the conviction that the Holy Spirit,
"transfusing vigour into all things, breathing into them being, life and
motion,"[67] should be incorporated more emphatically in a strategy for
inter-religious dialogue.

– The *decisive question* concerns *Küng's Christology*. Although one can
understand the 'apologetic' motivation behind a Christology 'from
below,' the cost of sacrificing the *vere deus* in its Chalcedonian formu-
lation is, after all is said and done, clearly too high.[68] Admittedly, the *ter-
minology* used by Chalcedon attempts in fallible, human words to artic-
ulate the *ineffable mystery* of who Christ is. Together with Calvin, it can
truly be granted:[69] "I am not so minutely precise as to fight furiously
for mere words." Surely, a true and living confession of the *vere deus* of
Christ in the context of the 21st century can never be a *mere repetition*
of the words of Chalcedon. Orthodoxy without something of the *ringing
doxology*, expressed by the apostle Thomas in the Gospel of John ("My
Lord and my God"), is a petrified—and, therefore, false—'orthodoxy.'
Such mere repetitions[70] can hardly be expected to function in *a truly
convi ncing way* within a serious inter-religious dialogue. Nevertheless,

---

[66] Cf. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haeresis*, 4.20.1 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1* eds. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004), 487.

[67] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion*. trans. H. Beveridge (London: SCM, 1962), 1,13.14; cf. also A. van de Beek, *De Adem van God: De Heilige Geest in kerk en kosmos*, (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1987), 179–218: cf. also: A. Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*: *Toward a pneumatological theology of religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 184–192. cf further: J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2. 2.15: "If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or contemn truth wherever it appears." Surely, this cannot only be applicable to the ancient Greeks, and not to Buddha, Confucius, and other sages!

[68] Cf. A.E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 296–300. He maintains that, unlike Küng, theologians like Moltmann and Jüngel could construct "beyond Hegel a biblical and coherent theology of the cross *grounded in a trinitarian ontology*…" (emphasis added).

[69] J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.5.

[70] Cf. P. Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for Old Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 253, on some Christians who "continue to talk about God and human attempts to encounter God by ignoring and slighting forms of knowledge newly discovered in the modern age."

until such time[71] as more adequate articulations of the mystery of Christ can, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit by way of a deeper listening to the scriptures (cf. Eph. 3:18–19), be found, the 'metaphysical' formulations of Chalcedon remain indispensable.[72] This does not mean that one has to be caught on the horns of a dilemma between 'ontic' and 'functional' ways of approaching Christology.[73]

It is indeed a grave possibility that a kind of 'analysis *paralysis*' can become an alibi for responding to the urgency of the challenge posed by Küng's strategy. Such a possible stagnation of *practical* inter-religious dialogues, stemming from fixed 'School Positions,' might perhaps be overcome by a somewhat more 'daring' approach, such as the one that Küng practices and requires.[74] In a courageous approach of that kind, Küng's inspiring strategy of open dialogue in steadfastness can be integrated and grounded in a Christology of which the existing "default setting"[75] (the default setting of *ontic* or *functional*) has been changed. Bauckham's astute observation is to the point here: "Once we have rid ourselves of the prejudice that high Christology must speak of Christ's divine *nature*, we see the obvious fact that the Christology of divine *identity* common to the whole New Testament is the highest Christology of all. It identifies Jesus as intrinsic to who God is."[76]

– Finally, Van de Beek's proposal for an approach of *unicism* in the dialogue between religions—inviting and open, yet undergirded by

---

[71] Cf. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Deel 2 (Kampen: Kok, 1910), 330: "*Voorshands* kan de theologie, indien zij waarlijk Schriftuurlijke en Christelijke theologie wil zijn niet beter doen dan de leer der twee naturen te handhaven. Zij mag zichzelve daarbij diep doordrongen van het gebrekkige dat hare taal, *bepaaldelijk ook in de leer van Christus aankleeft*" (emphasis added).

[72] Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *Een halve eeuw theologie: Motieven en stromingen van 1920 tot heden* (Kampen: Kok, 1974), 356–357.

[73] Cf. R. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41, on the problem of the distinction between 'ontic' and 'functional' Christologies.

[74] Cf. H. Küng, "Anfragen an die Reformation Heute," *Reformatio*, 27 (1978), 393, where he challenges Catholics and Protestants alike to heed the resounding call of Huldrych Zwingli, the great Swiss Reformer: "*Tut um Gott's Will etwas Tapferes!*" (*For God's sake, do something courageous!*). No bibliographical reference is given by Küng.

[75] Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What* the *Quest* for *the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 79–82.

[76] Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 42.

the paradoxes[77] of a more Chalcedonian Christology, as this approach seems to be—might be a fruitful starting point to construct and practice a fitting and creative response to Küng's strategy.[78]

[77] Cf. Esther Reed, *The Genesis of Ethics: On the Authority of God in the Origin of Christian Ethics* (London: Darton, 2000), 186. She pleads for the development of "a Chalcedonian way of thinking"; cf. further W. Aalders. *Plato en het Christendom: Over het Griekse, het Christelijke en het Ideologische Denken* (Den Haag: Voorhoeve, 1984), on "de opeenstapeling van machtige paradoxen" at Chalcedon, and on the "stijlvorm" of the paradox "als meest geëigende en doeltreffende, om de evangelie veilig te stellen…"

[78] A. van de Beek, *Jezus Kurios*, 295–268; cf. A. Nel, *Op Soek na God buite die Kerk?* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2003), 174–176, who pleads for a practical application of this approach—specifically in an African context; cf. also: H. Stoevesandt, "Wehrlose Wahrheit: Die Christus bekennende Kirche inmitten der Vielfalt der Religionen," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 102 (2005), 205–225.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND THE
SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTITUTION—THE
POSITION OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

PIETER COERTZEN

INTRODUCTION

The question that this paper wants to address is whether the guarantee of freedom of religion in a constitution can protect Christian identity. This question will be answered in the light of the current South African Constitution (1996). Many Christians despair whether a constitution with a bill of rights can protect their identity as Christians, and whether they would not be delivered to all kinds of secular forces and strange ideologies. This paper will argue that a guaranteed freedom of religion is one of the factors that can indeed help to protect Christian identity. It will do so first by describing what is meant by freedom of religion; second, it will analyze the South African Constitution with regard to freedom of religion. Before coming to a conclusion, the paper will pay attention to a very important related issue; namely, the place of religion in public life.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

There are different opinions about what religious freedom entails. Seen from a judicial perspective, B.P. Vermeulen and M.J. Kanne are of the opinion that religious freedom must protect certain vulnerable areas of action—especially historically determined areas of action that can be threatened by the state or persons of authority. A condition for something to be protected by the right of freedom of religion is that it must relate to a specific object—a defined area of action. That would be actions that give expression to a religion or conviction and can be determined according to objective measures. A consequence of this definition is that not every subjective action that comes from a subjective religious motive can be called a religious action and claim to be pro-

tected under the right to religious freedom.[1] J.W. Sap also accentuates the historical nature of certain action areas when it comes to the protection of the rights to religious freedom. He specifically refers to religious holidays in the Netherlands. He is of opinion that such days should be protected by the right to religious freedom. A nation has a certain history that leads to certain days with a specific social connotation that affects everybody. To easily disband such days shows disrespect for the past generations who mined gold from the mines, the scientists and politicians that helped to build the Netherlands. Such abandonment would indicate a return to the times of the barbarians.[2] He uses the same argument with respect to the subsidization of religious organizations and the use of the name of God in the annual Queen's speech.[3] K. Blei defines freedom of religion in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). From this he points out that religious freedom has both an individual and a social side. Religious freedom also means more than just having a religion and upholding inner convictions and feelings. Freedom of religion includes the right that everybody can express their religion and faith in worship, teaching, practice, and maintenance. This view of religious freedom means that individuals and religious groups want to live their religion, act according to it, and be witnesses to the truth of their faith, also in public. According to Blei, freedom of religion also relates to the fact that the religious convictions of people usually contain views on how they think society should be organized. He also points out the important fact that freedom of religion implies that the authorities must accept the responsibility and duty to respect and guarantee the right to freedom of religion. This responsibility is not accomplished if the authorities just steer away from an active involvement in religious matters. "It is not just a matter of keeping 'hands off' from religious communities in their territory and leaving them alone. On the contrary, active engagement by the state is required in order to make religious freedom a reality to all religious people. The state should create the possibilities and facilities so that freedom can really be enjoyed and implemented. Otherwise, the principle of religious freedom is in danger of being doomed to remain just

---

[1] B.P. Vermeulen & M.J. Kanne, "Kerk en Staat en de Mensenrechten," in L.C. van Drimmelen & T.J. van der Ploeg, *Kerk en Recht* (Utrecht: Lemma, 2004), 76–77.

[2] J.W. Sap, "Kerk en Staat vanuit het Staatsrecht. Meer Respect voor de publieke dimensie van godsdienst," in L.C. van Drimmelen and T.J. van der Ploeg, *Kerk en Recht* (Utrecht: Lemma, 2004),114–117.

[3] Sap, "Kerk en Staat vanuit het Staatsrecht," 114–117.

a nice principle without significance in practice."[4] At the same time, it can also be said that just as the state has an active responsibility to the freedom of religion, churches and religious communities have a similar responsibility—they must see to it that their order and structures are adequate for the practice of freedom of religion.

In his attempt to define freedom of religion, Witte writes in the third chapter of his book, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment— Essential rights and Liberties (2000)*, about "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Religion." Under these "Essential Rights and Liberties," he then understands (i) freedom of conscience, (ii) the free exercise of religion, (iii) religious pluralism, (iv) religious equality, (v) the separation of church and state, and (vi) the disestablishment of religion by the state.[5] These six principles regularly figured in the debates of the eighteenth century about freedom of religion. Eventually, they were all incorporated into the American Constitution and also into the constitutions of the different federal states—be it with different accents and applications. Up to this day they remain what Witte calls "at the heart of the American Constitutional experiment—as central commandments of the American constitutional order and as cardinal axioms of a new American logic of religious liberty."[6] They are, indeed, handy distinctions to understand what freedom of religion exactly is.

Freedom of Conscience

This is seen as the most fundamental right of religion. It safeguards the right of choice (voluntarism), while, at the same time, it protects people against any discrimination on the basis of their religion.[7] It also guarantees the freedom and indemnity of individuals and churches/religious associations against that which can be brought against them, either by people or the law, because of their religious convictions.

---

[4] K. Blei, *Freedom of Religion: Principle and Practice*, http://www.antenna.nl/ikvoud// docs/div/presentation-blei.html Also see L.C.van Drimmelen, "Kerk en Staat," in W. van 't Spijker & L.C. van Drimmelen, *Inleiding tot de Studie van het Kerkrecht.* (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 199.

[5] John Witte, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment. Essential Rights and Liberties.* (Boulder, Westview, 2000) 37.

[6] Witte, *Religion*, 37.

[7] Witte, *Religion*, 39–42.

The Free Exercise of Religion

Where freedom of conscience guarantees that everybody is free to choose, practice, or change his/her religious conviction, the right to the free exercise of religion entails the right to act in public in accordance with the choice of your conviction without transgressing with regard to the rights of others or disturbing the peace in the community. The free exercise of religion can take on a variety of public forms, i.e., freedom of worship, freedom of religious speech, the freedom of religious assembly, and the freedom of religious education. Freedom of religious education includes the right to private education as well as the right of churches and religious communities to educate and train their office bearers. It also includes the right to form religious bodies or associations, create one's own forms of worship, as well as the right to formulate and confess articles of faith. The free exercise of religion further includes the right to create an own internal order, own rules of disciplinary measures, procedural rules for assemblies, as well as liturgical formularies.[8] It also includes the right of churches and religious bodies to have their own terms of employment.[9] Vorster also correctly points out that the right to free exercise of religion enables churches and religious communities to play a strong role in society with regard to issues such as religious education in schools. It certainly also enables churches and religious communities to play a strong role with regard to religious activities in hospitals, prisons, the military, the police, homes for elderly, and in children's homes. It also enables them to participate in public functions where they are required.[10]

Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism is a third very important dimension of religious rights and liberties.[11] According to Witte, religious pluralism entails

---

[8] Witte, *Religion*, 43; Sap, "Kerk en Staat vanuit het Staatsrecht," 106; Verkuyl, "Godsdiensvrijheid," *Christelijke Encyclopaedie* 3 (1958), 266–268; J.M. Vorster, *Ethical perspectives on Human Rights* (Potchefstroom, Potchefstroomse Teologiese Publikasies, 2004), 223.

[9] Pieter Coertzen, "Kerkorde of Arbeidswet: Die posisie van predikante en ander persone wat in die NG Kerk werk," *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif(NGTT)* 44, 3 & 4 (2003), 248–258.

[10] Vorster, *Ethical Perspectives*, 223.

[11] Sap, "Kerk en Staat vanuit het Staatsrecht," 117–118.

both a confessional as well as a social element. Confessional pluralism is aimed at entertaining and accommodating a diversity of religious expressions and organizations in a community. The social pluralism is aimed at entertaining and accommodating a diversity of social institutions such as churches, synagogues, other religious associations, families, schools, welfare institutions, as well as academic and civil associations that all play a very important role in the keeping and expansion of religion. All these religious institutions also play a very important role against the interference of the state in religious affairs; the establishment of religious rights, as well as supplying vital sources for theology, morality, charity, and discipline in society.[12] The Dutch theologian Van Ruler pointed out that the recognition of religious pluralism brought about a radical shift in our view of the state. As a result of religious pluralism, he wrote, the state does not only acknowledge God, but also the not-god, the vacuum, the big X, the abstract of the philosophy.[13] Van Ruler was of the opinion that it was inevitable that this happened. It is, however, not a small matter and can very easily lead to an absolute state. This makes it absolutely necessary that the irreducible and unique duality (separation) of church and state must be kept intact. Personally, Van Ruler is of the opinion that the Reformed vision of the state is the biggest guarantee for tolerance and freedom.[14] Blei points out that it is very important that religious people tolerate one another. "If religious people do not tolerate each other religious freedom will not come about or will get lost even if the government interferes and keeps the quarrelling parties apart."[15] Within Christianity reciprocal tolerance and respect is known as ecumenism.

The Equality of Churches/Religious Communities

In order to keep and sustain freedom of conscience, and the free exercise of religion and religious pluralism, the equality of churches/religious communities are necessary—at least the equality of all peace loving religions.[16] Although it is primarily about the equality of religions

---

[12] Witte, *Religion*, 44–45.

[13] A.A. van Ruler, "De verhouding tussen Kerk en Staat," *Theologisch Werk dl VI* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1973), 137–139.

[14] Van Ruler, "De verhouding tussen Kerk en Staat," 137–139.

[15] K. Blei, *Religious Freedom the Basis of all Freedo*, http://www.iarf.net/AboutUs/Congress2002/co_Blei.html.

[16] Witte, *Religion*, 45–47.

before the law, respect for autonomy, diversity, and plurality in soci-
ety is equally important. It is also important that there is no discrim-
ination on grounds of religion or conviction. Public education must,
for instance, be given with respect for everybody's religious conviction,
while the authorities also have the duty to honor and respect the con-
victions of special schools in the community.

The Separation of Church and State

The separation of church and state is a matter that already came
forward very strongly during the Reformation of the sixteenth century.
To a larger or lesser extent, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the
Anabaptists were for the separation of church and state. Unfortunately,
both Luther and Calvin could not come to a complete rejection of a
Constantinian model for the relationship between church and state—
a model in which the state determined the role and influence of the
church in society.[17] The Anabaptists, on the other hand, recognized the
God-ordained authority of the church and, to a much more limited
degree, that of the state. They were, however, convinced that the roles
of church and state can and must be fully and completely separated
because the church is too holy to be influenced by or involved in
political life.[18] After the Peasant War of 1525, Luther was willing to give
the worldly authorities a bigger say in the government of the church—
something that was really only corrected in 1934 when the churches
in Germany expressed their views on the relationship between church
and state in the Barmen Declaration, articles 5 and 6.[19] The separation
of church and state departs from the principal that the church and the
state are two autonomous entities. The state has no right to intervene in
the internal affairs of the church, while the church has no competency
in the affairs and functions of the state. Independent from each other,
churches and the state have the right to make their own rules and laws
and to function in accordance with them. It stands to reason that there
are certain boundaries churches must maintain.[20] The state is a political

---

[17] John L. Hiemstra, "Church, State, and Kingdom of God, an overview," *REC Focus, vol. 5, number 2,* (June 2005), 28.

[18] Hiemstra, "Church, State, and Kingdom," 29–30.

[19] "Barmer Thelogische Erklärung, 27/31 Mai 1934," Adalbert Erler, *Kirchenrecht. Ein Studiebuch* (München: C.H. Beck, 1975), 206–208.

[20] *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 108 of 1996, (hereafter Constitution), sec. 36.

entity that embraces all the inhabitants within certain boundaries and governs through a sovereign government. The church, on the other hand, is a religious/spiritual entity that governs itself in accordance with its spiritual identity as expressed in the Bible, the confessions of faith, and the church order of the church. It is a community of believers who have committed themselves freely to each other. The state can enforce its laws with the power of the sword, while the authority of the church is of a spiritual nature.[21] The separation of church and state is not only necessary to guarantee freedom of religion, it also guarantees the integrity and independence of processes in the church. In this way, it importantly contributes to political and social stability in a community. The separation of church and state also forms an important context for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion, not only with regard to the internal affairs of churches, but also with regard to the involvement of churches/religious communities in society in fields such as social welfare, teaching and education, the conducting of marriages, and the forming of moral opinion.[22]

It is also important to note that the separation of church and state does not necessarily mean that the government no longer has to recognize biblical norms, and that they do not need to heed civil religion.[23] It also does not mean that the church has no obligation to dialogue with the contemporary state or government on matters of common interest—to the contrary.

The Disestablishment of a Church/Religion

Under the establishment of a church/religion can be understood that the state, from its side, undertakes certain actions to establish a certain church, faith, or religion as the church, faith, or religion of the community that falls under the jurisdiction of the state. It can described as "—the actions of government to 'settle', 'fix', 'define', 'ordain', 'enact', or 'setup' the religion of the community—its religious doctrines and liturgies, its religious texts and traditions, its clergy and property."[24]

---

[21] Van Drimmelen, "Kerk en Staat," 198.

[22] Sap, "Kerk en Staat vanuit het Staatsrecht," 105; Witte, *Religion*, 48–50, Vorster, *Ethical Perspectives*, 223.

[23] Sap, "Kerk en Staat vanuit het Staatsrecht," 105; Van Drimmelen, "Kerk en Staat," 112, 118.

[24] Witte, *Religion*, 51.

In the Americas during the eighteenth century, the disestablishment of churches was specifically requested in light of the establishment of the Anglican church by the authorities. Such establishment implied that everybody had to use a certain Bible translation, that the liturgies, prayers, and lectionaries of the Book of Common Prayer had to be used, everybody had to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles, and had to swear an oath of allegiance to the Anglican church, the Crown, and the Commonwealth. A result of this was that the state gained immense influence over the internal affairs of the church that it established and, also, over dissenters from that church. It was against the background of this situation that the principles of freedom of conscience, the free exercise of religion, religious pluralism, religious equality, the separation of church and state, and the principle of disestablishment developed in the USA as characteristics of religious freedom. In time the quest for disestablishment in the USA lead to a wall of separation between church and state. This was also due to United States jurisprudence that developed to a point "where the even-handed treatment of religions has often come to mean the 'non-treatment' of any religious matters by the state."[25] So, it is that the radical application of the principle of disestablishment can eventually lead to a completely secular state.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN THE SOUTH AFRICA CONSTITUTION

Freedom of Conscience

The South African Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience in section 15(1) "Everybody has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, conviction and opinion." Gildenhuys describes it as follows: "In the South African context, freedom of conscience entails freedom of the individual to voluntarily adopt (or not to adopt) a religious belief, and freedom of religious groups to associate and organize themselves without coercion or undue burdens by the state or other individuals. It moreover entails that religious individuals and groups should not

---

[25] J.L. Gildenhuys, *An Assessment of Constitutional Guarantees of Religious Rights and Freedoms in South Africa.* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2001), 198.

be discriminated against on grounds of religion and should not be subjected to general laws and policies which they could not, in good conscience, accept or obey."[26]

Free Exercise of Religion

In the Constitution of South Africa, the free exercise of religion is protected by sections such as 15(2)[27] that allows that the exercise of religion can take place in state or state subsidized institutions, given the fact that certain provisions are complied with—for example, that it is done in compliance with the rules laid down by the relevant authority, that it is done in a fair manner, and that attendance is not compulsory. Section 16[28] once again guarantees the right of free expression in compliance with certain conditions. Section 18[29] guarantees freedom of association, while Section 31(1)[30] states that persons belonging to a certain cultural, religious, or language group may not be denied the right to enjoy their culture, practice their religion, and use their language together with other members of their community. They may also join, support, and keep such communities.

Religious Pluralism

In the South African Constitution, the guarantee for religious pluralism is especially found in the word "everybody" in art. 15(1).[31] The fact that everybody has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, conviction, and opinion means that this freedom cannot be restricted to a certain religion or to just certain people. "Everybody" also does not refer to individuals alone; it also points to a variety of religious organizations, juristic persons, and religious associations.[32]

---

[26] Gildenhuys, *An Assessment*, 158.
[27] *Constitution* sec 15(2).
[28] *Constitution* sec. 16(2).
[29] *Constitution* sec 18.
[30] *Constitution* sec. 31(1).
[31] *Constitution* sec. 15(1).
[32] Gildenhuys, *An Assessment*, 172–173.

Religious Equality

As far as the South African Constitution is concerned, one of the basic ideas of the Constitution is that of 'equality.' "Equality is one of the cornerstones of the new South African era, as opposed to and in reaction to the apartheid regime which preceded it."[33] Religious equality is guaranteed by art. 9(1),[34] which stipulates that "everybody" is equal before the law and has an equal right to protection and benefit by the law. Art. 9(3)[35] explicitly states that the state, neither in a direct nor indirect way, may not unreasonably discriminate against "anybody" on grounds of, among others, religion.

Separation of Church and State

The South African Constitution does not explicitly provide for the institutional separation of church and state. However, Gildenhuys points out that since the Middle Ages the separation of church and state has been such an inherent part of modern freedom of religion that it is unthinkable that the guarantee of freedom of religion in the South African Constitution would not also include the institutional separation of church and state. She also points out that it appears that in court decisions the separation is accepted.[36]

On the question whether article 9(4),[37] which disallows unfair discrimination *inter alia* on grounds of religion 9(3),[38] enables the state to force the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) not to discriminate against women, Van der Vyver answers that it would amount to totalitarianism of the worst kind should the RCC be asked to defend an internal ruling before a secular tribunal.[39] From this, Gildenhuys draws the conclusion that "—section 9(4) should not be interpreted to sanction interference in the internal sphere of religious institutions or churches on grounds of the historical development of religious freedom as entrenched in section 15(1) and 31(1). It is submitted,—that the provisions of section 9(4)

---

[33] Gildenhuys, *An Assessment*, 207.
[34] *Constitution* sec 9(1).
[35] *Constitution* sec. 9(3).
[36] Gildenhuys, *An Assessment*, 222.
[37] *Constitution* sec. 9(4).
[38] *Constitution* sec 9(3).
[39] Johan van der Vyver, "Constitutional Perspective of Church-State Relations in South Africa." *Brigham Young University Law Review vol. 1999, number 2* (1999), 667.

should be read in conjunction with the provisions of section 8(3) and that, in certain cases, the right contained in section 9(4) should be limited accordingly."[40]

The Disestablishment of Religion

In the drafting of the South African Constitution, there was a deliberate steering away from the radical separation of church and state, or the radical implementation of the principle of disestablishment. Although the authorities are prohibited to establish a specific church or religion, there are enough indications in the Constitution that the government must take positive steps to see to it that a balanced handling of religious interests takes place in the society, interests such as is implied in sections 15(1); 15(2) and 9 of the Constitution.[41]

Freedom of Religion and the Place of Religion in Public Life

A few remarks about the concepts—*separation, accommodation, and neutrality*—is appropriate in order to help us to grasp the full meaning of freedom of religion. In its most strict form, the concept *separation* implies that church and state are independent and autonomous institutions and must be kept rigorously apart.[42] The concept of *accommodation* implies that while there is a separation between church and state that means that the government must remain rigorously neutral toward religion. There can be exceptional cases where the government is permitted to modify its normal behavior in order to accommodate some aspects of religious belief and practice.[43] With regard to neutrality, Thiemann makes the following distinctions; *strict neutrality, nondiscriminatory neutrality*, and *benevolent neutrality. Strict neutrality* implies a non-involvement from the side of the government in religious matters. This comes down to a consistent policy of no-aid to religion. *Nondiscriminatory neutrality* allows some public sphere accommodation of religion, provided that the sym-

---

[40] Gildenhuys, *An Assessment*, 224.
[41] Constitution sec. 15(1); sec. 15(2); sec 9.
[42] Ronald F. Thieman, *Religion in Public life. A Dilemma for Democracy*. (Washington: Georgetown University press, 1996), 64.
[43] Thiemann, *Religion*, 57.

bols or practices supported by the government are non-sectarian and nondiscriminatory. *Benevolent neutrality* "seeks to broaden the framework within which religion might be freely exercised by expanding the doctrine of accommodation to include public sphere accommodation."[44] This stand implies that beyond the two limiting principles of no coercion of religious belief and no direct benefits to religion the government is free to promote an atmosphere in which the free exercise of religion can flourish. Proponents of this position reject the notion that the government must be neutral between religion and non-religion. To them neutrality implies that the government must be impartial/neutral in its dealing with different religious groups.[45]

While the accentuation of the principle of disestablishment can lead to a secular state—freedom *from* religion—the accentuation of the principle of the free exercise of religion can lead to a state that can be called benevolently neutral—a state that not only promotes freedom of religion by giving room to all religions, but a state which also includes the public sphere accommodation of religion.

Blei describes the Western concept of the neutrality of the state as one where the state abstains from choosing sides in any ideological or religious debate. It is the task of the state to create the space where everybody can live and work according to their own religious conviction. If necessary, the state must also create the required infra-structure to make this possible. Blei is of the opinion that such neutrality is not possible due to the fact that the state can be ripped apart as a result of conflicting ideologies. Blei would rather see the task of the state as creating the space where ideological discussions can take place and also to enable such discussions.[46]

Van der Vyver, on the other hand, is of the opinion that South Africa after 1996 can be characterized as a neutral state rather than a secular state. It would seem that, using the categories of Thiemann, the South African state, according to Van der Vyver, can be characterized as benevolently neutral, although Van der Vyver only speaks of a neutral state. This characterization as a neutral state implies that the state must afford all religions an equal opportunity to practice and promote their religion without the state making a choice for a certain religion. Religious neutrality rests on the principle of equal treatment

---

[44] Thiemann, *Religion*, 61.
[45] Thiemann, *Religion*, 61–62.
[46] Blei, *Religious Freedom*, 12–14.

by the law, which to Van der Vyver is not the same as equalization. Equal treatment asks for proportionality in the distribution of rights and duties. In the case of religious education in schools, this will mean that all the religions within the school community will have to be accommodated, but then according to the percentage of support a religion enjoys within that community. If the school community consists of 80 % support for Protestant Christians, 10 % for Roman Catholic Christians, and 10 % for Islam, the religious education at that school must be given in those proportions.[47]

Perhaps the best characterization in this regard would be to speak of the South African state as benevolently impartial. This is done with reference to Section 7 (2) of the Constitution[48] that reads "The state must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights." This means that the South African state has a positive duty to also respect, protect, promote, and fulfil the religious rights of its citizens. The state cannot only play a neutral role of non-involvement, but in terms of the constitution has a positive and benevolent duty with regard to religion. This must, however, happen in an impartial way because the state also has the duty to treat all religions as equal before the law.

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that the South African Constitution with its guaranteed right to freedom of religion offers ample space for Christians and churches to realize their Christian identity within the ambits of the constitution.

However, this also means that churches—and for that matter all religious communities—in South Africa stand before the big challenge to fill the space given to them by the constitution with their deepest convictions and witness—and with their Christian identity. By doing this, churches can use their God-given freedom to live out their identity and to make a positive contribution to church and society. This will ask churches to avail themselves not only of their faith and ecclesiastical identity; the nature of their being as churches; their place within the kingdom of God; their relationship to the state, society, and other

---

[47] Johan van der Vyver, "Godsdiensvryheid: sekularisasie of politieke neutraliteit," *Woord en Daad*, 374 (2000), 4–5.

[48] *Constitution* sec 7(2).

religions and people of South Africa, but also of Christian freedom. The scope that freedom of religion poses to churches in South Africa indeed poses big challenges. If churches do not use this opportunity, it will be a lost opportunity because the scope of freedom of religion will then be used by other powers and authorities; freedom of religion is a space that cannot be left unoccupied.

Last, it can also be concluded that churches and Christians must accept the responsibility to guard their religious freedom. The state and other powers will always try to bridge the gap between church and state. It is for Christians and churches to be ever vigilant that the boundaries are not crossed illegally.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN CONTEXT

AFFIRMING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY
WITHIN INDONESIAN SOCIETY

Bambang Subandrijo

The Context of Indonesian Christians

Christians in Indonesia live in and face at least three different contexts. First, we live in and belong to a global society. There is no possibility of isolating ourselves from the influence of globalization in all aspects of life. If we try to do so, we would be marginalized and incapable of playing any role within society. Second, we live in a pluralistic society in Indonesia. Willing or not, we encounter other faiths. This fact requires us to cultivate harmony and good relationships with other faiths and, if necessary, to redefine our Christian identity. If we do not do so, we will be isolated from our neighbors and fail to carry out our task to proclaim God's love and peace, as well as the norms of His kingdom, by which humans have to abide. Third, and particularly, we live among Muslims, who are very strict in regard to their doctrine of *tawhid* (the oneness of God). The Islamic doctrine of God places a strong emphasis on the oneness, uniqueness, transcendence, and utter otherness of God. Muslims often misunderstand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that up to the present is the heart of Christianity. This misunderstanding contributes to the strained relationship between the two communities. In such a situation Indonesian Christians need to review and redefine their identity.

Globalization, which was at first concerned with market economy, has now spread quickly to all aspects of life. It is basically a phenomenon that resulted from the rapid development of communication and information technologies, and the escalation of the transmission of knowledge. By the power of communication technology, we can watch and record every occasion that happens in any hemisphere. This is the end of the time of every isolated community.[1] These amazing changes

---

[1] Adnan Aslan, *Menyingkap Kebenaran: Pluralisme Agama dalam Filsafat Islam dan Kristen Seyyed Hossein Nasr dan John Hick* (Bandung: Alifya, 2004), 147; translated into Indonesian

confront all religious communities with a collective awareness that there must be a structural and cultural adjustment of religious comprehension. Nevertheless, it does not mean that faith must be subordinated to rapid social, cultural, economic, and political development.[2]

There are various and complicated influences of globalization upon human lifestyle. In one case, globalization can destroy cultural norms and identity,[3] but, in another case, it can strengthen religious norms and traditional identity. In certain conditions, however, religion can also play its role in rejecting the global system. On the one side, intense acculturation and enculturation at a certain stage can blur one's own or one's community's cultural identity, including ethics and moral norms. On the other side, however, the attraction of a global lifestyle also arouses paradoxical reaction. Cultural and religious shock can lead people or a community to turn back to the warmth of their cultural or religious primordial bond. This inclination occurs along with every effort to affirm their identity.

Besides some positive things that it brought—such as the increase of consciousness of universal value of human life, increased respect for human dignity, the fading of a narrow primordial view that in the religious field is reflected in an excessive fanatic attitude, and other positive impacts—globalization also brought about some negative side effects. The global system tends to elevate a local social structure and order so that it causes alienation of humanity. Individuals are pulled out from their socio-cultural roots. Some other negative impacts of globalization are: the rise of a new hegemonic system that embodies injustice, either in the economic or political or socio-cultural fields; the decline of ethics and morality; atomization of life in which people do not any longer care about one another; and so on. Of course, all these contradict religious values that lay stress on love, great concern for one another, and respect for human dignity. Faced with such conditions, religions, including the Christian religion, should not remain silent and do nothing. Christians should have a critical attitude towards the influx of globalization and make every endeavor to maintain our fundamental mission to present God's love and peace for all human beings.

---

from *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (London: Curzon Press, 1998) by Munir.

[2] Bahtiar Effendy, *Masyarakat Agama dan Pluralisme Keagamaan* (*Religious Society and Religious Pluralism*) (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2001), 3.

[3] Effendy, *Masyarakat Agama*, 5.

Another context that cannot be forgotten is the pluralistic society of Indonesia. Christians in Indonesia live amid heterogeneity—either culturally, ethnically, tribally, or religiously. Existential experiences show that wherever Christians live, they live side by side with other religious and cultural traditions.[4] In such conditions, we cannot ignore or even underestimate them, although it does not mean that we have to do so for the sake of plurality at the expense of our Christian identity. A particular identity is not subordinate to plurality, but, conversely, each identity must be respected the way that it is. In this regard, Jürgen Moltmann's view is worthy for consideration. From his experience in dialoguing with Marxism, Moltmann learns that in encountering others one must seriously respond to the fundamental details of the dialogue that is stated by his or her partner. In this regard, one does not need to lose his or her identity, but has to achieve a deeper understanding of his or her identity.[5]

Franz Magnis offers a thesis, which I agree with, that within those two contexts—globalization and plurality—the people of Indonesia are involved in the paradigmatic shift concerning the concept of humanity—that is also going on all over the world—from a 'we-others' to a 'universal human dignity' paradigm. This new paradigm is pronounced in a new political ethic that is called democratic culture, and which acknowledges the autonomy and the equality of human beings; respect for human rights; attempts to abolish brutal sentences; prohibits torture; acknowledges the freedom of thought and of adherance to a chosen faith; pursues religious tolerance, social justice, and universal human solidarity; is concerned with protection of the weak, minority rights, and non-discriminative principles; dignifies all human beings without distinguishing them by gender, religion, color, cultural pattern, social status, and so on.[6]

---

[4] Harold Coward, *Pluralisme: Tantangan bagi Agama-agama* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 1989), 47; translated from *Pluralism, Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985) by Bosco Carvallo.

[5] Jürgen Moltmann. "Apakah 'Teologi Pluralistis' Bermanfaat bagi Agama-agama Dunia?" in Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Mempertimbangkan Kembali Keunikan Agama Kristen: Mitos Teologi Pluralistis Agama-agama* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2002), 252–253; translated into Indonesian from *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: the Myth of Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990) by Stephen Suleeman.

[6] Franz Magnis, "Bisakah Agama-agama Terbuka Satu Sama Lain?" ("Can Religions be Open to One Another?"), Tim Balitbang PGI, *Meretas Jalan Teologi Agama-agama di Indonesia* (*Cut a Road through Theology of Religions in Indonesia*) (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2000), 53.

In the arena of globalization and plurality, we are now faced with the question: Does our awareness that we are human lead us to acknowledge that others are also human? We realize how difficult it is to acknowledge that others—who differ from us in color, faith, ideology, and religion—are also human like us.

It is a pity that, in fact, religions are often not able to humanize humans and to lift up their dignity, and are not able to develop structures of law, social behavior, and morality effectively. Sometimes, religions still hold on to the old paradigm of 'we-others.' The way to see others depends on whether they belong to us (our family, our religion, our tribe, etc.) or not. The way to treat them depends on their inclusion or exclusion, their belonging to 'us' or to 'others.' In the transitional process, individuals or groups feel their identity, or even their existence, to be threatened. It is as if they lose their traditional guidelines and the certainties that secure their life and ensure their social acknowledgement. The opposite of the paradigm shift from 'we-others' to 'universal human dignity' is a tendency to turn back to primordial remembrances and exclusive bonds of group that, all this time, gave them the warmth of brotherhood.[7]

When narrow primordialism grows up, the threat to common human civilization will not come from universalistic ideologies or theologies, but from primordial-particularistic ideologies or theologies. Primordialism replaces respect for universal human dignity and rights with the 'absolutization' of a particular interest and dream, tolerance with intolerance, and civilization with cruelty that are all based on a claim of the absoluteness of particular religious truth.

The other fact that cannot be ignored is that Indonesian Christians live in a state in which the majority of its citizenship is Muslim. Indonesia is a country that has the largest Muslim population in the world. They form about 88 percent of the whole of Indonesia's population (around 240 million people), whereas Christians (consisting of several denominations) make up about 8 percent of it.[8] Christianity and Islam have different doctrines of God that often traps them in a strained relationship. This doctrinal difference is one of the stumbling blocks for

---

[7] Cf. Magnis, "Bisakah Agama-agama," 56–57.

[8] It is an estimation based on the 2000 population census of Indonesia (which at that time was 206,264,595 people) with a birth rate 1.26 % per year. See the statistics of Indonesian population of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of Indonesia; cf. Stanley R. Rambitan. "Jesus in Islamic Context of Indonesia," *REC FOCUS*, Vol. 3, No. 2, June 2003, 38.

their relationship, which contributes to generating hatred toward one another. The doctrine of God in the Qur'ān is rigorously monotheistic: God is one and unique; He has no partner or equal. Trinitarianism, the Christian doctrine of God, which teaches that God consists of three persons of one substance, is vigorously repudiated. Islam, therefore, denies the Christian belief in the deity of Jesus Christ. From its perspective of *tawhid* (the doctrine of the oneness of God), Islam finds it is hard to understand Jesus as God. If he is God, then there is more than one God. It is contrary to the *tawhid*. For Muslims the doctrine of *tawhid*, which strongly affirms the oneness of God, is a major theological expression of faith in the divine unity. The Qur'ān explicitly states that God is transcendent and beyond the sense of perception: nothing is able to represent him (Surah Al-Shura 42:11), and no vision can grasp Him—although His grasp is over all vision, and He is above all comprehension (Surah Al-An'am 6:103).[9] The Qur'ān understands God as the exclusive and absolute being, who has no equal.[10] "He is Allah,[11] the One and Only; …. He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him" (Surah Al-Ichlas 112:1–4). This Surah states plainly that God has no son and that no son can be God—although in the Arabic language of the Qur'ān, 'son' does not mean only a direct male issue or descendant. "How can He have a son when He hath no consort …?" (Surah Al-An'am 6:101). There are many verses of the Qur'ān that directly and frankly state its objection to the heart of the Christian faith—that Jesus is divine and the Son of God. These verses suggest that imagining God as having a wife and making love with her would be absolute folly. Besides that, Islamic scripture, the Qur'ān, denies Christ as a divine savior for all humankind, and it states that he was just a prophet for Israelites.

