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CLIMATE JUSTICE, FOOD SECURITY... AND GOD

Some Reflections from the Perspective of Eco-Theology

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6.1 The Current Climate in the South African Context

Allow me to begin my contribution with a few observations on the current interplay between climate change and food security in the South African context.¹¹ This interplay is appropriately termed the Food-Energy-Water nexus.¹² I offer these not as an expert in the field but as a concerned citizen. I will use this sketch of a constantly changing

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¹¹ In this contribution I will include academic-style references and some discussion in the footnotes rather than in the main text. I will deliberately draw mainly on (South) African literature and use some of my own work as short-cuts for a further survey of relevant literature.

¹² See the comment by Laura Pereira: “While the food-energy link is important, in terms of climate change impacts in South Africa the emphasis is on the linkages between the food and water systems.” See Pereira, Laura M., *The Future of South Africa’s Food System: What is research telling us?*, South African Food Lab, 2014. See http://awsassets.wwf.org.za/downloads/safl_the_future_of_south_africas_food_system.pdf (accessed 29 January 2016).

situation as the backdrop for some wider theological reflections on the underlying issues. It may perhaps serve as a parable that invites further reflection.

In the South African spring of 2015 climate scientists warned South African citizens that clear evidence from sea temperatures in the Pacific was available that a strongly developed El Niño system will have an impact on weather patterns in the summer rain fall areas in southern African countries in 2015/2016. This warning proved to be timeous, if perhaps not truly “prophetic”. In five of the nine South African provinces rain was virtually absent in spring (September to November) and early summer. Although some rainfalls were recorded by mid-January such rain came too late to plant maize. Much the same applies within other southern African countries.¹³ Maize is the staple diet for most South Africans and is also used as fodder for farm animals. The drought was associated with several heat waves, soaring temperatures and unprecedented dust storms. Especially the province of Free State was turned into a virtual sand desert. Pictures published in the media captured the imagination of many.

The implications of this drought are many and far-reaching, some with a long-term impact. In short, there is water scarcity in many towns – with dam and underground water levels dropping and the quality of water deteriorating, actual food shortages are likely (especially in Zimbabwe), food security for subsistence farmers will become an issue due to the now inevitable crop failures, maize will need to be imported at high costs, prices of some food products are expected to rise drama-

¹³ Obi Anyadike reports that “Southern Africa is facing the threat of extensive crop failures this year as a result of record low rainfall in a region in which 29 million people already don’t have reliable access to enough affordable and nutritious food.” See <http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/01/28/southern-africa%E2%80%99s-food-crisis-numbers> (accessed 28 February 2016).

tically, while inflation is around 6%.¹⁴ Some have called this South Africa's food price a time bomb. Moreover, herds of farm animals and wildlife on commercial farms will have to be culled, leading to a short term over-supply of meat with longer term cost implications. Of course, there is the possibility that this weather pattern will recur more frequently due to climate change, if perhaps not annually.

Farmer unions have called for the drought to be declared a national emergency and for support from government. However, such calls come within a volatile political climate. There are long-standing debates on the conquest of land and the widely acknowledged need for land redistribution. Controversies continue over the administrative lack of progress, the mechanisms used for land redistribution and the recognition of private property and market-related forces in this regard. In addition there are unresolved problems around support for emerging farmers in terms of infrastructure, skills development and financing. In this context government is understandably reluctant to provide financial support for farmers that would not also benefit farm workers.¹⁵ The dominant concerns remain over land redistribution, land rights, the rights of farm workers and minimum wages. However, there is also the recognition that South Africa relies on around 38 000 large commercial farms (3% of farm owners) for something like 95% of its formal sector food supplies.¹⁶ At the same time there are widespread concerns over

¹⁴ Recent media reports indicate that food inflation has increased due to the drought from 4.3% in June 2015 to 7% in January 2016. From January 2015 to January 2016 the market value of white maize increased with 150%, for yellow maize with 90%, while wheat and soya increased with 25%.

¹⁵ An amount of R1 billion was eventually made available for drought relief in the budget speech delivered by Min. Pravin Gordan on 24 February 2016. The amount is aimed at sinking boreholes and the distribution of water (R502 million), support for small-scale farmers (318 million) and distribution of fodder (187 million).

