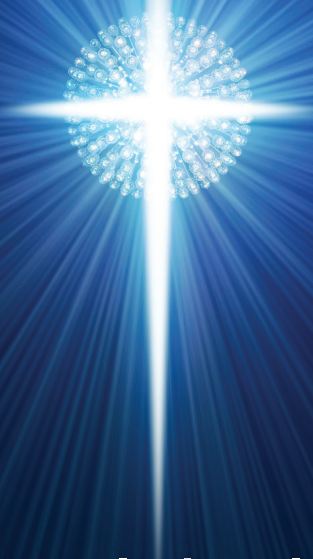
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

UNIO CUM CHRISTO®

UNION WITH CHRIST



Pastoral Theology and Practice

Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia

International Reformed Evangelical Seminary

uniocc.com

Vol. 7, No. 1 / April 2021

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

UNIO CUM CHRISTO®

UNION WITH CHRIST

Mission Statement

Unio cum Christo celebrates and encourages the visible union believers possess in Christ when they confess the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, the body of Christ. Thus, its mission is (1) to be an international scholarly and practical journal for the global Reformed community—churches, seminaries, theologians, and pastors; (2) to encourage deeper fellowship, understanding, and growth in faith, hope, and love in the Reformed community at large; and (3) to support small and isolated Reformed witnesses in minority missional situations. It will seek to do so by the publication and dissemination of scholarly contributions of a biblical, theological, and practical nature by Reformed leaders world-wide—including leading theologians, developing scholars, practicing missionaries, pastors, and evangelists.

Articles, interviews, and book reviews will consistently be in line with biblically based Reformed confessional orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Submitted or solicited contributions for its biannual issues will focus on specific themes of importance to the Reformed tradition and present debate.

This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database® (ATLA RDB®), a product of the American Theological Library Association. Email: atla@atla.com, www: www.atla.com.

The journal's "Ethics Statement" can be consulted on our website.

ISSN 2380-5412 (print)
ISSN 2473-8476 (online)

Printed in the United States of America and Indonesia

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

UNIO CUM CHRISTO®

UNION WITH CHRIST

Vol. 7, No. 1 / APRIL 2021

Pastoral Theology and Practice

Published jointly by

Westminster Theological Seminary
P.O. Box 27009
Philadelphia, PA 19118
United States of America

International Reformed Evangelical Seminary
Reformed Millennium Center Indonesia
Jl. Industri Blok B14 Kav. 1
Jakarta Pusat, 10720, Indonesia

uniocc.com
info@uniocc.com

Submissions

For questions regarding submission of articles, contact Paul Wells at pwuniochristo@gmail.com or Bernard Aubert at baubert@wts.edu. Guidelines of style can be found at our website: uniocc.com.

Subscriptions

Annual subscription rates for 2021 are $40.00 for institutions, $30.00 for individuals, and $20.00 for students. Single issues may be purchased at $14.00 per copy. Inquiries concerning subscription and orders should be sent to info@uniocc.com.

This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database® (ATLA RDB®), a product of the American Theological Library Association. Email: atla@atla.com, www: www.atla.com.

The journal's "Ethics Statement" can be consulted on our website.

ISSN 2380-5412 (print)
ISSN 2473-8476 (online)

Printed in the United States of America and Indonesia

CONTENTS

Pastoral Theology and Practice

INTERVIEW

SHORTER AND REVIEW ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITORIAL

Hope against Hope

PAUL WELLS

> Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Rom 4:18 NIV)

We thought the road ahead was straight; now, we cannot see around the corner. The present worldwide health crisis has tipped many people into despair. When normal life and its hopes are removed, emptiness and futility are laid bare. Many have lost loved ones, more have lost or will lose their livelihood, and we have all lost our comforting personal networks. The rich skein of our lives has become a skeleton.

When our expectations are dashed, what do we do, and where do we turn? Miracle solutions are hoped for. Realities in and of themselves legitimate become iconically idolatrous. To ensure the much-needed return to normal, high hopes are pinned on "the science," health services, masks and vaccines, political actors, and lockdowns. When idols do not deliver, hopes are soon shaken.

As Herman Selderhuis points in his comments on the pandemic in Holland, false hopes are tributary to unbelief. He concludes with hope for God's people:

> I started with unbelief, but I end with hope. The God who brought us down will in his grace lift us up. The God who brought us to a standstill in his grace will get us moving. The God who reigns over pandemics will bring his glorious plan to completion. Our hope is not in vaccines, nor in politics, nor in pastors or synods, but our hope is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him has been given all power in heaven and on earth (cf. Matt 28:18). He has revealed to the Apostle John on Patmos that all the things he was shown will happen and have to happen (Rev 1:1). And

> we see that they do happen as revealed. These are frightening signs but signs of hope. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, slain on the cross by the pandemic of our sins, raised from the dead by the vaccine of God's almighty power, we can have hope for the future of the church and for the future of our souls.

From a Christian perspective, hope is not the bedfellow of despair. Despair is resignation to an inescapable destiny. However, according to the New Testament, believers never find themselves in a hopeless situation, even when faced with persecution, death, or suffering. Hope may pass through the vale of anguish, as many psalms show, but it wins out. Thus, hope is often linked to forbearance and courage, which make something out of nothing, victory out of defeat.

Hope is present right from the start of the biblical story. It is hardwired into the human constitution by God's promise of life, by the eschatological perspective of the creation week, and by the fact that the human psyche, created in the image of God, is programmed with a memory of eternity. From the beginning, God's covenantal dealings with man have an eschatological perspective, as Geerhardus Vos argued in his article "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology."[1]

When the rebellion of sin excludes from God's sanctuary, human life becomes enslavement leading to death. If Cain's anguish naturally draws man in the direction of despair (cf. Gen 4:13), Babel's ambitious self-promotion pushes to the opposite extreme (Gen 11:1–9). The anguish of purposeless existence and impending death counterbalance the illusions of the *supermensch*. Futility or unlimited progress: Both varnish over the problem of sin as slavery, alienation from the source of life.

Biblical hope overcomes despair through exodus and the promise of new beginnings. The exodus theme grounds the hope of God's people from Abraham onward. God brings his people out of slavery to belong to a new humanity. Abraham is called from the paganism of Ur and receives a promise for the whole world. The exodus from Egypt and the pilgrimage to God's sanctuary in the promised land is the fundamental model of the fulfillment of the hope of Abraham. Later, a further return from the judgment of Babylon fulfills biblical prophecy and gathers God's people together once again to await for the promised Messiah. Jesus's exodus at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31), announced at the time of his transfiguration, is accomplished in his death and resurrection. Those who believe in him are raised by faith to new life

---

[1] Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 234–67.

and follow him in his exodus to the new creation, from death to resurrection. The entire biblical narrative is the hope of liberation from the bondage of sin and the entry into the new creation.

Abraham's "hope against hope" is the hope that looks to God in the absence of human means when all seems to indicate the contrary in natural terms. Biblical hope overcomes despair because it breaks with the pagan fertility cycle of birth and death. God breaks the infernal cycle of eternal return and introduces new life where nothing is expected. There are three great moments in the history of salvation when God intervenes to bring life into the natural void: the birth of Isaac, the virgin birth, and the resurrection. God gives Sarah a son when age makes it impossible. She laughs about it and names him Isaac (Gen 17:19; 18:11–12). Later, Abraham is ready to sacrifice this son, because he believes God able to raise him from the dead (Gen 22 and Heb 11:19).

The Virgin Mary is a symbol of the hope of God's people who wait for salvation. In Luke 1:38, Mary recognizes that God redeems lost humanity and that salvation comes from God alone, not human agency: "Behold, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." God enters the emptiness of life with its fears, and according to the promise Jesus will save his people from their sins.

The empty tomb is the opposite of the earth fertility cycle of pagan religions loudly proclaimed today in pagan anthems such as Elton John's "The Circle of Life" in *The Lion King*. Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty on Resurrection Sunday because nothing is expected from the earth. But when she meets Jesus, she confesses him (John 20:28). The living person of Jesus who came back from the dead is the epicenter of Christian hope for life beyond death and new creation. He broke the power of canceled sin, the power of death, and the power of Satan. This is the foundation of the Apostle Paul's hope in 1 Corinthians 15. If the realities of life lead to despair, God intervenes to bring the new creation.

These three cases indicate that Christian hope speaks of eternity. It models hope in a hopeless world. We know intuitively that life is not an eternal circle and that death is not the end. The grace of God reprograms our existence, and his intervention creates new life in Christ. What the world needs today, as Professor Selderhuis pointedly says, is "Jesus, slain on the cross by the pandemic of our sins, raised from the dead by the vaccine of God's almighty power." Our world has no meaning without God's purposeful promise of newness through deliverance by the gospel.

MATTHEW HENRY

1662–1714

Matthew Henry's Preaching and Pastoral Ministry at Hackney, 1712–1714

ALLAN M. HARMAN

Abstract

From Chester, Matthew Henry moved to Hackney (then on the northern border of London) for the final two years of his life and ministry. As a leading dissenter, he was immediately called to preach extensively beyond his congregation. In addition, he was working on his *Exposition* and publishing sermons. But various challenges faced him, in particular ill-health and tensions within his family. As at Chester, he had no formal elders or deacons to assist him. His extant diary from 1705 to 1713 gives a detailed account of his ministry. He displayed the Puritan ideal of a pastor/preacher, together with involvement in other dissenting interests. His ministry shows his deep devotion to New Testament teaching on the role of shepherding God's flock.

Keywords

Puritans, Matthew Henry, dissenters, non-conformists, Chester, commentaries, Hackney, Puritan spirituality

At the very end of the Puritan period, Matthew Henry pastored a Presbyterian congregation at Chester in northwest England for twenty-five years. His own Puritan connection is clear, for his father, Philip Henry of Worthenbury, was among many who lost their livings in the Great Ejection of 1662.

Moreover, Philip Henry was a pupil of the great Puritan professor, Dr. John Owen of Oxford. If anyone could claim Puritan lineage, then it was Matthew Henry.

In 1712, he moved to Hackney, which was then a separate township on the northern side of London. He only ministered two years there before his sudden death in June 1714, when he was returning from his second annual visit back to Chester. His ministry was essentially the same in Hackney as it had been in Chester, though by moving he was in the center of a considerable group of dissenting congregations. He had been used to ministering in small villages in proximity to Chester during the week, but at Hackney he took his place among the leaders of the dissenters. His ability as a preacher, and his known gifts as an expositor of Holy Scripture because of his *Exposition of Holy Scripture*, meant that he was in constant demand for his services. But there were changes as well that had a marked effect on his work and most probably contributed to his early death.

I. *Problems Faced at Hackney*

Henry was no stranger to London. In 1680 he went to London to study at Dr. Thomas Doolittle's academy. This and other similar academies were illegal establishments intended for nonconformist students. Their courses of study were more vigorous than the universities, and they also catered to students preparing for the ministry.[1] Accompanied by his cousin, Robert Bosier, Henry commenced study there before a virulent fever hit the students. He was ill and recovered, but his cousin contracted the disease and died. This led to Matthew's return home on September 25, 1680, to the family property at Broad Oak, south of Chester and across the Welsh border in Flintshire.[2] After pursuing studies under his father's supervision, he returned to London in April 1685, and at Holborn Court, Gray's Inn, he undertook studies in law and philosophy. Apart from a short period back at Broad Oak (from June 1686 till early 1687), he stayed in London until his ordination to the ministry on May 9, 1687.

---

[1] The dissenting academies commenced soon after the Great Ejection, when nonconformist students could no longer study at Cambridge and Oxford. Ejected ministers, to supplement their incomes and to provide education for students in subjects like logic, philosophy, Latin, and divinity, took young men into their homes. At times there was persecution, and the academies had to move regularly.

[2] Many have written as though Henry completed a full period of study at Dr. Doolittle's, but in reality, he was a student there only a few weeks.

1. *His Call to London*[3]

The whole process of moving to Hackney, and his lack of clear conviction regarding the call, dominated the latter part of his ministry at Chester (June 1710 to May 1712) and much of his time at Hackney (May 1712 to June 1714). It was a serious distraction for him and must have drained his energy at a time of increased pressures on him (moving to a new congregation, preaching and lecturing so often around London, continuing writing his *Exposition*, and publishing various addresses), not to mention the increasing disability he suffered because of kidney disease and diabetes.

2. *His Health*

John Williams, one of his early biographers, believed that Matthew Henry's health had started to fail as early as 1704. That year he was preaching one Sunday and fainted in the pulpit, though he recovered after a short time and insisted on continuing the service.[4] At various times, he mentions in his diary that he took "physic" (medicine), without indicating either the reason or the exact nature of the remedy. He also suffered from colds, some of which lingered for a long time. But in 1710, shortly after he received the invitation to Hackney, he had his first attack of kidney stones, or "gravel," as he often described them, and he had a succession of these. In two years, he had seventeen attacks.[5]

Another more serious illness was becoming apparent after his first visit back to Chester following his move to London. He returned to Hackney on the Saturday and preached twice on the Sunday. On Monday, he was fatigued and sleepy, and on Tuesday he consulted a very prominent physician, Sir Richard Blackmore, who diagnosed diabetes. Yet he preached the lecture on that day and baptized a child in Clapton. Sir Richard forbade him to preach the following Lord's Day, which then became "a melancholy day," the first Lord's Day he had missed preaching since he became a pastor. On the Tuesday, he recorded in his diary,

---

[3] I have dealt much more fully with the prolonged period after he received the call to Hackney and his removal there in Allan M. Harman, "Matthew Henry's Move to Hackney in 1712," forthcoming in the *Reformed Theological Review*. In these two articles, I am accessing material from his diary for the years 1705–13, held by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which I have transcribed and am now preparing for publication. The references are cited by the date on which they were written.

[4] John B. Williams, *Memoirs of the Life, Character and Writings of the Rev. Matthew Henry, with Matthew Henry's Biography of His Father, The Life of Rev. Philip Henry, A.M. with Funeral Sermons for Mr. and Mrs. Henry, Corrected and Enlarged by J. B. Williams* (1825; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 88.

[5] I have listed the attacks with the locations where they occurred in the article "Matthew Henry's Move to Hackney in 1712."

> Stud[ied] but little, being still indispos'd. I impute it to my indulging myself too much in drinking small Beer or mixt Beer w[n] I was thirsty as I often was & being too cool by which I lost the benefit of sweating.[6]

The reference to being often thirsty is significant because increased thirst is one of the symptoms of diabetes. By the following day, he recorded that his indisposition was going off, but that he was "dull."

Henry's diary is not extant for the last six months of his life, so we have no autobiographical notes concerning that period.[7] It is clear that his health was failing significantly, and though he was attempting to carry on as usual, the effect of declining health was leaving its mark. These kidney attacks were very debilitating, as modern analgesics were not available, and instead of resting afterward, he usually just carried on with his usual schedules. This included going out to preach the same day as he had passed stones.

3. *Family Problems*

Mary Henry, Matthew's wife, never kept good health.[8] When he was considering the call to Hackney, he had to tell his correspondents there that she was pregnant, and this would delay somewhat his removal.[9] For the period covered by the extant diaries, in addition to the birth of Theodosia (February 14, 1708) and Mary (March 31, 1711), Mary Henry suffered several miscarriages.

There were also problems with his son-in-law, Daniel Wittar. Just before the wedding of Daniel to Katherine, Henry's daughter by his first marriage, when arranging the marriage contract, he found out that there were discrepancies in the accounts left by Daniel's father. In particular, an annual payment of £38 had to be made to Alderman Street's widow. This almost jeopardized the marriage.[10] After the move to Hackney, Daniel and Katherine came to stay with them before moving into nearby accommodation. Later he commented on some unsatisfactory aspects of Daniel's character and commends Katherine for the way she was dealing with them.

---

[6] *Diary*, August 24, 1713.

[7] The only parts of his diary for 1714 available are some brief quotations in the early biographies. See William Tong, *An Account of the Life and Death of Rev. Matthew Henry* (London, 1716), 367–70, and Williams, *Memoirs*, 162–63.

[8] He noted this in his *Diary*, December 2, 1708.

[9] *Diary*, November 4, 1710.

[10] This difficulty in settling the marriage treaty may have been one of the reasons why the marriage was a very private one, with friends only being told afterwards that it had occurred. *Diary*, December 22, 1708.

His father, Philip Henry, had been brought up in London, and two sisters were still living in Chelsea when Matthew came to Hackney. He had been in regular correspondence with his aunts while at Chester, and there is mention of monetary transactions. It is unclear whether these go back to Philip Henry's time, for he was faced with financial difficulties on various occasions. Insufficient information has survived to work out accurately the financial standing of the family throughout Matthew's lifetime.[11] When his Aunt Dyer died, he and his wife went to Chelsea, but the reception they received was not good. In his diary, he comments,

> Studied. Went to Chelsey. My Aunt Henry pretty well. My wife went with me, we were not very welcome; but I went purely as a debtor to the memory of my dear father. My Aunt Dyer was very privately buried in Chelsey Church, between 8 & 9 at night.[12]

Another problem for him was the two families of in-laws, the Hardwares (from his marriage to Katharine) and the Warburtons (from his marriage to Mary). Again, the diary reveals many conflicts with members of both families, and these continued even after he moved to Hackney. He had had much difficulty with two sisters-in-law, Alice and Esther Warburton, and with male members of their family as well.

Finally, Henry could not escape his responsibilities for family property and finances, for beginning at the time of his father's death in 1697, he was responsible for them. Leases with tenants had to be arranged, and often the tenants did not pay on time. Dealings with his publishers and those selling his books were not always straightforward and added another aspect to his business life.[13] On the positive side, however, like his father before him, he used his wealth to lend or give money to others in need.

II. *Preaching at Hackney*

On moving to Hackney, Henry immediately assumed full responsibility for all aspects of congregational life. The following list shows the scope of his work as a pastor:

---

[11] Chester Archives hold some manuscripts relating to the finances of the Henry family, as does the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[12] *Diary*, September 22, 1712.

[13] See the entry for May 14, 1711: "y^{e} Booksellers wth me – some uneasiness about y^{eir} shares in my Book."

Preaching (twice on Sunday).
A mid-week lecture.
Pastoral visits, especially to the sick and dying.
Funeral services.
Catechizing.
Admission to the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
Occasional congregational Fast Day services.
Occasional thanksgiving services.
Special sermons for the young people.

It was Thursday, May 15, 1712, when Henry reached Hackney, his wife and children arriving some weeks later. He preached for the first time as the pastor on the following Sunday, May 18, from the text Acts 16:9, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." But his health problems manifested themselves immediately, for July 4–7 he was seriously troubled with kidney stones and finally passed one on July 7. From time to time thereafter, he notes in his diary that he took "physic" (medicine). He seems to have been unaware of how his health was failing, for after attacks of kidney stones he either writes of how his health was fully restored or that he was pursuing his work with full energy. Here is one example:

> I was taken ill of the gravel but blessed be God I was enabled to go through the work of the day with usual vigor.[14]

Another sign of his ill-health appears in comments relating to how he failed to complete any work on certain days. He can write, for example, that he "trifled away much time"[15] or that he "did little in the afternoon"[16] or that when he aimed "to do a deal sometimes I bring little to pass."[17] This is in marked contrast with entries for earlier years, when his general commitment to work is set out in his comments at the start of 1707: "O that the work of this year might be better done than that of the last, and my time more filled up, and that, I may never go weary of well-doing."[18] Early in 1713 he had another kidney attack that lasted for five days (February 14–18). Admitting that it was a "sore attack," he wrote that he was "not so recover'd yet as to rise early & keep close to my work."[19]

---

[14] *Diary*, September 21, 1712.
[15] *Diary*, June 24, 1712.
[16] *Diary*, July 25, 1712.
[17] *Diary*, December 1, 1712.
[18] *Diary*, January 1, 1707.
[19] *Diary*, April 22, 1713.

While ministering in Chester, Henry followed a carefully worked out scheme of preaching. He did not follow the example of many older Puritans who picked a doctrine and pursued it week after week from the *same text*. Rather, he chose a doctrinal subject and preached on various aspects of it *from different texts*.[20] Shortly before he left Chester, he sent a list of his preaching over his twenty-five years there to his friend William Tong, who included them in his biography.[21] What is surprising is that Henry does not seem to have followed this method when he moved to Hackney. No lists of his sermons at Hackney are provided in the biographies of either Tong or Williams, but they are noted in his diary for 1712 and 1713. That list yields no discernable pattern, which suggests that he was choosing texts of Scripture on which to preach that had no necessary connection with each other.

In moving to Hackney, Henry was conscious that he was going to a smaller congregation. At Chester, the Crook Street chapel where he ministered had over 350 members, while at Hackney he had less than 100. Several times in his diary he notes that an absence of new members being added to the communicants' roll was a concern for him. Thus, he wrote on April 29, 1713, "It is a trouble to me that there are so few Admissions to the Sacr[amen]t here; I have urged it all I can. The Lord enforce it."[22]

When an examination is made of the texts used in Hackney, they do not appear in the main to be ones that he used at Chester, which means that he was still doing fresh pulpit preparation at this time.[23] This is confirmed by the entries "Stud." in his diary in reference to preaching at Hackney and in London. The indication "Studied" is one of the most frequent annotations in his diary, and it is a reminder of how diligent he was in making due preparation before preaching. One fact, though, is strange. At least some of his books were packed on May 8, 1712, at Chester, in preparation for the move to Hackney, where they were unpacked on June 24. However, the main consignment of his books did not reach him there until the end of 1713.[24] This means that he was doing fresh sermon preparation (and also

---

[20] At times he preached consecutively through passages like Hosea 14, Hebrews 11, or the Lord's Prayer.

[21] Tong, *Life and Death of Rev. Matthew Henry*, 163–97; Williams, *Memoirs*, 273–92, gives Tong's list.

[22] *Diary*, April 29, 1713.

[23] One exception was a series of six sermons on the worth of the soul, which he had preached at Chester in 1696. They were printed in *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry, V.D.M., Containing, in Addition to Those Heretofore Published, Numerous Sermons, Now First Printed from the Original MSS*. (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1830), 1209–39. See Henry's comment on the response of the congregation to these sermons, *Diary*, October 12, 1712.

[24] *Diary*, December 14, 1713, "My Books came safe to me to day from Chester by long Sea y^{e} freight £3-5s-0d besides other charges." Is it possible that he thought he would not continue long at Hackney, and hence deliberately delayed getting the rest of his books?

continuing work on his *Exposition*) without the major part of his library for about eighteen months. Of course, his head was filled, first with Scripture (this comes out in the many quotations and allusions to biblical passages in the diary) and then with the reading and thought he had given to Scripture for over twenty-five years.

When preaching at Hackney on his visit in July 1711, Henry lamented that he did not have the pleasure of expounding on large passages of Scripture as he was accustomed to doing at Chester.[25] His normal practice was a chapter from the Old Testament at the morning service and a chapter from the New Testament in the afternoon. As soon as he moved to Hackney, he instituted the practice there, starting with Genesis 1 and Matthew 1. This meant that in addition to preaching from individual texts, he was also expounding much larger sections every Sunday.

In addition to preaching on Sundays, Henry, like most nonconformist pastors of the time, preached a lecture at a mid-week meeting as well. He had preached a lecture at his chapel in Chester every Wednesday evening, and he began following the same pattern as soon as he arrived at Hackney. There does not seem to be any real difference between the Sunday addresses and those at the mid-week meetings. There are references to his practice in the two early biographies of Tong and Williams.[26] One striking feature about his lecturing practice at Hackney is that he was using material that he had preached on already at Chester. He preached over twenty sermons on Hosea 14 that he had already delivered at Chester. Whereas he had preached 140 sermons on Hebrews 11 at Chester, he abbreviated that to a much lesser number at Hackney.[27] These series of continuous exposition also complemented his preaching from isolated texts on Sundays.

When at Chester, Henry devoted much time to preaching in other dissenting congregations during the week. While this was mainly in Cheshire, it extended also into neighboring counties as well. As soon as he moved to Hackney, he recognized that his sphere of usefulness had widened, to use his own expression, and many of his fellow dissenting ministers took the opportunity to get him to preach. A week after he arrived in Hackney, he delivered the evening lecture at Mr. Harris's congregation. After the lecture that evening, he went to Rotherhithe with Mr. Ratcliff and preached the morning

[25] *Diary*, May 27, 1711.

[26] Tong, *Life and Death of Rev. Matthew Henry*, 207–10, 355; Williams, *Memoirs*, 158 and 292.

[27] The exact number cannot be determined because of the missing diary for January-June, 1714.

lecture there the next day.[28] This was the beginning of many occasions on which he preached for fellow ministers in the London area. From May to December of 1712, he preached in over forty congregations in addition to his own at Hackney. When at Chester he accepted almost every invitation he received to preach. At Hackney, only on one occasion did he refuse an invitation.[29] These sermons or lectures were in addition to his two services on Sunday, his regular mid-week lecture, occasional fast and thanksgiving days, and funeral services. He also instituted within the congregation similar conferences and colloquia such as he had had in Chester.[30]

During 1713, Henry preached over seventy times outside his own congregation. His reputation had grown over the years, for he had visited London several times and preached in various chapels. Also, from the time the first volume of his *Exposition* was published in 1706, he had become known widely in the Christian world, not just among dissenters. This probably explains why so many prominent people, including nobility, came to hear him preach. He was one of the best-known dissenting ministers, and not surprisingly, he was associated in London with leaders such as Dr. Edward Calamy and Dr. Daniel Williams. He was afforded many opportunities to preach at combined services, as well as for individual congregations.

As already noted, few of the manuscripts of Henry's sermons preached in the Mare Street chapel at Hackney have survived. After the deaths of Philip and Matthew Henry, their manuscripts were dispersed widely, and some of Matthew Henry's are held in at least six different British libraries. However, several of his sermons preached in other pulpits so impressed hearers that they requested that they be printed. Seven of these appear in his *Complete Works*.[31]

Preaching was his calling, and he drove himself to fulfill invitations to the very end of his life. Even though he was seriously ill, he maintained all his duties at Hackney—preaching, pastoral work, catechizing, and conferences—and he also ministered to a widely dispersed group of dissenting chapels in the London area. Not even Sabbaths were reserved for Hackney, for early morning or later evening lectures in London could be added to his

---

[28] In his diary, he notes that Mr. Ratcliff was very involved with catechizing young people, and that four thousand had passed through his classes in five or six years. *Diary*, May 23, 1712.

[29] On June 30, 1713, he wrote in his diary, "Much perplex'd about an invitation to preach by Chatham. Lord lead me in a plain path—declined it & had comfort in y^{e} reflexion."

[30] He had a conference for young men in the congregation and a colloquium for more mature Christians that met following an evening meal in homes of members.

[31] Matthew Henry, *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry: Treatises, Sermons, and Tracts* (Edinburgh: Fullarton, 1855; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 1:153–97, 198–213, 213–30; 2:157–73, 264–80, 334–52, 477–95.

day's work. Having come to London, he was determined to serve the whole dissenting community.

III. *Pastoral*

At Chester, Henry had carried out extensive visitation and even asked if others knew of people in need; they would tell him so that he could go and pray with them.[32] At times, he would call in and pray for dying people several times on the same day, if he thought it necessary. Of course, Chester was a small walled city, and though dwellings were being built outside the walls, the population in 1700 was only approximately 7,500. Hackney may well have had a similar population, but it was on the edge of the metropolis of London with a combined population of 630,000. Henry did not take long to settle into visitation, for after arriving from Chester on Thursday, May 15, 1712, he visited fifteen people the next week, and the week after he visited nineteen. One thing noticeable about his diary for the period he ministered in Hackney (May 1712 to December 1713) is that the entries are becoming shorter, and less detail is given about individuals to whom he ministered. At Chester, he quite often had to counsel those who were "melancholy" (in depression) or were tempted to "self-murther" (suicide), and the same counseling took place at Hackney. Visits to sick young children were far more frequent at Chester, and often these visits were followed by their funerals.

The constancy of pastoral visitation saw no real change with the move to Hackney. Almost immediately, he was visiting those in his congregation, and especially those who were sick, though the number of pastoral visits was noticeably smaller. Two explanations could be given for this. The first is that the congregation was considerably smaller. The second is that at Chester, Henry was so well known and respected during his long ministry that people belonging to the Anglican church, as well as the membership of his own nonconformist chapel, were calling for him to minister to them in time of need.

[32] Williams, *Memoirs*, 133.

IV. *His Writing*

Henry's major writing project was his *Exposition of Holy Scripture*. He had begun to write notes even before there was any possibility of publishing on the horizon. The library of the University of St. Andrews has a full commentary on Matthew's Gospel in his handwriting that is dated 1698. Also, he began a commentary on John's Gospel in 1702. He did not begin his *Exposition* until 1704, but he was working through the Scriptures in family worship in his own home and expounding two whole chapters every Sunday. He must have had considerable notes available when he began to write the *Exposition*, for that alone explains how speedily he accomplished the task.[33] Even before he left Chester he would complain if he was hindered from continuing his writing, and while other duties were not neglected, clearly the *Exposition* had become a dominating feature of his life. If visitors came to his home, he would record how it kept him back from his work, "much hindered" being a frequent diary entry.

When he left Chester, Henry had finished Malachi, chapter 1. Arriving in Hackney on Thursday, May 15, 1712, he picked up his *Exposition* again the next morning, and within a few days had finished Malachi 2. In spite of settling into a very busy life, he continued, finishing Malachi 3 and 4 by May 29, 1712. His diary note was "Mal. 4 through y^{e} good hand of God I have this day finish'd the Expos[ition] of the O. T. Blessed be God."

That was not the completion of his work on the fourth volume. He had to read over it, correcting any mistakes, and provide a preface. When it was set up, the sheets came back to him for proofing. He was also involved in other publishing, as hearers were calling for sermons of his to be printed, and he was acquiescing.[34] It was not until September 11, 1713, that he was able to make a start on the New Testament. Many times, his progress was impeded by other pressing demands on his time, either at Hackney or, more often, in connection with the wider dissenting community. He took part in inductions, examination, and ordination of candidates for the ministry or attended meetings of the Presbyterian Fund.[35] At times, he could finish a chapter of Matthew in three days, while at other times it took him six days. Even six days is a remarkably short time, but he was utilizing material he

[33] Williams, *Memoirs*, 302–7, has a list of the manner in which he progressively wrote on the Old Testament from November 1704 until May 1712.

[34] For the list of his publications after he moved to Hackney, see Williams, *Memoirs*, 231–35.

[35] From 1688, the Presbyterian Fund was the main source of grants for ministerial candidates, needy ministers, and struggling congregations. Henry became a trustee of the fund before he left Chester, and after coming to Hackney he was a regular attendee at meetings.

had already at hand, even before there was any suggestion of publishing an exposition of the whole Bible.

V. *Assessment of Henry's Ministry at Hackney*

The first aspect of Henry's ministry at Hackney that needs comment is his perplexity over the call to Hackney, and his final decision to move there. He himself called his communication that set up a trial period at Hackney "the fatal letter."[36] What happened was a replica of the events relating to his earlier call to Salters' Hall in 1709, except for the length of time to consider the call and the conclusion of the matter. It was an unsolicited call that elicited a negative response from him, followed by intense pressure from ministers and leading men, especially those in the Hackney congregation. He vacillated and, in finally accepting, displayed very mixed feelings about the move. Repeatedly in his diary he makes comments like these: "Wrote to Mr Ball [at Hackney] that I could give less encouragement than ever to them to think of my settling with them";[37] "The love of my friends increases my grief";[38] "The more I see the impossibility of getting off here, the more perplexed I am. Lord let my soul dwell at ease."[39] From Chester there were the pressures on him to stay, and after arriving at Hackney he could write that he was "in continual pain and uneasiness about Chester."[40] Some of his longstanding and close friends expressed themselves very strongly. Mr. Kirks, who had been such a great supporter, made his feelings known. Henry wrote, "In the evening with Mr Kirks who fell very foul upon me leaving Chester. Passed many severe censures upon me, but if I know my own heart very unjust. I bless God I bore it with meekness."[41] Another old friend, Mr. John Hunt, advised him to take his leave of Chester earlier than he had planned, "being desirous," wrote Henry, "I should go away sooner than I intended, which makes me hasten to take the coach." At Hackney, there was disquiet over the protracted negotiations, and after arriving he went to visit Mr. Anthony. Of that visit he wrote, "[He] tells me that some here began to be impatient of my delay, yet all well now that I am come."[42]

---

[36] *Diary*, October 14, 1710.
[37] *Diary*, January 31, 1711.
[38] *Diary*, February 28, 1712.
[39] *Diary*, February 8, 1712.
[40] *Diary*, July 19, 1712.
[41] *Dairy*, March 3, 1712.
[42] *Diary*, May 19, 1712.

Related to this was the harassment that Henry had received from many in London urging him to come to Hackney. Undoubtedly, he was one of the most prominent dissenting pastors, from an impeccable Puritan heritage and with considerable gifts in preaching and writing. While it was going to be convenient to be near the printers, yet he had been managing well enough for the six years since the publication of volume 1 of the *Exposition* had commenced. He was besieged by letters from individuals, the congregation at Hackney, and groups of dissenting pastors. The main thrust of this pressure was that Henry had a duty to move to make himself more accessible to a greater number of people. Near the end of 1712, Mr. Tomson of Hackney sent him a letter that said, wrote Henry, "that they insist upon my coming." Not surprisingly he adds a prayer: "Lord help me."[43]

The second factor was his ill health—which seems to be responsible for his indecision over the call—and, after he arrived in Hackney, his worry whether he had done the right thing. He was suffering from two major illnesses, repeated attacks of kidney stones and type 2 diabetes. These may well have been interrelated. There is no doubt that he was a seriously ill man before he left Chester. He knew the fatal effects that both diseases could have because he notes in his diary men who had died from them.[44] He also expressed, particularly in the annual reviews he wrote at year's end, that he could see death ahead of him. From the first attack of kidney stones in October 1710 to the end of his extant diary for 1713, he suffered seventeen bouts of kidney stones. Also, he was constantly thirsty, had put on weight so that people remarked on his corpulence, and lacked concentration, and cognitive impairment appears to be behind his extreme indecision about the call to Hackney. All these features had been seen earlier in relation to the call to Salters' Hall in 1709, but now, as his health rapidly declined, they manifested themselves even more markedly.

The third aspect that requires comment relates to the amount of work he achieved after moving to Hackney. His extant diary covers just over nineteen months. In this period, he normally preached twice each Sunday to his own congregation and gave one midweek lecture. He preached/lectured constantly in other dissenting congregations in London, sometimes even three times in one day.[45] While back in Cheshire in 1713 from July 23 to

---

[43] *Diary*, December 11, 1712.

[44] For the deadly effects of stones in the kidney, see *Diary*, March 21, 29; April 3, 8–9, 1706; April 20, 1708; September 16, 1712; for death from diabetes, see *Diary,* March 20, 1705; May 21, 1705; September 16, 1712.

[45] For examples of him taking his own two services and then lecturing in another congregation, see his *Diary*, January 11, January 25, March 8, April 12, May 10, 1713.

August 12, he preached or lectured thirteen times. He completed the last three chapters of the Old Testament for his *Exposition* immediately after he arrived at Hackney, and from September 1712 to April 1714 he wrote the *Exposition* from Matthew 1 to Acts 4. How do we explain such a productive period for a seriously ill man? He has various expressions in his diary that show that his health was not permitting him to work under the same pressure as formerly. He was not getting up as early, he was "dull," he wasted away time. His vocation was to be a faithful pastor of God's flock, and having sensed that call over twenty-five years earlier, he never allowed it to disappear. His final New Year's Day brought these observations in his diary:

> Reflecting with sorrow, and shame upon my manifold defects, and short-comings in holy duties; and at other times inward expressions, not always answering outward expressions; having begged for pardon in the blood of Christ.
>
> I this morning renewed the dedication of myself to God, my own self, my whole self, body, soul, and spirit. Father, I give thee my heart; use me for thy glory this year; employ me in thy service; fit me for thy will. If it should be a year of sickness, and pain; if a new of family affliction: if a year of publick trouble; if of silencing and suffering; bonds and banishments; if it be my dying year, welcome the holy will of God; if a year of continued health, peace and liberty, Lord I desire to be busy in the improvement of it, both in study and preaching, in an entire dependence upon divine grace, without which I am nothing, and can do nothing.[46]

A fourth aspect is the lack of ecclesiastical organization within the Presbyterian congregations themselves and among the congregations as a group at that time. At Chester, and again at Hackney, there is no evidence that Henry had a body of elders or a diaconate. He admitted communicants and exercised discipline. On the one hand, this was a doctrinal issue, as many pastors, like him, believed that it was the pastor who administered the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19) and disciplined erring members.[47] While in Chester, he met informally with other Presbyterian pastors in Knutsford six-monthly for fellowship, for discussion of vacant congregations and possible pastors, and for the examination and ordination of ministerial candidates. The same practice was observed in the London area. No full Presbyterian system was in operation. He himself was disappointed when he was in perplexity about the call to Hackney and appealing to the dissenting ministers in London that they declined to enter into discussion in relation

---

[46] Quoted in Williams, *Memoirs*, 161.

[47] See the discussion on these practices in Williams, *Memoirs*, 131–32. Major decisions were often made by a small group of trustees or wealthy seat-holders. This has been described as church government by "a select oligarchy." See Duncan Coomer, *English Dissent under the Early Hanoverians* (London: Epworth, 1946), 11.

to it.[48] Another factor has to be taken into account, and that is the desire of Henry and others to see a comprehensive plan adopted whereby Presbyterians could be permitted back into the Anglican Church without some of the very restrictive practices that had precipitated the Great Ejection of 1662. The practices that would have been unacceptable were reordination by Anglican bishops and strict adherence to the liturgy of the Prayer Book. As late as 1705 (over forty years after the Great Ejection), Henry was still praying for "comprehension,"[49] and even in 1713 he was discussing with other nonconformists how they could work with the more moderate churchmen.[50]

Conclusion

Matthew Henry lived a very productive life in Christian service. He was dedicated to his role, and demands on time and effort were put above personal or family concerns. Life for him was obedient service to his Lord. In his diary there are practically no days that are recorded as vacation. Even on the Lord's Day he was working on his *Exposition* early in the morning before turning to the main preaching work of the day.

The tragedy of Henry's life was that an eminently gifted minister's life was cut off at the age of fifty-one. With modern medicine, his illnesses could have been controlled. With good advice from elders and fellow ministers, he could have curtailed his activities to match his physical abilities. There can be no doubt that many of them knew of his persistent ill health, but they seemingly ignored the warning signs and continued to press him to fulfill extra responsibilities.

No evidence of his profound ill health appears in his publications during his two years in Hackney, nor is there any hint that his preaching suffered. In regard to the *Exposition*, he pressed on with the New Testament at an amazing rate. Matthew was completed in exactly twenty-one weeks, while Mark took just five weeks. This could only have occurred if he was using material he had already prepared, which, with minimal change, was adapted to this purpose.[51] The same applies to his exposition of John's Gospel. This also explains the consistent quality of the parts of his *Exposition* that he

---

[48] *Diary*, June 5, 1711.

[49] *Diary*, December 31, 1705, in his concluding review of the year.

[50] *Diary*, July 22, 1712.

[51] The speed at which he finished the New Testament portion of his *Exposition* (Matthew-Acts) depends on his use of pre-existing written material, either from pulpit or from family devotions, or from the writing he did for his own pleasure.

completed after arriving in Hackney. His use of written exposition already in his possession ensured that the quality of Matthew-Acts was very similar to that of Genesis-Malachi.[52]

Death interrupted Henry's work on the *Exposition*. However, a "dear friend," usually taken to be William Tong, oversaw the production of the remainder of the commentary. It was published in 1721. Fourteen dissenting ministers completed the work, using considerable notes that Henry had left. A commentary on Romans was almost complete, and use was made of shorthand notes that auditors had taken while listening to Henry preaching. Dr. Isaac Watts, on a blank page at the beginning of his copy of the sixth and final volume, listed the names of the contributors, indicating that they endeavored to complete the *Exposition* in the style and method of Henry himself.[53]

From an early age Henry was addicted to his study. His mother had to try to get him to leave his books and go outside and get exercise.[54] His only form of exercise appears to have been either walking or horse-riding, as these were his means of transport to all the places he went to preach or lecture while at Chester. He was even riding from Chester to London in May 1711 when illness forced him to transfer to a coach.[55] There are one or two references to his time at Hackney that indicate that occasionally he rode into London, but he normally probably walked.

Puritan spirituality was exhibited in all of Henry's life. Regardless of his personal circumstances, he tried to learn from experiences and was constantly applying Scripture to himself. Christian ministry was his calling, and self-comfort and self-ease were unknown to him. Though coming at the tail end of the Puritan period, he was a fine exemplar of the Puritan spirit, overcoming many obstacles in his ministry and leaving writings that have benefited many ever since. His legacy lives on.

---

[52] For a brief introduction on Henry as biblical expositor, see Hugh O. Old, "Henry, Matthew (1662–1714)," in *Historical Handbook of Major Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 195–98. For a much more detailed assessment, see my discussion on "Matthew Henry the Commentator," in Allan M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: His Life and Influence* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012), 147–70.

[53] See the discussion on the completion of the *Exposition* in Williams, *Memoirs*, 308–9, and Philip Alexander, "Matthew Henry: An Annotated Bibliography," in Matthew A. Collins and Paul Middleton, eds., *Matthew Henry: The Bible, Prayer, and Piety: A Tercentenary Celebration* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 250–52.

[54] Williams, *Memoirs*, 3.

[55] *Diary*, May 9, 1711.

The Homelessness Crisis and the Role of the Church

WILLIAM B. BOWES

Abstract

In the United States, the homelessness situation has developed into what is commonly called a crisis. An array of helpful and unhelpful responses has been proposed, and public opinion on the homeless varies. Apathy or inaction on the part of the church is not an option, since concerns for the poor and displaced permeate Scripture. This article considers the complex factors related to homelessness and the theology of Scripture on the subject, evaluating approaches and offering meaningful and effective responses in light of the role of the church in the world. The intersection of ecclesiology and a practical response to the crisis will be examined to elucidate better a specifically Christian approach.

K*eywords*

Homelessness, homelessness crisis, ecclesiology, biblical theology, poverty, church action

---

Introduction

Homelessness is perhaps the most visible form of poverty in the United States. It is nearly impossible to walk through any major city and not pass by a homeless person. Particularly hard-hit areas are seeing the phenomenon of "tent cities," where large groups of homeless people gather publicly in

makeshift shelters. Due to significant increases in the number of people facing homelessness in recent decades and the insufficiency of many efforts to combat it, the issue is commonly referred to as a crisis.[1] In fact, one writer recently suggested that if the opioid crisis was the problem of the last five years, homelessness is the problem of the next five years.[2] While many interventions have been implemented to ameliorate the crisis, the majority of people believe that America is doing a poor job addressing the problem.[3] And, as one author puts it, "homelessness is not a new social problem. It represents the culmination of many social problems which have not been adequately dealt with over the years by federal, state, local housing and social welfare policies."[4]

This article proposes that the homelessness crisis cannot be solved without the significant contribution of an active church. Headway can be made against it by governments and secular organizations, but the homeless cannot be fully helped without complex, interconnected aid networks that require the commitment and action of the people of God. Homelessness is also a "public problem."[5] It is therefore the role of public theology to develop a formulated, reasonable, biblically faithful, and compassionate response. Tackling the homelessness crisis is an issue of public theology because it involves the ways in which the church interacts and dialogues with her larger community and society to bring about the public good, applying redemption not only to the people of God but to all people and societal structures. In the words of Nichole Flores, "public theology today demands a response to the threats posed to the most vulnerable members of our

---

[1] For recent examples of references to the problem as a crisis, see Christopher Rufo, "What's Really Driving the Homelessness Crisis," *Daily Signal* (February 24, 2020), https://www.dailysignal.com/2020/02/24/whats-really-driving-the-homelessness-crisis; LeeAnn Shan and Matt Sandler, "Addressing the Homelessness Crisis in New York City: Increasing Accessibility for Persons with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness," *Columbia Social Work Review* 14.1 (2016): 50–58, https://doi.org/10.7916/cswr.v14i1.1856. While homelessness is a global problem, this article focuses primarily on the homelessness crisis in the United States. Even so, the applications and suggestions made are designed to be applicable in various contexts, although churches internationally often exist under entirely different social and political systems.

[2] Erica Pandey, "America's Homelessness Crisis Isn't Going Away," *Axios* (January 22, 2020), https://www.axios.com/homelessness-crisis-american-cities-mayors-7fc17353-342b-40d7-a945-8dce5174dc75.html.

[3] Gallup, Inc., and Fannie Mae, "Homelessness in America: Americans' Perceptions, Attitudes and Knowledge," *General Population Survey and City Surveys* (Washington, DC: Gallup, 2007).

[4] Jon Erickson, ed., *Housing the Homeless* (Livingston, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 336.

[5] Ibid., 115.

society."[6] The homeless very much fit this description. Public theology thus involves a participation "in the incarnational character of the church."[7] We argue that Christian theology and a Christian view of homelessness is a matter of public theology in that Christian theology can shed fresh light on this difficult and endemic issue and can contribute to the public conversation and the development of more just, compassionate, efficient, and effective interventions, policies, and sustainable change for the homeless.

I. *The State of the Current Homelessness Crisis*

Homelessness is generally spoken of in two categories: "absolute homelessness," the condition of people "without physical shelter who sleep outdoors, in vehicles, abandoned buildings or other places not intended for human habitation," and "relative homelessness," the condition of "those who have a physical shelter, but one that does not meet basic standards of health and safety."[8] For our purposes, we will primarily examine those experiencing "absolute homelessness," not those who are housing insecure or those with unstable circumstances. When used here, "homeless" refers to "people in the 'streets' who, in seeking shelter, have no alternative but to obtain it from a private or public agency."[9] Plainly, an acceptable definition of *homelessness* is a condition where, on a given night, an individual has no place to sleep apart from public places or temporary facilities.

Because of the instability and unpredictability inherent in the problem, it is difficult to estimate how many people are homeless in the United States, and therefore the magnitude and causes of the problem are debated. As of 2018, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimated that 2.5 to 3.5 million Americans sleep in shelters, transitional housing, or public spaces each year.[10] According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, as of January 2019, 17 of every 10,000

---

[6] Nichole Flores, "What Is the Role of a Public Theologian Today?," *America* (June 12, 2019), https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2019/07/12/what-role-public-theologian-today.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Stephen Hwang, "Homelessness and Health," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 164.2 (2001): 229. Such "standards" refer to "protection from the elements, access to safe water and sanitation, security of tenure, personal safety and affordability."

[9] Erickson, *Housing the Homeless*, 127.

[10] National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, "Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes," https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless_Stats_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

people were experiencing homelessness.[11] That is, on a given day in 2019, it was estimated that more than 500,000 people went without shelter. The number of homeless people increased by 3% from 2018 to 2019, the third straight year of national-level increases.[12] In Los Angeles alone, from January 2019 to January 2020 there was a 12.7% increase in those living on the streets, vehicles, or shelters.[13]

The homeless population comprises groups that typically do not have much in common: single older transient males, deinstitutionalized mental health care patients, youth runaways, foreclosed or evicted persons or families, mentally or physically disabled persons with low incomes, abused women, victims of natural or humanmade disaster, undocumented immigrants, and victims of addiction or alcoholism.[14] Individual males are the most common demographic, and Black Americans, multiracial Americans and Latinx persons are statistically far more likely to be homeless than white Americans.[15] The homeless tend to have worse health than other people, and "disease severity can be remarkably high because of factors such as extreme poverty, delays in seeking care, nonadherence to therapy, cognitive impairment and the adverse health effects of homelessness itself."[16]

Despite major expansions of meal programs in recent years, food insecurity, hunger, and nutritional problems persist among the homeless.[17] Recent national studies of users of soup kitchens and shelters found that the "average homeless person ate less than two meals per day and frequently did not eat for entire days."[18] On average, more than a third of homeless people report having no friends, and more than 30% report having no

---

[11] National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition," https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2020.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Anna Scott, "Homelessness in Los Angeles County Rises Sharply," *NPR: All Things Considered*, https://www.npr.org/2020/06/12/875888864/homelessness-in-los-angeles-county-rises-sharply. California is estimated to have over 150,000 homeless, trailed by New York with just under 100,000.

[14] Erickson, *Housing the Homeless*, 4.

[15] National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition." African Americans represent 40% of the homeless despite representing only 13% of the overall population.

[16] Hwang, "Homelessness and Health," 230. About 40% have no health insurance, and middle-aged homeless people typically have health problems associated with those decades older.

[17] Barrett Lee, Kimberly Tyler, and James Wright, "The New Homelessness Revisited," *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 506.

[18] Anne Shlay and Peter Rossi, "Social Science Research and Contemporary Studies of Homelessness," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18.1 (1992): 139.

contact with family members.[19] The disruption of social bonds among the homeless can be especially devastating as these social bonds and roles can give homeless people a sense of meaning and provide connection, which is a fundamental human necessity.[20]

Additionally, studies suggest that 30%–40% of homeless adults deal with mental illness.[21] Chronic and infectious disease, traumatic injury, homicide, and suicide rank among the most common causes of death, which may also be hastened by substance abuse and the difficulties of insecure living.[22] More than half of homeless people report being victims of crime, primarily theft but also physical and sexual assault.[23] The sheer difficulty of homeless life has led some to even characterize the experience of homelessness as traumatic, likening the homeless experience to "trauma victims' sense of being without sanctuary in a world filled with malevolent forces … [which] is often compounded by actual failures of social support networks and by the social withdrawal of those on whom the victims have relied for support."[24]

While in previous generations the general public opinion of the homeless was negative, this has shifted toward viewing them as victims in need of help.[25] For example, since the mid-twentieth century there has been a progression in speaking of homelessness that has moved from "sin talk" before the 1960s to "system talk" through the 1980s into the "sick talk" of today.[26] Such public attitudes toward the homeless are quite important, as "positive attitudes are necessary to provide appropriate care."[27] While most are in favor of providing assistance to the homeless, research suggests that people also generally see the homeless as dangerous, more prone to criminality, and untrustworthy.[28] The public also attributes rates of mental illness and

---

[19] Ibid., 140.

[20] Lisa Goodman, Leonard Saxe, and Mary Harvey, "Homelessness as Psychological Trauma: Broadening Perspectives," *American Psychologist* 46.11 (1991): 1220.

[21] Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, "The New Homelessness Revisited," 506.

[22] Ibid. Suicide accounts for 25% of deaths among homeless people, compared to less than 1% generally.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Goodman, Saxe, and Harvey, "Homelessness as Psychological Trauma," 1220.

[25] For a study of these changes, see Amy Donley, "The Perception of Homeless People: Important Factors in Determining Perceptions of the Homeless as Dangerous" (PhD diss., University of Central Florida, 2008).

[26] Peter Somerville, "Understanding Homelessness," *Housing, Theory and Society* 30.4 (2013): 391. In other words, causation ideas moved from culpability to systemic failure to mental health-related incapacity.

[27] David Buchanan, Louis Rohr, Laura Kehoe, Susan Glick, and Sharad Jain, "Changing Attitudes Toward Homeless People," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 19.5 (2004): 566.

[28] Lindsay Dhanani, "How Religiosity Affects Perceptions of the Homeless," *Pegasus Review* 4.2 (2009): 1.

substance abuse to the homeless at higher levels than they actually occur.[29] When it comes to improving such views, however, any kind of exposure to the homeless (observing them, serving them, etc.) has been shown to erode stereotypes and foster more positive views among the public.[30] Some cities currently have laws targeting the homeless that can affect public perceptions; in Las Vegas, sharing food with the homeless or destitute is a crime punishable by a $1,000 fine or up to six months in jail.[31] Similar laws in other cities have been struck down, as in Boise, Idaho, where a court recently ruled that the city could not criminalize sleeping outdoors "on the false pretense that [the homeless] had a choice in the matter."[32]

Homelessness was generally not viewed as a crisis until the 1980s. During and just prior to that decade, the homeless population skyrocketed due in part to the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric facilities and to cuts in housing and social services.[33] These cuts were "in part a consequence of the transfer of federal dollars to a huge military buildup … and consequent large budget deficits."[34] This was realized to be a problem, and by the end of that decade legislative initiatives such as the 1987 McKinney Act allocated money to address the problem. An additional contributing factor has been economic change, as between 1960 and 2017 median household income increased 29% in the United States but median home price increased 121%.[35] In other words, the second half of the twentieth century saw a decline in the number of housing units that low-income people and those in need of assistance could afford, leading to increased demand and diminished supply. Additional contributing factors may have included changes in eligibility for welfare programs or disability insurance and a reduction in the percentage of intact families.[36] Prior to the 1980s, the majority of homeless people were alcoholic white males, but in recent years homeless people are much younger and become homeless as a result of a wide variety of factors.

