

IMAGINING A WAY

*Exploring Reformed Practical
Theology and Ethics*

Edited by Clive Pearson

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Foreword

In the middle of the 1990s David Willis, former Charles Hodge Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and I became aware of the fact that leading systematic theologians at important divinity schools of the United States expanded their ecumenical and interreligious profile by a decidedly Roman Catholic theological “vision” and/or “perspective.”¹ This prompted us to ask thirty colleagues from ten different countries for their specific ideas about a future Reformed theology with an ecumenical profile.² The resulting publication, both in English and German, achieved a powerful resonance, yet it also generated some complaints because of the dominance of systematic theology as well as of the Anglo-American and the German-speaking parts of the world.

Around 1998 Wallace Alston, director of the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI) in Princeton, and I pondered how these shortcomings could be compensated. We planned a series of three consultations, not only focusing on historical and systematic theological topics, but also involving biblical scholars and scholars in the areas of practical theology and ethics. Under the title *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* one consultation was held in Heidelberg, Germany, and two more took place in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

About eighty colleagues were involved, not only from Austria, England, Germany, Scotland, Switzerland, and the USA, but also from Africa, Australia, China, Hungary, India, Romania, and South Korea. Sadly, only two of the consultations could at that time be documented and published before Wallace Alston retired as director.³

It was the perseverance of the current director of the CTI, William Storrar, and of the Australian colleague Clive Pearson, visiting scholar at the CTI in 2008, that brought the work of the third consultation in this project to the fore again. Clive Pearson collected the manuscripts and encouraged the former participants to revise their original contributions “in light of the intervening years.” He also wrote an encompassing introduction that reflected on the complete discourse “toward the future of Reformed theology” in the last twenty years. I am very grateful that this CTI initiative thus comes to fruition.

Michael Welker
Heidelberg, February 2017

Preface

It is highly appropriate that this volume should be published on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The international team of scholars who have contributed their essays in practical theology and ethics stand in a Reformed tradition that accepts the need for reform today at the bidding of the same “Christ clothed in the Scriptures” who inspired Calvin, and countless women and men before and after him.¹ It is a diverse tradition. As Calvin wrote to a congregation seeking his advice, they must not make “an idol of me, and a Jerusalem of Geneva.”

Imagining a Way expresses this distinctive Reformed ethos in its multiple ways of thinking about our century’s ecclesial and social challenges in very different contexts around the globe. In commending it to a wide readership in and beyond the Reformed tradition, I thank those who helped to bring these essays to birth and now to a wider public.

First, I record the authors’ gratitude to Kathi Morley. With her gift for hospitality, Kathi made the international arrangements for the Stellenbosch consultation, where the essayists first presented papers.

Second, I thank my predecessor Wallace Alston for his leadership in embarking on a series of international theological consultations in the spirit of our founder James McCord’s global and ecumenical vision for the work of the Center of Theological Inquiry. Wallace did so in close collaboration with Michael Welker, the distinguished theologian and pioneer in interdisciplinary and international research, who has graced this volume with his Foreword, setting *Imagining a Way* within the history of their larger project.

Third, I pay warm tribute to the book’s editor, Clive Pearson, whose willingness to pick up the Stellenbosch papers and, with skill, insight, and judgment, turn them into publishable essays reflects his own scholarly vocation as a Reformed theologian. It is all the more fitting, therefore, that we have found in Westminster John Knox Press the perfect partner for his endeavor, along with the ideal collaborators in its professional staff. Clive and I record our special thanks to Robert Ratcliff, the Executive Editor at WJK, for supporting the proposal and steering it to publication.

But that is not quite the last word of appreciation.

In the Stellenbosch consultation where this volume was conceived,
two colleagues were present who are no longer with us:

Max Stackhouse from the United States

and

Russel Bortman from South Africa.

Both were exemplars of the Reformed tradition
at its best on each continent.

We miss them and dedicate this volume to their memory,
and also in gratitude to

Wallace Alston and Michael Welker.