---

[9] Adnan Aslan, "What is Wrong with the Concept of Religious Experience?", *Christian-Muslim Relationship*, Vol. 14, Number 3, July 2003, 303.

[10] Kenneth Cragg, *The Christ and the Faiths* (London: SPCK, 1986), 13–14.

[11] 'Allah' is an Arabic word which means '*the One True God*.' The word 'Allah' is used for God not only by all Muslims, but by all Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians in the Orient. See Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Muslim Doctrine of God* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), 19.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, Allah had been a supreme deity, but not the only one. In the Qur'ān, Allah is portrayed as the sole, unique God as in the basic Muslim statement of faith. His unity (*tawhid*) is stressed over the ultimate deviation of polytheism (*shirk*). Allah is omnipotent and dominant, but also compassionate. See Rosemary Goring (ed.), *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* (Hertfordshire: W & R Chambers, 1995), 16.

Facing this fact, there is a question: Should Indonesian Christians place emphasis on their doctrinal identity? To prevent misunderstanding that can ignite inter-religious conflict, especially with Muslims, perhaps it is more realistic if we make an extra effort to redefine our Christian identity relevant to our context.

Yearning for Affirming Christian Identity

As Christians, we seem to always long for a Christian identity marker: a sign that points to a person's status as a Christian.[12] Why do we have to affirm our identity? As said before, Christians in Indonesia live between two tensile strengths: globalization and plurality. Those two poles motivate Christians to affirm our identity. We, however, have to realize that our will to affirm our identity should not merely be 'feedback' or an instinctive reaction against these two poles. We should affirm our identity consciously so that our Christianity will not fade, but be able to play the role required to serve our global and pluralistic society. What is important is that we should know the essence of Christian identity, which is always expressed in accordance with its ages. Times always change, and likewise the situations we are facing. In this regard, what is important to change is not the essence of Christian identity, but the forms of its expressions, which are always transformed relevant to the ages. Indeed, Christians live in a dialectical dilemma. On the one hand, we do not exist suddenly apart from the faith traditions of the past and from the faith legacies we inherit. On the other hand, however, we may not be fixed in the enchantment of the past traditions and legacies because if we do so we would be living in their obsolescence and be marginalized by our age.

We have to realize that whatever religion is, it is clearly something central to our self-understanding as human beings. Religion is the heart of culture that constitutes a collection of mores, myths, and fundamental beliefs that holds people together and gives society a sense of coherence and identity. Every society needs a sense of tradition; a common understanding that is deeply rooted in the past and affirms that the past makes sense for the present and the future. All people

---

[12] Bryan Williams, "Identity Markers and Moral Action: Using Exemplar of Reconciliation Failures to Assist in the Creation/Evolution Controversy," http://www.warnerpacific.edu/personal/bwilliams/papers/identity.html.

inherit their past cultures, in which religions are the heart. We were born within a particular culture without any right to choose it, and to an extent, the same can be said for religion.[13] We are Christians because first of all we were born into our families that were Christian. One is Muslim because he or she was born into a family that was Muslim.

Although most people commit to the faith of their birth, this does not mean that religion that has sustained the community of faith for several hundreds of years cannot teach something that has universal significance. This fact gives them the possibility of changing their allegiance in order to be converted to a faith which they find, intellectually or emotionally, more satisfying. Nevertheless, there are many who grow up in a conscious commitment to the faith of their birth. If religion is more than a habit or a part of the socializing process by which we are integrated into our society, we have to affirm it for ourselves, find the source of its life, and repeat the spirit of the past in our lives. Only in that way is the past always alive. That is why it is said that religion is the heart of culture, even the heart of what people affirm to be true in an absolute sense.[14]

The problem is that we do not live in a religious homogeneity, but live amid religious plurality and diversity. The question is, then, how do we affirm our identity within this plurality and diversity? The problem of religious pluralism is the problem of 'the other,' the one who dresses differently, behaves differently, perhaps speaks a different language, and whose life seems to be guided by principles that are very different from our own.[15] In approaching this problem, it is necessary to affirm two principles: faithfulness to one's own belief and openness to others. One's religious attitude is, of course, based on a certain or particular perspective, i.e., his or her faith. However, it does not mean that one's identity must be static and exclusively closed in his religiosity. On the contrary, because of the awareness of his or her limited and dynamic identity, one is able to maintain a humble attitude that is open-handed in enriching and being enriched by his partner in dialogue. In this regard, a Christian is required to justify his faith within the togetherness with his neighbors of other faiths. That is the realization of a humble faith with integrity and openness. Integrity without openness inclines to

---

[13] Michael Barnes SJ, *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism* (London: SPCK, 1989), 3.

[14] Barnes, *Religions*, 2.

[15] Barnes, *Religions*, 3.

traditionalism and exclusivism. Openness without integrity cannot be justified because it heads for superficial opportunism.[16]

What is the relevance of Christianity in a pluralistic culture and religiosity? From the Christian side, this question should, of course, be answered according to the perspective of Christian faith. We believe that God loves the world and wants to save it. This has been fulfilled and realized through Jesus Christ, who presented the kingdom of God as the kingdom of love and peace. Christians are the receivers of salvation, who are not only the first receivers of the privilege God gave, but also sent by God as His envoy to bring this salvation to all people. From the Christian perspective, we carry out a task of mission to present God's love and peace for all humankind. This mission is exclusive in character, but the goal is inclusive because it includes all people in the world. Do we, in that way, have to deny that God also works outside the Christian faith? No! We cannot restrict God in the way He does His will. From the perspective of Christian faith, however, we believe that God has completed His salvivic act through Christ Jesus. This does not mean that there is no chance for God to reveal His truths through other faiths. Therefore, with our integrity of faith, we maintain an open mind to be enriched by other faiths through dialogical encounter with them. The other consequence is that we have to be respectful towards other faiths, and throw our prejudice against them away. This does not mean that we have to compromise our faith with other's as a syncretism, but to bring the inclusive Christian faith into life, in the same manner as God loves all mankind. We believe that Christians are summoned to present God's love and peace for all people and all faiths. This is our task amid cultural and religious plurality.

To meet our Muslim neighbors, particularly, we have to take special pains to minimize any doctrinal misunderstanding. We are summoned to show our Christian identity, which is different from what they suppose. Perhaps we do not stem from our doctrinal identity, but from the essence of Christianity which makes us Christians. As we know, formulation of the church's doctrine is an attempt to summarize principles of the Christian faith in order to deal with the contemporary challenges that are faced by the church. Times always change. The same goes for the challenges that Christians face from time to time. As a logical consequence, therefore, our doctrine also has to be open to change in

---

[16] B.J. Banawiratma, "Mengembangkan Teologi Agama-agama" ("Developing Theology of Religions"), Tim Balitbang PGI, *Meretas Jalan*, 41.

order to make it relevant to the reality that is at hand. We should try to demonstrate our Christian identity in such a way that we Christians are truly able to play our role as the peacemakers who are called to become a blessing for others. Seemingly, we cannot achieve it through any kind of doctrinaire formulation, but through practice of life as Christians. In that way, Muslims' hatred and prejudices towards Christians can be gradually reduced.

Identity Markers

Religion is often regarded as a divine instrument for knowing the world.[17] From a Christian perspective, however, according to Kaufman, there are four principal categories to understand reality: God, the world, the human being, and Christ. The first three categories also have an important place within Jewish and Muslim perspectives, but the fourth, Christ, is only found within the Christian perspective. In Christian tradition God is known as the ultimate source of everything, the basis of all realities, the Creator of the world, and the Lord of history. God is known as a person (*quasi-personal*), meaning that God is understood as being like a human person. The world is understood as God's creation, and a place in which the lives of human beings occur. Man is depicted as the 'image of God,' a creature who has self-consciousness and the capability to take responsibility for what he does. Christ is believed to be a historical figure who has revealed and defined, on the one hand, who God is, and, on the other hand, who the real man is. In that way, the historical Christ gives a concrete and specific character to the understanding of God and the human being. This figure has significantly formed the central symbols that define what are normative for orienting human existence in accordance with Christian understanding.[18]

So far, Christian identity often stresses the uniqueness and finality of the doctrine of Christology related to the salvation of human beings. That is a historical product of the development of Christianity. We

---

[17] Effendy, *Masyarakat Agama*, 183.
[18] Gordon D. Kaufman, "Kepelbagaian Agama, Kesadaran Historis dan Teologi Kristen" in John Hick and Paul Knitter (eds.), *Mitos Keunikan Agama Kristen* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 161–118; translated into Bahasa Indonesia from *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987) by Stephen Suleeman.

can review it at a glance. In the New Testament there are statements that are often referred to as supporting the concept of the uniqueness of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, whereas other statements that Jesus made concerning the adherents of other faith are regarded as the basis of Christian openness and inclusiveness. Paul's argument against the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem about the conditions that are required for salvation, such as circumcision and others, contributes to the separation of the Christian religion from Judaism. After avoiding Judaism, Christianity then encountered Greek philosophy (Hellenism). This encounter inspired the primitive church to reinterpret the gospel in accordance with categories of that philosophy. The challenge that came from Gnosticism caused the need to canonize the Christian scriptures (the Bible) and the formulation of various confessions or statements of the faith of Christianity. Gradually, consciousness of Christian identity, with its exclusive expressions, began to take shape. This process continued for hundreds of years because of the contributions of the early church fathers—Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen—and because of the influence of the Greek idea of Logos. This theological development came to a head in the controversy between Arius and Athanasius that concerned the nature of Christ and his relation to God the Father. Arius' view, which was regarded as heresy by the church, gave Christianity a chance to maintain an open mind in regard to other faiths. Conversely, Athanasius' view, which dominated the mainstream thought of those days, led Christian religion to be closed and exclusive by saying that Christ is the only incarnation of God and the only way to salvation. Christology became Christian identity for centuries.[19]

It is unavoidable that Christ is the heart of Christian identity, in the same manner as the designation 'Christian' derived from the name of Christ. From this perspective, all churches and Christian denominations are united in the same identity: faith in God who has revealed Himself and completed the salvivic work through Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, further interpretation and explanation of that faith varies—among other things, materializing in various doctrines that summarize the principles of Christian faith that are regarded as the core of truth. Among Christians, there are various opinions of Christian identity markers. From the brief history of the development of Christian doctrines above, it is clear

---

[19] Coward, *Pluralisme*, 84–85.

that every formulation of a confession was influenced by its contemporary thoughts, popular world-views which spread throughout society, and challenges that were faced at that time.

In the modern era, there is also no single opinion on Christian identity markers. Theologians, churches, and Christian denominations have their respective view of Christian identity. Most theologians and Christian denominations still firmly hold on to the exclusive legacy of the early church as it appeared in their living confession. Salvation through Christ as the only way is the fundamental Christian identity. Some evangelical church denominations give a strong emphasis to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which they regard as the prime identity of a Christian.

John Piper finds Christian identity in the first letter of Peter when the author is speaking about the church. He is briefly identifying Christians. This is who we are if we are Christians. This is how we acquired our identity as Christians. This is what we are here for as Christians.[20]

> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him Who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pe. 2:9–10).

Answering the question of who are we, Piper explains that the author of 1 Peter gives five ways of describing our identity. First, "you are a chosen race." This is a corporate identity because the author is talking about the church. Nevertheless, the implication is individual because this race is not racial. The chosen race is not black or white or red or brown. The chosen race is a new people from all the people—all the colors and cultures—who are now aliens and strangers in the world. Our identity is not color or culture, but chosenness. We have been chosen not on the basis of belonging to any group, but merely on the basis of God's grace. Second, "you are a royal priesthood." The point here is that we have immediate access to God. We do not need another human priest as a mediator. We have direct access to God through God himself, who provided the one Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. Second, we have an exalted and active role in God's presence. We are not chosen just to fritter our time away doing

---

[20] John Piper (April 17, 1994), "Desiring God" http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/94/041794.html.

nothing, but we are called to minister in the presence of God. All our life is priestly service. We are never out of God's presence, and never in a neutral zone. In that way we may proclaim the excellencies of God. Third, "you are a holy nation." We have been chosen by God; therefore, we are no longer merely part of the world. We are set apart for God and exist for God. And since God is holy, we must be holy. We share His character because He chose us. If we do not act in a holy way, we act out of character. We contradict our essence as Christians. Our identity is holiness to the Lord. Fourth, "you are a people of God, God's own possession." We are chosen by God to be His people—His own possession. This must mean something special. As God's possession, we are inheritors of the kingdom of God—the ones who He aims to spend eternity with. If we are God's people, His own possession, it means that God will dwell in us and walk among us. He will reveal Himself to us in personal relationship forever. Fifth, "but now you have received mercy." God has shown us pity. God saw us in our sin and guilt and condemnation, and He pitied us. He forgave our sins, helped our weakness, and saved us. God not only chose us, but also gave us His mercy.

In line with Piper, I want to say, in other words, that our fundamental identity as Christians is to be disciples of Christ. To be Christ's disciple means to obey everything Christ commanded (Mt. 28:19–20). The very first indication that someone is Christ's disciple is not his allegiance to a certain church's doctrine, but his fidelity to obey Christ's commands. As the letter of John states, "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his command. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is liar and the truth is not in him. … Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 Jn. 2:3, 4, and 6). And: "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one, who continues to sin, has either seen him or known him" (1 Jn. 3:6).

As Christ's disciple, we orient our life to him. He is our model. Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; our sensibleness and compassion should be the same as his, and we should do what he has done. Christian character should reflect the character of Christ. A Christian should meet his obligation to present Christ to everyone throughout one's whole life.

Implementation of Christian Identity

God loves the world, the entire world, so much. He does not manifest his love discriminatively. He is willing to save all human beings—without exception. His love is inclusive. God has realized His will in and through Jesus Christ, who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Php. 2:8). Love, modesty, and obedience to God became his identity, which distinguished him from his contemporary society. His attitude and life-style differed from that of his society. By performing God's will, he transformed his society's thought, world-view, and the culture of that time in order to fit them to God's standards. As Christ's disciples, we should imitate Christ, imitate his love, and imitate his obedience to God. He gave us a new commandment—that we love one another, and as he has loved us, so we should also love one to another. By this all men shall know that we are his disciples—if we have love one another (Jn. 13:34–35). Christ loves all people, so we should also love our fellowmen. Like God's love, Christ's love is also inclusive, and, therefore, our love should be inclusive.

Inclusive love as one of the Christian identities should be realized in the encounter with other faiths, especially with Islam. In this regard, we should try to abolish our prejudice toward them. We should humbly acknowledge that no one—Christian as well as Muslim and other non-Christian faiths—has absolute or final truth that is adequate for orienting people towards the problems of humanity in the Indonesia of today. Interfaith dialogical encounter is not just conversational gathering to obtain information about some points of view of Islam (and other faiths) that are different from ours, but a serious mutual interchange of truth for helping people—including us—find an orientation of life that is adequate for contemporary Indonesian society. Christians should attempt to build religious frameworks that can bring true guidance for finding true orientation of life.[21]

Christ's presence has brought 'Good News' to be extended to all people, wherever and whenever. As Christ's disciples, we should continue his mission, the mission of salvation. If we see others with the eyes of prejudice, the Good News we bring will be 'Bad News' instead. To proclaim Good News is not to Christianize others, but to present God's

---

[21] Kaufman, "Kepelbagaian Agama," 21–22.

love and peace to all people, to help whoever is in need, to comfort our fellow person who is having a bad time, to strengthen the weak, to side with the ignored, and so on. We may not exploit other's weaknesses and powerlessness for the sake of our own objectives. The love we give is true love—the love that makes one free and gives others the freedom to choose and make up their own minds.[22]

As Christ's disciples, we should imitate his obedience to God the Father that he realized by performing the will of God—who wished for truth, justice, peace, honesty, and holiness of life. Those all have to be implemented concretely throughout Christians' lives. We may not ignore the problems of humanity that are faced by our society. Where there is corruption, Christians have to lead the way to root it out. Where there is abuse of law, we have to show our obedience to God and voice the prophetic messages. Where there is injustice, we try to uphold the law. Christians should prevent and even resist moral and ethical decadence and try to demonstrate the holiness of God through our lives. In that way the church and every Christian really function as the bringer of the Good News.

As Christ transformed thinking within his contemporary society—its worldview and culture—Christians also carry out a task to reform and order our chaotic life. Traditions, ways of life, behaviors, and cultural legacies that are not in line with God's will must be corrected under the commandments of God.

Conclusion

Every effort to affirm religious identity should avoid the assumption that teachings from various religions differ from and contradict one another. On the contrary, we have to begin with the assumption that there are many differences among religions, but there are also many similarities among them that can become points of encounter in their diversity. In that way, the effort to affirm identity does not necessarily cause the rise of narrow-minded exclusivism and the exclusion of others, but maintains an open mind towards inclusiveness and universality. It should be acknowledged that in every religion there are specific and

---

[22] A.A. Yewangoe, "Sikap Gereja di Tengah-tengah Masyarakat Non-Kristen" ("The Church's Attitude amidst non-Christian Society"), *Berita Oikumene* (Ecumenical News), April 2005, 5.

particular things, but at the same time there are also many common and universal things.[23] Inclusivism represents an alternative theology that shows a significant shift of perspective: recognizing the other not just as individual, but also as a person who participates in a collective religious identity.[24]

Christian identity is naturally always dialectical. On the one hand, Christians inherit a certain legacy of the past, but, on the other hand, they should live in the present time with its different context and challenges. The problems and challenges that they face vary, and responses to them also vary. Therefore, Christian identity always needs to be reformulated relevant to the contemporary challenges they are facing. From this point of view, we realize that Christian identity, or—at least—its expression, is not uniform, but multiform. There is no single and final identity. However, those all empty into the same estuary—Christ. Nevertheless, interpretation and expression of the faith in him remain various. It is not necessary that discipleship identity, an option I propose here, be valid universally for all Christians everywhere, but in accordance with challenges we face within the context of Indonesia. Eventually, we have to realize that every effort to affirm Christian identity is a never ending process.

---

[23] E. Gerrit Singgih, "Hidup Kristiani dalam Masyarakat Keagamaan yang Majemuk" ("Christian Life within a Pluralistic Religious-Society") in Tim Balitbang PGI, *Meretas Jalan*, 103; cf. Effendy, *Masyarakat Agama*, 23.

[24] Barnes, *Religions*, 45–46.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE KOREAN CONTEXT

Seung-Goo Lee

By Way of Introduction

In this paper I want to briefly introduce the Korean church—her past, present, and future—with special reference to her efforts to maintain Christian identity in this troubled world. It was, in a sense, somewhat easy to maintain Christian identity when the Korean church was really (in every sense of the word) the small flock of Jesus Christ, although it was physically hard to do so. It becomes, however, difficult to hold onto Christian identity when there are so many different kinds of Christians in secular society. Today even the term 'Christian identity' becomes a matter of debate.[1] What do I mean by this? In order to answer this question, let us go back more than 120 years ago. I hope your voyage through time with me will not be boring, but an interesting and heuristic experience that can give us some clues to solve the problem of 'Christian identity in this global and pluralistic world.'

It was slightly more than 120 years ago that the first gospel missionaries came to Korea. Henry G. Appenzeller, the first Methodist missionary to Korea, and Horace G. Underwood, the first Presbyterian missionary to Korea, simultaneously stepped on Korean soil at Jaemulpo (In-cheon port) on Easter Sunday, 1885. Horace N. Allen, a medical missionary who belonged to the Northern Presbyterian Church of USA, had arrived in Korea on September 20, 1884.[2] There were several

---

[1] Some Korean theologians try to find Christian identity either in Minjung theology or a typically Korean theology in order to achieve the salvation of Korean society as a whole. Cf. Bung-Moo Ahn, "A Search for an Image of the Korean Christian," *History and Minjung*, published in Korean (Seoul: Han Gil Sa, 1993), 352; Ki-deuk Song, "The Task, History and the Future of the Korean Theology," *Theology and the Front*, vol. 2, published in Korean (Daejeon: Institute of Theology, Mokwon University, 1992), 80–81. The difference between them and my own concept of Christian identity will be clearer in the process of argument in this paper.

[2] In 1866 Rev. Robert Jermain Thomas, a Welshman, came to Korea as a guide of the American commercial ship named the *General Sherman*. It is said that he gave a Chinese Bible to Korean soldiers before he was killed for coming to Korea without

Korean Christians, however, before these missionaries came to Korea. These were people who read and were deeply interested in the scriptures, which had been translated into the Korean language. There were two versions of the Korean Bible that were translated into Korean even before missionaries came to Korea.

One version of the Bible was translated by the Rev. John Ross, a Scottish missionary, who was stationed at Manchuria, China. Because he published a *Corean Primer* in 1877,[3] we can see what his relationship with Koreans had been before that time. The Rev. Ross met Mr. Ung-chan Lee, a young, Korean man in 1874.[4] The Koreans who helped the Rev. Ross with his Korean and Bible translation were Mr. Ung-chan Lee, Mr. Jin-kee Kim, Mr. Hong-joon Paik, and Mr. San-yoon Suh. It is said that four Koreans, including Mr. Ung-chan Lee and Mr. Hong-joon Paik, had already been baptized on 1879 by Rev. John MacIntyre.[5] Mr. Chung-song Kim, a printer, was baptized in May 1882 as the fifth baptized Korean—after he had printed the Korean translation of the Gospel of Luke.[6] 3,000 copies of the Gospel of Luke, translated by the Rev. John Ross, were printed on March 1882, and the Gospel of John was printed on May 1882 at Sim-yang, China. The afore-mentioned Mr. Chung-song Kim distributed copies of the gospels to the Koreans. It is said that three learned men came to Sim-yang to ask the Rev. John Ross serious questions about Christianity after reading the gospels distributed by Mr. Chung-song Kim. The Rev. John Ross came to a Korean village near Zip-ahn to baptize 75 people during the winter of 1884 after a journey of 600 miles under hard temperatures of up to 40 degrees below zero centigrade.[7] It is certain that there were 20 candidates to be baptized in So-rae near Seoul by March 1885, one

permission from the authorities. But there was no direct contact between him and Koreans.

[3] Most information in this part comes from Mahn Yol Yi, *Special Lectures on Korean Church History*, Korean Edition (Seoul: Evangelical Student Fellowship Press, 1987).

[4] The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, published in Korean (Seoul: The Christian Literature Press, 1989), 145, 146.

[5] John Ross, "Manchuria Mission," *The United Presbyterian Missionary Record* (Oct., 1, 1880), 333–334, cited in *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 145–146.

[6] The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 150.

[7] J. Webster, "Journey to the Corean Valleys," *United Presbyterian Missionary Record* (Oct., 1885), 321–326; J. Ross, "Corean Converts," *The Missionary Review* (May 1885), 207–209, cited in The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 153.

month before 'gospel missionaries' came to Korea.[8] The whole New Testament was translated and 3,000 copies were printed under the title of *The Complete Holy Teaching of Jesus* in 1887.

The other Korean Bible was translated by Mr. Soo-jung Lee, a lay Korean Christian who converted to Christianity and was baptized on April 29, 1883, by the Rev. George W. Knox, an American, Presbyterian missionary in Japan.[9] After finishing a Chinese-Korean translation of the New Testament in 1883, Mr. Lee translated the Gospel of Mark into Korean by 1884. Six thousand copies of the Gospel of Mark were printed in 1885.[10] When Underwood came to Korea, he brought the copies of the Korean Gospel of Mark with him. In this way Korean Christianity started even before the first missionaries came to Korea. From the first, Korean Christianity was 'Bible Christianity,' and Korean Christians were 'Bible-loving Christians.'[11]

The Past

In the past, Korean Christians had a very clear identity as 'Bible lovers.' In a religiously pluralistic situation where some people were Buddhists,

---

[8] Cf. Mahn Yol Yi, "The Growth of the Korean Church and its Causes" (a paper written in Korean in his website, accessed on 25 June, 2005, available at: http://user.chollian.net/~ikcho102/y-2–1.htm). In this paper he is citing several sentences from Rev. John Ross' letter to British and Foreign Bible Society written in March 1885. See also The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 155 f.

[9] G.W. Knox, "Affairs in Corea," *The Foreign Missionary* (June 1883), 17, cited in The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 157. Yung-Hun Lee (in his book *The History of the Korean Church*, Korean Edition [Seoul: Concordia Press, 1989], 66) says that Mr. Soo-jung Lee was baptized by a Japanese minister named Yasgawa Do-o-roo. Yung-Jae Kim also has the same opinion of this problem. See his *A History of the Korean Church*, a Korean edition of his Dr. Theol. Dissertation, *Der Protestantismus in Korea und die calvinistische Tradition* (Seoul, The Korea Society for Reformed Faith and Action, 1992), 66. By the end of 1883 there were 7–8 baptized Koreans in Tokyo, so they gathered together for Bible study and to worship the triune God on every Sunday. Cf. *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 159 f.

[10] The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 163 f.

[11] Mahn Yol Yi, the head and the principal historian of the Korean national history, is the one who found such expressions from many mission reports of the missionaries and identifies Korean Christianity as "Bible Christianity" or "Biblical Christianity." See his "The Growth of the Korean Church and its Causes" (a paper written in Korean in his website), acceded on 25th June, 2005, available at: http://user.chollian.net/~ikcho102/y-2–1.htm.

some were Taoists, some were Confucians, and some were Shaman-
ists, Korean Christians had a very vivid and self-conscious identity as
people who believe in and only worship the Triune God who had
revealed Himself as such in the Bible. Such an identity was formed
at the very beginning when they became Christians because they had
been people who believed and worshiped other gods before they con-
verted to Christianity. They had been very religious even before they
became Christians, but they did not find a real satisfaction in their
spirit when they were in these other religions. They found the real God
in the scriptures, and, as a result, they also found the real meaning
of their life and the whole world in the biblical teaching of creation
and redemption. Therefore, they abandoned their formerly treasured
life and world-view after becoming Christians. They had tried to be
good people with the help of other great religions, and even with other
minor religions, before they became Christians. When they met Christ,
however, they abandoned their previously treasured religious views and
religious activities.

Some of them had been Buddhists for a long time before they
became Christians. As Buddhists, some of them tried to become a Bud-
dha (an Enlightened One) through various Buddhist methods, includ-
ing meditation (sometimes mentioned as Zen), reading and thinking
through the meaning of the Buddhist scriptures, practicing mercy to
other people, and other sentinent beings (helping people with a whole
and loving heart), or postrating 3,000 times in front of the statue of the
Buddha. Some of these Buddhists, however, were not conscious enough
to try to be Buddhas by themselves. They just wanted to have a good
life in this world and in the life after this life with the help of Gau-
thama Sithartha, the one who had become Buddha (the Enlightened
One) through his own meditation. Sometimes these Buddhists prayed
to the future Buddha (Amitāyus Buddha), who was supposed to come
and save this world in the future. They wanted to be totally committed
to the future Buddha and to be protected and blessed by Him in this life
and the life to come. They were generally good people and tried to be
good in order to have a better life in the next incarnate life time or to
be a Buddha, who is outside of such an eternal recycle of life, through
the true understanding of the real meaning of life as 'nothingness.'

But these Buddhists, after meeting the Christ in the Bible, found that
what they were doing was in vain. Some of them thought that what
they were doing as Buddhists was similar to what the Jews were doing
with their law before they met Christ. These teachings did the work of

a tutor who brought the Israelites to Jesus Christ. In the same way their Buddhist religious life worked in the role of a tutor who brought them to Christ, who is the real liberator, and the one who brought them true enlightenment and true liberation that they tried and failed to find in Buddhism. These Christians, converted from Buddhism, however, did not think that their Buddhist religious lives were a kind of preparation for becoming Christians. In order to become a Christian it was not necessary to be a Buddhist or a member of any other religion. One can become a Christian without being religious in any sense of the word. Some non-religious people became Christians after meeting the Christ preached by a street preacher or his/her friend. It is only through the grace of God that one becomes a Christian.

Many Korean Christians had been Shamanists before they became Christians. Shamanists were religious in their own way. Their religious life was centered around the shaman, who was regarded as a mediator between the divine and mundane world. "Knowledge of other realms of being and consciousness and the cosmology of those regions is the basis of the shamanistic perspective and power. With this knowledge, the shaman is able to serve as a bridge between the mundane and the higher and lower states."[12] The shaman, as Mircea Eliade said, had "access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community."[13] Everything in this mundane world was connected with divine beings. If one did something wrong, especially in relation to the divine beings that are closely connected with everyday life, these divine beings might be angry against that individual. In such a case, one could be sick, meet a bad future, or even be killed. In order to escape from such a bad situation, one would go to the shaman who would go through a ritual to get a pardon from the related divine being. Hence the place and time of the ritual were regarded as the most sacred place and time. The shaman was also regarded as sacred. In Shamanism the sacred person, sacred place, and sacred time were very important. These should not be contaminated in any way. If these were contaminated, then the ritual had no effect. Hence people did their best to keep these persons, places, and times sacred. Everyone had to be very careful. These persons, places, and times were different from other people, other places, and other times. Here comes the separation

---

[12] Cited in "Shamanism General Overview," accessed on 21st June, 2005, available at: http://deoxy.org/shaover.htm#2.

[13] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 7.

between the sacred and the mundane (the profane). This separation
is fundamental to the shaministic world-view. Everyday life is not so
important when compared with sacred times, rituals, and places.

When people with a shamanistic background became Christians,
they abandoned their previous shaman, their previous shamanistic ritu-
als, and their previous sacred times and places. They secularized (in the
good sense of the word) their previously sacred things. They came to
recognize the fact that everything in this world and the world to come
is the creation of the Triune God. Without creation by the Triune God,
there would be no world. Only the Triune God is sacred; everything
except this Triune God is secular. At the same time, in relation to this
Triune God everything can be sacred. There would be no intrinsic sep-
aration between the sacred and the secular. Everything except God is
secular; and anything can be sacred in relation to this Triune God.

For Christians with a shamanistic background, it is very easy to have
some shamanistic misunderstandings of Christianity. Hence, sometimes
Korean Christians have shamanistic ideas in their attitude towards
Christian practices and pastors. Sometimes the pastor of a church
becomes a kind of shaman through whom God gives all blessings. In
this regard, the benediction was regarded as a very important element
of the worship service. As a result, everyday life became unimportant
for such shamanistic Christians. What was important for them was
the religious life in *sensu strict*, e.g., prayer, worship service, fasting, etc.
Shamanistic Christians were very energetic in their prayer and very
sincere in their worship service. Their main aim in doing these things,
however, was to receive worldly blessings in this life and in the life after
death. They were eager to receive a blessing of healing from their dis-
eases by energetically praying to God the Almighty. Religious experi-
ence was very important for such Christians. Sometimes such expe-
riences were more important than the teaching of the Bible. In gen-
eral, they were rather happy with biblical accounts of healing and mir-
acles. It is true, therefore, that there were some shamanistic distortions
of Christianity in Korea where shamanistic ideas colored almost every
aspect of life. One of the most important tasks for the Korean church
and for Korean theology was to overcome such shamanistic influences
on Christianity. There are signs of clearing away these influences in
some sectors of the Korean church. This task has not yet been com-
pletely accomplished.

Some Koreans were Taoists before they became Christians, even
though the percentages of such people were rather low. For example,

the Rev. Sun-Joo Kil (1869–1935), one of the first Presbyterian ministers (1907) and a famous revivalist, had tried to be a powerful man through Taoism for almost four years before he believed in Jesus Christ.[14] One of the aims of Taoism is to become a divine being who can do miraculous things and live in harmony with nature outside this complicated and difficult life. Taoism can be easily mixed with mysticism. Many heretical teachings in the early Korean church came as a result of the combination of Christian ideas and Taoist ideas. For these heretical people, Jesus Christ appeared as a kind of divine being in the Taoist sense, and they tried to imitate such a Christ. John 1:1 has been used wrongly in this circle because the word 'Logos' was translated as 'Tao' in some early versions of the Korean Bible.

Sincere Christians have abandoned their previous attempts to become divine beings by their own effort because for they have realized the absolute difference between the God of the scriptures and human beings. Their understanding of human sinfulness and the need for atonement makes them realize that they cannot be divine beings by their own efforts. For true Christians there was a clear discontinuity and a clear difference between Taoism and Christianity. It was an either/or situation for them.

Most Koreans who lived 120 years ago were the followers of Confucius in some sense of the word. It is difficult to say exactly whether Confucianism is a religion or not. It is more likely a system of ideas (ideology) through which one interprets the world and life as a whole, and by which one lives. It is a way of life. It controls one's ideas, ethics, society as a whole, and education. It has its own metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social philosophy, and its own understanding of aesthetics. Hence, Confucianism is a kind of philosophy and also a social system by which every aspect of life is controlled. Sometimes, however, it looks like a religion where piety can be found. Actually 'piety' is a very important concept in Confucianism.

---

[14] Cf. Yung Hun Lee, *The History of the Korean Church*, 121. The Rev. Sun-joo Kil was regarded as one of the best preachers and evangelists that the Korean church had produced. Cf. Arthur Judson Brown, *One Hundred Years: A History of the Foreign Missionary Work of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. with Some Account of Countries, Peoples and the Politics and Problems of Modern Missions* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1936), 436, cited in Yong-Kyu Park, *Korean Protestantism and Biblical Authority: A History of Presbyterian Theological Thought in Korea*, Korean Translation of his Ph.D. Dissertation written at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School under the supervison of Kenneth S. Kantzer and John D. Woodbridge (Seoul: Chongshin Publishing House, 1992), 248.

Until 60 years ago, society in Korea from the 14th century (Yi-dynasty [1392–1910] and the Japanese Imperialistic Colonial Period [1910–1945) had been controlled by Confucianistic ideas. Some Confucianistic ideas are still living in the Korean society. Hence, 120 years ago virtually everyone in Korean society was Confucianist, since it controlled every aspect of his or her life. Even most Buddhists, Taoists, and Shamanists were Conficianists in one sense of the word. For most of them it was easy to combine Confucian ideas with their own religions. Basically, the Yi-dynasty had a policy of honoring Confucianism and despising Buddhism; yet in the life of ordinary people, it was common to practice Buddhism and Confucianism at the same time. Even some high-ranking officials, who were the most learned Confucianists, were Buddhists as well. Occasionally, princes became Buddhist monks after abandoning their crowns. In this way, Confucianism as a kind of ideology easily went along with Buddhism as a religion.

According to Confucianism, respect for one's parents is very important. Such respect for one's parents should be continued even after the parents are dead. One's respect for one's parents includes not only one's direct parents, but also the parents of the parents. So it goes to the original parents of one's family, hence comes ancestor worship or ancestral rites. One way of showing respect for one's parents when their parents were dead was by practicing various ancestral rites. Such rituals are called 'sacrifices.' It is supposed that when one is dead, one's soul becomes a divine soul, and one's body became a kind of spirit material. When sacrifices are offered to one's ancestors, the divine soul of the ancestors and the spirit material of the ancestors are supposed to come and receive the sacrifice in a spiritual way. After offering sacrifices to one's dead parents and ancestors, the meals that are supposed to be eaten by the spirits of the ancestors are shared by the descendents who have attended these sacrifices. In this way the ritual of offering sacrifices to the ancestors is very important for those who are in the Confucianistic system because it is the occasion by which the spirits of the ancestors receive honor from their descendents, and it is a time when all the members of the family gather together with each other to show a pietistic respect for their ancestors. Because of this ancestor worship system, Confucianism is regarded as a religion. One hundred twenty years ago, most Koreans thought that in the sacrifices to their ancestors the departed and divinized souls of their ancestors came to receive the sacrifice and to bless their descendents who were offering such sacrifice. Therefore, sacrifices to their ancestors were vital elements of the life of those Koreans.

Naturally when one converts to Christianity, it means that one should not worship these divinized souls of one's ancestor. One now decides to serve and worship only the Triune God. There are no other divine beings for this converted one. Hence, the converted Christian ceases to offer sacrifices to their ancestors. It meant much suffering for that one. But the converted Christian was not ashamed of the gospel of the kingdom, and he/she even risked his/her life. Many Christians were cast out of their families, but they were pleased to be 'considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name' of Christ. Sometimes they had to abandon family ties, but they still loved their family and prayed for members of their family, so that those who had cast them out should also become Christians and worship only the Triune God. From such suffering the identity of Christianity and of Christians formed in the Korean church and Korean society. The Christian is the one who believes and does only what is commanded in the Bible. The Bible is the soul and the center of Korean Christianity. The Christian worships only the Triune God, according to the teaching of the Bible. There are no other gods besides the Triune God of the Bible.

The demand of the Japanese colonial government to pay homage to the gods at the Japanese Shinto shrine was the climatic event that either proclaimed or showed an abandonment of the Christian identity of Korean Christians. When Japan colonized Korea in 1910, most Koreans, including many Christian, deeply felt that it was unjust to colonize another sovereign country and to disregard the will of the people. Korean Christians "groaned under their slavery, and cried out to God,"[15] who sovereignly rules all over the world to deliver them from the Japanese slavery[16] until they were finally liberated from Japanese colonial rule on 15th August, 1945. One of the most desperate reasons for their crying for help to God on the part of Korean Christians was the demand of the Japanese colonial government to pay homage to the deities at the Shinto shrine, especially the Japanese god who, according to their belief, created Japan. Christians should not pay homage to other gods; therefore they refused to attend the service at the Shinto shrine.[17] Especially after 1930, when Japanese colonial govern-

---

[15] Cf. Ex. 2:23.

[16] Cf. Pong Bae-Park, "The Encounter of Christianity with Traditional Culture and Ethics in Korea" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1970), 191, cited in Yung Jae Kim, 174.