The causes and risk factors of homelessness today are numerous and varied. One clear contributor in the hardest-hit areas is the high cost of

---

[29] John Belcher and Bruce DeForge, "Social Stigma and Homelessness: The Limits of Social Change," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 22.8 (2012): 929–46.

[30] Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, "The New Homelessness Revisited," 511.

[31] Randal Archibold, "Las Vegas Makes It Illegal to Feed Homeless in Parks," *New York Times*, July 28, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/28/us/28homeless.

[32] Sara Rankin, "Punishing Homelessness," *New Criminal Law Review* 22.1 (2019): 116–17.

[33] Martin Donohoe, *Public Health and Social Justice*, vol. 31 (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2012), 78.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Pandey, "America's Homelessness Crisis Isn't Going Away."

[36] Erickson, *Housing the Homeless*, xxiv.

housing.[37] Additionally, providers of services to the homeless simply do not have enough resources. Over the last five years, the number of temporary housing beds in America actually decreased by 9%.[38] Insufficient income or unemployment are of course contributors, along with mental illness and substance abuse.[39] For women, domestic abuse is also a significant factor that can lead to homelessness.[40] Policy shifts (in the provision of welfare or mental health services, for example), drug abuse epidemics, lack of preparation of the incarcerated to return to outside life, personal tragedy (such as a divorce or death in the family), or a catastrophe (such as medical bankruptcy or eviction) are all common causes of entering into homelessness.[41] Because of its multifaceted nature and complexity, thinking about causation "requires greater sensitivity to homeless dynamics and to the micro and macro influences that shape pathways not only into but through and out of homelessness."[42]

Because initiatives on behalf of the homeless need to work to stop it before it starts, an awareness of the various risk factors of homelessness can help address the problem's causes. Structural risk factors include poverty, insufficient employment, highly competitive or poor economic conditions (such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic), low wages, loss of public benefits and assistance, high housing costs and low availability (in large cities these are significant risk factors), family instability or divorce, deinstitutionalization, health care costs, and discrimination (especially toward women and ethnic minorities).[43] Personal risk factors include a lack of social support, experience with foster care or incarceration, family conflict and violence, sexual or physical abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, and military service.[44] Churches need to be aware of and take into account all of these risk factors as they consider how to help the homeless and prevent those at risk from becoming homeless. Additionally, to grasp how best to respond, it is necessary to understand what has been done and is being done to combat this crisis—both what works and what does not.

---

[37] National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition."

[38] Ibid.

[39] National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, "Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes," https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless_Stats_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, "The New Homelessness Revisited," 510.

[42] Ibid., 511.

[43] Roger Nooe and David Patterson, "The Ecology of Homelessness," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 20.2 (2010): 108–12.

[44] Ibid., 113–20.

II. *Contemporary Interventions on Behalf of the Homeless and Their Limits*

Many efforts have been undertaken in recent decades to house the homeless. Even so, some efforts have been more effective than others, and some argue that the system supposedly combatting homelessness in the United States is "unregulated, unlicensed, underfunded, and ultimately unsuccessful."[45] In terms of the limits to or problems with homelessness aid, one problem is that much of the money allocated to the cause of homelessness is misused or not used and can even end up harming the people it is meant to help.[46] Forms of charity that can become harmful in this way are those which only provide immediate assistance or provide finances without transitional support or a long-term structure for how the funds will be used effectively. For example, Robert Lupton notes that after Haiti's devastating 2010 earthquake, $8 billion in aid was given the country and much was misused, leading to the nation becoming 25% poorer after the aid was given.[47] Lupton argues that "top-down charity seldom works. Governments can give millions … churches can mobilize their volunteers. But in the end what takes place in the community, on the street, in the home, is what will ultimately determine the sustainability of any development."[48] This certainly applies to the hundreds of millions in aid that is allocated annually for the homelessness crisis. More than half of the American respondents to recent surveys have said that they would be willing to pay more taxes to fund programs to help the homeless, with 70%–80% saying that they would personally volunteer their time to help with organizations fighting homelessness.[49] Any endeavors to help, however, cannot be made solely of good intentions. They must be effective, either primary prevention that can stop someone from being homeless or secondary prevention designed to end it quickly, and they must be efficient, targeting well and not letting people slide through the cracks.

Additionally, some state and local governments have responded to homelessness with increased police regulation, forcing the homeless to

---

[45] Dennis Culhane, "The Cost of Homelessness: A Perspective from the United States," *European Journal of Homelessness* 2.1 (2008): 111.

[46] Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1994), 5.

[47] Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 56.

[48] Ibid., 85.

[49] Gallup, Inc., and Fannie Mae, "Homelessness in America," 7.

leave public places and penalizing activities such as sleeping, sitting, or begging in public areas.[50] This is, of course, an unsustainable recourse, providing no real solutions or forward avenues for those in an otherwise desperate situation. Similarly, legislation has been produced that excludes low-income people from certain areas through ordinances that require minimum acreage for housebuilding or prohibit multiple-unit dwellings. This leads to discouraging low-cost housing developments, shelter, and support programs, which "perpetuate the ghettoization of poverty."[51] Such responses are examples of "ultimately unsuccessful" responses to homelessness in recent years.

In terms of the levels of aid currently employed, the most common is the emergency shelter. Shelters play an essential role for the homeless in providing them a safe space and function to prevent "the descent into chronic homelessness."[52] However, even with increased funding in recent years, there are simply not enough shelters for the people who need them.[53] In recent decades, the pattern of intervention was typically to provide emergency shelter and then transitional programs or facilities, to aid in finding employment and stability, and finally to aid in acquiring permanent housing. However, this pattern has changed as more advocates are calling for "housing first" models and intervention strategies, which begin by providing a permanent residence and then introduce transitional assistance.[54] The rationale behind this shift is the antithesis of the idea that "homeless people are somehow broken and must be repaired before they can be trusted to succeed in permanent housing."[55] In the last few years, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in California alone to fund measures against homelessness that are mostly based on a "housing first" philosophy.[56] Recently, some cities have also established "safe zones" for the homeless, which limit them to a certain area to avoid problems caused

---

[50] Maria Foscarinis, "Downward Spiral: Homelessness and Its Criminalization," *Yale Law and Policy Review* 14 (1996): 49.

[51] Jim Tull, "Homelessness: An Overview," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 8.1 (1992): 39.

[52] Deden Rukmana, "Gender Differences in the Residential Origins of the Homeless: Identification of Areas with High Risk of Homelessness," *Planning Practice and Research* 25.1 (2010): 98.

[53] Foscarinis, "Downward Spiral," 2.

[54] For examples of this view, which advocates providing housing first before any other forms of assistance, see United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, "Solutions."

[55] Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, "The New Homelessness Revisited," 514.

[56] Randall Kuhn, Jessica Richards, Sarah Roth, and Kimberly Clair, "Homelessness and Public Health in Los Angeles," *UCLA: Campus-wide Homelessness Initiative* (2020), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gn3x56s.

by large congregations but likewise attempt to avoid the consequences of criminalizing their presence.[57]

The main problem is that most resources for homelessness deal with emergency situations or immediate needs and fail to address both the deeper factors that perpetuate homelessness and the risk factors that lead to it in the first place. That is, many interventions currently in place deal well with immediate needs but are not effective in long-term prevention or rehabilitation. Therefore, effective interventions with the homeless have to offer a wide range of supports across a broad time frame. A recent study found that there was effective and lasting change in the lives of homeless people after nine months of involvement with a transitional assistance program.[58] In this study, the effective program had a holistic approach that included counseling and support for addiction, relapse prevention, and training in managing anger and other mental health issues. It also taught life skills such as literacy and financial management, job skills such as interview preparation, and family reunification skills (for parents and spouses). It also provided food assistance as well as case management services to make sure clients were supported in different areas.[59]

Such an approach has been endorsed by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, which suggests that effective interventions both provide direct, affordable, subsidized housing first and connect people to support services in the community such as healthcare assistance and job training.[60] The best interventions are those that involve the community working together, where there are low barriers or minimal requirements for assistance, and where finances are allocated responsibly to accountable, local organizations that follow an agreed-upon methodology. Unfortunately, while affordable housing is clearly a major issue in this crisis, little has been done in recent years to expand housing options. Some have suggested that future initiatives will have to include support for negotiation with landlords; rental assistance programs; small loans for housing-related expenses, furniture provision, repairs, and other short-term necessities; and help with the development of financial management skills (e.g., building better credit).[61]

---

[57] Foscarinis, "Downward Spiral," 49.

[58] Douglas Luffborough, "Faith and Homelessness: Examining the Influence of the Faith-Based Component of a Transitional Housing Program on the Attitudes and Behaviors of Homeless Men" (PhD diss., University of San Diego, 2017), vii.

[59] Ibid., 18–20.

[60] United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, "Solutions."

[61] Martha Burt, "What Will It Take to End Homelessness?," *Urban Institute Brief*, 2001, http://webarchive.urban.org/publications/310305.html, p. 5. As will be discussed below, this is a clear area where the church can help.

Additionally, more work needs to be done with homeless people's mental health issues and to take into account the teaching of job and life skills.[62]

Many have also pointed out how data shows that faith-based programs are especially helpful for the homeless as they incorporate social elements of belonging and interaction, and such programs' spiritual aspects give the homeless "hope, confidence, and an anchor point within their lives. The counseling-type services offered by many churches [are] experienced as a form of cathartic inner healing."[63] This again points to the importance of a holistic, community-coordinated approach. Recent studies have shown that a significant factor in positive outcomes for the homeless was for them to have a sense that they had a strong support system and had the ability to overcome obstacles in life, which churches can provide.[64] Because such a holistic approach (including spiritual aid, which should not be neglected) is necessary and because so many approaches have fallen short, Christians can play an integral role in providing much-needed assistance. However, to know how to help, we first need to establish a biblical view of homelessness.

III. *A Biblical Christian Perspective on Homelessness*

A word equivalent to "homeless" occurs explicitly only a few times in Scripture, with most other applicable references being to the poor or destitute. Perhaps the most direct reference is Isaiah 58:7, where God is speaking to the people about what he considers to be a true fast versus a false fast that is purely a human religious practice. This true fast is comprised of action consecrated to the Lord; it is to be a way of living that seeks to right injustice, combat oppression, and help those in need. Part of this fast is "that you would bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isa 58:7).[65] This is a reference not only to the poor but specifically to the poor who have no dwelling place, and it is paired along with injunctions to "share your bread with the hungry" and "when you see the naked, clothe him." Leviticus 25:25 may also be in view here: "When a brother becomes poor, you shall support him and take him in." To do such things, in the eyes of the Lord, is true justice and not lip service or religious performance. As Alec Motyer puts it, such a way of fasting in the eyes of God is to "be used to correct

---

[62] Sanna Thompson, *Homelessness, Poverty, and Unemployment* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2012), 33.

[63] Megan Ravenhill, *The Culture of Homelessness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 173.

[64] Luffborough, "Faith and Homelessness," 86.

[65] The MT reads *wa'aniyim merudhim tabi' bayith*, literally meaning "and the poor cast out ones you will bring to (your) house."

every way in which social structures or wrongdoers within society destroy or diminish the proper liberty of others. …Work on the structures of society must be matched by personal care for the individual."[66] The reason why failing to concern oneself with this is a "false fast" is because, in the words of John Oswalt, "what good is it to deny oneself when those around one are going hungry?"[67]

To consider it radical or unwise to take a homeless person into one's home may be more of an indictment of contemporary believers and their view of the homeless than it is reflective of responsible exegesis or a right handling of Scripture. Regardless of the contention about how Isaiah 58:7 should be specifically applied today, it is evident God is concerned about shelter being provided for the homeless, and with believers personally caring about this need and expending effort to bring it about in order to rightly honor him. It is also worth noting that there is no exception clause in the passage for the homeless who are perceived as unworthy, incapable, or at fault. The passage simply calls for believers to personally concern themselves with providing shelter for those without it as a way of righting what is wrong in God's sight. Therefore, if being consistent with Scripture is the goal, inaction or apathy in the face of homelessness is unacceptable. A biblical perspective acknowledges that there is something inherent and God-given in people that desires and needs a home,[68] and Christians can be the ones who fight the hardest for the homeless to have one.

Aside from the most specific references, believers must remember the many applicable passages that deal generally with the plight and treatment of the poor (as all homeless people are). For example, verses like Leviticus 14:21 and 23:22 show that even from the time of Moses provisions were made in the law so that the poor could participate despite their circumstances; those who harvested were told to give of that harvest to those who had nothing. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 15:7–11 God commands the people to view and act toward the poor in a kind, generous, and open-handed way. In other places such as Psalm 12:5 and 34:6, God is said to act on behalf of the poor and hear their prayers, with Psalm 112:9 noting that a righteous person gives to the poor. Conversely, Proverbs 14:31 warns that to oppress the poor is to insult God, and Proverbs 21:13 states that God will not listen

---

[66] Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 408–9.

[67] John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 504.

[68] I define "home" as "an essential schema of relational order that brings meaning to experience in a space that allows a person to connect with the world and with others from the basis of security and safety." For a similar concept of home, see Kimberly Dovey, "Home and Homelessness," in *Home Environments* (Boston, MA: Springer, 1985), 41.

to the one who does not listen to the poor. Jeremiah 22:16 even states that to do good to the poor and needy is the very essence of what it means to know God. In Matthew 25:25–46, Jesus equates treatment of the poor with treatment of himself and says that this treatment is the basis on which judgment or blessing will come at the end. In the early church, Galatians 2:10 describes that even from the Jerusalem council, remembering the poor was of special importance. Romans 15:26 shows as well that taking contributions for the poor was a common practice. James 2:2–15 also reminds the church that one's attitude toward the poor must be backed up with practical action on their behalf.

A biblical Christian view of homelessness recognizes that the homeless have spiritual needs and the church should provide for these. In recent studies done with the homeless related to their spirituality and perception of Christianity, "there is little comprehension that the Christian story is good news for them."[69] For some homeless people, this can be the case because they feel helpless in their circumstances. For example, Jonathan Kozol relates the story of one homeless woman's feelings of helplessness related to God. After seeing a cross on the wall of the shelter she is staying in, he asks her,

> "Do you pray?" "I don't pray! Pray for what? I been prayin' all my life and I'm still here. When I came to this hotel I still believed in God. I said: 'Maybe God can help us to survive.' I lost my faith. My homes. And everything. Ain't nobody—no God, no Jesus—gonna help us in no way. God forgive me. I'm emotional … I'm scared to sleep. If I eat, I eat one meal a day. My stomach won't allow me. I have ulcers. I stay in this room. I hide."[70]

A theology of homelessness recognizes that many in such a state are desperate; they need the love, grace, and hope of the gospel. But they also need those having been changed by that gospel to act in practical ways in solidarity with them to help change their circumstances. As David Nixon puts it, "a theology of homelessness will be a new telling of the story which hopes to provide resonance for those who are rebuilding their lives, and to confront the myths and prejudices which attack them as they do so."[71]

A biblical Christian view of homelessness sees it not just as an abstraction but as actual people who need God's help and our help. Christian

---

[69] David Nixon, *Stories from the Street: A Theology of Homelessness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 148.

[70] Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2011), 67.

[71] Nixon, *Stories from the Street*, 149.

approaches based on this conviction, that one needs to personally know the homeless poor and to create a relationship and build trust in order to help them, can be particularly effective. As Bryant Myers writes,

> our point of departure for a Christian understanding of poverty is to remember that the poor are people with names, people to whom God has given gifts, and people with whom and among whom God has been working before we even arrived.[72]

A Christian view also understands that structural sin and evil (and not just personal sin and evil) play a role in the homelessness crisis and recognizes how these are situated in a particular society, economy, and political atmosphere.[73] To be faithful to Scripture and to Jesus, who served the poor and understood what it means to be homeless, the church must commit to caring deeply about the homeless and leveraging resources on their behalf at both the personal and structural levels, providing and/or supporting holistic interventions that both address the factors that brought about people's homelessness and work effectively to lead them out of it. We now turn to an exploration of various practical ways that churches can begin to do this or improve what they are already doing.

IV. *Suggestions for the Church in Responding to the Homelessness Crisis*

The church has a pivotal role to play in overcoming this crisis, and the impact that has already been made by churches cannot be overstated. For example, one recent article notes that in eleven major cities, ministries provide 60% of homeless shelters and save taxpayers more than $100 million.[74] In order for churches to be effective in such efforts, it is vital for them to invest in holistic approaches. That is, churches should create or support interventions that not only provide housing but also create a safety net to support the homeless through their transition. For able churches, this could mean investing in the creation of their own shelter, transition, or rehabilitation programs. For those that are not able, this could mean leveraging finances toward local organizations that are doing this faithfully and connecting at-risk or

---

[72] Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 106.

[73] Nixon, *Stories from the Street*, 148.

[74] Kate Shellnut, "Why a Christian Approach to Fighting Homelessness Pays Off," *Christianity Today* (March 6, 2017), https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/march/christian-approach-fighting-homelessness-pays-off-baylor.html.

currently homeless people to those resources. In areas where churches may not be able to make or further develop such connections or where there is a lack of resources, more direct or individual approaches can be taken. For example, churches can leverage finances to subsidize a transitioning person's rent or outstanding debts, and church members can provide food and furniture or help prepare the person's home for them by cleaning or decorating or providing clothes from their own supply.

Even though the church can play a pivotal role in homelessness prevention, the church cannot do it alone. Perhaps the best thing that churches can do is to be as connected to the wider community as possible—to other churches, organizations working with the homeless, mental health and case management services, halfway houses and rehabilitation programs, and organizations that provide or connect the unemployed with potential job opportunities and suitable housing options. The most effective work for the homeless will be that which has the support and resources of the entire community, which can work together to ensure that those in need do not fall through the cracks. Practically, churches should make connections with these sorts of organizations in their broader communities, developing cooperative relationships that can serve as a safety net for those attempting to come out of homelessness. In the event someone experiences homelessness, churches can be ready to connect them with every possible resource.

For many churches, leaders must first instill in the people the conviction that this issue is important for Christians to care about in the first place. Because simply saying that it is important is not enough, pastors and leaders can give opportunities for church members to work directly with the homeless through volunteering at a soup kitchen, offering a free shuttle bus service, or something similar wherein they would be able to interact with the homeless face to face. This direct engagement with the needs of the poor brings about an awareness and desire in people to actually work to alleviate their burdens rather than just talking about why that alleviation is essential. As Gary Temple puts it, "you cannot expect street people to change in response to knowing you if you are not changing in response to knowing them."[75] This must also entail that believers pray for the homeless. It is difficult to argue that one cares for the homeless if one does not spend time praying for them.

An active approach also necessitates that churches be willing to lobby policymakers for increased funding for housing, physical and mental healthcare, fair wages, and case management services. Such macro-level

[75] Gary Temple, *52 Ways to Help the Homeless* (Nashville: Nelson, 1991), 13.

interventions are necessary because of the reality of the systemic societal contributors to homelessness.[76] Even so, churches must keep in mind that the goal is "to elevate and not debase by relief," and so ensuring the best allocation of that funding is essential.[77] It is true that some homeless people have been hurt more than they have been helped by badly allocated charity. Thus, the church must keep in mind the need for holistic interventions as the most vital kind of help involves "a change in worldview, not just a temporary adjustment of worldly conditions."[78] Immediate and temporary help is often necessary, but this is often provided in place of the much more important hands and feet on the streets among the homeless and involved in their lives and rehabilitation. To return again to Jesus's example, it is worth noting that he "neither abandoned the needy nor fed them immediately—instead, he taught them."[79] Therefore, the church must be committed to action that empowers the homeless and does not lead to their dependency, which will only hurt them in the end. In Lupton's words, "compassionate service" is to "never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves."[80] The risk of so doing is high in short-term, immediate interventions, so interventions should instead be long term, holistic, and community based. In a word, the best way for the church to serve the homeless is first to holistically care and be committed for the long-term, second to be well-connected to the community and its resources, and third to be prepared to be a resource in ways that only the church can.

Conclusion

Why the church should be concerned with the homelessness crisis is an issue of ecclesiology. A Scripturally informed ecclesiology leads to the conclusion that the church should be involved in the world. Such involvement should not only bring about a knowledge of God and Christ through the spreading of the gospel but also bring about positive changes in communities at the

[76] Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 108. Lupton uses a helpful illustration for why addressing systemic social issues is necessary. We cannot simply say, "feed a man a fish and he'll eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime" when, in Lupton's words, "there are no fish in the lake because the lake is polluted and overfished." In this case, one must "figure out how to get control of the lake: stop the pollutants, issue fishing licenses, put wildlife-management policies in place. … Gaining control of the lake is a community issue." For more on ways to work against systemic social contributors to poverty, see Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2011).

[77] Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 30.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid., 71.

[80] Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 8.

local level, working against suffering and brokenness to bring about God's will and kingdom in the here and now. This call of the church is part of what makes apathy toward the homelessness crisis not an option and compassionate and direct action on behalf of the homeless essential for the church today—the church global and local, Protestant and Catholic.

While there is not agreement on the particulars of ecclesiology and the role of the church in all areas of its engagement with the outer culture, a basic consensus on the importance of ministry to the poor and homeless can be a point of agreement. For example, Protestants can concur with Pope Francis, who said,

> Charity and justice must be an essential and central dimension of what it means to be a follower of Christ. This self-understanding advances that liberating the poor from their pain and suffering … is a way of identifying with Christ. The Church shines brightest when she becomes a light not unto herself, but to the world.[81]

Similarly, Catholics can concur with Protestants who not only seek evangelism and conversion but believe that God's transformation is holistic and that the church is to be involved in the often long and dirty process of not only speaking what is good to the poor but providing for them.[82]

When it comes to the role of the church in the homelessness crisis, we could echo Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion. And it will be the kind of soul force brought into being as a result of this confrontation that I believe will make the difference."[83] The church has an essential role to play in fighting and overcoming this crisis, and I contend that without the church, it will not be overcome. But it will require the difficult, dirty, time-consuming work of those who are, by God's grace and for his glory, willing to lay down their differences, be united as the church, and spend themselves for the sake of the least, the last, and the lost.

---

[81] Stan Chu Ilo, "The Church of the Poor: Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerable Mission," *Ecclesiology* 10.2 (2014): 230.

[82] James J. Stamoolis, "An Evangelical Position on Ecclesiology and Mission," *International Review of Mission* 90.358 (2001): 310–12.

[83] Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," (Speech, Washington, DC, March 31, 1968), https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10.

IRES Jakarta, Indonesia

International Reformed Evangelical Seminary

A Reformed Fortress with Evangelistic Zeal

Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia

Theologische Universiteit Kampen
Netherlands

Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn
Netherlands

Refo500

Students
Enrollment
2021

Programme

Bachelor of Theology
Master of Theology
Doctor of Theology

Documents Submission

1st Period
November 9th, 2020

2nd Period
April 26th, 2021

3rd Period
June 7th, 2021

Successful applicant's entrance test and Interview session will be informed by phone or email by the registrar.

Phone: +6221-6586 7809 | HP/WA: +62-822-6969-9292
Email: admissions@sttrii.ac.id | Website: sttrii.ac.id

Reformed Millennium Center Indonesia
Gedung Kebudayaan Lt. 6
Jl. Industri Blok B 14 Kav. 1
Kemayoran, Jakarta Pusat, 10610, Indonesia.



On Christian Engagement with Digital Technologies: A Reformed Perspective

JEAN FRANCESCO A. L. GOMES

Abstract

This essay proposes that the Reformed theology of ordinary life has promising principles that can be applied to the recent challenges of the digital age. It first examines how contemporary scholars have grappled with the challenges posed by virtual life, highlighting their advantages and disadvantages. Then, it suggests that the Reformed attitude for sanctifying ordinary life leads Christians inevitably to embrace discipline in their use of technology. The author recommends digital resistance and digital intentionality as judicious parameters for Christian engagement in a digital age.

Keywords

Theology of common life, Christian vocation, technology, digital technologies, Christian life, Reformed worldview

---

Digital technology has changed people's lives in the twenty-first century. A recent survey indicates that the average American spends almost 24 hours a week online.[1] Technology facilitates communication, access to information, and shopping and enables various forms of entertainment. However, studies

[1] Harlan Lebo, *Surveying the Digital Future: The 16th Annual Study on the Impact of Digital*

have shown that the misuse of digital technology has side effects on the quality of interpersonal relationships,[2] has generated new virtual vices,[3] and is interfering in the functioning of our brains.[4] How should Christians stand in the face of this scenario?

In this essay, I argue that the Reformers' affirmation of *ordinary life* has promising principles that can be applied to the recent challenges of the digital age. The English Puritans coined the concept of *weaned affections*, which encourages us to love the things of the world as divine gifts and keeps us *weaned* from the world so that we do not enjoy it instead of enjoying God. From this perspective, I will maintain that digital technology is beneficial as an expression of human creativity but also has damaging potential. In taking this approach, I offer some guidelines for helping Christians acknowledge the positive components of digital technology without becoming naïve to its threats.

I will first look at how recent scholars have grappled with the challenges posed by digital life. Then, I will argue that the Reformed principles for sanctifying ordinary life lead us to embrace digital discipline in our use of technology. Finally, I recommend such discipline and intentional use of digital technology as good parameters for guiding Christian use of these tools.

I. *Digital Challenges*

What is digital technology, and why does it matter to Christians? Nicholas Carr defines technology as tools that supplement or amplify our innate capacities. These technologies can be divided into four categories: one set, encompassing the plow, the darning needle, and the fighter jet, extends our physical strength, dexterity, or resilience; the second, including the microscope, the amplifier, and the Geiger counter, extends the range or sensitivity of our senses; the third, including the reservoir, the birth control

Technology on Americans (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2018), 6, https://www.digitalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-Digital-Future-Report.pdf.

[2] Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

[3] Margaret E. Adams, *Internet Addiction: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Health Effects*, Psychology Research Progress (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2016); for the damaging effects of digital technology on children and adolescents, see Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu, *Internet Addiction in Children and Adolescents: Risk Factors, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: Springer, 2017).

[4] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010).

pill, and the genetically modified corn plant, enables us to reshape nature to better serve our needs or desires;[5] and the fourth, including the map, the clock, the typewriter, the abacus, the slide rule, the sextant, the globe, the book, the newspaper, the computer, and the Internet—the so-called *intellectual technologies*—is those we use to extend or support our mental powers, "to find and classify information, to formulate and articulate ideas, to share know-how and knowledge, to take measurements and perform calculations, to expand the capacity of our memory."[6]

Carr also argues that intellectual technologies are the most significant of all, given their lasting power over what and how we think.[7] For instance, the invention of the book forced humans to think deeply; to read a book is to practice an unnatural process of thought, one that demands sustained, unbroken attention to a single, static object. The book requires readers to train their brains to ignore everything else around them and to resist the urge to let their focus skip from one sensory cue to another. To read a long book silently also demands an ability to concentrate intently over a long period of time.[8] Therefore, because of the invention of the book, readers have become more efficient and more attentive.

The Internet is another intellectual technology that has significant implications for how we think. As a machine of immeasurable power, the Internet is subsuming most of our other intellectual technologies, and it is becoming our typewriter, printing press, map, clock, calculator, telephone, post office, library, radio, TV, movie theater, market, entertainment, work, and so on.[9] It is precisely because of this ability to combine many different kinds of information on a single screen that the emergence of the Internet fragments content and disrupts our concentration.[10] Accordingly, the shift from paper to screen is not only changing the way we navigate a piece of writing but also the degree of attention we devote to it and the depth of our immersion in it.

Thus, the chief challenge that digital technology poses to modern life is distraction. In fact, some scholars suggest that we live in an "Age of Distraction."[11] Carr notes that distractions in our lives have been proliferating for a long time, "but have never been to a medium that, like the Net, has been

---

[5] Ibid., 44.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 45.
[8] Ibid., 63–64.
[9] Ibid., 83.
[10] Ibid., 91.
[11] Cf. Justin W. Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

programmed to so widely scatter our attention and to do it so insistently."[12] He argues that digital technology is improving our primitive reasoning (multitasking and scanning abilities) while decreasing the more sophisticated way of thinking that had formerly trained us to be more attentive thinkers.

Living in a distracted age is also a challenge because most people tend to downplay the power of technological artifacts, considering them neutral. The basic assumption is that "our instruments are the means we use to achieve our ends; they have no ends of their own."[13] The idea of being somehow controlled by our tools is unthinkable to some. For example, the media critic James Carey declared that technology is technology: "It is a means for communication and transportation over space, and nothing more."[14] I believe Carey's instrumentalist view of technology is flawed because he overlooks that every technology embodies an intellectual ethic or a "set of assumptions about how the human mind works or should work."[15] James Smith rightly captures this nonneutral ethics of technology:

> Every technology is attended by a mode of bodily practice … whether we're hunched over a desk, glued to a screen; looking downward at a smartphone, our attention directed away from others at the table; or curled up on a couch touching a tablet screen, in every case there are bodily comportments that each sort of device invites and demands. Apple has long understood the bodily nature of this interface. In this respect, we already take for granted how revolutionary the touch screen is: a new, differently tactile mode of bodily interface, a heretofore-unimagined level of intimacy with machines.[16]

Therefore, if technologies have an embedded intellectual ethic leading us to a mode of being, thinking, and acting in the world, it should matter to Christians how to engage with them. Instead of remaining naive to the supposed neutrality of such technologies, we should be aware that many of our life routines follow paths laid by technologies that came into use long before we were born.[17] Smith draws our attention to what he calls "the iPhone-ization of our worldview." His basic argument is that the iPhone

---

[12] Carr, *The Shallows*, 113.

[13] Ibid., 46.

[14] James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 107.

[15] Carr, *The Shallows*, 45.

[16] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 142.

[17] Carr, *The Shallows*, 47. Smith says, "What appear to be 'micropractices' have macro effects: what might appear to be inconsequential microhabits are, in fact, disciplinary formations that begin to reconfigure our relation to the wider world—indeed, they begin to make that world." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 143.

invites us to live in the world differently, to assume that the tool—and, by extension, the world—exists to serve us and always be at our disposal.[18]

Having said that, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of engagement with digital technology? Primarily, we should admit that digital technology has been advantageous for everyday life. For example, the Internet is shortening the distance of relationships between friends, relatives, nations, and peoples all over the world. Through video calling apps, for example, my wife and I keep in touch with our relatives in Brazil almost daily. Although video calls do not replace real relationships, it helps people to bridge the distance remarkably. The Internet is also positive because it gives us easy and rapid access to unprecedented volumes of information online. Nowadays we access books, scholarly articles, and surveys on a digital platform that would be practically inaccessible, expensive, and hard to find in printed form.

Digital tools are also useful platforms for buying and selling products. A 2015 survey finds that "roughly eight-in-ten Americans are now online shoppers: 79% have made an online purchase of any type, while 51% have bought something using a cellphone and 15% have made purchases by following a link from social media sites." A survey done in 2000 registered only 22% of Americans shopping online. In other words, today, "nearly as many Americans have made purchases directly through social media platforms as had engaged in any type of online purchasing behavior 16 years ago."[19]

The public and free participation by the population in their city, country, and world affairs without intermediaries such as newspapers, book publishers, and the like is also a remarkable breakthrough of digital technologies. For instance, when someone wants to express their opinion, be it in writing, audio, or video, they just have to turn on their smartphone and publish whatever their political, social, spiritual, or artistic beliefs are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube. Due to this revolutionary and democratic potential of communication, new professionals called YouTubers, content creators paid by YouTube according to the reach of their publications, have appeared.

Despite their several advantages, digital technologies also have disadvantages. The side effects of virtual tools can be classified into the categories of thinking, relating, and acting.

---

[18] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 143.

[19] Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, *Numbers, Facts and Trends Shaping the World: Online Shopping and E-Commerce* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015), 2, https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/12/19/online-shopping-and-e-commerce/.

Firstly, developmental psychologists have shown the effects of different types of media on people's intelligence and learning capability. Patricia Greenfield holds that "every medium develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others." Greenfield grants that the Internet and other screen-based technologies have led to the "widespread and sophisticated development of visual-spatial skills." However, she also points out that our new abilities in visual-spatial intelligence go hand in hand with a weakening of our capacities for the kind of deep processing that unfolds "mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection."[20] Likewise, neuroscientists have claimed that the constant shifting of our attention when we are online may make our brains more nimble when it comes to multitasking, but improving our ability to multitask actually hampers our ability to think deeply and creatively. In other words, what we are doing when we multitask is learning to be skillful at a superficial level.[21]

Secondly, Sherry Turkle makes the case that our virtual habits have hampered our relationships, whether individually or in community. She first indicates how our moments of solitude have been challenged by our habit of turning to our screens rather than inward. Without solitude, she argues, we cannot construct a stable sense of self: "It is only when we are alone with our thoughts—not reacting to external stimuli—that we engage that part of the brain's basic infrastructure devoted to building up a sense of our stable autobiographical past." Solitude is also significant for our relationships because it allows us to reach out to others and see them as separate and independent. If children always have something outside of themselves to respond to, they do not build solitude. She concludes, "So it is not surprising that today young people become anxious if they are alone without a device. They are likely to say they are bored. From the youngest ages they have been diverted by structured play and the shiny objects of digital culture."[22]

Multitasking is also damaging relationships in the household, with friends, and with romantic partners.[23] In the family environment, Turkle notes that children complain about having to compete with smartphones

---

[20] Patricia M. Greenfield, "Technology and Informal Education: What Is Taught, What Is Learned," *Science* 323.5910 (2009): 69–71. See also Carr, *The Shallows*, 141.

[21] Carr, *The Shallows*, 140–41. Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008), 79–80. See also Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 108–9.

[22] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 61–62.

[23] Ibid., 59–102 (Solitude and Self-Reflection); 103–210 (Family, Friendship, and Romance); 211–92 (Education and Work).

for their parents' attention during meals. "At dinner and in the park, parents and children turn to their phones and tablets. Conversations that used to take place face-to-face migrate online," she remarks.[24] She comments that while adolescents have had difficulty expressing themselves face-to-face, they seem to be successful online,[25] commenting on the narrative of a high school senior girl to exemplify this relational paradox: "Amy barely says a word to boys at school or a party, but she rushes home to talk to them online. There, Amy says, you can 'take a breath,' relax, and plan what you are going to say before sending your message." Turkle explains that in person, teenagers imagine that the conversation can get out of control, go flat, or stop dead; online, however, adolescents feel playful. As a result, the social mores around cell phones have moved most friendships toward online exchanges.[26]

Digital technology also challenges romantic affairs. Commenting on the new apps that promote virtual romance, such as Tinder, Turkle argues that those tools give us the impression that we have a limitless choice of romantic partners.[27] She contends that "it offers a dialogue that is often not a dialogue at all because it is not unusual for people to come to online conversations with a team of writers." Still, virtual romance makes a false promise. She notes that it is easy "to think that if you feel close to someone because of their words on a screen, you understand the person behind them. In fact, you may be overwhelmed with data but have little of the wisdom that comes with face-to-face encounters."[28]

Thirdly, technology also plays a negative role when it comes to acting, particularly in our distracted manner of working. Taking lawyers as an example, Turkle exposes the concept of productivity held by young professionals. For many, productivity is "sitting in front of the computer and banging out emails, scheduling things; and that's what makes us productive." In contrast, she argues for a mutual causality between sociability and employee productivity. For her, face-to-face conversations lead to higher productivity and reduced stress; she notes, "Call centers are more productive when people take breaks together; software teams produce programs with fewer bugs when they talk more." Therefore, she points out that our interactions with other people help us foster new ideas, develop originality, and make the workplace more enjoyable.[29]

---

[24] Ibid., 105.
[25] Ibid., 141.
[26] Ibid., 142.
[27] Ibid., 180.
[28] Ibid., 181.
[29] Ibid., 250–53.

II. *Digital Discipline and a Theology for Ordinary Life*

How should Christians deal with technology? Is it possible to "sanctify" digital technology? What principles can help us use technological tools judiciously? To answer these questions we ought to find out the reasons, purposes, and methods of Christian interaction in the world. I argue that the Reformers' affirmation of ordinary life has valuable insights that will help us in our engagement with digital technology. I will first introduce the Reformed thought on how to sanctify all occupations of life and then apply it to Christian use of technology.

Charles Taylor claims that no movement had more historical significance in affirming ordinary life than Puritanism.[30] He suggests that the entire modern development of the affirmation of ordinary life was foreshadowed and initiated in the spirituality of the Reformers, peculiarly Calvinists, and more particularly Puritans.[31] In reclaiming the Puritan affirmation of ordinary life and trying to apply it today, I am not suggesting "a lifestyle transplant" from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first century. Instead, I advocate that some principles the Puritans developed in their context remain promising for us insofar as they are recontextualized to our reality. To grasp their affirmation of everyday life, I will address three questions about Christians' interaction with the world, namely, *why*, *for what purpose*, and *how?*

In the first place, Christians should engage in ordinary life because it is part of God's *calling* to humanity. John Calvin argues that humans were created by God to interact in the various activities of life and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when someone diligently applies themself to their calling for the benefit of all.[32] Calvin rejected the medieval notion that to withdraw from ordinary life and devote oneself to the service of God alone was the perfect form of the Christian life.[33] As Lee Hardy interprets him, "We become most Godlike not when we turn away from action, but when we engage in it. For God is not the cold, pure intellect of the pagan philosophers, but a full-fledged person, actively engaged in the governance and redemption of this world."[34]

---

[30] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 211–33.

[31] Ibid., 216, 218, 223, 227.

[32] John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:143.

[33] This view was endorsed earlier in the fourth century by Eusebius of Caesarea. See R. W. Forrester, *Christian Vocation* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 42.

[34] Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 57.

Taylor argues that the Reformers were innovative in denying the dualistic theology that separated godly life from ordinary life. He explains that whereas in Catholic cultures the term *vocation* usually appeared in connection with the priesthood or monastic life, the "meanest employment was a divine calling for the Puritans."[35] Thus, the Reformed repudiation of monasticism was a reaffirmation of lay life as a central locus for the fulfillment of God's purpose; for the fullness of Christian existence was to be found within the activities of this life, in one's calling, in marriage, and in the family.[36]

William Perkins elaborates on Christian interaction in the world by distinguishing God's general and particular callings to humans:

> The *general* calling is the calling of Christianity, which is common to all who live in the Church of God. The *particular* is that special calling that belongs to some particular men, such as the calling of a Magistrate, the calling of a Minister, the calling of a Master, of a father, of a child, of a servant, of a subject, or any other calling that is common to all.[37]

If Jesus himself submitted to work, claimed Hugh Latimer, then all kinds of work should be dignified. Latimer wrote, "The Savior of the world … was not ashamed to labor; yea, and to use so simple an occupation. Here he did sanctify all manner of occupations."[38]

In the second place, the purposes of Christian interaction in the world are the glory of God, the common good, and the exercising of our gifts. The glory of God is the tool that balances the Christian's love for the world. Although Christians are meant to enjoy the things God has given them in creation, they must enjoy the world while remaining detached from it, which means that Christians must love the world as God's good creation, but at the same time hate the world insofar as it turns their attention to the creatures rather than the Creator. To avoid this temptation, the Puritans developed the paradoxical notion that Christians should appreciate the world with *weaned affections*, that is, Christians should use the things of the world "but be not wedded to them, but so *weaned* from them, that you may use them, as if you used them not."[39] Additionally, the Reformers

---

[35] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 223.

[36] Ibid., 218.

[37] William Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations of Callings of Men, with the Sorts and Kinds of Them, and the Right Use of Them," in *The Works of That Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (London, 1612–1637), 1:752 (emphasis added).

[38] Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 25.

[39] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 223.

concluded from the creation account that God made humanity a societal creature, and thereby "the divine intent for human life is that we be employed in mutual service."[40] The Pauline metaphor of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 also influenced the Puritan understanding of society.[41] Perkins understood that the family is a body; every church is a body, and the commonwealth also is a distinct body. Composed of several members, "each body of society has a clear purpose: the benefit, happiness and well-being of humanity."[42] To this purpose, God gives different gifts to humanity so that each person might occupy his place in ordinary life and exercise his gifts for the common good.[43] Thus, Perkins concluded that not using these gifts must be considered an offense to God and the neighbor.[44]

Lastly, as for methodology, the Reformers teach us to serve God in serving people and to make liturgical use of our time. Thomas Shepard taught that Christians should see themselves working in worldly employments for Christ.[45] Overall, the Puritans believed that common life is sanctified not by the level of the nobility of the work done but by how and for whom it is ultimately done. As Perkins said, "God does not look at the excellence of the work, but at the heart of the worker."[46] Therefore, when a Christian serves his neighbor with his work, knowing that through this he serves God, this work, according to the Puritans, is holy. To remedy the temptations to either idleness or overwork, the Reformers urged their congregations to work diligently and make a liturgical-sacramental use of time in everyday life.[47] By the word "liturgical" or "sacramental," the Puritans referred to the disciplined use of time that ought to be consistent with the particular and general callings of the Christian.[48] They saw every day as

[40] Hardy, *The Fabric of this World*, 58.

[41] Ibid., 62.

[42] Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations," 751.

[43] Hardy, *The Fabric of the World*, 60.

[44] Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations," 756.

[45] Thomas Shepard, *Certain Select Cases Resolved Specially Tending to the Right Ordering of the Heart, That We May Comfortably Walk with God in Our General and Particular Callings* (London: Printed by W. H. for John Rothwell, 1650), 10.

[46] Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations," 758.

[47] Richard Tawney notes, "For to the Puritan, a contemner of the vain shows of sacramentalism, mundane toil becomes itself a kind of sacrament … [The Puritan] remakes, not only his own character and habits and way of life, but family and church, industry and city, political institutions and social order." In Richard H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1948), 199–200.

[48] For a contemporary use of the term "liturgical" applied to Christian way of life in the world, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). See also Tish H. Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

twenty-four hours of liturgy or service we render to God. Therefore, Shepard preached that Christians, making good stewardship of time, should separate time in the day for meditation and time for work.[49] He emphasized the need for rhythm between worship and work, subordinating our ordinary occupations to the "business of worship" and not as an end in itself.[50] For example, evoking the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 3, he argued that time should be administered in seasons. There is one season to worship God and another for "worldly employments." When our daily affairs take all our time, he argues, "nature brings grace into captivity." Similarly, we commit a great sin when we stop working on the pretext of seeking holiness—as was the case with monks.[51]

III. *A Digital Resistance*

Combining what scholars have said in the area of technology with the Reformers' principles for our engagement in ordinary life, I argue that the Christian use of technology requires both habits of resistance and habits of intentionality.[52] There are at least three temptations Christians must openly resist in their relationship with technology: omnipresence (multitasking), digital narcissism (self-display), and poor time management (idleness and addiction).

Omnipresence. According to Justin Earley, when we try to be present everywhere, we end up being present nowhere. Digital platforms, by their very nature, invite us to join in multitasking. Despite the relative productivity and velocity it might bring, this multitasking habit can lead us to consider that we can inhabit several places at the same time. Earley suggests that "this is why we must be attentive to our smartphone habits. The smartphone is a tool that enables many things, but it will never multiply our presence."[53] In fact, evidence shows that those who succumb to the supposed omnipresence inherent in digital technologies end up living a "fractured existence." He explains,

> Think of all the ways we now use our smartphones to fracture presence: working while vacationing, checking emails on a date, sexting with someone we'll never meet, taking calls while playing with our kids, interrupting our dinner with news

[49] Shepard, *Certain Selected Cases*, 7.
[50] Shepard, *Certain Selected Cases*, 10–11. See also Robert S. Michaelsen, "Changes in the Puritan Concept of Calling or Vocation," *New England Quarterly* 26.3 (1953): 323.
[51] Shepard, *Certain Selected Cases*, 7.
[52] Earley, *The Common Rule*, 64.
[53] Ibid., 66.

> notifications, posting a conflict instead of talking to someone about it, taking pictures of people in distress instead of helping them, taking a picture of someone who doesn't know it, watching videos of someone who doesn't want to be watched, curating our whole lives on a media feed in order to be "with" everyone except the ones we are actually next to. These are all ways of fractured presence, and they do real harm, both to us and our neighbors.[54]

Self-display. Christians are also tempted to live in digital narcissism or what I call the idolatry of self-display. Against the search for God's glory or the common good, many Internet users invest their lives in the search for likes on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and views on their YouTube channels. The mechanism of social media tempts us to identify our value as human beings from the number of views, likes, and shares of our texts, photos, or videos. As Smith argues, we live in an age governed by an expressive individualism, and given the expansion of social media, it seems that "every space is a space of mutual self-display." As a result, "every space is a kind of visual echo chamber. We are no longer seen doing something; we're doing something to be seen."[55] Therefore, for everyone's health, especially to maintain a healthy Christian spirituality, we must resist the temptation to live our lives in an idolatrous quest for likes and views.

Poor time management. American adults spend more than eleven hours per day watching, reading, listening to, or simply interacting with media on screens.[56] It seems inevitable that we spend much of our time making use of digital technologies—some "virtual workplaces" require practically 100% of their workers' time, for instance. Leaving this professional use of digital technology aside, it is noticeable that our interaction with the digital world can easily become time invested in insignificant things. Smith calls this media inclination the "pedagogy of insignificance." He points out that online life is loaded with a narrative about what really matters in life, "clicking our way around the environment, constantly updating our 'status' and checking on others, fixated on our feed, documenting our 'likes' for others to see." By submitting to this, "we are slowly and covertly incorporated into a body politic with its own vision of human flourishing: shallow connections for instant self-gratification and self-congratulation."[57]

---

[54] Ibid., 66–67.

[55] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 146.

[56] Peter Katsingris, *The Nielsen Total Audience Report, Q1 2018* (New York: Nielsen, 2018), 4, https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2018-reports/q1-2018-total-audience-report.pdf.

[57] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 148.

Because of these enslaving and superficial traits of the virtual world, Christians must resist the temptation to idleness and addiction to technology. To sanctify all our activities in everyday life, it is vital to think about the Christian theology of time. According to the Reformers, our time needs to be lived and administered as worship; that is, all the acts of our day (such as waking up, praying, studying, working, meals, conversations, and rest) function as liturgical acts that express our love for and devotion to God. It seems that a certain type of "digital fasting" or "digital dieting" is paramount if we are to balance our daily life liturgy.

Earley suggests three disciplines that might help us deal with the distracting potential of smartphones. First, he instructs us to turn off our phones in the presence of friends and family: "We have to acknowledge that our phones are carefully designed to attract our attention." For this reason, "we have to do the hard work of governing them, because they will not govern themselves, and they would love to govern us."[58] Second, he encourages us to turn off phones at work. In the age of smartphones, the ability to resist distraction is not just becoming "the single most important career skill," he says, "It's also a matter of whether or not we love our neighbors through our work." Finally, he prompts us to turn our phones off to seek silence. As psychologists have pointed out, he argues, our difficulty with times of solitude is related to the ignorance of who we are: "To sit peacefully in silence requires knowing your soul, knowing who you really are, and being fundamentally okay with that and at peace with that. This is exactly why we avoid it; we don't know who we really are."[59]

IV. *A Digital Intentionality*

However, resisting the power of digital technologies is not enough. In order to work out a healthy engagement with the virtual world, it is necessary to articulate our relationship with such tools from the parameters of God's glory, the common good, and the liturgical use of time. First, of all, it is necessary to recognize that the Internet, for example, is loaded with anti-God and anti-common good information. Evidence shows that social media can lead us to fight against our neighbor in a competition for popularity or simply because we think we have the right belief. Unfortunately, the virtual atmosphere is pervaded by aggressive, hateful, and sensual content published daily. Some people who appear to be harmless show their black

[58] Earley, *The Common Rule*, 67–68.
[59] Ibid., 73.

side when they are in front of the screen of a smartphone. Because they "feel secure" in the online atmosphere, some people show unbelievable behaviors—perhaps even to themselves.

To tackle this problem, Christians ought to use digital technologies with intentionality. Turkle points out that "laptops and smartphones are not things to remove. They are facts of life and part of our creative lives. The goal is to use them with greater intention."[60] I believe that virtual tools can be productive if used without excess and for the two worthy purposes of God's glory and the common good. One principle that might be promising for this constructive engagement is that, in order to sanctify their virtual activities, Christians be more content creators than mere consumers. To be a creator of "holy content" for the Internet can be described in a number of ways. Rather than describing them in detail, we must ask ourselves: How can I glorify God and benefit people's lives through the Web? In terms of video production, answers to that question may range from creating a YouTube channel for sharing the gospel to another teaching how to make apple pies. Whatever these contents are, what legitimizes them will ultimately lie on the search for God's glory and the common good.

As for social media more oriented to photos, like Instagram, Christians could expose less of their bodies and more of their ideas and values through art, or something that in some way elevates us to wonder about our neighbor's good and God's elevation. Indeed, it has never been so important to think about the Pauline exhortation to glorify God with our bodies than in these digital times (1 Cor 6:20). While it does not replace the power and value of books, the digital platform is also a valuable tool for publishing our ideas, reflections on varied subjects, and testimonies about our spiritual journey. Paul's advice applies also to this new reality: "Test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5:21–22).

Finally, our virtual entertainment needs to be intentionally oriented. Our individual leisure cannot be the only liturgical act of our life; otherwise, it becomes idolatry. Legitimate entertainment should be encouraged insofar as it is a part of the whole. A good liturgy of ordinary life entails time for silence and solitude, prayer, spiritual conversations and building relationships, hard work, taking care of our body, rest, and sleep.

---

[60] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 216.

V. *Final Considerations*

I have suggested in this essay that the Reformers' affirmation of ordinary life is a promising principle to be applied to the recent challenges of virtual life. I have presented the reason, the purposes, and the basic methodology that the English Puritans offered in their time for a holy engagement in everyday life.

Overall, digital tools are beneficial as expressions of human creativity, but they have also an intrinsic and powerful ethos that can collapse our Christian way of living in the world. In grappling with this issue, I have argued that digital resistance is needed to avoid some vices natural to that platform and offered parameters for Christian intentional use of digital technology.

We still have a long way to go in regard to our Christian engagement with the virtual world. Future research may focus on how digital life cannot control our way of being in the world, given that Christian ethics is based on the incarnation rather than the abstraction imposed by virtuality. For the present, it is enough to insist that God calls us to live in this world for his glory and not ourselves, for the common good and not just our interests, and to use our time liturgically instead of wasting it online.

Criticism and Legitimacy of "Cultural Marxism": Implications for Christian Witness in the Postmodern World

YANNICK IMBERT

Abstract

Recently, there has been a good deal of controversy regarding the use and definition of the expression "cultural Marxism." Some consider it to be simply conspiracy theorists' term for their fantasies; others consider it the best descriptor of the confusion of our current social discourse. This article critically evaluates the construction of "cultural Marxism," especially its Marxist-postmodern connection. It concludes that while the expression is relatively improper, it is difficult to deny the existence of a Marxist cultural turn and its impact on the historical development of our society.

Keywords

Marxism, postmodernism, cultural Marxism, apologetics, Jordan Peterson, cultural turn

It has become impossible to discuss the current influence of socialist thought without the expression "cultural Marxism" appearing. For many conservative observers of our culture, there is a radical change at work in the media, academia, and the broader culture.[1] This change is explained through the conceptual lens of this expression, which is used —often carelessly and inaccurately—to describe the ideology promoted by left-leaning thinkers in their efforts to transform society. The critics see "cultural Marxists" as having a self-defined "responsibility to eradicate the last vestiges of Christian influence and white male dominance in America's cultural institutions."[2] For those who think this way, "cultural Marxism" traces an ideological line from Marxism to gender studies and critical race theory—often conflated with identity politics.[3]

The expression "cultural Marxism" is so contested that a mere mention suffices to discredit the author or speaker. Many are content to dismiss the notion that Marxism plays any kind of role in forming our society. Others accept it as an accurate descriptor of the nature of cultural change. One could simply choose to reject it or to accept it, but that should not be done without critical reflection.

I. *Two Criticisms*

Two common objections to the expression "cultural Marxism" are its conspiratorial tone and its reliance on a dubious association between Marxism and postmodernism that borders on caricature.

