

Discerning the Calling of Theology

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In: Kirsten van der Ham, Geke van Vliet, Peter-Ben Smit and Klaas Spronk (2022 Eds.) *Building Bridges Towards a More Humane Society. Explorations in Contextual Biblical Interpretation on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Bridging Gaps Exchange Program*. Geneva: Globethics.net, 21-30.

Introduction

When we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Bridging Gaps programme, we look back in gratitude for the enrichment it has offered to not only its participants but also the theological institutions that hosted the programme. Having students from a wide diversity of backgrounds brought voices from many parts of the world—including Asia, Africa, Latin and South America, and Eastern Europe. Voices that challenged the host institutions and raised questions and perspectives different from those commonly heard in the highly secularised and relatively affluent context of the Netherlands.

Moments of celebration and commemoration are also opportunities for contemplation. What is the calling of theology – and theologians – in the concrete situation we live in? In other words, do we understand the ‘kairos’ of our times? How do we read the ‘signs of the times’? How does that understanding affect what we have done in the past, and how does it affect what we do today? To whom are we accountable for what we have done or will do? Who benefits from our theology, and who suffers from it?

When we discuss these questions, we engage in public theology, no matter which theological discipline one is specialised in. It may be helpful to distinguish between three kinds of public theology: 1) missionary theology, which aims to spread the Christian message around the globe and thus make the church grow; 2) critical or liberation theology, which aims to change the world by critically analysing it and confronting it with biblical values; and 3) cultural hermeneutics, which uses theological concepts to understand the deep meanings of cultures and societies.¹ Although all three kinds of public theology are legitimate and meaningful, to explore the questions raised in this contribution, I primarily choose the critical kind of public theology.

¹ Cf Ruard R. Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road when Tracing the Sacred. Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion,” paper presented at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Chicago (2009)

Attributed (probably mistakenly, and popularised by many) to Aristotle, it is said that our vocation is found at the intersection of our passions, our capacities, and the needs of the world. Regardless of its source, the saying serves as a powerful tool for reflecting on what theology could and should mean to today's world and to the faith communities living in it. When our passions are disconnected from expertise, it leads to amateurism. When our expertise is disconnected from our passions, it leads to disengagement. And when we are disconnected from the needs of the world, both our passions and expertise become blatantly irrelevant. The questions to be answered, then, to reflect on our calling are the following: what are our passions, and what drives us in our work? What are the capacities, skills, and expertise that theology brings to the table? And what do we identify as the fundamental needs of the world?

The Needs of the World

I start with the last question because it avoids the risk of inside-out thinking, which takes our own perspective as the standard and tries to find a need that suits our interests. Outside-in thinking, in contrast, leads to new approaches and innovation, as we have seen in the critical reflections emerging from liberation theologians, feminist theologians, contextual Bible-reading projects, and pop-culture theology.² Starting with the needs of the world, three interlocking issues come to the fore: the global COVID-19 pandemic, structural inequality and racism, and the climate crisis. At first glance, these issues seem rather unrelated. COVID-19 can be described and is often approached as a grave medical challenge, one demanding the implementation of strict measures based purely on medical – especially epidemiological – insights. Structural inequality and racism are usually approached as socio-economic and legal challenges, albeit fraught with emotional overtones that often lead to polarisation rather than resolution. The climate crisis, denied by a significant number of individuals, organisations, and even some countries, is often considered a matter of technological challenges and/or necessary changes in human behaviour.

Although many may agree that all three issues touch upon existential questions, societal and political responses are usually pragmatic, carrying a short-sighted bias towards the local rather than the global, the short term rather than the long term. An obvious corollary to this pragmatic short-sightedness is the (probably subconscious) assumption that all three, instead of being human induced and sustained, are basically quasi-natural phenomena. In effect, they are considered mostly unrelated to fundamental spiritual, religious, or philosophical questions.

One question theologians may start to ask, therefore, is what the intersection between these three issues might be, and how that intersection relates to the

² Cf Ruard R. Ganzevoort, "Framing the Gods. The Public Significance of Religion from a Cultural Point of View," in *The Public Significance of Religion*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Hans-Georg Ziebertz (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 95–120.

spiritual or religious domains. The question is not far-fetched. COVID-19 has exacerbated structural inequalities between individuals, groups, and societies. People with low-income jobs are more exposed to risks of infection, have fewer opportunities to protect themselves, and suffer more from lockdowns and quarantines because of their housing situation. Meanwhile, rich countries have the upper hand in acquiring and distributing vaccines, thereby increasing global inequality (and, actually, the risk of developing new and potentially more dangerous variants).

Similarly, the climate crisis significantly increases inequalities, with the more affected communities usually finding themselves in situations with fewer resources for adaptation. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, because they augment inequalities, lead to an increased polarisation, an increasing demand for solidarity, and an increasing push towards migration and international dependencies. In short, they foster geopolitical imbalances, imbalances that are fertile grounds for social ostracisation and racism.