¹⁶ This is according to a report for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) entitled *Agriculture: Facts & Trends South Africa*. See <http://awsassets>.

safety for farmer owners and farm workers alike due to numerous incidents of what is called “farm attacks” and “farm murders”, while allegations of racism and ill-treatment of workers are also rife and highly publicized.

In one incident (6 January 2016) near the town of Parys in the Free State province an elderly farmer, Loedie van der Westhuizen (72) was attacked, called for help, was assisted by a self-organised neighbourhood watch of around 40 men who pursued the two alleged culprits, Samuel Tjexa (35) and Seun Tangasha (28 or 29), apprehended them and beat them to death. Some reports suggested that this was not yet another farm attack but a wage dispute. Four farmers were then arrested but were released on bail due to insufficient police evidence – which is the pattern in all too many criminal investigations. Tensions are understandably high in the town.

All of this is situated in a highly volatile political climate. This is not easily captured with any degree of objectivity. Suffice it to say that there will be municipal elections in 2016. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) acknowledged during a mid-term review that its membership has dwindled while opposition parties hope to gain substantial support in order to challenge the ANC dominance in several metropolitan areas and with a view to the 2019 national elections.

In addition, there are ongoing service delivery protests, regular allegations of corruption and self-enrichment in many sectors of society, including government, concerns over the legacy of the Marikana massacre in 2012 (in which 41 mine workers were killed by the police), several legal battles which President Jacob Zuma has to confront (e.g. over “security upgrades” to his Nkandla homestead) and (occasionally

violent) student protests over the cost of tertiary education. In such a volatile climate fascist groups on opposite sides of the political spectrum have emerged that deliberately seek to polarise race relations. Universities have become the battle ground for simmering conflicts. This political climate needs to be understood in the context of extremely high levels of (youth) unemployment, the obvious need for poverty alleviation despite huge government spending on various social grants, the migration of millions of people to South Africa from other (southern) African countries, the highest levels of economic inequality in the world, declining currency values, financial security grading indicating a low trust from investors and implying that higher interest rates would need to be paid on loans, a deeply polarised education system (with some good schools relying on private funding and a significant proportion of dysfunctional schools), the prevailing impact of HIV and AIDS amidst an equally polarised public health system, soaring energy prices amidst what is called “load shedding”, controversies over unaffordable contracts for nuclear power, the building of coal-fired power plants and so forth.¹⁷

In all of this the South African context is far from unique but it remains a kind of parable indicating simmering global tensions.

6.2 Theological Resources and Approaches

It should be clear to all concerned that climate change has been directly affecting the livelihoods of marginalized communities, farmers and fishing communities, who are crucial to the world’s food security.¹⁸

¹⁷ There are ample sources be consulted on each of these concerns. A good overview may be found in the *Diagnostic Report* and the *Diagnostic Overview* produced by the South African National Planning Commission in 2011.

¹⁸ This formulation is derived from a WCC press release on 9 December 2015, with COP 21 still in session. See <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press->

The interplay between climate change, fresh water scarcity and food security requires political responses and a transformation of the global economy, including global food systems. Ecumenical networks, religious groups, Christianity in particular and Christian theology can only play a minor role in this regard and only in conversation and collaboration with other role players. Faith-based organisations would also be right to stress that food security cannot be reduced to ensuring production and distribution: “Rather than being driven by markets, our decisions and interventions need to be guided by communities’ priorities, knowledge and capabilities to plan for and overcome climate change.”¹⁹

Yet, given the immense complexity and scale of the problems there is a vital need to address the moral and indeed the spiritual roots of the underlying problem. Many have recognized that climate change and food insecurity are deeply moral issues and have rightly called for justice, equity, sustainability, resolving climate debt, frugality, wisdom,²⁰ charity where need be, and so forth. There is an obvious need to align oneself with such calls but perhaps no need to merely reiterate such demands if all are more or less agreed on the underlying principles, if not their implications. Ecclesial resolutions aimed at those in positions of power can easily degenerate to talking to the already converted insiders only, perhaps even with a sense of self-righteousness.²¹ A

centre/news/cop21-how-climate-change-affects-access-to-our-daily-bread (accessed 30 January 2016).

¹⁹ See again <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/cop21-how-climate-change-affects-access-to-our-daily-bread> (accessed 30 January 2016).