[17] Cf. Kun Sam Lee, *The Christian Confrontation with Shinto Nationalism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966). See also Bruce F. Hunt, an

ment placed more emphasis on the attendance at the Shinto shrines,[18] many Korean Christians were tortured; they suffered mockings, and even imprisonment. Sometimes they had to escape, so they were destitute and persecuted; they wandered in mountains and in caves and holes in the ground, or they had to go to foreign countries. They had to keep their Christian identity: they could not compromise the cause of Christ. For those Korean Christians, worshiping only the Triune God was more important than protecting their lives.

It is true that in that period many Christians were not faithful to this principle of worshipping only the Triune God. The Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Korea, for example, did not worry too much about the seriousness of this problem. They regarded attendance at the Shinto service not to be a religious matter, but rather a national matter.[19] Many Presbyterians also followed them. Hence many of them paid homage to the deities of the Japanese Shinto shrines

---

American missionary who became Korean more than Koreans, was one of the good witnesses of all of these matters. See Hunt, "Modern Martyrs," *The Presbyterian Guardian* 9 (March 1941): 69; idem, "Growing Work Amid Persecution," *The Presbyterian Guardian* 9 (September 1941): 67–68; idem, "Trials Within and Without," *The Presbyterian Guardian* 29 (Feb., 1960): 37–40; idem, *For a Testimony* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1966); idem, *The Korean Pentecost and the Sufferings which Followed* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1977).

[18] When the Japanese colonial government demanded the compulsory attendance at the service of Shinto shrines for every member of the mission schools at Pyung-yang in 1935, G.S. McCune, the principal of the Soong-sil College—after refusing to worship idols—was expelled from his position on 20th April 1936 and finally banished from Korea to the USA. Cf. Kyung-Bae Min, *Church History of Korea*, Revised Korean Edition (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1973), 344–345. See also Harvie Conn, "Studies in the Theology of the Korean Presbyterian Church," *Westminster Theological Journal* 29–30 (1966–1967), Korean Edition (Seoul: Siloam, 1988), 76 f.; and Yung-Jae Kim, 204.

[19] Min, 345. Mahn Yol Yi, *Special Lectures on the Korean Church History*, 193 f. See also Sung Chun Chun, "Schism and Unity in the Protestant Church in Korea" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University 1955), 175; and Young-Jae Kim, 207 f. See again William Paton and M.M. Underhill, "The Shinto Shrines: A Problem Confronting the Church," *International Review of Missions* 29 (1940): 312 f., cited in Yong-Kyu Park, *Korean Protestantism and Biblical Authority*, 280. Seong-Bum Yun, one of the Principals of the Methodist Theological College, also said in his Dr. Theol. dissertation that "this is a national matter; this is not a religious matter." ("Der Protestantismus in Korea, 1930–1955," in *Die korianishe Kirche in Geschichte und Gegenwart* [Basel, 1955], 45, cited in Yung-Jae Kim, 207, n. 33. Some leaders of the Methodist Church were eager to help the Japanese colonial government to corporate Japan and Korea by abandoning Korean characteristics (e.g., Korean language, Korean family names, and Korean customs) from the Koreans. See Min, 345. But there were Methodist martyrs who kept their faith until death. Young-Han Lee is one of the representative Methodist martyrs.

under a kind of martial law that demanded compulsory attendance at the rituals of Shinto shrines. Many of them returned to their homes and their church buildings with a repentant heart and tearful eyes. Some of them, however, tried to rationalize their acts; others thought that it was inevitable for them to keep their church safe; some of them thought that it had nothing to do with their Christian faith. On 10th September, 1938, the 27th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met at Outside West-gate Church at Pyung-yang and passed a motion stating that paying homage at the Shinto shrines had nothing to do with one's faith. This act was said to be necessary for members of a nation to do to show support for their nation. Even though it was done under the martial supervision of 100 Japanese policemen,[20] such a decision was disastrous and had a far-reaching influence on the history of the Korean church. Many Christians resisted the decision of the General Assembly. Many of them were imprisoned, tortured, and even killed by the Japanese rulers. There were many martyrs and many more 'living martyrs.'[21] Those of the Pyung-yang Presbyterian Theological Seminary refused to attend Shinto services, and, as a result, the seminary could not open the second semester of 1938.[22]

After liberation from Japanese imperialistic rule, the Korean church suffered from division due to the apostasy during the colonial years. Some tried to rationalize their act of apostasy, while others were too harsh against those who failed during those difficult times. In some cases, the virtue of suffering under the persecuting rulers had become merit by which one was superior to others. In this way, the Korean church almost lost her true identity of being Christ's small flock, sustained only by the grace of God. The Christian identity of the Korean

---

[20] Yung-Jae Kim, 212.

[21] It is said that 200 churches were closed, 2,000 Christians were imprisoned, and more than 50 ministers were killed by the Japanese colonial government. S.A. Moffett, *The Christians of Korea* (New York: Friendship Press, 1962), 75, cited in Min, 350. See also Mahn Yol Yi, *Special Lectures on the Korean Church History*, 189; and The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. II, published in Korean (Seoul: The Christian Literature Press, 1990), 337f. But the suffering that Korean Christians had to suffer was even more widespread. For example, the Korean Baptist Church was closed on May 10, 1944 and the Holiness Church was closed on 29th December 1943. cf. Min, 352. On 19th July, 1945, every church in Korea was incorporated into the 'Korean Branch of Japanese Christianity.' Cf. Min, 359; Conn, 88; and The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. II, 309.

[22] Yung Hun Lee, 206. Conn, 90. This seminary reopened on 18th September 1951 at Daegu because of the Korean War. Yung Hun Lee, 206; Yung Jae Kim, 255.

church comes from our suffering for the sake of the gospel, and from our determination to be faithful to our faithful God who had sustained the Korean church even in the furnace of the Japanese imperialistic iron rule that tried to get rid of all Korean elements (Korean family-names, Korean nationality, Korean language, and Korean culture) and even the church. It was only God who sustained Christian identity during these hard times, so that we could be the people of the kingdom of God.

The Present

Because of God's grace, the Korean church has grown during the last fifty years. After liberation from Japan, most Koreans (including non-Christians) thank God for giving us this liberation. Many of them became Christians, so that their thanks to God is more appropriate. It is said that now almost 20 % of Koreans are Christians. In recent research conducted by the Korean Gallup Poll in 2004, it is stated that Protestants are 21.7 % of the population, Buddhists are 24.4 %, Roman Catholics are 7 %, other religions are 0.9 %, and non-religious people are 47 %.[23] The Korean church is one of the largest religious groups in Korea. There are a number of things that the Korean church should do for the kingdom of God: (1) to evangelize more than 70 % of our population who are not yet converted to Christ; (2) to try to be genuine Christians on the part of those who confess the Christian faith; and (3) to develop and show the Christian culture, thereby influencing our Korean society as a whole with Christian elements. The Korean church—who should do her best in relation to these things—however, now has two different problems in relation to the question of Christian identity. These two problems are, it seems to me, two different symptoms of secularization.

Many fast growing mega-churches in the major cities of Korea have problems with cultural adjustment. They have become secularized in relation to their culture—either traditional or recent culture.

Some churches have a problem of becoming shamanistic churches, though they have replaced the traditional shamans with Christian pastors, and they have changed the traditional shamanistic rituals into

---

[23] Cf. http://christiantoday.co.kr/news/sn_6242.htm, accessed on 26th December, 2006.

Christian worship service and prayer meetings. For them, the ultimate aim of becoming and being a Christian is to receive blessings in this world and in the life after death. Those who belong to such shamanistic churches want secular blessings as well as spiritual blessings. One of the most cherished verses among these Christians is 3 John verse 2: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul." The so-called three-beat blessing theory is drawn from this verse; (1) spiritual blessing, (2) material blessing, and (3) blessing in relation to their health. The theology of prosperity also provides support for such an understanding of being a Christian. We cannot deny that these people are Christians, but we have to ask the question whether it is good for the health of the church to have and be satisfied with such an understanding of being a Christian. Here comes the question of identity. These people have secularized their religious faith in relation to our traditional shamanistic culture.

Other mega-churches in major cities have problems adjusting to the modern and post-modern cultural environment that today Korean society has as a whole. These mega-churches usually have very beautiful church buildings where their church members hold very modern or post-modern religious meetings. Their life is quite similar to other city dwellers. The only difference is that they have Christianity as their religion. Just like many American evangelical Christians, who are quite comfortable with their bourgeoisie lifestyle. Today many Christians in Korea are good citizens, who are quite comfortable with their decent neighborhoods. They are also quite interested in a good education for their children and the well-being of their life. They are, however, not interested in suffering for the sake of the gospel of the kingdom, although they usually give generous offerings at their worship services. Sometimes they participate in donations for the poor and for those who experience disasters. Moderation is the catch phrase of their life. As far as their theology is concerned, they are quite evangelical, but they usually do not care too much about theology. These churches have become secularized in relation to recent culture.

The other problem that the Korean church faces is the problem of losing their identity in relation to theology.

Some churches lose their identity because they are too interested in church growth. They will use almost any method that they see as useful for the growth of the church. In such circles, church growth means only quantitative growth: growth in the numbers of members in the

church, growth of the size of the offering, growth of the size of the
church building, and growth of the visible works done by the church.
It is assumed that qualitative growth will naturally follow from quan-
titative growth. These mega-churches have good buildings and good
manpower; they usually have a good Sunday school system, good Sun-
day school teachers, good programs, ample space, and many students.
So many people are attracted to these growing churches. In relation to
these mega-churches, denominations have little meaning. Their wor-
ship services have little to do with their denominational traditions.
Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist does not mean anything to these
churches. There is an identity crisis. Only basic evangelical teachings
are important to these churches. Presbyterian catechetical teaching has
lost its meaning in the Presbyterian mega-churches. People usually do
not care too much about denominations.

   At the same time, the influence of religious pluralism and other crit-
ical attitudes are also growing in the Korean church. Since 1970 many
theologians who were educated in the West have taught religious plu-
ralism. At first they said that there were elements of truth in other reli-
gions, especially our traditional religions. For example, Prof. Dr. Seong-
Bum Yun tried to relate the Christian understanding of the Trinity
to three divine beings in the Korean creation myth (Hwan-in, Hwan-
woong, and Hwan-Kum).[24] He also connected the Christian, especially
Barthian, understanding of the Incarnation to the Confucian concept
of faithfulness and 'piety.'[25] Prof. Sun Whan Pyun (1927–1994) tried to
relate the concept of Messiah to the future Buddha (Amitāyus Bud-
dha). Since 1980 many religiously pluralistic theologians have translated
books by religious pluralists.[26] Today religiously pluralistic ideas are

---

[24] Seong-Bum Yun, "Hwan-In, Hwan-Woong, and Hwan-gun is the God," pub-
lished in Korean, *Thought World* (May 1963): 264–265, 270; idem, "The Myth of Dan-
goon is *Vestigium Trinitatis*," *Christian Thought* (Korean Journal) (October, 1963), 14 ff.;
idem, *Christianity and Korean Thought*, Korean Edition (Seoul: The Christian Literature
Press, 1964), 60 ff.

[25] Sung-Bum Yoon, *Korean Theology: A Theology of Sung*, published in Korean (Seoul:
Sun-Myung Moon Hwa Sa, 1972), 11–32. For an analysis of this Sung theology written
in English, see Choong-Goo Park, "Social and Political Thought in Two Contemporary
Korean Theologies: A Comparative Study of Sung Theology and Minjung Theology"
(Ph.D. Diss., Drew University 1991).

[26] Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitude toward the World
Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), translated by Sun-Whan Pyun (Seoul: The
Korea Theological Study Institute, 1986). John Hick, *God has Many Names* (Philadelphia:
The Westminster Press, 1982), translated by Chan-Su Yi (Seoul: Chang, 1991).

spreading into the Korean church and into Korean society as a whole.[27] Prof. Dr. Kyoung-Jae Kim, Prof. of Han-sin University, is now one of the representative religious pluralists.[28] Under his influence some Christian churches and Han-sin Theological Seminary displayed a placard of congratulations on the occasion of the celebration of the birth of the Buddha that is annually celebrated on 8th April, according to the lunar calendar.[29] Some Buddhist temples, on their part, displayed a placard of congratulations during Christmas. These placards may be a mere gesture of mutual recognition in one society. Sometimes, however, these placards mean much more than mere recognition. According to the thought of religious pluralists, one can be saved either through Jesus, through being a Buddha by oneself, or by any other religious or non religious way. Being a Christian or being a Buddhist is important to each of them, but for these religious pluralists what is more important is being religious and ethical. As long as one lives a saintly life, it does not matter what kind of religion one has. Recently, one professor of religion named Hee-Sung Gil published a book entitled *Bosal Jesus*.[30]

---

[27] See the following Korean books and translations: Sung-Do Kang, *Religious Pluralism and Salvation* (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1996); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, translated by Kang Nam Oh (Seoul: Han Min Sa, 1997); In-Chul Han, *The Types of Religious Pluralism* (Seoul: Institute of Korean Christianity, 2001); Kang-Nam Oh, *There is No Jesus* (Seoul: Hyun Am Sa, 2001); idem, *One Question that Jesus does not Want to Face: A Dialogue for an Open Religion* (Seoul: Hyun Am Sa, 2002); idem, *A Survey of Great Religions of the World* (Seoul: Hyun Am Sa, 2004).

[28] Cf. Kyoung-jae Kim, "Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Utrecht University, 1994); idem, *Discourses on the Theology of Culture*, published in Korean (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1997); *Christian Faith and Spirituality*, published in Korean (Seoul: Kyo Yook Won, 1997); idem, *In the Spirit and Truth*, published in Korean (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1999); idem, *Faceless God*, published in Korean (Seoul: Sam In, 2002); idem, *Beyond the Wall: Introduction to Big Vehicle Christianity*, published in Korean (Seoul: Utopia, 2005). See his English article entitled "Minjung's Spirituality in the grafting process of East-Asian Religions—From a perspective of Korean Minjung Theology regarding with Korean Mahayana Buddhism, Tonghak religio-social Movement, and the Korean Protestantism," accessed on April 5, 2005, available at: http://soombat.org/wwwb/ CrazyWWWBoard.cgi?db=article&mode=read&num=25&page=1&ftype=6&fval=& backdepth=1.

[29] Cf. He wrote a letter to a famous Korean monk named Bup-jung to congratulate him and other Buddhists on the occasion of the birth of Gautama Siddhartha and published this letter in May Edition of *Christian Thought* (May 1997), published in Korean, available at: http://soombat.org/wwwb/CrazyWWWBoard.cgi?db=article&mode= read&num=6&page=1&ftype=6&fval=&backdepth=1.

[30] Hee-sung Gil, *Bosal Jesus* (Seoul: Hyun-Am-Sa, 2005).

In this book, Hee-Sung Gil, who identifies himself as a religiously pluralistic Christian, asserts that if we took Jesus as a kind of Bosal who tried to be a Buddha, we would get a much richer understanding of Jesus. Buddhism and Christianity are not antagonistic to one another; they are complementary. A Buddhist can have a transcendental element through dialogue with a Christian, and a Christian can get a much richer understanding of being a Christian through dialogue with Buddhists. This is the way we should go in the future, according to Hee-Sung Gil. Chan-Su Yi, one of Hee-Sung Gil's students, tried to show the similarity between the body of Christ and the Buddha,[31] and between the awakening of faith in Mahayana Buddhism and Karl Rahner's understanding of salvation.[32]

As you all see, however, according to prescriptive religious pluralism, one should not accept Jesus as the Son of God in the literal sense of the word. Jesus may be the Son of God in a metaphorical sense of the word.[33] The difference between Jesus and ourselves is a difference of degree, not that of kind, according to religious pluralism. Here comes the metamorphosis of Christianity. If we are ready to accept religious pluralism, we must abandon the identity of Christianity as it has been identified until now in biblical, orthodox theologies. Our understanding of Jesus, of the Trinity, of salvation, of the church, of the mission of the church, and of all others things in Christianity must be changed according to the norm of religious pluralism.

---

[31] Chan-Su Yi, "The Body of Christ and the Buddha as sambhogakraya," published in Korean in *Studies in Religion* (Journal of Korean Society of Religion), vol. 31 (2003), accessed on 22nd June, 2005, available at: http://chansu.netian.com/publications.html.

[32] Chan-Su Yi, "The Soteriological Structure of 'the Awakening of Faith in Mahayana' and Karl Rahner," A Paper read at the 4th IAAPR Meeting, L.A., USA, accessed on 22nd June, 2005, available at: http://chansu.netian.com/publications.html.

[33] Cf. John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed.) John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), 171–173; idem, *God and the Universe of Faith* (London: Macmillan, 1973; reprinted, London: Collins, 1977), 113–114, 163; idem, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 28, 72–73, 83–84, 125; idem, "John Hick," in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), Korean translation (Seoul: CLC, 2001), 71, 73.

The Future

Do we have a future in relation to the question of our identity as Christians? This is our last question. I would like to answer to this question in the following conditional way.

We can *not* expect a future if we continually go with the wave of our culture. The Korean church does not have a future if we follow shamanistic Christianity, or Confucian Christianity, or modern Christianity, or post-modern Christianity, or religiously pluralistic Christianity. Just as Western Christianity does not have a future in their wasteland if Western Christians do not stand against secularization (in the wrong sense of the word).[34] It is true today that in Korea and all over the world not many people believe the scriptures as the Word of God in the real sense (not merely in the functional sense) of the word; only few believe in the Triune God both in the ontological and the economic sense; only a few believe in Jesus Christ as the real (not metaphorical) Son of God and the only Redeemer and the Lord; only a few believe in the Holy Spirit as a personal Spirit who applies the works of Christ to us; not many people believe the church as the eschatological community that manifests the Kingdom of God here on this earth; not many people believe in the return of Christ; not many people believe that after death they will be in heaven with Christ in the presence of God; not many people believe that there will be a resurrection of the body and a last judgment; not many people believe that there will be an eternal punishment by which those who do not believe the way that God has provided for us will be punished eternally; and not many people believe that there will be a renewal of everything, the new heaven and new earth, *regnum gloriae*, where God is all in all. If we continually follow such unbelief and compromise by saying that there are also other ways of salvation than through Jesus Christ, then our Korean forefathers in Christ suffered and gave their lives in vain. Then there will be no future for us.

But we *do* have a future if we really trust the Triune God who shows Himself as such in the scriptures. But can we see faith in this period of the last days that has dawned in the person of Jesus Christ, and that will be consummated with His return, as He Himself said long

---

[34] Cf. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

time ago? If we continue to believe in Jesus Christ, who is the way to the heavenly Father in the midst of no faith, then there is a future for Korean Christianity. There is a desperate need to further develop an apostolic, biblical, and eschatological theology[35] in Korea in order to keep the Christian identity that our forefathers in Christ formed and developed through reading the scriptures. Please, therefore, pray for Korean Christians that they might continue to believe in the Triune God who has revealed Himself in the scriptures, so that they can further develop an apostolic, biblical, and eschatological theology. As I mentioned earlier, in the past Korean Christians suffered and even risked their lives in order to continually believe only in the Triune God. Korean Christians in the twenty first century should also imitate our forefathers in Christ who lived and died for the Triune God after abandoning other gods and other ways of being religious. Please pray for us to keep and further develop Reformed theology into a more biblical and consistent way. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to Korea at this time as Reformed theologians who will try to solve the problem of Christian identity in a pluralistic world. There is much to be learned from our Korean forefathers in Christ who showed their Christian identity by risking their lives in order to believe and worship only the Triune God of the scriptures in their religiously pluralistic situation.

I presume that Paul would agree with me since he said to the worshipers of Zeus and other Greek and Roman gods in Lystra that "we bring you good news that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them,"[36] and had said to those who were in other religions and philosophical schools of thought at Athens that "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things... now he commends all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a

---

[35] Cf. Seung-Goo Lee, "An Apostolic, Biblical, Eschatological Theology as a Way of Doing Theology Without Ulterior Motive," in *Religion Without Ulterior Motive*, Studied in Reformed Theology, 13 (ed.) Eddy A.J.G. Van der Borght (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2006), 159–178.

[36] Acts 14:15.

day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."[37]

In relation to this message of conversion, missionaries came to Korea to bring Koreans Good News of the Kingdom of God on one Easter Sunday 120 years ago, as I mentioned you at the beginning of this presentation. We Koreans thank God for the missionaries who came to Korea 120 years ago and the church who sent these missionaries to Korea. But currently, Koreans get a message of prescriptive religious pluralism from Western religious thinkers and those Koreans who are educated by these religious pluralists.[38] What an irony! Is this not the right time when we should learn again from Paul and our Korean forefathers in Christ who have believed and worshiped only the Triune God in their own religiously pluralistic situations? The Koreans, who had been religious in other religions before they became Christians, placed emphasis on the point that all of their own human efforts to be good, including all religious efforts, should be abandoned. The more they were serious in their previous religions, the more they felt those religious thoughts and practices should be discarded. They regarded their previous religious activities "as rubbish in order that they [might] gain Christ."[39] They regarded "everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus [their] Lord."[40] Likewise, the only way in which we can respond to the present challenge of religious pluralism is to follow Paul and our forefathers in Christ by pointing to Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation.[41] Why should we now lose the Christian identity that our forefathers in Christ formed and kept without regard for their lives years ago, in the name of tolerance towards other religions and a pluralistic understanding of salvation?

---

[37] Acts 17:24 f., 30–31.

[38] It is true that even from 1900 there were some missionaries who had a liberal view of the Scriptures and of Christianity in Korea. Cf. A.J. Brown, *The Mastery of the Far East* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1919), 540, cited in Yong-kyu Park, *Korean Protestantism and Biblical Authority*, 151. See also John P. Galbraith, "The Shadow and Sunlight of Korea," *Presbyterian Guardian* (Aug. 15, 1952), 153 and Sung Chun Chun, "Schism and Unity in the Protestant Church in Korea," 82, cited in Conn, 43 f.

[39] Cf. Phil. 3:8.

[40] Cf. Phil. 3:7.

[41] For my own detailed response to the religious pluralism of John Hick, see Seung-Goo Lee, "A Christian Response to John Hick's Religious Pluralism," A Paper read at Kimchi Theological Seminar, June 2004.

AFRICAN-CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: EMERGING CHALLENGES FOR GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

Daniel J. Antwi

An African proverb about identity says: "if lions do not have a story teller, tales of hunting will always favor the hunter." The morale is that identity enables communities and persons to tell others who they are and what they do from among themselves, and from their own perspective. It prevents others from calving out another communities' identity for them.

This paper is about African-Caribbean Christian identity—who we take ourselves to be, and how we orient ourselves to others. In a sense, it is about how identity is perceived within the context of our world. This may include the contradictions, conflicts, and even the failures of our people. In a more critical sense, it is about the central place that religion, culture, and theology play in all this. These concerns are taken up through a consideration of how they play out in the Caribbean Christian context.

The Roots of the Socio-Cultural and Religious Factors of Caribbean [Jamaican] Christian Identity

In his inaugural lecture as Distinguished Fellow of the University of the West Indies on May 12, 2005, Edward Seaga, Jamaica's former prime minister, gave some penetrating analyses of what he termed as "The Folk Roots of Jamaican Cultural Identity."[1]

Seaga suggests there are some activities of social and cultural nature in the Jamaican Caribbean context that call for deep probing in order to determine their contribution to, and therefore relationship with, other social and cultural—and one may add—religious manifestations in the quest for identity today. He lists four such activities as follows:

---

[1] Edward Seaga, "Social Riddle Rooted in Cultural Identity" *Jamaica Gleaner Online*, http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20050515.

  – High levels of aggressive behavior and discipline
  – Concepts of learning and earning
  – Robust individualism and vibrant creativity
  – Family ties and deep religious faith

These factors determine future patterns of development of the individual, and thereby, the building of the community.

If pregnant mothers lack sufficient nutrition to provide required protein for their unborn babies and children in early childhood stages, the result will be inadequate brain development, and learning will be impaired in later life. The logic is that the educational process will become handicapped by that very deficiency.

Furthermore, when love and lavish affection for children are soon replaced by the onset of sharp discipline—as the child is considered old enough to have sense to observe proper practices like toilet training, one can only imagine the extent of the traumatic effect in the life of the child. Aggression begins to emerge at this stage when training is not so much by teaching as by strong reprimand and punishment, including some measure of corporal punishment.

A report produced by UNICEF shows that about 72 % of Jamaican households use methods of punishment that incorporates some form of violence. This introduces the notion that learning can be enforced by punishment, without observing that lack of learning may link back to insufficient nutrition and, therefore, brain under-development.

Violence and confrontational attitudes continue into later years as prevailing poverty exposes children to a competitive environment of scarcity in which they have to struggle for their share of food, bed space, play things, clothing, and attention.

At the same time as the assertive, forceful, and aggressive individuals begin to emerge, so do their counterparts—the subdued, servile, and easily-led individuals, who are also fashioned by the influence of this aggressive, competitive environment.[2]

It is important to note here that the increasing act of violence and verbal abuse are symptoms of a radical change in society that is based, in good part, on the growing need for respect.

---

[2] Seaga, "Social Riddle."

This issue of 'respect due' must be understood against the background of the community's quest for collective identity and self-respect.[3]

Respect is, in fact, a powerful dynamic that works hand in hand with justice. The cry for justice, then, is not so much an indictment of the legal system as it is a protest against disadvantage. Any definition of identity in the Jamaican context, therefore, must take the issue of respect as human being and justice for all into consideration.

The Current Religious Landscape

Jamaicans are a deeply religious people. They freely admit to the centrality of religious beliefs in the governance of their personal and family lives. Most follow the Christian faith, although several other religious traditions co-exist with traditional Christian denominations. In fact, there are many Christian churches in Jamaica. So much so that the island holds the dubious record in the Guinness Book of Records as having the most churches per square mile. *The 2001 World Christian Encyclopedia* lists Jamaica as having "approximately 173 denominations, operating 5000 congregations excluding the indigenous revival cults numbering over 50,000 members."[4]

Among the religious denominations are Church of God, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal, and Baptist. The migration of East Indian and Middle Eastern origin brought the Hindu and Muslim religions to Jamaica. Recently, the Mormons have set up temples in Jamaica.

There are also members of the Revival Zion movement. The Revivalist believes in Jesus, baptism, and God. However, they also believe in many African religious traditions about spirits

Rastafarianism is a unique identity index because it originated in Jamaica. It is an Africa-Jamaican religious movement that blends the revivalist nature of Jamaican folk Christianity with a Pan-Africanist perspective promulgated by Marcus Garvey. Garvey was a native of Jamaica and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914. He devoted his life to promoting unity throughout the African

---

[3] Horace Levy, *They Cry "Respect." Urban Violence and Poverty in Jamaica. Rev. Ed.* Center for Population, and Social Change. Department of Sociology and Social Work (Kingston: University of the West Indies, 2001).

[4] David Barrett, George Keenan and Todd Johnston (Eds.), *World Christian Encyclopedia, 2nd Edition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Diaspora by underscoring common racial and cultural roots. Its Pan-Africanist message of black solidarity was founded on the recovery of black identity through and identification with Africa—most precisely with Ethiopia—as their ancestral homeland. Sometimes referred to as Ethiopianism, the notion of ancestral homeland was based on a complex set of ideologies derived from biblical references to all black peoples as Ethiopians They underscore the African peoples' proud heritage which is shown to predate European civilization. Ethiopianism has been used to express the political, cultural, and spiritual aspirations of blacks throughout the Diaspora since the eighteenth century.

For all its African-centeredness, Rastafarianism is fundamentally a Christian-based religion that turned its back on Jamaican Zion Revivalism and African-derived religious practices such as *Obeah* (witchcraft). During its formative years, Rastafarianism developed a new hermeneutic that centered on the notion of blacks as the new Israelites sent by God (*Jah*) into slavery to be subservient to white masters as punishment for their sins. In this new interpretation of scripture, one can see the very fabric of white Euro-American society—its social and political structures, responsible for centuries of black oppression and exploitation—emerging as a new Babylon.[5]

The Rastafarian movement identifies strongly with Africa. Its craft and music are defiant of a cultural imposition that denies the validity of things African. Mainline churches have not escaped the impact of the Rastafarian protest since it has forced them to re-examine their theological claims, liturgies, and rites, *vis-à-vis* the underlying political ideologies and economic structures to which they give legitimacy. Ashley Smith observes areas of change as follows:[6]

---

[5] Nathaniel Murrell, William Spence, and Adrian McFarlane (Eds.), *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998), especially Part IV: "Religion, Levity, Hermeneutics, and Theology." For a good summary of the basic tenets of Rastafarianism, see Margaret Olmos and Lizabeth Parovisini-Gebert (eds.) *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: University Press, 2003).

The notion of Rastafarians as the 'lost tribe of Israel' provides a link to a long tradition of Ethiopianism in Jamaica, where African Christians had been identified by European missionaries as Ethiopians in accordance with references to Ethiopia in the Bible. This point has been amply elucidated in Patrick Taylor (editor), *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 71.

[6] Ashley Smith, *Emerging from Innocence: Religion, Theology and Development.* (Mandeville: Eureka Press, 1991), 56ff. See further Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective.* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 102.

   a. Ethnic characteristics of congregational and denominational leadership
   b. Forms of worship and modes of liturgical behavior
   c. Approaches to, and attitude towards, the economic, political, and social realities
   d. Global politics and economics
   e. Theological education
   f. Inter-church and inter-faith relationships

It is important to note that when we consider how systems converge to create the incidents of history that help to shape the realities of culture and identity, we come face to face with a force that is no less encompassing than Babylon—as defined by the Rastafarians—in terms of its power and scope. This force dominates the context in which people are called upon to carve out self-definition. The first thing that Rastafarians are aware of in this nexus, and which provides challenge to Christian identity, is that you either define yourself or allow yourself to be defined. Self-definition means changing the images and patterns of an inherited structure—reaching for pre-colonial, non-European symbols—toward an authentic self-definition through affirmation of African roots. When they appeal to the Bible tradition to confirm the change, they are unwillingly assisted by traditional scholarship.

It goes without saying that the Christian church in the Caribbean has something in common with Rastafarians. First, both bodies share in some of the ramifications of the development of culture and identity. They may react differently to the negative aspects of acculturation, but they have been reacting for some time. Second, there is no serious discourse on cultural and religious identity in the Caribbean that ignores the Rastafarian phenomenon. In addition, with regards to their focus on African roots, there is hardly a denomination today that does not demonstrate the affirmation of African reality as having influence upon the Caribbean reality.

Jamaican Caribbean society thrives on creative individualism. Enshrined in the cultural identity is the hero of all individualists—Ananse. In Jamaican folklore, Ananse traces its background to the Ghanaian folk hero Kwaku Ananse, the creative genius, who always battles with the imposing systemic giants and wins by using his brain and conmanship. Jamaican individual creativity is always forged by determination to overcome systems and circumstances.

While Jamaican identity has been characterized as a people who, in the right circumstances, are able to achieve, and rise—with excellence—to the top in the arts and entertainment. It is also true to say that most Jamaicans stamp their characteristic cultural identity as a people of deep abiding faith in the ancient wisdom of the roots of their African heritage and the divine guidance of their God, securing a stable space in life where they live with respect and in respect.

As pointed out earlier, the wealth of religious denominations in Jamaica indicates the desire of the society to have religious experiences that respect their individual beliefs, whether it is the black king God of Rastafari, a personalized liturgy as in the 'spiritual' churches, or as even an indicator of high social status as demonstrated by membership in the 'established' churches.

The Caribbean Church and the Quest for Identity

In recent times, Caribbean Christian leaders have grappled with the issue of identity as the church continues to reflect on her missionary calling. The crux of the problem seems to center on the identity of a people that has been shaped within a de-humanizing environment, and characterized by brutality and wickedness that was controlled by the European missionary era, or by contemporary realities. Two types of mission engagement emerged: one in which some sided with the dominant order and gave legitimacy to the status quo that kept the people in servitude; the others aligned themselves with the suffering ones in resisting oppression.

The documents that outline and develop the positive impact of missionary enterprise on the religious, educational, and economic development of the peoples of Africa and the Caribbean are voluminous. However, in recognizing this fact, the quest for truth requires critical understanding of the factors that gave birth to the church's self-understanding and practice of ministry and mission.

To a great extent, today Caribbean Christian identity constitutes inherent ways of thinking, worshipping, structuring, and doing business that are more attuned to a past European missionary era. It is important, at this point, to examine the impact of the missionary legacy in the Caribbean and its implication for Christian identity.

It has been established that the Christian message that was communicated to the Caribbean people was done through the instrument

of a colonial culture whose value system and assumptions were not designed to serve the majority of African-Caribbean (Jamaican) people. In a sense, the practice of the mission of the church was in contradiction to its true calling because it embraced the dominant values of the society.

Roderick Hewitt argues that the inherited Christian legacy contains some entrenched realities that still impact negatively on the church's capacity to offer a culturally meaningful contextual engagement in mission and ministry.[7] These realities are:

a. The understanding and practice of salvation that focused on morals and acceptance of fate and postponed the realization of a better life to after death. Priority was given to saving souls at the expense of leaving structures of oppression in place. This led to the neglect of the environment in which the people sought to give meaning to their lives. The perception of identity that has persisted is like the Jew in the Roman colonies of New Testament era who was a non-citizen and could only see the fulfillment of the promises of the gospel in another age. The slave and indentured laborer and, subsequently, the dispossessed and disinherited in the Caribbean see personhood, freedom, and genuine fellowship— even with the bearers of the *euangellion*—as that which could be possible only in an age to come, or perhaps in another country.

b. The overriding motive and goal of conversion was expansion of Christendom without sufficient emphasis being placed on radical transformation and changed circumstances in which persons lived.

c. The preaching of an 'individual salvation' at the expense of community solidarity. To many the acceptance of the claims of the gospel meant rejection of one's natural, historical, and ethnic self, and one's identification with a human world that is not only other, but also better than that which is peculiar to one's own situation.

d. God was presented as foreigner and linked with dominant power —far removed and inaccessible—rather than the empowering Presence who has always been with the people through their pained history.

e. Missionary theology that reinforced low self-esteem of black people. They saw their development as a gift from others. Design for

---

[7] Roderick Hewitt. *Identity, Conversion and Witnessing Within the United Church* (London: Council for World Mission, No date).

living must be externally generated producing ineffective praxis in missionary Christianity.[8]

f. Acceptance of a clergy-centered understanding of ministry that contributed to the dis-empowerment of the faith community as a whole.

g. The wholesale adoption of *Pipe Organ Culture* meant an uncritical embrace of an European worship model created ingredients for future instability in the Caribbean church identity. It is a well-known missiological fact that pipe organs represented European worship models that guaranteed communication and economic dependence on a foreign supplier. It needed specialist musicians and a wide repertoire of organ pieces.

A keen reflection on the African-Caribbean theological landscape will show that theology as a discipline is struggling with the possibility of a paradigm shift of merely being relevant to that of identity and presence.

There is a line of thought that sees the possibility of reading and reflecting our 'religious (Christian) past'—that is, who we are—and 'our cultural present'—that is, where we are, as the intersecting point of our Christian identity. It is at this point that critical thinking about theology of identity should be concentrated.

Wrestling with questions of Christian identity has engaged the serious attention of both African and Caribbean theologians over the years. For African theologians such as Kwame Bediako, the way forward is to look at the question of identity from the perspectives of both the church fathers, who were our ancient parents, and the African siblings, who in their time had to negotiate a dis/continuous relationship with their religious past and present culture.[9] These church fathers responded to the question of identity in two ways. First, they carved out a distinct identity apart from the surrounding culture by vindicating Christian identity against Hellenism as the works of Tatian and Tertullian show. Of course, this response, while natural and necessary, ended up losing the ability to have an effective witness within dominant culture.

The second response is affirmation and fulfillment of the cultural present. Both Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria sought to establish Christian identity as not just the culmination of the Jewish tradition, but also as the apex of Greek tradition.

---

[8] Luwin Williams, *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 40.

[9] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Press, 1992).

For the African siblings, the question of identity is *who are we as African Christians in relationship to Missionary/Western Christianity?* For Missionary Christianity, instead of appropriating their religious past as the church fathers, they need to critically disentangle themselves from Western Christianity and the process of self-definition.

From the works of both Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti, with whom Bediako engages in conversation of African Christian identity, it is clear that the religious past and cultural present are not beyond criticism. Idowu, for example, seeks an African church that bears the unmistakable stamp of the Church of God in Nigeria and not an outreach of a colony of Rome, Canterbury, or Westminster Central Hall in London— or a vested interest of some European or American Missionary Board. In a similar vein, John Mbiti asserts that we can add nothing to the gospel because this is an eternal gift of God, but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food, drink, cover, and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wanderings.[10]

Three Caribbean Reformed Theologians Offering Answers

From the Caribbean perspective, the works of three theologians of the Reformed tradition need to be highlighted in order to show how the Reformed maxim of "Reformed and always reforming" is operating in Caribbean context as it relates to the issue of Christian identity.

The first is Roderick Hewitt, who doubles as the current moderator of the Synod of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and the moderator of the Council for World Mission.[11] In a perceptive way Hewitt points to some identity traits which are likely to impact the church's mission in the Caribbean context.

For our immediate purpose, however, it will be appropriate to define Hewitt's approach as an attempt to outline a viable theology of identity.

The first block in this construction of a theology of identity for the Christian church is that the *church is a community of faith with others*. There is a situation in which people can have certain minimum expectations about the church's identity. Such expectations should include both an embracing community of faith that is committed and functions with

---

[10] Bediako, *Theology*, chapters 7 and 8 where Bediako reflects on conversations with both Idowu and Mbiti.

[11] Hewitt, *Identity*, 6.

accountability to Jesus the Christ. In effect, the identity theology of the church is that of an open door and an open space—one that has room to welcome and receive others. The key identity is that of a community of faith that invites people to celebrate a God who gathers and holds all people and things together in Christ. Simply said, the church gives priority to breaking through the barriers that separate people from each other and from God. The implication of this is that the church, in seeking its identity, practices what Paul challenged the Christian community in Rome to be and to do: *Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Rom. 15: 7).*

The challenge here is how to develop a viable theology that will benefit and equip local congregations about their identity as a people who exist and function as a viable sign of God drawing all people and creation unto himself.

