

# Is prophetic discourse adequate to address global economic justice?

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This article outlined key features of prophetic discourse and investigated whether this form of moral discourse adequately addresses issues of economic injustice. It is shown that the strength of prophetic discourse is its ability to denounce instances of injustice whilst at the same time announcing a God-willed alternative future. The 'preferential option for the poor' in Latin American liberation theologies is treated as a case study of the influence of prophetic discourse in contexts of perceived economic injustice. Also the core weaknesses of prophetic discourse are investigated, specifically its incomplete moral argument, weak moral analyses, silence on transition measures, and its inability to take a positive stance on reforms in the system from which itself benefits. In the final section it is concluded that prophetic discourse plays an indispensable role in addressing issues of global economic justice, but – taken by itself – it is not an adequate form of moral discourse to address concrete matters of justice.

## Introduction

This article commences with an outline of five possible features of 'prophetic discourse'. This is a short, but important part of this article (section 2), as the rest of the arguments are based on the notion established at the beginning. The key strength of prophetic discourse relating to economic justice is then analysed via a case study of the so-called 'preferential option for the poor' (section 3). Thereafter four key weaknesses of prophetic discourse are shortly espoused (section 4), before the chapter closes with a summary and conclusion (section 5).

## Outlining prophetic discourse

Distilling defining characteristics of prophetic discourse is by no means simple. The difference in prophetic personalities, periods of prophetism in the Old Testament, the intra-canonical interpretation of the prophets and developments and changes of emphases in interpreting the prophets, make this a challenging endeavour (cf. e.g. Seitz 2007).<sup>1</sup> The interpretative challenge is further exacerbated by the term itself. When speaking of 'prophets', the interplay between modern understandings and expectations of the word and its use in the Old Testament does not necessarily aid one in the search for a definition.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately the complexity of interpreting and contextualising the prophets' message does not mean that we should refrain from interpreting and even systematising their message. Indeed, we are confronted with a basic challenge of theology, which we much accept with the same prophetic freedom Von Rad ascribed to the prophets themselves in his seminal *The Message of the Prophets* (Von Rad 1968:50–59).

In this article I shall identify, develop and apply certain biblical characteristics of prophetic discourse without implying that these impulses exhaust the message of the prophets.

It is clear, *firstly*, that prophetic activity in the Old Testament more often than not uncovers perceived economic injustice (Von Rad 1968:53).<sup>3</sup> Amos is a clear example. The 'houses adorned with ivory' and the 'mansions' will be destroyed (3:12), those who only want more to drink (4:1), those who 'dine on choice lambs and fattened cows' (6:4), are actually oppressing the poor

1. Seitz illustrates this complexity by examining developments in the interpretation of the prophets, different periods of prophetism (Mosaism, Prophetism and Old Testament) (Seitz 2007:79), differences in prophetic personalities (Seitz 2007:82ff) as well as their interpretation in this context of the canon (Seitz 2007:85).

2. Wilson (1980:21–28) gives a very helpful description of modern, classical and biblical meanings of 'prophet' and their influence on understanding prophetism in ancient Israel.

3. See Von Rad regarding the role of the prophet's own interpretation of the situation as of crucial importance for the communication of God's will: 'It is hardly possible to overrate the importance of the prophet's share, for without it the word the prophet receives does not reach its goal and therefore cannot be fulfilled. What makes it such a tremendous responsibility is the fact that the prophet is this the one who pits the will of Yahweh into effect: Yahweh thereafter commits himself to stand by the decision of his ambassador'.

and crushing the needy (4:1, 5:11). Amos' prophetic activity exposed the injustice and inequality ingrained into the societal structures of his time.

The prophetic uncovering of unjust societal structures is often connected, *secondly*, with a moral denouncement in the name of God (cf. e.g. Wittenberg 1993).<sup>4</sup> One of the most memorable examples is Nathan's denouncement of David's murder of Uriah and his relationship with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12. Nathan states plainly that it is the Lord himself (12:7–11) who denounces David's sin. David fittingly replies by acknowledging that he 'sinned against the Lord' (12:13).

