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## From Oppressive Calvinism to Transformative Calvinism in Indonesia

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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Singgih, Emanuel Gerrit
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-07-11 21:23:50
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173799">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173799</a>

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# **FROM OPPRESSIVE CALVINISM TO TRANSFORMATIVE CALVINISM IN INDONESIA: LEARNING FROM SOUTH AFRICA**

*Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, Indonesia*

### **1. Foreword**

This article was originally written in September 1998, four months after the sudden fall of General Soeharto, who had ruled for almost thirty years as President of Indonesia. It was a turbulent time, where forces of the reformation have to face the forces of the former regime, which tries to hold on as long as possible to their former privileges and power. Former vice president Habibie was appointed by Soeharto to replace him as president, and Habibie formally stated that he would continue the reformation which was started by the students who had opposed Soeharto. But at that time it seemed that the situation was bleak and that the struggle for democracy and civil society was going into a crucial stage in the life of the Indonesian people. I was invited to talk to a group of student activists, who were mainly Christians at the city of Semarang, but among them there were also some Muslims and Buddhists. The topic is how religions in Indonesia should respond to the

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Reformation (now with a big “R”). The term “*Reformasi*” in Indonesian has become a popular term to denote the post-Soeharto period.

At that time it was the students who became the spirit of the Reformation. It was they who started the big demonstrations after the monetary crisis hit South-East Asian countries in 1997 and created a change in the situation. But only a handful of Christians (mostly Catholics) were participating in the new movement. Even after the fall of Soeharto, many Protestants were at loss at how to respond to the Reformation. They decided to wait until the situation became stable (or until it was clear which part would win in the struggle). For some undisclosed reason, the talk was put off. Instead the group above asked me to send my article to them, which pretty soon was put on the internet and read by a wider audience. I suggested to my fellow Christians (in Indonesia, “Christian” means “Protestants” or “non-Catholics”) that one of the reasons was Calvinism as our theological heritage, which has become an oppressive theology because of its support for the *status quo*. However, I did not propose that Protestant churches in Indonesia should get rid of Calvinism, but by learning from South Africa, especially from John de Gruchy, try to revitalise and re-functionalise Calvinism to become a transformative theology.<sup>1</sup>

After eleven years it could be asked whether the period of learning is over, or whether we should produce contextual theologies which do not necessarily have a denominational colour. While striving to do this, I think what I have stressed at that time, is that Calvin (via De Gruchy of course) can help us in rethinking the idea of the state and the idea of the people of God. This is still valid and worthy to be considered even now, when it is clear that democracy, free elections and civil society start to function in Indonesia.

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<sup>1</sup> See De Gruchy, John W., *Liberating Reformed Theology*, Grand Rapids-Cape Town: Eerdmans-Philip, 1991.

## 2. Introduction

Theology does not consist of abstract ideas only. Increasingly people become aware that theology is a systematic reflection concerning the world around us and its concrete struggles. The world around us is Indonesia which is in the midst of a struggle to build or rebuild a civil society after the stepping down of president Soeharto on Ascension Day, May 21, 1998. What is hoped for is the making of a relevant theology for the churches in the present life of our nation and our country. This is what I try to offer in this presentation.

In this description of a relevant theology I cannot but rely on my background as a member of a Calvinist church (the Protestant church in Western Indonesia, which is the former colonial church, i.e. the state Calvinist church during Dutch rule in Indonesia). Although I am known as a contextual theologian who emphasised the local or the national dimension in doing theology in Indonesia, I never set aside Calvinism as my inherited theological convictions. As a Calvinist, I highly regard the Bible (that is why I am a biblical scholar first and only secondly a contextual theologian) and always try put my ideas on biblical bases, and of course these biblical bases are influenced to some extent by Calvinism, or better by John Calvin. I think Calvin has contributed deeply as to how the church could play a role in the life of a nation and country. He started from the understanding of the glory and image of God, and after that on the impact of this understanding on the relationship of one human being with another.