---

[1] Rod Dreher often reduces the issues of our society to the cultural influence of Marxism or neo-Marxism. See Rod Dreher, "Cultural Marxism: Enemy of Real Marxism?," July 24, 2019, *American Conservative*, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/cultural-marxism-enemy-of-real-marxism/.

[2] Jefrey D. Breshears, "The Origins of Cultural Marxism and Political Correctness," 11, 2016, *Aeropagus*, https://www.theareopagus.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Origins-of-Cultural-Marxism-1-Article-Revised.pdf.

[3] Jordan Peterson has talked of the "Marxist lie" of "white privilege." The latter expression is typical of critical race theory (CRT), so Peterson hastily traces a direct linkage between CRT and Marxism. See Jordan Peterson, "Identity Politics and the Marxist Lie of White Privilege," conference given at University of British Columbia Free Speech Club, November 3, 2017, *Sovereign Nations*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofmuCXRMoSA. See also Georgi Boorman, "How the Theory of White Privilege Leads to Socialism," June 26, 2018, *Federalist*, https://thefederalist.com/2018/06/26/theory-white-privilege-leads-socialism/. The article mistakenly identifies Marxism and socialism. See also Sean Walton, "Why the Critical Race Theory Concept of 'White Supremacy' Should Not Be Dismissed by Neo-Marxists: Lessons from Contemporary Black Radicalism," *Power and Education* 12.1 (2019): 78–94.

1. *Conspiracy of the Left*

The first criticism of the value of the expression "cultural Marxism" is that it is used to describe a conspiratorial project of the left; this evokes in the minds of the left images of right-wing and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.[4] In fact, according to Galen Watts, the expression "has been co-opted by hard-right people to push a conspiracy-theory view of how universities, political life and liberty itself came to be denigrated by nasty intellectual invaders."[5] Anyone using "cultural Marxism" would be a hard-right conspiracist. To qualify those who see any value in the expression "cultural Marxism" as "hard-right" is an ad hominem argument that will never foster responsible and critical dialogue.

However, we must honestly note that the conspiratorial nature of the "cultural Marxism" narrative is not absent from conservative discourse. It is at times expressed by a conviction that whatever "the left" is saying, something deeper, darker, is at work. Under the guise of laudable objectives like tolerance, freedom, or equality, left-wing thinkers and politicians aim to "destroy traditional culture and thus create the vacuum needed to enable a popular mass revolution."[6] One of the outspoken critics of the emerging "cultural Marxism" is Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson. Watts notes that Peterson "has gone so far as to say that Cultural Marxism threatens the very bedrock of Western civilization."[7] The secret goal of cultural Marxists is to radically change the culture. The transformation of culture is implemented through secret means: that is where the conspiracy lies.

Moreover, cultural Marxism denotes a large-scale project to revolutionize society through the abolition of Western tradition. One critic writes,

> Cultural Marxism is the father of the Democratic Party's identity politics and political correctness. It is the father of transgender insanity and racial polarization. It is the father of open borders and rights for illegal immigrants. And, yes, it is even the father

---

[4] Paul Rosenberg, "A User's Guide to 'Cultural Marxism': Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theory, Reloaded," May 5, 2019, Salon, https://www.salon.com/2019/05/05/a-users-guide-to-cultural-marxism-anti-semitic-conspiracy-theory-reloaded/. See also Peter Walker, "Tory MP Criticised for Using Antisemitic Term 'Cultural Marxism,'" March 26, 2019, *Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/mar/26/tory-mp-criticised-for-using-antisemitic-term-cultural-marxism.

[5] Brendan O'Neill, "Don't Call Corbynistas 'Cultural Marxists,'" March 27, 2019, *Spectator*, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/don-t-call-corbynistas-cultural-marxists-.

[6] John V. Asia, "Cultural Marxism: Social Chaos," *academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/24806338/Cultural_Marxism_Social_Chaos.

[7] Galen Watts, "'Cultural Marxism' Explained and Re-Evaluated," June 23, 2018, *Quillette*, https://quillette.com/2018/06/23/cultural-marxism-explained-and-re-evaluated/.

> of the anarchy and nihilism that gives rise to mass shooters and to Hollywood movies that portray hunting human beings for sport as "entertainment."[8]

No wonder many on the left see "cultural Marxism" as a propaganda tool used to denounce a supposedly evil scheme aimed at destroying society.

Others on the right side of the political spectrum point to the "left conspiracy" by warning that the left's political activism hides a secret goal of transforming society by, for example, transforming academia. On the conservative theological side, some quote writer Jay Parini (from Dinesh D'Souza's article, "Illiberal Education") as evidence of such a hidden hostile takeover: "Now we have tenure, and the hard work of reshaping the universities has begun in earnest."[9] While some young professors and philosophers really thought their part in academic life could lead to transforming society, this objective does not necessarily imply that there is a conspiracy. The desire to change culture through influence in academia is actually quite understandable—whether or not we agree with the proposed change. By implying that the "leftist" control of universities, in particular in the United States, is a telling sign of such a *conspiracy*, however, some conservative thinkers are undermining their own argument.[10]

However, even if conservative critics using the expression "cultural Marxism" do not construe it in conspiratorial fashion, thinkers of the "left" criticize them as being naïve, or even destructive, conspiracists. It is no surprise that they dismiss this expression with a wave of the hand as merely "a uniting theory for rightwingers who love to play the victim,"[11] as "anti-Semitic,"[12] or even as a "hoax" and "far-right bogeyman."[13] It is really not surprising to read, "A central concept in the contemporary genre of right-wing manifestos, Cultural Marxism is a term of art used to disparage the

---

[8] James Veltmeyer, "The Cultural Marxist Attack on Western Society," August 22, 2019, *Washington Times*, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/aug/22/cultural-marxist-attack-western-society/.

[9] Quoted in Dinesh D'Souza, "Illiberal Education," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1991), 57. D'Souza himself is not using this quote to argue for or against "cultural Marxism."

[10] This does not imply that there is no "leftist" ambition to transform academia and culture—for there is—but simply that it is not conspiratorial in nature.

[11] Jason Wilson, "'Cultural Marxism': A Uniting Theory for Rightwingers Who Love to Play the Victim," January 19, 2015, *Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/19/cultural-marxism-a-uniting-theory-for-rightwingers-who-love-to-play-the-victim.

[12] Bill Berkowitz, "'Cultural Marxism' Catching On," August 15, 2003, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2003/cultural-marxism-catching.

[13] David Neiwert, "How the 'Cultural Marxism' Hoax Began, and Why It's Spreading into the Mainstream," January 23, 2019, *Daily Kos*, https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/1/23/1828527/-How-the-cultural-Marxism-hoax-began-and-why-it-s-spreading-into-the-mainstream.

canon of Western Marxist thought as propagating a conspiracy to undermine presumably traditional Western values."[14]

This criticism is partly warranted, but it concerns only a margin of the conservative discourse. Thus conservative social critics should be balanced as to how they argue their case, and it has not always been so, especially on social media, where caricature, on both sides, is common.

2. *Marxism's New Clothes*

The second criticism aimed at the expression "cultural Marxism" is the relationship it establishes between Marxism and postmodernism. In fact, "today, it is increasingly common in Anglo-American circles to conflate post-modernism and Marxism under the label 'cultural Marxism.' The most famous and articulate contemporary figure is, of course, Professor Jordan Peterson."[15] Peterson has indeed explained that identity politics is a direct consequence of Marxists morphing into postmodernists. Given his notoriety, many associate cultural Marxism with such a development. Peterson clearly states, "postmodernism is the new skin that the old Marxism now inhabits."[16] He continues that in the 1970s, "[the Marxists] rebranded themselves under the postmodern guise and that is where identity politics came from."[17] This is language that some scholars understandably find objectionable.

Firstly, "rebranded themselves" implies a conscious and planned intent. While there was indeed a conscious rebranding of the old Marxism in the 1950s and 1970s, as seen for example in the history of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, its proponents could hardly be called "post-modernists" without serious qualifications. Some were merely neo-Marxists, and others were at odds with the postmodern rejection of objective reality. Similarly, some postmodern philosophers might have used and modified insights from Marxism, but even those cannot be called Marxists without serious qualifications.

A case in point is Michel Foucault. While Foucault acknowledged having gained some insights from Karl Marx, he repeatedly denied any formal

---

[14] Marc Tuters, "Cultural Marxism," *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 2 (2018): 32.

[15] Matt McManus, "On Marxism, Post-Modernism, and 'Cultural Marxism,'" May 18, 2018, *Merion West*, https://merionwest.com/2018/05/18/on-marxism-post-modernism-and-cultural-marxism/.

[16] Joshua Philipp, "Jordan Peterson Exposes the Postmodernist Agenda," June 21, 2017, *Epoch Times*, https://www.theepochtimes.com/jordan-peterson-explains-how-communism-came-under-the-guise-of-identity-politics_2259668.html.

[17] Ibid.

connections with Marxism.[18] Some have even said that "Foucault's [project] was one of rescuing Marx from Marxism."[19] When he relied on Marx, it was not uncritically, even if he always had a sort of admiration for the German writer.[20] However, Marx's influence should be read in light of Foucault's own philosophical project and not of postmodernism's subsequent history. Foucault relies mostly on the second book of Marx's *Capital*, concerned with the genesis of capitalism.[21] The Marxian insight Foucault adopted in his philosophy is the historical nature of reality—not first the issue of power or oppression. However, this influence does not justify applying the label of Marxist to Foucault.[22]

Secondly, Peterson tends to reduce postmodernism to a certain set of "universal" ideas. One of the most radical Marxist insights incorporated into the postmodern worldview is that social life is articulated around the opposition between oppressors and oppressed—though identification of the oppressed is not through economic analysis but through the lens of "power." Postmodern philosophers tried to further this issue in their own ways. The problem with Peterson's argument is that he conflates "postmodernists" with the issue of power, a central theme for some postmodern thinkers (Foucault) and an important one for others (Jean-François Lyotard), but not necessarily for all. It could be asked whether "history," not "power," is the unifying theme of Foucault's philosophy.[23] There is likely no single common theme uniting all postmodern philosophers—apart perhaps from the rejection of a universal system of truth. Peterson's reductionist and caricatural view of postmodernism affects his argument and credibility.

---

[18] Foucault said, "Do you mean to ask me what the relations are that I have myself established between my work and Marxism? I would tell you that I haven't established any. … The relations between my work and Marx are an entirely different matter. If you like I would say very crudely, to put things in a caricatural manner: I situate my work in the lineage of the second book of *Capital*." Michel Foucault, "Considerations on Marxism, Phenomenology and Power: Interview with Michel Foucault; Recorded on April 3rd, 1978," *Foucault Studies* 14 (September 2012): 100.

[19] Mark G. E. Kelly, "Foucault against Marxism: Althusser beyond Althusser," in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93.

[20] Ibid., 92.

[21] Foucault, "Considerations on Marxism," 100.

[22] Mark Olssen, "Foucault and Marxism: Rewriting the Theory of Historical Materialism," *Policy Futures in Education* 2.3–4 (2004): 475.

[23] Mark Olssen notes that for Foucault, "there is no guiding principle underlying structures or their emergence. Difference, then, is historical, and resists transcendence in all its forms, whether God, Cogito, Forms, Economy. There is nothing outside of history." Olssen, "Foucault and Marxism," 468.

This does not imply that the conclusion that there has been a cultural turn in Marxism from economy to culture is mistaken. It does not even mean that the Marxist insight about social opposition and oppression does not inform postmodern society. What it *does* mean is that Peterson's facile tracing of influence from Marxism to postmodernism is not the best way of arguing for this evolution. The direct route he presents borders on caricature, and the simplification, necessary in a brief overview of the history of ideas, is misleading and does not always contribute to a just appreciation of what these thinkers have tried to achieve. This prevents Peterson from appreciating some positive aspects of postmodern and "Marxist" philosophers.[24]

Peterson's historical analysis is nonetheless not entirely flawed. There is a quite natural historical "line" connecting Marxism and postmodernism. A new philosophical perspective on social life neither emerges spontaneously from a philosophical void nor is created *ex nihilo*. New ideas and philosophical endeavors are critically formed by interaction with what precedes. There is *some* connection between *some* postmodern thinkers and *some* Marxists. The influence of Marxism in the decades immediately following World War II renders the historical connection between these two "schools" unavoidable; it reflects the natural formation of ideas. The question is whether it is possible to present the historical connection in a balanced and meaningful manner while preserving the complexity of the historical evolution of ideas.

It could be asked whether the expression "cultural Marxism" is not philosophically flawed. If its genealogy suffers from the oversimplifications we have mentioned, does that automatically discredit its legitimacy? Not completely, for one main reason: the questionable relationship established between Marxism and postmodernism is distinctly that of Peterson. It is not commonly held by many conservative thinkers who use "cultural Marxism" to describe the nature of our society. While Peterson overstates his case, this does not necessarily entail that the expression "cultural Marxism" itself suffers from the same philosophical caricature. It is the responsibility of conservative theologians and philosophers who make positive use of the expression to argue in a more complex and historically accurate manner.

---

[24] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

II. *A Legitimate Descriptor?*

This debate over the Marxist origin of postmodernism takes us back to the question of "cultural Marxism" as a legitimate descriptor of contemporary society. Is there some legitimacy to this expression? Are there even some legitimate Marxist "insights" that explain the evolution of Western society? These questions invite a closer look at Marxism and its evolution.

1. *Of Marxism*

The first step is a basic definition of Marxism, even though to talk of a simple definition borders on the nonsensical.[25] Is it really possible to briefly define the main tenets of a social philosophy that has morphed many times in the past hundred and fifty years? No, but we have no choice but to try if we are to evaluate the notion of "cultural Marxism." One could begin with the unforgettable beginning of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."[26] Thus, Marxism has often been associated with a revolutionary goal revolving around "class struggle." This explains why Marxism's objective is often thought of as a mere social and cultural revolution.

Through encouraging the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Marxism attempted to transform the world into a better society. As Friedrich Engels wrote in a tentative "Communist Confession of Faith," the aim of this new social philosophy was "to organise society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of this society."[27] This is possible by the transformation of the so-called "bourgeois family" and dependence on a radically egalitarian central state.[28] Thus, the communist ideal demanded the removing of the dependence of children on parents and required dependence on the state.[29] This evidenced

---

[25] Charles Mudede, "Jordan Peterson's Idea of Cultural Marxism Is Totally Intellectually Empty," March 25, 2019, *Stranger*, https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2019/03/25/39717444/jordan-petersons-idea-of-cultural-marxism-is-totally-intellectually-empty.

[26] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" [1848], pdf online, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2010, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/, 14.

[27] Friedrich Engels, "Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith," *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2010, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/06/09.htm, 37.

[28] This comes again in Max Horkheimer's *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Verso, 2012), 86.

[29] Ibid., 52.

the classic Marxist's need for a central power, which nowadays could be that of the state or that of cultural institutions.[30]

Freedom is only possible as an outcome of class struggle, explained by Marx as the exploitative relationship between the bourgeois ("capitalist") and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is identified with capital owners and wealth production. "By bourgeoisie," Marx and Engels wrote, "is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live."[31] Based on this, Marxism is often reduced to the issue of the means of production, while clearly for Marx and Engels the means of exchange was also crucial.[32] In fact, bourgeois society is nothing more than "the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange."[33] This exchange between labor and wages leads to a form of exploitation in the strict sense of the term. Exchange/exploitation is built into the basic fabric of the capitalist society, and modern society revolves around this notion.[34] For Marx, "exchange," and not primarily "means of production," is the key to understanding society and promoting its transformation.[35] He was quite clear that his social analysis is not a case of economic determination. This notion of exchange is crucial to the Marxist worldview and Marxism's cultural turn.

While Marx was not merely concerned with economics, and did not argue for an economics-only social determinism, later Marxism became obsessed with economic analysis, maybe to the point that economy was seen as the single most influential factor in the constitution of society. For Marx, and a large part of Marxism up to the 1950s, the superstructure of society (what we could call "culture") was molded by its economic structural base. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote,

---

[30] Karl Marx, "The Paris Commune" [1871], *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2010, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm, 58–59.

[31] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 14.

[32] Ibid., 17.

[33] Ibid., 15.

[34] Exchange value "reflects the value of commodity when one commodity is exchanged for another." Rob Sewell and Alan Woods, *What Is Marxism* (London: Wellred Publications, 2015), 115.

[35] However, in their historical analysis, Marx and Engels considered the means of production as an essential interpretative tool: "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society." Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 16.

> The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence (which) determines their consciousness.[36]

This also leads to the notion of culture. During the 1950s and the two following decades, Marxists did not explain "production in material life" primarily in terms of economics but of *culture*, as the conceptual key to understanding the "reproduction of life."[37] Thus, only a change in the capitalist nature of economic reality could transform society.

This Marxian certainty was contested in the course of the 1960s and 1970s. David Cheney summarizes this crucial change well:

> Using the old-fashioned terms of the Marxist framework, culture is no longer seen as a superstructure generated by a socio-structural base, but rather as a general term for the sea of discourses and regimes of signification through which we constitute lived experience.[38]

If Marx was never merely about economics, even in the old classical sense, it did play an enormous role. However, after the 1950s it became increasingly obvious that if economics was a viable tool for social analysis, the reality was far more complex. Thus the supposed "cultural turn" of Marxism.

2. *Marxism's Cultural Turn*

The argument in favor of the meaningfulness of the idea of "cultural Marxism" concerns the evolution of Marxist thought since the 1970s. To conservative thinkers, there is a direct link between Marxism and essential components of our culture. Watts warns, "Tracing the emergence of Cultural Marxism is a complicated and controversial affair, and there is much disagreement over who has had the most influence in shaping its contemporary expressions."[39] Determining the specifics of Marxism's "cultural

---

[36] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" [1859], pdf online, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1999, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Contribution_to_the_Critique_of_Political_Economy.pdf, 4.

[37] "According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimate determining element in history is the production and reproduction of life. More than this neither Marx nor myself have asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract and senseless phrase." See "Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg," in *Marx-Engels Correspondence 1890, Marxists Internet Archive*, 1999, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Engels_Correspondence.pdf.

[38] David C. Chaney, *The Cultural Turn: Scene-Setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1994), 191.

[39] Watts, "'Cultural Marxism' Explained and Re-Evaluated."

turn" is a daunting task, but several threads can be seen. Note the influence of the Frankfurt school of social theory and its philosophers—among whom Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. There is also the work and evolution of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, also known as the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Others point to the influence of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci.

These thinkers wrestled with the reappropriation of aspects of Marx's heritage. While they neither held to a common Marxist philosophy nor valued the same dimensions of his philosophy equally, one common trait was attention to cultural criticism. While this evaluation might smack of a Petersonesque conservative argument, there is a "well-documented 'cultural turn' in social theory, where culture involves 'making meaningful—it is through culture that everyday life is given meaning and significance.'"[40] This Marxist turn to culture led, in the 1970s and 1980s, to a fundamental reworking of how society ought to operate.

But not all such statements come from those in line with "hard-right" or "conservative" thinkers. Judith Grant, professor of political science at Ohio University, opines in the same direction: "The Frankfurt school and its fellow travelers are largely responsible for Marxism's turn to culture," which occurred in the mid to late twentieth century.[41]

Grant explains that the Marxist turn to culture was crucial to the development of a modified version of Marxism because culture, in particular art, "would be crucial in helping the proletariat to see its place in the totality."[42] Thus, culture and art were considered a "mediating" tool that helped the proletariat perceive reality. In fact, the overall goal of Marxism, the emergence of better material social conditions, can explain the central importance of cultural analysis in the Marxist tradition of the 1960s and 1970s. One of Marxism's main insights is that truth does not exist apart from material reality. Marxism could consider truth as an unchanging set of statements disconnected from social reality. In very concrete ways, truth had to "become real." Therefore, the change of material social conditions was a waypoint in the emergence of a new and better society. Reaching that goal necessitated a mediating tool. For this "new" Marxism, this was

[40] Kate Nash, "The 'Cultural Turn' in Social Theory: Towards a Theory of Cultural Politics," *Sociology* 35.1 (2001): 77.

[41] Judith Grant, "The Cultural Turn in Marxism," in *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 132. Grant was the Director of Gender Studies, and the Director of the Center for Law, Culture and Justice at Ohio University. Previously, she chaired the Gender Studies Program at University of Southern California, and was the Director of the Center for Feminist Research from 1990 to 2003.

[42] Grant, "The Cultural Turn in Marxism," 137.

culture. This explains why "Marxist cultural studies, as manifested in German Critical Theory, centered around the overall possibility of radical transformations through culture. Culture was the repository of imagery yet to be realized. In culture, there was hope."[43] Thus, to say that Marxism has influenced the development of our society is not a conclusion unique to conservatism. It belongs with the Marxist ideal of changing society for the better.[44]

Culture is crucial since it is where meaning becomes concrete, where identities can be developed and construed. A new look at "culture" could lead to social truth and, in turn, to the emergence of a new and better society. In fact, the cultural turn follows the idea that "the culture of the literally vulgar, the marginalised and the excluded could be re-evaluated by being seen as forms of resistance and subversion."[45] Cultural knowledge and attitudes were seen as indicators of the dominant bourgeois forces. Now, a change in traditional and conventional forms of cultural knowledge is seen to be the best and necessary way to implement innovative thought.[46]

For many scholars, this cultural turn began with the Frankfurt school, which dedicated itself to the study of culture not as a side phenomenon, nor merely as the product of economic forces, but as a constitutive dimension of reality.[47] The "new" insight was that culture production is more crucial to influencing the tension between classes than the classical Marxist focus on economic production and exchange. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer applied Marxian insights to the critique of the "culture industry," itself a concrete manifestation of the dominant cultural forces of society. For Douglas Kellner, a reputed a third-generation "modifier" of the Frankfurt school, "the Birmingham scholars were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film, and other popular cultural forms on audiences."[48]

---

[43] Ibid., 141.

[44] If that were the only thing meant by the expression "cultural Marxism" there would be a real legitimacy to the expression.

[45] Chaney, *The Cultural Turn*, 38.

[46] Ibid., 38.

[47] For some critics on the left, even the use of the term *Frankfurt school* is anti-Semitic in nature; however, this argument is not valid. For instance, none of the conservative references used in this study, including the one in *The American Conservative*, show any sign of connecting the Frankfurt school to the Jewish origin of its philosophers. Contra Scott Oliver, "Unwrapping the 'Cultural Marxism' Nonsense the Alt-Right Loves," February 23, 2017, *Vice*, https://www.vice.com/en/article/78mnny/unwrapping-the-conspiracy-theory-that-drives-the-alt-right.

[48] Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Marxism and Cultural Studies," *UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies*, October 28, 2018, https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/culturalmarxism.pdf.

Along similar lines, other "neo-Marxist" thinkers developed what came to be known as "critical theory," held to be a necessary instrument in the liberation of human beings from the ravages of capitalism. The emergence of "critical theory" has often been tied to the Birmingham School of cultural studies. Like the Frankfurt school, scholars associated with this philosophical tradition concluded that mass culture played an important role in integrating the working class into existing capitalist societies and that the consumer and media culture formed a new mode of capitalist hegemony. An alternative cultural stance was considered to be the best way to resist the "mass culture" typical of capitalist hegemony. As Kellner explains, "the initial project of cultural studies developed by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson attempted to preserve working class culture against onslaughts of mass culture produced by the culture industries." This explains why, along this path, "cultural studies came to focus on how subcultural groups resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities."[49] Cultural change is the best strategy for oppressed groups to follow so they can reclaim their identity and work towards social freedom and equality.

To many on the conservative side, this is a clear sign of the leftist, Marxist-informed agenda to transform culture. And in a way, it is. There is nothing surprising there. In fact, any philosophy or worldview that aims at the betterment of society will seek to transform it. We might disagree on whether current social trends are moving toward a better society, but we should nonetheless recognize that even self-defined Marxist (post-Marxist, or postmodern) thinkers do not want to destroy society out of pure spite but aim at what appears to them to be a better world.

III. *Apologetic Implications*

In this last section, we will explore the implications of our discussion, focusing in particular on three areas: Marxism and postmodernism, the social construction of reality, and the nature of social order.

1. *Marxism and Postmodernism*

To begin with, we need to revisit the relationship between Marxism and postmodernism, noting that it is easy to assume a historical linkage between them. As Matt McManus remarks, one left-wing postmodern school can be more or less explicitly tied to Marxism. In fact, among postmodern

[49] Ibid.

theorists, "most are self-identified Marxists or post-Marxists. Representative thinkers include Frederic Jameson, David Harvey, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Neil Postman and Jacques Baudrillard."[50] However, another left-wing postmodern school is much more critical of the common postmodernist denominator: its stance on truth claims. McManus explains that "the primary theoretical position that unites many post-modern thinkers is skepticism towards the claim that we can achieve absolute certainty in our scientific, philosophical, and moral reasoning."[51]

A first issue is that, on both left and right, on both progressive and conservative sides, the contemporary philosophical landscape has been reduced to postmodern expressions. This explains why Peterson erroneously considers postmodernism a descendant of Marxism. However, postmodernism is not the only influential philosophical tradition. Post-Marxism itself is often an alternative to prevalent postmodern thought. Transhumanism too is a non-postmodern alternative, focused on the scientific achievement of human potential.[52] A second issue is the identification of postmodernism as a set of specific beliefs. However, this is hardly possible, the exception being the rejection of a unifying grand theory of truth.

Christian theologians should not assume that all philosophers are of the postmodern kind, especially on the left—a mistake easily made, as in the case of Peterson. If everything on the left were postmodern, and if everything on the left were Marxist, then there would indeed be a clear connection between the two. That would be the case if the history of ideas were linear and homogenous, which it is not. Reformed theologians, who put a particular emphasis on the history of redemption, should be wary of historical simplifications. As people anchored in time, we are largely dependent on the epoch in which we live, though not determined by it. Historical realities are part of who we are and part of what society has become. Recognizing that humans belong to their local material reality invites accurate representation of the historical evolution of ideas. This is a demanding task, especially because "the development of ideas and their links to the movements they generate or justify is often a messy process."[53] This is a necessary

[50] McManus, "On Marxism, Post-Modernism, and 'Cultural Marxism.'"

[51] Matt McManus, "What Is Postmodernism? (Part One)," March 8, 2018, *Merion West*, https://merionwest.com/2018/08/03/what-is-post-modernism-part-one/.

[52] For more on transhumanism, see Yannick Imbert, "Transhumanism: Anthropological Challenge of the Twenty-First Century," *Unio cum Christo* 3.1 (April 2017): 201–18.

[53] Robert S. Smith, "Cultural Marxism: Imaginary Conspiracy or Revolutionary Reality?," *Themelios* 44.3 (2019), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/cultural-marxism-imaginary-conspiracy-or-revolutionary-reality/.

implication of the Reformed emphasis on creational reality and the historical deployment of God's redemptive purposes in a fallen world.

Attention to the historical evolution of ideas is also crucial to Christian witness. In the long run, oversimplifications and caricatures will hurt Christian witness. The more we simplify our understanding of the current condition of society, the more we risk proposing an apologetic that will be aimed at the wrong target. While simplifications may be legitimate, they must aim at clarifying the current state of the world. This will not be achieved without taking into account the complexities of the created reality we inhabit.

2. *Common and Converging Threads*

The confusion about "cultural Marxism" comes, in part, from the common threads that run both in contemporary culture and in (neo-)Marxism. "Cultural Marxism" explains the existence of such common threads in a simple genealogy, for example, in a similar criticism of the traditional institutions of society, such as marriage. Some will note that there is a Marxist tendency to reject traditional marriage. Some Marxist thinkers have explained marriage as a construct echoing the nature of society. For Horkheimer, "monogamous marriage, but with the exclusion of incest, is the mark of the modern western civilization" and should be abandoned.[54] The current pressure against a biblical view of marriage could easily be seen as an example of Marxist lineage. However, this is far from obvious. Other factors should be considered, like social theories of knowledge and biological studies.

A second common thread is the fluidity of language. McManus notes,

> Post-modern thinkers … noted that many of us use language, either in speech or writing, without ever really reflecting on the often mysterious nature of the words we use. We often want to believe that the words we use have a clear meaning, without recognizing that many of them are open to a surfeit of interpretations.[55]

Language is fluid, and so are the concepts it embodies, notably gender, which has come to be considered a social construct. As part of this Marxist cultural turn, some more or less clearly identified Marxist thinkers have argued in a similar fashion. Louis Althusser thought that the subjective self could be "contradictory, and it can change within different situations and

---

[54] Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Verso, 2012), 86.
[55] Matt McManus, "What Is Postmodernism? (Part One)."

in response to different kinds of address."[56] Some critical theory and gender studies writers make a similar point. Language is fluid, gender is fluid. Poststructuralist and feminist philosopher Judith Butler has had a significant influence arguing in that direction. For Butler, it is impossible to define gender independently from the "cultural intersections" that "produced and maintained" it over the course of human history.[57] Gender is constructed, personally and socially. The reconsideration of gender in Marxism and contemporary culture has been explained in terms of philosophical kinship. However, this is *not necessarily* the case. For example, Butler cannot easily be qualified as a Marxist.[58]

The fluidity of language is a common trait of postmodernism and what is often labeled "cultural Marxism." It also explains why a superficial commonality between Marxist and postmodern insights exists. Both locate the possibility of finding alternative identity in cultural construction. Discourses and cultural engagement are the main means of affirming one's identity and exercising individual and social power. In this there is the seed of the social construction of personal identity and of victimhood. That is not to say that some individuals have not been targeted merely for belonging to such or such ethnic or cultural group. That is indeed the case. The problem lies with the underlying ideological conviction that a person belonging to a dominant group is *necessarily* an oppressor or belonging to a minority group means being subject to oppression.

Conclusion

Whether the expression "cultural Marxism" has any value is a legitimate question. For those who deny any value to the idea of cultural Marxism, to even pronounce the terms "cultural" and "Marxism" as one conceptual signifier is preposterous. To many it denotes a caricature not even worthy of critical reflection. Because the implication that our culture has become Marxist sounds ridiculous to many on the left, the impulse is to dismiss it without hesitation. But that is a mistake. To dismiss Marxist influence on

---

[56] Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20.

[57] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6–7. In this same book, Butler explains that "gender" is performed, a complex interplay of social and personal interactions. In *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), she explains further the "regulation" of gender.

[58] Rachel Aldred, "In Perspective: Judith Butler," *International Socialism*, Summer 2004, *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2004/isj2-103/aldred.html.

our culture is to be blind to the far-ranging vision of its founder and the persistent influence of the oppressor-oppressed model as a tool for understanding the structure of society. To consider the expression "cultural Marxism" as the tool of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory is an irresponsible and dismissive ad hominem argument, as is the idea that those who see cultural change as "cultural Marxism" take any kind of social progress to be inherently evil.[59]

On the other hand, to consider Marxism as the key influence that taints every new social debate is to be blind to the complexities of cultural formation. Is every theory of social divide between oppressor and oppressed necessarily of Marxist inspiration? While it can certainly be the case, the *necessary* link remains in part unconvincing.[60] In like manner, the similarities are evident between critical race theory and the neo-Marxist interpretation of class struggle, but they do not necessarily imply a common conceptual formulation or ascendancy.[61] They should, however, make us pause

The expression "cultural Marxism" is not the best conceptual tool to use. In fact, it is often misleading and borders on the caricatural. "Leftist thinkers," if we can speak that way with no derogatory connotation, are not Marxist wolves in postmodern guise in the flock of conservative sheep. "Leftist thinkers" might be influenced by some Marxist insights. They might even be self-identified Marxists. That can at times be the case, but that alone hardly suffices to legitimate the expression "cultural Marxism" as a universal descriptor of every "leftist thinker." That said, we must recognize the distinct Marxist influence that can be traced back to Marxism's cultural turn that neo- and post-Marxist thinkers acknowledge.[62]

Are we then left with only two choices, either of adopting this expression without a deeper understanding of its meaning and relevance or of rejecting it? In the current social and political situation, it might seem so. Confessing Christians are pressured by social context to choose a side and to disparage

---

[59] Andrew Woods, "The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Thrives in Bolsonaro's Brazil," October 16, 2019, *Fair Observer*, https://www.fairobserver.com/insight/cultural-marxism-conspiracy-far-right-jair-bolsonaro-brazil-latin-america-news-00054/.

[60] Contra Boorman, "How the Theory of White Privilege Leads to Socialism."

[61] See, for example, Abigail B. Bakan and Enakshi Dua, eds., *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), and its discussion of the complex relationship between "critical race theory" and Marxism through a specific focus on Foucault. See Mike Cole, *Critical Race Theory and Education: A Marxist Response* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), for a more critical interaction between the two "movements."

[62] Jonathan Church, "Jordan Peterson Is Not Entirely Wrong about 'Postmodern Neo-Marxism,'" January 9, 2020, *Areo*, https://areomagazine.com/2020/01/09/jordan-peterson-is-not-entirely-wrong-about-postmodern-neo-marxism/.

the "other side" by ready-made simplifications. This is the case on both the progressive and conservative sides.

The Christian apologetic ethos is founded on the word of truth, Christ himself (cf. John 14:6). The desire for truthful *and* accurate analysis should be a vital dimension of the manner in which we interact with other "belief systems," philosophical, religious, or social. There are admittedly worrisome aspects in the current state of society. The polarization of social and political discourse, the individualization of knowledge, single-sense interpretations, and the prevalence of critical theory and gender studies are signs of a societal evolution that can hardly be encouraging. Apologist Os Guinness makes the following assessment:

> Our Western nations have both forgotten God and forgotten where they have come from. Now they are attempting to complete the process of severing the roots of Western civilization, destroying its root system, poisoning its soil and ruining its entire spiritual, moral and social ecology.[63]

However, this need not be argued through the framework of "cultural Marxism." Christians should reject the expression "cultural Marxism," but they need not do so in a disparaging manner, as some have.

The claim that the expression "cultural Marxism" is relatively improper is a call for wisdom, to be "strangers and exiles on earth" (Heb 11:13). It is a call for practical, alternative, and Spirit-inspired wisdom. Even if we witness a social evolution that creates anxieties, we must not give in to such fears. Guinness exhorts us, "Let us then determine and resolve to be so faithful in all the challenges and ordeals the onrushing future brings that it may be said of us that we in our turn have served God's purpose in our generation."[64]

A Christian ethos demands that we act with kindness, patience, and honesty, working for the common good of a society that needs to hear the good news of salvation. As Al Mohler aptly notes, "we must remind ourselves again and again of the compassion of truth and the truth of compassion."[65] The current debate over the expression "cultural Marxism" does not demonstrate that Christians live with a different ethos. Unfortunately, too often they image society rather than being a light in the world (Matt 5:14).

---

[63] Os Guinness, *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 222–23.

[64] Ibid.

[65] R. Albert Mohler, *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* (Nashville: Nelson, 2015), 151.

Redeeming Redemption: Violence, Desecration, and Atonement[1]

CHRISTOPHER D. STEED

Abstract

The red stain of Cain presents an evocative approach to the atonement based on theological reflection and doctoral studies in the social sciences on human violence and the notion of symbolic exchange. The value and worth of Jesus in exchange for our demerit and history of devaluing others and dishonoring God provides a fresh commendation for an evangelical theology of substitutionary atonement that is also participative. Violence is not incidental to the cross; it is central to its potency both for redemption and for healing.

Keywords

Violence, desecration, atonement, Cain, value, power, symbolic exchange

This article approaches the interface between atonement and violence as it picks up on the theme of atonement through the notion of valuable personhood. I argue that this is key to the conundrum of how the death of Christ effects personal and societal transformation. Violence sets up an intense transaction and symbolic exchange in which the victims' value is scraped from their faces by the perpetrators. This is "violence as desecration," an intense degree

[1] Cf. the author's new book of this title, Christopher D. Steed, *The Red Stain of Cain* (London: Europe Books, 2021).

of human devaluation. In this article we reflect on violence in our world, the specter of Cain the restless wanderer. We consider how the death of Christ (both its significance and its manner) can be understood in the context of a desecration of valuable personhood (both ours and God's honor). Violence is a violation of the sacred. Lastly, we ask how, while remaining true to Reformed understandings of substitutionary atonement, we can use Jesus's immersion into violence to say something profound at a public level about forgiveness and reconciliation in our world.

I. *Background*

We are in the midst of troubling times: a lethal virus running amok, economies in difficulty, and the worst social unrest in America for decades causing unrest around the world. The potential for violence is enormous, not least in the home. These are not matters of individual sins or interpersonal struggles but issues for society and public theology. Just as Cain was deaf to his brother as a person, so violence is often the language of the unheard, to generalize words of the much-quoted Martin Luther King.[2] Can its transmission be broken? Maybe COVID-19 has helped promote greater social solidarity in encouraging us to be our brother's keeper. Hearing the cries of those around us will require a better theology of power and social sensitivity.

We are trapped between two Enlightenment visions and versions of human society and nature. The pandemic brought the best of times and the worst of times: On the one hand, it has vindicated the view of Thomas Hobbes that civilization is just a veneer and life is nasty, brutish, and short without government (Leviathan) to control us (for example, by regulating panic buying). On the other hand, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, society corrupts, but natural goodness can shine through (as in the recent flourishing of voluntary mutual aid). Juxtaposed with this modern way of looking at humans, the Bible is realistic in depicting the potential for self-centered assertion and violence (cf. Rom 5 and Eph 2).

Many commentators are concerned that substitutionary atonement theories have caused damage to theological and political conservatives.[3]

---

[2] "A riot is the language of the unheard." Dr. Martin Luther King, *The Other America*, 1967, Civil Rights Movement Archives Inc., https://www.crmvet.org/docs/otheram.htm.

[3] Marcus Borg, "Christianity Divided by the Cross," *Patheos*, October 25, 2013, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/10/christianity-divided-by-the-cross/. Marcus Borg, "The Real Meanings of the Cross," *Patheos*, October 28, 2013, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/10/the-real-meanings-of-the-cross/.

Seeing the cross as a punishment for sins is, we are told, defending a vengeful God who demands a blood sacrifice, even to the extent of engaging in cosmic child abuse (as some feminist theologians say). This is the opposite of a liberal approach that stresses nonviolence as a transmutation of hatred to love and contends that the pastoral problems of legalism, obsession with guilt, and disillusionment associated with punishment linked with substitution call for a different presentation of the atonement.

Reformed theology has a particular problem because of its history. The ransom view of the atonement was the dominant theory until Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*? at the end of the eleventh century. His satisfaction theory of atonement became dominant until the Reformed position emphasized punishment; among Reformed thinkers today, "substitutionary atonement" refers to Jesus Christ bearing punishment for sin to procure our forgiveness.[4] Such views tend to interpret Christ's work as the bearing of punishment, a bearing that assuages God's wrath against humanity, releasing it from its death sentence for the treachery of Adam and his race. There are plenty of variations on this theme, one of which is to draw on covenant ideas of a ruptured relationship that can bring new life to the relationship between God and people and the relationships between people.[5]

Christianity proposes to civilization the virtue and power of forgiveness. To forgive is to break free from the cycles of not only revenge but also honor. This can only happen when love is a gift and a privilege, not a right. Does Christianity have anything to say about the violence of our times? Violence is not incidental to Christ's story: it goes to its heart.

To speak to the underlying currents of fear and isolation that breed the violence with which our world is beset, theology must learn to move beyond its usual thought forms and expression modes and learn a somewhat different language. Our capacity to speak to the rage against racism that grips many countries must surely be tested if we remain in our linguistic bubble. If we do not have a theology of systemic power and control, we have no vocabulary that distinguishes protestors of injustice from mere lawbreakers.

II. *The Specter of Cain the Restless Wanderer*

The founders of major world religions mostly died peacefully, with one very notable exception. How does the wretched crucifixion become the means

[4] Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 2016), 202.

[5] R. Larry Shelton, "Covenant Influences as Wesleyan Integrating Motif," *Asbury Theological Journal* 59.1–2 (Spring/Fall 2004): 127–38, https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1151&context=asburyjournal.

of human redemption? Like Socrates, could Jesus have drunk hemlock, or was violence endemic to the scene and the drama of reconciliation? Beyond personal forgiveness and restoration of the soul, does this act and fact in which violence is central speak better things to the violence of the earth that daily is stained with blood and the legacy of Cain's act? Does atonement have anything to say about the reconciliation and forgiveness this world badly needs to overcome its endemic violence?

Christ's death confronts the many roots and shoots of restless Cain: hence atonement with its vast resource for transformative action, the power of love, forgiveness, participation, and divine-human exchange. The capacity to restore rupture speaks to cultures of violence and the narratives that sustain them so new stories can be told.

There is no history of violence on its own; only the history of humanity. A glance backward from 2000 shows that the previous hundred years were truly a century of violence. Are we, as Steven Pinker argues in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, getting less violent, and, despite what the news tells us, violence of all kinds has been decreasing?[6] Yet violence continues to haunt our human landscape. Religiously inspired violence is a phenomenon all too familiar, as is the specter of political violence in places like Syria when nation-states go to war or turn thuggish with their people. Workplace conflicts were common under provocation from long hours, worry about cutbacks, and intense competition. Hate and race crimes are on the rise, and social media allows for vicious verbal abuse.

Jesus is the sacrifice that cleanses violent, sinful humanity. The red stain of Cain is more than matched by the red stain of Christ wrought from savagery and systemic violence. How and why? Violence does not take place just because it stands at the portal of a single human heart and overwhelms it, as with Cain's personal jealousy consuming him. The virus of violence erupts from conditions that are ripe and ready for it. Its breeding grounds are cultures and environments that have permitted it. Once it takes hold, it is sustained by custom, practice, and narratives—both told and untold—about "this is how we do things around here." For "culture" is many layered. It refers to social practice that is learned and becomes familiar; cultures are grown. Racist violence erupts out of systems and goes far beyond the actions of individuals, an idea that challenges many in conservative Reformed circles, who see it as a concession to liberal forms of theological explanation that point to social wrongs needing to be righted at the social level rather than heart change at the individual level.

---

[6] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Penguin, 2011).

What would we say, though, to racist violence in the experience of black people? It is sadly comprehensible in sociological terms but baffling theologically that there was little Reformed alarm against the lynching in the southern United States that was cheered on by "God-fearin' folk." Reformed theologians sadly reinforced the culture of slavery and apartheid segregation in South Africa. Where were the theological antibodies against the desecration of human life?

Any glance at the contemporary landscape has to consider the anti-Semitism that continues to disfigure our world. Patterns of prejudice have singled out an ethnic and religious group in a way that is both terrifying and baffling. What was it about Germany, the epitome of progress at the time, that provided the seedbed of the Holocaust, the killing of one-third of the total worldwide Jewish population? The Eastern European Jewish population was particularly hard hit, being reduced by ninety percent. We will search hard to find a theological theory of horror that depicts the descent into the darkness of genocide. Where, apart from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Barmen Confession, were the Reformed theological voices engaging with such violence?

What do we actually mean by violence? Are there so many different manifestations and causes that to speak of the phenomenon is thoroughly misleading? Does terrorist violence have the same characteristics as domestic violence? Are all forms of violence the same?

Five texts might show how violence expresses an interplay of value and human devaluation:

1. "I might lose myself!" or "Don't touch me!": violence as *desecration* of identity
2. "I want to control you!": violence as *domination* and enjoying the domination
3. "I want to be who you are!": violence as *imitation* of highly prized people
4. "I am worth more than that!": *re-imaging* the human landscape through protest
5. "You will pay for what you have done!": violence as *retribution* and exchange.

It may be that violence is the norm and peace and harmony are not the usual state of affairs. I propose here that violence is *desecration*. The root of the idea of violence is perhaps the Latin word *violentia*, which indicates vehemence or impetuosity and emerges in the English words "violence"

and "violation." A violation is the act of "doing violence to" or, in a softer form, "to fail to observe duty"[7] toward another, with connotations of abuse or defilement. The violation of sacred space is the forcible unwelcome intrusion into the human value of individuals or groups in a bid for respect or to extract value by devaluing others. When this happens, there is protest. If my appraisal of the situation is correct, more questions arise about the religious justification for violence. Richard Tawney remarks about "the frivolity of it all. We are like mischievous apes tearing up the image of God."[8]

So, for example, racism is based not on empirical generalization but on ontological affirmation. It denies that certain people are behind economically or culturally because of environmental conditions and affirms that those people are inferior in their very being. What we can call the *value gap* is formed by the "differences and dissonances" that exist between the moral, social, political, and religious value placed on groups. The lack of connection between people amplifies it.

We know why we have value and from whence arises the indignant protest when that value is trampled on and discarded. We are desperate, from both psychological and social necessity, to have our value upheld so we can live in our world. With it, we flourish; without it, we wither. Few of us—even mocking atheists and aggressive scientists—will be inwardly silent in the face of indifference. Few of us are comfortable with being devalued or being meted out unequal treatment. Few of us will not react in the presence of indignity. Our value cries out in the night.

III. *Substitution, Participation, and Solidarity*

Therefore, we now ask the question, "What is the meaning of the cross for our times?" and we examine the meaning of the wretched violence inflicted on Jesus in terms of not only *participation* (Jesus being in solidarity with pain and searing separation) but also *substitution* (Jesus becoming one with us and in our place).

Substitutionary atonement has gone out of fashion in the circles of most thinking contemporaries. It seems irrational and unjust. It is, however, true to life and psychological reality. As with Abel's murder, something happens that demands recompense, redress, or payment. Violence sets up a sort of transaction (a symbolic exchange) in which value changes hands in much

---

[7] *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1977), 1513.

[8] Richard H. Tawney, commenting on his experiences at the battle of the Somme in July 1916, in *The Attack and Other Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953).

the same way as when money is offered or taken. Jesus's supreme value and worth are traded, as it were, for human demerit. This happens because Jesus is one of us, immersed in the human condition. The desecration of Christ comes through his identification with us. In that field of transaction comes forgiveness.

I want to propose a form of substitution that is not open to the objections raised against other interpretations. At the heart of the idea of atonement is exchange. In my view atonement is transactional: a substitution of value and worth between sinless and sinful. Jesus is embedded in the violence and desecration of the human condition. It is because of the value of personhood that devaluation of that person constitutes a deficit. In the moral accountability regime, violence is when something happens that needs addressing; if there is no response, the value of the person's status is thereby denied. This is what makes forgiveness, the willingness not to directly respond, hard work

Can this notion of substitution offer a new lens on substitutionary atonement? The atonement can be seen as a particular form of transaction and exchange. It combines the notion of devaluing people, and indeed devaluing God, with the symbolic exchange that takes place in a relationship trade, especially in a context of violence. The proposal is that Jesus is a worthy representative figure who stands in our place and who offers himself as sufficient payment for human moral failure and wrongdoing. How can this be put to work in atonement theology?

Five moves could develop the idea of the transfer of a value:

1. Something has happened: Human sinfulness is often constituted and reproduced by accountability for devaluing others or experiencing devaluation.
2. God is devalued: God as the ultimate source of personal value and supreme worth has to recognize infringements or failure to acknowledge him.
3. Payback and exchange must be made: Recognition of the value of persons leads to moral obligations being set up akin to payment (the metaphor of debt and payment).
4. Our place is taken: Jesus identifies with us in full, affirming human worth and taking on himself sin and violence and therefore demerit.
5. The cross is a place of exchange: "Dying in our place" (the just for the unjust) sets up a symbolic exchange, a transfer of value akin to economic terms. Second Corinthians 5:21 is rooted in impaired relationships and the need for reconciliation.

1. *Something has happened.*

I have traduced God and those around me. Does God require compensation or propitiation (the sacrifice system being a way of expressing this in the culture of the day—we would put things differently)? Surely the answer is yes. We can hear the idea of "the wrath of God" as God flaring up in anger and being implacably hostile. It may, however, be the biblical way of saying that God is also a personal being. We would have no difficulty saying that people exercise wrath because they are personal agents who have been dishonored. To say that God is not offended by human sinfulness or the things that mar his creation would imply that there is no issue of God's honor or attitude at stake and no question of recognition of divine moral agency; it would follow that God is exclusively a third party to human-human exchanges, present only as a moral force upholding the honor of moral agents.

2. *God is devalued.*

Every time we sin against each other, we are failing our duty to God. This is a deprivation, an absence of duty and service, though not perhaps an actual offense against God's value and worth. Divine law, which requires someone to be held accountable, has been infringed. The covenant web of linked relational beings has been breached. Our contemporary mindset objects to extending the New Testament language of law courts and sacrifice to our current situation and instead stresses the divine-human relationship as one of wounded love and the need for reparation. Yet in the world of relationship trade enforced by law, we are familiar with concepts such as libel and slander, offenses that require compensation and justice rather than private revenge.

3. *Payback and exchange must be made.*

The third move is that failure to treat people according to their worth and value. It leads to some sort of payment being required—hence talk of guilt and reparation arising from those failures. In the public space of obligations enforced by law and in private relationships this sets up a kind of trade, a symbolic exchange. Infringement then requires repayment; it creates a deficit in merit rooted in what is owed. "Merit is an adequacy of recompense or retribution qualifying a gift or a punishment bestowed or inflicted upon the receiver for something he has done with respect to the giver. Thus

God will judge all men according to their merits or demerits."[9] That is, one person's merit or demerit can be defined as another person's just obligation to give the first person a respective gift or punishment.

The usual approach to such deficits, though, is the idea of "debt." "Forgive us our debts" is a way of articulating the need for the aggrieved to cover the offender's offense. Atonement theology is usually expressed in terms of sacrificial language or that of the slave market and its overtones of redemption. Since everyday human transactions are replete with the metaphor of the circulating economy or market ("You will pay for that!"), it is instructive to deploy the economy as a cipher for the idea of substitution. Payment must be made. This is inseparable from ideas of judgment, which means that this is where the past catches up: we have to face the consequences of our actions.

We accept the ideas of cost, pushback, and payback as everyday features of human life. "It's payback time!" applies not only to acts of revenge but to ordinary relationship transactions: if someone is crossed and ignored, the perpetrators will soon learn about it! Violence is often practiced by those who are bereft of any sense of worth because of violence and abuse they have experienced; they then try, as it were, to scrape a sense of their own worth off the face of their victims to either recover their own lost value or honor or protect what remains. The tortured landscape of human violence often discloses a significant reality. Where there has been damage, there must be a payment, though the demand for payment may or may not be proportionate. Crowding the stage are familiar reactions that attempt to make up for the loss; these may be more easily explained through some form of exchange system and relationship trade. Losing name or status results in compensation being needed; comfort eating may well be a human response to this loss, as may indulging in the blame game. The unconscious plan is to act so as to stop feeling the loss so the pain can be relieved. Authority figures such as police forces are often accused of attracting those who have inferiority complexes and who need to compensate by throwing their weight around or by reacting unpredictably. This is perhaps their strategy to recover their value.

Richard Swinburne, in his defense of substitutionary atonement on philosophical grounds, proposes that being guilty means owing something to the person wronged: "By hurting you, I put myself in a moral situation somewhat like the legal situation of a debtor who has failed to repay money

[9] James B. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), 169.

borrowed from a bank."[10] Swinburne stresses that there is even more to the problem of moral guilt than past failure or present debt: the guilty one has acquired a stain that needs to be removed.[11] His account emphasizes that atonement is needed and that it is impermissible to ignore the offense and go on as if nothing happened. To take an extreme case, if you murder my wife, any attitude, especially on your part, that tries to say, "The past is the past, let's not nurse a grievance" simply will not do. That attitude trivializes human life, my love for my wife, and the importance of right action. It also involves you failing to treat me seriously, to take seriously your attitude toward me that was expressed in your action.[12]

In social sciences, the question of who does and should exchange what, with whom, for what reasons, and on what terms has been the stuff of social analysis from Plato onwards. The corollary of human interdependence is exchange. The essence of the great social coordinating mechanism known as the economic market is that if you exchange this, I will give you something you value more than what I am asking you to sacrifice.[13] As the social theorist Georg Simmel pointed out in the context of money, "exchange takes place not for the sake of an object previously possessed by another person but for the sake of one's own feelings about an object."[14]

The transactional character of human relationships seems inescapable. Some sort of exchange mechanism needs to be envisaged by which we are driven to seek compensation somewhere and from someone. A familiar enough scene is that of a girl who is subject to verbal and physical abuse; she subsequently unbottles her anger and lashes out. The subtext of such violent exchanges is a transaction in the emotional marketplace. Something has been breached in the depth of her being; her primal core material has been wounded, and the wounding evokes a primal cry of "I am worth more than that!" Someone must pay. The same desecration that has been inflicted on her must be visited upon others. Getting back at someone, anyone—retribution—will ensure that her depleted bank account of value is filled again at the expense of the object of her reaction. The impetus to make up the deficit is then relieved. The question is whether a valid way of understanding human relationships is theological in nature.

