



## **An experiential-realist approach to theology? An interview with Prof Klaus Nürnberger**

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### **Abstract**

This interview engages with Prof Klaus Nürnberger on his experiential-realist approach to theology. Following biographical engagement with Nürnberger in order to contextualise his work, the background to the experiential-realist approach is clarified. Furthermore, the significance of the application of the theory of emergence in this approach is outlined, as well as its consequence for theology in general, as well as Nürnberger's theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Moreover, Nürnberger's direction for the future of theology as a discipline is outlined against the background of the challenges of the modern world.

### **Keywords**

*Klaus Nürnberger; experiential-realism; theory of emergence; updating theology; science and faith*

Klaus Nürnberger was born in 1933 in Namibia as the son of a farmer. Expected to take over the family farm, he studied agriculture and economics at the University of Pretoria and worked briefly for the state in rural development planning. Having felt the call to become a missionary, he studied theology in Germany, ultimately with a doctorate in Systematic Theology at the University of Marburg. His wife, Maxi, earned their upkeep as a teacher. From 1968 to 1979 he served the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA)<sup>1</sup>, mainly as lecturer at the Lutheran Theological College in Maphumulo, KZN. In 1978 he obtained a doctorate in Theological Ethics at the University of South Africa (Unisa). He served

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1 The ELCSA is the church formed in 1975 by the union of various mission congregations (cf. Garaba and Zarvedinos 2014: 14).

at Unisa as professor of Theological Ethics from 1980. From 1989 to his retirement in 1998, he was at the University of Natal (now UKZN) as professor of Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics. He was visiting lecturer in Berlin, Bochum (Germany), Sao Leopoldo (Brazil), and Chicago (USA). He was shortlisted for a chair at Tübingen (Germany) and declined the call to a chair at Bochum (Germany) in favour of his work in South Africa. After his retirement he chaired a committee set up to establish the Lutheran Theological Institute, linked to UKZN. In 2004 the Nürnbergers moved to Pretoria, where Nürnberger continued with his research. In his career, Nürnberger concentrated on the relevance of the Christian faith in various dimensions of life, mainly economic discrepancies and ideologies, political conflicts under apartheid, and the interface between faith and the natural sciences. Other issues included modernity and African traditionalism, evolutionary hermeneutics, and Lutheran theology. He published 20 books, including a two-volume Systematic Theology, and 136 academic essays.

### **Interviewer:**

I am a theology student who is interested in your work. Thank you for making yourself available for this interview. Your theological approach is unusual in many ways. The aim of my questions is to clarify some issues I encountered when reading your more recent work. However, to become aware of the context of your work, it seems appropriate to begin with some questions on your person. It is generally known that you are a South African, white, male, German-speaking, academic theologian hailing from a Lutheran background. So let me take it from there. It seems to me that you have made major *sacrifices*<sup>2</sup> throughout your life, which must have had an impact on your theological thought: Firstly, choosing theology over farming and a government job; secondly, declining a distinguished career as a theologian in Germany in favour of work in South Africa; thirdly, moving from a massive theological faculty at Unisa to a fledgling theology department at the University of Natal (now UKZN). How have you dealt with these sacrifices?

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2 Words in bold mark the focus of the question.

**Nürnberg:**

I do not think that “sacrifice” is the appropriate word for these phases in my career because I lost nothing and gained everything in the process. The major decisions you mentioned were painful at the time, but most advantageous in the long run. Let me elaborate. (a) I would not have made a good farmer because my gifts and my passion were located elsewhere. (b) I would have been sucked into the apartheid machinery if I had remained in the Department of Native Affairs as a rural development planner. (c) I would not have made a good professor in Germany because I lacked the educational background necessary to survive in the competitive academic atmosphere in Germany. In contrast, I had the background knowledge and experience needed for work in South Africa. (d) Once my colleagues and I had built up our subdepartment at Unisa, the practical routine of distance education, where one corrected tons of assignments in a lonely office, but never saw one’s students, became so sterile that the handful of students at the University of Natal made me flourish again. In all these instances, I am grateful that God gave me the contexts and the freedom to develop my gifts.

**Interviewer:**

Quoting your website, you write the following about yourself: “With many of my generation I have witnessed the agonies and conflicts produced by nationalism, colonialism, and apartheid. I cannot shake off the burden of my belonging to the perpetrators” (Nürnberg 2012). How have you dealt with the burden of *belonging to the perpetrators*?