Critical to this quest for a theology of identity is the emergence of a new hermeneutic to the biblical priorities of welcoming strangers, freeing prisoners, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and announcing the good news of the kingdom (Lk. 4:18). It is this kind of theology of identity that will galvanize the ministry of sacrament, preaching, prayer, and worship to become barrier-breaking opportunities. They will serve as sources for equipping the church to be signpost of alternative community identity that God intends for the world.

The crucial question is what will be the meaning of the words, 'Reformed,' 'reforming,' and 'transforming' for the life of an African-Caribbean Christian church that is seeking to develop a theology of identity today? Do these terminologies mean only names that remind people of a past era, or a pointer to the church's commitment to ongoing renewal of her reason for existence?

Hoekendijk asserts that the presupposition of the existence of Christendom is firmly rooted in the Reformed heritage of the church.[12] He concludes that the purpose was not to create new communities, but to reform those already in existence. Consequently, Reformed churches reduced the number of distinctive identity marks of the church to one— the proclamation of the Word as the preaching and sacramental Word.

Christendom, of course, is a passing phenomenon in today's socio-political and cultural context, and one may be forced to ask: where is the community that the church is seeking to reform?

---

[12] Johannes Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 20.

The second is Ashley Smith, one of the foremost contemporary, Reformed, theological thinkers in the Caribbean.[13] Smith's observation is that Christianity has never *really taken root* in the Caribbean, as a sign of permanent involvement in giving to and receiving from the local people.

Instead, it has remained *a potted plant* that has managed to survive in the little container in which it was brought from the nurseries, and only offers sentimental beauty for a few people for a short period of time.

The challenge is for the local congregation to bear witness to its Reformed identity by making clear to its members what 'being Reformed' and 'transformed' invites them to be and do. In every community in Africa and the Caribbean where the church exists, the critical question that is being addressed is that which John the Baptist directed to Jesus: "are you the one who is coming or should we look for another?" The people have the right to know who the Christians are and why they are in their community, and what they can expect from these members of the community of faith.

The theology of identity is the church's reflective thinking on what defines it in the world. It requires commitment to being a witness to the whole gospel because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The third thinker is Lewin Williams.[14] Among other things, Williams has emphasized the necessity to develop a Caribbean theology, which is, in reality, a theology of identity for the Caribbean from within the context of the Caribbean. He sees the possibility of such theological development through the metaphor of Paul's olive tree in Romans 11. Here, Williams sees a deliberate creation of paradox out of discontinuity and continuity.

The Pauline paradigm in this respect calls for a) a radical break from missionary theology, and b) the observation that the Incarnation event creates the continuing drama of the working out of the divine purpose by drawing into itself both the old and the new.

While acknowledging that there is much more in the passage, Williams makes the point that even the church itself is subject to a kind of discontinuity. He further remarks:

---

[13] Ashley Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections on the Caribbean Church.* (Mandeville: Eureka Press, 1984).

[14] Lewin Williams, "What, Why and Wherefore of Caribbean Theology," *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies*,12/1 (April 1991), 29–40.

> The Incarnation itself demands that room be left for this discontinu-
> ity. That thought applied to the case between missionary theology and
> Caribbean Theology provides the later with quite some latitude for the
> adjustments determined to make theology contextually relevant. For con-
> textualization means that, the people's needs give rise to its own theol-
> ogy.[15]

In the exploration of the identity of being the Christian church in
Africa and the Caribbean, it is self-evident that it can only be true to
itself by being a missionary church.

That is to say: the self-definition and identity of the church, in so far
as these emerge from the contexts of both Africa and the Caribbean,
must be shaped by a firm understanding of both the relevance and
effectiveness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is for this role and task that God has called the church into being.
Theology of Christian identity is defined by the theology of Christian
vocation in the context of everyday living among peoples who have
known and continue to experience oppression, dehumanization, and
life-denying events.

---

[15] Williams, "What, Why and Wherefore," 29–40.

CHRISTIANITY OR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY?
ON CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

GODWIN I. AKPER

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary African theologians have taken a bold step to declare *African Christianity* a 'new religion' in its own right. The declaration of African Christianity as a 'new religion' is part of the ongoing discourse on African agency. African agency suggests that "human beings, even the most oppressed, marginalized and seemingly destitute among them, have the potential, possibility and even ability to act as (moral) agents of transformation and change in their own lives and in the lives of others."[1] Therefore, Africans 'have come of age' and must be agents in the transformation of their religious, social, and economic life, as well as that of others. This means that Africans are called upon to be truly active agents and not "alien fraudsters"[2] in their theology, Christian life, and welfare. They should be independent thinkers in transforming their Christian, social, political, and economic life. A point of emphasis in the agency discourse is the notion that Africans must make use of their own developed resources in their own way. Africans must "drink from their own wells."[3] This has to do with, among other things, self-definition that includes the exploration and retrieval of African indigenous traditions that define who they are in such a way that African self-identity and integrity is protected, maintained, and ensured.

In African Christianity, therefore, Africans are called to bid farewell (some have already done so) to the European and American missionary

---

[1] T.S. Maluleke & S. Nadar, "Alien fraudsters in the white academy: Agency in gendered colour," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120 (November 2004), 7–8.

[2] Maluleke & Nadar, "Alien fraudsters," 5.

[3] See T.S. Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in a New World Order: A time to drink from our own wells," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 112 (November 1996), 3–19.

Christianity that is practiced by mainline churches in Africa.[4] Africa must have her own Christianity in which African culture and primal religions define their identity—hence, African Christianity. This conviction is clearly echoed in the description by Andrew Walls, an Edinburgh University professor, of African Christianity. He says:

> African Christianity appears in two capacities: first as a new period in the history of African religion, continuing the story begun in the "primal" or "traditional" religions; and second, as a new period in the history of Christianity, in which the Christian tradition is being expressed in intellectual, social and religious milieux which it has not previously entered.[5]

He observes that "both aspects, the African and the Christian, are essential to 'the identity of African Christianity'."[6] Therefore, he defines African Christianity as "a new development of African religion, shaped by the parameters of pre-Christian African religion as the Christianity of the Jerusalem Church of the Acts of the Apostles was rooted in the religion of old Israel."[7] That is one side of African Christianity. The other side is that "African Christianity is also a new development of the Christian tradition produced by the interaction of that tradition with the life and lore of Africa, as complex and distinctive in their way as those of the Greco-Roman culture which determined so many of the features of Western Christianity."[8] African Christianity also deals with life and death issues "rooted in the exigencies of African experience, its tragedy and its celebration."[9] Here lies the identity of the new religion, African Christianity. It is rooted in and informed by African pre-Christian religious experience that is now being incorporated into Christianity. The question is: what is the uniqueness of Christianity in the face of African Christianity? What is the identity of Christianity in African Christianity? I propose to argue that only Christ and Christ

---

[4] See T.S. Maluleke, "A black missiologist: Contradiction in terms?" in *Missions Crossing Frontiers: Essays in honour of Bongani A. Mazibuko, 1932–1997*, R. Gerloff (ed.) (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2003), 294.

[5] A. Walls, "African Christianity in the history of religions," in C. Fyfe & A. Walls (eds.), *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1996), 1. See also A. Walls, *The Cross-cultural process in Christian history: Studies in the transition and appropriation of faith*, (Maryknoll: Orbis books & Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 116.

[6] Walls, "African Christianity," 1.

[7] Walls, "African Christianity," 1.

[8] Walls, "African Christianity," 1.

[9] Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 290.

alone give all Christians their unique identity as Christians, and, therefore, Christ gives Christianity its unique identity.

Mapping African Christian Identity Discourse in Africa

In order to understand the intention and purpose of African Christian identity discourse, it is necessary to locate it in the broader discussions in 20th century African theological discourse from which the 'identity' problem emerged. The quest for African Christian identity and selfhood is not just a product of post-independence and post-missionary Christianity, although it gained impetus at the beginning of the post-missionary era. Towards the end of the 19th century, it was already clear to some African Christians and evangelists that Africans should invent their own style of worship. No one expressed this concern more articulately than the South African Christian, Jeremiah Mzimba. Mzimba argued, "But for me it is clear that even the Black man [*sic*] in Africa must stand on his feet in matters of worship like people in other countries, and not always expect to be carried by the White man [*sic*] on his back."[10] Mzimba's conviction was that "He [black man] has long learnt to walk by leaning on the White man [*sic*], but today he must stand without leaning on anybody except his God so that the work of the Gospel should flourish…The child itself feels it must walk, stumbles and falls, takes one step at a time, but the end result is that it walks."[11] What emerges clearly in Mzimba's concern is the quest for independence from the West on matters of worship.

The call for an indigenous African worship was later to be extended to other areas of religious life by pioneer African theologians such as the Nigerian Bolaji Idowu—in the years following his country's independence from Britain (1960). To him, not only was the style of worship in Nigerian churches Western, but they also turned out to be another entity for further colonization of the Nigerian populations. Idowu was concerned that theological education in the 1960s in Nigeria

---

[10] See M. Champman & A. Dangor, *Voices from within: Black poetry from Southern Africa*, (Cape Town: Ad Donker, 1982), 31, cited in T.S. Maluleke, "A historical quest for a black presence that walks," in P. Denis (ed.), *Orality, Memory and the Past: Listening to the voices of Black clergy under colonialism and apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), 229.

[11] Cited in Maluleke, "Historical quest," 229.

was not doing enough to produce indigenous ministers for an indigenous church. He asked whether the aim of theological education in Nigeria was to make Christians or to "Westernize" Nigerians.[12] The fact that there was no African initiative in the theology and practice of the Nigerian church made Idowu to ask whether what "we have [in Nigeria] today is in fact Christianity and not only transportations from a European cult the various ramifications of which are designated Methodists, Anglicans, and so forth."[13] To a large extent, Idowu's quest for an indigenous church with its own ministers and theology set a new stage in the development of African Christianity in the form expressed in Walls's definition in the post-colonial and post-missionary era.[14] From the academic perspective, Maluleke argues that before 1965 African theology was hesitant to assume African Christianity as its main interlocutor. Rather, it pre-occupied itself with the question of Western ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism.[15] Maluleke is right. It was at Ibadan in 1966 that African theologians from all over the continent met on their own to explore and examine the extent to which Christianity is at 'home' with African religion and African religion with Christianity in Africa.[16] At Ibadan African theologians made the following conference statement:

> We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of Him and worship Him. We recognise the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of Him.[17]

---

[12] B. Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: SCPK, 1965), 1.

[13] Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 1.

[14] See Walls, "African Christianity," 1–16.

[15] Maluleke, "Black and African theologies," 2.

[16] J. Mbiti, "Looking at some resting points in African Theology," unpublished paper read during *African Theologies in Transformation* Conference, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, Cape Town, 3–6 June 2003. I know that in 1957 there was a conference on Christianity and African culture in Ghana. However, the papers read at that conference do not really address the question of the interlocutor of theology and Christianity in Africa as did the Ibadan meeting.

[17] Cited in Mbiti, "Looking at some resting points," 2.

The conviction that there is a radical continuity between African traditional religions and biblical Christian religion stimulated further interest in the theological exploration of indigenous religions and cultures, especially within African theology circles.[18] No one in recent times has been more committed to such an endeavor than the Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako. He describes African primal religions as belonging to "the African religious past" in the history of the religious consciousness of the African people.[19] He argues that the "point of theological importance of such an ontological past consists in the fact that it belongs together with the profession of the Christian faith in giving account of the same entity, namely the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christian."[20] The 'ontological past' then shapes the identity of contemporary African Christianity. Hence, Bediako contends, "To the extent that African theology's effort at 'rehabilitating Africa's cultural heritage and religious consciousness' has been pursued as a self-consciously Christian and theological activity, it may be said to have been an endeavour at demonstrating the character of African *Christian* identity."[21] In this sense the theological concern with the African ontological past is an attempt "aimed at clarifying the nature and meaning of African Christian identity."[22]

This post-missionary phase of African endeavors and initiatives in theology and Christianity was pre-occupied with the question of African Christian identity. From what can be understood from Bediako's discussion, it is clear that African pre-Christian religious experience—specifically African religious beliefs—constitutes this Christian identity. This makes conversion to Christianity an integration of African religious beliefs into Christianity. The implication of this conviction is that the apparent "crisis of repentance and faith that make us Christian

---

[18] J. Mbiti, defines this theology as "the articulation of the Christian faith by African Christians, both theologians and lay people." See J. Mbiti, "African theology," in A. König & S. Maimela (eds.), *Initiation into Theology: The rich variety of theology and hermeneutics* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 144.

[19] K. Bediako, "African theology," in J. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 428. See also K. Bediako, "Half-Century of African Christian Thought: Pointers to theology and theological education in the next half-century," in *Journal of African Christian thought* 3/1 (2000), 5–15.

[20] Bediako, "African theology," 428.

[21] Bediako, "African theology," 428–443.

[22] Bediako, "African theology," 428.

really integrates what we have been [believers in African traditional worldview] in what we become [Christians]."[23]

With more African countries having gained political independence from their colonial overlords, the issue of the relationship between Christianity and the state arose. The plight of the people, both Christian and non-Christians, found its way into the theological and religious aspirations of the people of Africa. Therefore, in the 1970s, the situation of political oppression in Southern Africa and the role of the Christian religion in it became a context of yet another form of theology in African Christian thought, black theology. Black theology then became a theological articulation of the system and condition of inequality in Southern Africa. Within black theology circles, there was a deliberate effort to dismantle apartheid or separate development (and its theological justification) that intensified the suffering of the black masses in South Africa. While mass rallies were conducted and protest matches were carried out by Christians, black theologians had another enormous task of providing a theological basis for the fight for liberation. Black theology was also an endeavor aimed at liberating black Christians. This point is clearly expressed in the fourth article of the Belhar Confession, which reads in part: "We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his church to follow him in this; that he brings justice to the oppressed …."[24]

We see, therefore, that the theology of 'identity' that occupied the central stage in African Christianity in the early part of the postmissionary era was broadened in the 1970s. In black theology the interlocutor of theology was not African pre-Christian religious experience, but the social and material condition of the poor and oppressed.[25] The interpretation of the gospel in black theology was preoccupied with seeking an interface between the material condition of the marginalized and the costly salvation achieved by Christ on the Cross. The Exodus liberation metaphor was a key analogous concept. There was

---

[23] Bediako, "African theology," 428.

[24] "The Confession 1982," in G.D. Cloete & D.J. Smit (eds.), *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 3–4.

[25] No black theologian argued more strongly for this position than the South African Itumelang J. Mosala. See I.J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

inevitably a theology and even a form of Christianity and meaning of the gospel for black and oppressed Christians. Blacks and whites did not see and understand Christianity and the gospel in the same way (at least for the majority of the Afrikaans whites in the Dutch Reformed Church).[26] There was inevitably a gospel for black Africans and another for whites. Since the concept of blackness in the South African context was synonymous to being African, black Christianity was understood as African Christianity. Christian identity was racially determined and conditioned in apartheid South Africa. This situation was to later pose a threat to the structural unity of the Dutch Reformed family of churches after the defunct of apartheid in the 21st century. African blacks and coloreds (with a few whites) worship in the Uniting Reformed Church, while the whites (mostly Afrikaans) worship in the Dutch Reformed Church, the mother church.

In April 1944, while the Air Force planes were flying South African flags greeting the newly inaugurated President Nelson Mandela, the first black South African president, Rwanda was in chaos. "The mass killings of more than half a million people in Rwanda from April to June 1994, even though 80 % of Rwanda's population is Christian, shocked the entire world. This means that Christians killed one another, and some were slaughtered in church buildings where they took refuge."[27] This occurrence and the South African experience paint the picture of "Christianity in a distressed Africa" in the 20th century.[28] But worse still, in 2000 there was a voluntarily religious suicide in Uganda. A religious group called the Ugandan Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments, disappointed that the well-expected and prophesized rapture did not take place at midnight on 31 December 1999, opted for a mass religious suicide. Maluleke narrates the ordeal as follows:

> On 17 March 2000, more than 500 members of the MOVEMENT were burnt to death in a church building. This happened at the rural village of Kanungu, about 350Km south-west of Kampala in Uganda. A few days later the whole world watched gruesome television footage of charred bodies of children and adults. Their death was apparently part of a religious mass suicide pact. Members of the MOVEMENT seem to have been aware of and prepared for some impending rupture shortly before

---

[26] See A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinistic Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984).

[27] Mbiti, "African theology," 155.

[28] Maluleke, "Christianity in a Distressed Africa," 324–339.

the burning. It is said that many of them had sold and given away most of what they owned. They then went around to invite all members of the MOVEMENT—even those who had backslided—to come to this the 'special' and 'final' service. Worse still, weeks after the special and final service Ugandan Police proceeded to discover the bodies of hundreds other members of the MOVEMENT buried in shallow graves at the homes of some of the leaders. By the first week of May 2000 when I was in Uganda, the country was still reeling from this gruesome event. The police could still not pronounce whether the leadership of the MOVE-MENT had fled or died with their flock in the fire. During my stay in Uganda, Fr. Dr. John-Mary Walligo, a human rights commissioner and activist in that country told us that there were several surviving members of this cult who were sorry that they 'missed out' on the occasion of the special and final service![29]

After narrating this story, Maluleke poses the question: "What is the message?"[30] He identifies many messages, but for the purpose of this essay, the key message is that "Christianity in Africa—even African Christianity—is not an unqualified success story."[31] Between the Kanungu, Rwanda and the South African realities, there is, on the one hand, "the racist outworking of the Christian faith [that led to the death of so many people] on the continent, justified theologically, internalized and practiced ecclesiastically, politically as well as economically."[32] Yet, on the other hand, there is the "myriad of African (indigenous and missionary) churches who though 'covertly resistant' … are nevertheless caught in the web of internalized 'Apartheid theology' as well as being caught in the tragedy of African existential reality—a reality inherited, imported and self-inflicted."[33] This means that a racially or ethnically determined Christian identity have not just turned Christianity in Africa into a "'messy mushroom soup' but that soup has not always been nutritious but has often been deadly poisonous."[34] While Christianity generally continues and will continue to have a massive presence in Africa, it has not been able to overcome its violent nature. Neither has it been able to extinguish the memory of its violent manifestations on the continent. The "apartheid Christian regime, the Rwandan

---

[29] T.S. Maluleke, "What if we are mistaken about the Bible and Christianity in Africa?", in Ukpong, J (ed.), *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 158.

[30] Maluleke, "What if we are mistaken?", 158.

[31] Maluleke, "What if we are mistaken?", 159.

[32] Maluleke, "What if we are mistaken?", 159.

[33] Maluleke, "What if we are mistaken?", 159–160.

[34] See Maluleke, "What if we are mistaken?", 159.

genocide and the recent Kanungu massacre in Uganda" all expose the "almost suicidal" nature of both Christianity and African Christianity on the continent.[35] This violent manifestation of Christianity in Africa is due largely to a human-conditioned Christian identity with racial, ethnic, or African religious backgrounds. Hence, the African Christian identity problem is again prevalent in 21st century African Christian theological discourse.

On Christianity and the African Christian Identity Problem

Many theologians in Africa—including conservative, evangelical theologians such as the late Byang Kato—have repeatedly aired their grievances with colonial-missionary and post-missionary mainstream Christianity.[36] Some of the grievances revolve around the conviction that Christianity in Africa was a convenient entity for the colonization and disinheritance of the indigenous people.[37] However, neither the southern African experience of Christianity nor the Rwandan genocide has prevented Christianity from growing. It now has a 'massive presence' in Africa, especially in the 20th century and beyond. The majority of African Christians and theologians agree on this point. Even radical critics of colonial Christianity, such as the South African theologian Takatso Mofokeng, have "reckoned that it would be unrealistic to think that black Christians could simply 'disavow the Christian faith and [consequently] be rid of the obnoxious Bible.'"[38] In a number of places Bediako argues that Christianity continues to have a "massive presence" in Africa.[39] This massive presence is not always due to the

---

[35] Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 294.

[36] See B. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisimu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975).

[37] See T. Mafokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation," in *Journal of Black theology in South Africa* 2 (1988), 34–42. See also G.O. West, "The Bible as Bola among African biblical apprehensions," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 112 (2002), 23.

[38] Mofokeng, "Black Christians," 40; Maluleke, "Christianity in a distressed Africa," 329.

[39] See, for example, K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa—The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); "'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God' (PS. 68:31)—African Christians living the faith: A turning point in Christina history?", in Bediako, K., M. Jansen, Van Butselaar & A. Verburg (eds.), *A New Day Dawning African Christians living the Gospel*, (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2004), 38–40.

influence of African initiatives in Christianity, although it is a contributing factor. Most of the mega-churches in Africa are mainline, traditional churches, such as Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and continental Dutch Reformed—the churches about which Idowu asked whether they were transplants of a European cult—and not African independent churches per se. The Pentecostal churches are vehemently non-tolerant of African beliefs in their theology and worship life. Yet, the famous prophet Joshua's ministries have millions of members and big metropolitan congregations in Nigeria and other countries.

Again, what is the message? There are two messages: the first message is that Christianity does not need to become an African religion in the sense of African Christianity for it to grow on the continent. Its prevalence on the continent, despite its ambiguous relationship with colonial imperialism, is reason for us to seek to understand its inherent authority and purpose in human history and Africa. The advocates of African Christianity "as a new religion" should also clarify what Christianity really is.[40]

Christians are identified and united together by the object of their worship, Jesus Christ. The identity of their religion—Christianity—is composed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Second, the fact that almost all contemporary advocates of African Christianity as a 'new religion' are members of Christian churches is revealing. Except if they are 'bewitched,' as the retired Bishop Setiloane,[41] one would argue that Christ composed their identity as Christians. Perhaps this explains why they are not members of African Christianity as 'a new religion,' but of Christian churches. In this way even the 'new religion' is well defined by Christianity as has been well said by Andrew Walls.[42] It then calls into question the necessity of African Christianity as a 'new religion.'

However, by proposing that African Christianity be reckoned as a 'new religion' in its own right, the African religious scholars are not necessarily recanting their earlier confessed faith in Christ. Their con-

---

[40] Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 290.

[41] When Bishop Setiloane was asked by a young student why he remains a Christian and prays—therefore seeking to make converts to Christianity—even though he asserted that African traditional religion is just as good, he replied as follows: "For me myself, first I am like someone who has been bewitched, and I find it difficult to shake off the Christian witchcraft with which I have been captivated," cited in Maluleke, "African Christianity," 186.

[42] Walls, "African Christianity," 1.

viction, as expressed by Maluleke, is that given the state of affairs in Africa and the nature of the person of the African, it is illegitimate to continue to speak of Christianity in Africa as if it were a universal entity whose face remains the same wherever it goes.[43] At least for Africa, Christianity has many faces: including that of massive converts and of violence typified by the South African apartheid legacy, the Rwandan genocide, and the more recent Kanungu massacre.[44] Hence, in Africa, Christianity has undergone some changes. African realities have changed Christianity to such an extent that its manifestations in Africa are different from other parts of the world. However, Christianity has also transformed and changed Africa significantly. Thus, Bediako argues that "the Christian significance of African experience and the African significance in Christian history are far from demonstrating that Africa is 'opting into exotic religions [i.e. Christianity]'." Rather, they "demonstrate that Africa is at home in the religion of the Bible, and point to an African phase of Christian history and a Christian chapter in African religion."[45] This implies that "any social [and religious cum political and economic] analysis of African realities that ignores religion and particularly Christianity and its role in African life, is bound to miss a great deal of what actually explains Africa in the present, and by implication also, what African future is likely to be."[46]

This is precisely where the difficulty lies; namely, defining the character and nature of African Christian identity. Since Africa is defining Christianity and Christianity is defining Africa, there is confusion as to what really identifies them.[47] What is the uniqueness of Christianity in the midst of Christian traditional African experience? What determines the character and meaning of African Christianity's identity? These are not easy questions with easy answers. To seek to answer these questions, it will be better to appeal to the proposal of advocates of African

---

[43] Maluleke, "Christianity in a distressed Africa," 338; "Black and African theologies," 3–19.

[44] See Maluleke, "Christianity in a distressed Africa," 333–337.

[45] Bediako, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God," 38.

[46] Bediako, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God," 39.

[47] J. Kombo already alludes to this confusion when he says: "We have walked through the path of contextualization; we can say through experience that the path is necessary. However, there is the strong whisper, it is multi-dimensional and therefore depending on who handles it, it could easily be amorphous." J. Kombo, "Contextualization as Inculturation: The experience of the African theological situation," in M.E. Brinkmann (ed.), *Christian Identity in a Cross-cultural Perspective* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003).

Christianity as a 'new religion.' Therefore, a brief biography of the faith journey of its main advocate, Tinyikyo Maluleke, will best illustrate the nature and character of the identity of the new religion. On its own terms, therefore, one shall hopefully identify the real identity of this new religion. Maluleke recounts his spiritual journey in African Christianity as follows:

> The rural home in which I grew up at the northern part of South Africa, towards the Zimbabwean border, was an African Christian home. In the middle of the homestead was a Morula tree—an important symbol of African religion, a tree whose fruit produced a lovely drink—called *vukanyi*—which when appropriately fermented became alcoholic. This drink was also pleasing to the ancestors, so it could also be used for libations. The Morula tree at the centre of the homestead had other uses. It was a shrine. I remember how the men would squat around the tree while the women knelt down around the tree during libation and ancestral prayer sessions. On those occasions we would be required to chant certain words in a call-response structure of homage and intercession, whilst a senior aunt or uncle would take the lead. And yet every evening we would first listen to grandma's great story telling. After that we would read the Bible together and we children would take turns to read the text aloud and offer passionate nightly prayers to Jesus. On Sundays we all walked to church at the mission station chapel, 10 kilometres away. There we would sing glorious songs from the hymnbook that the missionaries from Switzerland had given us. As children we would first go to schools early in the morning then we would hang around until the adult service commenced later in the day.

> At the beginning of spring for a few Saturdays there would be celebrations in the village as the graduates from the traditional circumcision school would return home triumphantly with new names and new identities. The initiates go into circumcision school as boys and come out as men. There would be wild jubilations in the village as they filed into the village led by their captains. From then on, all in the village would call them each by their new name acquired at the school and only pronouns of respect would henceforth be used to refer to them. Many of the initiates were also members of the mission station church congregation who would soon resume normal church attendance even as their chests swelled with pride for having survived the tough trials of circumcision school.

> Ghosts, snakes and witches roamed the maize fields, the streams and the forests at night. Occasionally some of us children would get strangely and inexplicably ill, developing strange and huge boils at awkward places or coughing incessantly for months. At those times we would either be taken to the local clinic, the local herbalist or to the African Independent Churches, which had no chapel but met in people's houses. At these

churches there was much noise, loud singing and dancing. What capti-
vated me at these African Independent Church services was the sight of
grown people lobbing around to the tune and rhythm of African gospel
singing, and adults crying out loud in orderly liturgical disorder. There it
seems to me that everyone was free to speak to his or her God or gods
in a language and manner they saw fit. I remember vigorous and never-
ending circles dances in the middle of which would be the sick and the
afflicted. A few times I have stood with other sick people in the middle
of that swirling circle, my ears bursting from the singing, smelling the
sweat of the worshippers, feeling their heat protecting me. Such circle
dances were only interrupted by the occasional collapse of an old man or
woman who could take it no more. Then would follow the prayer rituals
of reviving the fainted; if all else failed, some libations would be poured
on the ground to invoke ancestral intervention. As youngsters we also
assisted the traditional doctors in their training of new traditional doc-
tors. Our role was to hide the pig gallbladder, the unassisted finding of
which is the ultimate examination in one's training as a traditional doc-
tor. We will all stare in amazement as the trainee doctor would retrace
our steps to the place where the gall bladder was hidden. Yet on Satur-
days almost all of the village, the traditional doctors included, would go
to the mission station chapel for worship.[48]

This biographical illustration strikingly clarifies the nature and identity
of African Christianity as a new religion. First, the biographical illus-
tration indicates—and this is the intention of its narrator—that African
Christianity is indeed an African religion. There is not much of a differ-
ence between the practice of this religion and other African religions—
the role of ancestors, the form and style of worship, object in worship
(snakes, Morula tree, and so on), rites of passage, the belief in supernat-
ural and natural causation of illness, among other things—show that
African Christianity is just another African religion.[49] Second, although
African Christianity is an African religion, its links with the Christian
church also make it a Christian religion. Third, "African Christianity is
a new but coherent African religion and not merely a battleground for
Africanity and Christianity."[50] Fourth, while African Christians "do not
experience their religion in terms of conflict between Africanity and
Christianity,"[51] their religious practice suggests that African Christian-

---

[48] T.S. Maluleke, "African Christianity as African religion: Beyond the contextual-
ization paradigm," in E. Conradie (ed.), *African Christian Theologies in Transformation* (Stel-
lenbosch: EFSA, 2004), 188–189.
[49] See Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 297–299.
[50] Maluleke, "African Christianity," 188.
[51] Maluleke, "African Christianity," 190.

ity is more African traditional religion than Christianity. Fifth, African Christianity proceeds "upon an unpredictable dialectic of selection, affirmation, rejection, capitulation, resistance and blending."[52]

Without any attempt to evaluate the contours of African Christianity as a new religion, I shall proceed to discuss the first question raised earlier: What is the character of Christian identity in Africa in the midst of African Christianity as a new religion?

Some Concluding Proposals

The question is no longer what the character of Christian identity in Africa is. Bediako has made this clear in several works, some cited earlier in this essay. Maluleke's biographical illustration clarifies the meaning and character of African Christianity's identity. The unanswered question would be what gives Christianity its own identity in Africa? This question is also answered from different perspectives. For some in African Christianity it is the African traditional religious experience. For some in mainline Christianity it is Jesus Christ regardless of the contextual environment within which a church is located. This does not, however, mean that African Christians in African Christianity do not worship Jesus. What distinguishes Christianity from African Christianity is the centrality of African experience—the extent of Africa's influence on Christianity—in African Christianity. Must we then cease to be Africans in order to be Christians? The answer is no!

As the Dutch theologian Abraham van de Beek argues, we all have multiple identities. Referring to himself, Van de Beek says, "I am a father, a husband, a neighbour, a professor of theology, Dutchman, Christian and many more. All these identify who I am."[53] The same applies to me and others. We have our identities as black Africans, theologians, African theologians, Christians, Reformed Christians, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal, African Independent/Initiated Church Christians, among others. None of us can be identified by all these identities. But we certainly have more than one identity. In Africa, being an African alone does not fully identify

---

[52] Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 300–301.
[53] A. van de Beek, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek—or both Jew and Greek?", in E.A.J.G. Van der Borght, D. van Keulen & M.E. Brinkman (eds.), *Faith and Ethnicity* Vol. 1., (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 21.

someone. This applies to African Christians as well. Reformed Christians in Africa have their identity as black African Reformed Christians, colored Reformed Christians, and white Reformed Christians. This is more common in southern Africa than other parts of Africa. In West Africa we have our ethnic and cultural identities. We are Reformed Christians, but some of our Reformed churches are identified with specific ethnic groups. Hence, we have an ethnically determined Reformed Christian identity. As Van de Beek says, identity problems arise when we begin to ask "how these identities are interrelated, for all together they compose [our identity]."[54] It makes a difference, Van de Beek argues, "whether my identity as a husband is dominant over my identity as a professor or the other way around. The interrelations in the multiplicity of identities define who I really am."[55] This is precisely the origin of the identity crisis in Christian Africa: whether our identity as Africans should be dominant over our identity as Christians. On this there is no consensus. If our previous discussion (in this essay) is anything to go by, African Christianity insists that the identity of its Christians as Africans is dominant over their identity as Christians. Other Christians see their identity as Christians taking precedence over their cultural identities as Africans. Our Christian history in Africa has shown that racially, ethnically, culturally, and even linguistically determined Christian identity can only reduce Christianity into a 'messy mushroom soup' that will never be nutritious.[56]

Advocates of African Christianity as a new religion have taken a bold step by initiating the notion that African Christianity is a new religion.[57] Clearly, at least within the circles of African Christianity as a new religion, the identity of African Christians as Africans is dominant over their identity as Christians. The "milestones of African Christianity"[58] indicate that proponents of the new religion are rather more concerned about their identity as Africans than as Christians. Hence, the religion

[54] Van de Beek, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek," 21.

[55] Van de Beek, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek," 21.

[56] See J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); *Liberating Reformed Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids/Cape Town: Eerdmans Publishing Company/David Philip, 1991); Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation," 34–40; Maluleke, "Christianity in a distressed Africa," 324–340; D.J. Smit, "On the Christian Life: Gospel and Ethics from a South African perspective," unpublished lectures delivered during *The Joseph So Lectures on Culture and Ethics*, China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, 2–6 January 2005, 2–98.

[57] See Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 289–294; "African Christianity," 181–190.

[58] Maluleke, "Black missiologist," 290–292.

itself is defined more explicitly by Africa and its religious experience than by Jesus Christ and the religion of his followers—Christianity. Of course, the modern identity problem in African Christianity has a lot to do with the quest for liberation.[59] This point is clearly expressed by Bediako as follows:

> The 'intellectual' perception of the identity problem in Africa has its roots in the history of the contact of African peoples with the West. Although the regular contact between Africa and West existed centuries before, the problem of African identity with which we are concerned came to head in the nineteenth century when increasing Western cultural and political penetration and dominance in Africa coincided with an equally massive Western missionary enterprise. It is the African reactions to that cumulative Western impact on African life and on African self-identity which have shaped and conditioned the twentieth-century perception of the problem.[60]

The appropriateness of the African endeavor expressed in the above quote cannot be over-emphasized. However, when the preoccupation with cultural identity becomes a stumbling block to the clarification of our identity as fallen humans saved together in Christ, there is every reason to seek anew to recover our lost identity as Christians. Our interpretation and portrayal of Christ, who gives Christians their own distinctive identity, in African contexts should not unavoidably lead to a confused Christian identity.

---

[59] The Scandinavian New Testament scholar at Uppsala, Kari Syreeni, in a different context, argues that "*identity as a basic concept falls in the hermeneutical middle ground between theology ("truth") and Politics ("power")*" [italics original]. See See Kari Syreeni, "Identity, remembrance and transformation as key concepts in biblical hermeneutics," in *die Skriflig* 35(4) (May 2001), 537.

[60] K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh/ Maryknoll: Edinburgh University Press/Orbis Books, 1995), 5.

THE INEVITABILITY OF CULTURE AND ITS CONTINUED STRUGGLE WITH CHRISTIANITY: A CHALLENGE FOR REFORMED THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

Rothney Stok Tshaka

Introduction

The issue of culture and its relationship to theology continues to remain a contentious issue within Reformed theological circles in South Africa and perhaps Africa as a whole. The transportation of Christianity to Africa has left the impression that Christianity is generally a symbiosis of this faith with Western culture. Western ways of living has become synonymous with Christianity. The result has been a synchrony of western cultures and Christianity.

This synchrony of Western cultures with Christianity has prompted many to question the possibility of a faith that can resist its assimilation of culture (and any culture for that matter). This paper seeks to ponder the question "whether African Reformed Christians can continue to assert their Africanness and at the same time maintain their reformed ecclesial tendencies."[1]

The implied tension is reminiscent of the same tension that became prevalent during the haydays of apartheid, whereby black Reformed people had to justify the fact that they were both black and Reformed. The need for Africans to assert their Reformedness occurred during a period in the history of the Reformed faith in South Africa where Reformedness was seen as tantamount to being 'white.' Today the challenge is not for African Reformed people to defend their Reformedness, but to assert their Africaness in the wake of the challenges that they are

---

[1] The tendencies to which we are referring to here are primarily the Reformed principle of *sola scriptura, sola fidei, and sola gratia* that has tremendous ramifications for African Rreformed Christians who had never been able to hygienically dissect culture from faith in Jesus Christ.

confronted with, as well as to deal with the mounting criticism from those who had become disillusioned with mainline Christian theology that, in most cases, seems to be content with its dismissal of any attempt of engaging African culture.

In attempting to deal with the indicated challenge, this paper remains grateful to the response of many African intellectuals who continues to instill pride in many Africans. It will be pointed out that although this paper agrees with the need to redefine Christian identity in the light of initiatives such as the famous African renaissance call, these calls have to realize that they are not made in vacuums, but shall have to wrestle with the broader global reality.

The Reformed Church in South Africa certainly needs to do much more to domesticate this ecclesiastical tradition in Africa. At the same time, the pace followed in terms of the progress made in this direction cannot be uncritically dictated to by African Traditional Religions (ATR's), but Reformed theology must devise its own yardstick of measuring progress and failure encountered.

The Essence of Barth in a Changed and Changing South African Context?

The recent assertions of Africans in the wake of the participation of Africa in its own affairs without having to bow to the dictates of European forces impels African Reformed theology to give meaningful consideration to the question of who and what defines a Reformed Christian in Africa today.

While theology today must always remain aware of the challenges that multiply on a daily basis, it nonetheless should not be forgotten that theology in Africa is consistently faced with a monumental task of explaining itself to the rest of the world. The need for African Reformed theology to reassert itself in the light of the calls made by those who are convinced that theology practiced in Africa has to reckon seriously with African realities has instilled a degree of suspicion in those who still evoke European theologians in their theology deliberations. In conceding that African Reformed theology has to deal with its peculiar African reality, it has become imperative for us to continually explain the unique situation from which the theology of Barth emanated from. Therefore, to say that Barth was a male and European theologian is to state the obvious, yet such a piece of obvious detail is

imperative for understanding the need to wrestle with this theological giant in Africa, and in particularly in South Africa today.

Granting that the South African situation has changed, and continues to change, inevitably suggests that to do theology in South Africa today has become very challenging in that it impels this theology to deal with issues that are raised in other [South] African sectors. Although Barth's theology, like so many other theologies, remains, in certain instances, timed and therefore bound up in its own *Sitz im Leben*, it nonetheless speaks with a particular force, and in that way transcends his cultural inclinations and bears relevance for us today in South Africa. Consequently, it helps us to deal with the numerous challenges with which this society is faced.

While his reflections remains bound to the problems of his epoch and his people, by the time that his work appeared, as much as it was appreciated for its historical value and relevance, it was more appreciated for its suggestiveness of its categories of theology and politics in the ensued progressive contexts. Barth's continent-wide and even transatlantic acclaim was born because of the cultural events that plunged his theological reflection into a state of crisis.