²⁰ In its Food for Life Campaign, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) reported that “one-third and one-half of all food produced for human consumption is wasted, due to lack of storage and distribution infrastructure as well as through wasteful retail and consumer practices”. This clearly requires the virtues of frugality and wisdom. See <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/eaaf/food-for-life-campaign> (accessed 30 January 2016).

²¹ See the argument of my article “Climate Change and the Common Good:

welcome recent exception is the set of “Ten Commandments” on food through the lens of justice, presented by Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC general secretary, at a World Economic Forum session. He spelled out how food choices can become a catalyst for positive change.²²

The spiritual roots of climate change are less obvious but still widely recognized, for example in statements by Patriarch Bartholomew²³ and Pope Francis.²⁴ In short, if we know that there is a problem, realize the extent of the problem, know what is to be done, have the technology to address that, can calculate that the related economic costs are still bearable, have some political will to find solutions (e.g. at COP 21), but have collectively still been unable to turn the tide of carbon emissions, this suggests a spiritual problem. It points to a lack of moral energy, moral imagination (imaging what kind of different world is possible) and moral leadership.²⁵

Some Reflections from the South African Context”, in: *International Journal of Public Theology* 4, 2010, 271-293.

²² See <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/tveit-on-the-201cten-commandments201d-of-food> (accessed 30 January 2016).

²³ See Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Statement for the WCC Working Group on Climate Change”, in: *Climate change*, Geneva: WCC, 2005, 67.

²⁴ The spiritual roots of ecological destruction is a recurring theme in Pope Francis’ encyclical letter “On Care for Our Common Home” entitled *Laudato Si*, Vatican Press, 2015.

²⁵ In their foreword to a series on world religions and ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim comment: “It is becoming increasingly evident that abundant scientific knowledge of the crisis is available and numerous political and economic statements have been formulated. Yet we seem to lack the political, economic, and scientific leadership to make necessary changes. Moreover, what is still lacking is the religious commitment, moral imagination, and ethical engagement to transform the environmental crisis from an issue on paper to one of effective policy, from rhetoric in print to realism in action.” See Tucker, Mary E./ Grim, John: “Series foreword”, in: T. Hessel, Dieter/ Radford Ruether, Rosemary (eds.), *Christianity and ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and humans*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, xv-xxxii (xix).

Given the moral and spiritual roots of the underlying problem one can easily identify distinct yet related avenues to approach the problem from within an ecumenical context. Let me merely list them:

Some recognise the need for a pastoral response, i.e. helping the victims of climate injustice and food insecurity to come to terms with their loss and to find a way forward – and to pastorally confront perpetrators with what they are doing.

Some approach the problem at a practical level, e.g. through ecclesial praxis, the work of faith-based organisations with diverse interests, launching sustainable development projects, organizing charity and relief projects to address immediate needs and so forth.

Some consider a ritualized response, e.g. through the cultivation of spiritual disciplines (prayer, fasting, manual labour) and the cultivation of the virtues of frugality, restraint, generosity, hospitality, justice and wisdom.

Yet others insist that a political or prophetic response is required in order to stand in solidarity with the victims, to speak truth to power, to call for policy changes and so forth.²⁶

Some may think that offering ethical pronouncements may suffice. They adopt resolutions at various levels seeking to clarify appropriate principles, perhaps justifying such moral demands from biblical texts, social analysis, contextual needs or through rational argumentation.

Yet others focus on more strictly theological reflection. They ask what God is saying and doing in such a world, seeking to discern God's will, drawing on resources from their particular traditions to facilitate this task. I will return to this below.

²⁶ See the booklet produced for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002: *Solidarity with Victims of Climate Change: Reflections on the World Council of Churches' Response to Climate Change*, Geneva: WCC, 2002.

These avenues are not mutually exclusive, of course, but I suggest that the one may at times be emphasized at the cost of the other. In short, it should be clear that a multi-dimensional response is required, one that requires from all of us to use our hearts, our heads, our hands, our feet, ears, voices and indeed our guts.

There are rich resources available within the various confessional traditions to assist one with this task and to understand its complexity. Consider for example the typically reformed notion that a Christian vocation has prophetic, royal and priestly dimensions. Or consider the multiple dimensions of mission that may help us to see that witness through word cannot be separated from deed, that witness (*marturia*) cannot be separated from service (*diakonia*) and that the integrity of both proclamation (*kerygma*) and service (*diakonia*) will be judged by the quality of fellowship (*koinonia*) and more specifically by the orientation of worship (*latreia*) and liturgy (*leitourgia*).²⁷ Others have used the distinction between the liturgy and the liturgy of life to aid understanding.²⁸ In my view all these categories are helpful but do not yet address the core theological challenge that climate change and food insecurity confronts us with. I will now turn to that core theological challenge.