**Nürnberg:**

My wife and I began our work as missionaries in a remote rural area in north-western Limpopo that had not seen much change over the last 100 years. I was highly motivated to serve the underprivileged and “underdeveloped” communities with my expertise as a trained farmer, my experience in rural development, and my theological training. Instead, I found myself thrown into a traditional African context as an ignorant and clueless foreigner who had to learn not only the language and the culture but even the most basic rules of interaction. As a would-be “expert”, I had

answers to questions they had never asked, and my gifts and initiatives were not overly appreciated.

My next job was in the “Westernized” and politicized black townships on the Witwatersrand. Here cultural differences played a relatively minor role. However, the realization that I was a white person who did not share the black experience became more pronounced. Fortunately, a brotherhood of black pastors and white missionaries gave me a sense of belonging to a living community.

At the Lutheran Theological College things came to a head. At the time, Black Consciousness swept through the black student population country wide. The cream of my students was highly critical of our “spiritualized and individualized” white theology. The Kairos Document rejected the theology of forgiveness and reconciliation, which had been the core of my Protestant theology. Our message was considered a ploy of whites to undermine the resolve of the black liberation struggle. The advances of “white liberals” were rejected as a dishonest endeavour to calm their guilty consciences as beneficiaries of the system. Blacks did not want sympathy and support but dignity and equal rights in the country of their birth. Blacks could only be liberated, it was said, by blacks.

It was also the time when the call “Missionary go Home” arose in the “Third World”. In the end, my very existence as a white missionary, indeed as a white person in apartheid South Africa, became questionable. I realized that I could not climb out of my skin and had to accept the verdict. But I also realized after a time that my black students and colleagues did not really want to get rid of us. In fact, they may have needed us as “sparring partners” to develop their own strengths. At any rate the most difficult students later became the closest companions.

In retrospect I consider it an immense privilege to have lived existentially through one of the most far-reaching transitions in recent history (the liberation of the Third World from colonialism) rather than being immersed in a sophisticated theological theory in Europe. Let me mention a few of the lessons I had to learn in the unfolding situation: (a) A condescending attitude, however well-intentioned, humiliates rather than empowers the recipients and is, therefore, instinctively rejected. Vertical relationships (between superior and subordinate) must change into horizontal

relationships (between equals). (b) Never assume that you know better what is good for other people's lives than they know themselves, and never try to solve problems for them without them. (c) Where a clash of cultures is inevitable, become humble enough to realize that you may be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. (d) Be prepared for failures and disappointments – they are part of the cost of getting involved in such situations.

**Interviewer:**

How would you *advise other people* to carry the burden of belonging to the perpetrators?

**Nürnberg:**

The situation I sketched above now belongs to the past. New liberation struggles lead to new experiences that require new answers. As a Christian and a theologian, one must be open to face realities and the insights they generate as they come, however painful they may be. Today the gender issue has become a prominent example. Male violence may be the most pressing problem, but even the use of the male pronoun for God in my Systematic Theology (though deliberately placed in inverted commas to indicate its inappropriateness), has raised eyebrows among feminists.

**Interviewer:**

According to your biography, you consider yourself to be “a Westerner dropped in Africa by birth and entangled with Africa without his consent” (Nürnberg 2012). What made you choose to remain entangled with Africa? Was it an atonement for the burden of belonging to the perpetrators?

**Nürnberg:**

I was born, raised, and socialized in Southern Africa. When I was a visiting lecturer in Berlin and Bochum, I realized that I did not belong in Germany. One cannot escape the burden of belonging in one's native environment. When I got involved with some extraordinary missionaries in the Pretoria area, I felt a calling to serve as a missionary. Atonement had nothing to do with it. However, it had much to do with the realization that I was highly

and undeservedly privileged, which implied the responsibility of using my gifts to serve the less privileged.

**Interviewer:**

You mentioned that in your retirement you could finally work on topics which are of *particular interest* to you (Nürnberger 2012). In fact, since your retirement in 1998 you have written and published books and essays on: Hermeneutics (Nürnberger 2004), Lutheranism in contemporary context (Nürnberger 2005), Christ and ancestors (Nürnberger 2007), faith and science (Nürnberger 2010, 2011, 2013), a two-volume systematic theology (Nürnberger 2016), and a book on homiletics (Nürnberger 2019). It seems to me that your particular interests span the breadth of the theological disciplines. Since none of your pre-retirement work has even been mentioned here, it is impossible to do justice to your work as a whole in this interview. Therefore, I shall *focus on your recent work* as it seems to be of particular importance to you. Is there something you are still working on?