Closely connected to the denouncement from God is, *thirdly*, the prophets' call to repentance or judgement. This can be seen, for example, in Hosea: God's anger 'burns' against Israel (8:5) and they will be 'swallowed up' (8:8). Jonah's reaction to God's command that he should go to Nineveh and 'preach against it' (1:1), illustrates the close bond between repentance and judgement in prophetic discourses in the Old Testament. The citizens of Nineveh respond with repentance and Jonah becomes angry, as he knew that prophetic preaching of judgement often leads to repentance and a change of fortunes – because God is 'gracious and compassionate' and 'slow to anger' (4:2).

Prophetic discourse is characterised, *fourthly*, by its pronouncement of a utopian alternative to current realities. Prophetic discourse 'portrays an alluring vision of the future, of possibilities for life in the world in which the forms of strife and suffering we all experience are overcome' (Gustafson 1988:13). The prophet in Trito-Isaiah speaks lyrically of a time when there will be no hunger or thirst (49:10), as does the prophet in proto-Isaiah where he speaks of a time when God will 'settle disputes for many peoples' and they will 'beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks' (2:4). This characteristic utopian alternative one also sees in Ezekiel – albeit in even more metaphorical language – when he speaks of the 'dry bones' of Israel that will one day be made alive by the breath of God (Ezk 37:1–14).

When viewed more broadly, one can say that prophetic discourse is aimed at, *lastly*, expressing the will of God (cf. e.g. Gene Tucker's account of the role of God's 'own words' in prophetic speech, 1987:30ff). Uncovering unjust structures, making strong moral denouncements, calling for repentance and bringing a utopian alternative are aimed at nothing less than articulating God's will in reaction to very specific circumstances. Jeremiah's critique against the prophecies of Hananiah may suffice as a last example. God instructs Jeremiah to tell his people not to listen to their prophets, diviners and interpreters of dreams (27:9, 16) but that they should seek the will of God (28:9).

These five broad traits of prophetic discourse form the basis upon which the applicability and efficacy of this discourse

4.Wittenberg frames these moral denouncements as 'protest', and identifies the protest against idolatry (1993:23–32), oppression (1993:33–46), the politics of security (1993:47–62), false prophecy (1993:63–77) and despair (1993:96–112) as the most important dimensions of their protest.

in relation to economic justice are evaluated in the following section.

## The strength of prophetic discourse on economic justice

On the basis of the Biblical impulses set out in the previous section, it can be said that a key strength of prophetic discourse is that it focuses unambiguous attention to a specific dimension of justice (cf. Naudé 2008:208). Gustafson describes the strength of prophetic discourse as both indictments that expose the perceived root of evil (Gustafson 1988:8) and a 'powerfully attractive vision of a future which positively moves us to approximate it' (Gustafson 1988:13). According to Gustafson's analysis, prophetic discourse is passionate language 'proclaimed against the moral evil and apostasy of the world and societies' (Gustafson 1988:8).

Characteristic of prophetic discourse is that its unambiguous focus on a dimension of justice – proclaimed against a specific 'moral evil and apostasy' – may over time diffuse through to mainstream thinking and in this way affects public opinion and policy far beyond its initial scope or intentions. This is a multidirectional, transformative, spontaneous and at times even contradictory process.

In this section the extension of justice understood as the 'preferential option for the poor' will be analysed. It will be demonstrated how the prophetic cry emanating from Latin American liberation theologies (notably Gutiérrez) permeated political philosophy (Rawls), economic theory (Stiglitz), and later co-determined practical policy decisions (Doha ministerial declaration).<sup>5</sup>

### Latin-American liberation theologies: The preferential option for the poor

Gutiérrez famously described God's 'preferential option for the poor' as follows:

The very term *preference* obviously precludes any exclusivity; it simply points to who ought to be first – not the only – objects of our solidarity ... [What the option emphasises] is the free commitment of a decision. The option for the poor is not optional in the sense that a Christian need not necessarily make it, any more than the love we owe every human being, without exception, is not optional. It is a matter of deep, ongoing solidarity, a voluntary daily involvement with the world of the poor.

(Gutiérrez 1993:239)

'Poverty' is used as a comprehensive term, 'a universe in which the socio-economic aspect is basic but not all-inclusive' (Gutiérrez 1988:xxi). In Gutiérrez's understanding 'the poor' denotes at least three forms of poverty, namely the material poverty of the physically poor, the social poverty of those who are marginalised due to racial, cultural or gender oppression and the spiritual poverty of those who are not

5.The discussion draws extensively on an earlier article by Piet Naudé (see Naudé 2007).

open to God's will and solidarity with the poor Gutiérrez 1993:235–237).