---

[10] Richard Swinburne, "The Christian Scheme of Salvation," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 295.

[11] Anselm argued this in *Cur Deus Homo* 1.19.

[12] William Neblett, "The Ethics of Guilt," *Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1974): 652–63.

[13] Harry C. Bredemeier, "Exchange Theory," in *A History of Sociological Analysis*, ed. Tom Bottomore and Robert Nisbet (London: Heinemann, 1978), ch. 11.

[14] Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 44.

4. *Our place is taken.*

Jesus identifies with us in full, affirming our human worth but also taking on himself sin and violence and therefore our demerit. By virtue of that solidarity and identification, Jesus stands as the representative figure for humanity, dying in our place as one of us. "Jesus knows about human existence from his own experience. He knows what it is to be human. This solidarity is the source of our salvation."[15]

If the question be asked whether his human history and identity were relevant to the sacrifice he made, the clear answer from Scripture is that it was. The substitution was that of the representative for humanity represented. Christ can represent us because he is one of us. Representation is inherent in the idea of sacrifice. However, as Tom Wright concludes, "representation is important not least because it creates the context for substitution."[16] The idea of representation can imply a gap: a representative may be only temporary. This is why the idea of identification may be more helpful when speaking, as it closes the gap. Nevertheless, these are correlative concepts together with the idea of substitution. The atonement can only take place because Christ was incarnate as one of us.

The issue of Christ's identification with humanity has become more important theologically after Auschwitz. As Richard Rubinstein, the first Jewish thinker to name the Holocaust as a crisis for traditional Jewish theology, observed, "At the time I wrote 'After Auschwitz,' one could search through almost everything written by the contemporary establishment without finding the slightest hint that they were living in the same century as Auschwitz."[17] What would it mean to affirm that Jesus is identifying with those in the gas chambers, the tortured, and the victims of war? This may seem to be a question that classic theology sees no need to address outside of doctrines of divine impassibility. Yet presumably the identification of Jesus with humanity and the sin that wrecks and distorts it is not limited to interpersonal acts for which individuals are responsible. To suffer as one of us must have some sense of taking the place of victim as well as perpetrator, devalued as well as devaluer. Otherwise, the circle or cycle is incomplete.

It is central to the Gospels that Jesus's death was a violent one. Outside of some versions of Catholic theology, that fact has not always been given

---

[15] Cees J. den Heyer, *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: SCM, 1998), 115.

[16] N. T. Wright, "Redemption from a New Perspective? Towards a Multi-Layered Pauline Theology of the Cross," in *Redemption*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 69–100.

[17] Richard Rubinstein, quoted in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, ed. Gregory Baum (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 77.

the significance it deserves. In modern terms, would the death of Christ have the same valence, the same charge, if Jesus had taken a suicide pill and martyred himself that way? I think not. One feature of violent offenses is that they require greater payback than nonviolent ones. As René Girard points out, the reason why vengeance is so menacing is that "only violence can put an end to violence and that is why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the last blow."[18] This is what the language of sacrifice and priesthood affirmed. Sacrifice and sacrificed are one.

Violence often entails a symbolic exchange. The traumatic roots of violence lie in harm visited upon us that results in an injured psyche that looks for redress. A terrifying reality then confronts us. These strategies to revalue ourselves involve transactions that will take place at the expense of another in a competitive marketplace in which our sense of worth can only be regained if someone else's is denied. The violent engage in a form of monetary calculation in which they assume there is only so much to go around. When it comes to intimate love, land, and scarce resources, they may be right. Some sort of exchange mechanism needs to be envisaged by which we are driven to seek compensation somewhere and from someone. Retribution will ensure that my depleted bank account of value is filled again at someone else's expense. The impetus to make up the deficit is then relieved, but the one at whose expense I have made up the deficit may then feel the need to make up for their own deficit.

5. *The cross is a place of exchange.*

Payment is required. Representing us all, Jesus Christ offers himself. A transaction is set up. Jesus participates in human life by being joined to our humanity. In the symbolic exchange that is true of human transactions and relationship trade generally, and violence in particular, Jesus is a substitute for us. Dying in our place as one of the debtors means he pays the price and resolves the debt that needs to be paid.

The result of this divine transaction is a switching of subject position: Jesus participates in our lives so that we partake of his. His worth is put to our account—credited to us, as it were. He joins our humanity to his, which results in his being "in our place" as one of us, and because he is one of us, he can be offered instead of us. His worth arises from a perfect life with no moral debts hanging over it; he has no accounting to settle on his own account.

---

[18] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 26.

The question of course arises as to how the voluntary offer by an individual, however worthy, can address the guilt that accrues in personal and group life. How, in other words, does Jesus sacrificing himself address the wrongs I have committed against you? Such interpersonal situations seem to be between us, a prima facie case for apology and reparation from me to put the matter right. Why does a divine-human exchange interpose itself in this context?

An answer is possible from the notion of group solidarity. In ancient Israel, guilt and responsibility were attributed to a family or even a whole tribe (for example, the sin of Achan in Joshua 7). In time, corporate guilt was replaced by notions of individual responsibility: Each shall die for his own sins (Ezek 18). To modern Westerners, this sounds obvious. However, the individual sense of self has often been derived from the collective rather than the collective built up from individual minds. This has been the case in traditional societies and still is in African and Asian societies.[19] We are an inextricable part of the relationships through which we are defined, part of a web of interaction and inseparable from it. The concept of systems as it applies to social sciences teaches us that. The sin of devaluing others rather than recognizing that they live lives of value takes place within a given culture or subculture that shapes behavior. No man is an island. Sin requires redress because it is an offense against valuable personhood. This applies to God! God himself has been dishonored. The atonement takes back divine honor. "Grace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from this present evil age" (Gal 1:3–4). At the beginning of the first Christian writing stands the idea of Jesus being our substitute, one who gave himself for us.

In 2 Corinthians 5, the emphasis is not so much on the salvation of an individual soul (a phrase largely absent from Paul though implicit in 5:17); the new creation is "the new order in which God and the world, formerly disunited and alienated by some cosmic rupture are brought together and reconciled."[20] On the basis of a global salvation and the reconciliation of the world, Paul announces the arrival of the new age rather than appealing simply to the hope of forgiveness as the basis of the Christian's confidence. From there, he proclaims freedom from human ills.

Second Corinthians 5:21, with its switching of subject position ("for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might

---

[19] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology Confronts the Problems of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013).

[20] Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 40.

become the righteousness of God"), follows on, however, from a relational understanding of aggrieved parties needing reconciliation. Herman Ridderbos emphasizes that 2 Corinthians 5:21 is a summary of ideas by which Christ is the only ground for righteousness by faith, expressing the connection between Christ's death and the justifying, acquitting judgment of God.

The forensic idea is certainly very pronounced here. Not only does God treat the sinless Christ as though he were a sinner, but he makes him (by delivering him up to the death on the cross) to be sin in the forensic sense of the word. And it is in that sense that those who are in Christ through faith become righteous.[21]

The relationship of "Christ-for-us" and "we-in-Christ" indeed goes to the heart of how Christ's death and resurrection have justifying power. Ridderbos argues that there are two conceptions here that are different but inseparable. The corporate idea is closely bound up with the substitutionary one. In Romans 5:12–21, Paul grounds the corporate idea in the death for us. Christ has entered into our mode of existence. Jesus becomes one of us and offers himself as an exchange.

Christ's death was vicarious in that he stood in our place and represented us. As our representative, he took the penalty we deserve. Because we stand in corporate solidarity, payment for us as a corporate entity is required. Through payback, Christ liberates us from sin, the ultimate root of all disruption, injustice, and oppression. God imputed our sins to Christ—as belonging to him. Because of that, we may therefore plead Christ's death. In Pauline studies, it has been a difficult question as to what the connection is between the reconciliation that goes forth from God and the necessity of the death of Christ, the *katallagē* (reconciliation) that arises from social/personal relations and the *hilasmos* (expiation) that arises from the sacrificial system.

Ancient wisdom recognized this connection. The Greek word *katallassō*, a compound of *allos*, or "other," meant to change and exchange. Something is given in exchange. Yet it came to be applied to people changing from enmity to friendship. Human transactions are a site of relationship trade whereby people move from one state of being to another. In the New Testament it carries the meaning of "to reconcile," signifying how humans can be reconciled to God and to each other.[22] The root of the idea of atonement is paying something for an act of wrongdoing.

---

[21] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), 168.

[22] Colin Brown, ed., *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:166.

This is not to be taken as an unsolvable dialectic. A clear connection exists between reconciliation going forth from God and Christ giving himself up to cover the sin of his people. The latter is subordinate to the former and not the reverse. The same God with whom the restoration of the broken relationship originates is also the one who has instituted the order of propitiation (*hilasmos*) by the death of Christ.[23] Christ suffered and died even though he was not a sinner. In other words, he was subject to the consequences of sin. Only in this sense is "he made him to be sin" (2 Cor 5:21) intelligible. "Christ entered into the human situation so totally that he accepted the lot of all members of a fallen humanity." Seeing 2 Corinthians 5:21 as a transfer of value enables us to offer the following account:

1. Payment and penalty are mandated to uphold specific acts where value has been breached as well as in cases of systemic sin and evil (sin in the singular as an evil entity). Such factors generate unworthiness and shame. They both dishonor God and devalue people.
2. Jesus Christ has inestimable worth, not only by being God manifest in the flesh (cf. John 1:14) but also by living blamelessly and devaluing neither God nor those around him. He is conscious of being "my Son in whom I am well pleased" (cf. Matt 3:17).
3. The worthy one steps forth, the innocent for the guilty, but stands as one of us. His being with us is the basis of his being for us; there could not have been one without the other.
4. Jesus becomes the universal victim, whose death has global and indeed cosmic significance. His worth is transferred to the unrighteous and the unworthy whose account is flooded with divine possibility and honor. In that exchange, Jesus pays the penalty. Whereas something happened that creates a breach, the reparation is an act that reconciles.

There is a transfer of value between Jesus and humanity that effects redemption and reconciliation. The worthiness of the innocent sufferer is credited to the account of the unworthy, the desecrated.

IV. *Redemption through Violence: Interpreting the Cross*

As we consider the message of the cross, an inescapable reality dominates the skyline. At the heart of Christian faith lies an act of horrific violence committed against the innocent Christ. However, though the red mark of

[23] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 191.

Cain has stained the history of Christians as well and crimes committed in the name of the Prince of Peace fill the centuries, it is all the more startling to realize that the world was redeemed by violence. In the wake of Auschwitz, some have written about "the pain of God" or "the crucified God." These are evocative phrases, for the pain of God demonstrated at the cross connects radically and powerfully with the world's pain. The longer you look at the cross, the more you are moved and influenced by it. Yet there is more to the cross than the most powerful statement can conceive. Until recently, much of the Christian church has had little to say about structural violence. Violence as a defining category of social or interpersonal life and a violation of valuable personhood was a vicious example of flawed and fallen humanity. Violence is vital to the need for atonement and redress. A theology of violence is long overdue. It is easier to talk about sin in general or individual moral failure.

Human violence is an ongoing phenomenon that continues to warp individuals, distort relations between people and communities, and shape the destiny of nations. That humans' knee-jerk reaction to problems is to try to solve them with violence seems unwelcome and unacceptable but normal. Nonviolence has been considered a morally superior approach at least since Quakers and Mennonites had their peace testimony, repudiating involvement in the wars of state and invoking James 4:1. The crucified God suffers fully from the violence of oppressive regimes. To this, Jesus was no stranger. But he calls us to work for peace, justice, and dignity—which reflect the divinely given worth of people and the human soul—for of such is the kingdom of God.

The cross enables people to forgive by providing a pathway out of the trauma that violent abuse inflicts; it provides somewhere to go with the desecration. Forgiveness is extremely hard for many of us because we feel viscerally as if forgiveness prevents the value of whoever has been desecrated from being upheld and we let them down by forgiving. This is why we do not put up with, say, domestic violence or abuse and tell victim wives to go back and submit to their husbands as some divine duty. But we do tell them to forgive.

Just as Jesus bore the suffering, hate, and evil of the world and became a lightning rod for violence, we are called to bear the hate of the world without returning it so that it might be exposed and opened to forgiveness. We can say that Jesus disarms violence, that power is disarmed by powerlessness. "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one that judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23).

Peter's echo of the Servant Song of Isaiah 53 leads seamlessly to the next statement: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree [literally, 'to the tree'],"which is a great articulation of substitutionary atonement.

Yasukuni Shrine, Japanese Christian Responses, and a Kuyperian Ecclesiological Perspective

SURYA HAREFA

Abstract

This article explores the issue of official worship at Yasukuni Shrine and how Japanese evangelical Christians have responded to this problem. Established in 1869 as a mixed Shinto, military, and imperial site, it enshrined the souls of those who died for the emperor. The government used it to mobilize Japanese people for its fascist agenda during the first half of the twentieth century. After the disestablishment of the shrine as a state facility in 1946, many right-wing conservative politicians and war-bereaved families have worked ceaselessly to revive its special status. After surveying Japanese Christians' responses, the ecclesiological background of their arguments is analyzed and the implementation of Abraham Kuyper's ecclesiology to enhance their political engagement is proposed.

Keywords

Yasukuni Shrine, Japanese Christians, Abraham Kuyper, church and state, ecclesiology

This article explores the issue of reviving the Yasukuni Shrine as a state-operated place of mandatory worship and how Japanese Christians have responded to this ongoing problem. After the visit of Abe Shinzō[1] to worship there in an official capacity on December 26, 2013, citizen groups in Osaka and Tokyo brought appeals against the premier before the corresponding district courts. Prior to that, the official worship of Koizumi Jun'ichirō in 2001–2006 had likewise earned criticism and led to protest demonstrations. After citizen groups in Fukuoka, Matsuyama, and Osaka sued the prime minister in their district courts, similar groups in Tokyo and Chiba appealed to their respective district courts as well. Neighboring countries, particularly China and South Korea, also protested the premier's visit.[2] John Breen has rightly noted that the issue is "a problem of daunting complexity."[3] As we will show, it involves several interconnected aspects, including the constitution, historical perception, war criminals, commemoration, and war responsibility.

After elaborating on the issues surrounding the Yasukuni Shrine, we will survey the responses of Japanese Christians. We will evaluate those responses from an ecclesiological perspective and argue that Kuyperian ecclesiology can help in the continuing political engagement of Japanese evangelical Christians.

I. *The Issue*

Located in the center of Tokyo, the shrine was established on June 28, 1869, as Tokyo Shōkonsha ("spirit summoning shrine") to memorialize the spirits of fallen soldiers who took the side of the emperor during the Boshin War (1868–1869). Ten years later, the government renamed it the Yasukuni ("pacifying the nation") Shrine and designated it as a Special Government Shrine. The ritual of the shrine represents the memorializing of war dead by the feudal rulers in the Chōshū regions; it is in Shinto style and centers

[1] Macrons are used for Japanese terms, except for well-known names and places like Tokyo and Osaka. Japanese names and authors are given in Japanese order; family name precedes first name. For English literature written by a Japanese, the citations are given in the order used for Western authors.

[2] Cf. John Breen, "Voices of Rage: Six Paths to the Problem of Yasukuni," in *Politics and Religion in Modern Japan: Red Sun, White Lotus*, ed. Roy Starrs (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 285–86; M. William Steele, "Christianity and Politics in Japan," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. Mark R. Mullins (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 366.

[3] Breen, "Voices of Rage," 278.

on the emperor.[4] From the beginning, the Yasukuni Shrine had a unique position connecting the Shinto religion, the emperor, and the military.[5]

Despite the connection to Shintoism, the government insisted that the Yasukuni Shrine was a nonreligious national facility. Officials held that enshrinement was the highest honor a Japanese person could obtain, and this could be done only by sacrificing their life for the country. The majority of souls enshrined in Yasukuni are dead soldiers from the Pacific War (1941–1945).

After Japan surrendered to the Allied forces in 1945, General MacArthur (1880–1964) ordered the disestablishment of the state Shinto religion on December 15, 1945. This "Shinto Directive" diminished the Yasukuni Shrine's state-operated status to that of an independent religious corporation in 1946. However, once the Allied occupation government left Japan in 1952, many right-wing conservative—those who want to revive the system where the emperor occupies a central position—politicians and war-bereaved families attempted to revive the shrine's special status. Due to protest movements, these efforts have to date not proved successful.

1. *Constitution*

One of the reasons for the protests against official visits as well as the movement to renationalize the Yasukuni Shrine concerns the constitution:

> Article 20
> (1) Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority.
> (2) No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious act, celebration, rite or practice.
> (3) The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity.
>
> Article 89
> No public money or other property shall be expended or appropriated for the use, benefit or maintenance of any religious institution or association, or for any charitable, educational or benevolent enterprises not under the control of public authority.[6]

---

[4] Akiko Takenaka, "Mobilizing Death in Imperial Japan: War and the Origins of the Myth," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 13.38/1 (September 2015): 5–8.

[5] For a detailed description of the Tokyo Shōkonsha, see Takenaka, "Mobilizing Death in Imperial Japan," 1–3; John Breen, "'The Nation's Shrine': Conflict and Commemoration at Yasukuni, Modern Japan's Shrine to the War Dead," in *The Cultural Politics of Nationalism and Nation-Building: Ritual and Performance in the Forging of Nations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 140; Breen, "Voices of Rage," 287.

[6] "The Constitution of Japan," based on the English edition by Government Printing Bureau, https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c01.html.

To those who oppose the renationalization of Yasukuni—the use of public money for the Shrine and possibly the revival of the obligation to worship there as in the imperial period—the prime minister's official visit was a way to smooth the path for that renationalization. Hence, the movement is a violation of both the principle of religious freedom and the separation of state and religion as prescribed by Articles 20 and 89.

Proponents of Yasukuni counter by interpreting Article 20 as guaranteeing the prime minister's right to worship at a shrine. They also argue that it is a nonreligious Japanese custom and, because it enshrines the war dead soldiers who fought for their country, prime ministers should pay respect to their souls at Yasukuni. Accordingly, proponents insist on special treatment for the shrine.

On the occasion of Abe's visit, the district and high courts in both Osaka and Tokyo ruled against the lawsuits of citizen groups and avoided giving a verdict on the constitutionality of the prime ministerial visit.[7] Similarly, none of the trial courts ruled in favor of the citizen groups that submitted lawsuits against Koizumi. Since there is no constitutional court in Japan, the protestors could not sue the prime minister for unconstitutionality. They needed to base their appeal on other things, in this case the mental damage caused by the violation of the citizen group members' religious freedom, human rights, and peaceful living rights. Such appeals led the judges to render a "no [sufficient] reason for the damages claim" judgment.[8] Only the judges in Fukuoka District Court claimed that the visit was unconstitutional by promoting the Yasukuni shrine and Shintoism. However, such opinions are not the decisions themselves and have no binding authority.[9] As a result, on the legal level, there is both opposition to and support for prime ministerial visits to the Shrine.

In order to bolster the legality of official worship at, and the renationalization of, the Shrine, the politicians of the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) submitted a bill in 1969 offering state support. This bill provoked massive protests from opposition parties and religious groups.[10] The ruling party tabled the bill on five occasions in an attempt to have it

---

[7] *The Sankei News*, November 11, 2019, https://www.sankei.com/affairs/news/191125/afr1911250033-n1.html.

[8] For a more detailed description of the results of the lawsuits relating to the Yasukuni Shrine, see Breen, "Voices of Rage," 281–84.

[9] Fukuoka Chihō Saibansho, April 7, 2004, *Heisei* 13 (Wa), no. 3932, 5 Minji, https://www.courts.go.jp/app/files/hanrei_jp/141/008141_hanrei.pdf; Osaka Kōtō Saibansho, September 30, 2005, *Heisei* 16 (Ne), no. 1888, 13 Minji, https://www.courts.go.jp/app/files/hanrei_jp/273/002273_hanrei.pdf.

[10] Steele, "Christianity and Politics," 366.

pass, failing each time. Seeing that the 1947 constitution represented the biggest hurdle to success, the LDP sought to amend that.[11]

2. *Historical Perception*

By amending the 1947 constitution, which was enacted while the Allied occupation government was in power, the LDP believes Japan will experience a return to the glory days.[12] These are typically located in the imperial period (1868–1945), when Japan adopted Western ideologies and methods while utilizing Shinto doctrines that consider the Japanese emperor to hail from an unbroken imperial line descended from the goddess Amaterasu. It was in this context of reviving the central position of the emperor that the government established the Yasukuni Shrine.[13]

To turn Japan into a modern country like the Western countries, the Meiji government enacted a constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion in 1889. At the same time, Articles 1, 3, and 28 of the Meiji Constitution positioned the emperor as the sovereign and the Japanese people as his subjects and used this relationship as a limitation on religious freedom.[14] As a result, Japan became a powerful nation both economically and militarily. It prevailed in military conflicts with Taiwan in the 1870s, with China in the 1890s, and with Russia and other Asian nations in the twentieth century. Proponents of Yasukuni's renationalization emphasize this success story, but opponents point to the dark side of this, namely imperialism and fascism. They prefer to locate the beginnings of modern Japan in the period after 1945.

After issuing the Shinto Directive that led to the removal of the state-operated special status of the Yasukuni Shrine and the establishment of an independent religious corporation, the occupation government announced a new draft of a constitution that was to become the present constitution, which was enacted in 1947. In departing from the Meiji Constitution, the preamble of the 1947 constitution identified the Japanese people as

---

[11] For an elaboration on this amendment movement and the responses of Japanese evangelical Christians, see Surya Harefa, "Resistance to Japanese Nationalism: Christian Responses to Proposed Constitutional Amendments in Japan," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43.4 (October 2019): 330–44.

[12] Mark Mullins, "Neonationalism, Politics, and Religion in Post-Disaster Japan," in *Disasters and Social Crisis in Contemporary Japan: Political, Religious, and Sociocultural Responses*, ed. Mark Mullins and Kōichi Nakano (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 108.

[13] Takahashi Tetsuya, *Yasukuni Mondai* [The Issue of Yasukuni] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho, 2005), 6–7.

[14] For the English version of the Meiji Constitution, see "The Constitution of the Empire of Japan," trans. Ito Miyoji, National Diet Library, 2003–2004, https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c02.html#s2.

sovereign, rather than as the emperor's subjects. This new constitution prescribes freedom of religion and the separation of state and religion (Articles 20 and 89), states that the emperor is just a symbol of the nation (Article 1), and prohibits Japan from keeping military forces (Article 9).

For the proponents of Yasukuni, the post-1945 changes mark the demise of Japan as a prosperous and powerful country.[15] For the opponents of renationalization, in contrast, a revival of its special status would mark a return to imperialism and fascism; they fear that the government will use Yasukuni's status to encourage, if not coerce, people to worship there and to mobilize its citizens to military service again. This concern has only increased as they note the present government's attempt to reinterpret Article 9 and to promote the military character of the Japan Self-Defense Force.

3. *Class-A War Criminals*

These issues are of concern to neighboring countries, victims of Japanese militarism and oppression. Significant to this diplomatic problem is the enshrinement of "class-A" war criminals, that is, those who planned, initiated, or waged war according to the classification of the 1946 International Military Tribunal for the Far East. On October 17, 1978, Yasukuni enshrined the souls of these class-A war criminals, including Tōjō Hideki (1884–1948), the military general and prime minister who was responsible for initiating the Asia-Pacific War and the inhumane treatment of prisoners of war.[16] In the eyes of the countries that suffered under the atrocities committed by the Japanese military, class-A war criminals were the source of their suffering. Therefore, the worship of their souls as glorious spirits represents a painful denial of the brutalities that they inflicted on other countries.

Nevertheless, many right-wing conservatives and war-bereaved families believe that the 1946 tribunal was an unfair victor's trial and view the class-A war criminals as having died on duty for Japan.[17] For many LDP politicians, fighting for Yasukuni's renationalization would secure support from members of the Bereaved Society (an association for families of war dead soldiers) and the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership (a powerful political organization of the Association of Shinto Shrines).

The matter is more complex, however, because not all Yasukuni proponents agreed with the enshrinement of the war criminals. Even though the Ministry of Health had urged since 1958 that they be enshrined, Yasukuni's

---

[15] Breen, "Voices of Rage," 294.
[16] Steele, "Christianity and Politics," 367.
[17] Mullins, "Neonationalism, Politics, and Religion," 107–9.

chief priest at the time, Tsukuba Fujimaro (1905–1978), consistently refused the proposal during his tenure from 1946 to 1978. The famous Shinto figure Ashizu Uzuhiko (1909–1992), president of the Bereaved Society Koga Makoto, and two veteran officers number among those who disagreed with the enshrinement of class-A war criminals.[18] Emperor Hirohito (reigned 1926–1989) never visited Yasukuni after their enshrinement. When the diary of the emperor's aides was published, it revealed that the enshrinement of war criminals was the reason for his absence.[19] Similarly, although Emperor Akihito (reigned 1989–2019) visited Yasukuni four times as crown prince, he never visited it after his enthronement in 1989. He did, however, regularly attend the annual national rite of mourning for the war dead at Budōkan Hall in Tokyo and has made multiple memorial visits to war-related sites such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Okinawa, the Ogasawara Islands, Iōjima, and Saipan. These visits show that the emperor does hold much sympathy for the war dead but is reluctant when it comes to Yasukuni.

The shrine's historical position as an imperial site makes the emperor's reluctance to visit the sanctuary remarkable, leading several Yasukuni supporters to propose the removal of the fourteen class-A criminals in the hope that the emperor will conduct official worship there again. Some believe that removing these war criminals will restore the relationship with neighboring countries.[20] However, there is no room in the doctrine of the Yasukuni Shrine for the souls of those who have been enshrined to be removed. Furthermore, the government cannot force their removal, since this would impinge on the principle of religious freedom.

4. *Commemoration and War Responsibility*

Another critical angle to the Yasukuni issue is the need for commemoration. The war dead died on duty for their country; bereaved families lost their beloved for the sake of the country. For Yasukuni apologists, the state should therefore provide recognition for the war dead and their families. They also promote the *ishizue* (cornerstone) theory, which considers the war dead the cornerstone for the peace and prosperity of postwar Japan. This narrative has been embraced by many senior LDP politicians and prime ministers, and it is also narrated in the war museum located in the Yasukuni precinct, the Yūshūkan.[21]

---

[18] Breen, "Voices of Rage," 296–98.
[19] Ibid., 287–88; 301, note 27.
[20] Ibid., 289, 296–98.
[21] Ibid., 291–93.

Yasukuni's opponents, however, have countered that this narrative is irresponsible given the war's dark side. They consider the war to have been conducted not for the peace of Japan but for the invasion and colonization of other Asian countries. What the soldiers did was far from honorable.

One notorious example is the cannibalism committed in New Guinea. Faced with starvation, Japanese officers shot their comrades to consume their flesh.[22] The war museum in Yasukuni, however, describes the New Guinea campaign as a well-planned battle. There is no place for the story of cannibalism, starvation, or reckless military leaders.

Without any reflection of such facts, Yasukuni rites transform the war dead into glorious spirits. The ceremony of remembrance avoids, if not denies, the issue of the responsibility of the military commanders who initiated the New Guinea campaign. It praises the war dead for their virtues of loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice.[23] The rites decorate their deaths as glorious achievements to be celebrated, rather than recalling a tragedy to be mourned. Hence, many opponents of the Yasukuni Shrine prefer to have an alternate facility to answer the need for commemoration.

II. *The Response of Japanese Christians*

Japanese Christians were among the first to protest the movement to renationalize Yasukuni Shrine, sending letters to the prime minister, publishing protest statements, and filing lawsuits.[24] To analyze their response from an ecclesiological perspective, we focus on three Christian leaders of the protest movement: Tomura Masahiro, Nishikawa Shigenori, and Inagaki Hisakazu.

1. *Tomura Masahiro*

Tomura (1923–2003) was a minister of the United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ), the largest mainstream Protestant denomination. Although he was not an evangelical, his view helped evangelicals to understand the issue of Yasukuni. Tomura actively preached and gave seminars on Yasukuni all over Japan, and he served as the chair of the UCCJ Yasukuni Issue Special Committee. He also promoted the movement to confess responsibility for the war.

---

[22] Toshiyuki Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 124–26, 140.

[23] Breen, "Voices of Rage," 290–91.

[24] Tanaka Nobumasa, *Yasukuni no Sengoshi* [History of Postwar Yasukuni] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002), 86, 105, 110–11, 116–17, 119, 123–31, 132–36, 147, 156–57, 163, 176, 190–98.

Tomura criticized the extremely inward direction nationalism had taken.[25] For him, Japanese nationalism was unchangingly inward even when Japan ended its isolation and opened up to Western technology in the Meiji period (1868–1912).[26] Nationalism has proved so strong that not even defeat in war could put a dent in the Japanese notion that Yasukuni was a "nonreligious shrine."[27]

The proponents of Yasukuni saw themselves as merely attempting to recover its original function, but Tomura believed that that itself was the problem. He identified the purpose and arguments used by the Yasukuni proponents during the period from 1960 to 1980 as a "recapitulation" of the nonreligious shrine doctrine popularized under the Meiji government. In his view, along with their efforts to amend the present constitution, revise school textbooks, and establish emergency law, the Yasukuni proponents wanted to revive a system where the emperor occupies a central position. For them, Yasukuni and its festivals were effective in retightening the bonds of the state that may have been loosened.[28]

Moreover, Tomura argued that the Yasukuni Shrine's practice of enshrining only those war dead who had fought on the emperor's side had had the effect of brainwashing Japanese people with an oversimplified division between an imperial and a "rebel" army. Anyone who did not fight for the emperor was therefore considered a "rebel."[29] For Tomura, this brainwashing had been very successful, so that even contemporary Japanese people still have not recovered from its after-effects and still practice such discrimination today, albeit using different terms.[30]

Tomura also referred to the Japanese characteristics that fit group thinking rather than independent, individual thinking.[31] In Japanese thought, the smallest indivisible group unit is not the individual but the family. Although

---

[25] Tomura Masahiro, "Nihon no Nashonarizumu to no Tatakai: Yasukuni, Gengō, Daijōsai [Struggling with Japanese Nationalism: Yasukuni, Regnal Year, New Emperor's Food-Offering Ritual]," in *Tennō-sei Kokka to Shinwa: "Yasukuni," Shisaku to Tatakai* [Emperor System State and Myth: "Yasukuni," Thought and Struggle], ed. Tomura Masahiro (Tokyo: Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan Shuppan-kyoku, 1982), 25.

[26] Ibid., 12.

[27] Ibid., 12, 15.

[28] Tomura Masahiro, "Aa Ware Yasukuni-bito naru kana, Kono Chi no Ronri yori Ware o Sukuwan Mono wa Tare-zo: Ro-ma-bito e no Tegami 7:7–25 [O Yasukuni Man that I Am! Who Shall Deliver Me from This Logic of Blood: Romans 7:7–25]," in *Tennō-sei Kokka to Shinwa*, ed. Tomura, 189; Tomura Masahiro, "'Yasukuni' to Fukuin: Piripi-bito e no Tegami 2:6–8 ['Yasukuni' and Gospel: Philippians 2:6–8]," in *Tennō-sei Kokka to Shinwa*, ed. Tomura, 203.

[29] Tomura, "'Yasukuni' to Fukuin," 202, 206.

[30] Ibid., 202, 205.

[31] Tomura, "Aa Ware Yasukuni-bito," 189.

the feudal system has long been dismantled, the familial society is still the pattern of self-consciousness.[32] This way of thinking leads Japanese people to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, a distinction that severely hinders the ability to acknowledge those in Japanese society who have different identities or opinions. In Tomura's eyes, this inward familial system is at the very root of the Yasukuni problem.[33]

In addition, Tomura explained that the combination of a culture of shame and a familial society caused Japanese people to turn a blind eye to unfavorable things done by in-group collusion.[34] It is this inability that makes it difficult to reflect seriously on responsibility for the war. He associated Japanese familial society with what Romans 7 refers to as the deadly power of the flesh that exists in the human heart and fights against the power of God from the outside. For this reason, Japanese people need to be freed from this power.[35] Tomura has argued that by continuing their opposition to Yasukuni's proponents, Christians will be able to help their fellow Japanese to overcome the power of Yasukuni and to implement a more liberal nationalism.[36]

Interestingly enough, Tomura warned that the roots of the attempts to privilege the Yasukuni Shrine as a national facility could also be found among Japanese Christians.[37] He therefore reminded his listeners that they are not merely fighting against the emperor, prime minister, and LDP officials, but also against fellow Christians who still cling to such roots.[38]

Tomura likewise emphasized that the churches in Japan should be turning their church planting efforts into a struggle for freedom.[39] Evangelism should be carried out in awareness of the social tide.[40] Noting that the concept of freedom is still underdeveloped in Japan, he argued that this is an "honorable evangelistic opportunity."[41] To his mind, Christian churches have the rare opportunity to be able to think, talk, and at times struggle together with society for freedom. It is not merely the church's social responsibility; rather, it also relates to the church's very existence at a more fundamental level. Tomura believed that it is at once a task and a blessing from God.[42]

---

[32] Ibid., 190.
[33] Ibid., 194.
[34] Ibid., 195.
[35] Ibid., 197.
[36] Tomura, "Nihon no Nashonarizumu," 25.
[37] Tomura, "Aa Ware Yasukuni-bito," 188.
[38] Tomura, "'Yasukuni' to Fukuin," 206–7.
[39] Tomura Masahiro, "Shibarareta Te: Shito Gyōden 26:1–32 [Bound Hands: Acts 26:1–32]," in *Tennō-sei Kokka to Shinwa*, ed. Tomura, 180.
[40] Tomura, "Nihon no Nashonarizumu," 25.
[41] Tomura, "Shibarareta Te," 180.
[42] Ibid., 179.

2. *Nishikawa Shigenori*

Nishikawa (1927–2020) was a Christian journalist active in both church ministry and politics. He served long as an elder in the Reformed Church in Japan in Tokyo and earned the nickname "the Nishikawa of Yasukuni" for his long and active involvement in the Shrine debates. He was the representative of the Gathering of Evangelical Christians Opposing Yasukuni Shrine Nationalization, and served in leadership positions in several other Christian-related organizations.[43] He was also a bereaved family member since his older brother was a soldier who died of illness during the war in Burma.

Nishikawa protested the movement to renationalize the Yasukuni Shrine in many ways. Besides conducting protest demonstrations at the site and writing protest statements, he wrote several articles for national newspapers and published a number of books. He also delivered seminars on Yasukuni throughout Japan.

Unique to Nishikawa's approach was his commitment to hearing the plenary and committee meetings of the National Diet. He came to realize the importance of this approach after the ruling party submitted the controversial Yasukuni Shrine Bill to the National Diet in 1969. Even though parliament finally dropped the bill in 1974, the movement to revive the Shrine as a state-operated special corporation continued. Being aware of the nature of several other bills with consequences as serious as the Yasukuni Shrine Bill, Nishikawa decided in 1999 to attend meetings of the Diet. After sitting in on the meetings for ten years, he concluded,

> By hearing the National Diet, I could understand that the present National Diet is acting in concert with the proponents [of the Yasukuni] movement outside the Diet, which, with their three pillars——the Constitution, Self-Defense Force, and Education—ignore the basic principles mentioned in the Constitution of Japan, such as Article 9 (War Renunciation), Article 19 (Freedom of Thought and Conscience), and Article 20 (Freedom of Religious Belief and Prohibition of Religious Activities of the State).[44]

His observation of the National Diet provided him historical evidence for the current situation and position of current Diet members, which informed his reflection on the issue and had considerable appeal.[45]

---

[43] Nishikawa Shigenori, *Yūji Hōsei-ka no Yasukuni Jinja: Kokkai Bōchō 10-nen, Watashi ga Mita Koto Kiita Koto* [Yasukuni Shrine under Emergency Legislation: What I Have Seen and Heard from Ten Years Hearing the National Assembly] (Tokyo: Nashinoki-sha, 2009), 211.

[44] Ibid., i.

[45] Ibid., 204, 207.

While Tomura emphasized the importance of fighting the Japanese notion of an inward, familial society, whose roots he also found in the nation's Christians, Nishikawa suggested more practically and concretely that one should learn the historical facts from before and during the war period. He insisted on inquiring why the war happened and what kind of damage Japan inflicted on neighboring Asian countries. This, he believed, is of crucial importance for perceiving the absurdity of the official worship at the Yasukuni Shrine. He wrote,

> In conclusion, by learning the facts of the horrors caused by the [Pacific] war, one becomes unable to deny the war and post-war responsibilities of the emperor. It stands to reason that, if they [the bereaved families] perceive how unfair it is to regard their [war dead] family members, who were made "glorious spirits" by the worship of such [irresponsible] emperors, as subjects of "propitiation" and glorification, they will come to understand the contradiction of their movement towards the realization of the emperor's public worship for which they had hitherto hoped.[46]

Nishikawa also shared his experience when he spoke before several members of the Bereaved Society. Although this society had been one of the most passionate proponents of the Yasukuni Shrine, after listening to the actual historical facts, they could agree that official worship at the Shrine would open the way for the Japanese government once again to mobilize the people for war.[47]

Nishikawa likewise suggested learning and observing the basic principles of the constitution. For him, it prescribes popular sovereignty, pacifism, separation of state and religion, and freedom of belief, thought, and consciousness. However, in practice, the government and the Diet members of the ruling party often ignore those principles in the name of patriotism or Japanese traditions and customs. Knowledge of the underlying principles determined by the constitution enables one to identify unconstitutional practices on the part of the government and Diet members. Claiming that "constant caution is the price of freedom," he encouraged Japanese people to exercise their rights in assessing and criticizing the government.[48] As for the problem of the Yasukuni Shrine, he insisted that it is crucial to apply the principle of the separation of state and religion. In line with this, Nishikawa also sharply criticized official visits by cabinet and Diet members and the Tokyo governor, as well as the *hatsumōde* (New Year's Worship) at Yasukuni by the prime minister, which was largely ignored in the media.

---

[46] Ibid., 169.
[47] Ibid., 168.
[48] Ibid., 43, 127.

Following these suggestions, Nishikawa emphasized the need to offer a sincere apology. He compared Japan with Germany, which was in a similar position when it initiated war and inflicted terrible damage on neighboring countries. As he saw it, Germany was able to reconcile itself with neighboring countries because it had done its best to apologize and to seek reconciliation. Nishikawa believed that if Japanese people were to be educated in war history and the basic principles of the Japanese Constitution, Japan could be as successful as Germany in achieving reconciliation with its Asian victim countries.[49]

3. *Inagaki Hisakazu*

Inagaki Hisakazu (b. 1947) is a member of Tokyo Onchō Church, a church of the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ) denomination, and a professor of Christian philosophy at Tokyo Christian University, an evangelical institute of theological education.

In contrast to other Yasukuni critics, Inagaki warns that even if the prime minister were to stop official worship altogether and if the class-A war criminals were to be removed from Yasukuni, the problem would still not be solved.[50] The controversial Yasukuni Shrine is not just a political and diplomatic problem, but also a memory and reconciliation problem relating closely with the core of Japanese traditional religion.[51] He writes,

> We must distinguish between what we should and should not forget. We must forget the Yasukuni ideology that calls for sacrificing oneself for the sake of the state. This is something that should be put behind us. However, we must remember the past [Pacific] War and the victims of that War. At the same time, we need to face the past scars of war as experienced by people with different perspectives.[52]

For him, the shrine has two functions: honoring the fallen soldiers and offering a place of mourning for the massive numbers of those who died in the Pacific War.[53] These two functions must be taken into account as a

---

[49] Ibid., 145, 186.

[50] Inagaki Hisakazu, *Yasukuni Jinja "Kaihō"-ron: Hontō no Tsuitō towa Nanika?* [The "Liberation" Theory for Yasukuni Shrine: What Is the Genuine Commemoration?] (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 2006), 15.

[51] Inagaki Hisakazu, "Kokumin-teki Fukushi to Heiwa: Yasukuni ni kawaru Tsuitō Shisetsu no Mondai [National Welfare and Peace: The Problem of a Memorial Facility for Replacing Yasukuni]," *Kirisutokyō Shakai Fukushigaku Kenkyū* [Christian Social Welfare Science] 48 (January 2015): 7; Hisakazu Inagaki, "Memory and Reconciliation in Japanese History," *Diogenes* 57.3 (2010): 41–51.

[52] Inagaki, "Memory and Reconciliation," 46; Inagaki, *Yasukuni Jinja*, 17.

[53] Inagaki, "Memory and Reconciliation," 42.

solution to the Yasukuni issue. Accordingly, Inagaki suggests instituting public memorial places for recalling the horrors of war and pledging not to commit the same foolish mistakes again. These should be for everyone, Japanese or not, including both religious and nonreligious people.[54] Consideration for the non-Japanese is necessary because the Pacific War caused the death of not only three million Japanese but twenty million non-Japanese.[55]

While Inagaki agrees with the opponents who insist on pacifism and on the separation between Yasukuni and governmental activities, he disagrees with their claim that religious commemoration is merely a private matter.[56] Instead of making the new site free from religious rituals, he urges that "all religious and nonreligious groups, national or international, can gather in this place according to their diverse practices and cultural expressions" and that this facility "should be funded with taxes paid by the Japanese people, but the Government should keep an equal distance from all groups."[57] Inagaki thus emphasizes the importance of religion in the public square for two reasons: first, the Yasukuni issue is closely related to the uniqueness of Japanese religiosity, and the experience of spiritual conversion taught by the world's great religions transforms citizens into people who value tolerance. To maintain tolerance in a public space, the most crucial element is communication through dialogue.

Inagaki also suggests that the Japanese notion of *wa* (harmony) is useful for establishing this dialogical element. People in Japan have been practicing this since the sixth century, and the famous Japanese regent Shōtoku Taishi (574–622) considered it the most respectable virtue. Originally, *wa* was one of Confucius's principles, teaching harmony without uniformity. Therefore, it can be used to encourage the creation of harmony between those of different opinions, religions, and even nationalities. Chinese and Koreans, who suffered the most under Japanese imperialism, will welcome this concept because they are highly influenced by Confucianism.[58] Inagaki concludes his argument by suggesting Japanese Christians propose and put into practice a social movement, based on a Christian worldview, that can transform the government system into a more democratic one that respects the role of religion in the public square.[59]

---

[54] Inagaki, "Kokumin-teki Fukushi," 8.
[55] Ibid., 7.
[56] Inagaki, "Memory and Reconciliation," 43.
[57] Ibid., 47.
[58] Inagaki, "Memory and Reconciliation," 41–42, 50; Inagaki, *Yasukuni Jinja*, 149.
[59] Inagaki, "Kokumin-teki Fukushi," 13, 15.

III. *Ecclesiological Evaluation of Christian Responses*

With his thorough analysis, Tomura can help Japanese Christians understand the complexity of the Yasukuni issue. He clearly recognized the danger of Yasukuni and its cultural and ideological background. His arguments for the importance of pacifism and religious freedom are persuasive.

From the perspective of ecclesiology, we can conclude that Tomura raised awareness of the church's social responsibility. He influenced many Japanese Christians beyond his denomination, especially those who were members of the National Christian Council in Japan. Evangelical Christians also learned much from him.[60] However, they rejected his suggestion to redefine evangelism as a fight for religious freedom. Japanese evangelical Christians thus refuse the so-called Social Gospel implied in his proposal.

Nishikawa's works, on the other hand, help evangelical Christians learn from Tomura without adopting the Social Gospel implications of his project. Nishikawa's efforts in actively engaging with church ministry and political problems are a real model for Japanese evangelical Christians in their engagement with both church and society. He started his unceasing struggle to protest the nationalization of the Yasukuni Shrine back in 1969. His approach of attending the meetings of the National Diet is unique, as he seems to be the only opponent of official Shrine worship to do so. It provided him with real and substantial facts about the position of Diet members that others do not clearly see.

However, it goes without saying that many of Nishikawa's arguments that depend on the present constitution will become invalid once the Yasukuni supporters' attempts to amend the constitution succeed. In addition, since the discussions between opponents and proponents of the Shrine have failed to reach a satisfying conclusion even after decades of struggle, the feasibility of a solution based on protesting the nationalization of the Yasukuni Shrine and demanding a strict separation of state and religion is questionable.

Inagaki attempts to offer a third-way solution to the deadlock between Yasukuni's supporters and its opponents by not just protesting the supporters' movement but also providing a concrete alternative to the present

[60] For example, the following evangelical literature references Tomura's works: *Idogaki Akira, Shinkyō no Jiyū to Nihon no Kyōkai* [Religious Freedom and the Japanese Church] (Tokyo: Inochi no Kotobasha, 1983), 116; Ikejiri Ryōichi, "Oshiyoseru 'Kokka Shintō' no Nami: Seiji-Shihō Reberu de no Senzen Kaiki no Ugoki [Surging Wave of the 'State Shinto': The Regression Movement to the Pre-War State at Political and Judicial Level]," in *Kokka Shūkyō to Kurisuchan: Futatabi Junan no Toki wa Kuru no ka* [State Religion and the Christian: Will a Time of Suffering Come Again?] (Tokyo: Inochi no Kotobasha, 1988), 29.

Yasukuni Shrine. His proposal is very detailed, comprising both concepts for and contents of the site and even the way to run and maintain it. He accommodates both the proponents' religious needs and the opponents' concerns regarding the violation of religious freedom and the separation of religion and state. His proposal sees to it that the state grants its fallen soldiers and victims their due honor, but it also prevents the new facility from becoming a tool of abuse for mobilizing people for war. He furthermore takes into consideration the traditional Japanese notion of *wa*, which has a much longer history than the Yasukuni practice.

From an ecclesiological perspective, one can see that while Tomura and Nishikawa emphasize the separation between religion and the state, Inagaki suggests the Kuyperian participation of religions in the public space. He rightly understands the dissatisfaction of Yasukuni's supporters with the strict separation between church and state. Inagaki calls his approach *kōkyō tetsugaku* (public philosophy).

One can see that Inagaki's approach originates from the Kuyperian principles of common grace, sphere sovereignty, and distinction of the church as organism and institution. Abraham Kuyper distinguished between local churches on earth as the church institution and all believers bonded together by the mystical body of Christ as the church organism.[61] By proposing direct engagement of the organic church and indirect engagement of the institutional church, Kuyper attempted to secure the church institution's proper conduct of the ministry of the Word while encouraging the church organism to engage actively with society. Christians should be aware of and maintain the synergic relation between these two elements of the church.[62]

In line with this notion, Kuyper developed the principle of sphere sovereignty and common grace. Since absolute sovereignty belongs only to God, each life sphere is equal and has the responsibility not toward other spheres but only to God.[63] Although the state has the function to regulate the

[61] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1898; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 57, 59–62; Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace [1902–1905]," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 187; Abraham Kuyper, "Rooted and Grounded (1870)," in *On the Church*, ed. John H. Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 54–57.

[62] Kuyper, "Rooted and Grounded," 54–57; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 59–62. For a recent elaboration on this distinction, see Surya Harefa, "First Rooted, Then Grounded: The Position of the Church Institution in Kuyper's Ecclesiology," *Verbum Christi* 7.1 (April 2020): 25–40.

[63] Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty [1880]," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 466–67. Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, trans. John Kraay (Toronto:

"inter-, intra-, and trans-spherical" relation by implementing laws or regulations, the state is equal to other spheres and should not break other spheres' sovereignty.[64] Using the sphere sovereignty principle, Kuyper encouraged Christians to establish Christian associations in every life sphere to develop Christian principles vigorously so that they can be heard and considered by society.[65] At the same time, Kuyper also encouraged Christians to cooperate with non-Christians based on the notion of common grace, which maintains the life of the world, relaxes the curse that rests upon the world, arrests the progress of corruption, and allows the development of human beings.[66] God cares about not only church matters but also matters outside the church, and therefore, Christians should work on unfolding the potential of every life domain in God-glorifying ways.[67]

In my opinion, this organic-institution distinction is vital for Japanese evangelical Christians in their engagement with the Yasukuni problem. It can help overcome the tendency to withdraw from political engagement and answer the concern about replacing the traditional understanding of evangelism with sociopolitical engagement. Moreover, this organic-institutional model, combined with sphere sovereignty and common grace, encourages Christians to organize Christian bodies, including associations for dealing with the Yasukuni problem, that might also cooperate with non-Christians. By having a new direction for political engagement for evangelical Christians in Japan, Christians can provide comprehensive solutions for this complex problem and so communicate with the government and both opponents and proponents of the renationalization of the Yasukuni Shrine.

Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), 43; Bob Goudzwaard, "The Principle of Sphere-Sovereignty in a Time of Globalisation," *Koers* 76.2 (2011): 361–63.

[64] Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 472–73; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 99, 104, 106, 108.

[65] Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege of het Koningschap van Christus* (Kampen: Kok, 1912), 3:184–94, cited from Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 485.

[66] Kuyper, "Common Grace," 168; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 30, 52, 123–24.

[67] Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 31.

Personal Evangelism or Social Reform? The Challenge to Brazilian Presbyterianism in the Nineteenth Century

BRUNO GONÇALVES ROSI

Abstract

This article analyses how Presbyterian missionaries and the early pastors in Brazil answered the call to help lead the country to material progress. In terms of organization, it follows the chronological order of a scheme traditional among historians of Presbyterianism in Brazil: beginning, consolidation, and dissent. It begins with the antecedents and mostly the work of the pioneer James Cooley Fletcher. While some leaders wanted to help Brazil develop as a nation, most workers in the early Presbyterian Church had a more conservative approach. They were not necessarily antagonistic to the material progress the gospel could bring but favored personal evangelism as their main goal. Debates on this issue would mark the early denomination, especially in its dissent phase.

Keywords

Ashbel Green Simonton, James Cooley Fletcher, Brazilian history, missionary history, missions to Brazil, evangelism, social work

Introduction

Until the nineteenth century, Brazil was almost entirely a Roman Catholic country. John Calvin himself sent missionaries to Rio de Janeiro in the sixteenth century, and the Dutch Reformed Church followed when the Netherlands occupied a great part of the Brazilian northeast in the seventeenth century. However, despite these isolated episodes, from 1500 to 1800 there was almost no Protestantism in Brazil. This started to change early in the nineteenth century.[1] In 1808, the Portuguese royal family fled to Rio de Janeiro, running away from Napoleon. In 1822, Brazil claimed its independence from Portugal. The constitution that ruled Brazil from 1824 to 1889 was at least partially liberal[2]: although it maintained Roman Catholicism as the country's official religion, it granted religious freedom to non-Catholics. Protestant immigrants started to arrive already in the 1820s, and Protestant missionaries began planting Brazilian churches in the 1850s and 1860s.

No group was as active as the Presbyterians in planting Brazilian churches in the nineteenth century. The Presbyterian Church in Brazil was founded by Ashbel Green Simonton (1833–1867). Born in West Hanover, Pennsylvania, from a traditional Presbyterian family, he was named after Ashbel Green, president of New Jersey College, from which he eventually graduated. After college, he spent about a year and a half in Mississippi, working as a teacher for young boys. Disappointed with the local authorities' disinterest in schools, he went back to Pennsylvania and tried to become a lawyer, although by that time many people advised him to become a minister. In 1855, after a deeply religious experience during a revival meeting, Simonton enrolled in Princeton Seminary. In his first year there, he heard a sermon by Charles Hodge in the chapel and decided to become a missionary. He arrived in Brazil in 1859. He was followed by his sister, Elizabeth Wiggins Simonton (1822–1879), and his brother-in-law, Alexander Latimer Blackford (1829–1900). Elizabeth was a graduate of the Women's Seminary in Newark and Blackford from Western Theological Seminary. Several other collaborators joined them in the following years. In 1862, they saw the first Brazilian converts.[3]

---

[1] Vicente Temudo Lessa, *Annaes da 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana de São Paulo: Subsídios para a História do Presbyterianismo Brasileiro* (São Paulo: 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana Independente de São Paulo, 1938), 11–17.

[2] Whenever I use the term liberal in this article, I mean liberal in the classical sense of the term, in which Adam Smith and John Locke were liberals.

