

## **Changing landscapes of mission in post-Communist Europe: *Together towards Life* in dialog with a Protestant missiologist from a Central European context**

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The new ecumenical affirmation on mission and evangelism with an apt title *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (hereafter TTL), aspires to become a “new milestone in mission”.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, notwithstanding occasional critical voices,<sup>2</sup> TTL has been so far deservedly welcomed very warmly and with appreciation within WCC circles and beyond. Nevertheless, to be truly received and used widely by churches and mission agencies around the globe, the document needs to be unpacked and engaged with at grassroots levels.<sup>3</sup> Such engagement includes and even presupposes a contextual reading. The present paper seeks to be an example of one such reading from a post-Communist, Central European context. In particular, it is written from a Protestant missiological perspective. Its author was born in former Czechoslovakia while it was still ruled by the Communist regime, and spent most of his life living in post-Communist contexts.

It is a matter of course that the scope of the present paper does not allow for a comprehensive treatment of such a theologically rich and complex text as TTL. It can, therefore, aspire to no more than offering a couple of examples of the aforementioned contextual reading of TTL as well as of some commentaries on this ecumenical affirmation. The article consists of two main parts. First, it seeks to read some claims of TTL on systemic oppression and life-denying structures through the lenses of post-Communist experience in order to show directions in which Christians from Central Europe could possibly enrich the *oikoumene* and its understandings of mission and evangelism. In its second part, the paper goes on to discuss the issue of mission and creation in order to show possible ways in which

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the theme of one of the recent issues of *International Review of Mission* (101.2 [395] November 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Gerrit Noort, “So What?” – Dutch Responses to the New Mission Statement, *IRM* 102.2 (397) (November 2013), 191-198, Byung Joon Chung, An Assessment of *Together towards Life*: Korean Responses, *IRM* 102.2 (397) (November 2013), 199-204, and Pavol Bargár, Some Comments on the Document *Together toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, *Central European Missiological Forum* (2012), 14-17. However, it must be noted that these authors begin their critical remarks with the acknowledgement and appreciation of TTL as an important and well-elaborated text.

<sup>3</sup> For some specific examples of the use of TTL in the liturgical life of congregations see Kenneth R. Ross, From Talk to Power: Application of *Together towards Life* in Local Churches, *IRM* 102.2 (397) (November 2013), 148-158, especially 151-154.

TTL could be used as inspiration for thought and action. It is especially in this part of the present article that not only the affirmation itself, but also an emerging “pool of tradition” is taken into account, representing a growing number of contributions by missiologists and mission practitioners from various branches of Christianity who comment on TTL. In this way a much needed dialog between the text (TTL) and various contexts (represented by scholars, mission practitioners, church policy makers, Christian educators, and other commentators and “unpackers”) as well as among various “contextual voices” (i.e. the aforementioned commentators on TTL) themselves can be pursued. However, first of all, it is necessary to justify the choice of the term “post-Communist Europe”.

### **Post-Communist Europe: A terminological remark**

By definition, the term “post-Communist Europe” refers to those countries in continental Europe which had some form of a Communist<sup>4</sup> government in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They include Slovakia, the Czech Republic (the two constituted former Czechoslovakia), Poland, Hungary, the Eastern part of Germany (former German Democratic Republic), Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina (all of the above constituted former Yugoslavia), Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia (all of the above were part of the former Soviet Union), Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania.

Some scholars argue that the use of the term “post-Communist Europe” suggests that “attitudes of party state times have remained with us”<sup>5</sup> and, therefore, they prefer using the term Central and Eastern Europe, which highlights the geographical connotation instead of the political one.<sup>6</sup> However, I would argue that it is precisely this “political connotation”, this shared heritage of the life “in the shadow” of the past Communist regime which still has a major impact on and implications for the life of the societies and people in these countries until today, including Christian churches and their mission. Therefore, I opt for the term post-Communist Europe. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that for the purposes of this paper the context of Slovakia and the Czech Republic will be at the forefront as the author has most

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<sup>4</sup> At times the term “Socialist” is also used in this regard. However, there is neither space nor need to differentiate between the two for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> See János Pásztor, What Does It Mean to Be a Missionary Church Today?, *The Church in Reformed Perspective: A European Reflection. Report and Papers from a European Consultation Reformed Theologians held at the International Reformed Centre John Knox from January 9 to 13, 2002*. Geneva: Centre International Réformé 2002, 85-107, here 96.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Anne-Marie Kool, Trends and Challenges in Mission and Missiology in “Post-Communist” Europe, *Mission Studies* 25 (2008), 21-36, here 24.

experience with this context, even though the observations made by and large apply to other post-Communist countries as well.

