

## **New Themes and New Perspectives Offered by Younger Theologians**

### **Victoria Turner**

Edinburgh, the city where I live in Scotland, hosted the Edinburgh Spanish Film Festival. We went to see a film called Pheasant Island. Pheasant Island is a little piece of land in the middle of the river Bidasoa. On one side of this river is Spain and the other side France. This Island on the middle swaps between being under French or Spanish jurisdiction every six months. This area of the world is called the Basque country which straddles parts of north-central Spain and south-western France with one of (what linguists think) is one of the oldest languages in Europe. Many Basque residents want self-rule—independence from both Spain and France. For residents in this area movement between Basque areas of Spain and France is quite easy thanks to the European Union (that my country has stupidly left). This film however focused on how these borders effect people who are travelling to France to seek asylum. When they arrive in Irun, on the Spanish side, they find that the border is closed off. There are controls for pedestrians, train passengers and even for those in small boats. Of course, they only ask for the documentation of those who look Arabic or sub-Saharan African. If their documentation is not in order, they are sent back to Spain.<sup>1</sup> So, some people decide to try and swim the river, resulting in some people dying on this crossing.

This film follows a couple who are Spanish citizens living on the French side. They spot two migrants trying to cross the river in trouble. Whilst they were able to save one, the other sadly drowned. The film sees the couple learn more about the lives of asylum seekers in their town and become advocates. The film ends with the burial of the sardine carnival 'Entierro de la Sardina', celebrated on Ash Wednesday. It's a symbolical burial of the past to allow society to be reborn, transformed and with new vigour. The sardine is a symbol representing the excesses of the festival being burned. It represents a regeneration and liberation — the passage of the symbol through the fire represents a purging of the vices and a restoration of the order temporarily subverted during the festival; in ceremonies of symbolical burial, the theme is one of reflection.

This couple in the film's job is creating the large larger than life-size puppets (including the sardine) for these festivals. The final scene of the film follows the woman being stopped at the border into France for a second time. She was caught the first time trying to help the boy she

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://english.elpais.com/spain/2021-08-11/spains-bidasoa-river-the-new-death-trap-for-migrants.html>

saved from drowning cross into France. This second time, her car was followed by the carnival procession. With so much going on the border guard became distracted. The puppets (which weigh around 50kgs but are balanced in such a way that you can wear them) were being controlled by a small group of migrants that this couple and become friends with. As they reached the crossing they removed themselves from these suits and ran across the border into France. The film closed with the burning of the sardine.

I really felt inspired by this story and used it to help structure my talk. The first—witnessing. The second—tradition and purging.

### **Witnessing**

From the Belhar Confession:

- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need [...] the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

I think that our conception of what it means to witness has shifted because the stories that we tell about ourselves have changed.

Paul Virilio—the late French Catholic philosopher-phenomenologist talked of how our overly technologized world is multiplying the ‘bodily grievances’ and ‘epistemological inconveniences’ that distract us from God. He spoke of our computers, today we’d probably want to switch that to our phones, as ‘vision machines.’ These devices become not just tools where we can consult information, but they produce a synthetic time that comes with our ‘will to universalised illumination’—where with our phones we think we can/do see all and know all—almost seeing ourselves as being like God. It also has the reversing effect where we also wished to be gazed upon—as if we are being adorned. So we are watching and being watched. We have watched the genocide unfold in Gaza. That’s different to witnessing.

Michael Morrelli, a Canadian theologian, talks about a ‘rush of power’ that comes with watching through these vision machines—almost an intoxication and idea of control that comes from that fleeting moment. Has anyone else felt like they are existing in a different mental and

maybe even physical space when absorbed in technology? When 10 minutes or 30 minutes passes and if someone asks you what you've been doing you couldn't actually answer them? Gen Z calls this brain rot. Maybe a better term might be brain abuse. Byung Chul-han is a Korean philosopher living in Germany, and he talks about how we're enslaving ourselves to these machines—altering our hobbies, interests, opinions, identities and time for attention or approval.

The stories that we tell about ourselves have changed. Support systems are seen as weakness and success only quantified economically. It is becoming rarer in the UK to define yourself as part of a community—a member of a church, workers union or even trade, women's group, geographical area like a village or town. I recently visited a photographic exhibition called 'Resistance' which showed women's, working-class, eco, and anti-nuclear protests, and one image caught me seeing the smiles on the faces of the wives and women who were providing meals for the whole community that was striking during the 1926 General Strike. Last year in the UK, 14 million people faced going hungry because of not enough money. 90% of young people worried about earning enough money to support themselves in the future. The communal identity of being proud to be working-class has dissipated and people feel on their own. In 2023, one in five children and young people aged eight to 25 had a probable mental health condition. Suicide was the leading cause of death for people aged 5-35 in the UK. Schools in the UK are cutting subjects—art, music, drama to focus on subjects that lead to "success" economics, maths, business studies. We're teaching our children that there's only one way of surviving—and that way is the capitalist system that is only upheld by exploitation. Our children are afraid of the future.