Early signs of the terminology could already be seen in *Gaudium et Spes*, originating from Vaticanum II (1965).<sup>6</sup> But long before Vaticanum II God's preferential option for the poor was developing in the 'roots' of liberation theology, that is the theologies practised by the poor in their base communities.<sup>7</sup> The starting point of theology is understood not as 'doctrine' but 'reality' (Sobrino 1984:2).<sup>8</sup> It paved the way for the discussion thereof at the Second General Conference of Latin-American Bishops at Medellín in 1968 and a chapter devoted to the terminology in the final document of the Third Bishops' Conference in Puebla (1979) (cf. Bedford-Strohm 1993:151–166). According to Sobrino the poor is the 'authentic theological source for understanding Christian truth and practice' as the poor 'pose the problem of seeking God without presupposing that the Church possesses him once and for all', whilst at the same time offering the church 'the place for finding him' (Sobrino 1984:93).

Within Latin American liberation theologies the terminology gradually grew in importance and started to develop into a multi-faceted prophetic framework for seeing, judging and acting on perceived injustice. The experience of the poor served as methodological starting point; hermeneutically the readings of suspicion especially by ordinary people were taken as point of departure; the Trinity as a community of justice and charity opting as separate persons for the poor was understood as the fundamental theological motive; and an ecclesiology that connected the sanctification of the church with solidarity with the poor shaped the vision of the church (Naudé 2007:167–178).

By uncovering and pronouncing God's judgement on injustice by means of 'the preferential option for the poor' Latin American liberation theologies at the same time also provided a utopian vision on forms of justice that 'conform' to the 'reign of God' (Sobrino 1984:40) Sobrino (1984) expresses these forms of justice as:

the kind of love that seeks effectively to humanize, to give life in abundance to the poor and oppressed majority of the human race. Justice is thus a concrete form of love in which account is taken of the quantitative fact that its recipients form majorities and of the qualitative fact that they are poor and oppressed.

(Sobrino 1984:40)

Stated in other terms we can say that this terminology reacts to the injustice of material poverty with demands for a radical distributive justice, namely a form of socio-economic justice that regulates the distribution of goods and services based

6. According to Gutiérrez himself the 'name and reality' of liberation theology came into existence at Chimbote in Peru (July 1968), a few months before the bishops' conference in Medellín (Gutiérrez 1988:xvii).

7. Clodovis Boff views liberation theology as consisting of three forms of theology, namely popular liberation theology done by Christians in base communities (the 'roots'), pastoral liberation theology done in ecclesial communities (the 'trunk') and the liberation theology done by professional theologians by means of rigorous academic arguments (the 'branches'). Cf. Boff and Boff (1984:5–11 and 49–55), as well as Boff and Boff (1987:24ff).

8. Sobrino continues to qualify this provocative conviction: 'Doctrine is of course necessary and important. But in itself, apart from the concrete reality of the Church and apart from the present manifestation of God in the Church, it cannot take any real historical shape. It can be true, but it will remain ineffective and irrelevant.'

on a specific theory of justice in a particular geographical arrangement (cf. Roemer 1998). It also reacts to socio-political injustice with demands for cultural justice, namely a form of social justice that regulates the relationship amongst individuals from different cultural backgrounds or amongst cultural groups themselves (cf. Kwenda 2003).

## John Rawls: Prioritarian distributive justice

A few years later, on a different continent and in a very different context, impulses similar to the justice demanded by Latin American liberation theologians can be recognised in the work of the North American political philosopher John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), arguably one of the most – if not the most – important works on justice of the 20th century, Rawls develops justice as fairness in a theory of prioritarian distributive justice (Rawls 1971:60–90). Central to Rawls' theory is his difference principle: redistributive policies may allow for social and economic inequalities only when they are the least advantaged members of society (Naudé 2007:179).

Rawls conceptualised an 'original position of equality' – a hypothetical situation where all are 'similarly situated' – where people are required to choose the principles 'which are to assign basic rights and duties' and to determine the division of 'social benefits' (Rawls 1973:11) without knowing what their positions in this society will be, that is behind a 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls 1973:136–142).

