

Trends in contemporary Christian eschatological reflection¹

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Abstract

This article intends to make a scholarly contribution by mapping the main developments in the field of eschatology. Such an attempt could deepen reflection in a multidisciplinary conversation with, for example, Missiology. Exciting and constructive shifts have taken place in eschatology, and five such trends are briefly highlighted. Eschatology is not a mere appendix to the Christian vision, but belongs to its very nature, and requires careful hermeneutical exploration and articulation. The recent appreciation of marginalised voices have wrought exciting new sensibilities and should be cautiously heeded. Attempts are underway to expand the notion of a singular final *telos*, based on a broadened notion of the divine. Finally, the performative effects of eschatological discourse, especially the political, should be explicitly accounted for. The article concludes with seven guidelines that identify scholarly gains and areas for special future attention.

Keywords: Alterity, Eschatology, Hermeneutics, Hope, Politics

1. Introduction

The contours of the ultimate hope that a religious tradition promises can hardly no longer be presented as a fixed and timeless feature. The realisation of the historical nature of our speaking and our knowledge has destabilised essentialist thought; too many factors impact on our constructions. Although the ‘grammar’ of the future expectation of a specific religion may be fairly codified, how that grammar is imaginatively employed may result in diverse and ever more astounding pictures of the future. One such factor informing the imagination is the continuously developing and restless state of academic scholarship. This article aims to map some developments in Christian eschatology, new sensibilities that may potentially enrich, expand and even challenge our own visions of ‘life after death’. This is undertaken from a systematic theological perspective and hopes to advance interdisciplinary engagement with disciplines like Missiology.

¹ Revised version of a paper presented at an international conference of Missiology, UFS, Bloemfontein, 26 September 2014.

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A recently published comprehensive book – *The Oxford handbook of Eschatology* (Walls 2008) – conveys a clear sense of changes in approach: conventional motifs such as heaven, hell, and millennialism are still present, but the striking feature is the recognition of *plurality* in Biblical and confessional traditions as well as the engagement with *world religions*. Particularly insightful is the extensive discussion of fairly *innovative* perspectives such as, for example, eschatology and politics, cosmology, epistemology, and the fine arts. Clearly, in the house of eschatology, it is not business as usual. The concluding chapter in this book by Bauckham (2008) on ‘emerging issues’ is exceptionally informative. My own approach will attempt to distil and systematise some of the shifts and add additional recent work.

2. Five major trends

In the following central section, five major trends in Christian eschatological discourse will be briefly identified.

2.1 Radicalising future orientation

Although the roots for twentieth-century renewed interest in eschatology can be traced back to nineteenth-century reactions to liberal theology, the 1967 work by Moltmann – *Theology of hope* – could arguably be considered the decisive stimulus for a new appreciation of the future as central to the Christian vision of reality.³ His (1967:16) assertion that “[t]he eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but is the medium of Christian faith as such” alerted Christian thinkers and was heeded by many. Moltmann’s critical insight should be registered: he integrated eschatology and his doctrine of God – the future is essential to God’s very nature. Bauckham (2008:671) is probably correct in his judgement that twentieth-century eschatology should be ‘after Moltmann’, in explicit conversation with him. Moltmann’s great systematic summa – *The coming of God* (1996) – with its fourfold division of personal, historical, cosmic and divine eschatology deserves careful study.

Accepting the radical eschatological nature of the Christian faith does have many ramifications. *Being as such* is no longer protologically oriented, but eschatologically open to ever new possibilities.⁴ The entire architectural structure of *Systematic Theology* should be re-envisioned; eschatology is no longer an appendix, but the optic viewing all dimensions of the Christian faith. This is quite innovatively

³ Some interpreters (see, for example, Van den Brink & Van der Kooi (2012:641–647)) identify at least three trajectories in the development. The first was the retrieval by Weiss and Schweitzer of the category ‘Kingdom of God’; the second was the rethinking of the dialectic of time and eternity by theologians such as Barth, Bultmann and Tillich. The retrieval of motifs such as future, history and cosmos by Pannenberg and Moltmann forms a third development.

⁴ This is explored in Zizioulas’ forthcoming new work – *Remembering the future*.

implemented in the new work by Yong (2014); eschatology is discussed as the first ‘doctrine’ of the Christian faith.