²⁷ This structure is employed in a forthcoming volume entitled “The Church in God’s Household: Protestant Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ecology” edited by Clive W. Ayre and Ernst M. Conradie, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016.

²⁸ I have explored the transformative impetus of a liturgical vision (a way of seeing the world) at some length in *The Earth in God’s Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015.

6.3 The Theological Challenge: What is God up to?

For Christians there is only one thing which is more dangerous than trying to identify the finger of God in human history amidst the wider evolutionary history – and that is not to even raise the question. Amidst many false prophets and ongoing attempts to seek theological justification for particular social causes there is a clear need for an encompassing vision of God’s work and for more detailed discernment in particular circumstances,²⁹ to read the signs of the time through social analysis (seeing), to discern where God is within all of this (judging) and to seek God’s will (acting). How, then, does one proceed with this daunting task? Where does one find an appropriate key? Let us consider some possibilities, noting that the plausibility of every proposal is undermined by the next one.

Traditionally, especially in the reformed tradition, themes such as the weather, rains, fertility and harvests were discussed under the rubric of divine *providence*.³⁰ Since God cares for us as creatures (all God’s creatures), God continues to provide in our needs, despite the impact of human sin. Providence should not be taken for granted though: after the fall it required an actual decision from God not to relinquish the works of his hands (or the fruit of her womb), to maintain and govern the world in order to introduce a plan of salvation that would allow creation to flourish again. According to this logic, we should not be too surprised if

²⁹ For this distinction between vision and discernment, see Wood, Charles M., *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985.

³⁰ There is ample literature here, but the discerning reader will pick up an implicit reference to Abraham Kuyper’s (in)famous notion of God’s “common grace” – to restrain the impact of evil in the world. For a discussion from the perspective of eco-theology, see Conradie, Ernst M. (ed.), *Creation and Salvation: Dialogue on Abraham Kuyper’s Legacy for Contemporary Eco-theology*, Leiden: Brill, 2011.

weather patterns change, if rains do not come on time and if there is crop failure. This is what one should expect given the self-destructive impact of sin. It reminds us not to take God's providence for granted. This may be a form of punishment from God but it is better understood as a parental reminder that we remain dependent upon forces beyond our locus of control. If we heed that reminder and express our dependence upon God and our gratitude for God's sustained blessings (the very gift of life), God will continue to care for us, even if we act like rebellious children.³¹ Either way, such caring is not sufficient for our well-being. Beyond God's conservation of a fallen world (not allowing it to self-destruct), we also need God's governance in history and some form of mutuality between Creator and creature. Beyond providence in the form of *conservatio*, *gubernatio* and *concursus*, we also need God's salvation and the final completion or fulfilment of God's work.

Does such a theological interpretation of God's care help us to come to terms with climate change and food insecurity? Some would suggest that, given the gravity and scale of the nexus of problems, it would be better to discuss this in a *soteriological* key. What is required is nothing less than salvation.³² If salvation is understood as wholeness (*heil*) or

³¹ The specific theological content of the notion of sustainability is seldom recognized even though the apparently originated in an ecumenical context (at a WCC consultation in Bucharest, 1974). The emphasis on sustainability may indeed be regarded as a secularized expression of the doctrine of providence. It expresses faith in the God whose creative, nurturing, redemptive and innovative love sustains the whole earth, moment by moment. This is also the tenure of numerous Psalms: the steadfast love and mercy of God upholds, feeds and sustains us in time of need: "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me" (Psalm 3:6, NRSV). We do not need to be afraid for the Lord our God is with us. God strengthens us, helps us and sustains us (Isaiah 41:10). This sustenance that God provides is also enduring; it is based on the everlasting faithfulness of God to the work of God's hands. Accordingly, sustainability is best understood within the context of the doctrine of providence.