I learn about Calvin's understanding of the state and the people of God through John de Gruchy, a South African Reformed theologian. Of course as a student of theology in a former Reformed theological seminary (which is now an ecumenical and contextual theological faculty of a Christian University) I already studied ideas of Calvin concerning the state and the people of God, but I must confess that not until I re-read

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these ideas through the eyes of De Gruchy did I become aware of its significance for the life of Christians in Indonesia. From him I learn that the Church in South Africa has had much experience in challenging the dominant false theology which supported the apartheid system from the state.

Perhaps we can learn from Christians in South Africa how the world can influence faith. I expressly formulate it that way, because we used to think that faith is something which is permanent, and ought to influence the world. On one hand I wholeheartedly agree that our faith should have influence in the world, but on the other hand our faith also ought to be open to positive and transformative ideas of the world, precisely in order to produce a relevant and functional theology. The faith which belongs to the majority of white South Africans at the time of apartheid is expressed in a certain oppressive Calvinism which supported the apartheid system, and the result is oppression of the majority of the people of South Africa, who are black or coloured and who are also Christians (albeit from different denominations: the majority of the white people join the Gereformeerde church, while the majority of the black people join the Anglican Church).

De Gruchy and his friends who have fought to dismantle the apartheid system are able to rekindle the dynamics of Calvinist theology so that this theology can be used to counter the official Calvinist theology of the apartheid state. The struggle to make the world more just and humane (the fight against apartheid) which was going on in the society of South Africa can push Christians to produce a new interpretation concerning Calvinism which is based on the thinking of Calvin, and in turn this new interpretation can influence the white majority to get rid of apartheid. In Indonesia, Christians are not facing apartheid, but the ideology of the state as all-powerful and centralistic, which is created by the regime of Soeharto. During his long reign, Soeharto and his regime (he named his regime, "the New Order") has co-opted the other spheres

as well, including the church, and within the church people strived to adjust themselves to the demands of this ideology rather than resist this ideology. Our theological inheritance, namely Calvinism was "contextualised", and had become supportive of the status-quo. As I have stated above, it is this form of Calvinism which makes us unresponsive to the demands of the Reformation. Our Calvinist faith needs to be infused by new blood, namely the thinking of Calvin. But this re-thinking of Calvin is brought about by changes within the society, not within the church. In this case I think it is society which is influencing the church. That is why I used the term the world influencing our faith.

### **3. When the state becomes an idol**

The question of who is God, is fundamental. How we answer this question decides where our loyalty lies and the form of our loyalty towards Him. The question of who is God is closely related to the question of who are we as human beings: who am I and how is my relationship with my fellow human beings, my society and my environment. Calvin formulates it this way: without knowledge of ourselves as human beings we cannot possibly know God, and without knowledge of God we cannot possibly know human beings.<sup>2</sup> Calvin will agree to some extent that theology is related to anthropology. Our understanding of God also controls our understanding of ourselves. But at the same time Calvin emphasises that there is a fundamental difference between God and human beings. So it is very important to ask not only concerning who is God, but also what is his essence? "What is his nature?"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, 1,1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, I, 2,2.

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The difference lies in the absoluteness of God as Creator. Human beings and all the other creatures are not absolute, including those things which are created by human beings. Human beings cannot aspire to become absolute. If, however, they aspire to become like God, then it means that they have fallen into idolatry. The story of human beings is the story of the fall into idolatry, the hubris of human beings who uplift their understandings of race, nation, state, church, party, tribe, class, wealth and honour to become absolute, and by so doing they strive to set aside God. By changing God with their own creation which they have made absolute, they actually put themselves at the centre. Idolatry is worship of the self. According to Calvin, human beings are manufacturers of idols. It is our pleasure to manufacture idols.<sup>4</sup>

Usually we tend to regard idols negatively. Idols are symbols of paganism and paganism is against religion and against faith. But what Calvin wants to point out is not that aspect. The danger of idolatry lies in the fact that it consists of beautiful and glorious things, the high ideals that we all aspire to in our everyday life, even our image of God. In other words, the danger lies in our ideology or/and our theology. Calvin formulates it this way: idolatry is "impiety" but clothed with the language of "piety".<sup>5</sup> Why are people fascinated by idols? Because idols are attractive and full of promises, and by clinging onto these idols people feel that these promises will soon become reality, even concerning their ultimate aspirations. What is striking is that the effort of human beings to achieve their ultimate aspirations is termed "greed" or "covetousness" in the New Testament. Colossians 3:5 refers to sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. In Ephesians 5:5, covetous-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 11,8.