2.2 Prioritising a hermeneutical approach

It was unavoidable that two major intellectual ‘turns’ of the twentieth century – to eschatology and to hermeneutics – would intersect at some stage. The very nature of the quest of human and cosmic destiny – what is not-yet-there – renders self-reflection about responsible interpretation an imperative: how do we think and interpret a religious tradition’s future promise? Rahner (1974) made a seminal contribution in this regard with his essay *The hermeneutics of eschatological assertions*. In a number of theses, Rahner suggests exceedingly important principles to guide eschatological thinking. The change in cosmology makes such a quest urgent. He stresses that eschatology should communicate something about the future, without suspending hiddenness and mystery; it is about the ‘fulfilment of the whole man’. Finally, “Christ himself is the hermeneutical principle of all eschatological assertions” (1974:342).

Several other scholars have ventured into similar terrain.⁵ The contribution by Schwöbel (2000) is also worth mentioning. He cautions about ‘eschatological fallacies’ which could be committed; isolation, one-dimensional emphases, misplaced continuities/discontinuities, premature temporalisation and moralising should be avoided. Eschatology should be developed in interaction with all the Christian doctrines; Schwöbel (2000:238) advocates that “the task consists in developing a Christian eschatology as a Trinitarian eschatology”. Because man is a relational being, a multi-levelled ‘relational eschatology’ should be developed which is inclusive of all the dimensions of life. The death and resurrection of Christ furnishes an example for thinking about an acceptable approach to continuity and discontinuity. The starting-point for eschatology is not time, but God, and the end is not a human ethical project, but is ultimately in the hands of the triune God.

These proposals by theologians such as Rahner and Schwöbel are most helpful and should be developed further. However, these authors do not address the reality of projectionist constructions. In his magisterial work – *Life after death: A history of the afterlife in Western religion* – Segal (2004:698) reaches the disturbing conclusion, after 700 pages, that “imaging a heaven … involves projecting our own hopes on heaven and then spending our lives trying to live up to them”. How

⁵ The recent and comprehensive Systematic Theology by Van den Brink & Van der Kooi (2012:653) discusses “een aantal hermeneutische principes” (= “a number of hermeneutical principles”). They make the claim “In de eschatologie gaat het veel meer om de vraag wie en wat in het heden en in de toekoms bepalend is” (:657) (= “in eschatology the issue is much more who and what determine the present and the future”). The work by Thiselton (2007, especially chapter 22) should also be considered in this regard. His underevaluation of space (:575) is, however, disappointing.

a religion's imaginings of the hereafter mirrors what is valued most in life deserves careful attention: what is valid theological exploration and what is questionable projection?

2.3 Engaging alterity

The twentieth-century intellectual 'turn to the other' has inevitably been reflected in eschatological thinking. In this article, *alterity* is a convenient shorthand reference to voices, perspectives and disciplines which have not been part of traditional and conventional eschatological discourse. By including these in mainstream thinking, the potential of new insights has been tremendously expanded and some of the most exciting work is being undertaken in this regard. Six such innovative approaches can be mentioned.

Ecology and eschatology: A cosmic dimension has always been part of Christian hope for the future. With a new interest in ecology and an appreciation of materiality as such, this aspect has moved to centre stage. The majority of older eschatological theology has been strikingly anthropocentric. The emphasis is now on the redemption of nature as such (see, for example, Keller 1994 and Scott 2000). The ramifications of this shift should not be underestimated; there is new emphasis on the doctrine of creation, on this life, and on matters such as justice and economics. The work by the Australian Denis Edwards deserves careful attention. In an exemplary manner he integrates several motifs prominent in recent theology: ecology, evolutionary thinking and Trinitarian theology. The resurrection already impacts this reality through secondary causes, and this amounts to expressions or "instantiations of potentialities" given in creation from the beginning (Edwards 2010:105f). Quite interestingly, Edwards also discusses the possibility of hope for animals (2010:159ff). In a recent comprehensive overview of the state of scholarship on ecotheology, Conradie (2013:111), who has conducted more research on this aspect than anybody else in the South African context, laments an 'escapist eschatology' which is still deeply entrenched in the Christian mind. He perceives a "difficulty of expressing a clear vision of hope for the earth itself" (:111). The relation of creation to salvation is crucial in his theology, and he proposes that this be conceptualised as 'maturity' (:111, n 10).