William Storrar, Director
Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, NJ

WELCOMING

Chapter 1

Imagining a Reformed Practical Theology and Ethics

CLIVE PEARSON

THE POSITIONING QUESTION

In some indigenous cultures it is customary to take time and set the scene through acts of greeting and recognition. The gathering begins with one of those participating surveying the space, naming the others in turn, each time saying something about the last time they met; they may make some comment about the place from which the other comes or perhaps refer to a relative or an ancestor. It is a practice that takes time because everyone in the room will do the same.

This practice of welcome is often the way of oral cultures where genealogies and family connections to one another and to various places situate you as a guest and host of the other. It is a way of knowing and being known. It is a way of positioning yourself and being positioned—and that, it seems, has become an important theological consideration. Writing in an editorial of *Theology Today* some years ago, Hugh Kerr referred to the importance of the “positioning question.” The one he had in mind, “Where are you from?,” shares much with that oral cultural practice.

Kerr observed that this seemingly casual item of small talk seldom attracts much attention or weight. It has more the feel of a chitchat conversation, and yet

it has the capacity to slow us down and situate ourselves. At the most superficial level the names of the places from where we have come can seem to fall more into the realm of the accidental. It just so happens that we come from such and such a place. It was out of our personal control. Kerr's interest in this positioning question, though, digs deeper. One other way to reply is to say that we have come from our mother's bodies and, as a consequence, Kerr noted that we participate in a common humanity. Where we are from also binds us to a dependence upon others, in this instance to that "someone else [who] carried us, took care of us, and brought us to light and life." For Kerr this kind of dependence led him to reflect further upon the awareness that "only faith makes"—and that is the confession that we come from God, upon whom "we are in a position of 'absolute dependence' for our existence."

Where we are from has now become relational rather than merely spatial and temporal. How we answer this deceptively innocent question provides further insight into the unfolding of our character and identity. There is evidently much more to this simple positioning question than might be first imagined. Kerr delves a little more, knowing full well that when a theologian is asked the question "Where are you from?" it will most likely lead to others: "What is *your* theology? Where were you trained? Who is your publisher? What do *you* teach?" Those sorts of question are posed in a time of much change in theology: According to Kerr, "The history of the Christian church is a narrative of experimenting with new forms and structures." We are now "from" this particular period in history: this is our time of "during" and of our "doing," poised between yesterday and tomorrow. However we move forward, Kerr advised that this way ahead should not mean our "forgetting from where we came from." How has that past, that tradition, made us, come what may?¹

The importance of being some "one" from some "where" is well described by *Susan E. Davies* in her essay below. Its title "Justice Healing" perhaps masks a little the personal nature of the telling story of how her identity and vocational commitments have been informed by the Reformed tradition in which she finds herself. This somewhere is a mix of places, peoples, relationships, stages of life, health, and exposures to situations in need of healing and justice—all of which have been lived out in and through various forms of ministry. Some of these ongoing formational experiences, which led Davies to becoming the kind of feminist pastoral theologian she is, have been good, yet some have been anything but good. There is here a "look[ing] back on those years" with a stark realism that nevertheless reveals "God's benevolence toward me." There indeed is a strong sense of "where" some "one" has come from, into which were inserted, no doubt, a significant number of questions to do with how, why, and when. And here that "where" embraces "three Reformed emphases—the sovereignty of God, Christian responsibility for the world, and faith as a gift of grace." Davies's writing embodies rather well a response to Kerr's positioning question, leading right back to its source in God.

ADDRESSING THE QUESTION

This brief description of Davies's rather moving essay on justice and healing leads effortlessly into yet another dimension to this practice of welcome and recognition. The presence of others is assumed. The apparent need to explain where you are from implies a degree of difference. Davies is not alone: here she finds herself in this volume in the company of a mix of friends and strangers. Some—like *Nancy J. Ramsay*, *Denise M. Ackermann*, and *Jana Childers*—likewise refer to certain aspects of how they were formed and from where they came. In Ramsay's case part of the purpose of such is to show how one's own formation and cultural upbringing must not be regarded as normative for all. Others writing in this volume are less ostensibly subjective. This particular cast is held together by lines of thick-and-thin trust. There is a common purpose. It takes the form of the letter of intention, which asked the writers concerned to address a particular question: Does being Reformed mean doing practical theology and ethics in a distinctive and sometimes different way? We might call this an occasional question. It is naming the reason why, and the specific occasion for which, this body of writers has been brought together. The focus for this occasion was not so much, then, on the particular instance of a practice or an ethic; rather, the interest expressed via the occasional question itself has more to do with what light the subject of each address might shine on a Reformed way of doing and behaving. The disciplinary terms, practical theology and ethics, are thus being employed in order to serve an inquiry into the nature of a Reformed identity and ethos.