[3] Ashbel Green Simonton, *O Diário de Simonton, 1852–1866*, 2nd rev. ed. (São Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 2002), 152.

Presbyterians and other Protestants were favored by the generally liberal religious policy of the Brazilian authorities. However, this policy presented the Presbyterian church in Brazil with one of its first challenges: should it focus on personal evangelism or social change? Brazilian political leaders were eager to modernize the country, and they saw the missionaries and early Brazilian pastors as potential partners in this task. The United States was understood by some to be a model for Brazilian progress and Protestantism one of the factors that lead to American modernization.

I. *Antecedents of Presbyterian Work in Brazil*

James Cooley Fletcher (1823–1901) was a pioneer of the Protestant missionary work in Brazil and in many ways an interesting contrast to other missionaries who would follow. Fletcher was in Brazil at least four times between 1852 and 1869. Like Ashbel Green Simonton and other Presbyterian pastors who worked in Brazil, he had gone to Princeton Seminary. One difference is that Fletcher completed his studies in Europe. Not long after his return to America, he was ordained by the Presbytery of Muncie, Indiana, in 1851.[4] In the same year, he was sent to Rio de Janeiro as a missionary for the American and Foreign Christian Union and chaplain of the American Seamen's Friend Society.

Fletcher arrived in Brazil in 1852.[5] This mission and its religious activities were negotiated with the Brazilian government by Robert Cumming Schenck, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States to Brazil and Argentina, giving Fletcher thereby official protection.[6] Very early in his stay, Fletcher concluded that his duty was not only to be a pastor to seamen and Americans residing in Rio but also to evangelize the Brazilians.[7] The positions held in the Legation between 1852 and 1853 allowed him to make friends in the court, almost all of liberal inclination who supported the causes he advocated. One of the highlights of this initial

---

[4] Besides the fact that he studied in Princeton, several minutes from the general assembly show that Fletcher was part of the Old School. The Muncie Presbytery appears in the 1851 minutes. Fletcher is mentioned in the PCUSA Old School General Assembly minutes of 1854, 1855, 1857, and 1859 to 1868. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1854–).

[5] David James, "O Imperador do Brasil e os seus Amigos da Nova Inglaterra," in *Anuário do Museu de Petrópolis* (Petrópolis: Ministério da Educação e Saúde, 1952), 13:23.

[6] Lessa, *Annaes da 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana de São Paulo*, 186.

[7] Indiana Historical Society, *Calvin Fletcher Papers*, Letter no. 493. I also want to give credit to David Gueiros Vieira, *O Protestantismo, a Maçonaria e a Questão Religiosa no Brasil* (Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília, 1980), who made the same observation long before me.

period serving in the American diplomatic corps was meeting the Brazilian emperor, Dom Pedro II, in September 1852. Fletcher had to return to the United States in 1854, but he had started the work that would occupy him for many years: to draw the two countries together, removing the barriers of mutual ignorance that hindered closer contacts.[8] Back in Brazil in 1855, now as an agent of the American Bible Society, Fletcher got closer to Dom Pedro II and deliberately became an intermediary between the emperor and several American scholars and writers. The result was a long-lasting friendship between the Emperor and his "friends from New England." Beginning in 1863, Fletcher and Dom Pedro II started a correspondence that would last until the decease of the latter.[9]

One of the highlights of Fletcher's mission in Brazil[10] was the book *Brazil and the Brazilians, Portrayed in Historical and Descriptive Sketches*, first published in 1857. Initially an expansion of the work *Sketches of Residence and Travel in Brazil*, written by the Methodist missionary Daniel Parish Kidder and published in 1845, *Brazil and the Brazilians* reached another dimension through Fletcher's contribution. For many years it was the key book about Brazil in the English language.[11] It was even used as a reference by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (hereafter, PCUSA) for many years (see Kidder and Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians, Portrayed in Historical Sketches of Presbyterian Missions*, 1891 and 1897 editions).

---

[8] Daniel Parish Kidder and James Cooley Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians, Portrayed in Historical and Descriptive Sketches*, 9th ed. (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1879), 237–38.

[9] Kidder and Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians*, 9th ed., 249–50. Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 73.

[10] For a more detailed account of Fletcher's life and mission in Brazil, see Bruno G. Rosi, "James Cooley Fletcher, o missionário amigo do Brasil," *Almanack* 1 (2013): 62.

[11] Charles Frederick Hartt, *Geology and Physical Geography of Brazil* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1870); Hubert W. Brown, *Latin America: The Pagans, the Papists, the Patriots, the Protestants, and the Present Problem* (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada, 1909); Samuel R. Gammon, *The Evangelical Invasion of Brazil or a Half-Century of Evangelical Missions in the Land of the Southern Cross* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1910); John Francis Normano, *Brazil, a Study of Economic Types* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935); Cândido Mello-Leitão, *O Brasil visto pelos Ingleses* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1937); Arthur Ramos, *A aculturação negra no Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1942); Lilian Ellwyn Elliott, *Brazil Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Macmillan, 1917); Clayton Sedgwick Cooper, *The Brazilians and Their Country* (London: Heinemann, 1919); W. Reginald Wheeler, Robert Gardner McGregor, Maria Mcilvaine Gillmore, Ann Townsend Reid, and Robert E. Speer, *Modern Missions in Chile and Brazil* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1926); and Alberto de Faria, *Mauá, Irineo Evangelista de Souza, Barão e Visconde de Mauá* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1933).

II. *Beginning of Presbyterian Work in Brazil*

The PCUSA created a mission board, headquartered in New York, in 1837, and in a few years sent missionaries to several countries. Brazil was the sixth nation to receive missionaries from them.[12] Soon after Simonton arrived in Brazil, the Civil War broke out in the United States. This led to the division of his church into the PCUSA in the North and the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA) in the South, renamed Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) after the war. The PCUS immediately created its own mission board in Nashville. In 1869, following Robert Lewis Dabney's suggestion, they sent Edward Lane and George N. Morton to Brazil.[13]

The Old Princeton theology was the main influence on missionaries and early pastors in the early Presbyterian church in Brazil. The PCUSA sent twenty-nine missionaries to Brazil between 1859 and 1900. Of these, thirteen were Princeton graduates, five had graduated from Western Theological Seminary, three from McCormick Seminary in Chicago, and three others from Lane Theological Seminary. Western Seminary, where Blackford and others studied, was also "Princetonian."[14]

In the same period, the PCUS sent twenty-eight missionaries to Brazil. Nineteen of these had graduated from Union Theological Seminary, four from Columbia Seminary, and six from other places. Their main theological influence was Dabney,[15] who had proposed that the PCUS should start a mission field in Brazil. Dabney's theology was pretty much the same as Hodge's, except for his sad defense of slavery.

From these figures, we see that the missionaries sent to Brazil came from a very uniform theological education.[16] They were American Presbyterian Calvinists with some inclination to revival.[17] The Rio de Janeiro Presbytery, subordinated to the Baltimore Synod, voted against the reunion of the Old and New School in 1868.[18] Although this might be an anachronistic way to

---

[12] Alderi S. Matos, *Os pioneiros Presbiterianos do Brasil, 1859–1900: Missionários, pastores e leigos do século 19* (São Paulo: Editora Cultura Cristã, 2004), 13–14.

[13] Júlio Andrade Ferreira, *História da Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil* (São Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1992), 1:247–48. Matos, *Os pioneiros Presbiterianos do Brasil*, 13–14.

[14] Ribeiro, *Igreja Evangélica e República Brasileira*, 193–204.

[15] Ibid., 199.

[16] Alderi Souza de Matos, "A pregação dos pioneiros Presbiterianos no Brasil," *Fides Reformata* 9.2 (2004): 62.

[17] Ribeiro, *Igreja Evangélica e República Brasileira*, 196–97, 214–19.

[18] Ibid., 195.

put it, the Brazilian church was frankly Old School with very little influence of modernism.[19]

When Ashbel Green Simonton arrived in Brazil in 1859, he carried presentation letters, provided by Fletcher, to some "high class" Brazilians.[20] Fletcher himself was again in Brazil between 1862 and 1863, this time as an agent of the American Sunday School Union, and he took the time to visit his Presbyterian colleagues in Rio de Janeiro.[21] There seems to have been a disagreement between him and other missionaries. Simonton and especially Blackford were suspicious of Fletcher, his motives, and his methodology.[22] Although I believe that these quarrels faded away with the years,[23] they are key to an understanding of the different approaches the missionaries had to the work in Brazil.[24]

Fletcher was in Brazil a fourth time between 1864 and 1865, this time as an envoy from the American State Department to work with the Brazilian Parliament promoting the establishment of a steamship line connecting Rio de Janeiro and New York. Simonton also wrote the PCUSA mission board about this in unfavorable terms. It was hard for him to see how Fletcher's work could be described as "missionary." Between 1868 and 1869, Fletcher would make his last trip to Brazil, at this time as an agent of the American Tract Society.[25]

Even if he did not have a good relationship with the other Presbyterian missionaries, Fletcher could counterbalance that rejection significantly by

---

[19] The modernist controversy was delayed in Brazil until the 1930s. Ribeiro, *Igreja Evangélica e República Brasileira*, 198.

[20] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 135.

[21] Lessa, *Annaes da 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana de São Paulo*, 22, 51; Antônio Bandeira Trajano, "Esboço Histórico da Igreja Evangélica Presibteriana," in *Quadragésimo aniversário da Igreja Evangélica Presbiteriana do Rio de Janeiro, 1862–1902* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1902), 13.

[22] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 161.

[23] Daniel Parish Kidder and James Cooley Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians, Portrayed in Historical and Descriptive Sketches*, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1866), 160. Daniel Parish Kidder and James Cooley Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians, Portrayed in Historical and Descriptive Sketches*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1868), vi. Kidder and Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians*, 9th ed., 160.

[24] On November 6, 1863, Simonton wrote to the board what Vieira called "a long and bitter letter" against Fletcher. Indeed, there are many complaints in the letter. Simonton accuses Fletcher of worldliness and calls his work "religious roguery." Finally, he describes Fletcher as "a religious nuisance that should be abated." Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 2.116, A. G. S. to J. C. Lowrie, Rio, November 6, 1863. In my interpretation, Simonton had a hard time understanding—or accepting—Fletcher's approach. Simonton was trying to plant a church among Brazilians. Fletcher was getting entangled in Brazilian politics, believing that this was the way to open Brazil for Simonton's preaching.

[25] The way Simonton wrote to the board was not much better. Once again, it was hard for him to understand what Fletcher's work had to do with missions. Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 111.

his association with Aureliano Cândido Tavares Bastos (1839–1875), a congressman from the state of Alagoas and one of the main liberal leaders of his time. Thus he had a valuable ally and even a friend inside the Brazilian government.[26] Tavares Bastos mentions Fletcher in some of his writings as a counterbalance to the Americans whom he supposed to have imperialistic inclinations toward Brazil.[27] Tavares Bastos was elected to the Legislative General Assembly representing the Liberal Party. On this occasion he was, at the age of 22, the youngest member of Parliament.[28] He would be reelected for 1864–1866 and 1867–1870. One of his main contributions to Brazilian politics was his books and pamphlets, in which he defended liberal causes such as free trade, the abolition of slavery, and political and administrative decentralization. More closely connected to the missionaries, he defended religious freedom and the immigration of Protestants to Brazil.[29] He openly attributed to the "liberal spirit of the Protestant Reformation" the root of American prosperity.[30] It was because of this "liberal spirit" that he welcomed the first Protestant missionaries to Brazil.[31] He ended up becoming a friend of and lawyer for the Presbyterians in general, writing petitions and taking care of all their legal problems.[32] Although other Presbyterians preferred to resort to Tavares Bastos only in emergency, Fletcher was willing to have closer cooperation.

In 1866, Tavares Bastos participated in the founding of the Sociedade Internacional de Imigração (The International Immigration Society) and became one of its main leaders.[33] He believed that to achieve progress, Brazil

---

[26] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 95–97. Aureliano Cândido Tavares Bastos, *Cartas do Solitário*, 4th ed. (1862; repr., São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional 1975), 280–81, 331, 340–41.

[27] The history of how some Americans came to be seen as imperialistic towards Brazil is too long to be told here. I have written about it elsewhere. See Bruno G. Rosi, "Exploradores, missionários, cientistas e a abertura do Amazonas," *Conjuntura Austral* 2 (2011): 67. For Fletcher and Tavares Bastos, see Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 331. Gayle Thornbrough, Dorothy Riker, and Paula Corpuz, eds., *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher,* vol. 4: *1848–1852, Including Letters to and from Calvin Fletcher* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1975), xii; Gayle Thornbrough, Dorothy Riker, and Paula Corpuz, eds., *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher,* vol 5: *1853–1856, Including Letters to and from Calvin Fletcher* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1977), xx; Gayle Thornbrough, Dorothy Riker, and Paula Corpuz, eds., *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher,* vol. 6: *1857–1860, Including Letters to and from Calvin Fletcher* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1978), xxi. Tavares Bastos, *Cartas do Solitário*, 4th ed., 280–81, 331, and 338–40.

[28] For a more complete assessment of Tavares Bastos, see Bruno G. Rosi, "The Americanism of Aureliano Cândido Tavares Bastos," *Almanack* 19 (2018): 244, doi:10.1590/2236-4633201806.

[29] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 97, 99, 324. Tavares Bastos, *Cartas do Solitário*, 4th ed., 97.

[30] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 357–58, 391–92.

[31] Ibid., 139.

[32] Ibid., 240.

[33] Ibid., 223, 236, 248, 250.

needed people of European descent, and the best way to attract immigrants from Europe to Brazil was through the United States.[34] His appeal for immigration was timely. After the Civil War, some Confederate veterans (unsatisfied with the defeat) showed themselves willing to move to Brazil. This interested the Brazilian elites, who were in search of a workforce to replace the Africans, since slavery was in the process of being abolished, especially after the end of the slave traffic in 1850.[35] The immigration of Confederates was one of the most prominent episodes in the relationship between Brazil and the United States during the nineteenth century. It was of great importance for the implementation of Presbyterianism in Brazil since to bring European and American immigrants, Brazil would have to grant them religious freedom.[36] For missionaries, the same religious freedom that would benefit the Confederates would also benefit Brazilians who became evangelicals.[37] Besides that, many American Presbyterian leaders from the South became involved in the Confederate immigration to Brazil, among whom was Dabney.[38] He was not only a professor but also a friend of George Nash Morton and especially Edward Lane.[39] This made Confederate immigration especially important in the plans of the PCUS mission.

Shortly after he arrived in Brazil, Simonton wrote to his superiors in New York that the Brazilians' openness to immigration would favor religious freedom and the preaching of the gospel. Nevertheless, that did not impress him too much. Simonton believed that the missionaries should not rely excessively on the "second intention" Brazilian liberals had for favoring missionary work.[40] Accordingly, he cautiously helped the immigration cause, always manifesting that his purpose was to favor religious freedom and above all the preaching to Brazilians.[41]

---

[34] Tavares Bastos, *Cartas do Solitário*, 4th ed., 164–66, 183–84, 276, 415.

[35] E. Bradford Burns, *A Aliança não Escrita: O Barão do Rio Branco e as Relações Brasil-EUA* (Brasília: Funag, 2003), 59.

[36] Aureliano Cândido Tavares Bastos, *Os Males do Presente e as Esperanças do Futuro*, 2nd ed. (1861; repr., São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1976), 59–124. Anais da Câmara [the minutes of the Brazilian congress], July 10, 1867. Cited in Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 243.

[37] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 224–27, 230–31.

[38] Ibid., 212–15. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee Publication, 1903), 304–5.

[39] Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, 300, 316, 364, 368, 406, 408, 457–58.

[40] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 137, 234.

[41] Ibid., 228.

III. *Consolidation of Presbyterian Work in Brazil*

Simonton became ill and passed away in 1867. In his short time serving in Brazil, Simonton had planted the first church in the country (1862), started a newspaper (1864), created the first presbytery (1865), and started training Brazilian pastors (1867). On the occasion of the presbytery being created, he had ordained the former Roman Catholic priest José Manoel da Conceição (1822–1873) as the first Brazilian pastor. Alexander Latimer Blackford, Francis Schneider, and George Chamberlain had been his main companions in Brazil, and they continued the work he started.

The presbyteries in Brazil tried, as much as possible, to subject future pastors to the same education they would receive in Princeton or other Old School seminaries in the United States. Hodge, father and son, were especially emphasized.[42] Formal education started with the establishment of a seminary in the municipality of Nova Friburgo, not far from Rio de Janeiro, in 1892, and in a theological institute in São Paulo in 1893. The two institutions were merged in 1894.[43] John Rockwell Smith (1846–1918) was the main professor. A graduate from Union Seminary (1871), he was sent to Brazil by the PCUS in 1873 and served there until his death. Smith tried to transmit to more than fifty men he trained for ministry what he had learned from Dabney.[44] Temudo Lessa, an early historian of the Presbyterian Church in Brazil and one of Smith's first students, described him as scholarly, pious, energetic, and devoted to his students, besides being a "rigid Calvinist."[45]

Another important factor in the early Presbyterian history in Brazil was the establishment of Christian schools and Mackenzie Presbyterian University in São Paulo. Very early in his time in Brazil, Simonton expressed his desire for the missionaries to found Protestant schools in the country.[46] Accordingly, in 1870, Mary Ann Annesley Chamberlain, George W. Chamberlain's wife, started what would eventually become Mackenzie Presbyterian University.[47] It was initially a small school in their house in

---

[42] Boanerges Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira: Aspectos Culturais da Implantação do Protestantismo no Brasil* (São Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1981), 355–61. Francis Schneider even translated A. A. Hodge's *Outlines of Theology* into Portuguese. Ribeiro, *Igreja evangélica e república brasileira*, 195

[43] Alderi, *Os Pioneiros Presbiterianos do Brasil*, 63.

[44] Ribeiro, *Igreja evangélica e república brasileira*, 204.

[45] Lessa, *Annaes da 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana de São Paulo*, 289.

[46] Simonton, *O Diário de Simonton, 1852–1866*, 138. January 21, 1860 entry. Ashbel Green Simonton, "Os meios necessários e próprios para plantar o reino de Jesus Cristo no Brasil," in Simonton, *Diário*, 184.

[47] For Mackenzie and its trajectory in the nineteenth century, see Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e cultura brasileira*, 223–56, and Alderi Souza de Matos, "O Colégio Protestante de São Paulo:

São Paulo that served only Protestant children, but soon it started to grow, and non-Protestant parents started to send their sons and daughters there. Many members of the São Paulo elite sent their children to study with Mrs. Chamberlain and even helped the school with donations,[48] and non-Protestant teachers eventually started to work there. Dom Pedro II visited the school in 1878 and was impressed by what he saw, and, following his liberal leanings, he guaranteed religious freedom to the school.[49] The school grew greatly, and in 1885 Horace Manley Lane became its principal, and in 1891, it was named Colégio Protestante de São Paulo with Lane as its first president.

In 1873, Edward Lane and George Morton, the PCUS missionaries, started a similar school, the Colégio Internacional, in Campinas.[50] The school aimed to educate the Brazilian elite according to the American model. It did manage to attract people from the São Paulo elite, and it was also visited by Dom Pedro II.[51] Dabney had special care for this project and helped to secure its funds.[52] The school, however, faced many problems: though highly successful in the 1870s, it struggled to stay open in the 1880s. High costs and poor administration made it hard to attract new students, and it only started to grow again slowly in the 1890s.[53] In 1893, due to continuous outbreaks of yellow fever that hit the Campinas region, the school was transferred to Lavras, Minas Gerais, under the leadership of a new missionary, Samuel Rhea Gammon. The Colégio Internacional would later be renamed Instituto Presbiteriano Gammon.[54]

Um estudo de caso sobre o lugar da educação na estratégia missionária da igreja," *Fides Reformata* 4.2 (1999), https://cpaj.mackenzie.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/4_O_Colegio_Protestante_de_Sao_Paulo_Alderi_Matos.pdf.

[48] Matos, "O Colégio Protestante de São Paulo"; Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira*, 233. Among the donors were even the future Brazilian presidents Prudente de Morais and Campos Sales.

[49] Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira*, 223–24, 245–46. Lessa, *Annaes da 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana de São Paulo*, 151–57.

[50] Lessa, *Annaes da 1ª Egreja Presbyteriana de São Paulo*, 172.

[51] Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira*, 199–221. José Custodio Alves de Lima, *Recordações de Homens e Cousas do meu Tempo* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria editora Leite Rebeiro Freitas, 1926), 57–59. Erasmo Braga, "O Collegio Internacional e seus fundadores," *Revista do Centro de Ciências, Letras e Artes de Campinas* 3.44 (1916): 42, cited in Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e cultura brasileira*, 206. Júlio Andrade Ferreira, *História da Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil* (São Paulo: Casa Editora Presbiteriana, 1992), 1:116.

[52] Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, 330, 358–59.

[53] Ferreira, *História da Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil*, 1:115–18.

[54] Ibid., 1:487–502.

IV. *Dissent in Presbyterian Work in Brazil*

The years 1870 to 1888 were marked by tense debates about the future of Mackenzie, or more broadly, about the priorities of the PCUSA mission in Brazil. The missionaries, led by Blackford, were all Old School and wanted to focus on evangelism and church planting. Brazilian pastors, trained by missionaries, thought the same way.[55] Mackenzie became the focus of the disagreement. The missionaries feared that the PCUSA board in New York would transform Mackenzie into a New School institution.[56] The eventual failure of the Colégio Internacional also profoundly marked the attitudes of the PCUS mission board. In the 1870s, the board had already been recommending James Rockwell Smith not to engage in political disputes but to preach the gospel.[57] Later, disagreement over the place of education in the mission program (creation of secular schools, or direct evangelization?) would even lead to the division in the PCUS mission in 1906.[58]

Although they initially planted churches separately, the PCUSA and PCUS missionaries soon agreed to work together; they formed presbyteries and finally a synod in 1888 with three presbyteries, twenty missionaries, twelve Brazilian pastors, and sixty churches spread through most of the country. The veteran Blackford was the first moderator.

But the Presbyterian Church in Brazil would face its greatest challenge very soon. The Brazilian Synod wanted to focus on evangelism and on the seminary. The board in New York wanted them to focus on education, especially through Mackenzie.[59] However, the greatest challenge came from the clash between Eduardo Carlos Pereira (1855–1923), one of the first Brazilian pastors ordained by the missionaries, and Horace Manley Lane and other people connected with Mackenzie.

Ordained in 1881, Pereira very soon proved to be a powerful leader. His installation as senior pastor in the São Paulo church in 1888 and as the first Brazilian professor in the seminary in 1891 clearly reflects his abilities. Ironically, when Pereira was elected pastor in the São Paulo church, Horace

---

[55] Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira*, 250–51; Ribeiro, *A Igreja Presbiteriana no Brasil, da Autonomia ao Cisma* (São Paulo: Livraria O Semeador, 1987), 215.

[56] Ribeiro, *Igreja Evangélica e República Brasileira*, 205.

[57] Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira*, 303; David Gueiros Vieira, *Missionary Letters from Brazil, 1872–1875*, 347, cited in Matos, *Os Pioneiros Presbiterianos do Brasil*, 189.

[58] Matos, "O Colégio Protestante de São Paulo."

[59] Pereira also opposed the presence of freemasons in the church. Although this was greatly emphasized in later popular accounts, my reading of the original sources tells me that it was not the main issue at the time. Besides, I believe that highlighting this would obscure the focus of this article.

Lane, a member of that church, proposed that the election should be considered unanimous. However, a few years later the two would disagree. Four main issues have usually been identified as the reason for the disagreement between Pereira and other leaders: personal questions, the missionary question, the educational question, and the freemasonry question.[60]

On the personal issues, Pereira was concerned that Lane too frequently was absent from Sunday services and especially from the communion services. Lane defended himself, saying that his work as a medical doctor often prevented him from coming to church. Pereira was not convinced, and in 1891, he voiced to some that Lane's election to Mackenzie had been "a disaster" because Lane lacked piety and therefore was unable to form a generation of pious men in the college.

In 1892, Pereira tried to formally discipline Lane in the São Paulo church but was overruled by the presbytery, mainly by Thomas Porter and William Waddell (1862–1939). Yet another Princeton graduate, Waddell had arrived in Brazil in 1890 and eventually made his way into the Mackenzie administration. Pereira also wanted the presbytery to discipline Emmanuel Vanorden, a pastor who had sided with Mackenzie's leaders. Once again, the presbytery overruled him. In response, leaders in the São Paulo church wrote to the board in New York, arguing that Waddell and Lane were not the right people to lead Mackenzie. It did not help that in December that year Lane fired from Mackenzie the professor Remígio de Cerqueira Leite, a member of the São Paulo church and a great defender of his pastor.

With regard to the missionary question, Pereira argued that it was time for the Brazilian church to be nationalized. The New York board disagreed with him, arguing that because the American missionaries were affiliated with both the Brazil church and their churches in the United States, they should maintain their affiliation in America. Also, while the Brazilian church had the people and a better understanding of the country, the American churches had the money. Besides that, the American boards were not fully convinced that the Brazilian church was ready for independence, and they were not always sensitive to the Brazilians' pleas.

Regarding the educational question, Pereira and others, including John Rockwell Smith, believed that the synod should finance the education of future ministers at the seminary in Nova Friburgo and parochial schools for the children of church members, while the board in New York wanted to focus on education for the Brazilian elite at Mackenzie. Smith presented a motion in that regard that was signed by several Brazilian pastors and PCUS

[60] Matos, *Os pioneiros Presbiterianos do Brasil*, 330–37.

missionaries but only one PCUSA missionary, John Kyle. Chamberlain and other PCUSA missionaries, some connected to Mackenzie, protested.

The last issue involving Pereira was the freemasonry question. By the late 1890s, he had radicalized his position, saying that Christian faith and freemasonry were incompatible. Although initially supported by members in his church, Pereira soon lost people (many connected to Mackenzie) who left to form the Second and Third Presbyterian Churches of São Paulo. This ironically also affected the seminary that Pereira had so ardently defended: in protest against the planting of a third church, the members of Pereira's church removed their offerings that would have been destined for missions. When the seminary was inaugurated, no member of the first church came to the ceremony.

Although many other pastors and missionaries agreed in principle with Pereira, they thought that he was becoming extreme in the way he defended his causes. They wanted to focus primarily on missions and evangelism but thought that Mackenzie was also a worthy project and that the two could be conciliated. Pereira disagreed and with some other pastors founded a new denomination in 1903. Regardless, despite his deepest fears that the denomination would lose its focus on missions and evangelism, the Presbyterian Church in Brazil remained fairly conservative for many years after, being able to conciliate traditional evangelism and social work, especially through Mackenzie.[61]

Conclusion

As far as we can tell, all the missionaries commissioned by the PCUSA and the PCUS to plant churches in Brazil in the nineteenth century were solidly conservative in their theology. Their main doctrinal influence was the Old School Theology cemented by Charles Hodge in Princeton and Dabney in the South. These missionaries tried to educate the early Brazilian pastors in a similar vein.

Some Brazilian social reformers, such as Aureliano Candido Tavares Bastos, tried to enlist the missionaries to their cause, with little success, except when it touched on the theme of religious liberty. Apart from Fletcher, the American missionaries were unwilling to be involved with Brazilian politics. Choosing between social reform and personal evangelism was no hard task for them. Before going to seminary, Simonton wrote the following in his diary:

[61] Ribeiro, *Igreja Evangélica e República Brasileira*, 205–9.

> I do not hold that change is progress or revolution, reformation. Besides reforming has become a trade and many quacks finding it a profitable one are dabbling in it. … they are anti-religious, assuming that Christianity has failed to accomplish the regeneration of mankind and that it must give place to some more powerful agency.[62]

It does not seem that his opinions changed in Brazil. Simonton was a staunch Republican and enthusiastic antislavery advocate, but he was not in Brazil to subvert the monarchy or free the slaves. He was in Brazil to insert into the national religious system a new denomination formed by people who had had a transforming personal experience with God.[63] Being liberal was not enough. It was necessary to be godly.[64] Ironically, however, Fletcher had a more important role than the other missionaries realized at the time. His work helped to consolidate the political environment that would be favorable to missionary work.

The initial history of the Presbyterian Church in Brazil was deeply marked by the choice between personal evangelism and social reform. The main division in the young Brazilian Synod concerned education, mainly the role of Mackenzie. Eduardo Carlos Pereira represented a more radical, but not entirely unusual, stance on this topic: he feared that the United States churches, especially the PCUSA, were ignorant of the needs of the Brazilian church. Eventually, Pereira became alienated from most of his initial supporters.

Despite the division between personal evangelism and social reform, some pastors believed that the two issues were not necessarily incompatible. They occupied a middle ground, especially when it concerned education. Many Protestant schools were planted in the nineteenth century, and these schools attracted the elite that to a significant degree would rule the country in the First Republic.

---

[62] Simonton, *Diário*, 81–82.

[63] Ribeiro, *Protestantismo e Cultura Brasileira*, 26–27.

[64] Vieira, *O Protestantismo*, 139–40. As a final note, the tension between missionaries in Brazil was far from unique. Similar tensions happened throughout the missionary enterprise in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and even before. See William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Reflections on COVID-19 From Psalm 80

WILLIAM EDGAR

Everyone has been caught off guard. The numbers are staggering. As of this present writing, there are nearly 20 million infections of COVID-19 worldwide, of which some 730,000 have been fatal.[1] This unprecedented crisis has caused the best scientists and medical experts to face it with a view to finding cures and preventatives. Optimists tell us to wait a while until a breakthrough can occur. Realists worry that there is no end in sight. There is precedent for some hope in the fight against SARS and other types of viruses we have seen. And if we go back far enough, we can remember surviving the 1918 pandemic flu and many others. A babble of voices, some reliable, others not, is coming at us over the media, telling us what we can do. Governments have issued directives, suggestions, and warnings.

In a challenging situation in which Christians ought to have a good deal to say, not many voices have united to herald a single message. Should we just ignore the babble and wait? The love of our neighbor, being our brother's keeper, forbids it. Renowned theologians like N. T. Wright have written (for *Time* magazine) telling us to avoid pat answers and resolve simply to be sorrowful, to lament.[2] He pleads with us to stay away from hasty reactions that tell us the pandemic is a judgment. This, he says, comes from a "knee-jerk" rationalism that wants easy responses to something more mysterious.

William Edgar is professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and is a *professeur associé* at the Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France.

[1] Editor's Note: These reflections were written on August 9, 2020. The numbers in the text reflect the situation at the time.

[2] N. T. Wright, "Christianity Offers No Answers About the Corona Virus: It's Supposed To," *Time*, March 29, 2020, https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/.

My own view is that lament is wholly appropriate. The appeal to judgment is not rationalist but is, at least in part, biblical—"in part" because while there is no doubt that judgment is involved, so are other elements in the inscrutable providence of God revealed to us. Like many, I have taken refuge in the Psalms. However, it is not always easy to derive a simple message from the Psalms. They must be read expectantly yet with a certain amount of vulnerability.

Let us look briefly at Psalm 80. I find it rich yet also somewhat hard to summarize. Making an outline seems, if not futile, quite difficult. Various elements are woven together with no doubt a final message of confidence in God. But it is a frank appeal for mercy to a God who has chastised his people for a long time. Let us admit that there is certainly judgment here.

> O Lord God of hosts,
> how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
> You have fed them with the bread of tears
> and given them tears to drink in full measure.
> You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,
> and our enemies laugh among themselves. (Ps 80:4–6 ESV)

Secularized Westerners are hesitant to declare that there is such a God. Liberal theologians have long preached that, as H. Richard Niebuhr puts it, "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."[3] Evangelical Christians won't go that route, yet they are loath to talk about judgment, hell, and condemnation. But neither the Psalms nor most of the rest of Scripture makes much sense if there is not judgment. Indeed, the gospel message is premised on atonement from the wrath of God (Rom 1:18–3:31; 1 John 1:5–2:6).

Judgment, well, fine. Things become a bit more treacherous when we try to identify the cause of God's judgment. We do not possess the clairvoyance of the prophets. Yet it is not out of the question to make a few connections. Planet earth becomes complacent in a number of ways. One of them is to be satisfied with economic security. Another is the (often unspoken) assumption that whatever our challenges, science and learning can get us out of them. Yet another is that we do not need God to have meaning, or even to be good. So my humble surmise is that occasionally the Lord uses a powerful megaphone.

---

[3] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937), 193.

But we certainly cannot stop there. Our Psalm adds a number of themes to the theme of judgment. Strangely to us, perhaps, it reminds God of his great deeds.

> You brought a vine out of Egypt;
> you drove out the nations and planted it.
> You cleared the ground for it;
> it took deep root and filled the land.
> The mountains were covered with its shade,
> the mighty cedars with its branches.
> It sent out its branches to the sea
> and its shoots to the River. (Vv. 8–11)

The psalmist follows this up with an urgent question:

> Why then have you broken down its walls,
> so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
> The boar from the forest ravages it,
> and all that move in the field feed on it. (Vv. 12–13)

It is quite legitimate to ask God, Why? The question, when asked in faith, is not only legitimate but the only honest approach to God. Throughout the Psalms, and beyond, the saints of God ask, Why? and How long? (Pss 13; 43; 73; 88; etc.). Our Lord himself asked the question during his agony on the cross (Matt 27:46). I cannot underscore this enough: being a believer does not mean having all the answers. It does mean asking God to intervene. Now, he may do so, or he may do so but not on our terms. Our psalm asks God for restoration but does not dictate the terms. This is one of the great lessons of the spiritual life. Job was righteous but did not receive straightforward answers to his yearnings. According to divine wisdom, there are matters we need to know about and others we do not. This is a big subject. But the Reformation doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is solidly based on biblical evidence.

Applied to the present COVID-19 pandemic, this would mean we cannot know all of what God is doing. That is a difficult posture for Western folks, particularly Americans. Many of our leaders foolishly make claims that are soon shown to be unsupported. The balance is delicate because we do not want simply to throw up our hands and become resigned to our fate.

Finally, though we may struggle to find a clear outline for our psalm, it is resolutely a prayer of confidence:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might
and come to save us!
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Vv. 1–3)

The beginning and the end of the matter is that God is God. And he loves his people. And he has saved the world through his Son, Jesus Christ, the ultimate "man on his right hand."

But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!
Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!
Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Vv. 17–19)

So, worship God, admit you cannot discern all his ways, yet declare that he is good. Pray hard, rehearsing each circumstance, each question, each challenge. And, finally, do all you can to bring relief to your fellow suffering neighbors.

The Response of Christians and Churches in India to COVID-19

MATTHEW EBENEZER

COVID-19 has left a sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and fear in all communities around the world. Jesus's words on the separation that can come between the members of a family (cf. Luke 12:52–53) eerily apply to various situations where contracting this disease brings the fear of being disowned by your very own. At the end of 2020, India had the second largest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, after the United States. A glimmer of hope lies in the discovery of a truly effective vaccine that would control this disease, but will it be able to protect people from new strains of the virus found in the United Kingdom and South Africa? In a situation like this, we need to reaffirm God's sovereignty and his care for his creation and for his church. In this reflection, we will look at the response of the church in India to the pandemic. Before we do that, it is important to grasp certain basics about India.

India is a complex population of 1.3 billion. It is a multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual people living in twenty-eight states and eight union territories, divided roughly according to some major languages of the land. Christianity is largely a minority religion (officially 2.3%), but there are two states where Christians are the majority. However, their populations are relatively small. The response to COVID-19 in the states where

Matthew Ebenezer is principal of Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Dehradun, India.

Christians are numerous, Mizoram and Nagaland in the North-East, has been very different from that in most other parts where they are a minority. There is also one state, Kerala, where Syrian Orthodox Christians, though not in the majority, have a long history and considerable influence in society. These churches and their affiliates have been articulate in their responses to the pandemic. This shows that we cannot expect a uniform response from Christians and the church throughout India to COVID-19, but we can trace a general response.

"You are the salt of the earth. …You are the light of the world." (Matt 5:13–14 NIV)

Christians are generally known throughout India for their contribution to the country in three areas: education, health, and social advancement. Their role in providing health care and social uplift became especially prominent in the months after the outbreak of the pandemic. In many cases, the church assisted the government by becoming an avenue for social awareness. The social action and development organizations in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Protestant churches emerged as leaders in the early stages of the epidemic. One outstanding example of their contribution was during the lockdowns in assisting migrant workers stranded in the main cities, some of them hundreds or more than a thousand kilometers away from their villages, by providing temporary shelter and food and making arrangements to send them to their homes. They even extended help after the workers reached their villages. Leading among these development organizations were Caritas of the RCC and the Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief (EFICOR).

Christian hospitals in India played a crucial role in the wake of the epidemic. Both Vellore Christian Hospital in South India and Ludhiana Christian Hospital in North India took active roles at both national and international levels by being specialists and hosting webinars on COVID-19 in addition to creating awareness of the epidemic in their respective localities. Furthermore, other Christian hospitals under the umbrella of the Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA) and a number of independent mission hospitals throughout the land had a significant impact in various states by continuing their ministry of healing and compassion, providing basic necessities for the poor, and in general taking initiatives in public health to assist the government in the massive task at hand. World Vision focused on creating awareness among children by counseling them on the dangers of the disease and how to take preventive action. This contribution of the Christian hospitals and development organizations was recognized

when several institutions and individuals were honored for their exceptional contributions in the fight against COVID-19. In short, Christians fully cooperated with the government both in contributing funds and assisting in different ways.

Particularly during lockdowns, local churches took steps to comfort and encourage their congregations. In one case, where members of an ethnic Christian community wished to return to their home state during the lockdown when train and bus services were disrupted, their pastor obtained special permission to send them by arranging private transportation in buses on a journey lasting more than two days. Pastors were a source of comfort through online preaching and regularly visiting congregation members when possible to ensure they were safe and had food supplies. As one young pastor put it, we had online sermons, online Bible studies, and online visitation and counseling.

Of particular interest is the case of one pastor who contracted COVID-19 and was isolated in a special ward. Amidst all the depression of the fellow patients, he could keep his spirits high by trusting in the Lord and knowing that whether in life or in death he was safe with the Lord. Since his discharge from the hospital, he has been a vibrant messenger of the hope that Christ has to offer.

> Preach the Word;
> be prepared in season and out of season;
> correct, rebuke and encourage—
> with great patience and careful instruction. (2 Tim 4:2 NIV)

The church responded to the epidemic by taking a proactive attitude in ministering to the emotional and physical needs of congregations. One difficulty was that of weekend lockdowns, which meant that Christians could not meet on Sunday. To overcome this, a vigorous online ministry was initiated with sermons appropriate for the pandemic context. Platforms such as YouTube and Zoom were used extensively. Almost all sermons preached during those months made reference to COVID-19. Some sermons were specifically focused on the pandemic, as their titles reveal: "God Will Rescue You from the Pandemic"; "Mizos and the Pandemic"; and "Pandemic, Famine, and Earthquake." These sermons were followed by the believers who needed all the comfort they could receive. Several pastors and ruling elders uploaded sermons on social media to encourage the people. The pastors comforted them from God's Word. In some parts of the country where Christians are numerous, the church took leadership in giving instructions on how to cooperate in order to prevent the spread of the disease. It would

not be an exaggeration to say that almost every sermon preached during the alarming rise in the number of cases had a call to repentance and words of comfort and hope.

> Now I want you to know …
> that what has happened to me
> has actually served to advance the gospel. (Phil 1:12)

The church in India can identify with Paul's sentiments. It seemed to us like we were in prison when every weekend a lockdown would mean that we could not gather together. However, this seeming "thorn in the flesh" (cf. 2 Cor 12:7), which evoked a response from the church, is the biggest take-away for Christians in India. Instead of being discouraged and giving up, the church adapted to the new situation by seizing various media platforms to communicate with its members. A well-known Christian radio network, which had hitherto only aired messages on radio, additionally used Zoom to minister to its constituency, which grew exponentially since the broadcasts were now reaching a wider audience, live and with video. One church uses Zoom to reach a greater audience in their denomination with meetings *every* day in the mornings and evenings that are heard by their friends in India and abroad. They could never have done this earlier as scheduled physical meetings had numerous limitations. In many ways, the lockdowns and restrictions on meeting together have resulted in greater witness and strengthening of the churches.

Seminaries that needed help from visiting teachers abroad and other parts of the land now have them teach online without having to go through the red tape associated with such things as visas. Though we do hope for a day when things return to normal and students will be on campus, COVID-19 has opened future possibilities for online lectures that would help us benefit from the best scholars available abroad.

All this is not to say that the changes introduced during the pandemic are without problems. There are issues with connectivity during online lectures, sermons, and Bible studies. Students often tell us of power failures, losing connectivity, and poor reception during classes. Sometimes, the teachers themselves faced these problems, which affected the whole class. Some churches have uploaded their services to YouTube, which enables church members to watch the service at any time. Paramount among the objections is that church meetings became impersonal. This was particularly felt in the churches in India, but without doubt it is felt to some degree worldwide.

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced was with our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Almost every online attempt to celebrate this essential part of our communion with the Lord is fraught with difficulties. Should we practice what the early church did when the local bishop would consecrate and break the bread and send a piece to be mixed with the bread in each of the churches in his parish (a practice called *fragmentum*)? Who should administer the sacraments? Would there be enough elders to administer the sacrament in various places? These are only some of the questions that need to be considered.

To conclude, amidst the pandemic we can affirm that God is in control over the affairs of the world. Pandemics will come and leave in their wake untold suffering and fear. We need to listen to what God is saying to us. And to know this we need to read his Word with anticipation. Perhaps this will move us from fear to faith, and from hopelessness to hopefulness. May the Lord be glorified!

Plague and Sanctification: Indonesian Reflections

BILLY KRISTANTO AND AUDY SANTOSO

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various responses among church leaders, as it has among politicians. We will draw on some ideas in the Reformed tradition of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Ralph Venning, who all wrote on the plague, and relate their ideas to our current situation in Indonesia.[1]

I. *John Calvin*

For Calvin, self-denial helps believers to bear adversity. Self-denial is self-surrender to the God who regulates every part of our lives by his divine will. The more we believe in this divine arrangement, the more we are liberated from discontent:

> Therefore, he alone has duly denied himself who has so totally resigned himself to the Lord that he permits every part of his life to be governed by God's will. He who will be thus composed in mind, whatever happens, will not consider himself miserable nor complain of his lot with ill will toward God. How necessary this disposition is will appear if you weigh the many chance happenings to which we are subject. Various diseases repeatedly trouble us: now plague rages; now we are cruelly beset by the calamities of war; now ice and hail, consuming the year's expectation, lead to

Billy Kristanto is the academic dean at International Reformed Evangelical Seminary in Jakarta, an ordained pastor, and music director at the Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia. Audy Santoso is an ordained pastor of the Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia and the dean of students at International Reformed Evangelical Seminary, Jakarta.

[1] A booklet containing reflections on the pandemic was published by Billy Kristanto in June 2020. The reflections draw from the thoughts of Calvin, Beza, and Venning, among others.

> barrenness, which reduces us to poverty; wife, parents, children, neighbors, are snatched away by death; our house is burned by fire.[2]

A life of submission to God's will and doing God's will is not fatalistic. Self-surrender is not an escape from responsibility. Calvin quotes Psalms 78 and 79 to indicate the certainty of God's providence. In his commentary on Psalm 78:26, he points out that the providence of God can be sometimes hidden so that the desires of believers are frustrated while the desires of the wicked seem to be fulfilled.[3] In fact, in his wrath God grants the perverse desires of the wicked. In his providence God does not yield to human foolish desires but regulates his generosity for the sake of the well-being of his people. In this context, suffering and illness should not make believers lose their patience. On the contrary, they will see the righteousness and gentleness of God's chastening to make them patient. Christ's patience is formed in the life of believers through difficulties.

God's hidden and wise providence has prepared the church with a technological tool during this pandemic. The pandemic temporarily closed the door to the church meeting physically for worship;[4] however, it opened another door, the digital door, which has led to a greater ministry. While the digital ministry was not totally ignored in the past, it had not been well developed. Since the Reformed Injili YouTube channel was set up nine years ago, only 72 videos have been posted. But in the past seven months, 306 videos have been posted. Most of these videos are recent ministry from 2020 by the Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia (GRII) or the Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI).[5] Other branches of GRII have also developed their own digital ministries. The current situation has allowed the church to adapt to and adopt technology for the preaching of the Word. In the past, the Reformation succeeded in Europe partly because it could make use of the new printing technology. Now, the church is equipped and trained to labor in a new direction of ministry.

---

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 3.7.10 (1:700).

[3] John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: CCEL, n.d.), Ps 78:26–29.

[4] The practices of the church in worship and ministry have been directed according to the rules and regulations of the COVID-19 Response Acceleration Task Force under the coordination of the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management, involving the Ministry of Health, the Indonesian National Police, and the Indonesian Armed Forces.

[5] To an estimated eight thousand children at the National Bible Camp held June 23–25, to ten thousand teenagers in the National Reformed Evangelical Teen Convention held July 2–5, and to more than thirty-five thousand participants from eighty-five countries in Global Convention on Christian Faith and World Evangelization held October 1–6.

II. *Theodore Beza*

For Beza, a pandemic should lead to self-examination before God. Unlike Calvin, who emphasizes the sovereign will of God in the plague, Beza attributes the plague to human sins as the main cause. This is not to say that Beza did not believe in God's sovereignty over the plague; rather, he was more concerned to remind humankind of their mistakes and shortcomings before God:

> … but this especially must be agreed upon, that as our Sinnes are the chief and true cause of the Plague, so that this is the onely proper remedie against the same; if the Ministers dispute not of the Infection (which belongeth to Physicians) but by their Life and Doctrine stir up the People to earnest Repentance, and Love, and Charitie one towards another.[6]

Beza reminds pastors that they should be aware of their limitations and not speculate about illness, which is the field of medical doctors. Pastors who seek to ensure the physical health of their sheep are shepherds who neither recognize their special calling nor respect that of doctors. Pastors are not to go beyond their calling as the shepherds of the souls of their sheep.

In the Indonesian context, churches responded to the pandemic differently. The pandemic caused tension between churches that have strong and sound doctrine and those glorying in miraculous healing ministries. During a streaming Sunday service on April 5, Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong passionately criticized a recent video of a charismatic pastor. This pastor dared to say that Jesus asked him specifically to follow in rebuking a great storm by rebuking COVID-19 and the economic crisis: "Be silent, be still!"[7] In line with his past criticisms, Dr. Tong challenged the radical charismatic leaders to conduct a healing service for COVID-19 patients.[8] This caused a ripple effect among church leaders between those who follow Reformed theology and those in radical charismatic groups. The debates will likely be ongoing, with questions raised over the issue of loving cooperation or rebuke among church leaders. Matthew 18:6 authorizes stern rebukes of heretical sin, but

---

[6] Theodore Beza, *A Learned treatise of the plague: Wherein the two Questions: Whether the Plague be Infectious or no? And Whether and how far it may be shunned of Christians by going aside? are resolved* (London: Thomas Ratcliffe, 1665), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A27641.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext.

[7] Niko Njotorahardjo, YouTube, March 31, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA-Vp2cV_JQ.

[8] In the past, Dr. Tong challenged radical charismatic leaders to heal AIDS patients in an open stadium, a setting they often use for their "miraculous" meetings.

forgiveness is available for those who repent (Matt 18:15–20; see also vv. 21–35 on the parable of the unforgiving servant).

In our era, dominated as it is by naturalistic ideology, Beza's words indicate both what pastors should not do and what they should do as they carry out their calling. Those who only hope in medical doctors and do not care for spiritual health ignore the spiritual dimension of humankind. It belongs to pastors to remind their sheep of their spiritual needs by calling them to repentance and love.[9] Just as physical health is important, so is spiritual health. The latter includes human awareness of sin and transgression before God and an invitation to live in love. Here repentance is not understood as judgment in the midst of suffering and sickness, but rather as an opportunity for a loving life. As Christians, we are to show our love for others both in their spiritual and physical needs.

The church has always been ready to help those who are in need, especially fellow believers. The mercy ministry (*diakonia*) of GRII has been ready, especially for the many and varied natural and humanmade disasters that occur in Indonesia. In the past, we have allocated and distributed relief for the victims of the tsunami, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and flood.

This pandemic caught the whole world by surprise at different times in different countries. The mercy ministry of GRII in February 2020 sent many face masks to churches in Hong Kong and South Korea to ease the shortage; at that time, Indonesia had no official record of COVID-19 victims. When the pandemic struck Indonesia and lockdown measures were taken, the ministry of mercy distributed food and other necessities to poor and needy families, and various churches are still doing so. GRII also helped congregations by creating a network to advertise services, especially to support those who had lost income. Most countries in the world had already gone into recession before the lockdowns; therefore, the church ought to be helping those in need. A good reminder from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:58 during this trying period is, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

III. *Ralph Venning*

Venning was an English nonconformist well known for his sermons. He preached that the suffering or calamity people experience is under the hand

[9] Similarly, John Piper understands the coronavirus as "God's thunderclap call for all of us to repent and realign our lives with the infinite worth of Christ." John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 77.

of God (Amos 3:6). In this context, it can be said that God brings about evil but does not bring about sin. Sin comes from man himself. Thus, there are two kinds of evil:

> There are afflictions of several kinds, and they are all called evils. "Is there any evil (of any kind whatever) in the city and I have not done it?" (Amos 3.6), says the Lord. You see that God will own himself the author of that evil, but not of sin, for that is a bastard begotten and bred by another. The evil of plagues and afflictions are brought by God, though deserved by sin. And now indeed no affliction seems to be joyous for the present (Hebrews 12.1); although they are not to be desired yet they may be endured.[10]

When humans suffer misery, it is something they deserve as sinners. We should not ask where God is when we experience misery. Instead, we must ask why in the midst of a fallen world there is still God's goodness. In this context, there is no problem of evil; what we have is rather the problem of goodness.

Suffering, though never a good thing, must be endured patiently. Unlike suffering, "sin on the contrary is neither to be desired nor endured. Any sin is worse than any suffering, one sin than all suffering, and the least sin than the greatest suffering."[11] Venning relates suffering not only to the glory that is to come, but also to the evil of sin: compared to the evil of sin, even the heaviest suffering is nothing.

Sin is more fearsome than suffering, according to Venning. In the book of Amos, the plague was brought about by the Lord. In his hands, adversity can be a tool to make us aware of sin, leading us to repentance and drawing us closer to God. Sin, on the contrary, is far more devastating than the greatest suffering. People who are more afraid of suffering than of sinning do not understand the evil of sin. Believers are called to be like Christ as intercessors for the world. The church is called to perform the priestly function of mediating between the angry God and the sinful world. It should pray not only for the storm of the plague to pass, but especially for humankind to repent and return to God.

Like Venning, Dr. Tong affirmed during the conference at Kuala Lumpur (KL2020.com) on January 29, 2020, that suffering is a necessity for Christians who seek to follow Christ. Tim Keller was more hesitant about this proposition and argued that suffering does not necessarily make one a

---

[10] Ralph Venning, *Sin, The Plague of Plagues* (1669), https://www.gospeltruth.net/sos/sos_application.htm.

[11] Venning, *Sin, The Plague of Plagues*.

better Christian; it may lead in the opposite direction. In response, Dr. Tong commented that for God's chosen people, suffering will make them better Christians, while for the others it will make them worse. For the elect, suffering may effectively serve as a tool for sanctification.

May Christ have mercy on us during this difficult time.

The Pandemic and the Roman Catholic Church, Especially in Italy

LEONARDO DE CHIRICO

It is when the heart is under pressure that its true and deep commitments are exposed. When facing hardships, we reveal what is really important to us. In these months of the coronavirus emergency, the message that Roman Catholicism is giving is an alarming detachment from the basic principles of the biblical faith. This should come as no surprise. What is happening belongs to the core of Roman Catholic beliefs and practices as they are taught in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and as they are lived out in Roman Catholic parishes. However, given the favor with which even some Evangelicals view the self-styled "renewal" of Roman Catholicism and the action of Pope Francis, it is worth mentioning the spiritual regression we are witnessing in the midst of the pandemic crisis that severely hit Italy.

I. *Who Really Cares for the Country?*

After the outbreak of the coronavirus, at the peak of it, there was a flourishing of public dedications of Italy to *Mary's protection* (Pope Francis) and of Rome to the Madonna Salus Populi Romani, that is, the icon of Mary the pope is deeply committed to. The Archbishop of Milan dedicated the city to the Madonnina, the statue of the Virgin on the top of Milan's Duomo. In

Leonardo De Chirico is lecturer of historical theology at Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione, Padua, Italy, and editor of the theological journal *Studi di teologia*.