³² The relationship between God's work of creation and salvation has been explored in a series of publications. See Conradie, Ernst M. (ed.), *Creation and*

comprehensive well-being, then God's acts of salvation would target any deficiency in such well-being.³³ This accounts for the wide variety of biblical metaphors for salvation (used here as a generic term), including the liberation of slaves, liberation from oppression, healing from life-threatening diseases, feeding the hungry amidst famine, deliverance from evil through exorcism from evil forces, rescuing amidst military and security threats, redemption of those held hostage, reconciliation amidst various forms of violent conflict, the reintroduction of law amidst chaos and anarchy, pedagogy for the ignorant, the reconstruction of society through new visions and so forth.³⁴ It is obvious that some of these images are favoured in particular confessional traditions and theological schools more than others. Each of these has contemporary relevance amidst climate change, food security and environmental refugees. In the context of climate change we do not merely need a continuation of existing weather patterns but a transformation of the energy basis of the entire global economy from fossil fuels to sustainable alternatives. This would require something of a miracle within the next few decades and, should this happen, even secularized Christians may well attribute this to God's doing.

Others may pray for another, more overt form of *miracle*. This begs many further questions though: What can God really be expected to do

Salvation, Volume 1: A Mosaic of Essays on Selected Classic Christian Theologians, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011; also *Creation and Salvation, Volume 2: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012 as well as my *Saving the Earth? The Legacy of Reformed Views on "Re-creation"*, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013.

³³ This position has been adopted by Klaus Nürnberger, an eminent South African Lutheran theologian, in many of his books. See for example his *Regaining Sanity for the Earth*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2011.

³⁴ For a discussion and clustering together of such images, see my article "The Salvation of the Earth from Anthropogenic Destruction: In Search of Appropriate Soteriological Concepts in an Age of Ecological Destruction", in: *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, Ecology* 14 (2-3), 2010, 111-140.

about climate change? What miracle would change the concentration of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere? How does God act in the world?³⁵ How does science inform one's worldview and how do worldviews shape our notions of divine action? Should one place one's hope instead on human ingenuity and technological innovation? Would we have to redeem ourselves from the worst impact of climate change so that God-talk is merely a decorative way of mustering our strength for the task that lies ahead? What about differences of class, race, gender, culture and bioregion with reference to those likely to secure such "redemption" for themselves and their families? Who are then included in the whole household of God? Only the elite? What about all God's other creatures?

Given such unresolved questions, yet others would opt for an *eschatological* or even an *apocalyptic* key to understand what God is doing.³⁶ Apocalyptic imagery is of course rife in the media, popular culture, novels and films alike. Post-apocalyptic literature typically presumes that the world has to go through some form of punishment for the "sins" of industrialized civilization, often in the aftermath of a nuclear meltdown, infectious diseases or a dramatic change in weather patterns. However, after a period of tribulation a remnant of survivors is always somehow saved and they have to start anew, building human communities. The conditions may vary. Some images assume preliterate societies, others allow for technological innovation or for trans-human forms of life. The popularity of such imagery is perfectly

³⁵ There is a huge corpus of literature on this question in the context of science and theology discourse. For a discussion in the context of eco-theology, see Edwards, Denis, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010 and my *The Earth in God's Economy*, 175-220.

³⁶ For a critique, see my essay "Appropriate contemporary forms of apocalyptic", in Haker, Hille/ Torres Queiruga, André/ Wacker, Marie-Theres (eds.): *The Return of Apocalypticism, Concilium*, 2014/3, 96-103.

understandable. The global industrialized economy requires a precarious balancing of market forces but is plagued by serious distortions and internal tensions that seem irresolvable. There are legitimate fears that the whole system may simply collapse due to population growth, rampant consumerism, terrorism, nuclear threats, civil wars, the migration of peoples and so forth.

Given the popularity of such imagery Christians may well be tempted to draw on biblical apocalypse to conclude that climate change is indeed God's final *punishment* for human sin. Some would say that the world as we know it will indeed come to an end and put their trust either in some form of millennial expectations, in heaven as a "home beyond the clouds" where we (humans only!) will be relieved from this "earthly vale of tears", or perhaps in the coming into being of a "new heaven and a new earth". Others would agree that it may be necessary for God to "stir the soup", to allow for the destructive but creative forces of chaos to rule for a while in order to allow something radically new to emerge from such chaos.³⁷ Maybe some *homo excelsior* may then be born?! Yet others would lament the impact of the Anthropocene and fear that the evolution of intelligent forms of life will come to a premature end if the last of the hominid species comes to extinction due to climate change. If climate change would lead to the skipping of several ice ages, coupled with mass extinctions, it is possible (since the lifespan of the solar system is roughly halfway) that evolutionary processes may never get back on track again.³⁸

³⁷ I am drawing here on a famous article by Arnold van Ruler entitled "God en de Chaos". See van Keulen, Dirk (ed.), *Verzameld Werk, Deel III: God, Schepping, Mens, Zonde*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009, 159-172.