A poem from R. S. Thomas (1913-2000), a Welsh-priest-poet captures some of this:

'The Word'

A pen appeared, and the god said: Write what it is to be man.' And my hand hovered long over the bare page,

until there, like footprints of the lost traveller, letters took shape on the page's blankness, and I spelled out

the word 'lonely'. And my hand moved to erase it: but the voices of all those waiting at life's window cried out loud: 'It is true.'

I think this is not only altering how we think of ourselves, and how we act but even it is changing how we are as churches. As I'm sure you know, in the UK our churches are faced with decline. Less people are attending,

being baptised, and committing to mainline churches. I think we are becoming a lot more careful, and a lot more self-absorbed as we navigate this perceived “crisis”. We’re being more careful both in our witness and in our economic footprint. The well known but often ignored phrase in Congregational circles “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity” is becoming confused and stifling the prophetic. Regarding the genocide in Palestine, the churches in the UK tread carefully and chose to speak in some kind of collective rather than on their own. I’m recognising too that the churches were not just speaking as churches discerning God into our situation, but were using charities—especially Christian Aid to speak through. I have no problems with Christian Aid, nor with doing things together. But I’ve found in ecumenical circles in England, that discussions over tense points of departure—whether it be to support Palestine, affirming diverse sexualities, speaking honestly about money, are avoided and a tame middle-way is debated among a church hierarchy. A watered-down ecumenical statement that has come from six church leaders to me at least, has a lot less weight than a church statement—or even better—call to action, that originated from a local discussion of even one of the smallest denominations in the UK. So, if we can put this back into the theoretical framework I’ve presented about how we see ourselves and act in our technological age—this action of tepid unity is seeking a populist gaze of affirmation. It is not seeking a prophetic movement that comes from discussion, dialogue and discernment. With a situation demanding the urgency of Palestine, how dare we, as churches with so much privilege (especially also in my context—with historic connections (collusions), tread carefully to protect ourselves, hide behind charities and NGO’s, and not stand up and proclaim this injustice.

We’re also being very careful with our physical assets. We’re safeguarding for the future and becoming more efficient. We’re seeing a lot more secular, managerial language entering the church—whether that be pointing to a cost-based-return analysis for those training for ministry—such as only those with X years before retirement should be considered for full-time training—no matter their background or theological literacy. I feel uncomfortable with equating a stipend with a wage. We’re also masking secular managerial language with theology ‘new roots or fresh shoots’ to talk about prioritising where money is spent. Some churches are being called unsustainable, cast as a burden, the assets of which could be put to better use elsewhere... I don’t recall Jesus ever telling anyone they weren’t young enough or dynamic enough to follow Him. I recall him telling us to liquidate our assets and trust in Him. Our language about the future of the church in my context is focusing on

reducing and protecting—over-explaining and looking over our shoulders. I'm not sure that culling the weakest to make the stronger strongest is really a biblical mandate.

We've recently lost Kathy Galloway, who was a Church of Scotland minister and the first woman to be Leader of the Iona Community. She played with the story recorded in Mark 10: 17-31 where Jesus tells a rich man to sell all that he has and then to follow him. Playing the voice of the disciples Galloway imagined them thinking:

The young fellow really was genuine, and probably did want to follow him, but something was even more important to him. It got in his way. Whether it was the money, or the status or the power, I don't know. Perhaps it was just liking to be his own master. Because obviously, you couldn't follow J.C. and still be your own boss. It's quite clear that we're following him. We're the learners. The only thing that we've got going for us is that we're here.

We're certainly getting used to not being the most popular folk around, and if I think about it much (which I try not to do most of the time, because it frightens me), I can see us heading for disaster. But the hundred times as much is not so clear. In fact, it's not clear at all. We're poorer than when we started, we never know whether there's going to be a bed for us, and most of us have left our families behind... Funny, I never ever thought of money as being something that could get in your way, more as something that could let you get your way.

As churches in the UK we're wanting to cling onto our privilege, being so fearful of losing it. We want to speak and be listened to but not to speak prophetically. Our churches too are leaning into this vulnerability persona—are we really too weak, or fragile to stand where God stands? Do we not exactly want to give up our privilege to stand with the weak and destitute and work with them to reclaim their power?

### **Tradition**

The stories we tell about ourselves centre on showing our privilege (whilst simultaneously playing down our privilege and highlighting some vulnerability to forward a kind of rags to riches persona). We desire privilege—we want success, and the ability to do things that others can't do, to be separated out and called unique, special, impressive. Why do we think there's such an obsession with studying particular theologians—like Bonhoeffer? Whether taken as an American style freedom-fighter—film poster showing Bonhoeffer triumphantly waving a gun, or being able to speak into any situation that forwards a liberal theological position today.