**Nürnberger:**

I appreciate that you must keep this interview manageable. However, what I did after my retirement was by no means more important to me than what I did before. In fact, apart from trying to develop a feasible theology, my most compelling preoccupation over the years were problems posed by economic realities: poverty and affluence, economic development, the North-South conflict, economic systems, and ideologies etc. It was closely followed by the issues raised by apartheid. The most important issue after my retirement was the interface between faith and science and its relevance for the economic-ecological crisis towards which we are heading. With this I am not done yet. Most recently, however, I wrote a 380-page biography of my parents in the dramatic and tragic first half of the 20th century. It was an incredibly deep-going experience.

**Interviewer:**

Responding to your recent work, Conradie (2018:3) describes the natural sciences as your first love. However, elsewhere I read that you base your involvement with the natural sciences on “becoming all things to all

people” (1 Cor 9: 19–23). This suggests that theology comes first and your engagement with the natural sciences second. *Which comes first for you: science or theology?* Or is this a false dichotomy?

**Nürnbergger:**

The biblical faith comes first. The history of the biblical tradition is a series of contextualisations of a basic thrust: Again and again the message of God’s benevolence responded redemptively to changing conditions and worldview-assumptions: the nomadic clan; the settled tribe; the constituted nation; the kingdom; the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests; the exile; the impact of Persian domination; the priestly reconstruction; the impact of the Macedonian conquest; the emergence of apocalyptic, etc.

This history sheds light on the complex series of permutations of the biblical faith and its further history up to the present. It is a long series of contextualisations that we must continue for our times. My motivation as a theologian was the urge to find relevant faith responses to the most pressing contemporary problems in various dimensions of life. In this sense I have always been a missionary.

Early in my theological studies, Walter Freytag, a prominent missiologist at the time, taught us that, to find an appropriate response to another conviction, one must be tempted by the truth claim underlying this conviction. Again and again, I experienced the veracity of this insight when engaging different systems of meaning, including biblical traditions, African religion, economic ideologies, the natural sciences, atheist naturalism, apartheid, national socialism, etc.

So my guideline as a missionary became 1 Corinthians 9:20–23, which implies that the contenders struggle to find the truth together, rather than Matthew 28:16–20, which implies that Christians possess the truth and others have to accept their teaching without asking any questions.

**Interviewer:**

Now let me move to theology proper. Reading through the first volume of your recent systematic theology, I came across the distinction between *the creative power and the benevolent intentionality* of God (Nürnbergger

2016a:2). Are these concepts rooted in the Lutheran distinction of “*Law and Gospel*” and if so, to what extent?

**Nürnbergger:**

Not at all! The dialectic between the creative power and the benevolent intentionality of God on the one hand, and the dialectic between God’s expectation (Law) and God’s gift of a new life in communion with God (Gospel) on the other are two different issues. Biblical and classical theologies have always attributed the existing world to God’s creative power, which we experience in the whole of reality, while God’s benevolent intentionality was explicitly proclaimed in the name of God by lawgivers, prophets, and priests in Old Testament times and by apostles and evangelists in New Testament times. For Christians the Christ-event is the most definitive manifestation of God’s unconditional benevolence. Because it is proclaimed rather than experienced, we call it the “Word of God”. The concepts of “Law and Gospel” therefor refer to a dialectic *within the Word of God*, namely God’s expectation and God’s gift.

**Interviewer:**

Now turning to your theological approach: A key concept to understanding much of your work lies in *the experiential realist approach* you adopt. In fact, you write that, for theology to “regain its plausibility, integrity and credibility in our times, theology must follow the experiential approach – boldly and consistently” (Nürnbergger 2018:3). How so?

**Nürnbergger:**

Our worldview and our means of communication have changed fundamentally since the times when the biblical documents, the classical doctrines and the confessions of the Reformation were written. The advances in science and technology have been dramatic. Scientific methods have become more precise and more critical. The Enlightenment decreed that only what can be experienced (empiricism) and what makes sense (rationalism) can be true. When we apply these criteria, as we subconsciously do, the means of communication found in the Bible – metaphors, parables, myths, miracle stories, legends, and fiction – tend to lose their traction. Are diseases caused by demons? Is there a heaven up there in which injustice,

suffering and death do not exist? Can somebody be taken to heaven in a cloud? I try to unearth the valid intentions underlying these formulations in terms of the experiences of a living faith.

Moreover, a population clued up by science and technology finds it difficult to accept the idealist approach of making logical deductions from unsupported postulates as we find them in the classical Trinitarian and Christological doctrines. Based on ancient Hellenistic assumptions, they may have been appropriate at the time, but they have become quite indigestible even for the average believer, let alone for our secularised contemporaries. Christology: How can a single person be, at the same time, fully divine and fully human? Can an animal be a dog and a cat at the same time? Once you translate the ontological form of the doctrine into process categories as the “true human being” acting in the authority of the “true God” (the God of unconditional love) it becomes more intelligible.