³⁸ I have heard such views expressed by the (atheist) Australian philosopher Clive Hamilton. See for example his *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*, London & New York: Earthscan, 2010.

Given the popularity of such imagery and the scale and complexity of the problems it may be prudent, some would say, to give up on activist dreams to “save the planet”. It is futile and psychologically debilitating for ordinary folks to be overly concerned about planetary problems since these are in any case far beyond their locus of control. It is better to focus on one’s daily tasks and to cultivate skills and virtues that will enable one to survive in an increasingly hostile climate. Especially for those on the margins of the global economy this can only be done in community. It is therefore crucial to foster communities based on mutual care and resilience. These will have to be sustainable communities,³⁹ perhaps self-sustaining communities that would be able to attend to food sustenance, food security and sustainable livelihoods. In many (but not all) parts of Africa the church provides a symbol of hope in this regard. Local Christian communities are often amongst the more functional organizations. They attract regular attendance by significant numbers of people, have some credible leaders (despite the prevalence of abusive charismatic leadership), have moral resources to draw on and enjoy more trust from local people than any other political party, trade union, business or school. Such Christians may suggest that God’s plan for the salvation of the world, also amidst climate change, is through the church, through the establishment, formation, ministries and missions of local congregations. The task of formation is then crucial and is epitomized by the worshipping community, where people learn to see the world from God’s perspective despite prevailing power structures, to see the radical distortions of this world, beloved by God, in

³⁹ See my article “A Few Notes on the Heuristic Key of ‘Sustainable Community’, in: *Scriptura* 75 (4), 2000, 345-357, drawing especially on Larry Rasmussen’s *Earth Community – Earth Ethics*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996.

the light of the Light of the world. Accordingly, what God is up to amidst climate change can only be answered *ecclesiologically*.⁴⁰

There are, of course, other Christians who would find such a vision far too narrow, too provincial and domesticated. They may point to counter examples of dysfunctional Christian communities, of abusive leadership and of moral decay to suggest that the church is scarcely a symbol of hope. Moral communities are easily destroyed. In a context of rampant consumerism, amongst the affluent and poor alike, moral resources are more easily depleted than replenished.⁴¹ They would comment that church services are all too often demoralising and epitomize the underlying problem, that biblical preaching is replaced by motivational speeches, that the Holy Communion too often degenerates towards an empty ritual. Moreover, Sunday at 10h00 (or 11h00) remains the “most divided hour”⁴² of the week in terms of race, language and culture and even gender (noting the numeric weight of women despite predominantly male leadership). Instead of focusing on narrow group identities, there is a need for a more encompassing vision that would energize such local communities. Perhaps that vision is an *ecumenical* one, of the whole household of God standing in solidarity with each other before the Creator. Or perhaps the vision needs to be *missiological*: the church is an instrument in God’s mission to the world

⁴⁰ See again Ayre/ Conradie: “The Church in God’s Household”.

⁴¹ See especially Rasmussen, Larry: *Moral Fragments and Moral Community*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993. This emphasis on moral community is picked up in many WCC publications from the same period, including the study on *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, Best, Thomas/ Robra, Martin (eds.), Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997.

⁴² For a discussion on Martin Luther King (jr)’s phrase, see Van der Borgh, Eddy, “Sunday morning the most segregated hour: On racial reconciliation as unfinished business for theology in South Africa and beyond”, 2009. Inaugural lecture delivered upon accepting the position of VU University Amsterdam Desmond Tutu chair.

that God loves so much. Or perhaps there is still room for the vision of God's *coming reign*, to be established in "every square inch" of society.

The problem is of course that these expressions of an encompassing vision tend to sound rather hollow amidst simmering tensions, current migration patterns and the looming threats associated with climate change. How would such a vision sustain us if things get worse?