<sup>5</sup> See Calvin, John, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, p. 53.

ness is mentioned in one breath, and even identified with worship of idols.<sup>6</sup>

Why is greed identified with idolatry and not the other evils? Because according to Calvin, "...this disease is widely spread, and infects the minds of many like a contagion, but is not reckoned as a disease, but rather praised in the common estimation".<sup>7</sup> In the eyes of Calvin, what people regard as aspiration is precisely greed or avarice! For those who are used to the idea that Calvin is more or less responsible toward the rise of capitalism (and there are many who cling to this idea in our country!). I think Calvin promotes the sacralisation of hard work and "this-worldly asceticism", not sacralisation of accumulation of wealth at the expense of one's neighbour. That hard work and asceticism enabled people to save and in the end become rich and make investments is something which does not come into his considerations. Greed is closely related to money and power. According to De Gruchy who refers to Albert Nolan, the apartheid system which absolutised the Caucasian race is actually a camouflage to cover the urge to control all the assets in South Africa for the interests of the white minority. The roots of the doctrine of race supremacy is socio-economic vested-interests.<sup>8</sup> So, the idol is Mammon, the god of greed.

The problem faced by the church in South Africa (and also by the church in Indonesia) is a battle to choose between God and Mammon. In the framework of this problem it is useless to argue that idols are powerless images or statues, because here Mammon is very powerful, as the whole system, including the state, is within his grip. The state is an extension of the idol, and is in itself also an idol. We have seen above how

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<sup>6</sup> See De Gruchy, *ibid.*, p. 104. Calvin's comment on this passage in *The Epistles of Paul to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, p. 198 is quoted by De Gruchy.

<sup>7</sup> See Calvin, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See De Gruchy, *op.cit.*, pp. 105-106.

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Calvin in an ironic way described the beauty and attractiveness of the idol. But beside that, the state as idol can also show its fearsome aspect, its "tremendum". When the state becomes an idol, there is no freedom and all of its citizens are trapped in a gigantic prison called "the state" and are controlled by the state apparatus. This is the familiar story of the growth of a totalitarian society. How are we going to battle Mammon?

Calvin put forward the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Because God is sovereign, human beings do everything for the glory of God (*Soli Deo Gloria*). If this idea is isolated from the other parts of his thinking, then the danger is that we glorify God at the expense of human beings. I think there are many adherents of Calvinism in Indonesia, who always stress on the glory of God, and are oblivious toward the plight of human beings. Perhaps the influence of the dominant Islamic orthodox thinking, where God is everything and human beings are nothing is still strong. But clearly there is the other side of Calvin's thinking, where human beings are seen as taking part in the glory of God. It is through the obedience of Christ at the cross. In seminary we associate theology of the cross with Luther rather than with Calvin. But according to De Gruchy it is also evident in Calvin's own theology.<sup>9</sup> The glory of God is different from the glory of Mammon, because it is revealed through the humility of the cross. The humility of the cross is at the same time the glory of the cross. Through the glory of the cross, all the falseness and deceit of the glory of the idols are brought into its light, including the state! Calvin's theology concerning the glory of the cross enables the church to regard the state as the state and not as an idol.

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<sup>9</sup> See de Gruchy, op.cit., p. 122.

#### **4. Elected People: evidence of God's preferential option**

The notion of election is central in the Bible. In Calvin's thinking this idea of the elected people of God is related to the doctrine of predestination: if some people are elected, then logically others are not elected, or rejected. Seen in the framework of the one-sided emphasis on the sovereignty of God, this election and rejection becomes something that has been decided by God long ago, from the beginning of creation or even before that. It is the providence of God. But that is not in the end the intention of Calvin, or we can say later on he changed his mind on the function of the doctrine of predestination. He separated the teaching on predestination from the teaching of providence. The emphasis is on sureness and conviction that the life of the faithful is in the hand of God, no matter how difficult life is. It is intended as a doctrine of comfort. Predestination is not something that is arbitrarily distributed by God, but the grace of God, given freely to those who have no claim to that. It is the result of the people's reflection on God's grace to them.