From this position Rawls develops his egalitarian conception of justice. Although based on the equal rights and most extensive equal liberties to all, it acknowledges the existence of social and economic inequalities. It is therefore aimed at redressing 'undeserved inequalities' by giving 'more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favourable social positions' (Rawls 1973:100). It is not egalitarian in the radical sense of requiring that all should ideally have an equal share of all social goods. Although the difference principle itself is not to be equated with the ideal of redress (Rawls 1973:101), it nonetheless gives expression to the prioritarian thrust of his understanding of distributive justice: inequalities in 'rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth' (Rawls 1973:101) must always be distributed in a manner that improves the situation of society's least advantaged.<sup>9</sup>

In his later work, *The law of peoples*, Rawls broadens his work on 'justice as fairness' to include the reality of an increasingly globalised international society, composed of people with 'distinctive institutions and languages, religions and cultures, as well as different histories' (Rawls 1999:54–55). He conceptualises a second original position where representatives of all people meet behind a veil of ignorance (Rawls 1999:32–33) and eventually choose eight principles as the 'Law of the Peoples' (Rawls 1999:37). Also in this 'internationalised' version of his work he develops a prioritarian sense of distributive justice.

9. In terms of this understanding injustice is 'simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all' (Rawls 1973:62).

Rawls formulates eight principles of justice of free and democratic peoples (Rawls 1999:37):

1. Peoples are free and independent, and their freedom and independence are to be respected by other peoples.
2. Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings.
3. Peoples are equal and are parties to the agreements that bind them.
4. Peoples are to observe a duty of non-intervention.
5. Peoples have the right of self-defence but no right to instigate war for reasons other than self-defence.
6. Peoples are to honour human rights.
7. Peoples are to observe certain specified restrictions in the conduct of war.
8. People(s) have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavourable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime.

Principle 8 in particular marks Rawls' egalitarianism as prioritarian in character. He views those living under unfavourable conditions as citizens of 'burdened societies' because they 'lack the political and cultural traditions, the human capital and know-how, and often, the material and technological resources needed to be well-ordered' (Rawls 1999:106). This does not mean, however, that Rawls accepts a global difference principle. The principle of distributive justice is not necessarily the best or the only way to 'regulate economic and social inequalities among societies' (Rawls 1999:106). His three guidelines for the duty to assist, clarify this aspect of his theory (Rawls 1999:106–113).

Burdened societies are not assisted in order for them to reach greater equality in, for example, economic wealth, but rather to assist them 'to establish reasonably just basic institutions for a free constitutional democratic society and to secure a social world that makes possible a worthwhile life for all its citizens' (Rawls 1999:107).

### Joseph Stiglitz: A differential option for poor countries

The renowned – and in some circles infamous! – economist Joseph Stiglitz may come from a completely different intellectual tradition than Latin American liberation theologians, and from a different discipline than Rawls, but his work nonetheless has moments of prophetic intensity that matches that of the liberation theologians and of Rawls. One could contend that Stiglitz proposes an understanding of justice that shares at least some of the basic thrusts of the 'preferential option for the poor' or the least advantaged representative person or burdened societies discussed above.

Stiglitz continues to be committed to the free market, but has serious criticism against some of its traditional basic tenets. He rejects, for example, two long-standing premises of trade liberalisation (Stiglitz 2006a:23, 29; Stiglitz 2006b:18–21). Firstly, Stiglitz is not of the opinion that the liberalisation of trade will necessarily lead to more trade and higher economic growth. Secondly, he does not believe that growth will necessarily 'trickle down' to the benefit of all. According

to his research and reading of economic history and current economic theory neither of these 'truths' are supported by fact. In addition he rejects the separation of efficiency and equity considerations. He argues that efficiency cannot be the sole criterion of economic performance, but that so-called noneconomic values such as 'social justice, the environment, cultural diversity, universal access to health care and consumer protection' should be co-determinants of economic success (Stiglitz 2006a:xvii, 17, 22).

In a revealing reference to Rawls, Stiglitz asks how the economic system might have looked if those in power had to choose the fairest system from behind a veil of ignorance (Stiglitz 2006a:296, footnote 15). In this context he integrates his critique with his allegiance to the current system and suggests a 'differential option for the poor and the judgement of trade regimes by the criterion whether it does not make poorest countries relatively even poorer' (Stiglitz 2006a:58). He is of the opinion that after the World Trade Organization replaced the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1995 an asymmetric system with uneven implementation evolved, with the result that developing countries became even worse off (Stiglitz 2006a:48).