There is more than an echo here of a John Leith subtitle on the Reformed imperative: *What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*.² This anthology is the response to the invitation. The following chapters are the product of a conference held in Stellenbosch (South Africa) in April 2004 under the auspices of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, and its then director Wallace Alston. That gathering was the third and final in a series of conferences led by Alston and Michael Welker and designed to explore aspects of being Reformed in terms of theological scholarship and ecumenicity. Like Davies, the conference contributors had all been formed and informed by the Reformed tradition. In the judgment of the present editor, their essays are of more lasting significance and worthy of publication. With the active support of William Storrar, the current director of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Clive Pearson invited all the Stellenbosch participants to revise their original conference papers in light of the intervening years. These updated essays are also one way of answering Kerr's positioning question. In the act of responding they also reveal that which they do not hold in common and which can make their authors strangers to one another.

The original Stellenbosch invitation was extremely open-ended. What has eventuated is a multifaceted collection of ways to engage with pastoral practice, selected ethical issues (economics, cloning, environment, the common good), and a concern for identity. There is no one concrete problem or issue other

than the occasional question posed in the letter of invitation. Nevertheless the fact that all of those who were gathered for this task came (more or less) from the same tradition did not necessarily lend itself immediately to a common recognition of identity. The hermeneutical focus on being Reformed was filtered through differences in gender as well as those of place and culture. It was also negotiated through differences in language and intellectual infrastructure. The presenters came from very different parts of the world (the United States, Scotland, Switzerland, India, Korea, South Africa, and Australia). English is not the first language of all, though in this setting it is the functional language in which they can get by. It is evident that a number of variables play a part in any desire to build “a truly global theological network that would be as inclusive as possible.” Michael Welker has noticed “vast differences in academic infrastructure, competencies, and support” from one location in the world to another.³

Clearly the principle of contextuality is critically important. It is evident that the way in which the Reformed tradition is apprehended and practiced in one location varies greatly. This anthology cannot but help reflect those differences by the very nature of the disciplines themselves. The intellectual pursuits of a practical theology and a Christian ethic cannot easily stand apart from local contexts so that differences of place and culture can be heightened. Kerr’s positioning question comes back into focus.

The indigenous practice of greeting and recognition rarely happens in literary and academic circles. Now and then equivalents of inclusion and paying attention to who is there (and who is not present) emerge. One of the most notable examples of such would be that of Letty Russell’s idea of being the church and doing theology at a “the round table.” The purpose here can be partially described as seeking to encourage table talk and the sharing of perspectives. Thus the conversation makes room for the stranger and those on the margins; the metaphor is essentially one of relationships, issuing the invitation to “make connections across dividing lines of religion, culture, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.” The intention of the round table is to create “a circle of friends willing to listen and able to allow talk back to the tradition.” In practice this biblical metaphor represents a sign of God’s hospitality and a reminder of the already-and-not-yet nature of faith. The eschatological banquet of God’s new creation for which we yearn presently lies beyond us.⁴

Now and then the practice of dialogue and exchange happens where there is a cut-and-thrust response between two or more scholars. Here one can think of the imaginary conversations that Daniel Migliore set up in the epilogues to his *Faith Seeking Understanding*. On three separate occasions Migliore hosts a discussion by several well-known theologians on areas of doctrine to do with natural theology, the resurrection, political theology, and atheism.⁵ The purpose of this device is to let readers become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of a particular interpretation of a theological point over against another way of seeing the same thing.