Venice, the local bishop, Patriarch Moraglia, dedicated his city to Our Lady of Health. In Naples, the archbishop of the city, Cardinal Sepe, dedicated the city to the care of San Gennaro, the protector and patron saint of the city. During the lockdown, in a deserted Rome, the pope walked the empty streets to the church of Saint Marcello to pray for the end of the pandemic. He did so in front of the "miraculous crucifix" that is kept there in memory of past miracles that supposedly happened through it.

Examples can be easily multiplied. Throughout the country, with these actions of devotions to Mary and the saints, Roman Catholicism has shown what pillars remain stable and reliable when everything else trembles: the maternal care of the Madonna and the intercession of the saints. The explicit message that was communicated was that Mary and the saints are always "near" to those who suffer, always at hand and ready to intervene. This explosion of Marian devotions culminated in a *nationally broadcast rosary* (i.e., a Marian prayer) led by the pope himself, where the deep unbiblical commitments of Roman Catholicism were again on display.[1]

The question that needs to be asked is this: If when in trouble we have to look for help through human mediators, where is Jesus Christ in all this? Is Jesus Christ not alive and powerful to intercede for us (Heb 7:25)? Is the Holy Spirit not fully active and interested in being involved in our intercession (Rom 8:26)? Is the Father not attentive to our prayers (e.g., 1 Pet 3:12) and ready to act upon them? With the flurry of all these Roman Catholic devotions, it is as if the Triune God is sleeping and in need, like the Baal in Elijah's time (1 Kgs 18), to be awakened by human mediators.

II. *Puzzling Interviews*

The second area of perplexity has to do with two public statements by Pope Francis. He was interviewed by two Italian newspapers on two almost consecutive days. To *La Repubblica* (March 18, 2020)[2] he unveiled a concentration of humanism and universalism. Without ever speaking of Christ or of the sin and salvation that is received by repenting and believing in him, he gave voice to something that does not even resemble the biblical gospel.

---

[1] "Praying the Rosary with Pope Francis," YouTube, May 30, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilIkQyWaXzM.

[2] Paolo Rodari, "Pope Francis on Coronavirus Crisis: 'Don't Waste These Difficult Days. While at Home Re-discover the Importance of Hugging Kids and Relatives,'" *Repubblica*, March 17, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/vaticano/2020/03/18/news/coronavirus_pope_francis-251572693/.

When asked, "How can those who do not have faith have hope in days like these?" he answered, "They are all God's children and are looked upon by him. Even those who have not yet met God, those who do not have the gift of faith, can find their way through this, in the good things they believe in: they can find strength in love for their children, for their family, for their brothers and sisters. One can say: 'I cannot pray because I do not believe.' But at the same time, however, he can believe in the love of the people around him, and thus find hope."

"We are all children of God"; we can believe in the "good things" we believe in, these "things" being love for our own dear ones; we can "believe in the love of people around" us and "find hope in it." These are not statements stemming from the biblical gospel but from a man-centered message. The pope had millions of readers, and he spread a message that reinforced them in whatever they believed rather than presenting the gospel.

Then, in an interview with *La Stampa* (March 20, 2020), the pope once again reiterated that "we are all children of God" and that, after the crisis is gone, we have to restart our life by re-appreciating our "roots, memory, brotherhood and hope."[3] This too is a humanist and universalist message devoid of any gospel meaning centered on Jesus Christ and the need for repentance and faith. The readers (millions of them) are left with the conviction that whether or not they believe in whatever they believe, they are all right before God. No one is challenged to face the coronavirus crisis by repenting and trusting Christ alone, who saves and heals.

III. *Outpouring of Indulgences*

The climax reached by Roman Catholicism in times of pandemic is the *granting of plenary indulgences* to "the faithful suffering from Covid-19 disease, commonly known as Coronavirus, as well as to health care workers, family members and all those who in any capacity, including through prayer, and care for them."[4] An indulgence is a remission of the temporal sin administered by the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of the merits of the saints. Practically, it is a "work" that needs to be done in order to receive a benefit from the church. The whole of the indulgence system denies that we

[3] Domenigo Agasso Jr., "Coronavirus, Papa Francesco: 'Non abbiate paura,'" *Stampa*, March 30, 2020, https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2020/03/20/news/coronavirus-papa-francesco-non-abbiate-paura-1.38613733.

[4] "Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Granting of Special Indulgences to the Faithful in the Current Pandemic," vatican.va, March 20, 2020, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320c.html.

are forgiven of our sins by God himself through the sufficient and complete work of Christ. Martin Luther and the whole Protestant Reformation strongly opposed indulgences, rightly seeing them as a denial of the gospel.

The pope offered an outpouring of this medieval practice even to those who will listen to a *special vigil of prayer* (live from TV sets, the internet, etc.) that happened on March 27, 2020, where he imparted a special blessing.[5]

The most recent offer of indulgences is related to the year that Pope Francis inaugurated on December 8, 2020, to celebrate Saint Joseph, the legal father of Jesus. "During this period, the faithful will have the opportunity to commit themselves with prayer and good works, to obtain, with the help of Saint Joseph, comfort and relief from the serious human and social tribulations that besiege the contemporary world today." Moreover, "Everyone who entrusts their daily activity to the protection of St. Joseph, and every faithful who invokes the intercession of St. Joseph so that those seeking work can find dignifying work can also obtain the plenary indulgence."[6]

The basis of the Catholic Church teaching its members to call for the help of Saint Joseph, Mary, and the saints is twofold. On the one hand is a weird interpretation of what is proclaimed in the Apostles' Creed in article 9: "We believe in the communion of the saints"; for Catholics, that "communion" is extended to the dead and allows communication with them through prayers and petitions addressed to them. On the other hand is the Catholic view of the saints who, because of their heroic witness, can be "mediators" between God and humanity. Both teachings are biblically wrong: our fellowship with those who have preceded us in glory is spiritual until the resurrection comes, and we are never commanded to pray to the dead. It is actually forbidden by Scripture to have anything to do with the realm of the dead (Deut 18:10–12). Further, we have a living and loving intercessor in the person of Jesus Christ who perfectly hears our prayers (Heb 4:15–16) and who is perfectly qualified to be the only mediator between God and us (1 Tim 2:5). If we do not know what to pray and how to pray, we have the Holy Spirit, who helps us to pray (Rom 8:26).

---

[5] Devin Watkins, "Covid-19: Pope Offers Prayer to Virgin Mary for Protection," *Vatican News*, March 11, 2020, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-prayer-our-lady-protection-coronavirus.html.

[6] "Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* of the Holy Father Francis on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church," Vatican.va, December 8, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html.

IV. *What Is at Stake*

Indulgences are a medieval invention that has nothing to do with Scripture. They stem from a work-based view of salvation wherein we must do something to have our sins removed from us (e.g., reciting certain prayers, making certain pilgrimages, crossing the holy doors, and in the past paying an amount of money to buy them). They derive from a faulty view of the Roman Church, which claims to administer God's grace by way of opening up the "treasury of merits" earned by the saints and making them available on special occasions. There is no Scriptural support for either claim. The forgiveness of our sins is a gift that comes to us by grace alone and is grounded in the accomplished work of the Lord Jesus Christ who has paid the full penalty for our sins (1 John 2:1–2). Thanking God, we can go directly to the Father's throne in the name of the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Somehow, we should keep on nailing up the Ninety-Five Theses; they are as relevant today as they were in 1517.

What future can Italy have with such a message coming out of Rome? Because of these deceptions, the need for a robust, biblical witness is as relevant as ever. The "renewal" that Roman Catholicism is going through will not make it change according to the Word of God. It will empower it to inoculate people with words that may appear close to the good news but are, instead, nowhere near the biblical gospel. In addition to the health emergency of the pandemic, we are living in a time of even greater spiritual emergency.

The Churches in The Netherlands and the Pandemic

HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS

Below I try to describe in ten brief paragraphs how the Reformed churches in The Netherlands replied to COVID-19 and the effect this pandemic will have on these churches in the near future. I underline that these are my personal observations and analyses, but I do hope they give an impression of what the coronavirus brought about in the life of the church.

I. *Unbelief*

It all started in March 2020 with unbelief. For The Netherlands, China is far away, and no one knew where Wuhan was. Even when COVID-19 had reached northern Italy, we thought it was local and temporary. It was plain unbelief that a pandemic in our modern times with all that we know and with all that we can do could rise up and fundamentally disturb our activities. Thus, unbelief was also for Christians connected with a belief in science, a belief in human infallibility, and a belief that the words in James 4:13–16 were good to mention in church announcements but should not be taken too seriously—and further, with a belief that we still could carry out our planned meetings, synods, church services, and national and international trips. Unbelief in the reality of a pandemic was in fact grounded in unbelief

Herman J. Selderhuis is rector and professor of church history and church polity at the Theological University Apeldoorn, Netherlands.

that God would really decide to bring the whole world to a standstill.

II. *Obedience*

Once the pandemic was a fact and our government took measures, a question came up: Do we have to be obedient to the government if it is decided that churches should reduce attendance to thirty people or less? Does Romans 13 count when the government strongly recommends not to sing in church? These discussions in fact took place rather seldom in the Dutch churches. Rather, the general attitude was just to follow the rules; some churches decided to have no church services at all anymore and to tell the congregation to find online gatherings. This lack of discussion on the boundaries of political obedience is both striking and understandable as Dutch Christians were convinced that the church has a responsibility for the health and well-being of the wider community.

III. *Shame*

A handful of orthodox churches reacted differently and made it to the national news by giving the impression that they were ignoring political decisions and lockdown measures, or at least of pushing the limits of what was still allowed. It was negative headlines, and it shamed all churches and all Christians, especially since a good number of these churches were at the center of COVID-19 hotspots. The impression arose that the more strictly Reformed a church was, the more it was disobedient and a greater threat to national health. It will take quite some time and energy to repair the damage done to the image of the church—by a minority of Christians—as many see the church more as a danger to physical health than as a medicine for spiritual health.

IV. *Innovation*

The positive effect of COVID-19 was that many churches sought and found original ways to keep preaching and praising God and to uphold community life in the church. It became evident that there was much spiritual creativity in the Christian church, and some brothers and sisters have gifts that so far had not been recognized as such. Our digital era is often rightly seen as a danger, with the many negative influences and temptations the internet has to offer, but now it proved to be a great gift. It also became clear that many conventions and traditions were not as holy and biblical as we thought them

to be, and that the church can live well in spite of—or should I say thanks to—the fact that many meetings of elders, deacons, and committees could not take place.

V. *Pastorate*

For pastors, elders, deacons, and others with pastoral obligations, COVID-19 made it a heavy task to give good spiritual care. In The Netherlands, however, we also came to see that our presbyterian structure, with deacons, elders, and pastors, and our view that church members are also shepherds as well as sheep, is not just traditional but an essential part of the church of Christ. COVID-19 in this respect showed the truth that once you miss something, you come to see how much you need it. The Presbyterian, Reformed church structure prevented the church from falling apart. This gives hope for the situation after COVID-19, where we again have to learn to be the church, but where we also have already learned that the Reformed tradition offers so much of lasting value.

VI. *Death*

COVID-19 caused many deaths in The Netherlands. Death became more of a reality than before. And the lockdown rules made funerals even more a confrontation with the finiteness of human life. The Netherlands has a long history of Christianity, and that means that every town has churches with bells. These bells rang every time someone passed away. I live in a small, medieval town with a population of some seven thousand people, but in the spring, the church bell of the main church would ring sometimes three or four times a day, and it made people stop and think. *Memento mori*: Are you prepared to die? We pray that this reality of death may have a lasting impression on people both inside and outside the church.

VII. *Preaching*

The first lockdown Sunday in The Netherlands was Easter Sunday. Churches were as empty as the tomb from which Jesus returned alive. I preached in a large church with just one elder, one technician, and one camera. It was awkward, empty, and unreal. And I have learned since then—as have all preachers in the world—that we need to see the congregation if we are to be able to preach well. We need the coughs, the yawns, the running of children, the folks not paying attention, the young people

pretending to listen but checking Instagram. We cannot do without them. We need physical, moving bodies of brothers and sisters in the church in order to be able to preach well. I hear the same from colleagues and churchgoers. I found that online sermons need to be not too long, that they need to be lively, that they need to be close to Scripture and opening up Scripture, and that they also need even more preparation. And more prayer.

VIII. *Teaching*

Dutch churches suffer enormously from a lack of knowledge. There is a crisis in catechism class and in catechetical preaching. COVID-19 has increased this in spite of all that has been organized online. In The Netherlands the tradition of two services every Sunday—what we call text-preaching or an exposition of a Bible text in an experiential way in the morning service and preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism in the afternoon or evening—was already struggling before this pandemic, but the lockdowns made it even worse. Scripture says that the people of God are destroyed because of a lack of knowledge (Hos 4:6), and it is this destruction that is threatening us more than ever. Here I see an immense challenge to get back the rhythm of two services a Sunday and to get back the content that feeds the flock's heart and mind.

IX. *Concern*

The former issue brings me to the concerns the Dutch churches have. To put it bluntly: Will all members return to church after the pandemic? Online church services can make us sloppy in attendance, and it can make us picky about whom we listen to. What are the effects on our young people whom we already had a hard time reaching? The church needs to go into rehab. But will we completely recover? Over the past twenty years The Netherlands has been confronted with a tsunami of closing churches. Many congregations have not survived the pandemic, while some could stay open, but barely. Will the lockdowns deal them the final blow? Our concern is that this country with its rich tradition of lively churches and solid Reformed theology and spirituality will become a post-Christian wasteland. And that this pandemic has even accelerated that development.

X. *Hope*

I started with unbelief, but I end with hope. The God who brought us down will in his grace lift us up. The God who brought us to a standstill in his

grace will get us moving. The God who reigns over pandemics will bring his glorious plan to completion. Our hope is not in vaccines, nor in politics, nor in pastors or synods, but our hope is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him has been given all power in heaven and on earth (cf. Matt 28:18). He has revealed to the Apostle John on Patmos that all the things he was shown will happen and have to happen (Rev 1:1). And we see that they do happen as revealed. These are frightening signs but signs of hope. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, slain on the cross by the pandemic of our sins, raised from the dead by the vaccine of God's almighty power, we can have hope for the future of the church and for the future of our souls.

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

PHILIP TACHIN

The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic provoked different reactions all over the world. In Nigeria, fear enveloped everyone as all public places, including churches, were shut down. From medieval times to the present, deadly pandemics have afflicted humanity with devastating effects. Many questions sprang up: Is the pandemic of divine origin or human made or both? Is it a sign of God's judgment upon the sins of humanity? Is it a sign of the end times? In what ways are we able to see God's sovereignty in times like this? There have been a variety of theological responses and actions from churches and individuals. For contemporary believers, the experience of the global pandemic poses a challenge to church participation and response to the needs of those affected.

The global COVID-19 pandemic had devastating economic and psychological effects upon humanity, including on their healthcare and church participation. The Nigerian government ordered the closure of public gatherings, which consequently affected churches. This brought new challenges and new norms and necessitated an all-inclusive rethink of the role of the church and of strategy for its fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism. Many economic activities crumbled under the weight of the pandemic. Most businesses folded up and many people lost their jobs. Many were without food and money to meet their basic daily needs. All kinds of human relationships suffered when people became isolated from their families, relatives, and friends because of concerns that the disease

Philip Tachin is an associate professor of systematic theology at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Lagos, Nigeria, and director of the university's study center in Jos.

would spread. How did the church in Nigeria respond to this situation, especially in terms of reaching out to its members and encouraging them?

Church responses to the pandemic varied in interesting ways. Many churches, especially Pentecostals, believed more in the protection of God against infection than in any other human prevention or medication, and many stories of divine protection were circulated in social media to encourage believers.[1] This made some churches to initially be unmoved by government warnings against gatherings of believers. Some believed that the outbreak of the pandemic was divine displeasure over the sinful lives of the people, while others linked this to an end-time context in which the mark of the beast in Revelation 13:18 would be placed on people using 5G technology.[2] Many churches were not happy that physical church participation was suspended, one reason being that it would affect financial giving to the church.

The digital world has allowed our contemporary society to respond to situations like this in many ways that are different from what was possible in the sixteenth century. The church leadership in Nigeria introduced innovative ways of reaching out to followers using unconventional ways of rallying financial resources from the congregation. The shutting down of places of worship made churches use numerous media platforms like television to reach out to their congregations. Media were used more efficiently to reach out to believers. The concept of online or internet church became invigorated in Nigeria on a scale never seen before. Facebook Live, YouTube, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp became the most commonly used social media platforms for preaching.[3] The pandemic has pushed the church in Nigeria to begin to consider the training of church leaders in information and communications technologies (ICT) and multimedia.

At times like these, it is important to emphasize digital ministry, though as an adjunct and not as a substitute for the traditional church gathering and physical pastoral outreach to members.[4] Times are changing, and everything is changing with it, including methods of service delivery, whether

---

[1] Oluwasegun Peter Aluko, "COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: The Response of the Christian Church," *African Journal of Biology and Medical Research* 3.2 (2020): 112–13, https://abjournals.org/ajbmr/papers/volume-3/issue-2/covid-19-pandemic-in-nigeria-the-response-of-the-christian-church/.

[2] Ibid., 114, 118.

[3] Ibid., 116.

[4] Adebayo O. Afolaranmi, "Towards the Possibility of Internet Ministry as an Alternative Pastoral Ministry in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Information Technology and Language Studies* 4.2 (2020): 24, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343904627_Towards_the_Possibility_of_Internet_Ministry_as_an_Alternative_Pastoral_Ministry_in_Nigeria_during_the_COVID-19_Pandemic.

spiritual or secular, though the Word of God remains unchanged. Therefore, as Paul admonished Timothy in his time, men of God and church leaders should be prepared in season and out of season for effective delivery of the gospel (2 Tim 4:2). This means complete preparation so that no matter what event takes place in the world, ministers must not be lacking in preparedness to preach the gospel.

Nevertheless, village churches could not afford to conduct online services, lacking access to technology, the internet, and power. They were incapable of having their services on radio and television stations because they could not pay for telecast time. Village churches implemented the practice of family churches, as it was in the apostolic era, involving prayers in the company of only household members.

In the struggle with the pandemic, Rev. Soja Bewarang encouraged believers, saying, "But we are to be encouraged by our trust and faith in God to hold on and, praise His name, even more than ever before. He has never let one of His children down, not one of them has ever been forsaken and at the appointed time we shall not only be more conquerors but even more than conquerors."[5] One of the positive things during the lockdown is the understanding that the "main church is the people and not the church building itself, which is to help them increase their personal relationship with God."[6]

The material response of the Nigerian church to the pandemic has been mixed. Many churches that joined in the fight against the scourge made donations to the government instead of directly to their own affected members. The Anglican Communion of Nigeria donated cash to the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19. The head of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, Most Rev. Henry Ndukuba, also stated that the church "will intensify prayers on behalf of the country to ensure the healing of the land"; he directed "parishes to build food banks for distribution of food to indigent people" and "medical consumables which have been procured and are being released to both federal and state governments."[7] Donating to the government rather than directly to individuals was criticized as popularity seeking.[8]

When trouble comes, the church's response should be to innovate and be different from everyone else, and she should expect, with Christ in view, to

---

[5] Rev. Dr. Soja Bewarang, "Lockdown: CAN Advises Christians to Live Wisely," *Today's Challenge* 16.5 (May/June 2020).

[6] Aluko, "COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria," 122.

[7] Willie Bassey, "Anglican Communion Partners PTF on War against COVID-19," Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, 2021, https://www.osgf.gov.ng/news-media/news/post/anglican-communion-partners-ptf-war-against-covid-19.

[8] Aluko, "COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria," 121.

help more people. In doing so, it will shine its divinely given light in a dark world that is ridden with fear and trembling. Though we may not be able to explain why terrible things are happening, we are called to live our lives in the presence of God as we gaze upon the promises of a better world where such ugly events do not exist (Rev 21:4, 27; 22:3). While the world spreads messages of fear and uncertainty, we are coached not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). That entails that we not let the world dictate to us how to respond, but we let Scripture be our guide. Instead of hoarding resources, we can invent ways to reach out to the community. We can pray for supernatural understanding and policymaking ability concerning COVID-19 and the rekindling of resources for the protection of jobs and human sustainability.

The Church in the Midst of the Enduring Pandemic[1]

PIERRE BERTHOUD

As many of you know, France is one of the most secularized democracies in the Western world, and this has had significant repercussions in the way the French population has responded to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. The general cultural climate is characterized by a humanist world and life view implying atheism or agnosticism. At best, theism is considered irrelevant to the human plight and disconnected from life issues and crises within civil society.

I. *World and Life View and* Laïcité

This stance is well expressed by Luc Ferry, a contemporary philosopher, in a monograph presenting the debate he had with Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. Very much aware of the significant contribution Christianity has made to the development of Western civilization, he nevertheless argues forcefully in favor of an essentially horizontal perspective of the world and the human condition. Since the Enlightenment and especially Friedrich Nietzsche, the notion of a transcendent God is no longer considered necessary when dealing with issues related to the city. In other words, "we think

Pierre Berthoud is President of the Board and Professor Emeritus of Old Testament and Apologetics at the Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France.

[1] Cf. also my brief comments on the pandemic: Pierre Berthoud, "Au jour du malheur réfléchis!," Faculté Jean Calvin, April 27, 2020, https://www.facultejeancalvin.com/au-jour-du-malheur-reflechis/; translation, "In the Day of Adversity Consider!," The Huguenot Fellowship, May 20, 2020, https://www.huguenotfellowship.org/blog/2020/5/20/in-the-day-of-adversity-consider.

we can and even must resolve the question of life in society and the good decisions affecting its wellbeing by ourselves, without taking orders from above."[2] Such a philosophy underlies the specific understanding of the separation of state and church, as expressed in the key French concept of *laïcité*.[3] For Ferry "laicism means that norms and common values are no longer rooted in a theological understanding of reality."[4]

In fact, the philosophical aspects of the question are more complex. As Marcel Gauchet argues, there are two principles of legitimacy of power: either "the right of God" (legitimacy comes from above) or human rights (legitimacy emanates from society). He then goes on to say that "these two principles were put into action by the American and the French revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century."[5] In other words, God is at the center of the American Revolution and democracy. Such a vertical approach is no doubt due to the influence of the Protestant reformations. In fact, the countries that were influenced by Protestantism, especially Calvinism, had an understanding of the separation of church and state that made it possible for the Christian world and life view to have a significant impact on civil society.

Within the French context, *laïcité* (laicity) is considered a legal and political system that provides for the common good. It implies the separation of church and state.[6] As an "agnostic institution,"[7] the state (its officials and its civil servants) guarantees in principle the freedom of conscience and of religion as well as the public expression of one's beliefs and convictions. It also ensures the equality of all citizens before the law and public services.

On the other hand, as mentioned above by Ferry, because of the emancipation of French culture, the law has become progressively the exclusive emanation of the people without the input of divine transcendence. This is all the more the case as we have witnessed over the last decades a spectacular erosion of the Christian influence (especially of Roman Catholicism) on French society as a whole.[8] Within such a philosophical climate, to what

---

[2] Luc Ferry and Gianfranco Ravasi, *Le Cardinal et le philosophe* (Paris: Plon, 2013), 96–98.

[3] Often wrongly translated "secularism"; it is better to refer even in English to "laicism."

[4] Ferry and Ravasi, *Le Cardinal et le philosophe*, 97.

[5] Marcel Gauchet, "Les médias menacent-ils la démocratie?," *Médias* 1.6 (2004), http://gauchet.blogspot.com/2007/05/les-mdias-menacent-ils-la-dmocratie.html.

[6] That is, the church is not involved in the administration of the state and the state does not interfere in the inner organization of the religious communities.

[7] This expression is to be preferred to "the neutrality of the state"; see Daniel Verba, "La laïcité, oui, mais laquelle?," *Actualités sociales hebdomadaires* 3183 (November 6, 2020): 34–35. Such a posture does not mean indifference; the Minister of the Interior is expected to maintain relationships with the representatives of the religious communities.

[8] Guillaume Cuchet, *Comment notre monde a cessé d'être chrétien* (Paris: Seuil, 2018).

extent does the state remain an "agnostic institution," especially since the anticlerical trends of thought remain very strong in France? This explains why, since the adoption of the law on the separation of Church and State in 1905, there has been, within the political elites and the citizens, a recurring tension between the partisans of a more coercive and those of a more liberal interpretation of the law, the former limiting the freedom of religion to the private sphere, the latter seeking to protect both the private and public expressions of the faith. But many are those who think that such a public expression of one's faith should remain discreet! These considerations will help us to better appreciate the present circumstances and challenges that COVID-19 represents within the present cultural climate in France.

II. *The Christian Faith, the Church, and the Pandemic*

Apart from those who have a Christian perspective, the mainstream media have largely ignored or given an erroneous appreciation[9] of the contribution of the Christian faith and the church to the challenge of COVID-19. Edgar Morin, a stimulating author and well-known sociologist, argues that the coronavirus requires a radical and worldwide change in the direction of our societies. He thus says, for example, that if we have been slow in arriving at an ecological awareness it is because we live in a culture "where the Bible, the Gospels, philosophy and the human sciences have dramatically separated nature from culture, the human being from the animal."[10] There is some truth to this analysis emphasizing such a dichotomy, but Morin seems unaware that the Bible's doctrine of creation includes the protection and preservation of the environment. Likewise, the distinguished philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, in denouncing the political and religious gurus who see in COVID-19 a bad omen for our civilization, mentions some Christian leaders who are hardly representative of the historic Christian faith.[11]

---

[9] An exception was the interview of Samuel Peterschmitt, pastor of a large charismatic church in Mulhouse, which held a major meeting in February 2020 and subsequently became the center of one of the first outbreaks of the epidemic. It was severely criticized—unjustly, however, since it had clearly respected the government's instructions—and became a scapegoat in public opinion. Cf. Malo Tresca, "A Mulhouse la Porte ouverte chrétienne se relève douloureusement du Covid-19," *LaCroix*, October 20, 2020. See also the interesting sociological study of the National Council of the Evangelicals of France (CNEF): "Églises évangéliques et Covid-19: Enquête," Conseil national des évangéliques de France, May 13, 2020, https://www.lecnef.org/articles/55361-eglises-evangeliques-et-covid-19-enquete.

[10] Edgar Morin, *Changeons de voie: Les leçons du coronavirus* (Paris: Denoël, 2020), 21. In dealing with the human condition he also quotes a passage from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, but he makes no mention of the latter's Christian faith, treating it as irrelevant (30–33).

[11] Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ce virus qui rend fou* (Paris: Grasset, 2020), 43–44.

Nothing is said on the way "Christianity has been handling epidemics for 2000 years."[12] To be fair, Lévy speaks highly of Judaism and especially of the prophets of the Bible, who, far from being confined, "were exposed to the wisdom of another, a radically other, even God."[13]

One of the striking aspects of the two lockdowns we have thus far experienced is the docility with which the population has accepted and submitted to the sanitary regulations decreed by the medical and political authorities, especially with regard to the mandatary first confinement last spring.[14] Likewise, the churches in general expressed the same compliance to the guidelines and instructions imposed by the confinements. They were quick to adapt and adopt social networks and digital media to keep in touch with the members of the local communities. As Lévy says so well in the name of the health imperative, "the guiding markers of our civilization, such as the churches, the synagogues, as well as the cultural centers, museums," and diverse places of conviviality, "where people usually quench their non-quantifiable and non-mercantile spiritual thirst," became virtually inaccessible.[15]

Let us be clear: we do not mean that transmission precautions of the coronavirus should not have been taken, but did our sanitary and political authorities take the time to evaluate not only the political turmoil and the economic hardships but also the spiritual, human,[16] and cultural consequences of such radical measures and their impact on the freedom of conscience, religion, enterprise, and movement? If we take the example of the church, it is evident that the French authorities considered and thus treated it just as any other fellowship or institution. It declared its lockdown, and the churches accepted it, raising hardly objections and remaining disturbingly silent.[17] The church, however, is more than a human institution; it

[12] Title of an article mentioned by John Lennox in his excellent book, *Where Is God in a Coronavirus World?* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2020), 65, 82. French title: *Coronavirus, où est Dieu ?* (Marpent: BLF Editions, 2020). See also, Philippe Martin, *Les religions face aux épidémies, de la peste au Covid-19* (Paris: Cerf, 2020).

[13] Lévy, *Ce virus qui rend fou*, 61–65.

[14] The second lockdown in the fall was partial; businesses and schools remained open and continued their activities in situ.

[15] Lévy, *Ce virus qui rend fou*, 74.

[16] The anxiety, the fears, and the isolation triggered by the pandemic have been the cause of suffering and pain ranging from loneliness to depression in large parts of society, especially among the elderly and youth. The first lockdown was dramatic for the elderly as they were totally isolated, even from their families. Fortunately, things improved considerably for them during the second confinement.

[17] During the first lockdown, the French Constitutional court, at the request of lay Catholics, ruled that the government must lift a blanket ban on meetings at places of worship imposed as part of the measures to combat the coronavirus. During the second lockdown, the Conference

is the body of Christ on earth, the pillar of truth. As it takes care of the flock, resilient in the midst of hardships, and seeks to alleviate human needs and sufferings, we could also expect it to pronounce a prophetic word as Christians face, in their pilgrimage through such troubled and uncertain times, so many disruptive changes and challenges. In such times of crisis, it is necessary to be vigilant over the church-state boundaries, for it is tempting for the government to encroach on the freedom and rights of the church recognized by the law. This is all the truer within a secular and post-Christian cultural environment where our medical and political authorities are unable or unwilling to recognize the covenant community's unique calling! Could it be that the Christian church is presently in a modern Babylonian captivity with all the limitations and the intimidations that that implies? If such is the case, then it is essential to clarify one's priorities, to seek and abide by the will of our Lord whatever the costs (Acts 4:18–20), and to take heed to the words Jeremiah wrote to the captives, that they would be for a while in Babylonia: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare will you find your welfare" (Jer 29:7).

As we face this pandemic it is crucial for us, the body of Christ, to delve into the Word so as to deepen our knowledge of God, for it is his wisdom that will help us to understand our times and find the words and gestures to respond to the French population's spiritual thirst and search for meaning.[18] With this in mind, let us consider how André Comte-Sponville, a well-known philosopher, responds to the fear, panic, and anguish our contemporaries experience as they face the illness, the sufferings, and even the death produced by the pandemic. In recent articles, he begins by emphasizing that this panic and especially the reality of death have been considerably amplified by the media. It is as if our contemporaries suddenly discovered that they were mortal! COVID-19 has brought them face to face with a reality they desperately wanted to ignore because they see death as a

of Bishops was more outspoken and able to obtain an increase in numbers of people allowed to attend Mass. This action benefited Protestants and other religious groups. Objections were also raised with regards to the restrictions on funerals. On the silence of the churches, see Anne-Sylvie Sprenger, "Covid-19: 'Le silence des Églises face à ce qui se passe, est inquiétant,' dit François Dermange," *Journal Chrétien*, November 17, 2020, https://www.chretiens.info/eglises/covid-19-le-silence-des-eglises-face-a-ce-qui-se-passe-est-inquietant-dit-francois-dermange/2020/11/17/10/35/. Dermange teaches ethics in the Department of Theology, University of Geneva, Switzerland.

[18] Lennox's short book *Where Is God in a Coronavirus World?* is a remarkable example of such an approach. John Piper's book, with a more Puritan perspective, is another good example: *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); French translation: *Le Coronavirus et Christ* (Trois-Rivières, Québec: Édition Impact, 2020).

failure! In a desire to reassure people, Comte-Sponville says, "I have good and bad news for you. The bad news is that we are all going to die. The good news is that most of us will die from something other than COVID-19." He goes on to say that "finitude, failure and obstacles are fundamental to our human condition. We will continue to panic over every epidemic until we accept death." Admitting the reality of death gives us the means to appreciate life. Thus, "we love life all the more, as we become aware of its brevity, its fragility and its value." In other words, we must make the best of human existence because there is nothing after death! This awareness requires us to live a more intensive life while recognizing that health is only a "means of achieving happiness" and not an end in itself. Good health merely adds to the quality of life and cannot in any way take the place of core values such as justice, love, generosity, courage, and freedom.[19]

There is wisdom in Comte-Sponville's approach, with its emphasis on the precious character of life on earth, the importance of rejecting the idolatry of health, recognizing our finiteness, the limits of our human condition and of the ethical standards and values that bring meaning and depth to our existence.

However, we get the impression that he has drawn on the Judeo-Christian heritage but left out its world and life view and biblical roots. He clearly rejects the existence of a sovereign, personal God to whom we are accountable and with whom we can enjoy an intimate relationship. We are the only actors in this world, and there is nothing beyond the horizon! As to his acceptance of the limits of human life, especially of death, it is more akin to a form of stoic resignation.

In contrast, the Scriptures emphasize the scandalous nature of death in a broken world. It is the ultimate enemy (cf. 1 Cor 15:26), whose power is rooted in sin (cf. Rom 5:12), which is rebellion against our ultimate Vis-à-vis and his wisdom. It is precisely because the Bible distinguishes between the origin of being and the origin of evil that sin, suffering, illness, and death are a tragedy, a tragedy we can face with confidence in the midst of alarm and anguish because the Triune God has reversed the course of history, of our history, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we accept his atoning work and trust in him, we pass from death to life, a life that transcends this earthly horizon.

---

[19] André Comte-Sponville, "Laissez-nous mourir comme nous le voulons," *Le Temps*, April 21, https://www.letemps.ch/societe/andre-comtesponville-laisseznous-mourir-voulons; "Ne tombons pas dans le sanitairement correct," *Le Point* 2487, April 23, 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/economie/andre-comte-sponville-ne-tombons-pas-dans-le-sanitairement-correct-16-04-2020-2371708_28.php.

May the Holy Spirit give the church the wisdom to be ambassadors of good news in the midst of a troubled, faltering, and weeping world, speaking peace, comfort, and lasting hope that seeks to alleviate fears and anxieties! Since the "steadfast love of the Lord is better than life," it awakens within us trust, appeasement, hope, and praise (Ps 63:4).

How Has COVID-19 Affected My Teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary?

TODD M. RESTER

It would be easier to list how COVID-19 has *not* affected the experience of teaching than it would be to list all the ways it has! The mission is still the same: to train biblically faithful pastors and theologians in the whole counsel of God's Word that they might equip God's people for the work of the ministry and discipleship for the proclamation of the gospel, whether locally or globally. The commitment to intentional mentoring and fellowship with students is the same. Since we, as a faculty, are committed to the advance of the gospel and the good of God's people, we cannot turn back from our teaching responsibilities and calling. Where this intersects with the COVID-19 pandemic is that as a faculty, we have had to stay true to our mission while being creative and flexible via digital means in meeting the contexts and contours of that mandate. It has grown us, I believe, far beyond the confines of a traditional, physical classroom. Physical presence is invaluable for a dialogue or discussion, and I long for the day when our classrooms are back to normal. What I hope I do not lose once normal returns is how much at this point in the pandemic my family and I value and prize fellowship in person.

Todd M. Rester is associate professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and a postdoctoral research fellow at Queen's University Belfast.

In February 2020, who could have imagined how much our lives would shift in a year due to a globe-trotting virus and rapidly changing public policies and procedures? In February 2020, I started my second semester at Westminster Theological Seminary teaching church history courses. By the end of May 2020, I had moved from teaching all my classes in person to all my classes via Zoom and various means of recorded lectures. Students at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), Philadelphia, responded in a variety of ways: some returned to communities and congregations in other states and in some cases even returned to their home countries; others decided to stay in the Philadelphia area. In response to trending epidemiology and the prevailing wind of state government, it was last May and into early June that Westminster decided to suspend in-person classes for the 2020–2021 school year and move to an online learning environment. For me personally, this meant I had to become even more familiar with and proficient in integrating digital tools like Zoom, Google Meet, Yuja, Canvas, Slack, Populi, Calendly, and many others so I could serve students well. For my classes, the shift to teaching online has also required a shift to online resources both for class readings and training students in research methods. If it were not for generous and far-sighted donors who saw the need for digital access to databases and digital books, it would have been very difficult to teach seminarians at the level necessary this past year and into the future. Our library and tech staff at WTS have done a tremendous job in helping faculty integrate these new resources for students. It is definitely more challenging for a distance student to interlibrary loan a book these days, but with such a helpful staff, we have been able to get students what they needed.

One aspect of teaching on Zoom that I have appreciated is that I have had international students in their home country in real time on Zoom. The result is that questions in class discussions reflect more global contexts and perspectives than might have been available in a traditional classroom. In one class, I had students representing every time zone in North America, one in Europe, another in Africa, and another in Asia. It is hard for a North American student to complain about class time when their classmate on another continent is up at 2 am to attend class! I am humbled and encouraged by our students' sacrifices and commitments to do their best regardless of their circumstances.

I. *How Have I Responded to COVID-19?*

The first response of our family was to commit to prayer, specifically that God would glorify himself, that people would turn to God in repentance and

faith, that God's people and pastors would be faithful in both biblical doctrine and lifestyle, that God would grant wisdom and care to leaders at every level of society, that each of us in our family would be faithful in our various callings, and that in his mercy and good time, God would remove this pandemic from us. My second response was to commit myself to a path of careful but confident service to WTS students. As a result, I have pondered how I could turn COVID-19 and its attendant challenges into an opportunity and a blessing. One way to do that is through research and translation.

Current events do spur research questions; this is true for any pastor or theologian, but especially for a church historian and historical theologian. From March 2020 onward, as I watched lockdowns, quarantines, and masking implemented variously across countries, I began to wonder how Reformed theologians, pastors, congregations, and communities responded to plague outbreaks and all of the attendant circumstances, issues, and challenges in the past. How did their theology shape their response to plague? And how did plague clarify or develop their doctrine and practice? As I researched and read about historic plagues that shaped Christian identity, doctrine, and practice over the past two thousand years, I pondered what sort of church history course could bless future pastors. As I read, I discovered a variety of questions, conversations, debates, and writings that could be described as "plague and the doctrine of …." This realization sparked 1) a desire to teach an advanced elective on Christianity and plague and 2) a desire to bring some of these untranslated works into English as an anthology for seminary students and, Lord willing, the broader church and public.[1]

When I mentioned these two desires in a faculty meeting in the spring of 2020, my colleagues and administration were encouraging and supportive. I then entered into conversation with Westminster Seminary Press about building such an anthology and endeavoring to publish it relatively quickly.[2]

The first task was to select sources as there are many Reformed responses to plague. At least twelve issues the Reformed addressed were: 1) How is God sovereign over evil and ills like plague? 2) Is plague a divine punishment, divine discipline, or both? 3) If plague is a divine chastisement, can someone flee it or use preventatives? 4) Can you love your neighbor and avoid them at the same time? 5) Is death the worst thing? 6) What are a pastor's duties

[1] For more details and bibliographical information, see Todd M. Rester, "Stay or Leave? Reformed Ministry During Plague," *Westminster Magazine* 1.1 (Winter 2020): 12–22, https://wm.wts.edu/content/reforming-christians-in-a-time-of-plague.

[2] See Stephen A. Coleman, ed., *Faith in the Time of Plague*, trans. Todd M. Rester (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2021).

to their congregation in time of plague and vice versa? 7) What are the duties of the healthy to the sick and vice versa? 8) How should someone prepare to die? 10) How should the dying comfort their survivors? 11) What are the mutual obligations of magistrates and citizens? and 12) What are the mutual obligations of husbands and wives, children and parents, masters and servants?

The second task was not simply to deal with the topic addressed but the literary form. Some of the works I wanted students to read were questions occurring in exegetical commentaries, sermons delivered in churches, public disputations in seminary settings, public orations before a civic setting, devotional reflections on dying, pastoral counsel in letters to friends, and personal letters among families dying of plague. People in the past responded to plague in multifaceted ways, just as we are responding now; they were not agreed on the proper response to a widespread pandemic, just as our society is not now. One of my goals in this anthology is to give multiple lines and layers of approach to a complex topic. Such an approach may demonstrate that within the Reformed world of the early modern period there was quite a bit of unity doctrinally even while specific practices, approaches, and applications were debated. The overwhelming majority of the contents in this anthology are newly translated into English and reflect a variety of voices from across Europe in this period.

II. *What Do I Hope This Will Contribute?*

First, I hope this will help Christians understand that plague is not new, even though it is new to us. Second, Scripture frequently enjoins believers to remember God's covenant, to reflect upon their ways, and to look to God in faithful obedience for the future. Many Reformed theologians and pastors in the past reflected on this particular issue of plague and various aspects of the Christian life by expositing the Scriptures and working carefully through doctrinal and pastoral questions. I think this set of writings could serve as a helpful point of reflection and encourage Christians in a variety of ways doctrinally and practically.

INTERVIEW

Warfield, Bavinck, and Kuyper: Interview with Cornelis P. Venema and David Garner[1]

PETER A. LILLBACK

(March 16, 2020)

The following is the transcription of a discussion Peter Lillback held with Cornelis Venema and David Garner on the day before Venema delivered the Fourteenth Annual Gaffin Lecture on "Should Effectual Calling and Regeneration Be Distinguished?" (March 17, 2021).[2] *Besides discussing the contribution of Richard B. Gaffin Jr. and contemporary issues, this dialogue celebrates the memory of Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), and Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920)—three giants of the Reformed faith, who died just about a century ago—by recollecting some of their lasting contributions to theology, apologetics, and public theology.*

---

[1] Cornelis P. Venema is president and professor of doctrinal studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He is the author of *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of "the Other Reformed Tradition"?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), and *Christ and the Future: The Bible's Teaching about the Last Things* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008).

David Garner is academic dean, vice president of global ministries, and professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He is the editor of *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012) and the author of *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016).

[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnPsjpQXPBA.

PETER LILLBACK: *Friends, it is a great joy to welcome you again to our Richard B. Gaffin Jr. Annual Lecture. It has been a privilege for Westminster to do this for several years now. The lecture is often hosted by Dr. David Garner, and we are very grateful this year that we have Dr. Cornelis Venema, who is the first president of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He will be dialoguing with us as we have an opportunity to talk about some urgent and contemporary issues that are engaging Reformed theology today. So let me begin by saying, Dr. Venema, thank you for being with us.*

CORNELIS VENEMA: Thank you. I am pleased to be able to participate as well.

PL: *As we begin, I thought we might take a few minutes to talk about the Reformed legacy of theology that has come to us as we are thinking about the anniversary of the passing of the great stalwarts, Benjamin B. Warfield and Herman Bavinck, and also Abraham Kuyper. They all passed away at almost the same time, about a century ago. As we think about their lives, Dr. Venema, what would be their lasting significance as you look at systematic theology today from a Reformed perspective?*

CV: I do not think we can overstate their importance. Even though Warfield never published his own systematic theology, his biblical and theological studies, which have been gathered together and printed, are gems, an extraordinary resource that presents a theologian with a breadth of knowledge and acquaintance with the history of the church's reflection on Scripture.[3] It was a fluorescent period in Reformed theology with Kuyper and Bavinck. I cannot speak too highly of Bavinck as a theologian. I am thrilled that his *Dogmatics* is now finally in the English language.[4] I do not think that Kuyper was as great a dogmatic or systematic theologian as Bavinck, but he was a giant in his own right, not only theologically, but also in terms of the articulation of what he liked to call a Reformed world-and-life view. That was certainly a very rich and gifted period for Reformed theology.

PL: *Dr. Garner what would you add to those thoughts?*

DAVID GARNER: I echo them completely. I have to say, as I think about Warfield in particular, that his work on the authority of Scripture is incomparable—with his work on the term *theopneustos*, for example, about Scripture being God-breathed, in view of the challenges that continue to

---

[3] See B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 vols. (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

[4] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008).

come against the doctrine of Scripture and its authority (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).[5] Warfield's work still towers in response to that of today, as well as when it was written. Concerning the Dutch theologians, I share Dr. Venema's appreciation for both of them. Every time I open Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* and begin to read, not only is my mind challenged, but my heart soars because of the doxological tone of his writing, its scope and depth, and his vision of God's greatness. I appreciate that those men had a "big God" in the face of many challenges. That paradigm is lasting.

PL: *Dr. Venema, your lecture will present the theme of regeneration. What are your thoughts and why did you choose this topic for the Gaffin lecture?*
CV: Beginning last year, I engaged in a project dealing with the proposal that we can use speech act theory, associated with the names of Kevin Vanhoozer and Michael Horton, as a way of eliminating the necessity to sharply distinguish or make a fine distinction between effectual calling and regeneration. In my engagement with the topic, it is an *ordo salutis* question, and it seemed fitting, since Dr. Gaffin made some serious and meaningful contributions to our thinking about *ordo salutis*, to address it at the Gaffin Lecture series.[6] But I also think it is an interesting topic in terms of theological methodology in the way in which the speech act proposal has been argued. I am going to suggest it does not offer a better, more satisfactory, or more helpful treatment of the topic than, for lack of a better way of describing it, the classic understanding of the distinction between effectual calling and regeneration. It is a little bit too much shaped by interests in responding to contemporary philosophical and other challenges to Christian theology, particularly within postmodernism. Furthermore, it does not really deal with the whole testimony, the rich diversity of the Scriptures' teaching on the topic. To use an expression borrowed from Paul Helm, the net of the speech act proposal does not really catch all of that evidence.

PL: *Dr. Garner you mentioned you would like to engage Dr. Venema on some of the issues of the* ordo salutis. *What are the questions that you might have in mind?*
DG: Well, I was just thinking about this, as you are speaking about speech theory and *ordo salutis* concerns, how do you see it shaping your

[5] Cf. B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 229–80.

[6] See, e.g., Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. Andrew T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 271–88.

understanding, if it does it at all, of the *duplex gratia*, justification-sanctification?[7] Because it has been applied in those contexts as well.

CV: That is not the focus of my presentation, since I am going to focus largely on Vanhoozer's approach. But another significant theologian in the present day, Horton, borrowing from Vanhoozer, appropriated speech act theory and gave his own take on it.[8] He identifies the gospel word that really brings us into union with Christ and grants to us through union all of the blessings that are in Christ. He identifies that call of the gospel, or of the gospel word that is proclaimed, with a judicial act, a divine judgment regarding our absolution in Christ. Now that is a stimulating proposal. Maybe it is dangerous for me to say this, but were I to have compared the two or tried to compare them in my lecture, I would actually find Vanhoozer more congenial to my understanding than Horton.

DG: Do you think that speech act is useful in any way in terms of thinking about *ordo*?

CV: I think it is helpful. The one thing I will say by way of commendation is, these proposals share a very prominent theme in historic Reformed theology —that the person and work of the Holy Spirit is always a work and ministry intimately conjoined with the ministry of the Word. It is a Spirit and Word or Word and Spirit ministry; the two cannot be held apart or separated. Christ is present through his Word and in the power of his outpoured Spirit. The desire to keep the communication of the gospel and the drawing of men and women as fallen sinners into union with Christ, through the Word, and the Spirit's working as powerful and effective to truly bring in, to draw into communion with Christ, eliciting the proper response of faith and repentance, is commendable. On that score, both of the theologians in question, Vanhoozer in a broader and looser sense—and Horton in a more direct and more precise sense—are within the Reformed tradition. Bavinck would put it this way: the work of the Spirit ordinarily never takes place apart from the Word. But he still distinguishes the Spirit from the Word in

---

[7] Venema dealt with the concept in Calvin in his doctoral work; see Cornelis P. Venema, "The Twofold Nature of the Gospel in Calvin's Theology: The 'duplex gratia dei' and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1985).

[8] In two places, Horton addresses the subject and explicitly notes making use of Vanhoozer's speech-act proposal: Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 216–42 and *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 556–75. Vanhoozer's view is most thoroughly presented in Kevin Vanhoozer, "Effectual Call or Causal Effect?: Summons, Sovereignty and Supervenient Grace," in *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 96–124.

order not to ascribe to the Word alone a power that it does not possess unless the Spirit making use of the Word gives it efficacy.[9]

PL: *Dr. Garner, how would you engage with these things as you make your contribution to the* ordo *in the arena of adoption?*[10] *Do you see any relevance here, or would you engage it from that perspective?*

DG: At a very broad level, I think there are themes within speech act that are useful. That said, I do not see that particular paradigm as useful in the way I think about adoption's function in the *ordo* or the way in which adoption is effectuated for us as believers by virtue of our union with Christ. So, I do not see a direct correlation there, though I do have a great appreciation for the way in which Dr. Venema has put it, about the efficacy of the Word. There is the objective Word that God has given, but the work of the Spirit is necessary, and this really takes us back to Kuyper, who was so good on this in terms of the role of the Spirit in the church, among the people of God, illuminating us to the truthfulness of God's Word and attuning our ears to it.[11]

PL: *As we think about the contributions of Warfield and Kuyper and Bavinck, one of the points of real difference between these theologians was in the understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in apologetics. It seems that Warfield was much more comfortable with a classical apologetic, and that was something where Kuyper clearly wanted to emphasize the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Cornelius Van Til would follow along with that emphasis of Kuyper.*[12] *How does that issue work out in this day as we think about effectual calling and apologetics, the work of the Spirit? How would you address that, Dr. Venema, from your perspective?*

CV: One of the burdens of Van Til's approach to apologetics is to say that we engage also in the defense of the faith in the same way in which we proceed

---

[9] See, e.g., Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 404–38.

[10] See Garner, *Sons in the Son*.

[11] See Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (1900; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) and *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1898), esp. 553–63. Cf. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Richard B. Gaffin Jr. on Old Amsterdam (Abraham Kuyper)," in *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today*, ed. Peter A. Lillback and Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 555–57.

[12] For Van Til's positioning vis-à-vis Kuyper, Warfield, and Bavinck, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 260–66, 286–99.

in the articulation of the faith. If we say that no one will ultimately stand under the Word of God or receive what the Word of God teaches unless their heart is opened, their ears made receptive, their minds illumined so as to be given understanding, even our best efforts will not add anything to the power that belongs to God's Word as the Spirit uses the Word. So, there is a very close relationship. In one sense, you can say that the classic Reformed understanding of effectual calling, the persuasiveness of the Word belonging to the Spirit as the Spirit makes use of the Word, is what Van Til was wanting to do in terms of a reformation in the area of apologetics. If we make affirmations biblically, confessionally, and theologically about the blindness of a mind darkened in sin, the willful resistance to receiving the truth as it is in Christ, and our disinterest, our hostility toward God and the things of God and the things that belong to his kingdom, without a working of the Spirit with and through the Word—what does that mean by way of implication for how we go about defending the faith? Methodology cannot make assumptions antithetical to the ones we affirm theologically, and in that sense Van Til's basic project, in my understanding, was to develop a distinctively biblical and Reformed approach to the way we defend the faith. The way we defend the faith is important and is closely linked to the faith defended. It is an inconsistency to defend the faith on the basis of an approach that actually compromises the things you are wanting to affirm.

PL: *Dr. Garner, do you think there is any abiding significance for Warfield's classical apologetics, given that concern of inconsistency that Van Til focused on, that really reflects the Dutch tradition of Kuyper and Bavinck? What abiding significance is there for Warfield's work?*

DG: Immediately, I would want to echo Van Til's treatment of the proofs of the existence of God.[13] Van Til does not throw the proofs out; the difference lies in how they are used. As Dr. Venema well put it, the persuasion is ultimately a work of the Spirit by his Word, but that does not mean there is no persuasion. I do think that there are some very helpful things in that broader classical apologetic tradition when the foundation is actually a reliance upon Word and Spirit to do the work of actually using those arguments. But words that are grounded in Scripture and the work of the Spirit lead to that persuasion. Warfield is representative of the broader classical tradition of apologetics, but we do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is still much to be learned from him.

---

[13] For an introduction to this topic, see Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

CV: There have been studies of late that have pushed back a little in terms of Warfield. What he meant by "right reason" indicates that even in his more broadly "classical approach," Warfield was aware that reason, in its exercise and use, in the context of the fallen human race is often distorted and corrupted, morally pushed or misdirected.[14] So, my comments earlier, I hold to them, but I also think that Warfield himself is not sometimes fully or fairly represented if you make a radical separation between him and the Dutch theologians.