He therefore suggests a reform of international trade, which he calls 'fair trade for the poor'. This reform would entail that the current system of so-called reciprocity for and amongst all countries would be replaced by the principle of 'reciprocity among equals, but differentiation between those in markedly different circumstances' (Stiglitz 2006a:83). In practice this means that countries should trade with one another in a three-tier system of rich, middle-income and poor countries (Stiglitz 2006a:83). In such a system the rich countries open up their markets to all three tiers – reciprocally to other rich countries, but without reciprocity or political conditionality to middle-income and poor countries. Middle-income countries open their markets to other middle-income and poor countries without conditionality, and are not expected to open their markets to rich countries. Stiglitz suggests that this differential treatment towards developing countries should not be voluntary, but should be a necessary part of World Trade Organization trade negotiations.

Stiglitz defends his position from both an utilitarian and a deontological base: he is of the opinion that a differential option for poor countries would, firstly, serve the self-interest of developed countries as it would contribute to greater stability and security in these countries (Stiglitz 2006a:59). Such a trade regime can stem the inflow of immigrants to developed countries, and in the long run it will diminish the need for development aid and debt write-offs.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, Stiglitz motivates his position on the principle moral unacceptability of the scale of continued global poverty (Stiglitz 2006a:59, 100–101). Although he does not argue this case at length, it is clear that the humanity of developed countries is connected to the humanity of their attempts to address global poverty.

10. Stiglitz reminds us that rich countries cost poor countries three times more in trade restrictions than they give in development aid (2006a:78).

Let us turn to the last phase of this development from theologically motivated prophecy to policy formulation.

### Doha ministerial declaration: Special and differential treatment for poor countries

The (often subversive) conviction that those in structurally disadvantaged positions should be treated in a differential manner in order for injustice to be undone, is not only visible in the work of theologians from developing countries, academic philosophers or somewhat dissenting economists. The Doha Development Round of the World Trade Organization trade negotiations (commencing in 2001) included strong statements recognising the need for the differential treatment of less-developed countries.

In this document it is agreed that 'special and differential treatment for developing countries' forms an integral part of negotiations aimed at 'substantial improvements' in market access, reducing and ultimately phasing out 'all forms of export subsidies' and 'substantial reductions' in domestic support (World Trade Organization, Doha Ministerial Declaration Article 13). Differential treatment for poor countries is based on the premise that international trade 'can play a major role in the promotion of economic development and the alleviation of poverty' (World Trade Organization Doha Ministerial Declaration: 2).

Even in this document one recognises the implicit acknowledgement that current injustices are – at least partly – the result of a hierarchical, uneven and asymmetrical system (cf. Held, McGrew & Perraton 1999:213, 224). In Article 2 the declaration rather candidly states:

We recognize the particular *vulnerability* of the least-developed countries and the special *structural difficulties* they face in the global economy. We are committed to addressing the *marginalization* of least-developed countries in international trade and to improving their effective *participation* in the multilateral trading system.

(World Trade Organization Doha Ministerial Declaration: 3 [author's emphases])

These notions from the Doha Declaration understandably continue to receive strong support from developing countries, specifically from the Africa Union. The support is not, however, unqualified.

Whilst the African Union accepts the principles of a market economy, it chooses for a wider theoretical frame of reference than a narrow mercantilist view of trade negotiations. A comprehensive theoretical framework in which 'economic efficacy and solidarity, efficiency and equity, growth and sustainable development, short term gains and long term prospects' must be combined should inform trade negotiations (African Union Commission 2004:10). It also takes in a qualified stance regarding trade negotiations themselves. At this stage Africa still has low negotiation capabilities both in terms of human resources and technical knowledge. Although Africa is in the process of developing its trade negotiation capacities, the assistance of the World

Trade Organization will be needed to participate effectively (Economic Commission for Africa 2007:90).