### **Mission as confrontation of oppressive structures: Insights from a post-Communist context**

The collapse of Communism in Europe meant both political and economic changes for the countries which had been directly affected by this regime. In particular, the post-Communist countries went not only from the totalitarian form of government (the rule of a single political party) to plural democracy, but also – and virtually at the same time – from centrally planned economy to free trade economy. This fact remains to be of crucial importance until today as in the perspective of many people from post-Communist countries democracy and capitalism are intrinsically and inseparably linked. Therefore, if someone criticizes capitalism or some of its aspects, it is often viewed as if she or he attacked democracy as such. This situation obviously makes it very difficult for critics of social injustices and inequities and represents a significant challenge for the churches which seek to participate in God’s mission understood in a holistic manner. In this regard the churches from the post-Communist countries can benefit greatly from TTL’s prophetic criticism of “market ideology” and “idolatry in the free-market economy”.<sup>7</sup> They are confronted with the straightforward question posed by the affirmation, “How can we proclaim the good news and values of God’s kingdom in the global market or win over the spirit of the market? (#7). Moreover, they need to tackle the aim of mission as proposed by TTL, namely that “churches are called to *transform* power structures” (#40, emphasis in the original).

And yet, the whole issue is more complex than that. The problem of what is referred to by TTL as “market ideology” has numerous aspects and the churches from the post-Communist countries with their unique experience can make a significant contribution to the discussion and praxis of the ecumenical fellowship of churches with regard to life-denying structures of the present global economic order as well as to those of any other kind. It is precisely this experience, I argue, that should be taken into account in the global theological dialog, unless the worldwide church wants to risk losing one of its entrusted “talents”. The following section will seek to read the TTL understanding of mission as confrontation of oppressive structures through the lenses of the post-Communist experience in order to attempt showing the aforementioned possible contribution.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. especially ## 7 and 108.

In #37 TTL introduces mission (in general and the mission from the margins in particular) as confrontation and transformation of oppressive and life-denying systems, structures and cultures. The accent is therefore put on devastating influence of structural sin. To my mind, this is, however, done at the expense of the personal dimension. The role of the individual is downplayed; the document seems to lose sight of individual human beings in this section. Even if it speaks about “marginalized people” (e.g. #39) often, they are understood *en masse*, as a “collective individual”. The power of particular names and faces is thus getting lost. This is, of course, not to say that TTL would disregard the personal aspect completely; on the contrary, the latter is very much emphasized in the paragraphs on evangelism (for example, ##83 and 84). However, it must be said that role of the individual in confronting and transforming powers that deny life is somehow neglected by the document. Speaking from a post-Communist perspective, one must point out that the change of oppressive structures alone is not enough to bring about new, life-affirming values and social orders; quite the opposite, such a change can lead to a value and spiritual vacuum.<sup>8</sup> In the process of social and economic transformation, single individuals and their personal *metanoia* play their important part as well. Therefore, Christian missiology and mission ought to always have in mind the individual, personal and structural dimensions of human life as well as the relation between humankind and creation.<sup>9</sup>

The sphere of economy undoubtedly belongs among the structures that need to be confronted (or, at least, addressed) and transformed. In this regard, TTL discusses the issues related to the global free market. Referring to *The Accra Confession*, TTL says that the global free market is “a global system of mammon that protects the unlimited growth of wealth of only the rich and powerful through endless exploitation” (#31; cf. also #108). The conclusion, then, is that the reign of God is in direct opposition to the global free market which has been identified with the empire of mammon.