PL: *As we are honoring Gaffin's contributions to Reformed theology, we know the name Geerhardus Vos is very close to the core of his work, so that brings up the issue of biblical theology. Dr. Venema, as someone who spends a great deal of time in systematic theology, what are the benefits and the challenges that biblical theology brings to you as you try to do systematic theology?*

CV: In a general way, systematic theology builds upon a foundation, and, in that foundation, biblical theology is the most important component. I think that for systematic theologians—I still use the old language of dogmatics—the confessions also play a role as the church's summary of what churches heard the Word of God teaching in Scripture. I think systematic theologians should themselves also be as much as possible directly engaged exegetically. As I say to my students, the enterprise is a difficult one because it requires some facility exegetically, familiarity with a more synthetic comprehensive representation of the course of redemptive history in a more biblical theological fashion; it involves an element of acquaintance with the history of the church's engagement with Scripture, creeds and confessions, the history of doctrine. And then you also have to address contemporary questions, contemporary challenges, particular issues in our particular moment in history that may come to the foreground. So, it is a multifaced multifaceted enterprise, which is why a theologian like Bavinck is so extraordinary, being engaged in the task in all of these respects, in many ways that are without parallel. Very few theologians, and I am certainly not one of them, can do what Bavinck did with the extraordinary excellence that is represented in his *Dogmatics*.

PL: *Dr. Garner, you have had the joy to know Dr. Gaffin for many years, and you have spoken from time to time with me about his efforts to define systematics as biblical theology, maybe to remove systematic theology entirely and then to find*

[14] See, e.g., Paul Kjoss Helseth, *"Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), esp. 129–30.

a way to integrate it. Walk us through Gaffin's experience and where you think he ultimately came out in that regard.

DG: Well, you cannot think about biblical and systematic theology at Westminster without the 43 years of Dr. Gaffin's teaching here. Being at the forefront, he is not operating in a vacuum, as we have already talked about the influence of Vos, and then you think about John Murray's own language that dogmatics, systematic theology, becomes lifeless the moment that it departs from biblical authority, from the text itself, from exegetical theology.[15] And Gaffin as a New Testament scholar who moved from New Testament into systematic theology, as he was wrestling through these things in the early years of his career, did actually consider the abandonment of even the language of systematic theology.[16] He has retreated from that decision and boldly and very clearly articulates the necessity of systematic theology, but it is a systematic theology in the vein of Vos and Murray. Murray not only says that systematic theology is lifeless apart from the text but also that systematic theology faithfully done will be radically nonspeculative—that is, it will be grounded in the text.[17] As we think about biblical and systematic theology's relationship, Gaffin will speak of biblical theology as the handmaid to systematic theology, but at the same time, systematic theology is to be governed by biblical theology, and so there is a humility of engagement in biblical and systematic theology as they work together.[18] Even Moisés Silva, who served as New Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary for some years, will contend that when you are doing exegesis, if your interpretation takes you on a path that departs from historic confessional systematic theology, you need to have your thinking directed by systematic theology.[19] So good New Testament work, good Old Testament work, is going to reflect on the church's work, as faithful servants of Christ through the years have given us confessional documents that are systematic in their orientation; these are attempts to faithfully represent the Scriptures and what the Scriptures teach in their

---

[15] John Murray, "Systematic Theology," in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 4 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 17.

[16] For early views of Gaffin on this topic, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 228–37; cf. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, vol. 3 of *The New Testament Student and His Field*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 32–50, esp. 39.

[17] Cf. Murray, "Systematic Theology," 20–21.

[18] Cf. Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 39.

[19] Cf. Moisés Silva, "Systematic Theology and the Apostle to the Gentiles," *Trinity Journal NS* 15 (1994): 23–26.

culminating way. And Gaffin epitomizes that sweet interrelationship of biblical and systematic theology in that way.

PL: *As we talk about Bavinck, those that study him seem to think that there is the orthodox Bavinck and maybe a Bavinck trying to move beyond orthodoxy, and some have spoken of two Bavincks. Dr. Venema, is that a fair reading Bavinck? How would you respond to those who see him as on the one hand classically orthodox but also open to a new direction in theology?*

CV: That is a difficult question. Bavinck has his biographers, and the tension that you describe is reflected in editor John Bolt's essay on Bavinck's life and thought that introduces Bavinck's four-volume *Dogmatics*, so that gives it further traction.[20] However, a recent biography on Bavinck by James Eglington, possibly the best in English, pushes back a little on that.[21] It was not so much a tension in Bavinck as an awareness on his part that it was crucial, in the apologetical dimension of the entire theological enterprise, to engage the challenges that come from within the theological context, from liberal theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He wanted to give an appropriate answer from within an orthodox framework. I do not think there is any evidence that a tension in Bavinck was pulling him in two radically different directions theologically. The tension was to speak in a context where the Christian faith was being challenged on a variety of fronts. Perhaps it is bad for me to put it this way, but he is our Friedrich Schleiermacher offering an answer to the cultured despisers of the faith.[22] I do know this: at the end of his life, he was somewhat discouraged and lamented that his *Dogmatics*, which he had hoped would be more persuasive to his interlocutors among the mediating theologians in The Netherlands, who leaned to more liberal theology, did not prove to be the case. They dismissed it as an impressive species of fundamentalist Reformed thinking. Later in life, Bavinck became somewhat cynical about some of the politics associated with Kuyper addressing issues in the public square in The Netherlands. Having grown up in a Reformed church context, I certainly understand what Bavinck meant by "politics is bad but the worst form of politics is church politics." That reflects Bavinck's personality. Kuyper was aggressive and forceful; Bavinck was more of an academic, sensitive soul. I could tell many stories about their personal relationship; they got along fine

[20] See John Bolt, "Editor's Introduction," in Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, 11–22.

[21] James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

[22] An allusion to Schleiermacher's famous apologetic lectures and work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799).

and worked together, but their personalities were so different, and Bavinck was always a little uncomfortable in Kuyper's presence.

PL: *Dr. Garner, as we continue to think about contemporary issues, Scripture's inerrancy is never easily accepted in a culture that is influenced by many unbelieving systems. As you mentioned, Warfield's engagement of inerrancy has stood the test of time. Would you like to say why you believe that is true? Can we still go to Warfield and find a great defense of the doctrine of inerrancy even at this moment with the new perspective on Paul, multiculturalism, issues coming from anthropology attacking the* imago Dei*?*

DG: That is a large set of questions. What I appreciate about Warfield is that, to use the Robert Dick Wilson's phrase, he did not shy away from the difficult questions. He would say about the difficult biblical passages of which he could not make sense that the safest thing to do is to side with Jesus and his apostles. He acknowledges that there are difficulties, but we do not allow them to keep us from aligning with the clear voice of Scripture. As Calvin himself said, some things cannot be explained, but every Christian knows that the objective self-attesting witness of Scripture is undeniable. When a lion roars, we do not wonder if it was a mouse. And there is a real sense in Warfield of the high view of God along with a high view of Scripture. His treatment of inspiration, *theopneustos*, in its rigorous exegetically careful and theologically way, is still irrefutable. And that still stands the test of time. Although there are new issues that the church is facing, you know Satan's tactics are as old as himself, and there is nothing new under the sun. He is trying to deceive, he is trying to lead people astray as he works as an adversary, and the real issue is the hearts of men and women.[23] When we have seen Christ in Scripture, we do not unsee that. Warfield's treatment of Scripture is going to be valuable to the church for generations to come.

PL: *Well, Dr. Venema, you have mentioned the problem of politics in the church and in the public square; obviously, Kuyper did not shy from the public square, whereas Bavinck was more reticent. As you engage the public square in your own thinking as a systematic theologian, it seems that so many issues we are confronting today have to do with anthropology. Issues like human sexuality; When does life begin? What is gender? How do we look at race? How would you as a systematician counsel the church on how we get our bearings to address these issues that are tearing the public square apart, but doing it from the perspective of a deep commitment to Scripture and Reformed theology?*

[23] Cf. Garner, ed., *Did God Really Say?*

CV: We have to go back to the first things. We recently had a course at our seminary dealing with some of the delicate and heated questions of social justice and the debates today in the public square. The main theme of our guest lecturer was what you call biblical anthropology, starting with the *imago Dei*, the creation of man as unique among all the creatures God called into existence, bearing his image: "Male and female created he them" (Gen 1:27 KJV). We are finding ourselves increasingly in the North American Western context—and rapidly, in my judgment—in an astonishing situation where we have lost some of the most basic ABCs of the biblical and Christian worldview related to the issues of human sexuality. The Congress of the United States passed a bill, H. R. 5[24]—I have not read it word for word; I doubt the representatives have either—but it institutes policies overtly diminishing protections for citizens of the country in terms of religious rights to hold opinions and to act accordingly in the free exercise of their convictions. I think it is very important in seminary and in our teaching in systematic theology to take note of the way that what we are teaching based on Scripture faces off against what are becoming prevailing currents of thought in our culture. Indeed, any student graduating who aspires to the ministry is going to be pastoring a congregation of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who live in that world. It is all the more incumbent upon them to teach and nurture the churches and their members in the whole of the Christian faith, in its breadth and depth, and equip and furnish them to remain steadfast in their profession and continue to live before God's face in this world in a way that is far from perfect but at least shows what it means to live in accordance with what we know to be God's will for our lives and conduct.

PL: *Dr. Garner, are there any final thoughts you would like to share?*

DG: One thing I might add on the question of human sexuality. Absolute inconsistencies and impossibilities characterize the varying views that people hold, and in varying places and circles; cracks appear, as people are recognizing that they cannot hold all these varying individualized views. This opens the door for some opportunity for an apologetic going back to Scripture's authority about who we are and the *imago Dei*, who we really are before God. And then, the church will need to be bold in her witness and to issue warnings about rebellion against God in terms of calling wisdom foolishness and calling foolishness wisdom, as Paul teaches in Romans 1.

[24] H. R. 5 – 117th Congress (2021–2022): The "Equality Act" passed by the US House of Representatives on February 25, 2021 by a vote of 224 to 206.

So, it is a time for clarity, but it is also a time for courage. As people find their feet are planted in midair, it is also a time of incredible opportunity to point to the Christ who is alone our rock and redeemer. It is a wonderful opportunity even in the midst of incredible challenge.

PL: *Dr. Venema, we want to thank you so much for joining us, for the Gaffin Lecture, for engaging in this dialogue. I would love you to share any final thoughts.*
CV: I would like to say first that I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this session and honored by the invitation to give the Gaffin Lecture. I hold Dr. Gaffin in the highest esteem. He is a wonderful combination of biblical theological insight, great love for the Christ of Scripture, and for his church. I was always amazed, attending assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, of which he is a part, that he is most of the time in the thick of it, in the life and ministry of the church going forward. Regarding the topics we have talked about, perhaps the only thing I would add is that as we see this acceleration of departing from a wealth of inheritances in the West and in countries like ours, for the church it is a time of testing, and there is something good about testing and trial. We have been resting perhaps a little too comfortably on our laurels and making assumptions about what it means to be a follower of Christ, a disciple, a citizen of his kingdom. We are now at a point where there are no props, no artificial advantages to professing Christ, to being a member of his church. Now you have to take up your cross and follow him, seek first his kingdom. If it costs something, there is also something that is precious in the sense that it is refining, produces patience, creates an eagerness and a hopeful looking for Christ's coming and the fullness of his kingdom. It helps in not misidentifying his kingdom perhaps with what now is, but in identifying with what will be.

PL: *Dr. Venema, we would be honored if you would conclude in prayer and ask that God might bless this dialogue and the time tomorrow with Dr. Gaffin.*
CV: All right. Let us pray.

> Our father in heaven, we are grateful that we can once again come to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and know that you will hear us, that you are the one who has given us life and given us new life in Christ by your Spirit and Word. We are thankful for this conversation that we could have together, Dr. Lillback, Dr. Garner, and myself. We pray your blessing upon it, that it may be helpful and fruitful for those who listen in. We pray your blessing as well on Dr. Gaffin and his son

as they participate with us at the Gaffin Lecture tomorrow. We are grateful for his many years of service, for his witness, for the contributions that he has made in his own field, and for his love for Christ and for Christ's church. May that be for us also an encouragement in our own lives and in our own witness and labor. So, bless the events this evening as well as tomorrow, for your glory and for our blessing, we pray in Jesus's name, Amen.

SHORTER AND REVIEW ARTICLES

Gratitude Needs a Giver: Why *Political* Science Needs Intelligent Design

BRIAN G. MATTSON

Abstract

This article presents Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*. Classical liberalism is under renewed attack from many directions. Many of its most notable defenders claim that the liberal order has no need of distinctively Christian theological resources. This essay scrutinizes that claim and argues for the necessity of a Christian doctrine of providence.

Keywords

God, gratitude, Jonah Goldberg, J. Gresham Machen, political science, Western civilization, providence, historicism, John Calvin

I. *Liberalism in Crisis*

Liberalism, understood in its broadest scope as the political system of ordered liberty that has prevailed in the Western world for the past three hundred years, is under renewed and withering attack. It is a complex of mutually reinforcing ideas that includes commitment to individual equality before the law, representative government, private property rights, and wide freedoms of economic

exchange, speech, religion, and association. The emergence and global influence of this tradition (nowhere more profoundly instantiated than in the founding documents of the United States of America) has produced unprecedented global prosperity and improvement to quality of life by nearly every measurable statistic.[1]

There is nevertheless no shortage of academics, intellectuals, and politicians who, for varying reasons, decry this way of organizing society. Left-wing collectivists have always found liberalism inconvenient to their totalizing political aims, so it is unsurprising to find criticism from that direction—although its recent increased intensity and broad popularity is noteworthy. More novel is a number of recent attacks on liberalism from very *unusual* suspects: those who occupy political space usually associated with the right.[2]

Should Christians have a stake in these debates, and what should it be? It would be impossible to adjudicate in this essay various conceptual disputes over the role of the church in relation to the state. So for present purposes I begin, rather than end, with some preliminary conclusions: yes, Christians have a stake in these debates, and yes, in the main Christians should defend classical liberalism.

Here we have good historic company. In 1933, Westminster Theological Seminary founder J. Gresham Machen was alarmed by the "blatant and extreme" attack on civil and religious liberty represented by Russian communism and Italian fascism.[3] More worrisome, however, was that "exactly the same forces which appear there in more consistent form appear also in practically all the countries of the earth."[4] He lamented what he called the "machine"—the relentless growth of the paternal state, the centralization of its power, bureaucratic standardization and control, the "tyranny of the

---

[1] Cf. Hans Rosling, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than We Think* (New York: Flatiron, 2018); Hernando De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[2] E.g., Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy* (New York: Encounter, 2018); Adrian Vermeule, "Beyond Originalism," *The Atlantic*, March 31, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/.

[3] J. Gresham Machen, "The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age," in *Machen: Shorter Collected Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 366.

[4] Ibid. Machen was not idiosyncratic in his Reformed theological context. Decades earlier in Holland, Abraham Kuyper had founded his Anti-Revolutionary Party as a bulwark against this modern "mechanistic" progressivism. See, e.g., Herman Bavinck, "Revelation and the Future," in *Philosophy of Revelation*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), 213–45; cf., Brian G. Mattson, "Bavinck's 'Revelation and the Future': A Centennial Retrospective," in *The Kuyper Center Review*, vol. 2, *Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 126–54.

expert"—and he was particularly worried that this involves the erosion of other important institutions of a free civil society.[5] Machen's fervor was eloquent:

> The word "liberty" has a very archaic sound today; it is often put in quotation marks by those who are obliged to use the ridiculous word at all. Yet despised though liberty is, there are still those who love it; and unless their love of it can be eradicated from their unprogressive souls, they will never be able to agree, in their estimate of the modern age, with those who do not love it.
>
> To those lovers of civil and religious liberty I confess that I belong; in fact, civil and religious liberty seems to me to be more valuable than any other earthly thing—than any other thing short of the truer and profounder liberty which only God can give.[6]

Complicated questions arise: What is the relationship between those two kinds of liberty, between Christianity and classical liberalism? Is there any obvious connection between the two? Does Christianity contribute anything unique to classical liberalism? Does classical liberalism have any need of Christianity? Many have argued (Machen among them) that classical liberalism emerged from and was shaped by Christian culture, but public intellectuals like Steven Pinker (or, say, the late Christopher Hitchens) are confident that classical liberalism is purely the product of the Enlightenment project and therefore has no need of religious or theological content.[7] This essay aims to subvert that kind of claim in a fashion more indirect than making simple one-to-one correlations between Christian theology and various features of classical liberalism.

II. *God and Civilizational Miracles*

To test the hypothesis that classical liberalism does not need theological underpinning, there exists an excellent case study: American Enterprise Institute Fellow Jonah Goldberg's bestselling book, *Suicide of the West*.[8] That this is a useful contribution to the question is evident from the book's

---

[5] An argument ably carried on in recent years by notable writers: cf. Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Timothy P. Carney, *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive while Others Collapse* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).

[6] Machen, "Responsibility," 365–66.

[7] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

[8] Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy* (New York: Crown, 2018).

first sentence, printed in small caps: "THERE IS NO GOD IN THIS BOOK." His aim is clear enough: to make a full-throated intellectual defense of classical liberalism against its progressive detractors while self-consciously omitting all theological claims or arguments.

This is not an admission of atheism from Goldberg, as it no doubt would be for Pinker or Hitchens; it is a methodological move, an attempt to argue for the liberal order based purely on grounds he and his interlocutors could reasonably take for granted. But the result is decidedly mixed. It is on many levels an extremely capable and persuasive defense of the liberal order, but it also turns out that Goldberg was not telling the whole truth when he wrote, "THERE IS NO GOD IN THIS BOOK."

In May of 2018, I cowrote a review of *Suicide of the West* with David Bahnsen in the online pages of *National Review*.[9] Our assessment was mostly glowing, but we took him to task for this fundamental flaw at the very core: One cannot begin, even if just for the sake of argument, with the premise of the first sentence of the book—which, if it is to mean anything, means that there is no superintending providence, no transcendent meaning or *telos* to human history—and then arrive at the conclusion that we should all be "grateful." That train of thought will never arrive at that particular station. We put it this way:

> This tactic of pretending there is no God so that he may lay out the premises of the book, only to kick the ladder away once he arrives at the conclusion, is epistemologically unsound and an unnecessary, unhelpful drag on an excellent book. Goldberg's argument is that "nature" inexorably drags civilization back to its base origins, and something similar happens in his very own pages. All of the lofty rhetoric about a "miracle," meaning, significance, the good, the true, and the beautiful is rather sullied (Neil deGrasse Tyson-style) by the reminder that, actually, the "miracle" is probably just a random, meaningless accident, and that our gratitude must remain sadly bereft of its much-needed indirect object: grateful *to whom*?[10]

We might have put it more pithily by just quoting G. K. Chesterton: "The worst moment for an atheist is when he is really thankful and has no one to thank."[11] Goldberg conceded this criticism, admitting in his podcast that his opening sentence was, at the very least, overstated. But it is evident that this

---

[9] David L. Bahnsen and Brian G. Mattson, "Jonah Goldberg's Good Medicine—and Great Book," *National Review Online*, May 15, 2018, https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/05/book-review-suicide-of-the-west-gratitude-can-save-us/.

[10] Neil deGrasse Tyson is a celebrated astrophysicist whose trademark popular "brand" is to explain wondrous facts about the natural world by saying, "Well, actually," followed by technical mechanistic descriptions stripped of all poetry and sentiment.

[11] G. K. Chesterton, "Francis of Assisi," *Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 2:75.

point needs expanding beyond a single point in a book review. In his highly rated audio podcast, *The Remnant*, Goldberg repeatedly discusses with many brilliant guests his allergy to "Whig history" or "teleology"—by which he means something like historical inevitability, the notion that "things had to be this way," or that there is some intelligent mind directing things to appointed ends.

At first glance, the suspicion is understandable. "Standing athwart History and yelling, 'Stop!'" is how William F. Buckley Jr. described his task when he founded *National Review* (where Goldberg served as writer and editor for two decades), and the history he had in mind was capital "H" history. Modern progressivism is marinated in *Hegelian* history, the kind of history on whose "side" Goldberg and his allies are forever disqualified from being. German Idealist philosophy personified—no, *deified*—the historical process, and the result was a host of very destructive mass illiberal delusions in the twentieth century, the very movements that worried Machen in 1933.

One aspect, then, of Goldberg's allergic reaction to notions of divine providence is that, like Hegelianism, it seems to give divine *imprimatur* to whatever its collective societies decide to do, whether colonizing and subjugating peoples, starting world wars, engaging in genocide, or nationalizing industries. To the secular mind, it might seem that the problem is altogether too much "God" in this scenario. But this is mistaken; there is far too little. Idealism's god, in the end, is a human projection whose sole source of divinity springs from the elite intellectual class doing the projecting. Hegelian philosophy is actually the *erasure* of a personal, transcendent God willing, directing, and revealing himself in history. The job description of willing and directing history is thoroughly transferred to the state. Georg W. F. Hegel was bold about this: "The State is the march of God in the world." In its way, this is a doctrine of divine providence. But it is a grotesque and distorted one in which Almighty (i.e., transcendent, *a se*, free) God is dragged into the historical process, completely stripped of his *own* liberty, and himself remade, variously, into an Italian Fascist, a German engineer, or new "Soviet Man." Call it "God in the Gulag."

At other times, Goldberg seems to worry that the idea of divine providence works as a psychological sedative. This is something of an ironic concession to Karl Marx, who likewise believed religion to be the "opiate of the masses." And it does make intuitive sense: if people think that everything is planned and that progress toward an ultimate goal is inevitable, they will be content to rest on their laurels and not actually put any effort into achieving societal good.

The allergies are thus understandable. But when it comes to supplying some kind of alternative to this Hegelian *anti*-theology, this "immanentizing of the eschaton," as political scientist Eric Voegelin famously coined it,[12] Goldberg seems at a loss. It is one thing to resist an overrealized eschatology in the here-and-now, but quite another thing to dispense with the concept of eschatology altogether. Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin understood that not only was an eschatology inescapable, but that it also provided meaning to human endeavors and served as a catalyst—not sedative—for human action. A *telos*, a purpose, a "point of it all," is inescapable if one rightly refuses the utter nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche.

But *Suicide of the West*, whether for the pure sake of argument or not, relies on a great deal of evolutionary theory and evolutionary psychology: that human progress is the result of whimsical, random oddities that finally coalesce to create a moment in history so monumental it deserves to be called the "Miracle." By "Miracle" Goldberg means the astonishing ascendance and success of classical liberalism and all its beneficial fruits.

Although he calls it a Miracle, Goldberg simultaneously insists that nobody created it. And on one level that is certainly true. The innumerable factors involved in producing this age of prosperity and freedom came together by apparent serendipity because it was not a product of human design or central planning—it was a product of what wise theologians in an earlier age would call many "secondary causes." A recent podcast discussion between Goldberg and historian Niall Ferguson highlights the complexities of identifying the origins and causes of the Miracle.[13] Goldberg wishes to credit certain ideas, but Ferguson downplays ideas and instead credits random historical *material* factors. This is not a surprising disagreement, given that Goldberg's "atheism" is largely methodological while Ferguson's is real (material*ism* is thus for him an *a priori* commitment).

At one point, Goldberg suggests that the Protestant Reformation played a large role in the rise of the liberal order, and Ferguson agrees, with this caveat: the real contribution of the Reformation was not the ideas, but the material factors of the printing press and rising literacy. Ferguson seems oddly uninterested in the ideas that produced the demand for rising literacy (that is, the *reason* for which people were clamoring to read the Bible), and in the process he cuts off the listener from a real and profitable clue. What

---

[12] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 120.

[13] *The Remnant, Episode 129, Basement History*, August 26, 2019, https://jonahgoldberg.com/remnant-episode-129-basement-history-shownotes/4323/.

if the Reformation is more than just the happenstance of ink, moveable type, and paper?

By the end, Goldberg and Ferguson essentially agree that everything came together as a remarkable and somehow gratitude-worthy episode of historical contingency—no recommendations are made as to whom, exactly, we should be thankful. Perhaps the underlying whimsy and randomness is best expressed as Goldberg does in his most robust (and only half-joking) conclusion regarding the origins of the Miracle, in both the podcast and his book: The English are *weird*.

There is more to that than mere material factors, and an analogy from the natural sciences here suggests itself. Richard Dawkins famously assigned himself the topic of explaining everything—literally *everything*—by way of the natural laws of physics and chemistry in his book *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*.[14] His argument, likewise, foundered on a question of origins. How exactly did the "miracle" of the first self-replicating organism (the *sine qua non* of evolutionary theory) arise in a closed material universe of pure laws of physics and chemistry?

His answer stands as quite possibly the most flagrant self-contradiction in the history of intellectual inquiry: the universe is suddenly not, after all, exhaustively explicable by way of scientific laws; it is actually very *weird*. In fact, he argues, the universe is so ancient and so strange that impossible things (to us) are bound to happen from time to time, only human lifespans make it unlikely that they would ever witness them.[15] He attributes the origins of life literally to "a ration of postulatable luck" that, once used in "one big throw" in the initial moments, somehow gave way to ironclad scientific rules.[16]

Dawkins, in other words, is on the horns of a fatal epistemic dilemma, though he never seems to realize it: strict laws of cause and effect or pure contingency, determinism or indeterminism, rationalism or irrationalism? His *blind* watchmaker (natural selection) could not, in the final analysis, provide the explanatory power needed, so Dawkins turned to Lady Luck, his very own "goddess of the gaps." He does not realize that Chance is a jealous deity and is not content with filling in just the gaps. Dawkins thus failed to rid himself of the need for something more than "natural" in the natural sciences, and this raises what seems to me a profound question: does *political*—as well as physical—science need *intelligent design*?

---

[14] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: Norton, 1986), 14.

[15] Ibid., 156–59.

[16] Ibid., 146.

Just as mere material factors seem unable to account for biological life in the physical sciences, it is unlikely that they alone can account for *civic* life—particularly, the kind of civic life that places a premium on individual human dignity, freedom, and equality before the law. Goldberg himself repeatedly exclaims just how *unnatural* is the liberal order! Just so. It *is* unnatural and therefore requires an explanation beyond just the random self-organization of nature itself. Certainly, one can criticize "Whig history" or other various charlatans who have the pretense to read God's plans and purposes directly from a history book or newspaper. But the better proponents of providence have always cautioned that "God moves in *mysterious* ways."

Machen agreed that the liberal order is unnatural given human sinfulness and even anticipated to a large degree Goldberg's entire thesis about civilizational decline:

> If collectivism finally triumphs, if we come to live in a world where recreation as well as labor is prescribed for us by experts appointed by the state, if the sweetness and the sorrows of family relationships are alike eliminated and liberty becomes a thing of the past, we ought to place the blame for this sad denouement—for this sad result of all the pathetic strivings of the human race—exactly where it belongs. And it does not belong to the external conditions of modern life …. If liberty is crushed out, if standardization has its perfect work, if the worst of all tyrannies, the tyranny of the expert, becomes universal, if the finer aspirations of humanity give way to drab efficiency, do not blame the external conditions in the world today. If human life becomes mechanized, do not blame the machine. Put the blame exactly where it belongs—upon the soul of man.[17]

The *soul*—that which is beyond mere material factors—really is an archaic way of expressing things. But Goldberg himself gestures at something like it in his concluding chapter when he describes the social necessity of "God fearing," (rather notable for a book in which "there is no God"). He admits that he means "God" as a *sociological* entity, not "as an argument for providence or divine intervention."[18] That is, the *idea* of God has unequivocal psychological and social ramifications. This is a vindication of Machen's point: the maintenance of all of these blessings requires something of the human soul: personal responsibility when no one is looking, yes, but also heartfelt gratitude for the blessings.

Just as one cannot so easily dispense with nonmaterial factors like the animating theological ideas of the Reformation, it seems dubious that one

---

[17] Machen, "Responsibility," 367.
[18] Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 331.

can really dispense with the notion of *providence*—a plan, purpose, and goal of some kind. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God "has set eternity in the human heart," and perhaps if human beings are perennially prone to "immanentize" the eschaton, it means we know deep down that *there is an eschaton*. As already noted, there are only two alternatives to the belief in a transcendent God who superintends history: one is to simply fold God into the Hegelian historical process and thereby domesticate him, at which point humanity simply becomes its own providence or "meaning-maker." Or one might take the deistic approach that there is no guiding purpose in human history, in which case humanity simply … becomes its own providence. These are obviously not real alternatives. As Herman Bavinck wisely observed, deism and pantheism are "two sides of the same coin."[19]

Goldberg (and Ferguson) have chosen option two, and in so doing they are abandoning an essential backstop against the very Hegelian progressives at whom they are yelling, "Stop!" It is not persuasive or cogent to champion one moment the random material evolution of societies and that God really is just a useful anthropological projection and the next moment criticize progressives for thinking that human nature and human societies are essentially *malleable*. The point has already been conceded.

III. *The Blessings of Providence*

This is more than just a highbrow philosophical debate going back at least as far back as Heraclitus and Parmenides; there are practical implications. I have been a reader and listener of Goldberg for many years, and there are a number of consistent themes that warrant closer attention.

He laments widespread ingratitude in our prosperity, and this is a feature of both the political left and right. For progressives, prosperity is always exploitative, ill-gotten, and guilt-inducing. Prosperity is something to be repented of rather than sought. For those on the conservative side, ingratitude takes the form of taking it for granted—as if the market "miracle" is automatic and needs no virtuous human input—and letting the bulwarks and institutions that provided prosperity languish and die. More recently, ingratitude takes the form of being simply blind to blessings and turning instead to victimization and blame—globalism, bad trade deals, Wall Street, the Federal Reserve, or immigrants.

---

[19] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 412.

Goldberg also laments impatience in adversity. This is the bedrock of the Marxist revolutionary worldview, of course. The eschaton must be hurried into existence. Results must be immediate and perfect, and if they are not—people are constantly warned—catastrophe will be upon them. Thus, old ways and traditions and mores and institutions are cast down with little thought as to whether they performed important cultural functions and little worry that we might just miss them when they are gone—such as, to invoke a recent example, defunded police departments. But the political right is not exactly characterized by patience either, as the groundswell of populism, nationalism, swamp-draining, and "Flight 93" apocalyptic election rhetoric demonstrates.

Finally, Goldberg—despite his ominous book title—laments despair about the future. He flatly rejects narratives of inevitable decline, from the left or right. His book is not entitled *Decline of the West*; it is *suicide* of which he speaks. It is an act of collective volition, and he rightly identifies a contemporary cultural despair that manifests itself in an opioid crisis and rising suicide rates. Goldberg encourages confidence in the ideas and institutions of classical liberalism and exhorts his fellow travelers to be "happy warriors" for the cause.

If anyone had anything important to say about the sovereignty of God over human affairs, it is surely the Genevan Reformer, John Calvin. In his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, he summarizes the value of having a heart-filled faith in the providence of God: "Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future."[20] Gratitude, patience, and hope. Are these not the very things in short supply in the present day and age? Calvin goes on to argue that these are fruits that flow necessarily from faith in the overarching providence of God. Providence is not a sedative, an excuse to do nothing; for Calvin, it is a catalyst for confident human engagement in the world. It does not produce—as Marx famously thought—an *ennui* or settling for the status quo (an "opiate"), for it does something truly indispensable: it fills the whole of life with meaning. Not randomness and inexplicable serendipity, but meaningful history, meaningful ideas, and meaningful human action.

Future history books may well place a heading over the early twenty-first century: "Crisis of Meaning."[21] Goldberg often recognizes this, lamenting

---

[20] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.17.7 (1:219).

[21] For an eloquent overview, see Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 367–79.

how people seek their identity, their meaning, and their purpose from Twitter mobs or politicians. The subtitle of his book is: *How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*. Everything in that list is a *meaning-making* endeavor, and it should not surprise us that people who do not believe in anything truly transcendent would seek solace and refuge in such shabby and ultimately disappointing alternatives. Without any ultimate meaning—if it really is just an accident of the printing press or the "weirdness" of English people—why not?

In the final chapter of *Suicide of the West*, Goldberg argues that what we really need is a return to "God fearing" as, negatively, a buttress against widespread personal irresponsibility and, positively, because religion does have existential benefits the liberal order seems to need.[22] There really is something irreplaceable about having a God to whom we must answer and a God who has expectations for us. He is so indispensable that having rhetorically banished him in the opening sentence, Goldberg finds the need to sneak him in through the back door by the end. This is very reminiscent of a materialist dogmatist like Dawkins suddenly wheeling in Lady Luck to lend a hand. This move is not just rhetorically significant; it is philosophically significant. Human beings cannot *not* have God—or at least they must fashion a substitute to mimic him.

As for Gutenberg's printing press, we do well to briefly revisit it. Why were sixteenth-century Dutch Reformed and English Puritans so … "weird"? What made them different? Why they, of all people, to so ignite a history that ushered in such unprecedented freedom and prosperity that some call it a miracle? I believe it no coincidence that they were direct spiritual heirs of Calvin. They believed in their divine calling; they believed that their efforts were meaningful by virtue of God's exhaustive and absolute providential plan; as for "God fearing," nothing need be said. Among perhaps other things, their *Calvinism* made them different.

In our review, Bahnsen and I argued:

> [Goldberg] explicitly acknowledges that the miracle will not be preserved without God, or at least "acting like" there is a God. But a widespread effort to pretend to believe in God will not stave off suicide. Mind tricks or figments of the imagination are not sustainable foundations for individual belief, much less a thriving, virtuous culture. Goldberg essentially admits that defending the Western miracle cannot be done without belief in God. But our beliefs are not based on mere rhetoric; it is not

[22] Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 331ff.

> all "talk, talk, talk" or "stories we tell ourselves" or playacting. It is because God is real, and in him is the real providence and the real purpose by which the miracle can be sustained. Our civilization cannot be defended without *telos*, and our belief in that *telos* must be real, not a ponzi-like imitation of belief.[23]

Gratitude cannot long be suspended in thin air with no one to thank. Patience wears thin when a culture comes to believe we ourselves give it meaning. Hope swiftly dims when we are told that, actually, there really is not a point in anyone's—not even God's—mind. What is needed is not God "as a sociological entity." What is needed is a renewed apprehension of God, his ways, his works, and, indeed, his providence—the one theological term the American founders found fitting to invoke in the stirring conclusion of the *Declaration of Independence*.

For his part, Machen was unabashed in believing that civilization would resist decline only by widespread recovery of the Christian message. As foolish as it sounds, he understood that political science *needs* intelligent design:

> Do you think that if you heed the message you will be less successful students of political and social science; do you think that by becoming citizens of another world you will become less fitted to solve this world's problems; do you think that acceptance of the Christian message will hinder political or social advance? No, my friends. I will present to you a strange paradox but an assured truth—this world's problems can never be solved by those who make this world the object of their desires. This world cannot ultimately be bettered if you think that this world is all. To move the world, you must have a place to stand.[24]

[23] Bahnsen and Mattson, "Jonah Goldberg's Good Medicine."
[24] Machen, "Responsibility," 376.

George Will's *The Conservative Sensibility*

PETER A. LILLBACK

George F. Will, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of sixteen books, has delivered a six-hundred-page *tour de force*. *The Conservative Sensibility* (New York: Hachette Books, 2019) emerged from reflections incubated since his arrival at Princeton University's Graduate School in 1964 to pursue a doctoral degree in political philosophy. The Princeton ethos of his penmanship is prominent throughout.

I. *The Primacy of Princeton*

Westminster's early faculty launched forth from Princeton Theological Seminary to start a conservative seminary in 1929. Yes, a *conservative* seminary. J. Gresham Machen was already a well-known author at the seminary's birth as in 1923 he had published a timeless critique of theological liberalism, *Christianity and Liberalism*. The irony is that Machen critiqued liberal theology as a theological conservative and yet was a liberal in regard to personal freedoms. The adoption of the word liberal to describe what conservatives cherish today—constitutional liberties, especially those of the Bill of Rights—is a conundrum that Will explains:

> American conservatism has a clear mission: It is to conserve by articulating and demonstrating the continuing pertinence of the Founders' thinking. The price of accuracy might by [sic, "be"] confusion, but this point must be made: American conservatives are the custodians of the classical liberal tradition. (xxiv)

Will's work begins with the Battle of Princeton on January 2, 1777, which was in his mind a turning point in the American story as it secured the stunning surprise Christmas night victory of Trenton. Will quotes British historian George Trevelyan's comment regarding Trenton, "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater and more lasting effects upon the history of the world," and rejoins, "But this would not have been the judgment of any historian if Washington had not prevailed at Princeton" (xv). In fact, the Battle of Princeton brought together not only Washington, the future President of the infant republic, but John Marshall, "a fellow Virginian, a future Washington biographer and chief justice of the Supreme Court" (xv). But for Will, the real battle of Princeton brings together two other noteworthy political Princetonians—James Madison and Woodrow Wilson.

Madison, often called the architect of the American Constitution and the fourth President of the United States (1809–17), had stayed an extra year at Princeton in 1771–72 to study Hebrew under the Presbyterian President of Princeton, the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon. Wilson, the son of a Southern Presbyterian minister, would become the President of Princeton 130 years later in 1902 and then go on to become the Governor of New Jersey and then the twenty-eighth President (1913–1921). Will explains,

> The British retreated into Princeton, where some took refuge in Nassau Hall. Of the three cannonballs that American soldiers fired at Nassau Hall … the third supposedly sailed through a window and neatly removed the head from a portrait of King George III. It is said that the artillery was commanded by a Washington aide named Alexander Hamilton. It is altogether appropriate that Nassau Hall, which at the time was the largest building in New Jersey and the largest academic building in the nation, was, so to speak, present at this moment in the nation's creation. In that building James Madison, who was to become the nation's fourth president, had lived and studied, and Woodrow Wilson, who was to become the twenty-eighth president, would begin his ascent to national prominence from his Nassau Hall office as president of Princeton University. (xv)

As Will perceives it, the battle emanating from Princeton that reverberates through American history is the battle between the natural rights political philosophy of Madison and the progressive political philosophy of Wilson:

> This book is about American political thought, which today is, to a remarkable extent, an argument between Madisonians and Wilsonians. My subject is American conservatism. My conviction is that, properly understood, conservatism is the Madisonian persuasion. And my melancholy belief is that Woodrow Wilson was the

> most important single figure in the largely successful campaign to convince the nation that the Madisonian persuasion is an anachronism. (xv–xvi)

He continues, "My purpose is to show how the nature and stakes of today's political arguments can best be understood by placing the arguments in the context of a debate now more than a century old" (xvi). And again, he explains his purpose:

> This book is my unapologetic presentation to unbelievers, who are a majority of contemporary Americans, of reasons why they should recur to the wisdom of the nation's founding. Conservatism is about the conservation of that wisdom, or it is nothing of much lasting significance. The proper question for conservatives is: What do you seek to conserve? The proper answer is concise but deceptively simple: We seek to conserve the American Founding. (xvii)

This, of course, is precisely what Wilson did not want to do:

> It is therefore satisfying that Nassau Hall can be considered the symbolic epicenter of American political philosophy. In the era of revolutionary ferment, the building was, among other things, a dormitory housing James Madison, who would be the most creative participant in the process that produced the Constitution that produced a national government without the infirmities that drove the previous government to shelter in Princeton. By 1902, Nassau Hall contained the university's administrative offices, including those of the new president, Woodrow Wilson, who would become the first president of the United States to criticize Madison's constitutional architecture. (xix)

II. *The Continuing Pertinence of the Founders' Principles*

Will states, "This book's primary purpose is not to tell readers what to think about this or that particular problem or policy. Rather, the purpose is to suggest how to think about the enduring questions concerning the proper scope and actual competence of government" (xvii). "What however, does it mean to conserve an event—or, more precisely, a cluster of events—that occurred almost 250 years ago? This book is my attempt to answer that question by showing the continuing pertinence of the Founding principles, and by tracing many of our myriad discontents to departures from those principles" (xvii–xviii).

If "American conservatives are the custodians of the classical liberal tradition," Will explains that this is due to the legacy of John Locke.

> Liberalism acquired its name, and became conscious of itself in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when liberty was threatened by the forces of order—by

> institutions and instruments of the state, often operating in conjunction with ecclesiastical authorities. Liberalism championed individualism and the rights of the individual against those forces of enforced order. The label "liberal" was minted to identify those whose primary concern was not the protection of community solidarity or traditional hierarchies, but rather was the expansion and protection of individual liberty. Liberals were then those who considered the state the primary threat to this. Liberals espoused the exercise of natural rights within a spacious zone of personal sovereignty guaranteed by governments instituted to serve as guarantors of those rights. (xxiv)

For Will, the American political experience of the past century demonstrates that pursuing politics is hardly the same as patriotism. "One lesson of the twentieth century is that the comprehensive politics of the integrated state promises fulfillment but delivers suffocation. In contrast, American patriotism is 'an intricate latticework of ideals, sentiments and overlapping loyalties' that involves politics but is not primarily about politics" (xxv).

III. *American Exceptionalism*

In fact, the claim of "American exceptionalism" is, according to Will, related to American conservatism.

> In the stream of Western political thought, American conservatism is exceptional in a way that is related to the theory of "American exceptionalism." The multifaceted postulate of American "exceptionalism" includes one or more of these ideas: Americans were born exceptionally free from a feudal past, and hence free from an established church and an entrenched aristocracy. This made them exceptionally receptive to intellectual pluralism and exceptionally able to achieve social mobility. America had an exceptional revolution, one that did not attempt to define and deliver happiness, but one that set people free to define and pursue it as they please. Americans codified their Founding doctrines as a natural rights republic in an exceptional Constitution, one that does not say what government must do for them but what government may not do to them. And because the founding experience was the result of and affirmed the potency of, human agency, Americans are exceptionally impervious to bleak modern anxieties about human destiny being decisively shaped by vast impersonal forces. America's central government is exceptionally constructed to limit the discretion of those in power by balancing rival centers of power. (xxvii)

America is unique in that it is a philosophy not just a history.

> As Margaret Thatcher said, European nations were made by history, the United States was made by philosophy. Unique among all nations, the United States knows precisely when and exactly why it was founded. American conservatism is an ongoing meditation of America's Founding, which means on the Declaration of Independence

> and on the Constitution, which should be construed in the bright light cast by the Declaration's affirmation of natural rights. (xxviii–xxix)

Will concludes that the conservative's insistence on natural rights and limited government are at the core of the unique success of the American experiment. "All of these ideas are related to the doctrine of natural rights. It supposedly guarantees a substantial zone of individual autonomy by guaranteeing limited government" (xxvii).

IV. *The Sensibility of the Conservative*

But what is a "sensibility"? Will defines it this way:

> There is a braided relationship between a person's political philosophy and his or her sensibility, meaning a proclivity for seeing and experiencing the passage of time and the tumult of events in a particular way. Which comes first? Perhaps, in most cases, neither; they evolve entwined and are mutually reinforcing. A sensibility is more than an attitude but less than an agenda, less than a pragmatic response to the challenge of comprehensively reforming society in general. The conservative sensibility, especially, is best defined by its reason about concrete matters in particular societies. The American conservative sensibility, as explained in this volume, is a perpetually unfolding response to real situations that require statesmanship—the application of general principles to untidy realities. Conservatism does not float above all times and places. The conservative sensibility is relevant to all times and places, but it is lived and revealed locally, in the conversation of a specific polity. The American conservative sensibility is situated here; it is a national expression of reasoning, revealed in practices. (xvi–xvii)

This makes sense of why Will dedicates his book to an unsuccessful presidential candidate. Barry Goldwater, "the cheerful malcontent" (v), ran and lost in 1964, becoming the vanguard of the fledgling conservative movement that culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan (1981–89). With a direct critique of both the contemporary Democratic and Republican parties, Will again states the reason for his conservative masterpiece: "This book, written at a moment when conservatism is again a persuasion without a party, is, in part, an attempt to do what Goldwater attempted—to revive a worthy tradition" (xxxiii).

V. *The Political Debate between Conservatives and Progressives*

To revive the conservative persuasion so defined and to explain its political and patriotic sensibilities, Will's felicitous prose and clear logic are deployed through ten thought-provoking chapters. His thesis begins with the

acknowledgment that the American Founders made a basic epistemological assertion, namely, that they knew what can be known. This knowledge of humanity's natural rights gave them a confidence about truth that the Declaration of Independence describes as "self-evident." However, with the rise of progressivism, all that has changed. The progressives' revision for Will has been nothing less than an emancipation from natural rights. And all of this has profound institutional consequences. Under the control of progressive policies, American government is no longer a system of checks and balances by three equal branches of government. Rather, the presidency is triumphant, ruling through a rampant administrative state even as Congress is essentially asleep in regard to their actual constitutional duties. "Trying to restrain the modern executive, which is the motor of the administrative state, by depending on the Madisonian architecture of checks and balances seems increasingly akin to lassoing a locomotive with a cobweb" (xxviii).

And what of the High Court? Will assesses the tension between the passivity and quasi-legislative interventions of the High Court's judicial supervision of American democracy, highlighting the myriad struggles this produces. Here he engages the so-called "counter-majoritarian difficulty." This phrase from legal parlance summarizes the assumed power by the unelected high court to conduct judicial review of enacted legislation and to declare it unconstitutional even though it was enacted by a majority vote and by those who had been elected by majority to legislative office. Here Will as a conservative counter-intuitively favors a counter-majoritarian court, particularly in regard to personal liberties and property. He writes, "Conservatism has no more urgent task than that of convincing the country that an energetically engaged judiciary is necessary lest, in Justice Robert Jackson's words, 'the lights go out'" (215).

With his critique of the federal government clarified, Will turns to the role of politics on the nation's economy, asserting the need to rescue the "great enrichment from the fatal conceit." To encapsulate his discussion of the remarkable success of American capitalism and its interplay with government control and stimulation of economic forces, he cites Friedrich Hayek: "The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design" (216). Will's view of culture and opportunity is explained by comparing them to scissors that have shredded America's old convictions. Education has turned its focus from learning in the classical sense to other aims, so that instead of achieving success in learning it manifests the feebler and questionable academic talents of praising and pessimism.

American foreign policy is also measured by Will's conservative sensibilities. When America goes abroad, it does so, Will states, as a creedal nation that views the rest of the world as being on probation. But this progressive creed results in tragedy: "Vietnam became a heartbreaking story—comic, were it not staggeringly tragic—of earnestness foundering on mutual incomprehension" (433). Some have held, Will perceives, a better view, a pessimistic view of American success in foreign engagements: "Historical pessimism of the sort that Nixon and Kissinger entertained must have a profound influence on a foreign policy agenda. Kissinger would later deplore Woodrow Wilson's susceptibility to 'the irrepressible American conviction that understanding between peoples is normal, that tension is an aberration, and that trust can be generated by the strenuous demonstration of good will'" (450–51). Will says the conservative maintains that the progressive creed for foreign intervention is inherently false.

> Progressivism holds out the hope that human material is malleable, that the present is endlessly manipulable, and that the future in predictable. From this flows the recurring belief—it recurs soon after events refute it—that peace is the natural relation between nations and that war is an aberration explainable by the bad character of rulers and by benighted traditions and institutions. For two centuries progressives have been explaining the obsolesce of war—their explanations often hard to hear over the roar of cannon—in terms of the spread of democracy. (455)

VI. *Can There Be a Conservative Sensibility without God?*

For readers of *Unio cum Christo* the chapter entitled "Welcoming Whirl—Conservatism without Theism" will be of special interest. Will insists that there can be a conservative approach to natural rights that is not tethered to theism. This claim is dubious for those who take Romans 1 seriously, recognizing the idolatry implicit in claims for human autonomy with the resulting moral relativism and epistemological skepticism so well articulated by Cornelius Van Til. But, unlike so many of the new atheists, Will is a gentle advocate of atheism ("an amiable, low-voltage atheist"), perhaps well becoming of a grandson of a Lutheran minister and an atheist father (478–79). He makes his case by thoughtful appeal to Huck Finn and Jim wafting down the Mississippi gazing at the stars and wondering if they "were made or just there" (457). Like Alexis de Tocqueville (460), Will recognizes that religion plays an important role in American political life:

> Let us leave it to theologically grounded persons to decide whether, or how, the progressive doctrine of a changing human nature can be squared with the teachings

> of various religions. This much, however, is clear: A nation such as ours, steeped in and shaped by Biblical religion, cannot comfortably accommodate a politics that takes its bearings from the proposition that human nature is a malleable product of social forces, and that improving human nature, perhaps unto perfection, is a proper purpose of politics. Biblical religion is concerned with asserting and defending the dignity of the individual. Biblical religion teaches that individual dignity is linked to individual responsibility and moral agency. Therefore, Biblical religion should be wary of the consequences of government untethered from the limited (and limiting) purpose of securing natural rights. (459)

Similarly, he writes,

> Religion has been central to the American polity precisely because religion has not been central to American politics. Religion has played a large role in nurturing the virtues that republican government presupposes, particularly micro self-government—the Individual's governance of his or her self. The nation assigns to politics and public policy the secondary and subsidiary role of encouraging, or at least not stunting, the infrastructure of institutions that have the primary responsibility for nurturing civic and other virtues. American religion therefore coexists comfortably with, but is not itself a component of, American government. Religion's independence of politics has been part of its strength. There is a fascinating paradox at work in our nation's history: America, the first and most relentlessly modern nation, is, to the consternation of social scientists, also the most religious modern nation. One reason for this is that we have disentangled religion from public institutions. (473–74)

Will occupies the ironic position of rejecting biblical religion even as he calls upon it to support natural rights. He does this in part because he is conscious of the religious history of early America (462ff.). He claims that it is a historical fallacy to speak of America as a "Christian nation"; however, in doing so, he makes the same sort of fallacy of overgeneralization in reverse when he asserts that all the Founders were deists (466). The truth is, just as it is today for any group of political leaders, each person's faith has to be established on its own testimony and evidence. Unfortunately, he quotes the historically invalidated claim of Gordon Wood that Washington "seems never to have purchased a Bible" (478; see Peter A. Lillback, *George Washington's Sacred Fire* [Bryn Mawr, PA: Providence Forum, 2006], 305–33, 739–60).

Thus, given Will's observations concerning the role of biblical religion in the American founding, it follows that Francis Schaeffer provided an important insight when he wrote of America not as a "Christian nation" but as a nation with a "Christian consensus." A fair appraisal of the American story must admit that historic American culture is far closer to the Judeo-Christian tradition than to a Muslim, Confucian, Marxist, Hindu, Buddhist, or atheist culture. Indeed, how did the Bible get into the courtroom, where

it still is used to take oaths? Moreover, we should not fail to remember that even the United States Supreme Court in 1892 declared "This is a Christian nation" in its *Church of the Holy Trinity* case.

Will's "amiable and low-voltage" presentation of atheism includes claims that the American Founders' God-talk was deist rather than Christian, as seen especially in John Adams and Thomas Jefferson; that the philosophers Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes spurred on American modernity's "masterless man"; that too-deeply held religious convictions dehumanize those of other viewpoints; that while humanity may possess a religious impulse, the truth of no one religion can be established; and that cosmology and quantum physics do not reflect the divine as they appear unplanned and cannot be understood (472–89). Will avers,

> Yes, Earth is so finely tuned as to be hospitable to human and other life. This leads many people to conclude that a Fine Tuner had us in mind …. But this planetary friendliness can be understood as a happy accident of the evolution of this cooling cinder, Earth. And although this planet is friendly to human life, it has always been less than friendly for many lives …. Surely the Fine Tuner could have left out some of these ingredients—could have tuned the world to work a bit differently—had He been feeling a bit more friendly. (489)

Thus, Will concludes that the question of theism is ultimately of little importance: "Life is, presumably, either a cosmic fluke or a cosmic imperative. But because everything is a reverberation from the big bang—every atom of the material in us, and in everything else, is nuclear waste from that explosion—what, really is the difference between fluke and imperative?" (489). "So, perhaps the supposedly crucial question—is life a cosmic fluke or a cosmic imperative?—is not much of a question" (492). Astronomy, DNA, the ultimate extinction of energy in the universe, the thought of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud make human life ever smaller (492ff.).