Africa has been the recipient of many forms of forced political and economic interventions. Whilst therefore understanding that trade liberalisation is the general aim of trade negotiations, the African Union continues to emphasise that allowance for trade liberalisation should be made according to the development needs and adjustment capacities of a particular country or region (Economic Commission for Africa 2007:87). It also supports the notion of aid specifically aimed at meeting the adjustment costs of trade liberalisation – given that it is not misused as a political weapon in negotiations or as replacement for current trade commitments (Economic Commission for Africa 2007:87).

### Weaknesses of prophetic discourse

In the previous section the 'preferential option for the poor' that characterises Latin American liberation theology was used to illustrate the legitimacy and strengths of the prophetic discourse. But this legitimacy does not mean that prophetic discourse is sufficient (cf. Gustafson 1988:15). In fact, the discussion above exactly points to the inherent weaknesses of prophetic discourse if taken by itself or if isolated from other forms of moral discourse. As Gustafson reminds us, prophetic discourse is but one 'variety' of moral discourse. According to him, prophetic discourse must necessarily be supplemented by identity-sustaining narratives (Gustafson 1988:19–27), rigorous logically coherent ethical arguments (Gustafson 1988:31–44) and the choice and planning of particular courses of actions (Gustafson 1988:45–53).

### Failure to provide full moral argument

Prophetic discourse fails to provide a full moral argument. Moral discourse is aimed not at simply talking, but at reaching a decision (Tödt 1988:22). Uncovering the roots of perceived injustice with prophetic passion in the name of God, calling for repentance and inspiring with a utopian vision of the future, is but a dimension of moral discourse.

Although some proponents of the exclusive use of prophetic discourse rightly argues that it can also be logically rigorous, this still does not mean that it provides a full moral argument. In distinction to the sometimes conceptual impreciseness of prophetic discourse, one finds more precise forms of argumentation, such as Tödt's theory of moral decision-making (see especially Tödt 1988:21–84). To appreciate the flow and extent of moral argumentation we shall investigate the main movements of his theory.

Tödt distinguishes between six repetitious *Sachmomente* in a moral argument. The *first* is the recognition and acceptance of the moral problem. Only when the moral dimension of such a situation is recognised can the process of moral argumentation commence (Tödt 1988:30). The analysis of the situation in which this moral problem arose is the *second* step. It is of course impossible to come to a complete understanding

of the context, therefore this step is characterised by die selection of what is perceived as the salient features of the situation (Tödt 1988:31). It is characterised, furthermore, by the acceptance of the risk of error (Tödt 1988:32).

The *third* step requires considering the different actions that prove themselves applicable and morally required. Tödt wilfully diverges from the typical casuistic order (from norm to action) as norms can only be considered in concrete situations, and connected to concrete options (Tödt 1988:62). In the same way he develops this step not as merely a functional decision, but connects the ultimate action that needs to be taken intimately with the identity and integrity of the decision-making agent, as well as the situation in which such an agent finds him or herself (Tödt 1988:34–36). Only after possible actions have been considered can the norms, perspectives and other resources relevant for making the moral decision be applied, in a *fourth* step (Tödt 1988:53).

Before making the moral decision in a last step Tödt adds a *fifth* step. Because the moral agent is not alone on earth, and because moral decision-making is a supra-individualistic endeavour, each moral decision should have a 'communicative bindingness' (in German: *kommunikative Verbindlichkeit*) (Tödt 1988:74). This means that any moral decision should be able to be generalised in order to transcend the subjectivity of the particular moral agent. Only after this generalising step can the moral decision be taken as an 'integrated – i.e. cognitive, voluntary and identity-relevant – act' (Tödt 1988:77–78).

When compared to a moral argument such as proposed by Tödt it is clear that a passionate and unequivocal moral indictment in the name of God fails to provide a full moral argument. In this sense, the greatest strength of prophetic discourse at the same time gives birth to one of its greatest weaknesses.

## Weak on moral analysis

A second weakness of prophetic discourse is that it tends to be weak on moral analysis. The exclusive, or at least primary, use of prophetic discourse often leads to a totalising and one-dimensional view of the particular situation. Such a totalised view easily disables dialogue and misses the opportunity for interdisciplinary attempts at understanding the perceived injustice and formulating policy.