Science and eschatology: The important dialogue between faith and science has inevitably started to explore the interface between these two paradigms of human sense-making. A major publication such as *The end of the world and the ends of God: Science and theology on eschatology* (Polkinghorne & Welker 2000) conveys an impression of this exciting venture and the possible avenues. Eschatology is a particularly apt research problem for an interdisciplinary dialogue between science and religion. Not only does it address an urgent cultural crisis of despair and

cynicism, but it also challenges both science and theology to epistemic soul-searching – science to account for its reductionist physicalism and theology to warrant its public truth claims (Polkinghorne & Welker 2000:2,6). In particular, the old question about continuity/discontinuity receives heightened attention in this conversation. A scholar such as Murphy (2007:549) is even of the opinion that science and theology will ultimately part company in light of the radical nature of eschatological transformation. However, the contribution of science to challenge theology to update her operative cosmology and to re-envision the notion of human self and identity should be appreciated in a positive light. The fundamental challenge is to reconcile science's vision of a cosmic future of 'freeze or fry' scenario, depending on which cosmological one opts for, and theology's hope for an eschatological future of a new transformed new creation. Various models in this conversation could be identified (see Russell 2008:566–571). Russell, one of the participants in this conversation, rejects those that dismiss the possibility of rapprochement (e.g., irreconcilability or irrelevance) and suggests that "God must have created the universe *such that it is transformable* by God's action" (2008:574). The future could be what science predicts, but the possibility of a *novum* is real, especially in light of the event of the resurrection. Ultimately, theology's "basis is trust in the everlasting faithfulness of the living and eternal God" (Polkinghorne & Welker 2000:12).

Feminism and eschatology: In Christian Feminism important revisionary work is found on eschatology. In an overview of Feminist thinkers like Suchocki, Keller, Gebara, and Williams Ruether (2008:334) emphasises that their views are more skeptical and tentative than previous eschatological work by women. They are dismissive of absolutes and grand narratives of historical liberation, and focus the horizon of hope much more on the transformation of concrete relationships. For Ruether the Christian symbol of the reign of God refers to "what ought to be" in relationships, and provides hope as "an insurgent power of resistance" (2008:339). A theologian such as Keller has subjected the Christian vision, in conjunction with its underlying apocalyptic framework, to radical critique (see, for example, 2005).⁶ Her concern is directed towards the fundamental patriarchal orientation, the erasure of difference, and the historical imperialistic impact of a text such as the Book of Revelation. After 9/11, America, as the only empire in the world, developed in an unsettling direction, and this prompted her, with her scholarly interest in the 'politics of apocalypse', to study how the apocalyptic world of Revelation functions at the unconscious level of people. Traditional interpretation is aware of parody

⁶ The intricate world of scholarship on apocalypticism cannot be dealt with in this limited purview. Suffice it to draw attention to the continued reflection on this. See especially the recent collection of essays by outstanding thinkers (Davis and Harink 2012). Käsemann's claim that "apocalyptic is the mother of Christian theology" stills haunts theologians.

in this book, but what is often neglected is how the messianic world ‘mirrors’ or ‘mimics’ the Roman Empire: “John’s virtual *basileia*, his ‘empire of God’, shadow-boxes with the Roman Empire” (2005:39). The apocalypse reinscribes exactly that which is opposed. The hypermasculine God, the omnipotent God of Revelation, is fashioned after the Roman emperor (2005:29, 51). Keller is critical of fellow theologians, especially those working in a liberationist paradigm, who focus so much on Revelation’s potential for social justice that they are oblivious to the violence of the vision itself (2005:85). Her concern is that the book could be read as ‘the Book of Torture’ (2005:47). Keller’s alternative is a constructive theology, a ‘counter-apocalypse’, which focuses on ‘becoming’ and on love, and which frees the messianic from imperial imagery. It furthers sensitivity to the presence of power in theological constructions. Feminist thinking, in conjunction with its relational matrix, could potentially contribute to the rethinking of eschatological construction.