If it is God's grace, then the basis for election cannot be the prosperity of the people, or their position of power and might, or their marvelous exploits. The problem with the notion of election is that the people of God tends to forget the factor of grace and cling to the idea of seeing themselves as being superior to the others. In South Africa many devout white church-going people felt that they are elect people, meaning, they are superior to the black people (this is my impression from De Gruchy's description of the idea of the elect among the whites). In Indonesia there are many Calvinists (the majority of Christians in Indonesia are Calvinists) who tend to regard themselves as being superior to Muslims, this is also caused by the fact that the majority of the Muslims are poorer than the Christians.

In the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy 7:7-8, the idea of election is placed in the framework of the Exodus: "The Lord did not set

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his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (KJV). Because Israel is the smallest among nations, God's heart is turned toward them, and God is in love with them. That is why He brought them out from the land of slavery. The relationship between God and Israel is described by using the language of love. According to De Gruchy, Calvin's idea of the elect people of God is actually the same as the starting point of many theologians of the third world concerning the principle of "preferential option for the poor".<sup>10</sup> This principle is about God's preference for the poor and the weak. It does not mean that only the poor or the weak can be saved, but God prefers them because their situation is desperate. For example, in hospitals around the world there are emergency wards. Those who are responsible for these wards, work very fast and efficiently to help the needy. But there are other parts of the hospital where people who need treatment have to wait for their turn. If people are asked to wait because a seriously ill patient needs attention, then this is normal, and nobody will protest. So does God in his dealing with people, he prefers the poor and the weak. The rich and the strong can wait as their life is not in immediate danger.

The idea of Exodus is of course accepted widely in the course of history. But we also have to be aware of the manipulations of this idea in the life of the people. Even in South Africa, the Dutch descendants who called themselves "the Boer people" identified their history with the Exodus. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Boers are facing extreme hardship in a war, which is caused by

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<sup>10</sup> See De Gruchy, *op.cit.*, pp. 125-130.

the intervention of British imperialists in South Africa. In this war many Boer women and children were put into concentration camps (the first in modern history!), and many of them died because of the sufferings. It is imagined as the same as the period of slavery in Egypt. Also the Boers were doing a long journey ("The Trek") to escape the arms of British imperialism, and this trek is imagined as the same with the journey of the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. The trauma caused by this war helped many to forge a determination not to be treated again in the same way. They did not want to suffer again, and to do that they will do everything necessary, including to put suffering on others, for the sake of protecting themselves. This is the story of the birth of apartheid. Suffering caused trauma and in turn trauma caused superiority and aggressiveness towards others. Perhaps the official policy of modern Israel toward Palestine can be cited as a contemporary example. They have suffered terribly under the Germans and to avoid being back in the same situation, they make the Palestinians suffer.

So I think it is not enough just to get inspiration from the Exodus story. The Exodus also must be seen in the light of the theology of the cross. But also in the New Testament we can see the principle of the preferential option. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick. I come to call not the righteous but the sinner" (Mark 2:17, my own translation). The first part of the verse is a simile, which explains the second part. It means that the phrases "the righteous" and "the sinner" cannot be understood in a dogmatic way to identify the righteous as those who are really hypocrites at heart, and the sinner as all who have accepted salvation in Jesus Christ. This is I think the popular exegesis of this verse in the congregations in Indonesia. The context of Mark chapter 2 helped us to understand "the sinner" and "the righteous" are terms to denote the place of people in society. In other words, they are religious terms, which even in the time of Jesus already have socio-logical connotations. "The righteous" are those who are regarded as the

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respectable people, and “the sinner” are those who are living in the margins. It is for the latter that Jesus came. Also according to Paul, “the fools” in the eyes of the world, they are the chosen ones (I Corinthians 1:27-29). The notion of election is seen through the theology of the cross, and from this perspective, the suffering of the world gets meaningful.

