

Guest editorial

This volume is published in a time of crisis. The world is suffering under a devastating pandemic and there is a renewed awareness of the injustices and enmity marking societies all over. This situation, we believe, calls for honest and courageous theological reflection – also from emerging scholars doing theology from below.

For this reason, we are proud to present this supplementum of the *Stellenbosch Theological Journal (STJ)* with the title *Theology from Below: Contributions from Emerging Scholars*. The sixteen original essays collected in this volume, as well as the volume's title, stem from South Africa's first postgraduate and early career theology conference which was held in Stellenbosch in 2019. During this three-day gathering, emerging theologians from across South Africa, the African continent and beyond, came together to share their research with one another and exchange ideas. The conference operated with a very broad understanding of what "theology from below" is – or could be – which included (i) theologies speaking from the margins, that is, challenging those "at the top," (ii) theologies being developed in and concerned with the Global South, the African continent, and a country such as South Africa, and (iii) theologies being developed by up-and-coming scholars who stand at the beginning of their research careers. These aspects were reflected in the papers that were delivered at the original conference and are also reflected in this volume.

The essays here collected reflect a variety of approaches within what we have been calling "theology from below," crossing-over distinct albeit connected theological magisteria. They include innovative and contextual biblical readings, forays into theological aesthetics, philosophy, gender as well as some deeply pertinent empirical studies that touch upon highly contentious arenas in religious politics. Among the creative biblical expositions contained herein, the late Aleese Brown seeks to imaginatively correlate the experience of the haemorrhaging woman in Mark – and her determination to transgress the anciently-constructed bounds of decency – with the stories of "violent" activism in the so-called "Fallist" movements. Van Deventer opens up new avenues in New Testament exegesis through the lens of theatrical performance, while Belay makes the case for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church as being faithful

adherents to a Pauline vision of the Law. In the section focused on systematics, Van Der Westhuizen and Radler, in different ways, attempt to particularize the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Van Der Westhuizen through John De Gruchy's South African reception of Bonhoeffer's theology from below, while Radler provides fascinating insights into the jurisprudential background for Bonhoeffer's language of responsibility. As regards, theological aesthetics, Havenga argues that Balthasar's theodramatic and Christological approach reveals an explicit posture from "below," while Bosch relates Dante's theology of incarnational love to the work of the African artist Aïda Muluneh. Following this African focus, Bussey complicates for us René Girard's own developing views of sacrifice, while simultaneously arguing that the "typological" reading of sacrifice given by some African theologians provides a corrective to Girard's overly-evolutionary account. In "Justice for the Dead," Singata thinks that John Caputo – and his thoughts on resurrection – provide a fruitful point of contact for thinking through ancestor veneration on the African continent. And in another essay, Kabongo makes a plea for a revision of theological pedagogy in Africa towards including a greater emphasis on practical, hands-on experience. Moving somewhat more into explicitly philosophical terrain, Delport argues that Plato's method and metaphysics might provide constructive avenues for critiquing an ideological, purely "top-down" distribution of power or any naïve account of intellectual intuition. For his part Arlyn Culwick argues, provocatively, that a kenotic and trinitarian account of sign-action theory may provide a "testable mechanism" for discerning divine action in the world. Also included are those articles by Davids and Minnaar, which are centred on questions of gender and sexuality. Davids proposes that the Belhar Confession provides good news for LGBTIQ people in the Uniting Reformed Church, while Minnaar juxtaposes feminist theology to the painful realities of human infertility. Adopting a more empirical, case-studies approach, Momberg tracks the motivations of activists within the struggle for Palestinian freedom, showing how figures (with differing religious and non-religious backgrounds) seek to find meaning within their advocacy. And finally, we turn to the Tuduk's description of religious tensions in Northern Nigeria, and how through maintaining a broad-based consultation between both Christians and Muslims, there remains some hope that areas of common

concern can be articulated, and workable policies of redress might be developed.

A word about the cover art: the striking image on the front cover of this special issue is of a weathered crucifix carved by the acclaimed South African sculptor, Jackson Hlungwani (1923–2010). In a deeply suicidal state following painful ulcers on his right leg, Hlungwani was said to have had a revelation of Christ in 1978, wherein he was promised healing, the ability to see God, and a vocation for preaching. This divine vision would bring about a life of intense religiosity, including the establishment of his own church and the creation of his “New Jerusalem” holy site at Mbhokota, Limpopo. Drawing on religious themes of distinctly African hue, from Tsonga to Shangaan and Venda culture, as well as early Ethiopian Christianity, it was here that Hlungwani began his prolific sculpting and prophetic career. Emerging at a moment of great tribulation in South African history, Hlungwani’s “theology from below” appears through the mediation of the natural environment, wooded sculptures, carved and fashioned as if from hands touched by transcendence itself.

His cosmology elicits the great power of the metaphysical that exceeds comprehension – as seen in his famous *Hand of God* – while simultaneously remembers the lowly; the realm of animals, the gods, and indeed, the Christ that lives among us (beautifully captured in his *Christ playing football*). In the crucifix found on the cover (*Crucifix II*), one can see a large bird below the Christ figure. In Christianity, this is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, while in an African context “it is possible that this is a rain bird,”¹ an envoy from the spiritual world delivering news, and signalling the coming of rain, a good harvest and well-being.

This is a theology *from below*, as a theology *for the below*, one that defies the separation of theology from one’s context, engaged and embodied, an ethos which is represented and commended in this rich collection of essays.

We want to thank the Stellenbosch Theological Journal and its editor Prof. Robert Vosloo for inviting us to publish this collection. And we also want to thank the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch

1 Nessa Leibhamer, Amos Letshoalo, and Karel Nel. *Alt and Omega: Jackson Hlungwani*. Cape Town: Norval Foundation. [Exhibition]

University, Prof. Reggie Nel, for his support of this project. We would also like to extend thanks to Prof. Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and Extraordinary Professor at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch for encouraging us to host this conference and to publish this volume.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this Supplementum to the memory of our late colleague and friend, Dr Alease A. Brown, whose work and life was and remains a continuing inspiration for doing theology from below.

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