However, this link (the free market = the empire of mammon) requires further elaboration. For example, the TTL authors state that “the global free market is an ideology that claims to be without alternative” (#33). Their argument would be much more convincing if they described some of those alternatives in the document. In the present form, their appeal appears to be unsubstantiated and lacks validity. As Stephen Bevans reminds, it is exactly this kind of claims by (ecumenical) Christians that economists often criticize as naïve.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kool, *Trends and Challenges*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> The significance of the latter will be discussed upon in the following section of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Bevans, *Together towards Life: Reflections on the Proposed WCC Mission Statement*, unpublished paper delivered to Finnish Lutheran theologians (August 2013), 7-8. Bevans in this regard refers to Eugene Ahner, *Business Ethics: Making a Life, Not Just a Living*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2007, 1-24.

Furthermore, speaking from a post-Communist context once again, one is painfully aware that mammon can blossom in other economic systems, too. Therefore, the replacement of the global free market economy by another system would alone most probably not suffice. The transformation must go deeper. To my mind, it would be helpful if TTL also reflected on these aspects of the whole issue.

When identifying “changing landscapes of mission” in her contribution to a panel discussion, which was part of Ecumenical Conversation on TTL during the 10<sup>th</sup> WCC General Assembly in Busan, South Korea, Dr Septemmy Lakawa distinguished the “landscapes of the Empire” from the “landscapes of the Spirit” as diametrically opposite.<sup>11</sup> The implication was that “the Empire” is identified with the contemporary global free market economy. However, post-Communist experience teaches us that it would probably be more appropriate to speak of the mission of the Spirit vis-à-vis empire $\text{s}$  (plural) as social, political, economic and other structures of oppression can take on different guises. Even though it does not by any means call for maintaining the *status quo* and abstaining from attempts to unmask, confront and transform the sources of injustice and exploitation, this approach gives us a sense of sobriety that even if one such guise (“the Empire”) is unmasked and its source(s) is confronted and transformed, it does not necessarily have to mean the end of all oppression, exploitation and suffering.

### **Creation and mission: A dialog inspired by TTL**

It is one of the most significant traits and contributions of TTL that it places creation at the very center of God’s mission in which the church takes part. In the very first paragraph the affirmation states quite unequivocally that “God created the whole *oikoumene* in God’s image and constantly works in the world to affirm and safeguard life” (#1), the statement identified by one Korean theologian as “the most revolutionary sentence in TTL”.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, TTL has it, Christians have been given by Triune God “the mission of proclaiming the good news to all humanity *and creation*” (#101; emphasis added) and are called to pursue this task. And it must be emphasized that TTL itself pays detailed attention to the relation between mission and creation.<sup>13</sup> It is very praiseworthy that the new WCC affirmation on mission and evangelism does not forget this dimension of *missio Dei* as this area of the missionary involvement of the church has often been underestimated and neglected, not least due to the

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<sup>11</sup> See Septemmy Lakawa, *Changing Landscapes of Mission: Challenges and Opportunities*, unpublished paper (presented 31 October 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Chung, *An Assessment of Together towards Life*, 203.

<sup>13</sup> See especially paragraphs 19-23.

understanding of God's mission exclusively in anthropocentric categories. Speaking from a post-Communist perspective, this "anthropocentric reduction" has been very much apparent in most Protestant churches in Central Europe whose understanding of mission – if reflected upon at all – was traditionally limited to the project of saving souls and expanding churches.

With regard to the issue of mission and creation, however, there is yet another danger in addition to that of the aforementioned "anthropocentric reduction", namely the reduction of the task of the church in particular and humanity in general to a set of environmentalist phrases and activist catchwords. It is precisely this danger that South African theologian Ernst Conradie points out in his thought-provoking and dense article.<sup>14</sup> This part of the present paper will seek to critique and further elaborate some inspiring thoughts presented by Conradie. Its aim is not to comment exhaustively on all theses postulated by Conradie; it rather seeks to make a contribution to the emerging discussion on the important topic of mission, creation – and spirituality – inspired, *inter alia*, by the new WCC affirmation on mission and evangelism.