It is this merger between the idea of Calvin concerning the elect and the principle of preferential option of the poor and the weak by De Gruchy, which I find most helpful in looking at the place of Christians among others in Indonesia. I propose that we follow this new understanding, rather than the old understanding of the people of God above, where Christians tend to feel superior to others, especially non-Christians. The people of God are precisely people who are open to serve the others, not in a condescending way but in a humble and contrite way. But there is a difference in context. Both in the context of Calvin and De Gruchy, the majority are Christians. But in Indonesia, the majority of the people are Muslims who are poor and weak. We need to acknowledge humbly that the Muslims, precisely because they are in the margins, are also the people of God! In “contextual” reflections by church people who have adjusted themselves to the ideology of the state, this new idea cannot take root, because the Muslims are suspected of harbouring aspirations to make Indonesia a Muslim state and nation, like Iran or at least like Malaysia, where Islam is the state religion. It is the state ideology *contra* the Muslim ideology!

So what we need is a new contextual ideology which is not related at all to the state ideology. I am not a supporter of the idea of a Muslim state, but a supporter of a civil society in Indonesia. The church should participate in the building of a civil society. In a civil society we do not look at others through the perspective of a state ideology, but through the theology of the cross. So there is a dialectical relationship between the church as the people of God and the majority as the people of God.

We have to be aware of this dialectic, as this is the only way we can deal satisfactorily with the problem of plurality of religions in Indonesia. In the state ideology we deal with ethnic plurality, in the theology of the cross we deal with ethnic plurality *and* religious plurality. Both are important in our new contextual theology!

## **5. A Postscript**

In the foreward I referred to the students who played a crucial role in the fall of Soeharto in 1998. Their motivation was clear. After almost thirty years in power, Soeharto and his cronies were betraying the high ideals of the founding fathers of Indonesia, that is to make Indonesia free from the Dutch rule, so that the people can have a just and prosperous society. The country becomes a totalitarian state where everything is controlled by the state, and in turn the state is controlled by the circle around the president. In this situation where no one can control those who are in power, corruption and misrule becomes rampant. Outwardly, the country seems to be stable and prosperous, but the monetary crisis from 1997 onwards opens the eyes of the people that it is a "balloon-like prosperity", financed by big loans from abroad, and thus very fragile. The really prosperous are not the people. In fact, the people are pressured to make many sacrifices, such as the villagers in the region of Kedungombo, Central Java, who are forced to leave their villages and lands, so that their former area could be flooded to become a reservoir to provide electricity for the industrial needs of the big companies. It is the circle around the president who becomes richer and richer. We can say that the student revolt not only had a political and social dimension, but also a religious dimension. The fall of Soeharto also meant the breaking of the state as idol. By breaking the idol the people becomes free but also the state becomes free. When the idol is gone, we can regard the

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state as the state, nothing less and nothing more than that. It is part of the created reality around us.

But eleven years after the Reformation, we learn that the created reality around us is not only the state, but also the market and the community. These three entities are interdependent and form a kind of a triangle. But sometimes one of the corners tries to dominate the others, or one corner allies itself with the other corner, to dominate the third corner. During the period of the New Order, the state dominated the market and the community. Now it seems that the market is dominant, or the market and the state are allying themselves to the detriment of the community. But sometimes also, the community becomes dominant, as can be seen from the rise of primordialism in every part of Indonesia. Civil society moves within this triangle and tries to hold the triangle to be in a balance. Seen from a religious or theological perspective, the effort from civil society to hold the triangle in balance can be seen as an effort to prevent idolatry. Not only the state, but also the market, or the community could become (new) idols! Christians and the church are called to support civil society in its effort to hold the balance of power between the state, the market and the community. That is how I see the relationship between the church and the world in the context of Indonesia today. And all the time we have to be watchful, not to let our faith to be co-opted into one of the sphere of powers. What Calvin has taught us regarding the state and the people of God is still relevant today, if we broaden the scope of our vision to include the market and the community as part of that reality. By fighting against idols, we glorify God, especially in humanity coming alive (Irenaeus: *Gloria Dei vivens homo*), or better, we glorify God, especially in the liberation of the poor to full life (Romero: *Gloria Dei vivens pauper*).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See De Gruchy, *op.cit.*, p. 137.