The Accra Confession, accepted by the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004 (World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2004a), serves as illustration of how the overriding use of prophetic language weakens its capacity for comprehensive moral analysis.<sup>11</sup>

The confession understands itself as a prophetic critique<sup>12</sup> against the unjust global economic system as the root cause

11. Already the Accompanying Letter use very emotive language and makes use of (prophetically) charged phrases such as the division between 'those who worship in comfortable contentment and those enslaved by the world's economic injustice and ecological destruction'; 'If Jesus Christ is not Lord over all, he is not Lord at all'; 'dethrone the false gods of wealth and power' (World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2004b).

12. Cf., for example, Article 39: 'The General Council calls upon member churches ... to undertake the difficult and prophetic task of interpreting this confession to their local congregations'.

of massive threats to human life and nonhuman forms of life on earth.<sup>13</sup> This economic system is identified as the 'neo-liberal ideology' (Accra Confession, Article 14) that claims sovereignty over life and is therefore idolatry (Accra Confession, Article 10). It promotes policies of limitless growth (Accra Confession, Articles 8 and 23) and promotes rampant consumerism and competitive greed and selfishness (Accra Confession, Article 29). In classic prophetic style the Accra Confession also identifies the agents driving this unjust system:

The United States of America and its allies, together with international finance and trade institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization) who makes use of 'political, economic, or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of capital owners.

(Accra Confession, Article 13)

Although it is very clear on its identification of the perceived injustice and those responsible for these injustices, the Accra Confession lacks a convincing moral analysis on which to base these very strong statements. Like many prophetic documents it runs the very real risk of self-ideologisation. By the ideologisation of its own position it creates 'a huge barrier ... between prophetic voices and those that speak in more precise and rational modes of argumentation' (Gustafson 1988:16–17) and in this way misses the complexities and importance of inter-disciplinary dialogue. Economists – even those who are Christian and wish to eradicate injustice – feel silenced by this mode of discourse for two reasons: there are factual and perception distortions, and the black-white dividing lines make rational interaction difficult, if not impossible.

## Silent on transitional measures

Closely connected to its weak moral analysis, is the fact that prophetic discourse is likely to be silent on how exactly to bridge the gap between its judgement and its proposed utopian future. In a sense it is unfair to pronounce the principles and envisioned future without contributing to the transitional measures *en route*. These transitional measures can also be described as policy suggestions. Prophetic discourse indeed 'does not concern itself with incremental choices that have to be made by persons and institutions in which good and evil are intricately intermingled' (Gustafson 1988:16).

Gustafson identifies two strengths of a policy discourse that may help us understanding this weakness of prophetic discourse better (Gustafson 1988:46–47). Policy discourse, firstly, is not done by 'external observers', but by those who have the responsibility to make the choices and carry out actions. Responsibility and accountability are central to formulating policy decisions. The tendency to self-ideologisation not only weakens prophetic discourse's moral analysis but also sidelines its proponents from contributing to formulating and enacting transitional measures, and hinders them from taking responsibility for the role they should play in reaching the envisioned future.

13. Cf. Article 6: 'The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death'.



According to Gustafson, the second feature of policy discourse is the 'particularity of conditions' in which policy should be developed. These conditions at the same time 'limit the possibilities of action' and also 'enables them'. Prophetic discourse may easily be located in the abstract world of its utopian future without ever acknowledging the concrete realities within which its vision should necessarily take form. Ironically, denouncing and dreaming in the name of God can easily stay disconnected to realising God's will – and prophetic discourse may be a way of speaking most prone to this irony.

We may refer to the Accra Confession to illustrate this weakness of prophetic discourse. Virtually nothing is said on ways how the transition from the sinful global economic system to God's future may be managed. Although the document understands itself as 'prophetic' and it presents a theological argument, even 'clues about action and discipleship', seems to be missing (Naudé 2008:211).<sup>14</sup>

### Unable to dislodge itself from system that stands under judgement

A fourth and last weakness of prophetic discourse relevant for our discussion is that it often does not adequately recognise that it cannot dislodge from the system that stands under judgement. Prophets indeed often:

do not help responsible Christian persons who seek to gain political and economic power as a means to serve the public good within the constraints of political, economic, medical or other institutions.