Culture has always proven to be a subject that has to be reckoned with. It could not be ignored by people such as Barth during his theological enterprises, and as will be noted, it cannot be ignored by the church in this current era. The aspect of culture is especially imperative as we ponder the economic and political challenges that stares the church in the face. The past few years have seen the rigorous self-assertion of African people. These assertions were manifested in talks that were related to 'African Renaissance' as well as institutions such as the African Union et al.

To maintain that we ought to reckon with Barth undoubtedly comes across as being very presumptuous. It is an assertion that goes against the grain of the plea made especially by the African intelligentsia for the rebirth of Africa. However, it is our contention that as much as we are to pay heed to this call we nonetheless dare not leave an impression that Africa is best understood as an island. In asserting ourselves as African, we are to entertain the reality that the intervention of Europe in the process of our cultural development has robbed us of the possibility of seeing how this culture would have evolved. More importantly, we are to reckon with the reality that the concept culture, when interpreted in an African context, has a number of interpretations as well.

A meeting of about 470 African intellectuals held in South Africa in September of 1998 was a move to put this thought to task.[2] Within theological circles, many have started to question not only the methodological issues applied in theology, but have began to question whether African people in this country can do theology that is guided and governed by their own theological methods.[3] The justification for African people to think for themselves about issues that concern and affect them is necessary and relevant given the history of colonialization that has plagued this continent for ages. Boesak is therefore correct in maintaining that Christianity came to South *Africa* very much part and parcel of the colonialist project, and its role was practically a mirror image of the role of the established churches in Europe.[4]

Despite the fact that people like Barth were used as ammunition for combating apartheid, it cannot be denied that the fact that he is a European male will, for the most part, be treated with suspicion. However, who Barth is as a person should not be used to dismiss the type of theology that he stood for and advocated. Many attempts have been made to display Barth as still relevant and significant to the new situation in which theology is conducted in the world today. It also needs to be added that the theological and therefore political situation in which these questions are posted today differs tremendously from the situation in which Barth did his theology.

Africa is a continent with numerous religions, and this fact brings the theology of Barth into sharp criticism since his views with regard to other religions is not very encouraging. He called one of his early the-

---

[2] This meeting was historic because it was the first time in South Africa that such a conference was organized in which the subject of African renaissance was deliberated. It is worth noting that the subject of African (Christian) theology was not discussed. The conference pondered, among other themes, the theme of what African renaissance entailed. It probed who and what an African is *et al*. For details of the deliberations cf. M.W. Makgoba. (ed.). *African Renaissance* (Johannesburg: Mafube Publishing, 1999).

[3] In June of 2003 a conference was convened at the University of the Western Cape with the theme: "African Christian theologies in transformation: *Respice et prospice*." The conference was hosted by the Department of Religion and Theology and this conference reflected on the years of theological studies at that institution. A number of renowned African theologians spoke about the need for theology on this continent to wrestle honestly with a theological method which would reflect the essence of Africa. Cf. E. Conradie (ed.), *African Christian Theologies in Transformation* (Cape Town: EFSA, 2004).

[4] A. Boesak, "Truth Crushed to Earth will rise again: Christian theology in Africa —Looking back," in E. Conradie (ed.), *African Christian Theologies in Transformation* (Cape Gown: EFSA 2004) 9. Emphasis added.

ological works *Christian Dogmatics*, and then almost immediately back-paddles and replaces Christian with church, hence his Magnus Opus is entitled *Church Dogmatics*. Even from this little correction, it cannot be denied that Barth has a specific audience in mind, and that audience is those who are aligned with the church. To speak about religion is one thing; however, to speak about the different contexts is another imperative subject that we have to address lest we contort the gist of Barth's theology.

With regard to his views of Africa, there are only a few hints with which we are confronted with here and there. We can only speculate that the views that he had of Africa were on par with those held by his peers at the time. For instance, while he was still an assistant pastor in Geneva, he felt that the religious knowledge among his pupils (in catechism) was no better than "that to be found among Negro children on the Gold Coast."[5] It must, however, also be pointed out that Barth ought to be commended for deliberately refusing to publish his works on ethics since he was of the view that his work on the orders of creation could be misconstrued for the purpose of racism.[6] This refusal has resulted in him being criticized for not doing much with the subject of ethics and its relationship to theology.

From the few extracts of Barth's meetings with other people, and therefore with other cultures, it can be inferred that Barth was indeed open to listen to them. An important example is certainly his visit to the Netherlands in 1926. Upon arrival in the Netherlands, accompanied by his wife and sixteen students, Barth was impressed by "a quite independent form of Reformed Christianity and a very distinctive type of man [sic]".[7] At the end of his visit, he gave a lecture on the relationship of church and culture that remains an important piece of work.[8]

It is, however, unfair to Barth to judge him on the little that he said about Africa and its people or his silence with regard to Christian theological reflection in Africa. Yet if we insist that he has to be judge on these matters, we would be elevating him to the status of someone

---

[5] E. Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1976) 55.

[6] Webster argues that this work remained unpublished during his lifetime because Barth still appeared to be advocating the idea of the orders of creation that he vigorously rejected in the 1930s. Cf. J. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 41.

[7] Busch, *Karl Barth.* 170.

[8] Cf. K. Barth, *Theology and Church* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1962), 334.

who was suppose to have an answer to all the possible questions. Such an elevation will certainly misconstrue his theology in general. It has been said that his theology played a pivotal role during the church's struggle against the theological legitimacy of apartheid.[9] It is, however, also imperative that we evaluate him in light of the new and changing context that we attempt to do theology in.

The confessional character that lingers emphatically in his theology is precisely the ability of affording Christian theology the freedom of making itself plausible in a particular context. This is nowhere more strongly emphasized than in a reply he made to one of his Asian students. The question of the importance of a context in understanding Barth's theology was highlighted when Barth responded to Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, who inquired from Barth as to the right interpretation of his theology in a Japanese context. Barth's response to him intimated that the Japanese context was fundamental, and therefore the possibility looms large that his theology might not be relevant in a strange and removed context.[10] Barth was concerned about the possibility of the full comprehension of his theology once transported from its original context. This concern was raised in another instance when Barth cautioned Martin Rumscheidt that his theological qualms with some of his teachers ought to take into account that he had transcended them. Rumscheidt later wrote his dissertation on the subject of Barth and his once favored teacher, Adolf von Harnack.[11]

The renaissance of Africa and the changed and changing contexts in which theology finds itself today poses significant questions of how we interpret European theology. A few black theologians (at least in South Africa) have written extensively about Barth's theology. Among those can be counted some of South Africa's most prominent theologians such as Dolamo, Mofokeng, *et al.* Because of the difference between Christian theology and its exponents in Africa and Christian theology and its exponents in Europe, it would be frivolous to insist that the practice and comprehension of this faith should be the same.

---

[9] Cf. C. Villa-Vicencio, (ed.). *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988).

[10] Cf. R.S. Tshaka, *Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the confessional theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession.* Dth dissertation (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2005), 211.

[11] Cf. M. Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An analysis of the Barth-Harnack correspondence of 1923/4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

Just as is the case with theology in Europe, as far as African (Christian) theology is concerned, culture plays a pivotal role in the life of the church. Maluleke has tried to illustrate how different an African Christian is from his/her European counterpart.[12] In an autobiographical fashion, Maluleke demonstrated how our African culture and customs complimented our African Christianity.[13]

Consonant to Maluleke, many African Christians does not see themselves as suffering from Du Boisian twoness.[14] The two realities that are obviously implied in the words African and Christianity clearly suggest the coming together of two realities and are, consequently, vexed with the awareness that one can easily be assimilated by the other. Maluleke was, however, not the first to detect the unavoidable tension between these two realities. The instrumental work of Boesak entitled that black and Reformed deal with the mentioned tension, although on a different level.[15]

It cannot be denied that the collision of these two entities had to a certain degree to do with culture. In the case of Du Bois, it was the question of being African and American. In the case of Maluleke, it was a question of being African and Christian, and in the case of Boesak

---

[12] Cf. T. Maluleke, "African Christianity as African religion: beyond the contextualization paradigm," in E. Conradie (ed.). *African Christian theologies in Transformation* (Cape Town: EFSA, 2004), 181.

[13] Maluleke's description of how these two entities are intertwined is impressive and is reminiscent of many African experiences. What therefore follows is merely a paraphrased version of the main idea that he hoped to point out. It is paraphrased because the situation is very similar to the situation in which I was raised. He begins by making reference to the household in which he was raised, which was Christian, then continues to point out the numerous stories told by grandparents about issues such as witchcraft and the ceremonies made in remembrance of the ancestors. While this was prevalent, the reading of the Bible ensued and going to church on Sundays was obligatory. A need to question the relationship between these two practices never occurred since they were seen to be complimenting each other from the onset. While being ardent church goers, when things went wrong in the lives of Christians it was not uncommon for such a person to consult a herbalist or to seek the counsel of a Sangoma. Cf. Maluleke, "African Christianity as African religion: beyond the contextualization paradigm," 188.

[14] W.E.B. Du Bois speaks about a psychological condition that African-Americans are suffering from. He describes this condition using the concept "twoness"—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. W.E.B. Du Bois cited in: J. Montmarquet and H. William (eds.). *Reflections: An Anthology of African American Philosophy* (Belmont: Wardsworth, 2000), 9–13.

[15] Cf. A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinist tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984).

before Maluleke, it was a question of being black and Reformed. The fundamental question, however, is whether the relationship between these identities has been successfully dealt with? Are they reconcilable or are they not simply two *personas* that are worn by one individual? And is one perhaps considered superior to the other? One of the ways in which these two identities were dealt with was that the African aspect has traditionally and continues still today (for the lack of adequately dealing with it) been chastised as heathen. The ignorance that Westerners had of Africa, and therefore its cultures, made it easy for them not to entertain the merits of African cultures. What is most fascinating today is that it is not primarily Westerners that continue with the rebuttal of this aspect, but this is today successfully continued by the very Africans who have drank from the wells of their European masters.

Although Barth speaks of culture as we have already noted, it is worth pondering whether in his understanding of the concept culture African culture is included. Nevertheless, we are not to discredit him on this issue; but instead, we are to pay heed to the reasons that substantiated his intolerance of the intrusion culture into theology. This intolerance, however, needs to be located within its particular context.

The result of a cultural intrusion into theology has seen the theological justification of the First World War, the exclusion of Jews from the ecclesial positions during Hitler and the German Christians, and it has seen the theological justification of apartheid in South Africa to mention but a few. The caution applied to culture when one is involved with theology has also rendered Barth rather an unworthy source of reference. Yet, having pointed this out, it needs to be stated that Barth's reservations for the concoction of culture and theology ought to be heeded. Barth understands culture as the sum of the aims proceeding from human activity and, in turn, stimulating human activity; or more in accordance with idealism and more in the sense of the German word *Kultur*, as the idea of the final goal and the totality of norms by which human activity should be guided.[16]

---

[16] Cf. K. Barth, "Church and Culture," in K. Barth. *Theology and Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 337.

The Essence of Black Theology and Its
Contribution to Reformed Theology in SA

Many of the prominent black theologians that would latter expose the theological underpinnings given to the apartheid ideology as a lie and a heresy were mostly people who grew up with Christianity as their earliest ideological frame of reference. Theologians as well as politicians belong to this category.[17] The chief characteristic of black theology was the oppressive situation in which black people found themselves.

Black theology in South Africa arises from a context of racism, suffering, and the exploitation of black people. Many South African theologians have convincingly argued that black theology in South Africa is existential.[18] It was the socio-economic and political situations that gave birth to this theology, and this served as a distinguishing factor of this theology. Boesak puts it this way: "Black theology is the black person's attempt to come to terms theologically with his black situation. It seeks to interpret the gospel in such a way that the situation of blacks will begin to make sense."[19]

Black theology in South Africa was precipitated by the then dominant Afrikaner theology that subjected black people to its mercy.[20] In reaction to white dominant theology, many black theologians insisted that the black race's experience should be held as the prerequisite for doing theology. It must be said that the criterion for doing black theology was stimulated by the distrust between black and white people that soon ensued because of the apartheid system. This is best described by Steve Biko's famous "Black man you are on your own" statement. That the black experience was the most important criteria for doing black theology is unavoidable.

The suspicion and disappointment that black people had with white liberals reached its zenith with the formation of the South African

---

[17] Among most of the 'radical' prominent politicians can be included the likes of Robert Sobukwe, Anton Lembede, Albert Luthuli et al. For a concise exposition of the lives of these politicians cf. G. Gerhart. *Black Power in South Africa: The evolution of an Ideology* (California: University of California Press, 1978).

[18] Cf. B. Moore, "What is Black theology?" in B. Moore (ed.), *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 5.

[19] A. Boesak. *Farewell to Innocence: A social-Ethical study on Black theology and Black power*. Dissertation (Kok: University of Kampen, 1976), 17.

[20] For a thorough overview of the evolution of apartheid ideology and its theological endorsement, cf. R.S. Tshaka. *The URCSA and a renewed public calling*. Mth thesis (Amsterdam: Free University of Amsterdam, 2004).

Student Organization (SASO). The political demarcations of race and color had tested the tangibility of the solidarity that some whites purported to have had with blacks.[21] This distrust was justified to a certain extent given the conduct displayed by some white liberal students at times. Boesak observed in his dissertation that white liberals needed to identify more radically with the struggle that black people were experiencing. He wrote: "This farewell to innocence means …that the traditional role of the white liberal is thoroughly re-evaluated. The question is no longer whether whites are willing to do something for blacks, but whether whites are willing to identify with what the oppressed are doing to secure their liberation. And what whites are doing about in their own communities."[22]

With the ostensible debate of what method would best suit a black theological hermeneutic that would challenge apartheid theology and its ideology, one can already detect that those on the forefront of this struggle realized that they could not solely rely on African mechanism as means of combating this evil, hence black theology's employment of the Marxist tool of social analysis. This method coerces theology to scrutinize the material condition of those who were traditionally located at the periphery of society.[23]

Black theology appeared on South Africa soil as an intellectual subject that was transported from the shores of the United States of America. It was made possible in South Africa through the activities of the then University Christian Movement (UCM) of 1971. This movement was established in 1961 with the initiative by the likes of Archbishop Selby Taylor of the Anglican Church of South Africa.[24] Black theologians in South Africa who have engaged Barth have realized that the subject of his theology is Christ and that such a subject had to be brought into critical debate with the new contexts in which they found themselves.[25]

---

[21] Cf. R.S. Tshaka. *URCSA and a renewed public calling*, 27.

[22] Boesak. *Farewell to innocence*, 11–12.

[23] Cf. T.A. Mofokeng, "The evolution of the Black struggle," in I. Mosala and B. Tlhagale (eds.). *The unquestionable right to be free* (Johannesburg: Skotaville publishers, 1986), 125.

[24] The purpose of founding this movement was so that it remains multiracial and ecumenical in character and will thus fill the gap which had rose due to the split of the Christian Association into exclusively African, colored, and white association in accordance with the apartheid structure.

[25] Cf. T.A. Mofokeng. *The Crucified among the Crossbeares: Towards a Black Christology*. Dissertation. (Kok: Kampen University, 1983).

Another imperative aspect which we have to mention briefly here is the question of African theology. We have, until now, dealt with black theology primarily because we believe that it precipitated the assertion of black Reformed people during the apartheid regime. It is, however, clear that many have advocated for the independence of African theology from black theology. One such theologian is Motlhabi, a one time protagonist of black theology. When responding to Motlhabi's article in which he argues that the time has arrived whereby black theology needs to make way to African theology, Maluleke vehemently rejects this approach and believes that Motlhabi reached his conclusion without fundamentally understanding what black theology was all about.[26] We, however, agree with Motlhabi since black theology dealt primarily with the socio-economic and political issues and did not necessarily deal with the integration of our Africanness and Christian theology. The critique leveled against black theology is that it has done well in addressing the depressing socio-economic and political conditions of black people, but failed dismally in exfoliating the negativity surrounding African beliefs.

Black theology and for that matter, black consciousness, should be credited for instilling into black people a sense of self worth and pride. This theology should be applauded for denying whites in South Africa the right of dictating the program that should be undertaken for the blacks' liberation, yet it cannot be denied that it did considerably less in cultivating a sense of pride in African beliefs and ways of living.

The Ambiguous Nature of the Concept 'African Theology'

We are citing Thabo Mbeki's view of an African[27] at length in order to put our assertion that Africa and Africans are so intertwined with the world and therefore with other cultures that it has become almost impossible to separate one aspect from the other into context. In doing this we also hope to deal briefly with the importance of context and

---

[26] Cf. T. Maluleke, "Black theology lives!—On a permanent Crisis" (JBTSA, 9: (1) (May) 1995), 1ff. Maluleke criticizes Mothlabi on a number of points where he (Mothlabi) seems to call into question the significance of black theology and opts for African theology.

[27] "I owe my being to the Khoi and the Sun whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape-they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide

thereby entertain the notion of culture. The importance of context here is informed by the numerous theologies that maintain that context ought to be a fundamental directive for doing theology today.

While we shall endeavor to confine ourselves to the subject matter indicated, we attempt this because we feel inclined to deal with the broader subject of the concept Africa that remains a controversial subject today. The controversy of this subject is underpinned by the fact that there are numerous definition of what Africa is, and therefore, the question of who and what an African is. An understanding of 'who and what' 'African' is is fundamental for one's participation in debates pertaining to African Reformed theology.

Despite the obvious fact that for the most part of its existence Africa has been separated (and deliberately so) from the rest of the world, it is also true that Africans (some more than the others) have been assimilated into European ways of living. The apparent perception that some Africans north of the equator have of South Africans—that the country is only geographically an African country—also informs the critique that is leveled against South Africans in their definition of 'who and what' an African is.

Self-evidently a definition of 'who and what' an African is differs from context to context, and therefore from interpretation to interpretation. It is, therefore, understandable to note that the aspirations held

our native land has ever seen, they who were first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perish in the result …I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home in our native land. Whatever their actions, they remain still part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the Far East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence…I am the grand child of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to the battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonor the cause of freedom. My mind and knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eyes and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk: I am the grandchild of Nongqause…I come to those who were transported from India and china, whose being resided in the fact, solely that both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that existence. Being part of all these people, and in my knowledge that none dare contest that assertion I shall claim that I am an African." Cf. T.M. Mbeki. *Africa: The time has come* (Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishing, 1998), 31–32.

by South Africans to speak about this subject is considered a late aspiration that has already been dealt with by Africans from other parts of Africa.[28]

Many South Africans have been criticized for their definition of who an African is. Kwesi Kwaa Prah intimates that Africans are people whose origin, cultures, and history derive from the African continent. In his view, Africans are in the first instance products of culture.[29] In speaking about culture, he concedes that culture is dynamic, and that there are therefore no real borders to cultures. However, Kwesi Kwaa Prah maintains that there are significant continuities within historical frames or periods.[30] Kwesi Kwaa Prah opposes the South African school of thought that in its definition emphasizes that an African is anybody committed to the African continent.[31] Admittedly, the criteria for determining who and African is is problematic. As much as Kwesi Kwaa Prah understands that culture is dynamic, he nonetheless leaves an impression that African culture is not part of the broader cosmos and, consequently, becomes stagnant.

The subject of Africa is also controversial at another level. The written history about South Africa begins with the arrival of a few Europeans to the Cape in 1652. The pseudo understanding of Africa as the 'dark Continent' in need of serious enlightenment thus became an inculcated view in the minds and moral fibers of white people. More importantly, the belief that white and Europe represented the epitome of civilization while black and Africa represented the reverse had forced many whites to maintain the 'European tag.' This is manifested in the many European and non-European signs that became the trade mark of the then apartheid regime.

Biko[32] calls the year 1652 a rather unfortunate year because it was the year in which South Africans experienced a process of acculturation—

---

[28] In my conversations with my colleagues from West Africa and elsewhere in Africa, I have come to note that they do not see the debate concerning what and who an African is as one of the subjects that warrant their attention. For some of them the question, "Who is an African," is a given question. An African is fundamentally someone through whose veins African blood flows. As long as this is the case, one can never will away one's Africanness. It is unavoidable.

[29] Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "African Renaissance or Warlordism"? in W. Makgoba (ed.). *African Renaissance*. (Johannesburg: Mafube Publishers, 1999), 38 f.

[30] Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "African Renaissance or Warlordism"?, 38 f.

[31] Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "African Renaissance or Warlordism"?, 38.

[32] Stephen Bantu Biko is one of the founding fathers of the black consciousness movement in South Africa. The said movement is the philosophical counterpart to

which for him suggests a process of a fusion of different cultures.[33] It is inevitable that many Africans remain convinced that there is much that African culture can contribute to Christian theology. Biko reminds us, for instance, of simple issues that are well-known among Africans which is the traditional African culture. He refers to issues such as conversations and the place of the stranger. He holds that a conversation is determined by age and division of labor. Thus one would find all boys whose job was to look after cattle periodically meeting at popular spots to engage in conversation about their cattle, girlfriends, parents, heroes, etc.

Concerning the stranger, Biko rightly maintains that within Western culture, this person is always met with the question "what can I do for you?" According to him, this is an attitude that sees people not as themselves, but as agents for some particular function either to one's disadvantage or advantage that is something alien to African culture.[34] By making reference to this cardinal quality in African culture, Biko touches on a profound issue, which is the belief held by most Africans in the inherent goodness of all humanity.

Within theological circles, the subject of 'who and what' and African is also prevalent. With the commemoration of thirty years of theological studies at the University of Western Cape, African theologians debated the issue of African (Christian) theology at length.[35] What was fascinating was that the question of 'who and what' an African is was not discussed, although it is assumed at all times that it is a given question. Understanding that there exists a number of different definitions, we shall deal with African Christian theology in South Africa by relying on Mbeki's definition of the notion African.

It is our contention that until the subject of what and who an African is dealt with adequately and sincerely, theological debates in South Africa will continue to follow after what has already been decided upon in other disciplines. Admitting that there are cardinal issues that makes Christian theology Christian, our new situation, which is a situation in

---

black theology. He became particularly popular after the banning of the ANC and the PAC in the 1960s. He was arrested and died in police custody in 1977.

[33] S. Biko, "Some African cultural concepts," in S. Biko. *I write what I like* (New York: Harper and Row publishers, 1978), 40–41.

[34] Biko, "Some African cultural concepts," 42.

[35] See the various essays by prominent theologians from south, west and east African countries in E. Conradie (ed.), *African Christian Theologies in Transformation* (Cape Town: EFSA, 2004).

which we attempt to assert our Africanness, calls for us to exfoliate the distorted perception which uses were designed by European missionaries out of ignorance of our African cultures. It was Biko who endeavored to correct the misconception that many had of African religious life. Biko stated that:

> We believed in one God, we had our own community of saints through whom we related to our God, and we did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship in isolation from the various aspects of our lives. Hence worship was not a specialized function that found expression once a week in a scheduled building, but rather it featured in our wars, in our beer drinking, our dances and our customs in general. Whenever Africans drank, they would first relate to God by giving a portion of their beer away as a token of thanks. When anything went wrong at home they would offer sacrifice to God to appease him and atone for their sins. There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man-hence we took it for granted that all people at death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect.[36]

A second issue is at stake here, and that is while an African view point as intimated by Biko can serve the purpose of enhancing our Christian faith, the ignorance of what is happening on this continent remains one of the major obstacles. Alluding to the very abstract by Biko, Pityana criticizes Biko for not having presented a critique of the religion that he espoused, and that Biko did not understand it in its dynamic meta-narrative expression.[37] Pityana seems to be ignoring the double persona that was also lurking in Biko. Biko does not see the need of eviscerating his Africanness in order to be a good modern Christian. Biko was merely stating a general truth for every black South African.[38] Having said what he said, it is dangerous to conclude, based on this, that Biko was not a modern man. In our view, Biko was very much a modern man, as he was aware of the fact that he was African. That he was a modern man is encapsulated in the words:

---

[36] S. Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity," in B. Moore (ed.) *The challenge of Black theology in South Africa* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 42.

[37] Pityana, "The renewal of African moral values," in M. Makgoba (ed.). *African Renaissance*, 145.

[38] I am well aware of the debates concerning the designation 'black South African.' The existing school of thought that maintains that Africans are only those who are natives of this continent is, in our view, problematic given the fact that we espouse the view of who is an African that is epitomized by Mbeki.

> There is a tendency to think of our culture as a static culture that was
> arrested in 1652 and has never developed since. The 'return to the bush'
> concept suggests that we have nothing to boast except lions, sex and
> drink. We accept that when colonization sets in it devours the indigenous
> culture and leaves behind a bastard culture that may thrive at the pace
> allowed it by the dominant culture.[39]

It goes without saying that the concept 'culture' remains controversial
in itself. Although it is a reality which the church (especially) cannot
ignore, a closer reading of this concept demonstrates that it is used at
times for selfish reasons. More importantly, one gets the impression that
inherent to it is its inclination to rob less dominant cultures of their
assertion.

   While it is our view that African culture(s) should be reviewed as
something that could enhance the church in Africa, this view should
be undertaken confessionally. By this we suggest that there exists a
need to challenge the fallacies that were spearheaded by European
missionaries—that African culture(s) are at best in contrast to the gos-
pel. In challenging these fallacies by calling upon the essence of cul-
ture(s) that can assist the church to address what faces it in Africa,
it is suggested that the Christian fundamentals remain the very ones
which are informed by the Holy Scripture. To ignore these fundamen-
tals would be to make Christian theology in Africa a caricature as well.
A confessional approach, therefore, means that we are to entertain the
views that call for the church in Africa to domesticate it, albeit we are
to listen to these calls critically.

Conclusion

During apartheid, it became urgent for African Reformed Christians to
assert their Reformedness. This exercise was facilitated by the arrival of
black theology in South Africa. However because black theology was
too narrowly focused on the socio-economic and political situation of
black people in general, it failed to integrate African ways of living with
the Reformed faith.

   This paper suggests a platform where Africans within the Reformed
faith can agree on ways of integrating these two, cardinal, existen-
tial facts of their being. It remains aware that African Christianity

---

[39] Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity," 45.

within the so-called mainline churches is vehemently critiqued for not doing enough to introduce African values in their theological reflections. ATR, it seems, is the only frame of reference because not many Reformed Christians have really entertained its criticism that the Reformed church is not doing enough to give it an African shade to this church.

It is conceded that the concept African Reformed theology is more problematic than black theology in that this theology seeks to find ways of reconciling African values with Christianity. Nevertheless, it must be stated that a need exists for this church to continually ponder the tension between these phenomena, and in that process, create for itself a frame of reference to which it will subscribe instead of allowing ATR to be the only frame of reference.

THE QUEST FOR AFRICAN
CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S IDENTITY

AKUA FRIMPONG

INTRODUCTION

Doing theology in Africa has been, for the last generation, predominantly a matter of relating Christian faith and traditional culture. The premise has been that African Christian identity will be secured only when the faith is interpreted in terms of traditional cultural categories.[1] Theologians have tried to show how the message of Jesus Christ has resonance within categories of the traditional African worldview.[2] African Christians yearn for healing, fullness of life, cultural identity, selfhood, and transformation of broken relationships. The quest is for a theology and an ethic that deal with the realities of the African people. African Christians want to break from the ethics of domination and control that are prevalent within middle-class Christianity, or Afro-European Christianity, and neo-colonial Africa. These theologians contend that an authentic African Christianity and theology must take the human condition seriously, including integrating Christian values with African spirituality and morality.[3]

African theologies that relate Christian faith to traditional culture have not really impacted the life of African Christian women since they have often ignored and rejected women's experiences and perspectives on African realities.[4] The Christian identity constructed by male scholars does not go deep enough to confront and dismantle both Christian and African traditional values, attitudes, beliefs, and structures that

---

[1] Nyambura Njoroge. *An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2000), 123–124.

[2] Kenneth Ross, "Crisis and Identity-Presbyterian Ecclesiology in Southern Malawi, 1891–1993," *The Journal of the Southern African Missiological Society* 23 (1997): 381.

[3] Njoroge, *African*, 123–124.

[4] Daisy Nwachuku, "The Christian Widow in African Culture," in *The Will to Arise*, Mercy Oduyoye and Kanyoro Musimbi (eds.) (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 56.

undervalue women. To a large extent, African and liberation theologies have been uncritical of cultural values that propagate sexism in the church and society. It appears as though men have assumed that attacking Western imposed values and structures will be enough to transform African communities.[5]

A second concern of African Christian women in their quest for identity is Christianity's relationships with other religions. Africa is a place of religious pluralism. There is tension between Christianity and Islam, and Christianity and African traditional religions. Some Africans—both church and non-church members—say, "Africans already have our own religion. It was arrogant for the White man to presume we needed theirs." The tension between Christianity and African traditional religions is escalating. Christians are exploring how much they can witness to their faith without being imperialistic. They seek to maintain the integrity and validity of their faith while acknowledging the inherent worth of the adherents of other religions. Is it possible for Christianity to stand on common ground with other religions and even to be instructed by them? Can such a vision be translated into social reality in Africa? It is argued here that the quest for African Christian identity should necessarily not be based on wholesome representation of inculturation, albeit that it is also important. Rather, our motivation for the quest of African Christian identity should first be a Christology that recognizes Christ as Lord in the midst of other religions (*lords*). A recognition that leads to an encounter with Jesus then becomes the basis for the affirming of one's faith and the critique of other religions/cultures. The liberating message of Jesus Christ also becomes the basis for removing oppressive structures in Christianity and for dehumanizing rituals and taboos in African religio-culture. In this paper it is argued that the search for meaning and identity in culture must be defined to include women's experiences. This search must inform the ongoing search and quest for an authentic and relevant African Christian woman's identity if women are going to have life and have it in abundance. African Christian women find their identity in Christ, who they have recognized and experienced as the eternal Word of God, liberator, and the hope of the whole world—African culture inclusive.

In an attempt to make a clear argument, women will be discussed in the context of the African religio-cultural tradition and the church in

---

[5] Njoroge, *African*, 123–124.

addition to a synopsis of the African Christian dilemma. This paper will show that Christian affirmation about the unique Christ in the midst of other religions is a necessity in the quest of an African Christian women's identity in the church and African culture. The paper seeks to discover African Christian women's identity in Christian and African religio-culture. How African Christian women apply Jesus' treatment of women to themselves and how they have been able to find their identity in him will also be presented.

Women in African Culture

Africa consists of many cultures and a wide variety of religions, but there are still some commonalities in the experiences and perspectives of African Christian women. The cultures are rich in spiritual traditions and metaphors with a strong emphasis on community, but in many places women are traditionally undervalued. Certain institutions and structures are established to support and maintain rituals, which have direct impact on women's lives irrespective of their social location. Rituals are very important in African religio-culture. Most of these rituals favor African men and place women in oppressive positions. Initiation rites that are intended to define women's identity instead serve to oppress them. For example, female circumcision marks the rites of the initiation of girls from childhood to adulthood in some cultures. One of the major reasons given for female circumcision includes the dampening of sexual desire in women to prevent promiscuity and maintain chastity between the ages of puberty and the time of marriage, and also to ensure fidelity in married women. Female circumcision is a grave health hazard to women as well as dehumanizing.[6] There are other controversial issues such as courtship, bride wealth, child marriages, polygamy, barrenness, levirate marriages, divorce, remarriage, widowhood rites, and sex taboos and practices. These elements of African culture militate against the African woman's image of herself.

In both the private and public spheres, the roles and images of African women are socially and culturally defined. Within this framework of operation, women have been socialized into a state of numbness. Culture silences many women in Africa and makes it impossi-

---

[6] Florence Dolphyne, *The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective* (Accra: Assemblies of God Literature Center Limited, 1997), 13.

ble for them to experience the liberating promises of God that are
found in the Bible. Women in African societies are valued for their
role as mothers, but at the same time, regarded as the purveyors of
evil and misfortune—often in the guise of witches, polluters of the
sacred, and spiritual sources of danger. Women are therefore excluded
in many ways in African religio-culture. The ritually 'dangerous' nature
of women is expressed in the notions about the polluting nature of
blood, especially blood of menstruation and of childbirth. As a result,
the role of women in Africa traditional religions is kept at the periph-
eries. Such traditions fail to affirm the humanity of African Christian
women. Unfortunately, modernization and Christianity have not done
much for the African Christian women with respect to these elements
in African culture.

AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Women experience religious marginalization, exclusion, and subordi-
nation for hermeneutical, cultural, and historical reasons. Such experi-
ences have affected, limited, distorted, and even subverted the African
Christian woman's identity. In many parts of Africa, issues of purity and
impurity deeply influence and limit the role of women in the church.
This affects both the Reformed and the African Independent church
families.[7] Women have been socialized to private, male-dependent roles
in the church, and this has kept most women from exercising reli-
gious leadership. It has therefore deprived women of a sense of them-
selves and limited their imagination in regard to what services they
might render.[8] As a result of this socialization, most women have devel-
oped the tendency to accept the monopoly of leadership and author-
ity by the men with whom they work as normal and unquestionable.
Women who depend on men for affirmation and approval are very
threatened by the emergence of leadership potential in other women.
Indeed, many women actually mistrust women in ministerial positions
and prefer to work with men. Such women attribute to themselves,
and to other women, the stereotypical traits of flightiness, lack of con-

---

[7] Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 20.

[8] Joseph Edusa-Eyison. "Women in Church Leadership: Focus on the Methodist and Presbyterian Church in Ghana," *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, 6 (1996): 56.

fidentiality, poor judgment, sentimentality, and lack of intelligence that they have been socialized to regard as characteristics of women whose appropriate role is in the private sphere and in subordination to men. It is feared that if such practices become entrenched for future generations, it will be very difficult to have women in leadership positions who would mentor as well as become role models for young women.

Although women fill a majority of church pews every Sunday and prayer and social meetings during the week, they are kept silent in decision-making.[9] Many African churches have resisted including women in leadership positions. The most common argument is no longer theological, but cultural: African cultures do not allow women to lead men. Such an argument seems to deliberately ignore African cultures that allow women to be leaders at shrines as priestesses and mediums, as well as cultures that have female queens and chiefs. There is then a contradiction in the way that the church in Africa has preached about the equality of all humanity in Jesus Christ while in practice excluding women from the Eucharistic ministry.[10]

Synopsis of the African Woman's Dilemma

Kanyoro maintains that the African Christian woman often walks with one foot in African religion and culture and another in the church and Western culture. While the former is condemned as evil and traditional, the latter is passed for good and gospel. The dilemma of the African Christian cannot simply be wished away.[11] Christian women of Africa are a part of these two worlds.[12] In Africa, there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material, or the natural and the supernatural. Culture and religion is one and the same thing: they embrace all areas of one's life. African Christian women therefore find it difficult to break completely from traditional religion since it will be an attempt to break away from their heritage and scrap their African identity. The question is: must African Christian women renounce their own heritage in order to be Christian?

---

[9] Edusa-Eyison, "Women in Church," 56.

[10] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introductions in Feminist Theology 6: Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 81.

[11] Chinu Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 25.

[12] Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press Ltd., 2002), 13–15.

Must they live a double life—essentially taking up the claims of the church on Sunday and then denying them on Monday? Where is the boundary between the gospel and African religion? How much can the church adapt itself to the prevailing worldview and still remain recognizably Christian? How does the Christian church and African theology impact the daily lives of African women? What does it mean to be an African Christian woman in the context of African culture?

To answer these questions, a discussion of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the midst of other faiths is presented. Here this paper agrees with Kenneth Cragg that the actual history of the achievement in the ministry of Christ is able to stake its claims in the religious world of other faiths because we hold that the 'mind of Christ' generates the mind of the church about the Christ, and not the other way round.[13] The 'meaning of Christ' as given in the symbols of the Incarnation, the Cross, and the reconciling fellowship at the Lord's Table can become operative in human hearts because He belongs there. Whatever is ultimate in the religious universe of every 'tradition of response,' at least in intention, is Christ—that Christian affirmation about the unique Christ in the midst of the plurality of religions implies the provision in Christ-like humanity and vulnerability, of the conditions, which make the perception and recognition of Jesus as Christ the Lord possible.

Christian Affirmations are Recognitions not Assertions

According to Bediako, Christian affirmations about the uniqueness of Christ arise from the relationship to the claims and presuppositions that are made by persons of other faiths.[14] Thus there are no real grounds for affirming the uniqueness of Christ where there are no alternatives to be taken seriously.

In the words of the apostle Paul:

> For although there may be so called gods in heaven or on earth-as indeed there are many '*lords*', yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom they exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all and through whom we exist.[15]

---

[13] Kenneth Cragg, *The Christian and other religion: the Measure of Christ*, (London and Oxford: Mow Brays, 1977), 59.
[14] Bediako, "Christ is Lord," 50.
[15] I Corinthians 8: 5–6, RSV.

In the Apostle's statement, the very affirmation that there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, is made in relation to the other 'so called many lords.' In other words, affirmation of uniqueness has meaning as it relates to alternative claims. Christianity affirms the unique, divine self-disclosure that we have been given, and which culminates in our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, it has become customary in our contemporary generation for people to treat the affirmation about the unique Christ as essentially theological datum—as some sort of fixed grid of doctrinal position that has an inherent meaning in and of itself, irrespective of its validation in terms other than those in which it is stated, even in Christian circles. But affirmation about the unique Christ cannot be treated as fixed datum. Rather, being an integral part of total biblical revelation, it is to provide the conditions for humans to make an identical response of faith in the unique Christ, whom they reveal and of whom they bear witness.

In 2 Cor. 4: 13–14 Paul says:

> Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote: "*I believed and so I spoke*", we too believe, and speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into His presence.

The truth of biblical revelation, therefore, is not just truth to be 'believed in' as by mere intellectual or mental assent: it is truth to 'engage oneself in.' Paul, by his faith in Christ, finds that he has become a participant in the same truth as motivated the psalmist in Ps. 116: 10, to say: "I believed therefore I have spoken." So the truth of biblical revelation is the truth of recognition, but not of assertion. In that sense, Bediako maintains that biblical affirmations concerning the uniqueness of Christ are not arbitrary claims or assertions made *a priori* in the interest of or for the benefit of any particular community, not even of the Christian community, nor for men alone, but for both men and women.