At the very beginning of his paper Dr Conradie very aptly points out three distortions which the perception of Earth-keeping as a dimension of Christian mission is exposed to. These include ecological insensitivity (humankind as a biological species can hardly bear full responsibility for the flourishing of ecosystems), cosmological silliness (humankind as an "episode" in the history and space of the universe is not the ultimate guarantor of its well-being), and theological shallowness (a handful of ecological formula represents a desperate reduction of the treasure of the Christian tradition regarding creation and mission). It seems that particularly the last above mentioned reason is the decisive impulse that leads Conradie to suggesting several positive theses which "may deepen our theological understanding, inspire a renewed vision and incite the moral energy, courage and leadership".<sup>15</sup>

In his first thesis Conradie argues that we are not to ask the question, "What did God create?" but rather "How should this world best be understood?"<sup>16</sup> I understand it to mean that Christians are not called to be "paleontologists" of creation but first and foremost its interpreters; and, for that matter, not purely "academic" ones but interpreters that are existentially involved – engaged for the sake of creation. According to Conradie, we do not have sufficient support for the aforementioned "paleontological" approach; to derive the original God's creation from our observations of the world around us is inappropriate and presumptuous. Moreover, there is a risk of becoming too absorbed in the illusionary "lost

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<sup>14</sup> Ernst Conradie, Creation and Mission, *IRM* 101.2 (395) (November 2012), 339-344.

<sup>15</sup> Conradie, Creation and Mission, 340.

<sup>16</sup> Conradie, Creation and Mission, 341.

golden age". After all, the biblical witness and worldview encourage us to adopt an eschatological perspective with the view focused forward, towards the coming reign of God.

Conradie very correctly reminds that creation is more than mere "nature", "world" or "environment".<sup>17</sup> The biblical rendering illustrates this fact with the images of the garden and the city from the books of Genesis and Revelation respectively. Creation therefore continues also within the history; the latter's fulfillment ought not to be a mere return to that which was "in the beginning". In other words, the goal and motivation of human creative efforts ought not to be environmental conservatism or conservation, but rather creative activities. After all, it is perhaps creativity that also gives an expression to the belief that humankind was created to God's image. However, such creativity should in no case be a pretext to plunder nature and squander its resources. Using the Johannine image of the city (cf. New Jerusalem) once again, the ideal – at least as perceived today – is not a "concrete jungle", but rather the application of "green architecture" or, in other words, the connection of nature and culture.

In his second thesis Conradie argues that the act of creation (*creatio*) is only one aspect of God's mission.<sup>18</sup> Christians tell God's story in at least seven "chapters", namely

creation, ongoing creation, the emergence of humanity in all its grandeur and misery, the Father's patient providence in keeping "the whole world in his hands" despite the destructive legacy of human sin, the history of salvation, the formation of the church (its governance, ministries and missions) and the expected fulfilment of God's work, on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>19</sup>

It is probably this thesis that provokes the most question marks in the whole Conradie's paper. The very division is problematic as it appears too artificial and schematic. In practice, it is actually very difficult to separate the respective parts or, more precisely, aspects of God's work into independent and clearly distinguishable chapters. In addition, the metaphor of "chapters" implies chronological sequence; the following chapter begins only after the previous one has come to its end. That is, however, obviously not the case with God's mission which respective "chapters" mingle and merge into each other.

Further question marks are elicited by Conradie's claim that the church has its significance and relevance in one of the "chapters" of God's mission only.<sup>20</sup> Even though this statement can be helpful inasmuch that it leads the church and Christians to necessary

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

humility and reminds them what their place in God's plan of salvation and liberation is, it simply does not correspond to reality. Even if one accepts Conradie's division of God's action into seven chapters, it is evident that the church plays its role not only in the explicit "ecclesial chapter", but also in the history of salvation and perhaps also in ongoing creation as well as the expected fulfillment of God's work.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Conradie's observation can also be appropriated positively and constructively when one considers in what way it is possible to rethink the task of the church in God's mission in general and in the care for creation in particular. It is also relevant to ask what role humankind as such plays in this "story".