Trinity: How can three persons relate to each other, even move around within each other, in a single divine being? The intention underlying this formulation is clear: the God whose creative power we experience in the whole of reality is the very God whose unconditional love manifested itself in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, and also the very God whose creative and redeeming Spirit is present in the community of believers. This doctrine rejects the persist dualism between an evil god (Angra Mainyu) and a good god (Ahuramazda), or between Marcion's Demiurge (the evil Creator) and the god of Christ (the benign Redeemer), or the Platonic and Gnostic dualism between (evil) matter and (good) spirit.

### **Interviewer:**

Did you arrive at this experiential realist approach by *following Luther*? I ask this because in your book on *Martin Luther's Message for us Today* you classify Luther's theological approach as an experiential approach: “Luther analyses what we experience; he does not speculate. [...] It is one of the strengths of Luther's theology that he does not speculate. He analyses what happens when we encounter God in his Word. To be honest, I am going to take Luther's experiential approach more seriously than he did himself” (Nürnberg 2005:29–30).

**Nürnbergger:**

Not at all! I grew up as the son of a farmer and studied basic natural sciences, agriculture, and economics before I studied theology. So an empirical and practical approach to reality came “naturally” to me, while I am uncomfortable with abstract, purely intellectual constructs. Because in his theology Luther analysed and articulated (spiritual) experiences rather than engage in purely dogmatic argument, it appealed to me more than a theology based on unsupported postulates, such as an inerrant Bible, an orthodox doctrine, or an infallible pope. In short, I opt for an inductive, rather than a deductive approach.

**Interviewer:**

How far have you taken the experiential realist approach?

**Nürnbergger:**

I tried to take it all the way. I found that I could do that without losing my faith when I realised that the transcendent God is not accessible to us as such but only through his immanent manifestations: God’s creative power is identical with the process of cosmic evolution as explored by the natural and historical sciences. God’s benevolence is experienced through the impact of the Gospel on our consciousness. We can accept these immanent manifestations because this is the way in which the transcendent God discloses his creative power and his benevolent intentionality to us.

In fact, I grew curious about how God goes about achieving these manifestations, as the sciences continue to reveal them. In contrast, I believe that the adoption of an idealist approach, which focuses not on the reality we have but on perfection, misled theology into unsustainable formulations, while missing out on the explanatory power of the empirical sciences. I think that the approach of experiential realism can restore the integrity of believers and the credibility of their message in the modern world.

**Interviewer:**

Let us focus on the three assumptions that underlie this approach. You say that one of the three assumptions of experiential realism is that it “ignores idealist constructions, metaphysical speculations or supernatural

revelations and confines itself to immanent reality, leaving the issue of transcendence open (agnosticism) or denying its existence (naturalism)” (Nürnbergger 2020: 41). Can there be faith without transcendence?

**Nürnbergger:**

No, faith in God cannot. But the scientific method can and must exclude the transcendent because the task of science is to explore and explain and you cannot explore and explain something to which you have no access. So science must leave the issue of transcendence open. However, faith and theology have no immediate access to the transcendent *as such* either, but only to its manifestations within immanent reality. While faith and theology are inherently geared to an intuited or assumed transcendent Source and Destiny of reality, whom we call “God”, this intuition or assumption is itself based on existential experiences within immanent reality: we are derived, dependent, vulnerable, and mortal; we need foundations and directions; we are responsible and culpable; we need to understand our identity within a greater whole.

The proclamation of God’s gift and God’s expectation responds redemptively to these experiences. And, by way of the “performative” power of this proclamation, the benevolence of God becomes effective in our lives. Moreover, the tradition on which this proclamation is based, has also evolved in history as part of immanent reality. Our intuitions, notions, and concepts of God themselves belong to immanent reality. They can be analysed, critiqued, changed, or abandoned, otherwise theology would make no sense. The task of theology is to find the most appropriate and the most accessible concept of God possible under current circumstances and worldview assumptions. In short, “revelation” of the transcendent is mediated through the immanent. In contrast, the transcendent as such and apart from its manifestations in the immanent world is something beyond human observation, explanation, and manipulation and it is not very meaningful to speculate about it.

**Interviewer:**

Are there not also aspects of immanent reality to which we have no access?