6.4 Another Theological Challenge: Which God?

Given such conflicting attempts to read the signs of the time and to discern the finger of God in human and evolutionary history, there is perhaps a need for clues to look in the right direction. This is why it is theologically unavoidable to reflect on the identity and character of God. This is an equally difficult task. In the context of secularized societies many would be inclined to leave God out of public debates on climate change since these are complex enough (and plagued by climate denialists with religious agendas) so that it may be wise not to confuse public discussions with added controversies. In the context of interreligious dialogue and multi-faith collaboration to address the moral problems associated with climate change to focus on God's identity may prove to be divisive. Nevertheless, there again may be only one thing that is worse than talking about God's identity and character and that would be to eschew such God-talk altogether. This reduction of religion to matters of morality is the danger of self-secularisation⁴³ – which will in the end leave Christians with not much to contribute to public debates

⁴³ For an early discussion of this term, see Huber, Wolfgang, *Kirche in der Zeitenwende: Gesellschaftlicher Wandel und Erneuerung der Kirche*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1998. The danger here is of reducing God-talk to ethics for the sake of public accessibility.

except in purely functional ways, given the lasting influence of Christianity in many societies.

There is another important reason to address such *theological* concerns and that is the need to respond to the now global culture of consumerism – which plagues industrialized societies, countries that become indebted due to spending habits embedded in the national psyche and the upwardly social mobility in emerging economies alike.⁴⁴ It also pervades Christianity itself – as is evident in ongoing debates on the prosperity gospel, the good news of “health and wealth” proclaimed by many. The question here is one of idolatry: as Luther observed better than most others, one’s god is that in which one puts one’s trust to ensure well-being. There are many available surrogates for God and these are widely discussed, if also elusive: nutritious food, the power of positive thinking, sport, hygiene, physical beauty, bodily strength, education, development, money, the Market and so forth. In addition, there are many rival claims for influence (as exercised by movie stars and sports heroes) and power, if not omnipotence – from gods legitimizing the interests of narrow group identities with their claims to control water, oil and territory, to military super-powers, to computing power to an evolutionary battle cry for the survival of the fittest.

In this context Christians may need to revisit the ancient contestation between Israel’s faith in Yahweh, the God of the exodus, and fertility cults such as Baal. In Canaanite religion (where harvests depended on rainfalls rather than irrigation) the dry summers were explained as Baal’s time in the underworld and his return in autumn was said to bring the rains. The cult is therefore aimed at ensuring the timeous return of Baal. Anxieties over the availability of water increased the immediate significance of this cult in comparison with the more aloof God “El”.

⁴⁴ For a discussion, see my *Christianity and a Critique of Consumerism: A Survey of Six Points of Entry*, Wellington: Bible Media, 2009.

At the heart of this contest is the altogether human need to come to terms with that which lies beyond one's locus of control. This includes issues related to health, fertility, rains, harvests, surviving military battles, safety on the road, personal happiness and so forth. In each case there are many things that can be done to enhance one's chances, to extend one's power and sphere of influence, but ultimately each of these categories lies beyond one's locus of control. This begs the question: what determines that which cannot be controlled? Perhaps luck, fate or randomness, but it is easy to understand why such forces beyond one's control can become hypostasized in the form of heroes, superheroes, lesser divinities, deities or their representatives. Indeed, social insecurity seems to drive people to religion while some degree of security seems to alienate others from any need for religion. It is also easy to understand why offerings and sacrifices may be deemed expedient in order to steer the whims and moods of fickle, capricious and impulsive gods in a way that would secure their favour. Such sacrifices elicited the ridicule of Israel's prophets and the vehement critique whenever such sacrifices are brought to Yahweh with a similar pretence. The danger is of course that one can easily blame that which is beyond one's locus of control for any misfortune. If one cannot blame the enemy, why not blame the gods?⁴⁵

Such prophetic critique invites the need for more clarity on how Israel's God is different from the gods of Canaanite fertility cults, for example Baal and Asherah. What kind of God is this? It is clear that the favour of this God cannot be induced by bribes. It is not like playing the lottery either. However, there is no simple answer here given contesting theologies already embedded in the Old Testament. For Christians the best available clue to God's identity and character may be found in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, later proclaimed as the Messiah,

⁴⁵ See Midgley, Mary, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1995, 42.