Global Christianity and eschatology: The shift of the centre of gravity to the South is one of the epochal changes in Christianity and the consequent emergence of an array of new voices from Asia, Africa and Latin America holds immense implications for the practice of doing theology, also for eschatological articulation. Not only are Western conceptions critiqued, but also new accents are suggested. This can be clearly found in African approaches to eschatology. There is an acute awareness of the dissimilarity between Christian eschatology and traditional African views (see for example Ojo 2006:97-99). In an intriguing contribution Katongole (2008) contrasts a Western and an African approach. According to him a conventional Western eschatology is futuristic, marked by anxiety about individual survival and desacralizes the present time. Building on the well-known work by John Mbiti on an African understanding of time, Katongole proposes alternative emphases. Eschatology is primarily about “a determinative posture in the present” and not about a set of beliefs what will happen in the future (2008:283). A two-dimensional eschatology, one that stresses a long past and a dynamic present, values the following elements: the sacredness of the present, memory and a community of ancestors. Such an eschatology is devoid of anxiety and brings a deep sense of hope. Interestingly, Katongole argues that such a past-oriented eschatology is also more biblical as the end has already happened in Christ (2008:284). Global Christianity may bring fruitful corrections; it may highlight orientations which are not biblical but typical Western, and it may encourage a more faithful attention to the Bible.

Aesthetics and eschatology: Jenson’s (1999) provocative maxim – “the end is music” – conveys the cardinal insight that aesthetic categories may be most suitable to represent the truth of the Christian hope of the future. Propositional speaking could go so far, then it should give way to the artistic imagination. This is not

always appreciated. The central place of the notion of ‘glory’ in the vision of the Christian *telos*, as intimated in Revelation, should not be missed (Venter 2012). Some outstanding Christian thinkers such as Edwards, Barth and Von Balthasar also interpret the ‘glory’ of God in aesthetic terms. The end is beautiful, because of the triune nature of God and the human and cosmic participation in this very divine life. There is an undeniable appeal to vision in the text of Revelation. In both Jenson’s and Venter’s reflection, the character of the final end is determined by the life of the triune God – the beauty of love reaching its destiny.

Post-colonial theory and eschatology: In a fascinating and major recent publication – *Eschatology and space* – Westhelle (2012) tries to redress a dominant trend to focus on time in eschatology, and retrieves the central place of *space*. Over against a longitudinal approach with its various permutations – whether axiological or teleological (2012:58) – which has held sway over Western eschatology since the time of Augustine, he advocates a latitudinal one. The emphasis is no longer on chronological movement, but on the topological awareness of the importance of place and locale which have been absent from eschatological discourse. In this ‘turn’, ‘space’ refers to the “confinements of geographical, social, psychic, and epistemological domains” (2012:3, 113). These ‘domains’ are never homogeneous or neutral, but imbued with power and dominance. Westhelle’s shift to space is interested in neglected *experiences*, experiences of marginality, displacement and liminality which have rarely, if at all, been the focus of eschatological reflection. In his proposal, the notions of ‘margin’ and ‘crossing’ are crucial, and become fundamental eschatological categories. In this sense, a postcolonial approach is crucial, for it highlights a crossing over, a transgression of boundaries. The crossing of the domains mentioned entails eschatological experiences. At the margins, where the transitions occur, salvation or condemnation is pronounced (2012:xv, 79, 107). Eschatology, for Westhelle (2012:73), “is a discourse on liminality, marginality, on that which is on ontological, ethical, and also epistemological sense different”, and he names as such the experiences of crossings (2012:132). For this reason, eschatology could never be a *meta*-physical topic, something beyond the physical reality of all creation, and it is about ‘tactical’ practices in everyday life of the weak (2012:120f.).

These few examples stress how listening to marginalised voices, to non-theological disciplines and new methodologies may unsettle ossified positions *as if* the Christian vision could be domesticated and represented in a fixed formula. The Christian tradition has a surplus of meaning precisely because it is *God’s future*. Alterity, in its many manifestations, may assist to destabilise dead metaphors and retrieve new treasures, which may enable the vision to become inspiring and meaningful again.

2.4 Considering multiple religious ends and the potential of the God symbol

In a globalized world the existence of a great variety of religions, their visibility and their mutual interaction have become a conspicuous feature of contemporary society. Increasingly Christian theology has become aware of the imperative to explore the implication of religious plurality also for her vision of human and cosmic destiny. The reality of alternative visions of the ultimate end can no longer be ignored by any religion. A responsible envisioning should proceed in a dialogical fashion. The older, but trailblazing work by Hick *Death and eternal life* (1985) deserves mentioning. Advocating a Copernican revolution in religion which no longer considers one religion as the touchstone for truth, but religions as different responses to the same Ultimate Reality, he ambitiously construes a “global theology of death” that listens to the various religions as they “point to” a common human destiny. Fascinatingly he appeals in the end to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that could be used analogously to imagine a “perfect community of personal relationships” (1985:460ff).