**Nürnbergger:**

Yes indeed. I have learnt to distinguish between “immanent transcendence” and “transcendent immanence”. Immanent transcendence means that there are aspects of immanent reality that are not (yet) accessible to human observation, explanation, and manipulation, which any scientist will concede. Transcendent immanence means that immanent reality is not closed upon itself, as naturalism assumes, but open to a transcendent Source and Destiny. The most fundamental misunderstanding between science and theology occurs when “God” is taken to be some “supernatural” being located within immanent transcendence, rather than taking it as an implication of transcendent immanence. When God is understood as a part of reality that can compete or cooperate with other such parts, God can no longer be the transcendent Source and Destiny of reality as such and as a whole. And an absolutized part of reality is an idol in terms of the biblical tradition.

**Interviewer:**

Continuing to probe experiential realism, I would like to turn to the second assumption: “In response to epistemological scepticism and post-modern deconstruction, experiential realism insists that *immanent reality is objectively real*, and that scientific research leads to greater approximations of human comprehension to objective reality” (Nürnbergger 2020: 41). Could you help me understand how this assumption does not contradict the first one? Is the insistence that “immanent reality is objectively real” not itself a metaphysical speculation?

**Nürnbergger:**

Quite definitely not! Sceptics and (some) post-modernists argue that there is no objective reality or universal validity. Of course, it cannot be denied that all our insight is partial, perspectival, provisional, model-dependent, and therefore questionable. But that does mean that the object to which it refers does not exist! That my deceased wife is no longer with me is a painful fact, not an illusion that I must get out of my head. Surgeons can replace a human heart, which is a matter of life and death, rather than fantasy. Technicians can land a rover on a precise spot-on planet Mars and

receive messages from there, which can be noted by any human being on earth who has the apparatus and the expertise to do so.

**Interviewer:**

The third assumption, which De Gruchy (2017:207) applauds in your treatment of theodicy, pertains to the *theory of emergence*: “Reality is driven by an evolutionary and differentiating dynamic that proceeds in “emergent” levels of complexity. Each higher level is constituted by a network of lower-level constituents with its own set of characteristics and regularities” (Nürnberger 2020: 41). Moreover, this theory includes the whole of immanent reality, from sub-atomic fields to spiritual phenomenon and social processes (Nürnberger 2018: 4). Does that mean that we can scientifically analyse spiritual phenomena?

**Nürnberger:**

In principle yes, in practice only to a very limited degree. This is due to exponentially growing complexity and contingency as we move up the hierarchy of emergences. Let me elaborate: Emergent evolution is a scientific theory that replaces the earlier empiricist and reductionist theory according to which only material (physical and biological) phenomena are real, in contrast to merely subjective fantasies. According to this theory, higher levels of emergence are composed of networks of exponentially growing numbers of lower-level factors. This also means that each higher level is built on all lower levels as its infrastructure. As we move up the hierarchy of emergences, the levels become exponentially more complex, contingent, versatile, and unpredictable. When at the physical level two cars crash, the likely result can be predicted fairly easily with the help of the parallelogram of forces. At the biological level the task is vastly more difficult. What happens at the spiritual level through the interaction of billions of neurons in our brain is, due to a vastly increased complexity and contingency at that level, largely beyond analysis and prediction. And yet even in apparently chaotic and totally unpredictable situations certain patterns (called “strange attractors” in chaos theory) emerge which can be observed and explored.

**Interviewer:**

What is the significance of the theory of emergent evolution for theology?

**Nürnbergger:**

For me emergence theory has become an extraordinarily revealing tool for the nature of, and relation between, academic disciplines, including theology. In an age of science and technology, this theory confirms the empirical reality of constructs at the spiritual level and removes the stigma of fantasy and superstition attached to worldview assumptions. The question is no longer whether God exists. Conceptualized as a part of immanent reality, albeit a “supernatural” part, God cannot and does not exist anyway. But intuitions and concepts of God do exist objectively as parts of immanent reality. They have consequences in this world and must be taken seriously. They can be traced, at least in principle, as synaptic structures in the brain. The real question now is what the consequences of a particular concept of God (or any other absolutized mental construct) are. Hitler’s faith and Mother Theresa’s faith both existed. Yet look at their respective consequences! Emergence theory shifted the focus from a non-issue (empirical existence) to the real issue, namely the quality of the consequences of a particular faith assumption.

**Interviewer:**

Does the application of the theory of emergence not run the risk of describing society *without regard to the self-understanding/consciousness of human beings*?

**Nürnbergger:**

No, on the contrary! The hierarchy of emergence runs from subatomic layers through the physical-chemical, the biological, the neurological, the mental (personal or existential) to the social levels. Each higher level is built on the infrastructure of all lower levels. Consciousness is located at the mental or spiritual level, which presupposes the neurological level. The social level is a highly complex network of human consciousnesses, thus presupposing the spiritual level. There is no social level without the spiritual level of the humans who make up the society.