the Christ. This too remains open to contestation as is amply evident in debates on the historical Jesus, the Christ of faith and the manifold cultural faces of Jesus. Such debates continue nowadays in terms of critiques of race, gender, class, industrialised capitalism and Empire, e.g. in the context of feminist theology, liberation theology, black theology, eco-theology and postcolonial theology, albeit that such critiques do not always (despite the rubric of *theology*) focus on God's identity and character. There are some innovative exceptions such as an emphasis on the feminine face of God, the God of the underdogs, of the poor, oppressed and marginalized, the black Christ, the nurturing womb of the Mother, the life-supporting and life-changing Breath of God and so forth. These debates are important and have to be related ecumenically to the Trinitarian heart of the Christian (Nicene) confession. Such debates cannot but be situated in the context of interreligious dialogue, debates on secularism and multi-faith collaboration on anything that is of common but penultimate concern. Seeking full clarity would underestimate the divine Mystery but not even approaching such Mystery will be spiritually empty.

6.5 So what about Climate Change and Food Insecurity?

There is no shortage of lobbying groups positioning themselves on public debates on climate mitigation and adaptation. There is likewise no shortage of proposals on how to address hunger, food insecurity, development needs, widening economic inequalities, rampant unemployment or violent conflict. Yet solutions remain elusive to say the least. In such a context Christians may need a moment to meditate on appropriate responses rather than to merely reiterate prophetic critique and calls for actions, crucial as that would obviously remain. There is a

need for wisdom, vision and discernment amidst the cacophony of lobbying voices.

Such meditation may take many forms in different contexts, including Bible study, liturgical renewal, prayer, spiritual disciplines such as celebrating the holy communion, fasting, manual labour and the cultivation of the virtues of gratitude (for food and rain), frugality, generosity, hospitality, justice and wisdom. In such meditations it would be wise to reflect *theologically* on the symbolic meaning of words such as climate (air, being a feather on the breath of God), food (its production, distribution and consumption⁴⁶), eating (absorbing other metabolisms – which always involves a degree of force unless what is eaten includes only fruit, nuts and seeds – as in the holy communion⁴⁷) and water. It may suffice here to give two related examples of such meditation, returning to the South African context sketched above.

The historically deeply divided Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church in the Western Cape have a long-standing joint project on reintroducing a common lectionary in reformed congregations. We are currently planning towards the Season of

⁴⁶ The annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa, 11-15 July 2016, will be “From farm to fork: Theological and ethical reflection on the production, distribution and consumption of food”.

⁴⁷ I am currently teaching a postgraduate module on “Religion and food contestation” within the context of a Mellon-funded project on “Food Contestation: Humanities and the Food System” housed within the Centre of Excellence in Food Security, located at the University of the Western Cape. In this project we are exploring the interface between gender and food security and the social construction of the symbolic meaning of food. One crucial aspect is to understand the very act of eating. This is indeed contested terrain with Darwinian, capitalist, ascetic, puritan, vegetarian, vegan and feminist perspectives coming into play. The crucial theological question is how the act of eating (and the degree of violence involved) has to be understood in the context of the Christian affirmation of the goodness of God’s creation. For a delightful South African contribution to this debate, see Versfeld, Marthinus, *Food for Thought: A Philosopher’s Cook-book*, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983.

Creation in September 2017. There are three core texts for the relevant Sundays, namely Exodus 3:1-15, 12:1-14 and 14:19-31. All three (the burning bush, the first Passover and the crossing of the Reed Sea) are foundational within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. They tell of the presence and mighty acts of God in the midst of an enslaved people. Given the impact of food insecurity amidst the current drought (food insecurity is likely to prevail in the southern Spring of 2017, awaiting a new rain season in most areas) we will raise the question: what can we expect God to be doing in this context? What can we still pray for? Can God, in order to bring relief, change weather patterns that we are changing in a different direction?

In another project, still in an early planning phase, Ezra Chitando and I are hoping to put together a volume of essays provisionally entitled “Praying for Rain? African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change”. Would it make sense to pray for rain if we know that droughts are related to El Niño and that El Niño is aggravated by anthropogenic climate change?

These are pertinent questions that will bring into play confessional differences, contextual needs and underlying worldviews. It will also bring into play scientific insights and ongoing debates on divine action in the world. Our sense is that Africans need to contribute to global and ecumenical discourse in this regard.

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