There's just been published an excellent review by New Zealander scholar Andrew Clark-Howard of a book that's called '***The White Bonhoeffer: A Postcolonial Pilgrimage.***' Andrew reveals how the author, who premised this book on themselves feeling akin to Bonhoeffer as a middle to upper class, relatively smart white man, centres whiteness as the conduit for knowing, without real confrontation with the violence of coloniality and Empire. Quoting here from Andrew's review:

white Christian innocence and the Bonhoeffer industrial complex. Bonhoeffer is a figure who looms large in the white Christian imagination throughout a range of radical, liberal, and conservative approaches. Yet in all such camps, a similar hermeneutic is adopted whereby Bonhoeffer himself—not merely his written work but his personality itself—stands in as the most “authentic” representation of one's position. The author's first chapter “begins where Bonhoeffer would want us to start” (xix). Regarding Discipleship the author “seeks to fill out some of the incompleteness within this well-known classic that Bonhoeffer himself sensed would need to be done” (xxi)... This “personality” hermeneutic, rife across liberal Bonhoeffer scholarship especially, feeds into the wider problem of privileging white subjectivity in the undertaking of a decolonial theology today. Rather than understanding Bonhoeffer and his own whiteness as part of the problem, Bonhoeffer himself is allowed the chance to speak from beyond the grave to excuse his own sins.

“White folks have a particular journey to make if we are going to inherit the kingdom of heaven. As least, that's what I believe the Black Christ is saying to us, and I believe in him. Bonhoeffer did too” (163). Though Bonhoeffer did indeed speak well of his time in Harlem participating in Abyssinian Baptist Church, if the Black Christ was configuring his political courage so deeply, one would imagine it would appear more often and more directly in his writings than it actually does. Bonhoeffer does not speak in following the Black Christ nor should get the last word as its chief interpreter, even for white readers and communities. In *The White Bonhoeffer*, this vital context is not clear.

The author, when deciding to write a book on a postcolonial privilege to “decentre their whiteness” chose a theologian that reminded him of himself. Rather than explore who inspired Bonhoeffer and his witness—the black Christians in the USA, the women who supported and I'm sure challenged him, the persona of Bonhoeffer instead stays central stage. Our stories don't relay our connectedness but centre our own knowing. Michael Jagassar has summed up this tendency well as ‘ongoing colonial

habits.’ These inherited deposits continue to hold many in the Reformed family in multiple forms of theological and ecclesial captivity, especially noticeably in the Reformed habit to defer to its theological ancestors to ensure what it means to be ‘properly’ reformed.’ These Reformed ancestors, Michael continues, ‘offered theological/moral authorisation for conquest and euro/western expansion, fed by the idea of the *theatrum mundi* and believers’ supposed role in enacting God’s salvific drama for unenlightened savages... Reformed history and the development of its core theological doctrines, did not escape coloniality and its insidious reach.’ To map back to my scene from the film—we still haven’t burnt the sardine. We’ve not purged ourselves by really grappling honestly with our colonial entanglements. We keep defaulting to problematic ideas of tradition or doctrine that moved back into spaces of privilege and we spend time excusing them for their blindness towards privilege rather than seeing how acknowledging these past mistakes can enable us to let go of grasping that identity towards renewing our church and world through collective action and power.

David Thompson, one of our prevalent historians in the URC wrote how -‘Reformed’ is not an off-the-peg suit of clothes that one can buy and put on, without having to do the hard theological work involved in interpreting what the “Gospel of God’s grace declared in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ” means.’ Living up to being a Reformed Church is a much more risky enterprise than we sometimes suppose.’ Our tradition is in collective discernment. It is in jumping towards this “risk”—into these tricky conversations, into detangling our violent past and being honest about how confessions have failed to hear the spirit’s groans and see Christ in the eyes of the dispossessed. Just as the carnival puppets enabled liberation in the film scene, our tradition is disruptive to the order of the day. It is this leap towards the rawness and unknown that is so so alien and so so necessary to counter what society teaches. Like how the dynamic carnival parade disorientated the border officer, God’s promise of abundance and our mission of life-flourishing for all disorientates the rhetoric that those with privilege deserve all they have and those who do not are a necessity evil. Being Reformed is not to be in the business of congratulating ourselves—we need to purge ourselves from our self-obsessed society, peel ourselves away from our vision machines, promote releasing ourselves from our privilege and participate in grassroots movements that build up power. Privilege buries the prophet under the rubble. I wonder what God’s church would look like if it actually prioritised solidarity over prosperity—I hope I’ll see it someday.

**Dr Victoria Turner**