**Interviewer:**

Can you give examples of how theology can be contextualized in terms of the theory of emergent evolution?

**Nürnbergger:**

This is a tricky issue. The sciences replace theories that have proved untenable in favour of more convincing theories, integrating valid insights of the former into the latter. Because of the foundational character of religious commitments, this procedure can be painful and may at first be resisted. In fact, this is true even of established scientific theories. If theologians engage in such an exercise, they risk losing the trust of their more conservative parishioners. However, if they continue to use mythological and metaphoric expressions and assumptions that have become problematic in modern times – heaven above, angels, demons, miracles, prophetic predictions, reunion with one’s beloved ones after death etc. – they risk losing the respect of their more critical parishioners and the secularized world around them.

A decluttered and realigned set of faith assumptions can lead to a liberated and empowered faith and greater accessibility for our secularized contemporaries. This must be done carefully and gradually by interpreting obsolete forms with contemporary alternatives. Here are a few examples:

*Creation:* The manifestation of God’s creative power is identical with what the sciences describe in terms of the energy that is driving the process of emergent evolution. We must get our clues about the origin and operation of the universe from advancing scientific insight rather than the ancient worldviews found in the Biblical creation stories.

*The concept of God:* Conscious intentions and actions appear at the personal level of emergence. A stone has no intentions and does not act. According to the biblical witness, God became a person for human beings because human beings are persons. However, as the transcendent Source of all of reality, including the non-personal levels of emergence, God must be much more than a person, just as humans are much more than persons. They are also atoms, chemical substances, and biological processes, which function according to their own regularities.

Traditional theism reduces the concept of God to the personal level of emergence, thus overpersonalizing reality. Then everything is believed to be caused by the will of a personal God. However, a tsunami is not caused by a conscious decision of God, but by tectonic shifts in the crust of the earth that follow the laws of nature – which are also of God! The laws of nature are God’s laws, they are valid, they are necessary for our world to function. So one can think of them as expressions of God’s benevolence at the non-personal levels.

*Anthropology:* the theory of emergence implies that the human being is an indivisible whole. The spiritual level (the soul) cannot exist without its biological and physical infrastructure (the body). The Platonic dualism between mortal body and immortal soul has become untenable. In fact, with some marginal exceptions, the biblical tradition does not know of a disembodied soul either.

*Eschatology:* Cosmic evolution is a continuous process from the nascent origins of energy to the total dissipation or re-compaction of energy. The apocalyptic expectation of a pending transition from “this (defective) world” to a (perfect) “world to come” has become untenable. The valid intention of this model is the dialectic between what has become and what ought to become. But that can be expressed more appropriately as God’s vision of comprehensive optimal wellbeing, which acts like a compass that gives direction to our behaviour. This vision moves on like a horizon as we approach it, tackling any deficiency in wellbeing on the way and opening up ever new challenges and opportunities.

**Interviewer:**

How would you contextualize the ascension and reign of Christ?

**Nürnberg:**

To unearth the intended meaning of these concepts, we first have to explore the underlying imagery. In the Ancient Near Eastern model of a king’s court, the executive of the king (the “Prime Minister” as it were) is adopted by the king as his son and seated at his right hand. The executive acts as the representative of the king and implements the king’s intentions. So the king acts through his representative. This model is used to legitimate the

earthly king's authority: God, the heavenly king, adopts the earthly king as his son and representative through whom he keeps the social order intact and channels his blessing to the people. In Psalm 2 this model is applied to the relation between God and the Israelite king.

In the New Testament, Jesus is seen as God's messianic (that is: royal) representative. Jesus embodied, proclaimed, and enacted the redemptive intentions of God: healing the sick, forgiving the guilty, accepting the outcasts and calling his disciples to do the same. John's Gospel depicts the flow of divine love from the Father (God) to the Son (Jesus) and on to the believers. In doing so, however, Jesus transformed the Jewish perception of God from a strict lawgiver and judge to a merciful Father. And he did this in the authority of God's messianic representative.

With that he seemed to undermine the validity of the Mosaic law. His opponents rejected his claim to messianic authority and got rid of him as a dangerous heretic and impostor. The "resurrection of Jesus from the dead" meant that God confirmed Jesus' messianic claim and the validity of his message. He did this by lifting the crucified Jesus out of the constraints of time, space, culture and physical power into universal and lasting authority and accessibility for all people on earth. In terms of the ancient three-story worldview (heaven above, the earth, and the realm of death below), Jesus ascended to heaven. Note that in Ephesians 2:1–10, believers are situated with Christ in the heavenly places. So this story is a typical contextualisation.