A major and most innovative proposal was formulated by Heim in his work *Salvations* (1995; see also 2001 and 2014) in which he deliberately tries to move beyond the typical pluralist paradigm. Implicit in pluralist views is the assumption of *one* religious end; Heim questions this axiom. A truly pluralist approach would accept a *range of human fulfilments*; this is the only way to show respect for other faiths. His subsequent argumentative move makes Heim’s proposal fascinating – he (1995:163) proposes that this diversity be “authorised by the Trinitarian vision of God and a notion of the divine plenitude”. In a recent article, he (2014:125) states that “the doctrine of the Trinity offers Christians the deepest grounding for an understanding of religious diversity as a positive gift”. The project by Heim will obviously generate contestation, but his two central moves – to embrace *plurality* and ground that in his specific tradition’s *understanding of the divine* – cannot be ignored. How to address the reality of plurality and to question the potential of divine construals to carry the burden of new visions of the future may be an important agenda for the future.

2.5 Facing the political

The originating social matrix of Christian hope – the experience of Israel’s suffering, the question of theodicy in the inter-testamental period, and the resurrection experience of the early followers of the crucified Jesus – points to the undeniable context of politics and justice. Christian eschatology is no privatised, bourgeoisie and moralistic-therapeutic reality: it addresses fundamental matters of evil, suffering, and desperation.

The “resurrection of the dead” is a powerful symbol in the Christian eschatological imagination to raise questions of justice in history. With roots going way back

to Isaiah, Daniel and 2 Maccabees, it intimates notions of a powerful God who vindicates those who suffer unjustly (see Setzer 2001:90f). In his magisterial *The resurrection of the Son of God* Wright (2003:730) highlights the “inescapable political meaning” of the resurrection as it affirms that creation matters. It conquers the ultimate weapon of tyranny – death.

A pervasive realisation that Christian hope cannot be divorced from the political marks contemporary reflection. The future is God’s alternative world; it contradicts and judges earthly dispensations. Arguably, no other text embodies this more persuasively than the Book of Revelation. The immense popularity of this book evidences this intuition.⁷ Here is a book with the throne as central symbol, taking Empire with utmost seriousness, and proposing an alternative – a deeply ironic world where the weak will triumph. But, crucial – at its heart is a specific rendering of the divine. Bauckham (1993:164) correctly states that the entire vision stems from its understanding of God. Because of this conviction, the symbolic world is amazingly inclusive, concrete and material, aesthetic … and political.

The theme of hope in the South African struggle literature has been most capably documented and analysed by Conradie (2000). This eschatology is dominated by the critical relationship between the eschaton and the present, and by its potential to inspire people amidst oppression. He considers the return to the prophetic roots of Christian hope a strength of this theological labour, but he is at the same time critical of the neglect of the theme of liberation of the land, and of the dangerous equation of political liberation and the coming of God’s reign (2000:20f).

In a radical interpretation of the relation between eschatology and politics, Jenson (2004:415) argues for grounding this in the life of the triune God: “the classical doctrine of the triune God displays precisely a perfect polity” – each divine person subsists in self-giving to the others. Because of the life of the God of the future, eschatology is inherently political.

3. Some concluding guidelines

A number of concluding comments and guidelines can be offered.

One should constantly face and resist the temptation of reification of religious symbols. A hermeneutical approach to eschatology will fuel an epistemic humility and nurture a realisation that our speaking of the final end *can never be settled*. The fragility of human knowledge in the face of inexhaustible divine freedom can result – discursively – at most in a ‘*poetics of hope*’. The grammatical structure of language can be stable, but an aesthetic imagination will employ this with limitless new possibilities. Something of this analogy applies to eschatological thinking in the

⁷ For a good overview of the state of scholarship, see Osborne (2004).

Christian tradition: caution against ossification, trust in some stable features, and recognition of ever-astounding divine possibilities. Eschatological speech should arguably not be exclusively propositional, but rather more aesthetic, employing imagination, symbol and metaphor.⁸

This conviction allows the task ahead to crystallise: to rethink and *reconstruct* traditional symbols of eschatology. One should face the danger of speaking in platitudes, and the scandal of *sheer cognitive emptiness*. The majority of religious speaking about the final horizon of human and planetary life pales against the ‘futuribles’ (Toulmin) being offered by human scientific and technological endeavours. This is often so painfully present in popular accounts of people’s experiences of life after death, or of heaven.⁹ The need for *new categories* to stimulate creative thinking for a world undergoing radical changes could hardly be questioned.¹⁰ The task of responsible theology is not to merely repeat, but to probe the traditional resources in light of new experiences and the best of recent intellectual investigation. As briefly intimated, the trend towards interdisciplinary work and the emergence of subaltern voices could provide resources to contribute to this revitalisation. The future of eschatology may be located in these new conversations.

