

Theological Reflection on Economy of Life

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1 Good morning! I appreciate this chance to share with you my theological reflection on an economy of life. As I was reading through a series of important resources presented for this plenary,¹ a profound sense of gratitude for those creative minds who worked hard to forge this kind of vision welled up in my heart. Primarily for two reasons. Firstly, I am thankful because these serious and innovative collective efforts embody for our contemporary times the power of prophetic imagination that takes its deep root in the Bible. The alternative consciousness that the prophets and the prophetic community evoke in the Bible is what Walter Bruggemann, a well-known Hebrew Scripture scholar, calls "prophetic imagination." Prophetic imagination entails prophetic criticism and resistance. The prophetic perspective dismantles a royal, imperial, or totalitarian consciousness which promotes social and cultural domination by means of three interlocking systems: first, the 'economy of affluence' which promises the individualist happiness of consumerism and self-satiation; second, the 'politics of oppression and exploitation' which is solidified by military force and bureaucracy; and third, the 'religion of God's captivity' in which God is domesticated to serve a triumphalist cause of the status-quo. The prophetic stance not only criticizes the prevalent reign of royal or imperial consciousness, but it also takes one step further to energize people through offering an alternative. In a prophetic counter-vision which is radical, the 'economy of sharing and equality' replaces the 'economy of affluence,' the 'politics of justice and compassion' substitutes the 'politics of oppression and exploitation,' and the 'religion of God's sovereign freedom' stands in for the 'religion of God's captivity.' Bruggemann argues that the royal consciousness is embodied in an empire like Egypt and in a king like Solomon, while the prophetic alternative takes shape in the radical vision of Moses, prophets like Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, and Jesus of Nazareth. One can add to this latter list the first church in Jerusalem which was also a prophetic community saturated with prophetic practice.

As it is pinpointed in the moderator's address, we now live in a scandalous "global jungle," notorious for its inequality, injustice, unfairness, and absurdity. It legitimizes the cruel culture of the "survival of the fittest." According to Accra Confession, "The annual income of the richest 1 percent is equal to that of the poorest 57 percent, and 24,000 people die each day from poverty

¹ These include the Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE), and others produced in the process of, or as the follow-ups to, the program of Poverty, Wealth, and Ecology (PWE) of the WCC, such as "Economy of Life, Justice and Peace for All"(2012 AGAPE Call to Action), "The Sao Paulo Statement on 'International Financial Transformation for an Economy of Life,'" "Economy of Life for All Now: An Ecumenical Action Plan for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture," "Report of the Ecumenical Conversation on Economy of Life (EC 13)" at the 10th WCC Assembly, and so on.

and malnutrition." The value of life has become countable in money, as there is "the obvious disparity between the value assigned to life in developed nations versus developing nations – most particularly as reflected in World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) decisions."² The parable on "a rich man and Lazarus" (Lk 16:19-31) graphically captures a dehumanizing gap that existed between the haves and the have-nots in the first-century Palestine. While Lazarus was dehumanized by hunger, illness, and homelessness, the rich man, filled with individualistic greed, indifference, and apathy, was all the more dehumanized by enjoying daily conspicuous consumption alone and ignoring a fellow human being who suffers, lying at his gate and covered with sores. The exploitative economic system gives rise to ever-growing injustice in society, destroys human relationships and communities, and dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed. In Women's Pre-Assembly in Busan, we listened to the paralyzing stories of women in this global jungle, who suffer from the feminization of poverty, bearing the brunt of economic injustice, and undergo human trafficking, forced migration, and all kinds of gender-based violence. The human dignity and the *imago dei* of human beings are being insulted and destroyed.

The military industrial complex, capitalist economy, technocracy, and patriarchy collaborate to promote the system of domination, which likes to eliminate or wither true prophets. Deprived of the prophetic vision and voice, and crushed by the immense system of domination that has penetrated even into private space, people in despair and resignation stop imagining that the better world is possible. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). At critical times like ours, when the future of human and earth communities cannot be guaranteed without economic and ecological reformation, the passionate voices we hear in a number of alternatives presented for the sake of an economy of life for all, demonstrate the vitality of the prophetic imagination in our midst. They are our prophets. In many contexts, the extent of gross dehumanization evokes the sin of sacrilege. There is indeed "a deep need in our time for a new unity of spirituality and humanity," as stated in the Report of the General Secretary. The prophetic imagination to envision the abundant life for all is a convergence point where "a new unity of spirituality and humanity" can be found.