The palpable inconsistency of Will's position is that he does not ask the inevitable question: If humanity is a fluke and nonconsequential in the story of the universe, why should individuals matter? Why should ethics, human politics, liberty, conservatism, and progressivism matter? And why not simply adhere to the principles of raw nature rather than of historic American values? Nevertheless, Will is compelled to recognize the tension of his conservative atheism given the essential contributions of Christianity to American political conservatism:

> Christianity was a source of three ideas central to the American founding. One is the idea of humanity's irremediable imperfectability. The second is that original sin does not vitiate individual dignity. The third is that there are universal moral truths. All this poses a challenge for societies that are increasingly secular and given increasingly to believing in the social or genetic influences on consciousness: How do we define and defend the integrity of the self? This matters for self-government because since the second half of the nineteenth century the unitary understanding of the human personality—the idea of personhood—has become to seem problematic. Yet strangely or perhaps understandably—as the idea of the self has become more attenuated there has been increased emphasis on self-assertion and self-expression. As the self has become a hazier concept there has been a more urgent desire to celebrate the assertion and expression of this elusive thing. (495–96)

The task, then, for the conservative atheist is explained by Will as a response to William James. James defined religious faith as "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto." Will responds,

> Just so. Reasonable atheism asserts the absence of convincing evidence—evidence that can be seen, sifted, tested—of such an order. Therefore, atheists—those without a theism—embark on the project of finding other reasons for adjusting, and adjusting to moral rules and social norms that enable us to live in harmony with our natures and with others. Virtues are acquired human qualities that enable the individual who possesses them to achieve certain good outcomes, and the absence of which impedes such achievement. Qualities are acquired by habituation—by emulation, instruction, and, especially, immersion in social practices. This, then, is the crux of the conservative project: to advocate those practices—political, economic, and cultural—that are conducive to flourishing, understood as living virtuously. (505–6)

Will does not provide a rationale for why in such a world one should adjust to moral rules or social norms in order to live in harmony with others. He does not explain why this is a virtue. How in a chance world does one know what a good outcome is? Why is one achievement considered more virtuous than another? Indeed, is there even such a thing as virtue if life is but a fluke? If all of life advances by the progress of evolution that is marked by the strong surviving, can it be wise to limit one's advance by concern for another, as proposed by Christianity? Would not rejecting others for one's own best interest be the flourishing that conforms to the world as it really is? Does not progressivism better conform to a world of power, chance, and survival than does a system bound to a system of values that comport with limiting power by way of limited government? Can conservatism survive without God? Welcoming Will's "whirl" of pursuing meaning without God eventually will make conservativism and conservative values evaporate—to be gone with the whirlwind.

Yet for all this, Will in his final chapter longs for American thinkers and leaders to be borne back to the earlier emphases of natural rights and the Founders' vision of freedom rather the progressives' desire for the ever-growing and all-sufficient modern state. His conservative sensibility leads him to pursue the quest for a useable past. This quest takes the conservative back to the Founders:

> How did America come to its present condition? By a protracted apostasy from principles that, by limiting the scope of government, protected the stature of politics. Our nation had a founding moment, which means it is founded on more than inertia. Our nation emerged not from forces obscured by the mists of the past but from a clear public act of choosing—an affirmation. Of the correctness of their choice, the Founders were breathtakingly confident. (521)

In sum, Will calls for a serious act of national self-denial in order to rediscover the Founders' vision:

> One measure of a political philosophy's seriousness is what it requires of its adherents. Conservatives today are required to tell people that they should be formed by respect for the Constitution. They should be formed for a life of choosing not to choose all that government can offer because those offerings come at a cost to the virtues of independence and moderation …. It can only be elicited by respect for the Constitution and, hence, for the virtues of self-reliance and self-restraint, that our polity presupposes. (522)

Conservatives' task is to build a society that nurtures individuals to self-sufficiency, including independence from politics. Now more than ever conservatives need to be focused on this nurturing because the related forces of urbanization and statism are exerting a powerful pull toward an enervating dependency. It is a dependency on large economic entities, and on government, for security. Ultimately, it is dependency on—and addiction to—security as the highest aim of life. This addiction produces, over time, a timid, fearful, debased people erecting barriers against a competitive world and aggressively asserting an entitlement mentality, including an entitlement to government protection against uncertainty. This entitlement exacts a steep moral cost. Government that acknowledges such an entitlement becomes a bland Leviathan, administering a soft, kindly, but ultimately corrupting statism of benighted benevolence (533).

VII. *The Silent Artillery of Time Has Leveled the Political Walls of the Old Princeton*

One may well wonder, however, if Will's desire is possible, namely, for American thinkers and leaders to be borne back to the earlier emphases of natural rights and the Founders' vision of freedom rather the progressives' desire for the ever-growing and all-sufficient modern state. Moreover, by his atheistic worldview Will has removed from the Founders' Declaration of Independence the God they referred to in four instances in that document. The God the Founders believed in made liberty and limited government possible.

Will's excision of the Founders' theism means that his worldview scissors have cut out from the American political enterprise timeless theological verities such as "endowed by our Creator," "laws of nature and of nature's God," "appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world," and "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence." Without the truths of God as Creator, Legislator, Judge, and Executive, one may well wonder how a tripartite (dare we say a triune?) human government, reflecting such divine functions, can cohere and simultaneously not arrogate to itself prerogatives of deity. The temptation of government is to become the Leviathan that assumes divinity when there is no transcendent power above it to limit its pretensions and control its appetite for cultural ubiquity and political omnipotence. Indeed, how can the three contributions of Christianity to the American founding acknowledged by Will survive as government-shaping principles?

Will laments the triumph of progressivism:

> "It has been our fate as a nation … not to have ideologies but to be one." … The original one, the Founders' natural rights philosophy, began losing ground to progressivism more than a century ago and today is seeking to regain lost ground. What progressives aimed for, and largely achieved, was a second American Founding, this one taking its bearings not from unchanging nature but rather from history, which is a river of change. (xxviii)

But alas, Will has also changed the Founders' philosophy. His river of change sweeps away the faith of the Founding Fathers in the transcendence of God, leaving us awash in a history that no longer permits an appeal to natural rights established by "the laws of nature and of nature's God."

Will's book begins by quoting Abraham Lincoln's "Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," dated January 27, 1838. I conclude this review by borrowing from Lincoln's remarkable rhetoric:

> I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the revolution *are now* or *ever will* be entirely forgotten; but that like every thing else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time …. At the close of that struggle, nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of its scenes. The consequence was, that of those scenes, in the form of a husband, a father, a son or a brother, *a living history was* to be found in every family … but *those* histories are gone. They *can* be read no more forever. They *were* a fortress of strength; but, what invading foemen could *never do*, the silent artillery of time *has done*; the leveling of its walls. (ix)

Borrowing images from this, we might say that the artillery of Will's atheism has only aided in the demolition of the fortress of strength of the old Princeton of the Founders. By leveling its theistic walls, Will has indirectly helped to erect the temple of progressivism, even though disdained by his conservative sensibility. He assists progressivism to continue its hegemony over conservatism by seeking the demise of theism. Theism alone makes natural rights, self-evident truth, and true liberty possible.

Nevertheless, Will has composed a monumental treatise well worth reading. It is packed with historical and political insights to be relished by conservatives and thought-provoking responses to progressives. As a political conservative, my sensibilities have been acknowledged and my liberal spirit encouraged. As a theological conservative, my sensibilities have been startled by Will's lack of appreciation for how severely his atheism weakens his figurative "cobweb," with which he hopes to "lasso the train of ever-growing executive power," whether the metaphorical engine is in the hands of a Republican or Democrat engineer/president.

Finally, to paraphrase Lincoln, once "*a living history was* to be found in every family." But "*those* histories are gone. They *can* be read no more forever. They *were* a fortress of strength; but, what invading foemen could *never do*, the silent artillery" of progressivism and atheism *has done*. Progressives, along with even those with conservative sensibilities, have forgotten God. Together they have leveled the once formidable walls of old Princeton's founding political persuasions.

Book Reviews

Derek W. H. Thomas and John W. Tweeddale, eds. *John Calvin: For a New Reformation*. With an afterword by R. C. Sproul. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

It was somewhat quiet after the Calvin jubilee in 2009. The five-hundredth anniversary of John Calvin had resulted in a flood of events including a huge number of publications. But then silence fell over Calvin, as happens so often after jubilees. It is therefore praiseworthy that Crossway has taken the initiative to publish the book under review. It contains twenty good-sized chapters, of which the first seven (part 1) are more historical and biographical and the other thirteen (part 2) more theological. Several of the chapters have been published before elsewhere, and it is a good thing that they are included and form a unity with the other parts of the book.

Chapters 1 (Michael A. G. Haykin) and 2 (Stephen J. Nichols) sketch the contours of Calvin's biography. Chapters 3 (David B. Calhoun) and 4 (Douglas F. Kelly) deal with Calvin as pastor. In chapter 5 (W. Robert Godfrey), many of Calvin's theological friends are introduced, including the influence they had on the Reformer. Chapter 6 (Steven J. Lawson) gives a clear overview of Calvin's homiletical work, and chapter 7 (Derek W. H. Thomas) describes the various stages Calvin's *Institutes* went through from 1536 to 1559. As said, part 2 focuses on Calvin's theology, the basis being mainly the *Institutes*, but included are his sermons, commentaries, and letters. The subsequent chapters cover Calvin's thinking and teaching on Scripture (K. Scott Oliphint); creation and humanity (J. V. Fesko), including such themes as government, natural law, science, art, and music; providence (Burk Parsons); the law (Guy Prentiss Waters); the person and work of Christ (Paul Wells); the Holy Spirit, meditation, and prayer (Joel R. Beeke);

the Christian life (Edward Donnelly); knowing God through suffering (Derek W. H. Thomas); and predestination (Paul Helm). These are followed by a chapter on Calvin's ecclesiology (John W. Tweeddale), and a chapter on the sacraments (Keith A. Mathison). The last two chapters focus on Calvin's thoughts on the perseverance of the saints (Robert A. Peterson) and on his eschatology (Cornelis P. Venema).

A review is not the place for me to go into each of these chapters, but the list of topics shows a coherent and inclusive representation of the life and thought of the Reformer. A strong point is not only that many quotations from Calvin are given, but that all authors describe Calvin in the context of his time and indicate how he made use of what other Reformers (like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and Philip Melanchthon) and church fathers (especially Augustine) had written before him.

In the preface, the editors inform the reader that the authors of the various chapters "reflect on the significance of the ministry and teaching of John Calvin for the church today" (9). So the aim of the book is not purely academic; it also has a focus on the practical life of the church. I can say that each author succeeded in accomplishing this aim. This, however, does not turn the book into "just" a popular work—there is nothing wrong with popular books on theology and church history, by the way—as the multitude of footnotes referring to a wealth of primary and secondary sources make clear. Indeed, it is evident that the authors are, so to speak, Calvin enthusiasts, and critical distance to his personality, attitudes, and exegetical and theological work is absent. This sort of one-sidedness is a healthy counterweight to the equally biased and unfounded critiques found in many other publications on Calvin. It must at the same time be said that the authors do supply the proofs for what they state by referring consistently to Calvin's books, catechetical work, sermons, and letters. In addition to this value, the authors also show that they are familiar with the present state of Calvin research, of which they have made good use, as the references indicate.

This all means that the book is a fine example of how academic research can be made accessible for a wider audience and especially for those with an active role in the church or those who just want to know more about Calvin and Reformed theology. I would add that the book can also be used as a textbook as it presents a fine overview of Calvin's life and theology in chapters that can also be studied separately. This book demonstrates that we do not need jubilees to get good books published.

HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS
Rector and Professor of Church History
Theological University Apeldoorn, Netherlands

Tom Holland. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. New York: Basic Books, 2019.

Just when we thought the pendulum had swung irretrievably to historiographies that either bemoan or at least minimize any positive Christian influence on Western culture, this book comes out showing the extensive affirmative sway of the Christian worldview on the West. It is a powerful and largely persuasive volume. As one who teaches Christian apologetics, I find it significant, though sad, that the author is no longer a convinced believer. At the same time, he is nothing if not nostalgic about the faith he has lost. Indeed, he movingly recounts how he began as a church-going believer and then saw his faith cool off (though possibly not abandoned altogether) after realizing what an enormous world we live in. Nevertheless, his defense of the influence of the gospel on the West is robust and forceful. It is always good when even unbelievers support the right views.

The book is fresh. It is wide ranging. The author covers persons and incidents beginning back in Athens and ending in today's immigration issue in Germany. He divides Western history into three phases: Antiquity, Christendom, and "Modernitas." By his own admission, Holland's book is not a history in the strictest sense. Its great virtue is its originality. Instead of a recital of dates, battles, and treaties, the author describes often-neglected events or heroes in the unfolding of this interaction of the Christian worldview with the development of unique Western values.

His thesis, reaffirmed throughout, is that the gospel reverses the usual way in which power works by introducing love rather than conquest. This has happened over and over again throughout Western history. One might say that the basic proposal is "the meek shall inherit the earth" (cf. Matt 5:5). At the outset, he describes in gruesome detail how the method of execution consisting of tying a victim to a gibbet is among the cruelest and most humiliating, let alone painful, ever invented. Christ endured it. He argues that this suffering Lord is the key to the influence of the Christian faith on civilization: dying for the powerful rather than toppling them. Though he misses the point that Jesus's suffering is far greater than physical, he has caught the fundamental biblical message: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly," and through this he "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Rom 5:6; Col 2:15).

The text is over five hundred pages long. Though he covers many centuries, we never feel rushed. This is because Holland is a master storyteller. A

couple of examples among many can be cited. In a chapter on charity he recounts the rivalry of citizens from Poitiers and Tours over the rights to the body of Saint Martin. Why? Because he was a new kind of hero. If the Greeks and Romans adulated great warriors, by the fourth century it was those who gave away the most of their possessions who were celebrated. Of Martin, well-attested legend said that he resigned from the army. In the coldest of winters, he spotted a poor freezing beggar and gave him half of his warm military coat. As did Jesus in the parable of the good Samaritan, Martin shocked those around him by renouncing the power available to him as a soldier and becoming like the hated outsider who was the only one to have compassion on a helpless victim. When the denizens of Tours won the rights to his remains, they did so because everyone was convinced he "was touched by Christ himself" (147). Though born in Hungary, he became a French bishop and will always be known as Saint Martin de Tours. The area he served became known for its charitable way of life.

Because of his interest in featuring people who are not the usual suspects, some of his choices will seem curious. In his discussion of abolition, there is no mention of William Wilberforce. The diplomatic Castlereagh steps in, instead. And there are no black abolitionists (Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Equiano, etc.). But Benjamin Lay (1682–1759), the Quaker, has a major part. After being expelled from Barbados because of his radical opposition to the treatment of slaves, he moved to the Philadelphia area and with his wife campaigned vigorously against the evils of slavery. He spoke about the horrors of the whip and the general conditions of slave labor. Though William Penn, himself a Quaker, was the founder of the Pennsylvania colony, with its motto from the book of Leviticus, "To proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev 25:10), Lay considered it sheer hypocrisy, since whips and chains were sold in the markets of the City of Brotherly Love (385). The ultimate effectiveness of such abolitionists is not scrutinized.

Indeed, the entire discussion of modern slavery, somewhat brief, occurs buried within the two chapters on the Enlightenment in which he discusses the defense of the vulnerable. Along the way, he covers Voltaire's vindication of the Huguenot Jean Calas and the bizarre Marquis de Sade. His point in both cases is that even these radical skeptics built on a platform of freedom of expression made possible only in the Christian message. In his brief treatment of the United States during the Enlightenment, he makes a considerable point from the statement in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," which endows them with "unalienable rights." The instinct for reformation, the renewal of society so active in the American experiment, while claimed by the *philosophes*, originated much farther back

with Gregory VII. Much later in the book Holland returns to America. He praises Martin Luther King Jr. for his prophetic work, defending oppressed blacks, based on good "theological presumptions." He even sees in feminist movements represented by *The Handmaid's Tale* and the #Me Too initiative a Christian, even Pauline (Gal 3:28) background, one that pleads for equality between the sexes.

Again, in the defense of women's equality, from the Middle Ages, some choices are strange. For example, in chapter 11, titled "Flesh: Milan," the character he writes about is Guglielma (1210–1281). Though likely of noble birth, she chose to live in dire poverty. As a cult leader, she attracted quite a following. She taught that the end was soon and that she herself would return raised from the dead as the Holy Spirit! Everything about Guglielma was heretical: a female priest, her claim to be God, celibacy (and therefore a possible seductress)—these were intolerable departures from the church. So, her books were burned, only to reemerge, thanks to a certain Antonio Bonfadini, who wrote a hagiographic biography of this woman in 1425. This was followed by the humanist playwright Antonia Pulci, who set Guglielma's story to a drama in the late fifteenth century. From his account of this strange woman, Holland abruptly transitions to a discussion of Mary in the Middle Ages, who, he says, embodies the paradoxes at the heart of the Christian faith, such as the thick theological tomes produced in the Middle Ages alongside the simple biblical images of a mother suffering for her son's sake (276). Would it not have been wiser to highlight less controversial women, such as Hilda of Whitby or Catherine de Pisan?

Owing no doubt to Holland's career as a journalist, as well as his general interests, we are treated to a good look at the Beatles, the Iraq war, and evangelicals for Donald Trump. All of these are somehow related to either a statement of, or a distortion of, the Christian message as an agency of deep reform. In the end, Holland tells us, "Love, and do as you will. It was—as the entire course of Christian history so vividly demonstrated—a formula for revolution" (495). His allusion to John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is a poignant and convincing way to retell the story of World War II and the threat to Western civilization (477–81).

This book will have been widely reviewed, as it deserves. Some reviewers find it naïve, or at least one sided. In my own view I think certain analyses could be a bit more nuanced. Yet he is surprisingly favorable on John Calvin, on the Puritans, and on missionaries. On the Crusades he does not fall into caricatures. He is very much aware of the role of the Christian faith in developing modern science. There would be none if it were not for the Christian commitments of its founders. Even Charles Darwin is said to

have desired to defend a designer God. He eventually was not able to do that, at least in any sort of orthodox manner. In a touching aside, Holland reminds us that Darwin's struggles with the Christian God were based on his incredulity at the creation being based on so much suffering. One rather weeps at this finding.

I do object to the cover! It is the famous *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* by Salvador Dali. In my view it is a deeply blasphemous painting, showing a Christ hanging, not on the cross, but on a Gnostic scaffold with perfect wooden beams, without nails, without blood, without agony (contrary to what Holland had said in the first part of the book about crucifixion). The painting was motivated by an inspiration Dali apparently had, in part based on a drawing kept in the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila, perhaps done by Saint John himself after a vision he had. The perfectly muscular Christ is looking down toward the earth, with no semblance of the compassionate suffering on behalf of sinners. This is odd, considering the title of the book is *Dominion*, presumably meaning the dominion of tough love over against the raw power of the present world structures. I believe this is an unfortunate choice, one possibly imposed by the editors.

This excellent book reminds us of two things. First, powerfully and disturbingly Holland describes the presence of evil in the world and the need for redemptive love to overcome it. From the unspeakable cruelties of the Third Reich to the abuses of Harvey Weinstein, Holland makes no attempt to whitewash the horrors of human history. That diagnosis in itself is of course a profoundly Christian insight. But second, his ultimate message is hopeful. The power of Christ to overcome evil produces the kind of dominion he ultimately believes in. Holland believes it is still at work, and we should be grateful for it and cultivate it for the future.

WILLIAM EDGAR

Professor of Apologetics
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, PA

Herman Bavinck. *Christian Worldview*. Translated and edited by Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

Talk of a Christian worldview has fallen on hard times of late within some of the diverse circles of Reformed thought. Some see it as the driver of a lopsided approach to Christian faith and religious life, which places an undue emphasis on the cognitive. Others indict it with the charge of

smuggling into Reformed thought an unhappy vestige of post-Kantian philosophy. Herman Bavinck entertained neither of these reservations when he penned this book in the early twentieth century.

The repository of riches Bavinck left in this short book has been sealed off from those without reading ability in Dutch. No longer. The trio of translators and editors of this book have unlocked the vault for English readers and furnished for them a formidable example of why speaking of a Christian worldview is perhaps not so misguided after all.

Like the *Reformed Dogmatics*, this book showcases the towering scope of Bavinck's erudition. He converses widely with the intellectual milieu of the nineteenth century and the emerging decades of the twentieth. Readers will find familiar names among the intellectuals who rotate through Bavinck's attention in the book—names like Augustine, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche—but also others who have settled into more obscure positions in intellectual history. One of the many laudable features of the book is that the editors have provided footnotes that give very compact biographical information on this cast of intellectuals with whom Bavinck engages.

Another very useful convention the translators have included throughout the book is an inclusion of certain important non-English words, mostly in bracketed form, which clue the reader into the technical nuances of Bavinck's usage and allusions to the writings of other thinkers. By doing this they have accomplished the feat of delivering a translation that is both approachable for the non-expert and technically transparent for those with more linguistic and historical expertise. They have also applied their considerable expertise as Bavinck scholars in providing a succinct orientation to the book for current readers.

In the introductory chapter Bavinck sets his rationale for the composition of this work against the backdrop of the spirit of modernity. He captures the dynamic of modernity with vivid, truthful colors that the passage of a century has not dulled: "Before all else, what strikes us in the modern age is the internal discord that consumes the self and the restless haste that drives it" (22). Bavinck pinpoints neo-Romanticism, racism, Marxism, relativism, chauvinistic nationalism, and a waning materialism among others as voices amidst this disorienting cacophony of early twentieth-century modernity. The persistence of these voices or their progeny a hundred years later in our own historical moment gives Bavinck's project an uncanny freshness.

This discord of modernity is Bavinck's foil and impetus for providing in this book what he sees to be the basic contours of a harmonic and holistic Christian "world-and-life view" (22) and its hard antithetical stance towards

its religious competitors (27). He traces the root of our "disharmony of being" to our sinful rupture with God (27–28) and unfurls the flag of Christianity as the antidote with its exclusive claim as "the only religion whose view of the world and life fits the world and life" (28).

Three rudimentary and perennial problems are identified which form the subsequent three chapters of the book: "What is the relation between thinking and being, between being and becoming, and between becoming and acting?" (29). Bavinck reduces the motley array of competitors to Christianity to one fundamental human stance, "autonomous thinking" (29). Opposite the invariable dissatisfaction of human pretensions to autonomy, Christianity yields the reconciliation of "the human being with God and, through this, with itself, with the world, and with life" (29).

Chapter 1 engages the relationship between thinking and being. Here Bavinck tackles the basic questions of epistemology, but not in a way that maps neatly onto the agenda that has been set for epistemology by most current philosophical taxonomies. He refuses to discretely sequester questions of metaphysics from epistemology. The title of the chapter indicates this. Bavinck rejects out of hand the modern philosophical disjunct between thinking and being, between epistemology and metaphysics, as his aim is to show the organic harmony between the two.

Bavinck defends the spontaneity of the basic belief in the "reality of the external world and our trust in the truth of sense perception" (34) and grounds it in the Christian religion (33). A satisfactory epistemology that accounts for the correspondence of subject and object can only be rendered by one "illumined by the wisdom of the divine word which sets on our lips the confession of God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth" (38). Bavinck strikes a note here that is imperative for the church to heed in every age, no less in our own, which has in so many ways unhinged consciousness from our being. Any generation of Christians that takes for granted and does not self-consciously attend to the doctrine of creation will find the ground of epistemology—and, as Bavinck will show in chapter 3, the ground for ethics—washing out from beneath its feet.

Bavinck closes the first chapter by drawing on Augustine (45) and providing a robust theological account of the realism he proffers: "The world becomes, and can only become, our spiritual [*geestelijk*] property, for it is itself existing spiritually [*geestelijk*] and logically and resting in thought" (46). The whole hope of the scientific enterprise of humans then rests on the Trinitarian work appropriated to the Son (47), in whom both "being and knowing … have their 'reason' [*ratio*]" (51) and who thus upholds the harmony between being and knowing.

Chapter 2 covers the relationship between being and becoming. Bavinck engages the problem of unity and diversity (67) as well as being and becoming (71). He does so journeying through many of the contemporary philosophical and scientific paradigms of his day. The heart of this chapter is the antithesis he establishes between a mechanistic worldview and what he will later label the "organic-teleological worldview" of Christianity (125).

Bavinck avers that this organic worldview is able to hold together the reality that the world "contains a fullness of being, a rich exchange of phenomena, a rich multiplicity of creations," the "lifeless and living, inorganic and organic, inanimate and animate, unconscious and conscious, material and spiritual," which are "taken up in the oneness of the whole" (71–72). Here we see on display the organic motif which lends to Bavinck's thinking its potency.

Because God's archetypal thought and decree has deposited in the things he has made, their ideas or forms, and the particularity of all things "being in a certain way" is upheld (77). Furthermore, the immanent activity of the Triune God in creation (78) not only upholds these *forma* but propels them in the dynamic teleological becoming of the world (80). Again, Bavinck declares that this harmony of the one and the many and of being and becoming is "only provided by the Christian confession that God is the Creator and that his glory is the goal of all things" (91).

The third and final chapter treats the relationship between becoming and acting. Here Bavinck gives an account of both ethics and a philosophy of history as they encompass "personal, independent, and free acting" (93). His positive project is set against the relativism, radical autonomy, and evolutionistic monism of the early twentieth century, which he characterizes in a way that is still a trenchant description of the postmodernity which has emerged from that matrix: "The human person forms his own religion and morality, his own world-and-life view; the main thing is that he, bound to nothing but himself, might enjoy himself and give a moment of aesthetic enjoyment to others" (102).

Bavinck makes the case that the Christian worldview alone "allows sin to be what it really is" (111) and accounts for the divine moral order legislated into the very fabric of nature (106). The Christian religion furnishes us with a genuine history held together by God's saving acts (115) as "the world realizes salvation itself according to the counsel of his will" (116). The reason and spirit at work in history, which find ultimately empty expression in Georg W. F. Hegel, are situated in their rightful place in Christianity (120). "For that reason Christianity is not hostile to 'history' [*historie*], but it is the animating idea, the leading thought, the all-pervasive leaven, in it" (121). Christianity holds together the unity of the world against the recalcitrant,

autonomous pretensions of man, reminding him that in his being and acting he is "always and everywhere bound to laws that were not devised by him but that are prescribed to him by God as the rule of his life" (128).

Translation of Bavinck's *Christian Worldview* has supplied readers access to another key artifact of Bavinck's brilliant abilities. English readers have already had access for some time to Bavinck's insights into Christian epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics as threads woven into the arrangement of dogmatic loci in the *Reformed Dogmatics*. But those insights, which are woven as threads into a dogmatic tapestry there, find distinct and detailed thematic attention here. The result is that readers now have access to a fuller picture of the theological genius of Bavinck as he deployed it in the development of a unified Christian worldview against its contenders.

This book is no defense of a generic natural theism that can stand with functional epistemological independence apart from the revelation of Scripture. Nor is Bavinck offering modest propositions about the reasonable warrant of Christianity. Rather, he is advancing the audacious claim of the exclusivity of the explanatory power of the Christian worldview.

Bavinck's cultivation of that Christian worldview in this work resources an organically unified Christian epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics for the sake of combating the discord of life that he perceived at the beginning of the twentieth century, one that has marched on in violence and vigor since then. The translation of this relatively small book is a significant gift to Christians confronted with our own furiously discordant world. It traces the contours of the harmonious hope that belongs to those who "assemble under the banner of the King of truth" (129).

DANIEL SCHROCK

Adjunct Faculty and PhD Student
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, PA

Grant Wacker. *One Soul at a Time: The Story of Billy Graham*. Library of Religious Biography. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019.

As a follow-up to Grant Wacker's 2014 volume *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), which focuses largely on Billy Graham's relationship to American culture, *One Soul at a Time* focuses more on Graham himself; this is more of a traditional biography. Each of the fifty-one chapters—or "scenes," as Wacker calls them—are short, ranging between three and eight pages, and are organized in four parts: 1. Young Barnstormer, 2. Leading

Evangelist, 3. Priestly Prophet, and 4. Elder Statesman. Though much of this volume necessarily focuses on Graham's relationship to American culture and politics, Wacker also considers Graham's endeavors internationally, particularly with respect to his evangelistic crusades (see esp. 187–203). He cites the opinion of another author that Graham did more than anyone else to turn evangelicalism into an international movement (187). Wacker even suggests that his influence abroad may in the long run be more significant than his influence in the United States (187).

Graham's story is well known to many. Wacker suggests at the outset, "Probably more people saw or heard Graham preach than any other person in history" (1). This itself is remarkable and worthy of further attention. Wacker asks two driving questions: 1) how to account for Graham's unique standing in American religious history (perhaps comparable only to George Whitefield), and 2) how to account for Graham's power to connect with people. Wacker answers the first question by highlighting Graham's adaptability to and use of the trends of the age in which he found himself. To the second topic, Wacker argues that Graham was malleable—not in a duplicitous manner, but in his willingness to change (5–6). Later, he concludes that Graham expertly withstood the influences of modernity while also being flexible enough to adapt with the times (257). Wacker believes Graham's weaknesses, while real, were much less pronounced: name-dropping, basking in the limelight, willingness to speak on issues beyond his expertise, and lack of attention to the deeper views of others (268–70). As for strengths, Wacker includes Graham's successful ministry devoid of scandal, (some examples of) political courage, his charisma and hard work, his role as a lasting "moral gyroscope," and genuine humility (270–75).

Whether readers already know the gist of the story of America's most famous twentieth-century preacher or not, they will find this to be an informative, briskly paced narrative that fills in the picture of the evangelist. Wacker writes well and does not burden the volume with overly technical jargon; his style is much more informal. Endnotes are few and far between, but their dearth belies a deep familiarity with the subject matter; Wacker has clearly done his research, including extensive research in relevant correspondence and visiting with Graham himself. Wacker is a biographer, not a hagiographer; his discussion of Graham is critical at points, but the overall portrait is, on the whole, sympathetic. This becomes clearer as the book draws to its close. He treats the twilight of Graham's life and his legacy with deference and due circumspection. Even so, Wacker's own theological views, which he identifies as standing to the left of many of Graham's, peek through at various junctures, as he himself implies they might (xiv).

Occasionally the author assesses what Graham (or his associates) were feeling or thinking, or why they were motivated to act a certain way. For example, the author states matter-of-factly that it "never occurred" to Graham, the governor of South Carolina (Strom Thurmond), or to anyone else, that Graham's address to the South Carolina legislature in 1950 "might cross a boundary between church and state" (45). This cannot be demonstrated. We often simply do not know whether Graham had any doubts about a course of action (155), or whether he "felt not a trace of intimidation" (223). Similar statements are made elsewhere. Though Wacker is right to assess events in Graham's life, and even to assess his possible motivations, we should be cautious in saying too much.

This biography raises some important questions with which those in ministry must wrestle. What are the legitimate or illegitimate uses of technology and marketing for the sake of the gospel? How does a minister of the gospel navigate the toils and snares of politics without dismissing their importance? Is it ever proper to play down theological distinctives for a larger, strategic cause? Readers may also ask whether Graham's theological foundations were deep and precise enough. Even so, Graham's legacy will likely be remembered positively, both inside and outside the church. The consistency in Graham's message and character, which are amply recounted in this volume, are likely major reasons why.

The hardback edition features a dust jacket, several high-quality photographs of Graham through the years, a timeline and alphabetical listing of crusades and countries visited, and a general index. For those interested in such things, *One Soul at a Time* has also been released in audiobook format.

BRANDON D. CROWE

Professor of New Testament
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, PA

Stephen Tomkins. *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*. Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010.

Visiting the Museum of Slavery in my hometown of Liverpool, I was struck by the extent to which the secular mentality succumbs to the sirens and airbrushes out Christian contributions to history. Of course, this remark applies not to the origins of slavery, for where there are victims, perpetrators are named and shamed, but to its abolition, for in that case the Christian contribution is often relegated to a footnote. The historian's task is essential in overcoming the postmodern fad of selectively rewriting the history of

racism to suit the agendas of social constructivism and its *bêtes noires* of whiteness, colonialism, and the free-market economy. Insofar as that is concerned, this book fulfills its promise by not letting memory die and narrating the story of the Clapham protagonists, warts and all.

Stephen Tomkins has authored several books on Christian history, including biographies of John Wesley, William Wilberforce, and David Livingstone, and is editor of *Reform* magazine, a publication of the United Reformed Church in England. This volume is neither an academic monograph nor a popular work for general readership. However, it is well documented with original and secondary sources and has a useful select bibliography and index. It fills a gap in documenting the work of the Clapham group and of Wilberforce himself, the leading actor among many whose names are forgotten today. It provides a useful door into the complexities of the abolition of the slave trade, and then slavery itself, at a time following that other momentous event in Europe, the French Revolution. It is for this reason that a short review of a book published ten years ago is relevant in this journal, as in light of the present context, public theology can hardly forget the herculean labors of Wilberforce but must rather showcase them.

It goes without saying that neither the Clapham sect nor Wilberforce himself were ever the flavor of the month with the establishment, who had financial interests in the slave trade and whose activities were undermined by abolitionism. What is more, their religion, influenced by the evangelical revivals, was too "enthusiastic" for social respectability. The name itself "Clapham sect" can be attributed to a lapse of memory by Sir James Stephen, one of the descendants of the group, in 1844. The original critic he was referring to had called them "the Clapham church" or "the patent Christians of Clapham." (Clapham at the time was on the outskirts of south London, but some of the group never lived there.) The introduction points out that the group was not a sect in the modern sense, as all were devoted members of the Church of England who were keen to distance themselves from "dissenters" and Methodist excess. Nor was it an official organization, although it spawned many societies for social reform, mission activities, education, the struggle against poverty, and the distribution of the Bible. The sect "was simply a group of friends who shared a particular religious outlook, in this case evangelical Anglican activism" (11).

These comments set the scene for the seemingly insurmountable mountain the group set itself to climb by taking up reform and the courage and perseverance that were required to overcome entrenched opposition. What they may have lacked in finesse, they certainly made up for in vision,

courage, enthusiasm, and conviction as to the rightness of the outcome. Their passion had two channels, social action and evangelism. Two paradoxes can be pointed out. The logic of evangelical social action is a strange one. While holding an otherworldly position with a strong contrast between the present evil world and eternity, they set about making this world better. Tomkins says that this was "because evangelicals were creatures of the Enlightenment and so believed that God gave us a world to be improved, not just conserved." The sacrifice of Christ "meant that costly mercy is God's most important attribute, and so gracefully forwarding it is essential to being his child" (19–20). But one wonders if that is all there is to it. This seems to be rather a modern understanding of this development, and one wonders whether the shift from Calvinism to Arminianism in the generation that followed John Newton, which is described in a rather unsatisfactory and cursory way (33), is not of more strategic importance. The second paradox is that the Clapham group invested all their efforts and their fortune in their movement, and yet in doing so, they became rather well off in terms of upward social mobility, which was one of the reasons for their subsequent influence on Victorian Britain. "They believed in holding their earthly wealth lightly and so were willing to share it" (19). Their sacrificial self-giving was recompensed with blessing in a way they had perhaps not sought.

This is a challenging issue for those who hold a "faith and life" view. If the Clapham group worked with a critical attitude to the world—and even more so some of its pleasures like theater, opera, and the fine arts—and concentrated on activism, is there not a danger in political theology or in a "faith and life" view of becoming lost in theoretical discussions and forgetting action? Is the tendency not to become sterile or even divisive on points of theory? It would certainly be interesting in this context to compare the Clapham group's view of poverty and that of Abraham Kuyper, who criticized his contemporaries for being too slow to act.

Three further comments can be made in evaluating this book. Firstly, if this is not an academic analysis, it is not particularly easy to follow either. This is not because it is badly written (although I did find an incomprehensible sentence on p. 58, lines 11–12), but because of the way Tomkins tackles the subject, focusing on the dozen or so families involved, the Thorntons, Venns, Wilberforces, Babingtons, Macaulays, and Stephenses, over three generations, with intermarriage and breeding. In spite of the *dramatis personae* provided at the start, the skein of interrelations is sometimes so complex it is difficult to disentangle. Perhaps diagrams of family trees would have been useful. Furthermore, in adopting the approach that makes the Clapham story a family story, which in itself is legitimate, Tomkins

bypasses some of the broader interests the average reader might have. For instance, since the main achievement of the group concerned the abolition of slavery, some background to the question of slavery itself would have been useful: What are its origins and development in early modern Europe? How did those who were confessedly Protestant, like the Dutch and English, rationalize their action, if they did at all? Was Scripture used to justify it, as later in the case of apartheid? Did perceptions of race contribute to the development of the slave trade, or was it simply financial opportunism? What did the Enlightenment view of man contribute, if anything, to the growth of the slave trade? How did slavery, granted it has always existed in different forms and societies, lead to modern racism? In a sense, the author supposes in several areas that we know something already, whereas we know very little because until very recently taboos have limited knowledge of this somber page of history.

Secondly, if the scene of this drama could have been better set in a background introduction, the book sadly lacks at the end as well. It hardly lives up to its subtitle. The last three pages are fascinating and merit a longer development. The author's thesis that the Clapham group was out of sync with the eighteenth-century ethos but that it prepared the Britain of the Victorian era is affirmed but only developed in the most summary way and certainly not demonstrated. The offspring of the group were influential and sometimes illustrious, as in the case of the great historian of the epoch Thomas Babington Macaulay: a bishop, two archdeacons, a canon, thirteen other clergy, nine MPs, an earl, a lord, two barons, two baronets, three knights, the governor of Bombay, civil servants, lawyers, a newspaper proprietor, and the authors of the hymns "O Worship the King" and "Just as I Am" are referenced. Also, there are descendants of the second generation who turned away, such as Sir Leslie Stephen, an agnostic who published Thomas Hardy and was the father of Virginia Woolf. Clapham became the spirit of the Victorian age, we are told: "the earnestness and solemnity, the fervour and dogmatism, the puritanism and fastidiousness, the sense of duty and self-denial, the sexual propriety and sobriety, the philanthropy and charity, the domesticity, the sabbath keeping, the distrust of the theatre, and the sense of a benevolent, God-given mission to the world" (248). All these things later generations found to be moralistic and self-righteous, or in other terms, paternalistic. The question is as to how the holy ardor of the first generation turned into the moralism of later evangelicalism, with an overbearing legalism that plagues the evangelical world down to today. This is not a footnote, but a question that remains, as neo-evangelicals chase and attempt to hop on the juggernauts of social justice.

Finally, there is the theological question. The Bible Society, which grew out of the movement, distributed 8.5 million Bibles in 157 languages by 1834 and 181 million by its centenary in 1904. These were people who loved and honored God's Word, but some of the values they got from it, though essential to them, seem to us to be antiquated, culture conditioned and foreign—in a word, not biblical or binding at all. The question of the theology, perhaps we should say the faith, of Clapham, if it is referred to in many places, is not described in any detail, and the relation between that faith, coming out of the earlier revivals and life, and the subsequent history of the Victorian era, remains something of a mystery. "Amazing grace" led to a multitude of works and was the powerhouse behind them, but how those works became incarnate practically in sinful society seems to have been more of a pragmatic operation than a result of theological consequence. Put another way, On what biblical and theological basis did the Clapham group oppose slavery? It would appear that they had no place for John Calvin's third use of the law or integrated theology of the Christian life. The territory of social reflection was increasingly occupied by the enemies of Clapham: Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, to be followed later by Karl Marx and his disciples. It remains the default position of social visionaries to this day.

This book is valuable as a way into the achievements of the Clapham group. It raises many questions that have become more pressing ten years later and offers an invitation to another and more definitive work on the subject. Is it too much to hope that such a work will not be written from the perspective of social constructivism?

PAUL WELLS
Professeur émérite
Faculté Jean Calvin
Aix-en-Provence, France

Christian C. Sahner. *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

This finely researched and written book began as a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University. Christian Sahner is associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Oxford and a fellow of Saint Cross College. His work is a boon to anyone interested in the interplay between Christians and Muslims as Islam expanded west in the seventh to the ninth centuries of the present era (ca. 660–860). It provides a description of the world in which

the Christian martyrs (called "neomartyrs" by their contemporaries) lived and answers the question as to how the early medieval Middle East, northern Africa, and eventually Andalusia, progressively mutated from being a majority Christian territory into a majority Muslim society.

The book is not a general history but focuses on the role of largely unknown Christian martyrs and also how violence was a factor in the expansion of Islamic power. The known Christian martyrs during the period examined number less than three hundred (3), including a great number in Spain (forty-eight in Cordoba between 850–59), whereas Muslim martyrdom was nonexistent. On the Christian side, in contrast with Jewish or Zoroastrian victims of violence, Sahner indicates that martyrdom was a specifically Christian idea and practice. There was almost a predetermined script for persecution and martyrdom, established by the first Christian martyrs and the fact that all but one of Christ's apostles died a martyr's death. And its supreme example was from "the most profound inspiration from the figure of Jesus himself, who preached a message of finding strength through weakness and achieving victory through defeat" (1, 4, 7).

The use of capital punishment against Christians was an important feature of this history but was limited in scope (5). Rather than being the result of constant hostility and systematic persecution under the early caliphs, martyrdom existed against the backdrop of a common shared life as a means of establishing borders between the two communities. It served to maintain Muslim supremacy in a situation of minority power over against the conquered Christian majority. The Umayyad and Abbasid authorities persecuted and killed Christians to keep them in place since Islam could not afford challenges to its legitimacy. So bloodshed and martyrdom were rather the exception and served specific goals. Sahner argues that Christians did not experience systematic persecution under the early caliphs and remained the largest portion of the population in the greater Middle East for centuries after the Arab conquest. He calls the martyrs "outliers" (78), using a neologism I thought existed primarily in the realm of statistics.

The extraordinary episodes of oppression are a factor that contributed to the spread of Islam. But rather than the sword, it was heavy taxation and harassment by the Muslim authorities, as well as obstacles to trading, that made Christians turn to Islam "faster than sheep rushing to water." Given these considerations, the fact remains that Muslim expansionism was by conquest, leaving a trail of bloodshed and slavery in its wake. Memories of bloodshed and martyrdom forged the Christian conscience of what it means to be a minority identity in the new Islamic empire. Perhaps it could also be said that Muslim identity was also forged by the spirit of conquest

and oppression, and the expression of this attitude has remained ingrained and known resurgence at various times in the history of Islam. Memory laid the foundations for subsequent antagonistic relations in centuries to come.

The martyrs came from all over. One of the great things about this book is that we get to know the moving stories of those who have been completely forgotten but who paid the ultimate price for their belief. Sahner introduces little-known martyrs executed by Muslim officials in far-flung places such as Syria and Spain, Egypt, and Armenia. They include an alleged descendant of Muhammad who converted, functionaries of the Muslim state or traders who unwisely insulted the Prophet, the children of mixed marriages, and many Christian monks. The story is one of how isolated individuals or small groups rejected Islam in dramatic acts of resistance, including apostasy and blasphemy.

The book has five major chapters, in which the following themes are examined consecutively: "1. Converting to Islam and returning to Christianity; 2. Converting from Islam to Christianity; 3. Blaspheming against Islam; 4. The trials and execution of Christian martyrs; and 5. Creating saints and communities." Two indices follow, one a comparison of Christian and Muslim accounts of the martyrdoms and the second a helpful glossary of names and keywords. In order to tackle the subject the author examines the original sources in the martyr narratives in a range of Middle Eastern languages. Contrary to some recent scholars, such as Candida Moss, Sahner accords a good deal of credence to the literary form of the martyr stories and resists the temptation to consider them as simple hagiographic fabrications (8–22).

Two main issues are present in the stories which end in martyrdom. Firstly, conversion from Islam to Christianity—either by those who had been Christian before their conversion to Islam and more rarely the conversion of those of Muslim origin—and secondly, blasphemy. The general rule at play concerning conversion is that "although it may have been easy to join the Muslim community, over time, it became exceptionally hard to leave it" (35). Sahner points out that contrary to the complex initiation rites for conversion to Christianity, the threshold for entering the Muslim *umma* was low. Often it entailed the mass conversion of Arab tribes or people groups. It was a straightforward procedure (and remains so today) involving the recitation of the double *shahada*, or Muslim confession of faith, one of the five pillars of Islam: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger." If apostasy is hardly condoned in the Qur'an, at the same time there is no provision for the execution of apostates. Early on there were examples of Muslims who apostatized but were not killed, including the

Prophet's Companion 'Ubaydallah b. Jahsh, who converted to Christianity never to return. Later however, after the Ridda Wars (632–33), apostasy became inadmissible. The *hadith* narrated by the Companion Ibn 'Abbas (688), "Kill anyone who changes his religion!" gained weight (36).[1]

Blasphemy seems to have been an extension of apostasy, the act of pouring scorn on the Messenger and his sacred status by negating the *shahada*. It arose in some cases by misadventure out of inattention and in others by intentional provocation. Efforts were made in the trials of apostates and blasphemers to persuade the perpetrators and encourage return. Offenders were sentenced only as a last resort. Umayyad and Abbasid officials were cautiously clement and followed procedure before the sentence, but refusal and condemnation culminated in "decisiveness and fury," including torture. The so-called *hiraba* (brigandage) verse of the Qur'an (Q. *al-Ma'ida* 5.33) states, "The recompense of those who wage war against God and His messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land is that they be killed or crucified or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, or they shall be expelled from the land. That shall be their degradation in this world, and in the hereafter, they shall have a terrible torment" (170–71). If the burning of heretics is nowhere present in the Qur'an and was contested by Muslim jurists, it was probably adopted on Roman and Byzantine precedent (176–91). Burning served to demonstrate who held power in Islamic society and also prevented there being relics to feed the cult martyrs.

The final chapter recounts how in martyrologies the apostates of one community became the icons of the other. Their lives are presented as models to honor and emulate, so encouraging others to abandon Islam, and illustrating the injustices of the enemy. The aim was to present resistance to the powerful by openly disparaging the foundations of Islam and the Prophet himself. Several of the martyr stories originated in a small number of monasteries and represented the no-compromise position of the martyrs who were themselves often monks or nuns (213).

This first book-length study of Christian martyrdom in the early Islamic period is completed by a fifty-page bibliography and index. It raises important questions that remain in the mind of the engaged reader. Sahner states in the preface that his intention is not to compare religious violence in the early Islamic era and the present situation, and that should such

[1] Sahner does not reference Christine Schirrmacher, *"Let There Be No Compulsion in Religion" (Sura 2:256): Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians: Discourses on Apostasy, Religious Freedom and Human Rights* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), which primarily concerns the modern era, but probably appeared too late for inclusion; see *Unio cum Christo* 3.2 (October 2017): 252–56.

considerations be legitimate, it is a work best left to another writer. A concluding chapter on the issues linking the past to the present would certainly have been difficult to write, but without it the book remains suspended in the past. Martyrs there were then, and martyrs there are now, as history sadly repeats itself. That now as then these martyrs are almost exclusively Christian cannot but raise suggestions in the readers' minds. Perhaps the most prominent of these concerns how the witness of the founders of each faith is formative for their followers since they were the supreme exemplars.

Furthermore, if, as the author states when discussing conversion, scholars tend to overlook what kind of Islam converts were embracing and what kind of Christianity they were leaving, and if it is necessary to recall that "Islam" and "Christianity" "meant something very different than they do today" (33), the tantalizing question remains as to the nature of those differences. It is hard to overlook that whereas Christianity in the West has gone through the transformations of Humanism and the Enlightenment, the same is not the case for Islam. In both cases this fact must impact the nature of mission and the winning of converts. Does Islam recognize that there should be "no compulsion in religion," as Christianity has done because of the break with caesaropapism and the rise of the notion of freedom of conscience following the Reformation? Is it still difficult to exit Islam, and what does that say about it as a religion? And if in post-Christian Europe it is becoming rapidly difficult to dissent from social agendas and express one's opinion without compulsion, what does that say about the "progress" of Western society? This indicates the difficulty of holding together conviction and liberty or certainty and tolerance in any society.

Finally, what does this book say about ourselves as its modern readers? It is a paradoxical experience to be sitting comfortably with a finely produced volume about martyrdom and to measure the difference between our comfortable lives and the gory sufferings of martyrs who seeded the church—rather like sitting in a plush, air-conditioned cinema watching people slipping down the deck of the Titanic to their doom. We can be relieved not to be there, but does it not ultimately raise the uncomfortable question as to the nature of faith and the outcome of our lives? Have the creature comforts we consider essential to our quality of life effectively weakened our perception of the grace of God?

PAUL WELLS

CONTRIBUTORS

WILLIAM B. BOWES is a PhD student in New Testament and Christian origins at the University of Edinburgh. He also works as a mental health counselor with disadvantaged populations, frequently with those affected by homelessness.

JEAN FRANCESCO A. L. GOMES has been a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil since 2013 and is a PhD student at Calvin Theological Seminary majoring in systematic theology and moral theology. He worked as assistant professor in homiletics and practice of preaching at South Presbyterian Seminary (2013–2015) and taught the same subject at Servant of Christ Theological Seminary (2015–2017).

SURYA HAREFA is a researcher at the Faith and Culture Center of Tokyo Christian University. He earned his PhD at Theological University Kampen with research on Abraham Kuyper's ecclesiology and its implications for equipping Japanese Christians for their political engagements. Prior to this, he studied at Tokyo Christian Theological Seminary and International Reformed Evangelical Seminary in Jakarta.

ALLAN M. HARMAN taught Old Testament at Free Church Scotland College, Edinburgh, Reformed Theological College, Geelong, and Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne, Australia, where he also served as principal. He has written commentaries on Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and Isaiah. He is the author of *Joseph Addison Alexander of Princeton* (EP Books, 2014) and *Preparation for Ministry* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2015).

YANNICK IMBERT is professor of apologetics and church history and dean of the Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France. He is a member of the theological commission of the Conseil national des évangéliques de France and the editorial committee of the *Journal of Urban Mission*.

He has written several studies on J. R. R Tolkien and is the author of an introduction to apologetics, *Croire, expliquer, vivre: Introduction à l'apologétique* (Excelsis and Kerygma, 2014).

PETER A. LILLBACK is president of and professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He spent twenty-seven years as a pastor in Pennsylvania and Delaware. In 2000 he founded the Providence Forum. His most recent work is *Saint Peter's Principles: Leadership for Those Who Already Know Their Incompetence* (P&R Publishing, 2019).

BRIAN G. MATTSON is adjunct professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and senior scholar of public theology for the Center for Cultural Leadership. He is the author of *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Brill, 2012) and *Cultural Amnesia: Three Essays on Two Kingdoms Theology* (Swinging Bridge, 2018).

BRUNO GONÇALVES ROSI is an MDiv candidate at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Previously, he was a professor of political science and international relations in Universidade Cândido Mendes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Among his recent publications are "Brazil-USA Relations from Tiradentes to Barão Do Rio Branco," *Brazilian Journal of International Relations* 6.1 (2017) and "Political Aspects of the Early Implantation of Protestantism in Brazil," *Rever* 18.2 (2018). He is a member of Primeira Igreja Batista Bíblica do Rio de Janeiro [First Biblical Baptist Church in Rio de Janeiro], Brazil.

CHRISTOPHER D. STEED spent a dozen years in United Kingdom government service before embarking on full-time Christian ministry. He is currently Programme Lead in Theology and Counselling at London School of Theology. With doctorates in social studies and theology, he spent three years as director of Operation Mobilisation and seven years in secondary education. Publications include *The Red Stain of Cain* (Europe Books, 2021) and *The Identification Principle: The Radical Implications of the Incarnation* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2019).

CALL FOR ARTICLES FOR *UNIO CUM CHRISTO*

The editorial committee invites the submission of articles (7,000 words maximum including footnotes) for future issues of the journal. Articles should be rooted in the Reformed faith and its confessional texts, and aim to be informative, edifying, missional in perspective, and relevant to current challenges facing the Christian faith worldwide.

We would like to encourage theologians (including research students) and pastor-theologians, particularly from countries in the developing world, to submit articles on issues relevant to the role of Reformed theology in their national and cultural contexts, and also book reviews.

We would also be pleased to consider texts translated into English that have already been published in journals in other languages.

Submissions will be peer reviewed before acceptance.

Upcoming numbers of the journal will present the following general themes:

2021/2 Pastoral Theology and Preaching
2022/1 Economics and Business
2022/2 J. I. Packer, John Stott, and Global Anglicanism
2023/1 Biblical Counseling
2023/2 The Doctrine of the Church and Its Mission

Dates of submission of completed articles are six months before the appearance of the journal in April and October.

Before submitting an article, contact Bernard Aubert (baubert@wts.edu) with a proposition of subject and an abstract (less than 200 words). Details concerning formal presentation will then be communicated to the author together with approval of the proposition (Guidelines of Style are available at uniocc.com/journal/guidelines).

Paul Wells
Editor in Chief