(Gustafson 1988:17)

Prophets often fail to recognise that also they benefit and make use of the very system they regard as being under God's judgement. In his theory of moral decision-making Tödt recognises that moral decision-making is much more than simply applying certain universal principles to certain situations. Principles can only be understood in combination with 'institutions, roles, social arrangements of relationships and routine chains of interactions' (Tödt 1988:37)<sup>15</sup>. This means that persons who address a moral problem should always recognise that they always in a sense act from the inside, rather from the outside of the situation.

When prophets do not recognise their own position within the system they denounce, it is very difficult to appreciate the strengths and avenues for reform present within the system. An interesting example is the pursuit of 'enlightened self-interest' which attempts to curb the social and ecological excesses of the 'neo-liberal empire' (Accra): Increasingly individuals and enterprises are realising that it is possible to do well by doing good (Vogel 2008:184–188). According to the influential Global Compact of the United

Nations, 'financial markets are starting to recognise that environmental, social and governance issues can be material to long term performance' (United Nations Global Compact 2007:4). Globally business enterprises are putting into action business practices that ensure both sustainable profit and a sustainable use of natural and human capital. As businesses generally have 'the greatest pools of human and monetary capital' (Institute of Directors in Southern Africa 2009:8), they are in a strong position to contribute to a more humane global order.

This is especially clear in the promise of corporate social responsibility in the activities of businesses. Although many definitions of corporate social responsibility exist, at least six core characteristics makes evident how businesses are increasingly understanding themselves as in a position to bring social change and create a capitalism with a human face (Crane, Matten & Spence 2008:7–9). In essence it is the *voluntary* actions undertaken by businesses to both *manage externalities* and *moving beyond philanthropy*, by *aligning social and economic and social responsibilities*. This is done by internalising certain *values and philosophies* and by *engaging a variety of different stakeholders*. According to a survey done by PricewaterhouseCoopers, already 70% of global chief executives believe that corporate social responsibility is vital to their companies' profitability (quoted in Vogel 2008:185).

The link between doing good and doing well is also clear in the growing trend of businesses to invest responsibly. Following the example of the FTSE's 4Good Index, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange launched its Socially Responsible Investment Index (SRI Index) in 2004. It was launched in order to reach at least four key objectives, namely to identify companies that integrate the principles of the triple bottom line and good governance in their business practices, to provide a tool for a holistic assessment of companies based on local realities and international standards, to enable responsible investment by providing nonfinancial risk variables and to contribute to responsible business practices in South Africa (Johannesburg Stock Exchange & Ethical Investment Research and Information Service 2007:2). Since its inception the SRI Index has grown to one the JSE's most prestigious products, with 34 of its top 40 companies on the Index in 2009 (Johannesburg Stock Exchange 2009).

But in blanket denouncement of the neo-liberal system as such, prophets will – if they are consistent – also have to denounce all these efforts as driven by mere 'postponed' self-interest, and a seeking of public approval for the sake of business reputation. The question then arises: What is to be done as an alternative? And prophetic discourse on its own is not equipped to answer this important question, unless it wishes to dismantle the system as such. How such dismantling is to happen in practice is then a legitimate follow-up question.

## Conclusion

This article gives an outline of key features of prophetic discourse. It then asks the question whether prophetic discourse – understood in this particular way - is an adequate

14. For a document with both a strong theological argument and strong clues on policy and an openness for dialogue, see the EKD's discussion paper, *Gerechte Teilhabe* (EKD 2006).

15. The original German is: 'Sittliche Normen sind im Zusammenhang von Institutionen, Rollen, sozialen Beziehungsgefügen, regelmäßigen Interaktionsabläufen zu verstehen'.

mode of moral language to address issues of economic injustice.

The strength of prophetic discourse is its ability to unambiguously denounce a specific situation of injustice, and at the same time announce a God-willed alternative future. This rhetorical power is not be underestimated as it has the potential over time to influence public debate beyond theological discourse and even lead to concrete policy formulation not intended by the original prophets. The case study of a preferential option for the poor demonstrated how, over a period of more than 40 years, the insight of Latin American liberation theologians finds tentative expression in the Doha Round of trade negotiations.

The core weaknesses of prophetic discourse are its incomplete moral argument, weak moral analyses, silence on transition measures, and its inability to take a positive stance on reforms in the system from which itself benefits.

The conclusion is that prophetic discourse plays an indispensable role in addressing issues of global economic justice, but – taken by itself – it is not an adequate form of moral discourse to actually address concrete matters of justice.

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