2. Secondly, while I was reading through the fresh and innovative ideas of the "Action Plan," in the areas such as the international financial sector (financial regulation, international capital/flows, financial services), public finance and debt (public expenditures, public revenues, sovereign borrowing and debt), and global economic governance (the United Nations system, indicators of wellbeing), a number of faces of my students, friends, and neighbors near and far, both in the global South and North, who suffer from poverty, lack of material resources, and financial dilemma, loomed large in my heart. If they know that the churches, ecumenical institutions, and all people of good will attempt to undertake the actions in solidarity to translate

² "Value of life" in Wikipedia.

these alternatives into reality, this knowledge would become a source of hope, empowerment, and even healing. Prophetic imagination entails prophetic energizing that could restore hope to the people in despair and resignation, and might function even therapeutically. One of the features of trauma-stricken people is the damage of the faculty to imagine. If our passionate collective endeavor to envision and actualize an economy of life at local, national, and global levels, could rekindle the imagination of people who are trauma-stricken for economic and ecological reasons, it would signal the ushering-in of the divine grace into our mundane life, the divine grace that heals the damaged imagination. This would be the case of 'healing imagination,'³ and this is why I am thankful.

Let me share a recent tragic event in South Korea. On April 16, 2014, Korea and the world watched from TV 304 people simply disappear and die in a capsized ferry in the southwest sea of Korea. 250 among the passengers were high school students on their school trip to Jeju Island, who lived in the area classified as low-class or poor. They chose a ferry because they could not afford the airplane tickets. Many of them were youth group of the WCC member churches in Korea. It was not just an unfortunate accident, but a human-inflicted tragedy. I wouldn't go into details, but this disaster revealed the structural economic violence such as government's deregulation on ferry's life span and prioritization of corporate profits over human life, human security, and the public safety. This heart-rending tragedy exposed a cruel face of contemporary Korea with the so-called 'strong economy.' A number of citizens are wearing a yellow ribbon or a yellow pin like this one I wear to express their condolences and indignation towards government and the marine company, raising a fundamental question to what direction our political and socio-economic system leads us. 11 people are still missing in the abyss of the sea. The neglect of the intrinsic value of human life and its commodification is the bare face of the cruel society in captivity of Mammon. The market-centered ideology wants us to believe that human beings are not created in God's image.

After this ferry disaster, the anti-nuclear-power-plant (anti-NPP) movement in Busan is now being accelerated, as a sense of crisis, which evokes a book title, *The Fire Next Time* (James A. Baldwin), and the mistrust in the political and economic leaders have grown strong. Busan, the venue of the 10th Assembly, is located within 20-30 kms from the most outdated nuclear power plant, *Gori* NPP, which has been found dangerous with its frequent malfunctions due to its prolonged life span. In the post-Fukushima era, there has been a growing awareness that the Korean peninsula and the North East Asia are not only one of the most militarized regions in the world, but also one of the most dangerously concentrated nuclear zone. North Korea clings to nuclear weapons, while South Korea has fallen in love with nuclear energy. Korea, still suffering from the bleeding wound of the classic Cold War in the 20th century, is now encountering "the spectre of a new Cold War" due to the rise of military tension in the North East Asia, or the

³ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 20.

possibility of a "Hot War," this time heavily armed with things nuclear. It seems that Korea has jumped out of a frying pan into the fire, so to speak, not just the normal fire, but the strange, inextinguishable, and unquenchable fire. Some of you are informed that during the Busan Assembly, the local ecumenical ministers and activists were in forty-days fasting prayer for the abolishment of *Gori* NPP. Now as part of a post-Assembly process, the pastors of the local churches, who collaborated in unity as the local hosts for the 10th Assembly, decided to get involved together in the anti-NPP movement. A common awareness of crisis is growing that the nuclear industry feeding on energy greed is not so much an economy of life, as the economy of death. In Korea, nuclear exodus will be part of the pilgrimage of justice and peace. I hope that the prophetic imagination to envision an economy of life for all could give hope to myriad of people who suffer from the economy of death, or the absence of God, as it performs the ministry of accompaniment through remembering their pain and wrestling with the root cause of the structural economic violence. It could be therapeutic to know that "we are not alone."

3. The church has a significant role to play in this journey for an economy of life. The above-mentioned document, "An Ecumenical Action Plan for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture," argues that in order to transform the global financial and economic architecture, we need "change on at least three levels of social being: 1) The structures themselves; 2) The human behaviors that are shaped by and shape these structures; and 3) The worldviews, value systems, and thought processes which embed and sustain these behaviors and structures." While striving to struggle for the changes on all levels, the church needs to give a special attention to the third point. Thomas Berry, the late ecological prophet, prescribed "the most complete reversal of values that has taken place since the Neolithic period" for the fatal illness of our civilization. Our pilgrimage of justice and peace is to be a journey towards a new civilization.