The *referent of ‘eschatology’* remains elusive in the literature; what is exactly referred to? For example, despite Westhelle’s incisive critique of longitudinal approaches and Keller’s violent apocalyptic world of Revelation, one cannot escape the impression that something is amiss; that eschatology is *more than* liminal experiences and vulnerable love. Eschatology, at least in a Christian sense, is about the final and ultimate transformation of creation and of the redemption of history. It is about personal, historical and cosmic *telos*. This should not be eclipsed.

The heart of the future of Christian eschatology should be clearly discerned: the *doctrine of God*. The one motif being emphasised by one scholar after the other is that eschatology is only possible in light of God’s reality, nature and identity. Eschatological exploration is theo-exploration. In a Christian sense, the Trinitarian life is the grammar for our eschatological poetry. This grammar bespeaks ultimate mystery, kenotic relationality, endless becoming and fecundity, exuberant love, astounding complexity, surprising hospitality and ecstatic faithfulness – rightly, an inexhaustible *pleroma*. Trinitarian imagining may be the central task ahead for

⁸ In this regard, the work by Avis remains crucial – *God and the creative imagination: Metaphor, symbol and myth in religion and theology* (1999).

⁹ See the comprehensive overviews of the plethora of literature on this topic. For a critical treatment thereof, see Gottlieb (2014a & 2014b).

¹⁰ This is also the problem with serious work on eschatology such as those of Van de Beek (2008) and Du Rand (2013). The reflection is thoroughly informed by traditional scholarship, but evidences very little of a wider epistemic world.

Christian eschatology. The exciting developments since the mid-twentieth century in Trinitarian thinking should still be fully explored for eschatology. Classical theism with its onto-theological orientation does not hold much promise for the reconstruction of eschatology.

Eschatological thought is never innocent, and the history of speaking of heaven and hell has never been without consequences. Eschatology is fundamentally an *ethical project* – it has performative effects. The motivational potential of eschatological symbols and visions is currently widely recognised. Precisely for this reason, some developments such as the greening or the spatialising of eschatology are exceedingly important. This may contribute to a new consciousness, which may result in new social practices. The ethics of theological construction can no longer be ignored, and should accompany all responsible theology.

Eschatology should speak about God's possibilities for this world, employing categories from the Bible, the Christian tradition and contemporary intellectual world, but never forget that it should *generate hope*. The contemporary cultural horizon, with its loss of hope and deep cynicism (see Wolf & Katerberg 2004) renders this task with acute urgency. The Christian vision of God's movement with the cosmos, with our planet, and with individual lives should speak a language that truly engages and suggests meaningful possibilities. To orientate life by revitalising hope may be a central theological task of our time. This makes eschatological thought important and urgent, but also critical, as it should deeply question mechanistic and bleak scientific extrapolations about cosmic inevitability.

One underdeveloped motif in the Christian vision of an ultimate *telos* should be pointed out: *justice*. One can hardly escape the impression that greater prominence should be given to this, especially in light of pervasive historical yearnings by those who suffer innocently, but also because this is a dominant biblical motif. E Schüssler Fiorenza (1991) is one of the few voices who emphatically called attention to this controlling theme in the Book of Revelation. The constructive task is to think of the Triune God in terms of justice. The end will be beautiful, because God will establish justice.

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Call To Papers

14th Assembly of the International Association For Mission Studies

August 11–17, 2016 Seoul, South Korea – “Conversions and Transformations – Missiological Approaches to Religious Change”

No matter what the goal of mission activity is considered to be, mission aims at transformation of some sort. The issue of conversion – a traditional goal of much Christian missionary activity – is much debated, both within and between religious communities. This is often due to the controversial methods and aims some Christian communities have employed. The nature of the transformation brought about by religion is also a contested field: Is it “purely” spiritual or does it also have social, cultural, political and other dimensions? The Scripture and the different Christian traditions abound with ideas, models and impulses about the types of religious change to be followed and those that are rejected. The way Christians perceive the nature of religious conversion and transformation influences the ways they relate to other Christians and to the people of other faiths. In this way, religious change, as viewed from theoretical, theological, ethical and practical perspectives, occupies a central place in the field of mission studies.