For a contemporary contextualisation we can fall back on Paul's concepts of the "Body of Christ", in which we are "members", or being "in Christ", or "in the Spirit", or "living according to the Spirit (of Christ)". The "risen Christ" is not the revitalisation or reconstitution of a corpse. Rather, he represents a new way of being human in fellowship with a loving God in which we are called to participate. This happens at the normal spiritual level of emergence. We experience the living Christ in the proclamation, the faith, and the life of a fellowship of believers. The Synoptic Gospels simply call it discipleship.

**Interviewer:**

Do we experience Christ through positive feedback loops from levels of emergence that are higher than our conscious levels of emergence?

**Nürnbergger:**

No, the Spirit of Christ is living in us at the (spiritual) level of emergence. It is at this level that we are confronted with contending alternatives. Our life is determined either by the spirit of Christ, or (for example) by the spirit of Hitler's National Socialism. The consequences of these two spirits are diametrically opposed. In other cases (Islam, liberal Humanism, Buddhism) the differences may be more subtle, but certainly significant. It is the question of what kind of God (or absolute) we believe in.

However, if God is taken to be the transcendent Source of reality as a whole, all these spirits are the result of God's creative power, just as a snail and an elephant are results of God's creative power, irrespective of their specific characteristics. To use an image: the mechanism that propels a motorcar forward functions irrespective of the intended directions of its driver.

**Interviewer:**

Relating specifically to anthropology touched on earlier: Veldsman (2018:4) reckons that you would agree with him on the following statement: The human being is "*dust, but definitely more*". Firstly, do you agree with this statement? Secondly, in your view, what is this "more"? Are we dust that spans across all the levels of emergence?

**Nürnbergger:**

Veldsman quotes the title of my essay on the anthropology of the Old Testament, "Dust of the Ground and Breath of Life". This dialectic must not be understood in terms of the Platonic dualism between matter and spirit. In the OT, "dust" refers to the creature as a whole apart from God. In this sense it covers the entire hierarchy of emergences. "Breath of life" is the gift of God that bestows life, thus the creature empowered by God, again covering the entire hierarchy of emergences.

**Interviewer:**

Let me move from anthropology to ecclesiology. You distinguish between *the empirical and the true church* (Nürnbergger 2016a:257). Could you, in short, define these and highlight their difference? Moreover, is the distinction between the two necessary? According to Peters (2018:63), such distinctions have fed schismatic impulses in the past. What do you make of his proposal to “construct a Lutheran ecclesiology that holds to only one church, not two? That one church is the visible church. The visible church is not pure. Rather, it is *simul justus et peccator*, both sinful yet held in God’s grace at the same time” [his emphasis] (Peters 2018:63).

**Nürnbergger:**

I agree with Peters. But there is no way we can escape the discrepancy between what is and what ought to become. In my book *Informed by Science, Involved by Christ*, I distinguished between “real” – referring to what actually exists – and “true” – referring to what ought to exist but may not. Of course, the real (= visible) church is a sinful church – and there is no other church on earth than this visible and sinful one. And in the process of being transformed from its own sinful nature into the new life of Christ in the fellowship of God it is *simul iustus et peccator*. Peters can rightfully reject the fantasy of something perfect hidden within, below or beyond the real church. He can also reject the claim that a particular existing church is the true church, which is a sectarian rather than a Protestant assumption.

**Interviewer:**

“The *unity of the church* must be based on God’s suffering acceptance of the unacceptable, rather than doctrinal consensus or institutional uniformity” (Nürnbergger 2018: 6). If I view “God’s suffering acceptance of the unacceptable” itself as a doctrinal statement, I must concede a contradiction. Do you agree?

**Nürnbergger:**

The Gospel constitutes the Christian faith. Without it, the Church loses its identity. To be communicated, however, it must be formulated in such a way that its intention is clear. The Protestant version says that we are justified by grace, rather than by moral achievement or excellent disposition. Because

it was formulated in response to Jewish and Catholic legalism, this version uses legal terminology which, from the outset, led to misunderstandings. If God declared a sinner righteous, for example, this would be a miscarriage of justice. Translated into relationship terms, the intention becomes clear: Transformation is non-negotiable. God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable in Christ means that God forgives the fact that we are sinners, suffering our sinfulness, while transforming us in God's fellowship. In other words, transformation is the consequence, rather than the precondition of God's acceptance.