Above all, Christians and Christian leaders need to be equipped with the biblical perspective which does justice to the vision of economic and ecological reformation that our times require. The "Action Plan" points out that our approach to an economy of life should be intra-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, inter-religious and trans-sector. It introduces "the wisdom of social solidarity as expressed in various contexts and cultures, e.g. Ubuntu of Africa, Sangsaeng of Korea, and Sumak Kawsay of Quichua cultures," all signifying "living together" or "good life." Recognizing the significance of all other approaches and all these concepts, I would like to highlight the basic importance of church's drinking from its own well in a relevant way. The biblical interpretation often evokes a battle field. Despite our confession of the Bible as the book of salvation, critical thinkers have shown that it often functioned as "the most dangerous book in the world" in the human history. From an economic perspective, the Bible can be interpreted in a way that legitimizes prosperity gospel, greed, individualism, growth-centrism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism, and neglects the importance of eco-justice and peace in the market. Considering this danger, it would be a critical failure not to proclaim and highlight the sublime

biblical motifs, revealing the noble horizon for humanity and nurturing the vision of an economy of life for all, such as jubilee, shalom, the *basileia* of God, eucharist, *oikos*, *koinonia*, and so on. The first churches in Jerusalem and Antioch demonstrated its being *ecclesia* in the power of the Holy Spirit through sharing their possessions within and beyond their own community. Nonetheless, it is our ecclesial reality that in many contexts these great biblical motifs and inspirations remain "solid food," hard to digest, not "milk," easy to drink (1 Cor 3:2). Yet it would be an irony for the church to claim the canonical status of the Bible without attempting to live up to its noble horizon, even though we acknowledge that it is "solid food" to many, and presents a challenge.

Furthermore, the call for economic and ecological reformation in our time presents a profound theological challenge, as it requires an overhaul of our theological formulation and imagination in many areas and at many levels. There is a significant role that theology can and must play in transforming *Homo economicus* into *Homo Emphaticus*. Theological anthropology and cosmology needs to be in dialogue with an eco-feminist vision that pays due attention to the intrinsic interrelationship of a web of life, as well as such issues as eco-justice, ecological debt, sustainability, and biodiversity. Theological construction also needs to be informed by the voices from the margin with 'epistemological privilege' that *knows* how economic injustice feeds on the structural and cultural system of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, and age, and envisages the alternatives. Theological education needs to enhance economic and ecological literacy in a way that encourages a new lifestyle, embodying a transformative spirituality that nourishes the love of God who loves justice (Isa 61:8) and that anticipates a new humanity. At the same time, theological curriculum needs to introduce the good practices and initiatives of diverse contexts and networks to stimulate the passion to practice the ministry and mission in line with the vision of eco-justice for human and ecological communities, thus equipping church leaders with proper leadership suitable for a new era.

Finally, the "Action Plan" states that "The church is composed of the colonized and the colonizers, the oppressor and the oppressed both in the Global South and the Global North. Many of 'us' inhabit the camps of both oppressor and oppressed, the margins of power and its centers. This complexity complicates the quest for justice, yet also is of infinite worth." The church is a space where we confess that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Due to its catholicity, the church can create prayerfully a space where a spirituality of hospitality towards 'the other,' abolishing the walls of barriers, can be practiced, a space where an alternative channel of communication, beyond boxes and boundaries, takes place, a space where truth can be spoken and the stories of victims are remembered and circulate, and a space where we can have a glimpse of the dawning of the *basileia* of God on earth.

4. Gathering for the 4th WCC Assembly in Uppsala, churches confessed: "Our hope is in him

*who makes all things new. He judges our structures of thought and action and renders them obsolete. If our false security in the old and our fear of revolutionary change tempt us to defend the status quo or to patch it up with half-hearted measures, we may all perish. The death of the old may cause pain to some, but failure to bring up a new world community may bring death to all. In their faith in the coming Kingdom of God and in their search for his righteousness, Christians are urged to participate in the struggle of millions of people for greater social justice and for world development.*⁴ This urgent call for a radical transformation, presented almost half century ago, is all the more relevant now in the 21 century. We are now living in an era when love without economics and ecology is an empty rhetoric, and this presents an immense challenge. Yet I would like to believe the wisdom of a Brazilian saying: "If we dream alone, it is just a dream. If we dream together, it is the beginning of new reality. If we work together, following our dreams, it is the creation of heaven." May this Central Committee be distinguished by dreaming together to transform our lamentable global jungle to the joyful, hopeful, and beautiful global village, where abundant life for all, especially for the next generations to come, will flourish! Thank you!

⁴ *Uppsala Speaks* (p. 45).