At the beginning of this paper we mentioned that Christians have often understood (and they still do) their participation in God's mission almost exclusively in anthropocentric terms, i.e. with the focus on humans and their destiny vis-à-vis God (*coram Deo*).<sup>22</sup> However, Conradie - as well as TTL - reminds us that the mission of the Spirit is centered not only on humankind, but on creation (*creatura*) as a whole. One of the TTL's sections is entitled "Mission and the Flourishing of Creation" and Conradie echoes this emphasis *expressis verbis* when he states that "God's mission is for the sake of God's creation".<sup>23</sup> This observation can be especially inspiring for the missionary effort of the church as it deepens its foundations and widens its horizon. The church ought not to be interested in human only, but also in creation as a whole.<sup>24</sup> Mission is not to be *anthropocentric*, but rather *ktisocentric*<sup>25</sup> – focused on creation. Only then it can be truly *theocentric* because God is the God of the whole creation, both – as Conradie correctly observes – the act (*creatio*) and the product (*creatura*).

It is somewhat surprising that Conradie in his article does not work with the theme of the Spirit and spirituality to a greater extent. This topic undoubtedly belongs to the aforementioned treasure of Christian theology and praxis which can be used when one reflects on the issues related to creation and mission. Although it is true that he mentions and relates the work and mission of the Holy Spirit to creation, it was certainly possible to make a better use of the richness of this theme. A possible direction is suggested by TTL. As an example, one could mention an inspiring idea which presupposes the interconnectedness of human

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> In this respect it would also be possible to speak of undue individualism (the emphasis on the human as an individual) and spiritualization (the human soul as that which is important and "eternal"); however, these considerations go beyond the scope of the present topic.

<sup>23</sup> Conradie, *Creation and Mission*, 342.

<sup>24</sup> "We are therefore called to move beyond a narrowly human-centred approach and to embrace forms of mission which express our reconciled relationship with all created life" (TTL, # 19).

<sup>25</sup> From Greek *ktisis* = creation.

participation in (God's) mission, the existence in creation, and the practice of the life of the Spirit (#21). Equally important is the image of worship and celebration of the Creator together with the whole creation (#22).<sup>26</sup> This emphasis seems to be especially acute in post-Communist contexts where for many (at least Protestant) churches the whole issue of the relation between worship and creation is reduced to a single Sunday per a year, namely the Thanksgiving Sunday. And even then, this relation with its manifold aspects and meanings is interpreted quite functionally as a thank-you service addressed to God for blessing the earth so it can serve human needs.

And, finally, TTL introduces another intriguing aspect related to the topic of creation, mission and the Spirit, namely "our [i.e. human] spiritual connection with creation" (#23). However, it is a pity that the WCC affirmation does not elaborate this idea further, but instead moves on to the (undoubtedly momentous) issue of pollution and exploitation of the Earth and its resources. The idea of "spiritual connection", therefore, requires deeper theological reflection.

As we could see, both Conradie's article and TTL offer a significant amount of food for missiological reflection. The discussion – and the related praxis – therefore does not finish here, quite the contrary. The issue of creation and mission (of the Spirit and in the Spirit) is too important to be finished with too early.

## **Conclusion**

The present paper argued that it is essential that the new WCC affirmation on mission and evangelism, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, be read contextually in order to become genuinely received and used at grassroots levels. It pursued such a reading from a Protestant missiological perspective, coming from a post-Communist, Central European context. By way of a "case study" on mission as confrontation of oppressive structures, the discussion has shown that the churches from post-Communist countries can make significant correctives to the understanding proposed by TTL, while being at the same time challenged and stimulated by many claims of the ecumenical affirmation. In its second part, the present article sought to enter into dialog with some observations by South African theologian Ernst Conradie on the issue of creation and mission, as inspired by TTL. The particular area of mission and creation is of special importance to the churches from post-Communist countries as it has been by and large underplayed and neglected in their theology

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<sup>26</sup> To be fair to Conradie, he mentions this "cosmic liturgy" (my expression, PB) at the end of his article. Unlike TTL, however, he does not relate it to the need for a new conversion and spirituality.

and practice. In addition, the present discussion has demonstrated that creative dialogical engagement of various contextual readings of TTL is just as important as interpretations of the affirmation itself.