In addition, Bediako says that the affirmations are meant, in centrifugal motion, to find their true significance in their application to the human whole. In reverse centripetal motion, these affirmations also provide the opportunity and the conditions for the recognition by others of their significance for them. In this way, biblical revelation can be described as a testimony that God has given especially concerning His Son, but also testified by those who, in response to the divine initia-

tive, become partakers by this recognition in the truth of the testimony of God. Biblical revelation as testimony is expected to generate similar recognition of the truth to which it testifies.

Thus, 1 John 1: 1–3 says:

> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life-the life was made manifest, and we saw it and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so you may have fellowship with us.

These verses show that the climatic divine self-disclosure was not in a set of documented religious formulae or theological propositions; but rather, in human life that could be seen, looked upon, and touched. And yet, the quality of that human life was such that it provided, and continues to provide, clues for its recognition as truly divine in its origin, as it was truly human in its manifestation. It is upon this recognition that Christian affirmation makes its claim that the human-divine life to which it bears witness is the light of the world, the life and hope of the whole of humankind, and of the cosmos itself. So we can say that for Christians, Christ, and not the Bible, is the eternal Word of God translated. In sum, the principle of recognition, focusing as it does on seeing Christ as God incarnate and accessible, becomes very critical for rightly understanding the true character of the Christian affirmation concerning the unique Christ.

Religions as a Tradition of Response

Christian affirmations about the unique Christ are not assertions; but rather, invitations to recognition. The fundamental question regarding the status of the unique Christ amid the plurality of religions is 'to be answered not by Christian claims alone,' but also by conclusions arrived at through working with the inward meanings of the religious worlds of other faiths. This is because the vindication of the status of the unique Christ is seen ultimately, as a demonstration that He is able to inhabit those worlds also as Lord.[16]

This article is concerned with religions, not as 'belief-systems,' but as the matrix in which men and women experience and respond to the

---

[16] Bediako, "Christ is Lord," 52.

'stuff of the sacred' in their human existence. John V. Taylor has said that peoples' religions may be regarded as follows:

> I believe it is truer to think of a religion as a people's tradition of response to the reality the Holy Spirit has set before their eyes. I am deliberately not saying that any religion is the truth, which the Spirit disclosed, nor even that it contains that truth. All we can say without presumption is that this is how men have responded and taught others to respond to what the Spirit made them aware of. It is the history of a particular answer, a series of answers, to the call and claim of him who lies beyond all religions.[17]

Every religion can be probed if we look at religion as 'a tradition of response' to the reality and disclosure of the Transcendent, but not so much for the measure of truth it contains as for the truth of the human response to the divine action within the tradition. As a tradition of response, every religion also displays within it, "the same tension between conservatism and development which characterizes all human response to the call of God which comes through the new situation."[18]

What Confronts Us in Christ?

If the Christian affirmation about the unique Christ in the midst of the plurality of religions encounters traditions of response to the disclosure of the Transcendent that the Holy Spirit sets before people, then we need to show how the spiritual witness to the life and ministry of Christ, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, is the clue to the yearnings and quests in the religious lives of people.

According to Bediako, there are three aspects of Christian affirmation about the unique Christ that readily stand out for consideration. These are:

1. The affirmation concerning the Incarnation; namely, the affirmation that in Christ, God humbled Himself and identified with humankind in Christ's birth as a human baby, born of a woman, and endured the conditions of 'normal' human existence. In other words, the Incarnation is supremely the unique sign and demonstration of divine vulnerability in history.

---

[17] John Venon Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London: SCMP, 1972), 182.
[18] Taylor, *The Go-Between*, 183.

2. The Christian affirmation about the Cross of Christ showing forth the will to suffer forgivingly and redemptively as the very expression of the divine mind and logic of the divine love. Accordingly, all other attempts to achieve the redemptive ends, which Christ sought, apart from the way of the cross are revealed as partial and inadequate.

3. The communion at the Lord's Table in which the invitation to all who are united to Christ in faith to partake of the holy emblems of bread and wine—symbols of Christ's redemptive achievement through his body and blood—demonstrates the uniqueness of making one people out of the many of mankind. Accordingly, the reconciliation of broken relationships across racial, ethnic, national, cultural, social, economic, and gender barriers becomes an important test of the nature of a people's response to the disclosure of the Transcendent which the Holy Spirit sets before them.[19]

According to Bediako, these three aspects of what confronts us in the ministry of Christ can be formulated as follows: In Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit reveals to us a divine paradigm which confronts all religions and challenges men and women in three specific areas: in the understanding of power and weakness, in the response to evil, and in the response to cultural enmity and social exclusiveness.[20] It is by these down-to-earth clues to the divine paradigm disclosed in the ministry of Christ that all religions are challenged and invited to make an equally concrete response in faith, repentance, and obedience. In this respect, Christianity too, formally equivalent to the other religions as traditions of response, is challenged to respond to the unique Christ who is the Lord because man/woman in Christianity lies under the wrath of God just as much, and for the same reasons, as man/woman in Hinduism. Moreover, it is not Christianity that saves, but Christ. Thus, in Jesus we have the threefold paradigm of divine vulnerability, the will to redemptive suffering, and reconciling love—not as abstract notions, but as concrete events and deeds in a human life, and achieved in ways which Christian faith reads as expressive of the divine nature itself. Therefore, what, in Christ, confronts us are clues to the recognition of divine self-disclosure, and the consequent challenge to discipleship to

---

[19] Bediako, "Christ is Lord," 55–56.
[20] Bediako, "Christ is Lord," 57–58.

the One in whose incarnate life that disclosure has been given. Thus, the Christian affirmation about the unique Christ in the midst of the plurality of religions does not arise, first and foremost, from theological propositions of creedal formulations, but rather from the recognition of the divine nature expressed in actual historical existence. What remains important is the realization that the focus of the Christian affirmation is not the assertion of a formula, but the recognition of an achievement in actual history that, in turn, provides clues to the source of those deeds. So a Christian theology of religious pluralism becomes an exercise in spirituality in which one affirms a commitment to the ultimacy of Christ while accepting the integrity of other faiths, and those who profess them.

The foregoing discussion of the unique Christ in the midst of religious pluralism leads to certain conclusions that must be kept in view of any quest for Christian identity in religious pluralistic societies.

1. Not only does Christ represent the culmination of the prophecy of a single religion (Judaism), but he is also the incarnation of the universal Intelligence, which has been the hopeless struggle of every religion to understand. It is only in Christianity that the quest for religious satisfaction can be found. This shows that truth has only one source that is in Christ. Christian identity thus becomes the culmination of the surrounding cultures.

2. To affirm God's unique action through Jesus Christ is not arrogance; it is the best tool against the arrogance of every culture that decides its own rules by which others are judged.

3. The unchanging things about the Christian faith that make the Christian different from people of other religious faiths are the divine paradigm disclosed in the ministry of Christ in the area of divine vulnerability. If Christ, the divine One, chose to become weak in his life here on earth in order to empower the weak, Christians should do likewise. If Christ suffered forgivingly, the Christian should also suffer forgivingly. Moreover, Christ's response to cultural enmity and social exclusiveness should be the challenge of the Christian in a religious pluralistic society.

4. Abstract nouns such as justice and compassion belong to Christian vocabulary, but the content of these words is found in the concrete life of Jesus Christ. So Christians do not simply 'contribute' values of justice and compassion, truth and righteousness, they contribute these values as a result of the life of Christ in them.

5. Our affirmation of the unique Christ in the midst of plurality of
   religions, which is the task of a Christian theology of religious
   pluralism, consists in commending the meanings of Christ as dis-
   cussed above to men and women in their own worlds of faith,
   respecting their personality as beings created, as ourselves in the
   image of one and the same Creator, and yet seeking to '*move them
   Christ-ward*' in the freedom of their personal wills. What confronts
   all religions in Christ, which is the divine self-disclosure, becomes
   the basis for critiquing, as well as affirming, all religions and their
   cultures. This includes the Christian religion as well as the African
   religio- cultural tradition. Crediting of the religious values of other
   faiths as traditions of response to the reality of the Transcendent
   makes it possible for us to engage in double hermeneutics: biblical
   hermeneutics in dialogue with cultural hermeneutics, which helps
   African Christian women to find their identity in Christianity and
   the African religio-cultural tradition without any tension. We now
   turn to African Christian women's identity.

Discovering African Christian Women's Identity

According to Bediako, Christian identity consists of who we are as
Africans in relation to Mission/Western Christians and African religio-
culture.[21] In the present quest of the African Christian women's iden-
tity, this definition is not enough. Although it emphasizes the concep-
tualization of the Christian gospel within African culture, this defini-
tion has neglected African women issues in Christianity and African
religio-culture. This paper is of the view that African Christian women's
identity is found only when the written Word and African culture are
interpreted to bring liberation and transformation to African women.
Thus, in this paper, African Christian women's identity is defined as
who we are as Africans in relation to Mission/Western culture affirmed
and critiqued, and African traditional religions affirmed and critiqued.
This definition of African Christian women's identity becomes possi-
ble only when we affirm the unique, divine self disclosure that we have
been given, and which culminates in Christ as we have seen above. An

---

[21] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the
second century and modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), 3–5.

affirmation of a commitment to ultimacy of Christ in a religious pluralism, while accepting the integrity of other faiths, makes it possible to do cultural hermeneutics where African women view the Bible through 'African eyes' as they distinguish and extract from it what is liberating. Since the Bible depicts other people's cultures, and we know from African culture that not everything in culture is liberating, we come to the Bible with the same cautious approach we have to culture.[22] By this, African women are devising a hermeneutics of liberation to identify the positive aspects of culture and to promote them. In their quest for identity, African Christian women seek parameters for identifying cultural elements that are life-affirming for women in Africa—whether they are validated by traditional Christian teachings or not. Elements deemed incompatible with the gospel of fullness of life are studied for the cracks that may lead to transformation. African Christian women thus ally cultural hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics, (which begins with an African interpretation that includes the social and cultural contexts as well as the African woman's experience) and finds this a very possible area for finding an African Christian woman's identity that makes her live her faith as a Christian and, at the same time, maintains her African identity in total liberation.

African Christian women accentuate the positive aspects of their culture by making free usage of metaphors and stories from African and biblical traditions. This paper now considers how a single story can affect and express African women's understanding of themselves. For African women, the woman who is healed of the flow of blood is most symbolic and challenging for their situation. This woman was faithful enough to overcome cultural taboos for the sake of healing and is included in Jesus' community with the title 'Daughter.'

Elisabeth Amoah finds universal significance in this gospel episode after comparing the Akan of Ghana's taboo on menstruating women with the way the Israelite laws on impurity would have affected the woman in the story.[23] She is of the view that the story of the 'hemorrhaging woman' enables African women to challenge and question all customs and traditions that enslave them. Theresa Souga also uses

---

[22] Ambe Oduyoye, *Introductions*, 12.

[23] Elizabeth Amoah, "The Woman Who Decided to Break the Rules," *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, John S. Pobee and B.von Warten-Potter (eds.) (Geneva: WCC, 1986), 15.

the story to remind African women who are outcasts that Jesus restores beyond expectation.[24] The woman is not just made well; rather, she is made whole with her community.

Conclusion

Seeped in African religion and believing in Jesus, African women are able to proclaim the Jesus who breaks the chains of evil. Jesus feeds the hungry and sets free the victims of patriarchy. He is therefore the Christ for African women who know all too well the bondage of both. Jesus beckons them to endure the Cross, but promises fullness of life as the final outcome of their discipleship. For without the Cross there is no resurrection. African Christian women find their identity in the liberation message that Jesus proclaims, in cultural hermeneutics, and in the Christ who recognized and affirmed women.

---

[24] Teresa Souga, "The Christ-Event from the Viewpoint of African Women," *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, V. Fabella, M.M. and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (eds.) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 4.

CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY
IN THE HUNGARIAN REFORMED CONTEXT

Szilveszter Füsti-Molnár

Postmodernism

A theologian is always in trouble when the mysterious notions of post-modern and post-Christian are on the table. Bruno Latour's remark deepens the hesitation of a theologian when he exposes the falsity of the myth by saying that there are direct fracture lines in cultures through-out time.[1] The notion of post-modernism is a very complex and uncertain notion. It is complex because pluralism and relativism are its main internal parts. It is uncertain because post-modernism suggests that we have a common viewpoint according to which our age is homogeneous enough to say that modernism is over.[2] We can see that the Western culture is very far from that uniformity. Deconstruction, as a critical method, is one of the main features of postmodernism.[3] This becomes the fertile soil for many options. We have less certainty in our existential questions, but more choices. By giving up the task of a systematic construction,[4] even in theology, we either lose a hermeneutical basis and our identity, or we arrive at a deformed view that is close to subjective relativism, and where we absolutize our own persuasion. We define what our conditions are in relation to life or church-community according to our measurements.

---

[1] Latour claims that the different movements in cultures are not irreversible. He gives a number of examples from the Middle Ages to the early modern period to show that certain aspects of the late medieval theological thoughts, in fact, underpin later characteristically 'modern' ideas. B. Latour, *We have Never Been Modern* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 1–10.

[2] D. Kolb, *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[3] Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

[4] As it appears in the thoughts of Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: Post-modern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

The peculiarity of our age can be detected in its irony. "In virtually every corner of the globe human beings spin around and around, living out their lives as individuals paradoxically compelled in their 'private' lives to make choices from a range of options that are enumerated and managed by institutions they cannot see and people they never meet face-to-face."[5]

Kärkkäinen makes an important point on the basis of Harvey; namely, that in the post-modern context Christian (traditional) denominations (churches) consist of a majority of those "who still call themselves Christians but their lives are distinctively secular, with the experience of God in worship and prayer not figuring very prominently in all that they do."[6] This is also one of the key issues for the understanding of the Hungarian situation.[7]

While trying to find itself in the rapid changes of the world, Christianity has to face many challenges. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the church confidently looked forward to a 'Christian century.' In the second half of the twentieth century, in a variety of ways, Marxism (Communism), positivism, modern sociological-religious views (such as by Max Weber) and Dietrich Bonhoeffers writings all predicted that religion would disappear. Their prophecy never happened, but the new age of our time broke into the plurality of all sorts of religions.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seems to be more appropriate to ask whether this century's religious market will have any place for Christianity at all. More precisely, will it be possible for people to call themselves Christians? The term 'Christian' indicates an identity of something we attach ourselves to that defines who we are. Answering the question from the point of the individual does not necessarily present great difficulties because we can come to an agreement with Harvey's observation. Christianity's identity seems to be more acute if we turn our attention to the direction of the church and its power. The symbolic net of Christianity interwove the religious and cultural life of the West more than any other religious or intellectual movements

---

[5] Barry A. Harvery, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999). See in Veli- Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology, Ecumenical, Historical and Global* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 221.

[6] Harvery, *Another City*, 2. See in Veli- Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 222.

[7] In the Hungarian context, we can find a more complex picture that is still interwoven with unstitched threads from our recent past of Communism.

did for centuries. The question is whether Christianity will be able to reweave its net from the broken pieces. Does it have to be mended at all? If yes, then in what ways? In order to answer these questions, the starting point has to be taken from the materialistic, utilitarian, and selfish societies that the dominant part of the world belongs to. Is Christianity's aim to serve the interest of the world, or to give a different measurement of values? The process of desacralization, the loss of cultic symbols, and the adoration of language in communication becomes increasingly problematic among Christian denominations. The demythologization of Christ and Christianity is still vividly present, just like the rationalization of Christian dogmas that are unable to become the foundation of everyday (church) life. We should not forget that during the history of Christianity the tension between an omnipotent God and the self-contradictory humanity always gave a wonderful power and motivation to Christianity to find its place, identity, and call.

Religious Indifference

Religious indifference is a sociological phenomenon that dominantly reveals several options, and this plurality of beliefs and opinions are built around the notion of uniqueness. The (post)modern person's aim is to find his or her self-identity. But self-identity itself is a multi-layered notion—as becomes clear from Van de Beek's study on the question of faith and ethnicity. We often struggle with the accumulation of identities, not knowing which should be dominant. This often leads to inclusiveness or exclusiveness. That ambiguity, on the one hand, makes us feel the need to redefine our self-identity. On the other hand, it makes us realize the multiplicity of self-identity according to the different settings, such as historical, racial, political, social, and religious, and finally we often end up in confusion.[8]

Religious indifference, first of all, conquers the intellectual leaders, then it widens its boundaries, which leads to the religiously plural society. Today Christianity is in such a position that it needs to be aware of the changes around it in the (post)modern world. The strategies of the Christian church, which worked for centuries, are not able to function as they used to. Today we can hardly speak of a Christianity

---

[8] Abraham van de Beek, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek—or both Jew and Greek?", *Studies in Reformed Theology 6* (Meinema: Zoetermeer, 2002).

that could characterize the whole continent or society. Modernity and post-modernity also resulted in a social layer that has no interest in religious matters at all. Their 'religious hunger' is fed by politics, which replaces religion. At the same time, the process of individualization in religion or in Christianity becomes more dominant. Christian churches face a crisis, and for an outside observer (and for a church member), that crisis may seem to be an agony.

While religious indifference is present on certain levels of society, the susceptibility for the transcendent is also vivid. Masses of people turn to the spiritual side of life, and the seemingly empty pantheons of the gods become full again. The rebirth of black magic, superstition, and various forms of the occult have become glaring in society. The imbalance between Christianity and neo-paganism has become one of the key problems regarding the question of identity. The rationalization of Christianity created a situation for itself where myth and theory are no longer harmonized. Neo-paganism can find a fertile ground in that vacuum. This process points to human beings' natural desire for the transcendent in order to find a deeper ground for their existence.[9]

The individualization that positively characterized the Reformation's movement often currently becomes an anarchy. In that sense, anarchy means that everybody can shape his/her relation to religion on the basis of more or less sympathetic elements from the surrounding religious syncretism. The frame of Christianity or religion, or even a particular denomination, does not carry much weight anymore.

The Return of the Archaic Form of Religion

We face ambiguity when we consider the return of the archaic form of religion. On the one hand, the (post)modern person is against the idea that the insecurity of his/her material life and the fragility of his/her existence should be the foundation of his/her religious concerns. As a matter of fact, human history proves the opposite. Moreover, when instability shakes our present life and our vision of the future, then even the most rational behavior is ready to reach beyond empirical reality. People are often pleased to find shelter in archaic forms of religion such as fate, superstition, and the many forms of the occult. Many popular phenomena of our time prove this—for example, the paranormal,

---

[9] Tamás Molnár, *Pogány kísértés* (Budapest: Kairosz, 2000,) 9.

parapsychology, UFO 'believers,' and so forth. In the past, just as well as in the present, these component forces belonged to paganism. Any forms of paganism are the adoration of nature that mystifies the religious motif in nature according to a flight of imagination and fantasy. The vivid imagination of paganism has not lost its power because it never appeared in a comprehensive system. It was flexible enough to be dressed in attracting forms according to the requirements of a certain age. It never had to struggle with the piddling details of harmonization of rationality with faith or whether to give up the one in favor of the other. On the level of the masses, paganism was a conventionalized understanding of nature, and on the level of the intellectuals, it was a protection in opposition to the temptation and problems of nature. Pagans can easily allow themselves to live in two worlds at the same time; therefore, the possibilities of Christianity and paganism differ in many areas.[10] If Christianity was able to behave as the religious elements in paganism, Feuerbach's critiques of religion—namely, that religion is a projection from the human imagination that expresses what humanity itself cannot be—would be right. Therefore, the Barthian statement that differentiates religion from Christianity—on the basis that in religion man is searching for God, which leads to idolatry, and in Christianity God addresses man in His revelation—becomes an important insight in relation to our theme. Following Barth, Bonhoeffer comes closer to the problem when he talks about 'Christianity without religiosity' in order to avoid the trap of metaphysics and individualism.

Statements such as Barth's and Bonhoeffer's, which distinguish religion generally from Christianity, can also be criticized. One can say that all religions are built on revelation, but then the question is if people respond to revelation authentically—which can often lead to exclusiveness. What is important in the Barthian distinction is that revelation and religion are not equal. Religion as a human attempt always stabilizes, while revelation's main characteristic element is the dynamic force that disturbs us and provides an ecclesiology where the church is on the way.[11]

---

[10] Molnár, *Pogány kísértés*, 67–101.

[11] Vincent J. Donovan, *Church in the Midst of Creation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987). Donovan makes a distinction between revelation and religion on the basis of Jacques Ellul, and following his train of thought, I tried to harmonize with Barthian and Bonhoefferian thoughts.

Christian identity is greatly challenged by the appearance of the
archaic forms of religions that lead to neo-paganism in (post)modern
society, and also in the Christian church.

The Distortion of the Holy

The notion of the holy is *unum necessarium* for people. The question
is: What do we understand by the meaning of holiness, and how is
Christianity able to preserve it and apply it to a certain age? If we were
able to systematically follow the metamorphoses of the holy, we would
probably be able to solve the problem of the relativism of values. It
would be possible to come to a general conclusion about the diversity
of the basic values (such as existence, love, humanity, goodness, beauty,
etc.) without trouble because all of these basic values would be suitable
for the aim of the basis of true reality; namely, God.

We also have to pay attention to the fact that the notion of something
sacred is not exclusively the characteristic element of religion, but is
present in the secular world. In the realm of the profane, holiness
is no longer connected to God. Its main feature is to defend what
belongs to this world. When the holy loses its original meaning that
fills the gap, something else tries to take its place. These are often
the worlds of the sciences and politics. Often both territories are in
contrast with the true meaning of the holy, although people have the
same expectations towards science and politics as they had in the past
in relation to the holy. Both modernism and postmodernism have a
human-centered view that people use to free themselves from the duty
of obeying God's laws. We are ready to take the world's present and
future into our own hands. This is also the effect of globalization in
which we are the participants of the growing world-community, and,
at the same time, we become lonelier. Therefore, we often fight for the
direct shaping of our history. Our situation shows many similarities to
the time of Hellenism.

How is the value of holiness connected to daily reality? In order to
find the answer, let us turn our attention to the credo, "We believe in
the holy church." It is risky ground because while talking about the
rejection of the secular flatness and the mentality of worldliness the
holy church bears witness to new grace giving affirmation of this world.
The means of holiness is misused not only by the secular world, but
the church as well. It does not mean that the members of the church
are holy in the sense of moral perfection in a way that they have

no sins at all. Certain pietistic orientations claimed this in the past, just as they do in the present. Our holiness is understood from our baptismal identification with Christ—the best. The Word made flesh, the Incarnation, and Crucifixion can be used to support any concept of holiness in theory, just as well as in practice. Our conviction, by means of *fides specialis*, that we are saved should not be misunderstood to mean that we are saved in order to continue in the same sinful way. By that assurance, we have to enter the world around us more completely, even to the very heart of its darkness.

The incomprehensible God reveals Himself in holiness, and His power is radiated through this. In this way, our holiness becomes a new reality that is based on our relationship with God. Holiness cannot be the result of our own efforts since it must always be the work of God's Spirit. Christianity will also have to pay attention to that, especially concerning the question of the crisis of its own identity. We still acknowledge God's existence as a far and abstract boundary, but his power is not of great account in our concerns. He is more like a ruler who gave his power to us. One of the biggest challenges for Christianity in the identity crisis is to reveal the true meaning of *ecclesia sanctorum*.

General Description of the Hungarian Context

A general description of the Hungarian context among the above mentioned post-modern challenges displays the different socio-politically and economically motivated characteristics of the world, such as globalization, secularization, and plurality. Through economic transactions, political conflicts, and changes in cultural traditions, we experience globalization; namely, whatever happens in the other corner of the world will have some effect on us. Being a member of the global village in central and eastern Europe, we also become a playground of the dominant politically and economically interested powers, while we have a false illusion of the new player. That illusion becomes so realistic that it determines people's entire attitude to life in a very negative way. Basically, the greater part of the Hungarian society now displays a consumer frenzy and shows signs of spiritual neuroses and nihilism. Having been a member of the European Union for years, we see that there was propaganda about the unification, and that the reality is different. We also have to realize that we are on a different stage of development

in modernization. The age of nationalism is not left behind, and the present struggle of the Union shows these signs. Local identity becomes stronger as a counter-effect of the unification, as we can see in Western societies.[12]

In connection with the question of nationalism, it is important to note the fact that nationalism is often misinterpreted. The root of the problem—that nationalism is often used as a political *ism*, and as an ideology—is strongly connected to the state. Nationalism cannot be studied as a mere general concept. It has many levels where one can distinguish the elements of territory, culture, ethnicity, history, tradition, doctrine, and politics. The church as an institution in society is not separated from the complex notion of national '*ism*' since the church is also present as a certain form of culture, and as a counter-effect of secularization, the church plays an important role in the discussions on nationalism.[13]

Since the European Union is mainly politically, economically, and military oriented, many problems will be untouched—such as the spiritual and cultural sides of Europe. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernization destroyed the traditional boundaries of community in society. Politics is also ready to take the force of integration of the church for its own purpose. In order to understand the challenges and danger for the church and for Christian identity, we have to call attention to some of the internal elements that generally describe the Hungarian society after the collapse of Communism.

The Changes of 1989–1990

Focusing more on the changes on the level of politics in Hungary, one major characteristic element has to be named, and this is that the changes were determined in 1989 by external possibilities. This point is very important to understand of the nature of the changes. There was not a revolutionary battle in Hungary in 1989–1990. The

---

[12] On the contrary, it can also happen that when the mixing chaos of identities is powered by a materialistic propaganda, a 'monster' comes alive. We experienced this on December 5, 2005, when our nation had the possibility to decide by vote whether the Hungarians outside of the mother country could have a Hungarian civil status or not. Unfortunately, the result of the vote was negative.

[13] Kjell Blückert, *The Church as Nation, A Study in Ecclesiology and Nationhood* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 11–135.

political changes took place not because the so called ruling class lost its power, and the nation did not want to live in the same way as they did. The collapse of the old communist system happened basically for two reasons. 1) the USA won the battle of armaments over the Soviet Union, and 2) The communist party ran into economic debts which resulted in complete dependence. Consequently, they no longer had power to maintain their total political dictatorship.[14]

Being on the border line of east and west, the twentieth century was a continuous shock for us: first, Trianon,[15] then the end of the Second World War,[16] then 1956,[17] and finally Communism. What was common in our negative historical experiences is that we were always the means in the hand of the dominant powers, and when tragedies occurred, we were usually abandoned. From this list I would like to focus on the last shock—the situation after Communism.

During the four decades of Communism, a terrible process can be detected in the society of the Hungarian population. While in the time of Communism the often articulated slogan was that we live in the time of 'cultural revolution,' reality showed the opposite. The majority of the Hungarian population was left without convertible and competitive cultural knowledge that normally creates a solid basis for any further real and effective developments in any segments of society. The 'brain washing' by Communism was far more effective than anybody had thought. On the different levels of society, the control of information shows enormous differences. In the new situation, only a very limited number of people—the so called elite—can take advantage of the new possibilities regarding private ownership and democratically structured society. The result of that fact is that the 'gown' of civil society has to be created from above and has not 'fit' the whole society yet. While development is only present in a very small portion (approximately 5 %)

---

[14] László Tökéczki, "Az elmúlt tíz év a politika mérlegén" (The last decade on the scale of politics), *Théma, Theológiai Élet Ma—Protestáns Tanulmányi Kör*, (2000/4).

[15] Hungary signed the Trianon Peace Treatment on June 4, 1920. According to the treatment, the territory of Hungary decreased from 325,000 km^2 to 93,000 km^2, and the population decreased from 18 million to 7,6 million.

[16] Hungary's loss was one of the biggest in Europe after the Second World War. After the war, Hungary became the sphere of the Soviet Union's interest.

[17] In 1956 there was a revolutionary situation in Hungary in which the nation was left without the help of the world; therefore, the army of the Soviet Union put down the Hungarians' fight for independence.

of the Hungarian society, it is not possible to stop the individualistic aims in development that often does not serve the interest of the whole society. Among the many side effects, we have to name at least two of the sources or motivations that can be described as selfishness and immoral because we are dealing with power-oriented structure.[18]

When the political changes opened new possibilities, these new situations became fertile grounds for inequality under the slogan of democracy and private ownership. On the one side, we can see capitalism, and on the other side, poverty and hopelessness. Life became more and more incompatible. At the same time, according to the above mentioned context, the life of the individual became more and more isolated and lost the sense of community in the family and society. The most painful realization of the process of loneliness can be seen in the rural areas that were the strongholds of the sense of community for many centuries. The huge cement blocks of the towns illustrate that process as well. There is no space in those buildings that would provide the basic requirement of being together. Tradition is lost without community life, and without tradition there are only anonymous masses. The new Hungarian civil society is still in its infancy, where subjective relativism is the only measurement of values on every level. Our disordered society tries to give an illusion of a mature society, where the misinterpreted role of the media and the image of superstars give a value system without real and functioning ethical norms. The first step of reality would be to face where the informational level is very weak. The result of Communism is still present in politics, economics, and culture. One has to clearly see that in a fragmented society the only effect of modernism is pluralism, and at the same time, one is unprotected from the manipulation of politics and business.[19]

The Hungarian Reformed Church after the Changes

The changes opened new possibilities for the church in many ways. In 1989, the church was freed from the pressure and control of the state that had almost completely paralyzed its work. In 1991, the law of religious freedom and recompense settlement agreements guaranteed that the forty years were truly over. In that same year the general election of

---

[18] Tökéczki, "Az elmúlt tíz év a politika mérlegén."
[19] Tökéczki László, "Az elmúlt tíz év a politika mérlegén."

office-bearers took place in the Reformed Church of Hungary. Many people in the church thought that a spiritual renewal had begun with the new leadership.

Shortly after, it became clear that the changes in leadership provided new historical, political, and theological insight, but did not provide for the cleanness of the soul.[20] The collective self-criticism and penitence (Neh. 9 and Dan. 9) were missing from the Hungarian Reformed Church.[21] It is important to note that the collective penitence of the church has to happen first in the context of faith and in the relationship of God and humanity. If this dimension is avoided, we will abuse the highest aim of Christian existence, which inseparably connects us to the saving work of Christ, "who is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1: 29). Therefore, the confession of sins is part of our act of worship, and is independent of the actual political and ideological pressures.[22] As long as the Hungarian Reformed Church is not ready to face the priority regarding its past in the Communist era, every attempt will be just a supplementary act that has ethical importance on the basis of human relationships, but the real purpose cannot be reached. On the one hand, we also learn from the present that the appearance of the different spy lists—which try to reveal the names of those from the church who collaborated with the Communist regime—is greatly motivated by the interest of the actual political situation, and in this case, the church becomes a toy in the hand of politics. On the other hand, the intense tempers toward the church and within the church drive us away from our Christian calling and the priority of confessing sin *coram Deo*.

It is clear that the Hungarian Reformed Church found itself in a complex and difficult situation after the changes: instability, the lack of self identity, and the missing concepts of the present and future were fed by the above-mentioned circumstances. All the major changes in the world, such as globalization, the sudden dominant force of capitalism with all its negative effects, post-modern threats and self-emptiness, greatly impacted Hungarian society—which desired urgent

---

[20] Ferenc Sz″/cs, "Az elmúlt 10 év teológiai értékelése (The Theological Evaluation of the Last Decade)", *Théma, Theológiai Élet Ma—Protestáns Tanulmányi Kör*, (2000/4).

[21] János Pásztor, "A Magyarországi Református Egyház útja 1989 óta (1) (*The Hungarian Reformed Church Since 1989*)," *Református Egyház*, (October, 2002).

[22] Sándor Fazakas, *Emlékezés és megbékélés, A múlttal való szembesülés teológiai kritériumai* (Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadó, 2004), 70–79.

arrangements from the Reformed Church of Hungary as well—in many ways. Regarding the order of the task, the Hungarian Reformed Church mixed up its priorities. This has been clearly shown in the series of evaluations about the last decade of the Hungarian Reformed Church. On the basis of the evaluation and the evaluation of the evaluations, the following observation—which is closely related not only to the Hungarian situation, but our theme of Christian identity as well—has to be brought to attention.

Bishop Gusztáv Bölcskei highlighted the notion of *consensus* in relation to the present Hungarian situation in the Reformed church. He claims without doubt that *consensus* has a necessary priority in order to make further steps. The consensus has three major functions in relation to the church. First, it declares something that the church obligatorily admits for itself any time and any place. Second, this declaration also contains the concrete situation. The 'when' and the 'how' are addressed here in relation to the clarification of the church's essence, which cannot be given up regardless of the circumstances. Third, this consensus has to be obligatory for the members of the church as well.[23] If we had had a functioning consensus about the doctrines, the teaching of the gospel, and the practice of the sacraments according to the Word of God, all the problems that we inherited from the past 40 years could be rightly placed, and the attempt for a solution—taking the new challenges of the present into account—could have a more constructive results. We could have had come closer to the Tillichian notions of *protestant principium*[24] and the *catholic substances*[25] that should be in an ideal correlation with each other, as is stated in István B. Szabó's evaluation.[26]

---

[23] Gusztáv Bölcskei, "Konszenzuskeresés és hitvallásos helyzet", *Théma, Theológiai Élet Ma—Protestáns Tanulmányi Kör*, (2000/2–3).

[24] Under the notion of *Protestant principium*, we understand the spiritual force that is able to defend the church from the destruction of the profane and the demonic powers.

[25] By the notion of *Catholic substance*, we mean the spiritual presence that is manifested in culture.

[26] István Bogárdi Szabó, "A MRE elmúlt tíz évének írásos értékelései," *Théma, Theológiai Élet Ma—Protestáns Tanulmányi Kör*, (2000/4).

Conclusion

The identity crisis of the Hungarian Reformed Church started one and half centuries earlier than the time of Communism, when the age of secularization arrived at Hungary with some delay. After the Independent War of 1948–1949, the inner lives of the Reformed church led to decay and resulted in disappointment, ignorance and indifference—which paralyzed every good intention in the church. It was not only true for the believers, but the pastors of the church as well. The existential need and the low values of the Hungarian Reformed Church, which were dominantly present at the end of World War II, provided fertile ground for the Communist regime's church politics in which the collaborators of the church were ready to maintain all the purposes of Communist ideology—almost without any critique. One of the results was a deep inner struggle of identity of the church where *practical atheism*—in which not the existence of God was doubted, but God was not seen as *Kyrios*—became a major characteristic of church life. The decades of Communism in the life of the church did not allow the realization of secularization because that would have harmed the purposes of church politics, but placed other false aims to the church that deepened its inner struggle.

In the present situation, all the different elements in the challenges of Christian Reformed identity are present at once. Facing these challenges, the Hungarian Reformed Church needs to deepen its ecclesiological considerations, which would clearly set the foundation of any consensus and ways of *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Therefore, Christian identity and the identity of the church have to be seen as transcendental and which is rooted in Christ *extra nos*. All the other layers of identity of the believers will be lost without that basis in Jesus Christ, or their identity will be confused and become contradictory as we often experience it today. This is true as well for the actions of the church that can also easily arrive at a dead end if the basis is not clear. Ecclesiological clarifications should not happen just theoretically, but in the reality of faith.

PROTESTANT IDENTITY IN AN ORTHODOX CONTEXT: THE EXAMPLE OF SERBIA

Luka and Angela Ilić

Introduction

It must be stressed that the term 'Protestant' is surrounded by enormous confusion in Serbia.[1] There is no such thing as a unified Protestant identity in the country. The mainline Protestant denominations (the Lutheran and Reformed churches)[2] regard themselves as the only true Protestants and guardians of that name and identity. They harbor an uneasy attitude towards neo-Protestant churches (Baptist, Pentecostal, Brethren, etc.) and think of them as dangerous, proselytizing groups—referring to them as 'sects,' which in Serbia has very negative connotations. On the other hand, neo-Protestants view themselves as genuine Protestants and wish to be designated as such in public. They think that the Lutheran and Reformed churches place too much emphasis on tradition instead of the gospel. Almost no form of dialogue or cooperation exists between these two camps, and they are very suspicious of each other. Some of this antagonism comes from the fact that neo-Protestants have often evangelized among the flocks of the mainline churches.

---

[1] The term 'Serbia' in the present paper refers to the territory and people of the Republic of Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Montenegro). Present-day Serbia consists of two historical entities: Serbia Proper (or Central Serbia) and Vojvodina. The latter is an autonomous province in the northern part of the country that until the end of World War I formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and is an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously mixed place, where almost all of the mainline Protestants are located.

[2] The Methodist denomination is the only exception, as they seem to have found some acceptance with the Lutheran and Reformed churches because they also baptize children and ordain women. On the other hand, they share some similarities with the neo-Protestant churches in their stand on evangelism, a freer style of worship without full liturgy, and in the fact that their ministers wear ordinary clothes instead of robes.

ORTHODOX IDENTITY

"In the West when we speak of the Church, we usually mean the ecclesiastical organization. To the Easterner [that is, the Orthodox] the Church always means the whole body of the faithful, the 'holy catholic church' of the Creed, or at least the faithful of his own persuasion."[3] The Orthodox understanding that religion is experienced almost exclusively in a community is in stark contrast to the Protestant view that each person can stand before God and is individually responsible for his life and actions before Him.

In Eastern Orthodoxy there is a huge chasm separating clergymen from the laity. Priests are "specially trained to perform the mysteries"[4] and to lead their faithful. In general, lay-people are not involved in affairs of the church and do not hold office on either the local or the national level. Most often, the laity does not understand the doctrines and liturgies of the Orthodox Church,[5] and thus remain passive. The Protestant understanding of the priesthood of all believers is a completely foreign concept for an Orthodox Christian.

Throughout the world, Orthodox churches relate to each other within a loose structure and have an ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople (Istanbul). This patriarch, considered to be the first among equals, holds no formal authority over the national churches, which are all autocephalous (independent, with their own church leader). This means that all Orthodox churches are identified with a particular nation, its language, and its culture. On an individual level, this means that as a member of a certain nation, which has its own Orthodox church, one is expected to belong to that church. Religious and national identities are therefore intertwined and are often seen as interchangeable. For example, it is a generally held belief that Serbs are all Orthodox because Serbia has its own autocephalous Orthodox church.

---

[3] Steven Runciman, *The Orthodox Churches and the Secular State* (London: Oxford University, 1971), 14.