According to *this understanding*, we are drawn into God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable, including the fact that we do not all agree on what the Gospel means. Denominations each have their own doctrinal system, their institutional arrangements, their liturgical formulations, etc. Moreover, each individual believer has particular understanding. Unity cannot be reached through an artificial harmonisation of these different positions, or a reduction to the most basic common denominator, because that would only produce new versions that would again not be approved by all parties. Unity can only be reached when each partner participates in God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable. Under the canopy of divine and mutual acceptance, they can then struggle for greater approximations to the most appropriate formulations in love. But even the outcome of such a struggle will always remain a matter of "reconciled diversity", rather than imposed uniformity. The demand or expectation that a Lutheran must first become a Catholic before fellowship is granted and vice versa is an expression of the law (conditional acceptance), rather than the gospel (unconditional, suffering acceptance).

**Interviewer:**

Similarly, in your dynamic conception of truth you state that the Word of God cannot be confined to a *static doctrinal system* (Nürnberg 2016a:435). However, is your systematic theology not such a doctrinal system? Could you help me get make sense of this paradox?

**Nürnberg:**

If "systematic theology" means the construction of a system of "eternally valid" propositions and deductions that are to be taught and learnt like the

grammar of a language or the rules of mathematics, whether you believe in it or not, whether it makes a difference in your life or not, it is indeed a doctrinal system. The authors of “dogmatics” or “orthodoxy” claim to produce valid and binding formulations of the truth and consider all deviations from it heretical.

For me, however, “systematic theology” means thinking through, in a systematic and disciplined way, the implications of the gospel as a dynamic and transformative message changing in response to changing situations and different dimensions of life. Tracing the trajectory of the Word of God through history as it responds redemptively to concrete human needs and predicaments does not lead to an eternally valid system of meaning, but ever provisional responses to changing situations, presumptions, and interpretations. Think of a river whose flow has a shape that can be recognised and described, yet never remains quite the same.

Paul distinguishes between “letter” and “spirit” (2 Cor 3), or between human wisdom and the power of a transforming message (1 Cor 2), or between the law as a disciplinarian and the freedom of the children of God (Gal 3; Rom 8). These are dynamic rather than static terms.

**Interviewer:**

You write that Christian *theology needs updating* (Nürnberg 2007:258). However, you specify that this updating opens up the future which is “infinitely ahead” and “undiscovered territory”. Billionaires are going to space, and Elon Musk wants to colonize Mars. Is space exploration and colonization of new planets part of this undiscovered territory and the future that is infinitely ahead? Is that the kind of updating theology needs?

**Nürnberg:**

No, updating means that theology must catch up with current insight in the sciences, albeit in a critical way: big bang cosmology; sociology, anthropology; neurology; etc. Faith and theology must abandon world view assumptions that have proved unfeasible, such as the existence of a heaven above the clouds as the abode of God, diseases caused by demons, or a future world without entropy, suffering and death, and replace them with more appropriate ones.

But this is an ongoing task. Human beings always reach out beyond the given. This movement can easily derail in some form or another. Theology must offer a system of meaning that gives valid and beneficial purposes and directions to the process. The advances of scientific insight and technological expertise confront us with new facts, challenges, and directions that call for critical and redemptive responses.

Today the economic-ecological time bomb with its different dimensions is the most formidable and most urgent challenge before us. Just to mention a few of this aspects: the impact of nuclear and fossil energy on the climate; the extinction of plants and animals, the overexploitation of natural resources; rampant and continuing population growth; growth of material expectations; growth of productive power in economic centres rendering economic peripheries uncompetitive; economic marginalisation through the replacement of human labour with machines and computers; growing discrepancies in life chances, thus the growth of social conflict potential; the growth of the number and sophistication of weapons and their marketing in highly volatile societies. We are systematically destroying the future of humankind and that should be a major concern for Christian faith and its theology.

Most critical, however, is the fact that the entire economy, and increasingly all other aspects of life – science, technology, health, education and training, recreation, art, spirituality, etc. – are based on selfish motivations: the acquisition of profit, financial power, status and the immediate and lavish satisfaction of personal whims and desires. We are skidding along seemingly self-propelled tendencies towards catastrophic outcomes rather than deliberately setting up beneficial targets and throwing in our weight to bring about change.

In my view space travel belongs to the endeavours of our times that theology should question very fundamentally. As if there were no more urgent tasks to face in today's world! The insanity of wanting to colonize Mars with a handful of crazy people and spending vast sums of money on that endeavour cries to high heaven. Every person with brains can sense that the billions of human beings that our earth can no longer carry, cannot be settled on Mars or anywhere else in the universe. This idea is plain vanity, and the mere fact that a single tycoon commands financial resources of

such magnitude and gets away with it, is a scandal of the first order. The concentration of wealth, power and expertise in a miniscule global elite is itself highly irrational and counter-productive in terms of the human project.

**Interviewer:**

Thank you for your work, insight, and setting aside time for this interview.

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