At this point, I am reminded of the 'conciliar process' that the World Council of Churches initiated in 1983, a ten-year programme of 'mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.'³ The prophetic vision behind this process has not lost its pertinence, especially because it takes a holistic perspective in identifying the major problems of the contemporary world. Although this fundamentally spiritual approach to fundamental societal challenges has not always resonated well in (international) politics, the concepts used are more than applicable now, some 40 years later, when we understand that peace and justice are also at stake in the three issues I foregrounded here, that the integrity of creation proves to be even more fundamental to those issues than it may have been acknowledged in the 1980s. To take these interlocking challenges seriously, we need to address the domains of climate justice, medical justice, and, especially, the fundamental interconnectedness of all creation of which we are part.

Our Expertise

What, then, can theology offer to the needs of the world? Obviously, the expertise of theologians varies from detailed scrutiny of biblical sources to understanding the history and development of traditions of faith to analysing the logic and coherence of religious convictions to critically describing and fostering faith practices within and beyond faith communities. All these can be brought to the table when dealing with the fundamental needs of the world, especially when we consider the intersections between them. The current challenges may not be identical to those encountered by our predecessors in biblical times, but the traditions of wisdom represented by various religions remain an invaluable resource for critical reflection and inspiration. These traditions of wisdom help us cope with the radical uncertainty of our human

³ *Now is the Time*. JPIC Final Document, Geneva, 1990. Discerning the Calling of Theology

condition in times of climate crisis, our existential frailty surfacing during a global pandemic, our fundamental connectedness with the world and its inhabitants, and our ubiquitous struggle to uphold peace and justice for all. For me, the present crises and biblical insights result in at least the following four challenges that theology should take seriously.

First, we need to consider that, over the course of centuries, but especially in this age called the Anthropocene, humankind has not espoused the virtues of stewardship but has instead chosen destructive dominion over nature. In light of the fact that human extinction is a real possibility, one that would probably be beneficial to the earth and its other creatures, critical theological self-reflection is needed about the often-claimed unique position humans have among the rest of creation. How can we overcome our broadly shared hubris, possibly grounded in a dangerous interpretation of the Imago Dei, and develop a sense of cosmic humility?⁴

Second, we need to consider that, although our efforts to diminish our vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life, including pandemic diseases, may have been successful in some ways, our technological advances have, in fact, produced a 'risk society'⁵, one where we are prone to human-induced disasters on a global scale. Not only does this change our perspective on contingency and human agency, but it also leads to the question of how risks are distributed across different communities and individuals. Even when addressing natural disasters, the issue of 'risk justice' becomes important.⁶ Human frailty is no longer an amoral reality, if that was ever the case, but it has taken on a strong moral significance.

Third, we need to consider that hegemonic western theologies have often contributed to segregating individuals and communities rather than to a holistic understanding of our interconnectedness. Sometimes, this segregation was based on nationalism, racism, or similar exclusionary perspectives that many theologians today will find untenable.⁷ Sometimes, this segregation is still defended based on religious differences or opinions about gender and sexuality. Whatever ground is used to support division and segregation, the question of whether our theology contributes to an understanding of the world as being holistically interconnected must be raised.

Fourth, we need to consider the degree to which the (Protestant?) tendency to foreground dogmatic truth, the (Catholic?) tendency to highlight aesthetic

⁴ R.Ruard Ganzevoort, "Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: A Theological Essay about new Technologies," in *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, ed. Jan-Albert Van den Berg (Bloemfontein, South Africa: SUN Press, 2020), 45–64.

⁵ Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1986).

⁶ Alan March, Leonardo Nogueira de Moraes, and Janet Robin Stanley, "Dimensions of Risk Justice and Resilience: Mapping Urban Planning's Role Between Individual Versus Collective Rights," in *Natural Hazards and Disaster Justice: Challenges for Australia and Its Neighbours*, eds. Anna Lukaszewicz and Claudia Baldwin (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 93–115.

⁷ Marthe Hesselmans, *Racial Integration in the Church of Apartheid: A Unity Only God Wants* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018).

liturgical values, and the widespread tendency to locate ethical values especially in the individual domain of physical behaviours, such as sexuality, substance use, and violence influence our theologies. This could challenge us to ask whether we have given enough attention to matters of structural, political, and economic injustices and violence. Notwithstanding many theological contributions that have addressed this domain of public justice, in many contexts, faith communities may still face the temptation to look the other way.

Our Passion and Calling

Finally, I need to discuss our passions. A keyword in this challenge within theology for me is compassion.⁸ Compassion is not just an emotional or mental state of empathy; it is not altruistic behaviour with which it is commonly associated. In my view, compassion is first and foremost the awareness that we are connected to the entirety of creation, that what happens to any part of creation affects all of it (cf 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). This awareness includes not only humans but also (other) animals and the inanimate world surrounding us, as Saint Francis already understood. Based on this awareness is our willingness to be affected by the sufferings and joys of others and to be engaged in contributing to the well-being of all. This makes compassion an integrative and wholesome spiritual exercise that could be considered the central passion for theology and, therefore, a cornerstone for understanding our calling.

Our calling as theologians in the twenty-first century now becomes more concrete: it is to understand the signs of our times and address the fundamental challenges humankind and the earth are facing. It is to selfcritically assess the positive and negative contributions that our theological endeavours have yielded. It is to creatively and constructively build an inclusive, humble, and life-giving theology. It is precisely this calling that is prominent in the Bridging Gaps programme and that is exemplified in the many contributions of its alumni.

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