[4] Runciman, *Orthodox Churches*, 15.

[5] In most Serbian Orthodox churches the liturgy is still performed in Old Church Slavonic, a language that the contemporary laity does not understand.

The Historical Background of Orthodoxy in Serbia

In the history of Serbia, four time periods are of special relevance for the topic of this paper.

The Serbian nation, as an enduring sovereign political entity, first emerged in the middle of the 12th century. The consolidation of the Serbian state became strongly tied to the birth of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In 1219 Prince Sava obtained recognition of an autocephalous Serbian Orthodox archbishopric from the Greek patriarch. In 1346 the status of the archbishopric of Peć (in Kosovo) was elevated to that of patriarchate, which then became the center of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, Serbia was gradually conquered by the armies of the advancing Ottoman Turkish Empire, which established its reign that lasted five hundred years. It was under Ottoman rule that the Orthodox Church assumed its role as the guardian of national culture and identity, which promoted education and nurtured people's resentment of their oppressive rulers. As part of an effort to weaken the influence of the church, the Turkish authorities ordered the removal of nationalistic elements from Orthodox liturgy and church life. This was a counterproductive measure because the Orthodox clergy emerged as the primary supporters of the Serbian movement for liberation. At the end of the 17th century, the Turkish armies were driven out of northern Serbia, and that territory was then attached to Hungary, which was under Habsburg rule.

Much later, at the end of World War II, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) became the ruler of the new federal Yugoslavia, which included Serbia. Tito tried to balance a Socialist-inspired, centralized political and economic system with the characteristics of a relatively free market economy and considerable cultural liberty. In the first few years of the new Yugoslavia's existence, "the view of the Communist Party [...] was that religion, as an outworn superstition, would wither away,"[6] and it tried to remove religion from the public sphere. Atheism spread among the population, and church attendance gradually dropped.

After Tito's death, Yugoslavia disintegrated in the wars of the 1990s. In Serbia, Slobodan Milošević rose to power at the end of the 1980s on an ultranationalist political platform and established his autocratic

---

[6] Fred Singleton, *Twentieth-Century Yugoslavia* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 202.

regime that lasted until October 5, 2000. It was during this time that a resurgence of religiosity, particularly among Orthodox believers, occurred in Serbia.

A Brief History of Protestantism in Serbia

During the 16th century there were efforts made to spread the Protestant Reformation among the southern Slavic peoples. For a short time during the 1560s, a printing press was established in the German city of Urach, near Tübingen, under the leadership of a Slovenian, Primus Truber (1508–1586).[7] Many catechisms, Bible translations, song books, and works of Luther and other Reformers were published in Croatian and Slovenian in both Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts (the alphabet that is still used in present-day Serbia) with the purpose of educating the local population, and in the hope that they would convert to Protestantism. Another factor in establishing the Protestant presence was the peregrinating students who had attended the universities of Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and England and then returned home, bringing with them new ideas of great Western spiritual and religious trends[8] and establishing new Protestant parishes. However, the conquests of Serbia and Vojvodina by the Ottoman Empire, plus the strong counter-Reformation in Slavonia, were determining factors in eradicating Protestantism from the territories inhabited by southern Slavs.

A new wave of Lutherans, who have always formed the largest Protestant denomination in Serbia, came from Germany and settled in the northern province of Vojvodina soon after the withdrawal of Turkish presence at the end of the 17th century. During the second half of the 18th century, not only more Germans, but also Hungarians and Slovaks came to Vojvodina at the invitation of the Habsburg Empress, Maria Theresa. Among these settlers were Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists.

---

[7] For a detailed history of a Slavic printing press based in the province of Württemberg and a complete list of their Croatian publications, see Franjo Bučar, *Povijest hrvatske protestantske književnosti za reformacije* [The History of Croatian Protestant Literature during the Reformation] (Zagreb: Tisak Antuna Scholza, 1910; reprint Daruvar: Logos, 1996).

[8] Elek Csetri, *The Declaration of Religious Freedom in Transylvania (1568)* (Oradea, 2002), 8.

Serbia Today

Serbia's ethnic composition is characterized by an astounding diversity. This is partly due to the constantly changing political boundaries throughout history, wars, migration, and, most recently, the influx of refugees from Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. The results from the nationwide census that took place in 2002 in the Republic of Serbia (excluding Kosovo)[9] bear witness to this. Apart from Serbs, who form the majority of the population, the other larger ethnic groups include Hungarians, Roma (Gypsies), Croats, Montenegrins, Albanians, Slovaks, Romanians, Macedonians, Bulgarians, and many other smaller groups.[10]

In the census, the greatest number of citizens (85 % of the total population of almost seven and a half million) declared themselves to be Orthodox. Most Serbs belong to this tradition. Catholics form the second largest religious community (6 %), and many among them are Croats and Hungarians. Muslims are the third largest group (at 3 %) with Bosniacs, Albanians, and Turks belonging to this category. The number of people who declared themselves Protestant is 81,000, which amounts to just above 1 % of the population. This category denotes a wide range of denominations, including the Slovak Lutheran Church, the Hungarian Lutheran Church[11] and the Hungarian Reformed Church, Methodists, Nazarenes, Seventh-Day Adventists, Brethren, and Pentecostals. Only half of one percent of the population explicitly stated that they were not religious.[12]

One of the main issues regarding the position of religion in Serbian society, which is a result of the historical heritage, is the strong bond between ethnic and religious identity that does not only characterize the Serbian Orthodox Church. Throughout all of former Yugoslavia, Croatian national and ethnic identity is almost exclusively associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, in Serbia most Croats

---

[9] The United Nations Security Council Resolution #1244 of 10 June 1999 placed Kosovo under interim UN administration.

[10] Republički zavod za statistiku, *Stanovništvo: Veroispovest, maternji jezik, nacionalna ili etnička pripadnost, prema starosti i polu* [Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Population: Religion, Mother Tongue, National or Ethnic Belonging, according to Age and Gender*] (Belgrade: Republički zavod za statistiku, 2003), 20.

[11] The Slovak Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession has its bishop's seat in Novi Sad. The Lutheran Christian Church of the Augsburg Confession operates in the Hungarian language, and its superintendent's office is in Subotica.

[12] Republički zavod, *Stanovništvo*, 12.

belong to the RCC, but the church also includes Hungarians and Slovenes. The vast majority of the faithful in the Greek Catholic Church in Serbia are members of the Ruthenian ethnic community. We can also see the fusion of national and religious identity within the other mainline churches: including the Slovak Lutheran Church, the Hungarian Lutheran Church and the Hungarian Reformed Church. Only the smaller and often relatively new neo-Protestant communities are multiethnic in their composition.

The Issue of Proselytism

Serbia's history and the primarily Orthodox culture make proselytism a sensitive issue. Generally, proselytism is negatively regarded in Orthodox societies for several reasons. First, because of the autocephalous nature of their church, religious and national identities are intertwined. Second, the Serbian Orthodox Church claims to be the defender of national values; therefore, proselytism is understood as a cultural, as well as a religious issue. Although in Serbia proselytism by Protestants had historically existed, it gained new momentum at the beginning of the 1990s. As the decades of Communist rule ended, leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as churches elsewhere in Eastern Europe, were hoping to recover their 'lost faithful,' but instead they found themselves fighting over them with other religious groups. The Orthodox Church did not expect proselytism in what they claimed was a 'Christian country.'[13]

Orthodox Christianity recognizes baptism as an unmistakable sign of becoming a member of the church. Beside infant baptism, they also practice adult baptism. Mainline Protestant churches in Serbia also conduct infant baptism and, much less frequently, adult baptism. The neo-Protestant churches, on the other hand, only recognize adult baptism and usually re-baptize people from an Orthodox or mainline Protestant background when they admit them to their fellowship. This is one of the greatest points of tension between them and the mainline churches.

The conflict over proselytism has been largely characterized by tensions inherent in the differences in theology. According to Miroslav

---

[13] Silvio Ferrari, *Religious Liberty and Proselytism in Europe*, public lecture presented at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 5 November 2003.

Volf, these include differing perspectives on the church, the relationship between church and culture, and on what it means to be a Christian.[14]

The Legal and Societal Position of Religious Communities

At the moment, there is no law regulating the legal position of religious communities in Serbia or their relationship to the state. Since 2001 several attempts to enact such legislation have failed.[15] The preamble of the draft law from 2001 enumerated seven so-called 'historical' or 'traditional' religious communities: the most important of these is the Serbian Orthodox Church, followed by the Islamic community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, the Lutheran Christian Churches of the Augsburg Confession, and the Hungarian Reformed Church. These religious communities were recognized for their long-standing contribution to society and were selected because each one of them possessed a special agreement with the state before World War II. Although no special legal status is secured for these seven religious communities, they have nonetheless been treated preferentially by the state. For example, only these religious groups are allowed to conduct religious education in public schools, and they are the sole recipients of public funds. This situation has deepened the divide between Lutherans and Reformed, on one hand, and neo-Protestant churches, on the other.

When asked whether discrimination on religious grounds in everyday life exists, Serbian religious leaders give varying responses. Chief Rabbi of Serbia and Montenegro, Isak Asiel, claims that no such discrimination exists against individual Jewish believers. Others admit that discrimination on religious grounds is present in Serbian society. However, it is often difficult to differentiate religiously motivated discrimination from that directed against ethnicity in such incidents. A pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church, Katalin Réti, thinks that discrimination against Reformed Christians is primarily based on their ethnicity, since most of their members in Vojvodina are Hungarian. Rev. Dr. Andrija Kopilović, prorector of the Roman Catholic

---

[14] Miroslav Volf, "Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: Mission and Proselytism as Challenge to Theology and Church Life in Eastern Europe," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 16 (1996), 37.

[15] For an in-depth examination of the legal status of religious communities in Serbia, see Angela Ilić, "Church and State Relations in Present-Day Serbia," *European Journal for Church and State Research* 10 (2003), 199–225.

Theological-Catechetical Institute in Subotica and president of the Cat-
echetical Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Serbia and Mon-
tenegro, and Prof. Mevlud Dudić, vice-president of the Sandžak Islamic
Community and director of the College of Islamic Studies in Novi
Pazar, emphasize the religious motivation of such unfair treatment and
behavior, stating that subtle discrimination in society does exist against
Roman Catholic and Islamic believers on a personal level.[16]

For years international organizations have warned about religious
intolerance in Serbia. Attacks of violence, especially against smaller
religious communities, are, unfortunately, too regular to ignore. Some-
times even the clergy or the buildings of the majority Serbian Orthodox
Church are the target of such acts. Non-governmental organizations
that follow these incidents claim that more than 100 attacks targeted
Protestant, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Muslim, and Roma-
nian Orthodox establishments and believers in 2004, with more than
25 such attacks between January and May 2005. These ranged from
graffiti and hate speech to physical assaults. A common characteristic is
that the perpetrators are hardly ever caught by the police or brought to
justice, which illustrates that, in practice, both the government and the
legal system provide little protection for the religious rights of minority
groups.

Religious hate speech continues to be a problem, which is often
present in the Serbian media. This is partly a legacy of the wars
and the surrounding propaganda of the 1990s. Anti-cult campaigners
in the media "create a tremendous confusion with regard to religious
communities, in particular the small ones and endanger the religious
rights of their members."[17] At the same time, "religious leaders have
noted that instances of vandalism often occur soon after pejorative press
reports on religious communities"[18] are published.

---

[16] For interviews with Rabbi Isak Asiel, Rev. Katalin Réti, Rev. Dr. Andrija Kopi-
lović, and Muslim cleric Prof. Mevlud effendi Dudić, see Angela Ilić, "On the Road
towards Religious Pluralism? Church and State in Serbia," *Religion, State & Society* 33/4
(2005), 284–291.

[17] International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *Report on Religious Discrimina-
tion and Related Violations of Helsinki Commitments: Yugoslavia*, 2002, www.ihf-hr.org.

[18] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S. Department of State, *Inter-
national Religious Freedom Report 2004*, 15 September 2004, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/
rls/irf/2004/35482.htm.

The Special Position of the Serbian Orthodox Church

In Serbia all religious communities are considered equal in the eyes of the law. However, as many observers note, "the Serbian Orthodox Church has been offered a special status as the church of the Serbian nation and has been given media and other support"[19] that includes being the main recipient of government financial assistance for religious communities. Although this church no longer enjoys the status of being an established religion, it has, nonetheless, *de facto* taken up the role of a national church. The Serbian government has openly embraced Serbian Orthodoxy, and often church dignitaries make public statements on political and societal issues, ranging from the choice of the country's national anthem to recommendations on policies to be pursued in Kosovo.

Small Religious Communities and the Issue of 'Sects'

As with other countries experiencing change and upheaval, the disintegration of the communist system meant the influx of a wide range of religious and esoteric groups into Serbia. Cults that are controversial or have been associated with socially destructive behavior in other countries (such as the Unification Church/Moonies, the Church of Scientology, or The Family/Children of God) have appeared—which alarmed the leaders of mainline churches and political groups. In Serbia the word 'sect' (*sekta*) has come to describe a very wide range of religious or quasi-religious groups and esoteric cults. Whereas in English 'sect' is often used to denote various smaller denominations without any pejorative meaning, in Serbian there is no such distinction. So, for example, Adventists are sometimes grouped together with Satanists in this category.

ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

In the last few years, ecumenical dialogue has been taking place among representatives of various religious communities.[20] The importance that

---

[19] Paul Mojzes, "Religious Human Rights in Post-Communist Balkan Countries," J. Witte, J.D. Van der Vyver (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspectives* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1996), 277.

[20] See Luka Ilić, "On Inter-Church Dialogue in Serbia—Current Situation," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 27/3 (August 2007), 60–64.

several religious groups attach to these meetings is shown by the fact
that they usually send their highest level representatives. Such meet-
ings are often initiated by, or are the result of pressure from various
international organizations and activists. However, most religious lead-
ers in Serbia agree that ongoing dialogue among the various religious
communities is an indispensable factor in building a pluralistic and
religiously tolerant society. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bel-
grade, Stanislav Hočevar, stresses that the religious dimension should
be viewed as the most important one in inter-religious dialogue: only
this will lead to "reconciliation, peace, involvement, voluntarism and
hope." He also points out that religious communities need to be secure
in their own identity if they want to enter into societal dialogue.[21] This
view is echoed by Belgrade sociologist Milan Vukomanović, who hopes
that inter-religious dialogue will also continue without international
pressure as religious communities become more confident and inde-
pendent.[22]

   One of the examples of inter-religious cooperation from the last few
years is the Maribor Initiative, the main goal of which is to bring recon-
ciliation among religious communities, and focuses on building democ-
racy and respecting human rights and religious minorities in South
Eastern Europe. The meeting of the round table discussions of 14 and
15 December 2001 resulted in the Belgrade Declaration on Religious
Communities and Religious Freedoms in a Democratic Society.[23] The
declaration emphasizes the importance of inter-religious reconciliation
and dialogue. Many other discussions have taken place in recent years,
exploring the place of religion in society, the relationship between the
state and religious communities, and other topics. Although they sig-
nal an important step of cooperation, it remains to be seen just how
many practical benefits they will produce. As an example of practical
cooperation, in January 2004 Archbishop Stanislav Hočevar preached
at an ecumenical church service that was held at the Lutheran church
in Subotica and led by Lutheran Superintendent Árpád Dolinszky.

----

[21] His Excellency Monsignor Stanislav Hočevar, Archbishop of Belgrade, inter-
view by Angela Ilić via e-mail, 23 April 2004, translated by author from the Serbian
original.
   [22] Milan Vukomanović, "Religion, Conflict, Reconciliation," M. Vukomanović,
M. Vučinić (eds.), *Inter-religious Dialogue as a Way of Reconciliation in South Eastern Europe*
(Belgrade: Beogradska Otvorena Škola, Čigoja Štampa, 2001), 27.
   [23] Goran Bašić, Silvo Devetak (eds.), *Demokratija i Religija: Izbor tekstova i diskusija*
[Democracy and Religion: A Collection of Texts and Discussions] (Belgrade: Mari-
borska Inicijativa, Altera, 2003), 241–243.

Serbian Orthodox Bishop Irinej and Reformed Bishop István Csete-Szemesi also attended the service. In November of the same year a three-day conference on the contribution of churches to religious, cultural, and international cooperation on the path to European integration took place in the towns of Subotica and Bečej. Representatives of the Orthodox, Catholic, and mainline Protestant churches, as well as governmental and local leaders, attended and addressed the matter in a series of talks and workshops.

Each year, an ecumenical prayer service for the unity of Christians is held in Belgrade with the participation of Roman and Greek Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, and various Protestant representatives. This initiative provides an opportunity for church leaders and ministers to meet, but there is a great need to take this fellowship to the level of average church members. There is still a lack of knowledge and trust between believers of various Christian denominations. The future success of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation depends to a great extent on how successfully trust can be built among church members in general, rather than among the clergy.

Differing Interpretations of Identity among Protestants

There is an enormous gap between the mainline Protestant churches (Lutheran and Reformed) and the neo-Protestant churches in how they have adjusted to functioning in an Orthodox environment, which also affects their identity.

As already mentioned, the mainline Protestant churches in Serbia are all tied to one specific ethnic group.[24] This ethnic character also determines which language they exclusively use in their liturgy. Just as over the centuries the Serbian Orthodox Church has become a defender and stronghold of Serbian ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity, the mainline Protestant churches have also strongly embraced their role in representing and preserving their heritage of the same. Lutheran

---

[24] Most of the Germans, who had traditionally formed a significant part of the Lutheran community in Serbia, either left the country at the end of World War II and afterwards or perished in concentration camps. Their descendants, very small in number, are represented within both the Slovak and the Hungarian Lutheran churches, but neither of them regularly conduct liturgies in German anymore. Regular church services in German resumed in Belgrade-Zemun in 2005, under the leadership of a pastor sent from Evangelische Kirche Deutschland.

and Reformed churches in Serbia are closely tied to the cultural institutions and organizations of the Slovak and Hungarian minority communities. Observing their behavior and liturgy, it is sometimes difficult to tell where the gospel ends and where cultural tradition begins.

Luka's personal experience demonstrates this. When the topics of his religious affiliation and ethnicity come up in conversation with members of any faith community, they invariably shake their heads skeptically and comment: "But how can you be a Serb *and* a Protestant?" or "How come that you are a member of the Lutheran church as a Serb?" These responses vividly illustrate how his very identity seems to shake up the traditions and stereotypes to which generations have been accustomed in Serbia.

In contrast to embracing a specific ethnic identity, the neo-Protestant churches gather members of many different ethnic groups and are, therefore, not tied to a specific ethnic community. They mainly conduct their church services in Serbian—the majority language. Exceptions are a few Pentecostal and Baptist churches that use Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian in their services, but are still members of their respective denominational unions.

A very practical difference can be seen in the observation of church holidays. The Serbian Orthodox Church is one of the few in the world that still follows the old (Julian) calendar. In order to preserve and express their different tradition, Lutherans and Reformed rigorously follow the Western calendar and celebrate Christmas, Easter, and other religious holidays with the rest of the Catholic and Protestant world. Neo-Protestant groups, in an attempt not to attract too much unnecessary attention or make themselves conspicuous, celebrate church holidays together with the Serbian Orthodox Church, following the Julian calendar.

Because of their ethnic character, Lutheran and Reformed churches took root exclusively in the northern province of Vojvodina, which, as already mentioned, is home to many different ethnic groups. Most of their parishes are in villages that are often ethnically homogeneous and are, therefore, the most advantageous setting for reinforcing their common identity. This rural character has a strong impact on how these churches function, and—with the exception of the towns of Novi Sad and Subotica—there are no significant mainline Protestant communities in multicultural urban settings. That is why they are facing an enormous challenge in Belgrade, the capital city of two and a half million inhabitants, where only the Serbian language is used.

In contrast to the geographical limitation of the mainline Protestants, neo-Protestant churches have successfully carried out evangelism and spread in the cities and towns of Serbia, as they mostly use the majority language and are already multiethnic in their composition.

Due to their linguistic confines, the mainline Protestant churches never reached the Serbian majority population, so Protestantism did not affect Serbian culture in any significant way. The Reformation in the 16th century also stopped short of making an impact in Serbia, contrary to some of the neighboring areas, such as Transylvania, Hungary, or eastern Croatia, where it managed to take root. As a result, there are almost no Serbs who are Lutheran or Reformed.

The ethnic conflicts and tensions that have characterized the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and are still present in its territory, have negatively affected the mainline Protestant churches. Many of their members have left the country and moved back to the country of their forefathers (that is, Slovakia or Hungary), or have intermarried (mostly with Serbs) and have made a clear break with their linguistic, cultural, and even religious heritage, which means that mainline Protestant churches are literally dying out. As a result, they have been focusing on trying to preserve their status quo, and have not been thinking about the mission field that surrounds them. This is, of course, partly due to not wanting to upset the Serbian Orthodox Church, which in some places fiercely wants to protect its presumed faithful. Nonetheless, the result is decreasing numbers in membership and church attendance.

Conclusion

There is a great need to re-define what it means to be Protestant in 21st century Serbia. Whether one comes from the Serbian majority or a minority ethnic group, all of us are experiencing the impact of globalization, on one hand, and the still strong nationalistic feelings of our people groups. How to create a truly biblical, Christian identity, which is not based solely on cultural or linguistic traditions, is one of the challenges that Protestants face in Serbia.

Dialogue between mainline Protestants and neo-Protestant churches would be a good way to begin addressing some of the issues both groups face in everyday life. Even though the Lutheran and Reformed churches enjoy the status of mainline churches, this does not make a big difference in their everyday affairs, at least in Belgrade. Their buildings

have not been returned to them by the government, and they often face opposition and suspicion from officials as well as local people. Perhaps a conference on the theme of Christian identity could be an important step on this road.

Finally, it is crucial for Protestants to continue and to strengthen their dialogue with other churches. Together they should examine how they can create a freer atmosphere in which the religious diversity of Serbia can be considered as a source of strength. Recognizing the opportunities to learn from each other in a multi-confessional context will benefit the entire nation, and, not least, the Protestant minority.

THE IDENTITY OF A RELIGIOUS MINORITY: INNOVATION AND INTEGRATION IN FRENCH PROTESTANTISM

Paul Wells

A century after the separation of church and state in France is a good time to assess the successes and failures of the Protestant minority. If there are aspects of this question that pertain to the specific nature of the French situation, there are also issues that apply to religious minorities in general.

It is dangerous to generalize about a religious movement as multi-faceted as Protestantism in France. However, it can be said that the attitudes of this minority have been some times characterized by optimistic innovation and progressive social action in which Protestantism collaborated with those who had no goals other than humanitarian ones. When it did so, its Protestant identity stood out. At other times and more recently, Protestantism manifested a desire for integration and collaboration with other Christians, particularly the Roman Catholic majority. When this was the case, it tended to lose its specific Protestant identity and also its social relevance.

These contrasting attitudes seem to have been triggered by the need for self-preservation. As a minority conscious of its vulnerability, it sought ways to protect itself from threats to its core values. For this reason, it is not possible to describe the attitudes developing in French Protestantism toward the social context in a regular linear way. It is rather characterized by an oscillation between two opposing poles: the struggle for justice, social innovation, and strong identity over against the desire for integration with the Christian majority, and the danger of a loss of identity.

At different times the future of the Protestant minority in France has been considered optimistically or pessimistically. In terms of historical development, it can be said that Protestants contributed in an important way to the separation of church and state in 1905 and gained a good deal from it in terms of recognition and freedom. However, during the 20th century the values of society in general caught up with the Protestant values of liberty of conscience and freedom of thought and

led, at the end of the century, to an identity crisis. Protestantism found it difficult to maintain its specific character, or to react in a coherent or an innovative way to a globally secularized society. The ecumenical venture was an alluring proposition, but it proved to be a dangerous course of action for a religious minority in a thoroughly secularized society.

A Protestant Identity

The Protestant minority has had a twofold problem to contend with, both religious and social, related first to the rejection of the Reformation and subsequently to the development of modernity in France.

As a religious minority in a predominantly Roman Catholic society, Protestantism has suffered from being considered a deviant religion. Religion and Catholic were synonymous in the first instance in France; Protestantism was labeled *la religion prétendument réformée* (supposedly reformed religion). Later with the broadening of knowledge of religions, Christian and Catholic became synonymous. Protestantism suffered from the ambiguity of being a part of Christianity, but not recognized by the Roman Church—Christianity's official representative. Protestantism was considered sectarian. "Sect, for instance Lutheranism" was found in dictionaries even in the 1930s!

A similar ambiguity arose with regard to the development of secularism in France. Protestantism supported the separation of church and state and played an important part in the growth of what the French call *laïcité*—supporting the freedom and the autonomy of the state. This French word is impossible to translate in English other than by 'secularization.' However, it is more specific than the latter, and refers only to the movement of secularizing public institutions and making them religiously neutral. Secularization may be taken to have a broader connotation and can refer to the culture as a whole.[1] In France *laïcité* describes the neutrality of the state on questions of religion and ethnic origin. "The State believes nothing." In this respect, it is foundational for the central Republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In the second half of the 19th century, in the combat for freedom against the power of Romanism, French Protestantism allied itself with the

---

[1] Cf. Jean Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme doit-il mourir?* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), Annexe II.

growing current of *laïcité*, whose leaders were Republican free-thinkers. These allies in the struggle for freedom were enemies on the ideological level as they were critical of any forms of religious practice. The more Protestantism became permeable to free-thinking, the more it risked losing its religious identity and becoming an expression of "unchurched tolerance."[2]

This position between the devil and the deep blue sea has never been an easy one. Ultimately, Protestantism could neither look to the church nor to progressive movements in society for its security. "Protestantism is the only group in France to be a religious minority, a de-sacralised religion and a Christian confession… Over against the two Frances, Protestantism alone has affinities pointing in both directions."[3] Christian and *laïque* has been the Jekyll and Hyde identity of this minority in its search for survival.

When Protestants found their allies in the proponents of secularization, they retained social relevance and influence out of proportion with their numerical strength. Having gained the victory and been assured of a space of liberty in the separation of church and state, they lost their strategic position and became another religious party, and a small one at that. When they turned to the Catholic Church with a desire for ecumenical overtures in the second half of the century, they ran the risk of being smothered by the Catholic majority.

Too close an association with either the forces of social progress or with those of the official representative of Christianity in France has always weakened the Protestant minority. In the first instance, the distinctive Protestant stance has faded into a well-meaning humanism, and in the second place, Protestantism as such has been threatened by common belief.

The problem of French Protestantism, therefore, is specifically defined with regard to a dominant, pervasive, and often hostile religious majority. Over against Roman Catholicism, Protestantism has also been weakened by its own structures—characterized by a deficit in terms of institutionality, sacrality, and universality.[4] The positive relationships it

---

[2] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 223ss.

[3] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 233. The "two Frances" are Catholic France and Republican France. Cf. Jean Baubérot, *La morale laïque contre l'ordre moral* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); Émile Poulat, *Liberté, laïcité: la guerre des deux France et le principe de la modernité* (Paris: Cerf-Cujas, 1987).

[4] Jean-Paul Willaime, *La précarité protestante* (Genève: Labor & Fides, 1992), 11.

has generally sustained with regard to the development of modernity, in contrast with Catholicism, have tended to weaken it rather than reaping dividends.[5]

Nor does this tendency show any sign of abating. Protestants tend to define spirituality in relation to Christ first of all, and their relation to the church in terms of it, whereas Catholics do the opposite, with the relation to the church being primary and mediatorial.[6] In the present crisis of religion in the West that erodes institutional religion and authorities, individual spiritualities of all kinds flourish, the perennial nature of the Roman institution cannot be doubted. It retains its symbolical attraction as a factor in structuring religious aspirations, as was dramatically illustrated by the fervor surrounding the death of John Paul II.[7] Religious practice continues to decline more rapidly in established Protestant churches than in the Roman communion.[8] Protestantism suffers from its lack of institutional visibility and its divisiveness, and has recently been overtaken by Islam, which has become the second major religious force in France: this is, for obvious reasons, something that retains everyone's attention.

Historical Considerations

Some historical illustrations can be given about this minority that is both French and Protestant.

The first synod of the French Reformed churches in 1559 adopted the *La Rochelle Confession*, penned largely by Calvin, in remarkable circumstances. The synod lasted four days, even though there were gal-

---

[5] Steve Bruce, *A House Divided. Protestantism, Schism and Secularisation* (London and New York; Routledge, 1990).

[6] As Friedrich Schleiermacher already noted. Cf. André Birmelé, *Le salut en Jésus-Christ dans les dialogues œcuméniques* (Paris/Genève: Cerf/Labor & Fides, 1986); Paul Tillich, *Substance catholique et principe protestant* (Paris/Genève: Cerf/Labor & Fides, 1995); André Gounelle, "Catholiques et Protestants: du bon usage de la différence," in Daniel Marguerat, Bernard Reymond (eds.), *Le Protestantisme et son avenir* (Genève: Labor & Fides, 1998), 61–76; Paul Wells, "Eglise et histoire, un modèle pour interpréter la différence entre le Catholicisme romain et le protestantisme," *La Revue réformée* 54 (2003), 40–53.

[7] Jean-Marie Donegani, Guy Lescanne, *Catholicismes de France* (Paris: Desclée-Bayard 1986), 276.

[8] Jean-Paul Willaime, "Risques et atouts de la précarité protestante," in Marguerat, Reymond, (eds.), *Le Protestantisme et son avenir*, 32.

lows and pyres in every part of the town. But the secret of the meeting was so closely guarded that it was not discovered. Seventy congregations had been summoned to send delegates, but less than thirty were represented. The Gallic Confession was born in a situation that was prophetic of the tribulations that the Reformed faith would know in France, in one form or another, over the centuries, down to the present.

Forty years later, the Arminian crisis having risen in the Reformed churches, an assembly of European Reformed churches was summoned to Dordrecht in Holland in 1618–1619 to deal with the problem. The French were invited, but their delegates were forbidden to attend by Louis XIII. Engravings from the period show the empty French seats in the synod. When their next synod met at Alès in the Cévennes in October 1620, the five articles or *Canons of Dordrecht* were added to the *La Rochelle Confession* as the secondary norm of the French Reformed Churches.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Protestant faith suffered a two-pronged assault. Between 1630 and 1792 only three monarchs reigned in France, fostering royal absolutism, exemplified by Louis XIV, who abolished the civil liberties of Protestants. The French monarchy would not accept that France could be unified with a non-Catholic minority within its boundaries. That the result was persecution, deportation, or voluntary exile for many French Protestants is well known. At the time of the Revolution, there were only around 100,000 Protestants in France and 80 pastors, whereas at the start of the 17th century there had been 700 pastors.[9]

During the century preceding the Revolution, the cardinal points of the faith were eroded by the rise of Enlightenment philosophy in France. Even though Protestants were granted freedom of conscience and worship at the time of Revolution, and their pastors were paid as civil servants from the time of Napoleon's *Concordat*, the churches had become mere husks, and the faith of the fathers' had become, in many cases, a modified form of deism.

During the 19th century, Protestants in France, contrary to all expectations, knew a period of great expansion. Their new-found liberty was the occasion for growth in the establishment of new churches, in some

---

[9] Cf. Alice Wemyss, *Histoire du Réveil. 1790–1849* (Paris: Les Bergers et les Mages, 1977).

cases even whole villages being converted.[10] Missions developed in both the evangelistic and social sense. There was an upward movement of Protestants in the economic and academic fields. By the end of the century Protestantism had become a vigorous minority, able to use its influence with other groups in social development and political policy. Sometimes this led to opposition, such as in the 'white terror' in 1814 or later in the century in 'anti-Protestant' propaganda, which sometimes accused Protestantism, along with Jews and Free Masons, of being an *éminence grise* in French society.[11]

To sum up the result of over two centuries of intensive persecution: Protestantism survived the assaults of Catholicism and was even able to be a magnetic attraction in the 19th century, but it had lost its theology in the process. Since the time of Calvin and down to the present, no major systematic theology has come from the pen of a French theologian!

Protestantism, Innovation, and Progress

Over against reactionary Catholicism, Protestantism gave the impression of being open to progress and renewal in society: "religion that corresponded to the Revolution."[12] Contrary to elsewhere in Europe, where the Revolution was often considered to be an anti-Christian phenomenon, as is generally also the case among French Roman Catholic historians, Protestant historians in France have considered it as anti-Catholic.

The idea of an 'anti-revolutionary' theory or party as advocated by Groen van Prinsterer and his successors in Holland is quite incomprehensible to someone from the French Protestant minority. 1789 can only be seen in one light for most French Protestants: as a providential opportunity for freedom from bondage, and social recognition and liberty of worship and action in society. The Revolution was seen as a new exodus for the persecuted people of God. It is not surprising that

---

[10] Jean Baubérot, *Le retour des Huguenots* (Paris/Genève: Cerf/Labor & Fides, 1985), chap. 4.

[11] An accusation that exists to the present in France in the politics of the extreme right. Cf. Baubérot, *Vers un nouveau pacte*, 50.

[12] Eugène Réveillaud (1851–1935) proposed this in his book *La question religieuse et sa solution protestante* (1878).

the Protestant minority took sides and made alliances with the cause of freedom and pursued policies to safeguard and increase the scope of their liberty.[13]

Catholic intolerance had pushed French Protestantism into the camp of the free-thinkers: throughout the 19th century Protestants embraced with enthusiasm the possibilities opened up by this turn of events. Toward the end of the century, the climax of this development was reached in the early years of the Third Republic by the presence of a majority of Protestant ministers in the cabinet formed by W.H. Waddington (1879). The utopian vision of the minority throughout this period was to protestantize France, a dream that only faded in the early years of the 20th century.

The ambiguity of this situation was twofold. On the one hand, Protestants had to show themselves to be French patriots while at the same time being different from the population in general. This was a delicate operation, since the vigor and development of Protestantism in missions and social work depended very often on outside help in terms of finance or personnel from Anglo-Saxon Europe or from Switzerland. The shadow of 'perfidious Albion' or Prussia seemed to lurk behind its good intentions.

On the other hand, in the French context, to show themselves *bona fide*, Protestants embraced the global ideas of French Republicanism. "The more Protestants desired to bring the gospel to their countrymen and act with religious enthusiasm, the more they were led to make alliance with those who ideologically were not Christians or who showed it but little."[14] This was a paradoxical situation indeed that required all the skill of a tightrope walker. The joys of being a religious minority!

The answer to this double conundrum was to kill two birds with one stone. It was an ingenious policy that was the guideline for French Protestantism, even if it was one born of necessity and, as subsequent history shows, a dangerous one. "For militant Protestants, Protestantism was at the same time the solution to the religious problems of France and an active factor for social change."[15]

---

[13] William Edgar, *La carte protestante. Les reformés francophones et l'essor de la modernité (1815–1848)* (Genève: Labor & Fides, 1997).

[14] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 46.

[15] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 49.

So in the course of a century from being stigmatized and excluded, Protestants became an active force in French society and, in the advent of modernity, crystallized in the separation of church and state in 1905. Protestantism acquired social legitimacy. This was symbolized by the reintegration of a minority faith into the history of France. On the one hand, Protestants considered the historical developments in a positive way; they saw their role in it as being that of a religion adapted to the 'modern world'—contributing to political freedom and democracy. On the other hand, the minority was often seen as being, in the words of Jules Ferry, one of the founders of the Third Republic in 1872, "a powerful friend, a necessary ally" for the anti-Catholic forces of progress.[16]

Protestantism was therefore closely allied with the forces of progress and Republicanism. The values of Protestantism were even thought to be necessary to the maintenance of Republicanism. Atheism carries with it the danger of a moral vacuum and with it the temptation of a return to Catholic clericalism. As the religion corresponding to the spirit of 1789, Protestantism is a convenient halfway house between the radically opposed forces of atheism and clericalism. Religion was necessary for the social good. Victor Hugo claimed that the disappearance of religion would lead to an absence of morals, a lack of a sense of human dignity, and would even take away the purpose of life itself. But the excesses of clericalism had to be avoided at all cost.[17]

So it came to be considered that atheism and clericalism feed each other mutually. If society needs a religion, Protestantism is the one best suited to progress and a viable third way between the extremes of moral nihilism and intolerance. The minority 'secularized in order to protestantize.'[18] From 1870 onwards, fueled by the dream of a Protestant France, the Protestant party was, at least in its leadership, fully engaged in the process of the secularizing of the institutions of the country and played a vital role in the creation of modern France, not only in the sphere of the separation of church and state, but also in the fields of education—one of the battleships of the Republic, medicine, and the struggle against poverty.

---

[16] Baubérot, *Le retour*, 77–80.
[17] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 57.
[18] "Laïciser pour protestantiser" to use the expression of Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 49.

Jean Baubérot, a leading French Protestant historian and sociologist, has described this process as a two-tiered development in the secularization of French institutions at the turn of the last century, which describes theoretically a progressive marginalization of religion in public life. Protestants were actors in this overall development that ended in a social truce (*le pacte laïque*) between the state and religious groups and between the Catholic majority and minority groups. It was generally considered a satisfactory outcome that would guarantee freedom and tolerance of personal faiths in society as a whole, without deciding on the question of their legitimacy.[19]

The first stage of secularization took place throughout the period of the *Concordat*, during the 19th century. Religion was no longer coextensive with society as a whole, but was generally recognized as being one of the institutional features that contributed to it. It was one of the basic human needs, and the state secured the means whereby citizens could find that need satisfied. The state guaranteed freedom of worship without giving recognition to any one religious option.

The second tier of secularization corresponds to the developments of the Third Republic during the last thirty years of the century. It took the privatization of religion further and found expression in the law concerning the separation of church and state. Religion was no longer considered as having a public function or as contributing to the social fabric at all. It is socially marginalized and became a private affair regulated by public law. The state occupied a position of neutrality with regard to religious factors and guarantees freedom for various forms of religious practice as long as they remain within the law. The position of the state was one of neutrality, and religion is not to enter the public arena or function in public institutions such as schools or hospitals.