This 14th IAMS Assembly will examine issues of conversion and religious change from the multiple perspective shaping contemporary mission studies. The issues of conversion and religious change have not received enough scholarly attention by missiologists and Christian theologians working in the discipline. In many ways the questions of conversion and transformation have been dealt with by other sciences, such as social studies, general psychology and psychology of religion, philosophy, developmental studies, etc. At the same time, these questions have often been answered by theologians and missiologists employing historical or denominational approaches to conversion and transformation. Merely historical or denominationally specific approaches to such questions can keep theologians from the wider exchange of views important for Christian life issues.

One of the aims of the 2016 IAMS Assembly is to contribute towards creating a space for critical and constructive dialogue among scholarly disciplines, different Christian traditions and varying contextual backgrounds. From this perspective, we would expect to see paper contributions that relate mission studies with other relevant disciplines and sciences so that issues of conversion and transformation are critically

analyzed and theoretical approaches to religious change in interreligious contexts are elaborated.

We welcome papers on mission, conversion, transformation and the various missiological approaches to religious change from the perspective of the main fields of the IAMS Study Group, as well as from other scholarly fields of study. Other paper topics are welcomed, too, provided they contribute to the wider exploration of Christian mission and mission studies.

While preparing for the 2016 Assembly, please keep in mind the following information.

IAMS-2016 Study Groups

The academic procedure of the 2016 Seoul Assembly includes presentations of panel papers and session papers within the framework of the work of IAMS' seven study groups. These are:

- BISAM: Biblical Studies and Mission
- DABOH: Documentation, Archives, Bibliography and Oral History
- Healing/Pneumatology
- Gender in Mission
- Religious Freedom and Mission
- Theology of Mission
- Interreligious issues

All papers accepted should be presented within one of the Study groups. When proposing your paper, please think of which Study group your theme of research belongs to.

Timeline

1. Proposed topics with 250-word abstract are due by 31 August 2015.
2. Applicants will be notified of the acceptance of their papers in November and December 2015.
3. Draft papers of 2000 words are due by 31 May 2016.

Guidelines for writing paper

1. Papers presented during the conference are not to exceed 2000 words or 20 minutes to allow 10 minutes to be allocated to questions and answers.
2. If conference participants intend to submit their papers to Mission Studies for publication after the conference, they should develop them to between 6000 and 10,000 words, including notes.

3. Authors are expected to strictly adhere to the Style Guide for Mission Studies
<http://missionstudies.org/index.php/journal/style-guide-for-mission-studies/>

Process governing acceptance of paper

1. All proposals with abstracts will be reviewed by the IAMS Academic Committee who will finalize the Seoul programme in early 2016.
2. Applicants will be notified of the Academic Committee's decision by the end of January 2016.
3. If additional clarifications are needed, paper presenters and the Chairs of the six IAMS Study groups will additionally review the submitted paper abstracts and notify the paper presenters by 31 March 2016.

Papers admittance criteria

While writing your paper and before submission, check that you can answer the following questions positively:

1. Is your paper topic relevant to the IAMS-2016 Assembly general theme or the theme of your Study group?
2. In what way does your paper make an original contribution to the chosen field of study?
3. Does your paper show the following features:
 - Clarity and logic of argument;
 - Originality and concreteness of content;
 - Level of engagement with relevant scholarship;
 - Accuracy of form, expression, and language inclusiveness.
4. Is your paper abstract less than 250 words, and your draft paper for presentation less than 2000 words?

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Black Theology of Liberation Twenty Years after Democracy in South Africa

Is Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) still relevant? Let us put this question in another way. Is the liberation paradigm of doing theology still relevant in the twenty first century? Perhaps this is not only a relevant question to pose, but also timely a question when the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria is celebrating its centenary soon. Since the Hammanskraal Conference in 1978 on racism which set the path for a black confessing church, the formation of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa (ABRESCA), the Ottawa World Alliance of Reformed Church's declaration of apartheid as a heresy culminating to the Kairos Document and the Belhar Confession and the on-going SA kairos movement engaging current political powers and trends, is there still a need for a black confessing church in South Africa after the demise of apartheid? Does BTL need an epistemological broadening additional to the content matter of socio-economic-religious aspects to include much more deeply a critical discourse towards other societal imbalances such ecology, gender based violence, human trafficking, disability, marginalisation of sexual minorities, and post- and colonialism?