Protestantism became socially viable as one of the contributing factors to the development and victory of modernity in France. However, in terms of its implications for Protestantism as a religious belief, its results are more debatable. Its values were no longer thought of in terms of the Reformed faith, or even of the Christian gospel, the transcendence of God, and the Incarnation. Republican values and Protestant values tended to coalesce. Protestant Christianity was rationalized, and the Revolution was spiritualized; like ebony and ivory the two lived together in perfect harmony.[20]

---

[19] Baubérot, *Le retour*, chap. 1, and 301 f.; *Vers un nouveau pacte*, passim.

[20] Cf. Philippe Joutard, (ed.), *Historiographie de la Réforme* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et

In spite of evangelical revivals during the 19th century and re-editions of Calvin by the Société de Toulouse that led up to the magnificent work of Émile Doumergue on the Genevan Reformer, the tenor of Protestantism was generally ethical—particularly among the cultured elite. Protestantism was identified with the primacy of the individual conscience and the freedom of examination. The material principle of the Reformed faith was not considered in conjunction with its formal principle. Protestants did not hesitate to point out the proximity of liberty, equality, and fraternity to the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and charity. This paved the way for a further humanization of Protestant belief and the reception of the ethical religion of the old liberalism, introduced in France in the last quarter of the century by Auguste Sabatier and others.

At the end of the 19th century, French Protestantism had an evangelical heart, but a humanistic head in terms of its belief system and its constituency. The minority had shared its ethos with the majority in the process of secularization, but was to pay the price for its success in the years to come.

After the separation of church and state in 1905, the Republican ideals of the rights of man and the citizen, freedom of conscience, and tolerance became the new values surrounded by an aura of sanctity. The state became a new guardian of things sacred in place of the church, and proposed ethical standards (*la morale laïque*) for all its citizens. The state was the sovereign of the new secular covenant and the public school was the place of catechism for the young. Protestantism had lost its cutting edge, as its social values were indistinguishable from those that regulated public life in general.

How could the specific character of Protestantism be restored, maintained, and promoted in this situation? French Protestantism, as is the case of other Protestantisms active in the development of the modern ethos, seems to have become the victim of its own success story.

Integration and Loss of Identity

By a strange twist of fate, Catholicism seems to have benefited more than Protestantism, relatively speaking, from the separation of church

---

Niestlé, 1977), 171–181.

and state. Protestantism suffered from its isolation as a small religious minority over against an imposing mass of Catholics.[21] It lost out by becoming just another minority in society with no specific role to play in the political process. Catholicism, on the other hand, in spite of the privatization of religion, could claim to be the major religious institution in society—the first partner in any dialogue with the state. Even down to the present, it has not abandoned the dream of re-Christianizing France, the 'eldest daughter of the church.' John Paul II could still exhort a rally of young people in Paris in 1980: "France, what have you done with your baptism?"

Integration in this new secularized situation led to an imperceptible, but real, loss of identity for Protestantism throughout the 20th century as it strove to affirm its Christian identity. This symbolic deficit in identity relates to *three specific issues*: ecumenism, the interpretation of what the Reformation actually was, and internal tensions.

First, ecumenism developed in France largely because of external influences and contacts. Before the Great War, it developed in the Christian social movement and continued through the influence of Nathan Soderblom and *Life and Work*. Social action to alleviate poverty was a common platform that could be shared by Protestants and Catholics alike and increase the credibility of Christianity with *hommes de bonne volonté* with humanitarian concerns.[22]

Another major influence in ecumenism was the impact of the theology of Karl Barth that provided a common ground for ecumenical discussion for both confessions after World War II. A dominant theology belonging to a church that was an ultra minority in France lent Protestants credibility and made them worthy partners in dialogue.[23] This permitted them to emerge from religious isolation and gain a certain recognition with majority Christianity. The flagship of Protestantism, the Église Réformée de France, became dominantly Barthian in the 1940s and remained so until the 1970s, when political theology had its day.[24] It was the major partner in dialogue with Catholics, exemplified by the joint discussions held by the Groupe des Dombes or the early Taizé movement.

---

[21] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 71 ff.
[22] A detailed description of the movement is found in Baubérot, *Le retour*, II.
[23] Willaime, *La précarité*, 41 ff., 166–168.
[24] Neo-Calvinists in the Reformed Church such as Auguste Lecerf, Jean Cadier, Pierre Marcel, Pierre Courthial, and Richard Stauffer took their distances from Barthianism early on—in the 1930s or shortly after the War.

"Ecumenism appears to be one functional form of religion in a secularised society where religion is privatised."[25] In the French churches, the ecumenical movement was welcomed with enthusiasm as a demonstration of the viability of Christian belief and its ability to adapt to the modern world. It was considered to have considerable apologetic value against the argument that religion is always divisive and intolerant. It was aimed less at reunion than at communion and religious rearmament in the context of a society becoming ever more irreligious.[26] To be ecumenically involved became for the cultured classes a proof of Christian authenticity. Because of numerical factors, its impact was much greater on Protestantism than on Catholicism—where it retained marginal importance. Catholics found religious renewal after Vatican II through Bible-reading or the charismatic movement.

The ecumenical movement was a real danger for the existence of French Protestantism.[27] It became fashionable to be a 'Christian,' rather than primarily a member of a confession—a slippery slope for Protestant identity in France, where 'Christian' always means 'Catholic.' Moreover, the combined factors of the increasing problem of the religious socialization of the younger generations after 1968 and the continual hemorrhage from the ranks of the minority through mixed marriages lead to a weakening of the mainline Protestant denominations that has not abated to the present. For these churches, it was a wonderful window-dressing, but tended to be counter productive in reducing the stock in shop. Once again the result is paradoxical, as Jean Baubérot states rather pessimistically: "Ecumenism was a guarantee for French Protestantism. At the same time, as it proposes the hope of 'one church' and as the standing of the two confessions is very unequal, in the long run it could mean the end of Protestantism in France."[28] To claim to transmit the 'gospel,' but not Protestantism with it may be understandable from the point of view of Christian belief, but it is sociologically suicidal.[29]

---

[25] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 91.

[26] Willaime, *La précarité*, 166.

[27] We refer to ecumenism with Roman Catholics. Enthusiasm for the WCC has generally been rather tepid in France, and reached a new low after the fall of the Berlin wall and embarrassment over WCC policy regarding the former Eastern bloc.

[28] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 97.

[29] As Willaime remarks in his article already quoted, "Risques et atouts de la précarité protestante," 34.

Second, closely related to the question of ecumenism was the problem for Protestants of what to make of the 16th century Reformation. The conjunction of the spread of secularization and the success of the ecumenical movement made assessing the Reformation a neuralgic point in the crisis of modern Protestant identity. Three possible interpretations seemed to be current in the post-Vatican II period.[30]

The liberal interpretation said that the Reformation was the precursor of modern freedom of thought. Freedom of the individual conscience from the church institution is the first step on the road to free-thinking and the liberty of the individual. This anti-authoritarian interpretation of the Reformation was highly plausible in post-1968 France. Protestant identity is defined in terms of 'gospel and liberty.'

The ecumenically oriented view, probably the most popular in Protestant circles, was that the Reformation was a reorientation of Christianity, and that the separation had been a necessary evil. Its result was positive as a challenge to a monolithic institution and as a recovery of the fundamental nature of the gospel. Now the ball is in the court of ecumenism to pursue the fundamental task of the Reformation in renewing the whole church in a biblical way. Protestant identity is defined in terms of 'biblical renewal on the road to unity.' The biblical theology movement that enjoyed great popularity in both confessions from the 1930s to the '80s, later criticized by James Barr, was a great incentive in this perspective.

Finally, there was the view traditionally adopted by Catholic historians that the Reformation was an unfortunate mistake, a parenthesis in the history of Christianity needing to be closed as soon as possible. Right-wing Protestants tended to pick this view up through their political associations. A small minority adopted it because of bad conscience at being divisive Protestants. Protestant identity is not something to be proud of, but 'a cross to bear on the road to unity.' The final historical task to be accomplished by Protestantism is to heal the wounds and reunite with *L'Eglise de France*, as Cardinal Lustiger called it, making a new and renewed church.

Uncertainty related to the meaning of the Reformation itself might seem normal in a pluralistic society and is typical of the confessional errance of late modernity. However, it shows that if Protestants know what street they live on, they have forgotten the number of their abode.

---

[30] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 97–102.

Third, the ability of Protestantism to adapt to the new situation of an increasingly secularized society was paradoxically a threat to its identity throughout the 20th century, but never more so than in the context of the hyper-individuality of post-modernity. If ecumenism had served to soften up convictions about the 'rightness' of the Protestant way, extreme relativism did the rest. The reasons for former antagonisms became vague, and truth claims lost their relevance in a situation where "it was henceforth possible to live without specific goals or meanings, in sequential "flashes"—and that is something new."[31]

In this situation, relativism and pluralism tended to highlight the tension that has existed perennially within Protestantism between orthodoxy and liberalism. If the first theological trend held pride of place through most of the last century because of the impact of neo-orthodoxy, liberalism never disappeared, and it re-emerged in the last quarter of the century as the methods of theology were increasingly influenced by the humanities. Steve Bruce has pointed out the fact that non-believers in Christianity do not convert to liberalism. Its recruits are drawn from more orthodox groups who experience the lack of plausibility between what they believe and the dominant ideology of society.[32] The position of liberalism is 'parasitic.' Its mediating stance between faith and modernity and its desire to do justice to both also means it is a halfway house between Protestant practice and a secularized way of living. The more liberalism reaches a synthesis in reconciling faith and current ideologies, the more it has an erosive effect on Protestantism. The many recent and popular 'theologies of the genitive' have similar consequences. The social effects of liberalism are no doubt very different from what its adherents honestly intended.

This same rule may well hold good in so far as the numerical decline in Protestant religious practice is concerned. The progressive and innovative contributions of Protestantism in France led to a new social order that seemed to be favorable to its freedom and provide conditions in which it could prosper. By adapting to this new situation and seeking to renew Protestant identity in ecumenical bonding, to make something of the Reformation in the present, and to adapt to post-modern individualism, main-line Protestantism—for all its honorable intentions—found itself in an increasingly fragile position and in numerical decline. "It

---

[31] Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 44.

[32] Bruce, *A House Divided*, 109, chaps. 5, 6.

is not by chance that the Protestantism that is declining numerically is Protestantism that has interiorised secularism and ecumenism."[33]

Protestants in France had been in the vanguard of innovation and progress, but their integration in the resultant society threatened the existence they had fought so hard to preserve. It is cold comfort to interpret this as the ultimate success because of the 'protestantization' of French society.

Conclusion

Within French Protestantism at the beginning of the 21st century, the cards seem to being re-dealt within the minority and the results of this movement are by no means certain.

Statistics indicate that if there were 765 Evangelical communities in France in 1970, today there are almost 1,900. There are almost 1,600 main-line Lutheran and Reformed churches.[34] It is obvious which group has the social clout and which has the capacity for evangelizing a de-Christianized France. Many of the evangelical groups in the suburbs around the large cities are made up of a high proportion of immigrant 'people groups' which means that Protestantism in the France of the future will be quite different from *Protestantisme à la française*. The neo-Pentecostal character of these evangelical groups may well appear uncultivated to sociological Protestants, but the directness of the message, the community spirit, and the ability to communicate it in their surroundings are stimulants to growth. If the current trend continues, the face of Protestantism in France could well be very different, and it remains to be seen what the result of the cross-pollination between the established and new groups will be.[35]

We have sought to show that when the Protestant minority in France has been socially involved, innovative, and progressive, it has tended to lose its Christian heart. When it has sought integration and ways of Christian witness with 'Catholic France,' it has lost its Protestant character.

---

[33] Baubérot, *Le Protestantisme*, 29.

[34] Cf. A recent article by the General secretary of the French Evangelical Alliance Stéphane Lauzet, "Le paysage évangélique en France," *Idéa*, (2005/5), 1–5.

[35] Sébastien Fath, *Du ghetto au réseau. Les protestants évangéliques en France, 1800–2005* (Genève: Labor & Fides, 2005), and his article, "Croire en situation de minorité. Les Protestants évangéliques français," *La Revue réformée* 57 (2006:4), 1–11.

The question remaining at the end of this study is: how can a religious minority act in such a way as to be socially involved without losing its specific Christian character? How can such a minority articulate its message in a way that is universal, without losing its religious particularity?

If in France the door has been firmly and finally shut to the utopia of "Christian France,"[36] what examples in the Christian tradition can provide a fruitful starting point in looking for answers?

---

[36] Cf. Émile Poujat, *L'ère postchrétienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994); Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 200–230, and *Church after Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). From another angle, Grace Davie, "Global Civil Religion: a European Perspective," in *Sociology of Religion*, Winter 2001, on www.findarticles.com, and Jean-Paul Willaime, *Europe et religion* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

ON THE WAY TO THE LIVING GOD IN POST-CHRISTIAN AMSTERDAM. A SEVENFOLD INVITATION TO OVERCOME THE CRISIS OF THE CHURCH

Willem J. de Wit

O Jesus Christ, shine with your light
on those who live here in the night.
Unite them with the flock you feed,
lest they would miss what they most need.

Fill with your shine of grace the hearts
of those who follow dangerous paths,
of those with their presumptuous air,
of those who inwardly despair.

Shine in the eyes of those who blind
and dark and doubting do not find
the way to you, but lost have gone.
O Light and Truth, guide you them home![1]

Post-Christian Amsterdam

> God and Jesus, they were the great
> men of the past.
>
> *–A high school student*

The Location, Statistics, and Question of Post-Christian Amsterdam

From my apartment in the center of Amsterdam, it is just a ten minute walk to the famous, or infamous, Red Light District, and another five minutes walk to Dam square—the lively heart of the city. When I speak about Amsterdam as post-Christian Amsterdam, one may be inclined to think especially about the Red Light District, where everything is practiced that God has forbidden in his wisdom. However, this would

---

[1] Based on J. Heermann, "O Jesu Christe, wahres Licht" (hymn). http://www.ge-sangbuch.org/lyrics/00031.html.

be a grave mistake. If Christian presence is still visible in the city any-
where, it is in the Red Light District, where many Christian organiza-
tions offer facilities for those in need. Here the church is successful in
making a difference.

The Dam square is much more characteristic for post-Christian
Amsterdam. This vibrant place breathes the idea that life can be good
without God. Certainly, the impressive *Nieuwe Kerk* ('new church,' built
since 1380 and rebuilt after 1645) decorates the square, but it is no
longer used for regular church services, only for exhibitions and special
ceremonies. Actually, it is a living example that in Amsterdam God
and the church belong to the past. In a very subtle way, post-Christian
Amsterdam is even more tangible in the relatively quiet block where I
live. The factual situation is that only a few people go to church, but
one little word is usually added: only a few people *still* go to church.

The usage of the word *still* can be justified in the light of the statis-
tics. A century ago, the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck already
said, "Unchurchedness is one of the most serious diseases of our time."[2]
He said so in the light of the 1899 census, which revealed that 2.3
percent of the Dutch population did not belong to a church or any
other religion. For Amsterdam, this figure was 5.9 percent.[3] However,
between 1900 and 2000, membership of the major protestant churches
in Amsterdam decimated to just a few percent of the population. Most
people who practice a religion today are Muslim and Christian immi-
grants from non-Western countries. In a population of almost 750,000,
there are about 25,000 regular church visitors, of whom 14,000 go to
migrant churches. Unchurchedness has born fruit tenfold: today the
majority of the citizens of Amsterdam have no religious affiliation at
all.[4]

However, the word *still* seems to imply more. It seems to imply that
the church, and the Christian faith have fundamentally lost their plau-
sibility. It is not mere circumstance that the church loses its members.

---

[2] Herman Bavinck, "Buiten de kerk," *De Bazuin* 49/28 (1901): "De onkerkelijkheid
is eene der grootste kwalen van den tijd."

[3] Percentages calculated from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Uitkomsten der
achtste tienjaarlijksche volkstelling in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden gehouden op den een en dertigsten
december 1899* (The Hague: Belinfante, 1901), 4:221 and 12:131.http://www.volkstelling
.nl/nl/volkstelling/imageview/VT189904H5/ and http://www.volkstelling.nl/nl/volks-
telling/imageview/VT189912H5/.

[4] See Kerkenraad en missionair team Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk Amster-
dam, "Diepe vrede in kleurrijk Amsterdam" (Amsterdam 2003), section 3.1.

The church stands for ideals, beliefs, and practices that have had their time. If some people are still Christians, they are for sociological and psychological reasons. For example, although I speak Dutch without any recognizable accent, in conversations, people openly infer from the mere fact that I go to church that I must come from the provinces. The point is that this is true. I was brought up in a safe Christian context. The present essay can be interpreted psychologically as an attempt to refind my identity in Post-Christian Amsterdam—unfortunately for me, I do not yet have the guts to be truly honest to myself and to leave Christianity behind in order to become a post-Christian myself. Who am I to say that such an interpretation is misguided?

I only hope that the benevolent reader will discern that at least my attempt—essay in the literal sense—goes much further. It is not the desperate attempt to safeguard myself and others from becoming post-Christians. Rather, it is the invitation to move beyond the post-Christian condition. The question is not—how can one *still* be a Christian?—but—how can one *already* be a post-post-Christian?

The Threefold Plausibility Crisis of the Church

In order to be able to move beyond the post-Christian condition, it is, first of all, important to face the fundamental plausibility crisis of the church within this condition. Why is it that the Christian religion is considered to be passé? Why is it that the church is considered to be a remnant of the past rather than a vital option for the future (even by church members themselves)? Why is it, as I observed during a teaching practice several years ago, that a high school student can say in his simplicity that God and Jesus were the great men of the past and that other students also use the past tense when referring to God? In my perception, the plausibility crisis of the church has three dimensions, which I indicate with the triad, 'head, heart, and hands.'

Head. The *intellectual crisis* of the church is that there seems to be no sensible reason to believe that God exists, and especially that he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Moreover, even if it is granted that God may exist, there seems to be no way to say something about him with certainty. This intellectual crisis is not to be understood as if all people are outspoken atheists who willfully take position against Christianity. Of course, such people do exist, but for many people in Amsterdam, Christianity seems to belong to the past so much that they have never felt the need to take position for or against it.

Heart. The *existential crisis* of the church is that even if people acknowledge that the intellectual discussion does not result in an unfavorable position for the Christian religion, it can still be that they cannot reach it with their heart; they can feel an existential hesitation or doubt that hinders them from believing. It is not to be excluded that this is also the case for church members. They regularly read the Bible, but it does not say much to them; they pray, but they have the feeling that it is talking into emptiness.

Hands. The *practical crisis* of the church is that she does not succeed in offering a positive morality with which one can make a difference in everyday life. The church seems to take and give between droll morals and permissiveness. A concrete and attractive moral ideal is wanting.

Although this is a very brief analysis of the crisis of the church, it sufficiently indicates that we have to face some fundamental questions if we do not want to end up with a compromise between outdated Christianity and the post-Christian condition, but really hope to find a way beyond the post-Christian condition.

Answering the Post-Christian Condition

Others have already reflected on the post-Christian condition. Among Reformed Christians I perceive four tendencies of how to answer it.

First, there is the *conservative* or *confessional Reformed* answer: keep to the status quo of the church as defined in confessions of some centuries ago, and as established in practices that have been received from past generations.

Second, there is the *liberal Reformed* answer: give in to the post-Christian condition and adapt beliefs and practices accordingly.

Third, there is the *evangelical Reformed* answer: freely adapt all forms to the present condition, but maintain the fundamental Christian beliefs and ethics of the past.

Fourth, there is the *catholic Reformed* answer: exploit the rich heritage of the church of all places and times to respond effectively to the post-Christian condition.

The conservative or confessional Reformed answer is laudable for its stability, but it runs the risk of intellectual and existential dishonesty, as it has decided beforehand that the response to any post-Christian objection will be that one will, nevertheless keep to the status quo (be it labeled as 'the confession' or 'the Bible'). Bound as it is to the past, it does not show a way to the future.

The liberal Reformed answer is laudable for its honesty, but runs the risk of failing to make clear what Christianity still adds to the post-Christian condition. Bound as it is to the present, it does not show a way to the future.

The evangelical Reformed answer seems to be quite successful, but runs the risk of understanding the post-Christian condition too superficially. It shouts down the fundamental questions rather than answering them. It may be stronger in evangelism and contemporary worship, etc. than either the conservative or the liberal answer, but when the fundamental questions become pressing, it cannot do more than find a compromise between these alternatives.

The catholic Reformed answer is most sympathetic to me. It is a honest attempt to face the fundamental questions without simply adapting to the post-Christian condition. However, it has its limits. Many of today's questions that were not discussed by the sixteenth century Reformers may have been discussed by the church fathers or the great medieval theologians, but there are also truly new questions or old answers may no longer really suffice.

In my view, the crisis of the church will remain unless we are prepared to go further, to move through and then beyond post-Christian thought. Christians may hesitate to do so. Are we not losing much that is valuable? However, we will only lose that what does not have lasting value. Although it may be painful for a moment, it is actually not a loss but a gain. We will be freed from cherished beliefs that, however, have turned out not to be true or not to be worthwhile anymore.

Only, this is not to be understood as if we should willfully throw away all what we have or believe or do now. That would mean a loss indeed. Moving into the post-post-Christian area, we do better to take the catholic Reformed repository with us.

In short, faced with the post-Christian condition of Amsterdam, I search for a post-post-Christian identity while using the catholic Reformed repository. Let us now see how this works out.

A Sevenfold Invitation

> My soul thirsts for God, for the living
> God.
>
> –*Psalm 42: 2*

The Existential Invitation: Understand the Desire
of the Heart as a Desire for the Living God

I take my starting point in Psalm 42: 2: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" This verse is an invitation to understand the desire of the human heart as a desire for the living God.

Many people seem to have an unfulfilled desire. This is rather clear for those people who are interested in new religions and philosophies, and probably also for those who indulge themselves in materialistic or sexual excesses, seeking in vain for existential fulfillment. But how about those who indicate that they are rather content with their life? I do not want to project an unfulfilled desire on them. However, it may be that some of them mean that they have stopped hoping for deeper fulfillment, and therefore can be rather content with their life.

On balance, I do not want to argue here that all humans factually have a *desiderium naturale* for God. I limit myself here to speaking about an invitation to acknowledge an unfulfilled desire in one's heart and to understand this desire as a desire for the living God. This is what the psalm invites its readers to do.

In face of the existential crisis that the Christian beliefs do not really touch the human heart, Psalm 42 exactly begins with the desire of the heart—the soul.

The Theological Invitation: Believe in the Living God Only

I come to the second invitation. What does the heart desire for? The soul thirsts for the *living* God: the soul cannot be satisfied with a God who does not really exist. Although such a desire does not prove that God exists, it offers a first condition for speaking about God adequately—it must be about a God who really exists. The church must refrain from definitions of God in which he does not really exist (God as a metaphor for inter-human love, God as a character in a story, etc.) and from definitions from which it is rightfully concluded that such a God cannot exist. In her desire for the living God, the soul prefers a

minimally defined God who exists over a much better defined God who, however, does not exist.

In face of the post-Christian idea that God belongs to the past, the psalms verse invites us to make a fundamental shift, and to think about God as the one who—by his very definition—is present, actual, and the living God. In face of the atheistic claim that God does not exist, the soul cannot prove that he does exist, but she can thirst for him and does not want to call herself satisfied with anyone or anything less then him.

These considerations lead to an important theological conclusion, which hopefully will evoke discussion. In her thought, the (post-post-Christian) church should give structural priority to the *living* God over the *biblical* God. That is—we should not first speak about the *Bible* and then about the *God of the Bible*, but first about *God* and then about the *Bible of God*.[5] Keeping in memory the main character of an ancient collection of books may have some intrinsic value, but has only ultimate value in as far as this main character refers to the living God for whom the soul thirsts.

I recall the two sides of the intellectual crisis. On the one hand, there is the outspoken atheistic claim; on the other hand, people are already beyond the point of having to make a decision for or against Christianity, even to make up their mind whether they believe in a God whatsoever. Over against this second side, this verse is a powerful invitation to make up one's mind about God right now, not about 'God as the great man of the past,' but about the living God who is now.

However, the first side—the atheistic claim—may still need some more discussion. Has it been proven that God does not exist? If so, the heart can desire for the living God, but then this desire is in vain. Now, the atheistic claims that I have met do not say that it has been proven that God does not exist; rather, it is argued, on the one hand, that the concept of God is superfluous as an explanation for any state of affairs and, on the other hand, that the evil in this world is irreconcilable with a God who is infinite goodness. This twofold argument for atheism is by no means something new. For example, Thomas Aquinas already knew it and countered it, among others, with his famous *quinque viae* ('five ways').[6]

I am not going as far here as to demonstrate that God does exist. I just remark that it may well be that God is superfluous as an expla-

---

[5] See also the section on the hermeneutical invitation below.
[6] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1 q2 a3.

nation, but that this does not disprove his existence. It only raises the question whether there is even then any *sensible reason* (I use this term for lack of a better one) to believe in God. I think there is. Although space forbids giving a full elaboration here in this essay, we can take the example of this desire of the heart for the living God. Such a desire can probably be explained psychologically or even biologically. However, this explains the desire; it does not explain it away—the desire remains. Thus, even after explaining it, there remains something in the desire that can be understood as a true reference to God.

As for the problem of evil, this is indeed a challenge to belief in the living God. However, there is evil anyhow, and faith in God can also offer the best way to cope with it. This answer may not yet suffice fully, but it gives a first indication how to deal with this problem.

In conclusion, the invitation of Psalm 42 stands very strong in the light of atheistic claims. It fully agrees with them that we should not concentrate on a God who is not alive. However, it dares to see the possibility that, whatever gods may not exist, there is the living God who, by his very definition, is the God who does exist. Believing in this God and desiring for this God is not an intellectual activity in itself, but it meets any criteria of intellectual honesty.

The Anthropological Invitation: Life on the Way to the Living God

What happens with humans who live from their thirst for the living God? Their lives gain direction. Their lives become lives in via, on the way.[7]

I basically see three manners of living our human life: to stay, to stray, and to be on the way. Many people just stay or stray; these are the easy manners of conducting life. Still, our life can and should be a purpose driven life.[8] We can live towards a goal. That is to be on the way.

However, it is very important to set the right goal. Psalm 42: 2 indicates just one goal—the living God. We should not be after any

---

[7] Understanding life as a journey is a traditional Christian motif, but the journey motif is also present in many works of world literature, e.g. Homer's *Odyssee*, Dante's *Divina Comedia*, Goethe's *Faust*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

[8] This term is derived from Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), without giving full consent to the way Warren elaborates the idea of a purpose driven life.

material or spiritual idol, only after the one who, by his very definition, is not an idol, but the living God.

In a sense, the identity of every human is eccentric in God. We know ourselves partially, in our own experience our identity can be fragmentized; we do not know how the different sides of ourselves exactly relate, we are changing over time. Using the image from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, we can experience our identity as an onion—take off layer after layer in search for real identity and in the end nothing is left. However, God knows us fully and deeper than we know ourselves.

Conversion to a life on the way means that our eccentric identity receives a second dimension: we willfully entrust our identity in the hands of God, and by living the life on the way, more and more of that identity becomes already actualized in our lives, until, having arrived at the end of the way and having come to God, we will be who we are face to face with God. Thus, living on the way to become who we are in God is true spiritual growth.

As an old man, Peer Gynt finally asked in despair, "Where was I, as myself, as the whole man, the true man?" Then his love from his youth, Solveig, answers, "In my faith, in my hope, and in my love."[9] Experiencing himself as an onion, he found himself outside himself in the one who had loved him all the time. Of course, Ibsen idealizes human love. As believers, we may find our true identity in the living God, for whom our hearts desire.

The Ethical Invitation: Walk the Way in Love and Liberty

In principle, the idea of living on the way does not only help us to overcome the existential crisis, but also the practical crisis. Living on the way to the living God is a powerful metaphor for a positive moral ideal. In fact, it is the old biblical ideal of loving God with all of one's capacities.

However, does living on the way not imply a very world-avoiding, even world-denying type of ethics? I would say no. As a traveler, I can enjoy and love what I meet on the way. However, I cannot and need not fully bind myself to it. I think that is not a problem; but rather, a liberation. Conversion to a God-bound life is not giving up one's

---

[9] Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, Act 5 Scene 10. http://home.c2i.net/espenjo/home/ibsen/peergynt/.

liberty, but receiving liberty. Living a God-bound life means living a life
in liberty and love towards each other (cf. Gal. 5: 13).

The question may be whether I am not much too optimistic so far.
First of all, there may be this desire in our heart, and we may be willing
to understand this as a desire for the living God, but our heart is not
always filled with this desire. Next, the ideal of living on the way with a
clear-cut purpose may sound nice, but in the practice of life, it is often
difficult to decide which way is to be taken—to discover where the way
goes—to see the goal. The question arises whether it is not all nonsense
after all.

Such objections should be answered with realism. Having a clear
goal does not mean that one is constantly thinking about that goal,
or that the road is always clear. In the Bible, the right way is both
compared with a highway (Isa. 35) and with a narrow path (Matt. 7).
However, knowing the goal gives us the possibility to search for the
right track again, and not to fall back into mere staying or straying—
both of which impoverish human life. Living on the way is not the
easy way of life that makes all things simple; however, accepting this
'struggle of life' enriches life after all.

Humans are possibly glorious accidents. In a historical and scientific
sense, they are possibly accidental results of the evolutionary process. If
we look to humans in this perspective, we cannot see the goal. Deriving
a goal for human life from scientific sources is nonsense. However,
humans are *glorious* accidents.[10] They have the unique capacity to see
further than what is just before their eyes. Ultimately, they have the
capacity to thirst for the living God, for the one who is structurally
prior to all physical reality. As such, that is not nonsense, but a fact.
The invitation to live our life on the way to this living God is certainly
an invitation to take a risk—I have not proven God's existence, nor
have I already seen the end of the way with my own eyes. But it is
taking the risk of living human life in the fullest sense—of doing justice
to our glorious side.

Still, there may be something of a riddle in human life. Why do we,
even if we know the goal and know that it is good, still not always live
in accordance with it?

---

[10] The term 'glorious accident' was introduced by evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay
Gold; see Wim Keyer, *A Glorious Accident: Understanding Our Place in the Cosmic Puzzle* (New
York: Freeman, 1999).

*The Christological Invitation: See Christ both
as a Glorious Accident and as Sacramentally Present*

I turn to the fifth invitation, the Christological invitation. I hope this one will evoke discussion. Some will probably object that I spoil my argument so far by bringing in Christ. Others may object that I bring Christ in much too late. And is it not a heresy to call Christ a glorious accident?

By calling Christ a glorious accident, I mean that he cannot be derived from nature or history by necessity. God's incarnation does not take place at all times and places, but took place then and there. Continuing its focus on Jesus Christ and him crucified keeps the church bound to the past. And since time goes on, the cross as a historic event belongs more and more to the past. It is hard to see how people will still seriously believe in the crucified one, after a hundred thousand years (having developed over an even longer time, there is no reason why there would not still be humans or descendents from them over such a time).

Still, Christ is a glorious accident. Even in his crucifixion without glory he was recognized as the Lord of glory.

In a speech, Herman Bavinck compares Dante's *Divina Comedia* with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He says that in Dante's work the human reaches the entrance into paradise after a long way of suffering and punishments, whereas in Bunyan's work Christian loses the burden of sin at the cross and continues his way comforted and encouraged because his sins are forgiven and his salvation has been assured. And, as Christian is shown, Christ continues to keep the fire burning in the heart through the oil of his grace.[11]

Many people do not find the cross. But those who do may experience what Christian experienced. It adds a third dimension to their eccentric identity. They can see themselves in Christ as justified and sanctified.

The folly of the glorious gloriless cross is the key to deal both with the riddle of natural evil and of the evil in human life.

The folly of the cross should, however, not legitimate our own theological follies. That would be abusing the wondrous cross. Thus we have to face the problem of the pastness of the Incarnation—of the cross.

---

[11] See Herman Bavinck, *Feestrede ter gelegenheid van het 25 jarig bestaan der S.S.R. 9 febr. 1911*, n.p. [1911], 23–24.

I do not have the final answer, and hope to learn from the thoughts of others. However, I have some remarks:

1. The pastness should not be overemphasized: on the timescale of the Lord, two thousand years are just two days, and on the time scale of modern science, hundreds of thousands of years are just a few months on traditional time scales.
2. The problem that Jesus of Nazareth has become too much a great man *of the past* is not recognized by many Christians worldwide as a problem. We may have serious intellectual problems with it, but it cannot be maintained that no one can still believe in Jesus Christ—the facts speak to the contrary. The church grew in the twentieth century as never before.
3. Christ is not only bound to the past, he is also sacramentally present. The cross stood then and there, but is brought to us in bread and wine now. The sacrament at least places the pastness into perspective. It also opens up to the future and makes us God-bound—we wait until he comes. Apart from the sacrament of bread and wine, Christ is also sacramentally present in a broader sense. To mention just one example, he is the way to the living God. Being on the way to the living God is being in Christ.

Believing in Jesus Christ is not an intellectual activity; at times it can even be hard on the intellect. But having seen the glory in the accident, it is not unfair to accept the folly and live from this. In full awareness of the post-Christian condition and having studied a lot of critical New Testament studies, I still think it is intellectually honest to invite myself and others to believe in Jesus Christ.

If my argument—not taken to its badly structured presentation, but to its real intention—stands, then it means that Christian faith and Christian theology are still a most serious option beyond the post-Christian crisis. If so, in the context of Amsterdam, the question: are you already a post-post-Christian can be simplified to "are you already a Christian?"

The Hermeneutical Invitation:
Read Scripture in Relationship to the Living God

Some time ago, a neighbor invited me to write a new Bible—one that addresses the questions of our days. I politely declined.

But he had a point. The canonical scriptures of the church are already several thousand years old. Of course, the church and her individual members have written many confessional, theological, and devotional works, but nothing has the same character and status as the books of the Bible. Is it not her own fault that the church looks so much like a remnant of the past?

Surprisingly, when a new Bible translation was published in 2004, it sold very well—even in Amsterdam's major secular bookstores. Sales were only outnumbered by Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. The success can be explained by the fact that the Bible was not only presented as the book of the church, but also as a cultural and literary product. Apart from church editions, two literary editions appeared. I can imagine that *The Da Vinci Code* has contributed to the sales; it increased the awareness among the educated that knowing the Bible helps one to appreciate arts and literature.

However, is the hermeneutics that is implied in the idea of a 'literary edition' of the Bible not a bit below par? Is not any hermeneutics below par if it neglects that the character 'LORD' or 'God' in the Bible refers to the living God who was then, but who is also now, and for whom human hearts desire even today? The lasting value of scripture is not lain in its historicity—sometimes it is historically accurate, sometimes it is probably not, nor in its artistic value—sometimes it has, sometimes it has not, nor in its elevated ethics—sometimes they are appealing, sometimes they are offensive. No, the actuality of scripture lies in the actuality of the living God.

My neighbor's question was legitimate. We have 'the right' to have a Bible that is not only helpful as a guide book for the famous paintings in Amsterdam's *Rijksmuseum*, but that also addresses the existential needs of today. However, we do have such a Bible. Of course, there are all kinds of exegetical and hermeneutical questions, but let us be fair—more has been written on them than ever before. And again, it is not always clear whether and how the character 'LORD' in the biblical texts truly refers to the living God. In the light of the previous section, I think that Luther's principle *Was Christum treibet* ('What refers to Christ') is still a good hermeneutical rule. Anyhow, all this does not diminish that scripture itself is actual if only it is read in relationship to the living God. Such is a high claim, but may the present essay as a reflection on Psalm 42: 2 be a modest proof that it is not nonsensical altogether.[12]

---

[12] The point of this section is not that theological and devotional books and essays

The Ecclesiological Invitation: Base the Actuality
of the Church on the Actuality of the Living God

The church in Amsterdam is only a remnant of what it was in the past. In the light of the statistics, it is difficult to say otherwise. However, there is a danger that such a statistical fact becomes a part of the identity or self-understanding of the church. If so, the downward spiral is strengthened rather than broken. Who wants to remain a member of an institution that has no future?

What the church needs is a theological self-understanding that gives her the strength to remain vital and future-oriented. Such a theological self-understanding is not to be confused with theological rhetoric that only shouts over the present condition. What is needed is a fundamental shift in her orientation.

I invite the church to make a shift from a past-bound to a God-bound identity. The church is the community of those who are on the way to the living God. The church may still have some recognized relevance because of the secondary functions she fulfills—who would deny that she does a good job in the Red Light District—but much more can and should be said about her actuality. The actuality of the church is to be based on the actuality of the living God. Her primary and remaining task is to invite and encourage people, generation after generation, to live their lives on the way to the living God. The ideal of living on the way to the living God is an old ideal, but it is not an invitation to a past-bound life. No, on the contrary, it is an invitation to a future-bound life.

Psalm 43 expresses the hope that the thirst of Psalm 42 will be satisfied: *Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy*. As we have seen, living on the way can be hard, but it is also joyful: the eschatological expectation is characterized by hope for exceeding joy. More passages could be mentioned, but may Isaiah 35 suffice: those who are on the highway to Zion, will come there with singing—*everlasting joy shall be upon their heads*. Hoping for joy already fills with joy right now.

---

are simply superfluous—the present essay is not an attempt to argue that it should not have been written. In my view, it is a good idea that a standard collection of classical and contemporary readings from the Christian tradition were made and published together in one volume, with the same layout as a modern Bible edition. Such a volume should not replace Holy Scripture, but, on the contrary, help to see how scripture has remained actual under ever changing circumstances.

Some time ago, I wrote an article for a local church magazine. It was on a beautiful, but rather rural hymn by the Dutch, blind, poet Jan Wit. So I decided to slightly change the last stanza in order to make it a better fit for the context of the city. I was gladly surprised by the many positive reactions from people in church about the article and especially about this stanza. As it fittingly summarizes much of the present essay, I give here an English translation:

> Let then, o Lord, my heart be Thine
> and let me go and see and hear
> all what is Thine and every sign,
> with open eyes and open ear.
> It's then in Amsterdam so good,
> because the heavens me salute.[13]

---

[13] Based on Jan Wit, "Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren," *Liedboek voor de kerken*, hymn 479. Decontextualized, the fifth line runs like this: "Then is my earthly life so good."

INDEX