A few years ago one exponent of this school argued that BTL "lives on a permanent crisis." Twenty years after the demise of apartheid what is it that seems to have attained permanence as a crisis on which BTL must live? Are the problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality a permanent crisis for a black interlocutor? Well, others have implicitly suggested that BTL is on the doldrums and has no relevance in a South Africa that has now been politically liberated.

The question of the relevance of BTL has been so pervasive in the last two decades and continues to be posed even in academic platforms, while exponents of the school continue to be at work reasserting, rearticulating and redefining the basics of the school simultaneously with parasitic fraudsters co-opting the elements of this paradigm without ceasing. Yet there are equally important developments within the school that cannot be left unnoticed. In the last two decades in South Africa a number of exponents of this school assumed highest positions in institutions of higher learning, others in government, let alone in political spaces that opened up in South Africa post 1994. There was an "exodus" of BTL exponents to places other than those previously understood as sites of the struggle for liberation and a number of views have been expressed with regard to this question. One of the most troubling paradoxes of our times nonetheless, probably most vexing, is whether the erstwhile oppressor needs the exponent of liberation to perpetuate and further the ends of marginalization, exclusion and violence, albeit with sophistication and complexity

today. In addition, BTL has had to respond to a number of theological innovations some of which have been paraded as successor paradigms to liberation.

It is probably the sporadic collaboration between black males and women that might deeply question what BTL itself identified as a triple oppression of women. The collaboration and even serious engagement between Womanist discourses and BTL in responding to the perennial constructs of violence against women and ultimately the advancement of the school to respond to questions of human sexuality surely cannot be viewed as adequate in our times? Violence against women, children and sexual minorities' post 1994 is psychotic with litanies of self-directed anger amongst the blacks, the interlocutors of BTL itself!

Well, the crisis of democracy, others might argue, in a world fraught with fundamentalist religo-political groupings rubs salt to the wound, while technological advancement and scientific innovation are elevated signs of success in this century with their own distinct spirituality, ostensibly expressed in postmodernist culture. *Mea Culpa!* I am merely posing questions. Is BTL still relevant?

With Belhar celebrated in the world today which remains central to black and white unity for the humanity of blackness, what is the role of BTL in a world that is life-killing today? Perhaps the convergence of the liberation paradigm with the language of life as articulated in the Accra Confession, AGAPE, IWF and CWM discourses is a potent sign of the irruption of dangerous memory that history cannot suppress even in conditions of living death. There are global lessons that could be learned from the global South. The relationship between Latin American, Asian, North American, and other critical schools with BTL surely places on all of us the responsibility to continuously harness treasurers of knowledge elsewhere. What are these lessons? There are many questions and challenges in our fragile democracy:

- Poverty, Unemployment and Inequality.
- Race
- Land
- Reconciliation
- Economic Liberation
- HIV and AIDS
- Ecological Diseases
- Violence against Women and Children
- Genocide and Wars
- Human rights and disability
- Constitutional "religious freedom" as a Troyon horse to peruse existing discrimination
- Marginalisation of sexual minorities
- Black AND white consciousness

- Postcolonial discourse and global interaction
- Globalisation in economics
- Arab spring and the Palestinian kairos movement
- Religious and military fundamentalism
- Neo-colonialism

These and many other questions are relevant for the Conference then:

- Is BTL or broadly the liberation paradigm, still relevant?
- What place is there for a black confessing church post 1994?
- What are the methodological questions at stake that can propel the school?
- What are the tools of analysis for BTL in the context of neoliberal hegemony?
- What collaborations between Womanist and BTL discourses can deepen the epistemological quest for liberation today?
- What role can BTL play in economics?
- What contribution can BTL make in deepening life-giving theologies?

All this is meant to stimulate rather than demarcate and prescribe what your thoughts on BTL could be. Please send abstracts (150 words) for papers to be presented in the Conference, on the 22- 23 October 2015 at the University of Pretoria Groenkloof Campus.

These papers will also be published in HTS Theological Studies (an ISI/Scopus/SciELO SA accredited journal), UP century Volume, HTS 72, 2017, Issue 1, in a delineated section with section editors appointed. Articles need to be submitted on between 1 September and 20 November 2015.

Please submit your abstract, at the latest on 31 August 2015, to Vuyani.Vellem@up.ac.za.

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