How the task before our writers might not be the same as other anthologies can be discerned by way of a comparison. On occasion there has been a good

and significant connection made between the Reformed tradition and a particular aspect of the relevant discipline. One example of such is the collection brought together by Wallace Alston and Cynthia Jarvis on the formation and practice of a pastor-theologian. The focus here is specific. The emphasis is placed on addressing the “hiatus between mind and heart, between academic theology as an intellectual discipline and ecclesial theology as a confessional stance.” *The Power to Comprehend with All the Saints* is designed to encourage and enhance the nurture and sustaining of pastor-theologian; it does so on the basis of where this happens, “the church lives,” and where it does not, “the church tends to be trivialized and languishes.”⁶ The anthology is pervaded by a Reformed spirit and is directed unerringly to a common task—but it does not cover the wider field of either of these two disciplines.

The same could be said of *Reforming Worship*, edited by Keith Riglin, Julian Templeton, and Angela Tilby,⁷ as well as Lukas Vischer’s edited version of *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches*.⁸ These texts are intended to reveal both the history and diversity of Reformed worship practices while seeking to discern some order. This current volume does deal with worship as well, most notably in the contributions of *Ralph Kunz* and *Jana Childers*. They both share and mediate the same kinds of interests and concerns as do volumes dedicated to worship alone.

Kunz, for instance, addresses the ever-present tension in Reformed worship surrounding ordered freedom and spontaneity. That orderliness is derived from a desire to proclaim the gospel and to do so without that kerygma being compromised by unnecessary accretions. Such freedom is not a license to do whatever one pleases but rather is bound to the need of being open to the Holy Spirit’s leading. It so happens that Kunz’s particular focus is on what has been transpiring over recent decades in the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches. The presenting issue is the “proper little debate” that has emerged between those who favor a greater respect of the characteristic form and “unity” of the Reformed service and those who support a “freedom of arrangement.” The former are concerned at the level of “liturgical erosion” now to be found in the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches. Kunz is able to address this rift with the benefit of an historical perspective.

It seems as if the Swiss concern for the characteristic form is itself a relatively recent phenomenon and represents “the reform of this tradition.” It is not his intention, though, to dispense with form, as might be the imagined consequence of this disclosure. Kunz looks back to the aesthetic nature, “the sparse beauty,” of Zwingli’s worship service in Zurich and draws upon theories of drama and theatrical aesthetics. How might these roots be “cultivated” and be helpful now? The analogy is made between a service of worship and a theater production. This claim might at first seem contentious and leads to many further questions. There is always the risk of overstaging, and there are so many paradoxes: the protagonist is God, who is “portrayable but not producible”; are the congregational members only spectators, or are they actors and participants in the service? That list of questions could be extended.

There is a considerable affinity between Kunz's desire to negotiate this tension with what Riglin and Templeton are trying to do in an English context. There is a general recognition of how it is in the very nature of a Reformed church to be always reforming—and further, in the opinion of Riglin and Templeton, that worship must be in the “vanguard of [that] reform.”⁹ The issue is how to maintain a delicate balance between extremes, on the one hand becoming repetitive and boring, and on the other hand making a “descent into kitsch,” in the memorable words of Ernest Marvin.¹⁰ The task is not slight. One of the core elements of Reformed worship is its reliance on Scripture: by tradition it is worship “that rests in and grows out of a deep familiarity with Scriptures”; the dilemma recognized by Tilby is that “contemporary congregations are much less familiar with Scripture than their forebears.” She is convinced that the sheer range of Bible versions of varying quality have “virtually killed off the scriptural memory and cultural resonance on which our Christian formation depended.”¹¹

By way of comparison Childers is writing on the practice of preaching. Here Childers is well aware of how preaching and Scripture possess a priority in the tradition: preaching is of “primary importance,” “near the top” of any list of hallmarks, and attracts a “symbolic importance.” Childers is even willing to pluck up courage to interpret Calvin in the light of making a claim for preaching being a sacramental act.

Like Davies, Childers is personal at times in the most helpful of ways. She knows the “value of speaking from my own location.” Her location has experienced a good deal of “social change.” The immediate context in which Childers situates preaching is in an age of much spiritual seeking and also of a relative decline in membership of mainline denominations in the United States. It is, she argues, a time of change and, she suggests, an age of the Holy Spirit. Thus the issue at stake is partly one of whether the Reformed tradition can say something about preaching that no other tradition is likely to do. Another way of posing the same question is to ask, Can the Reformed tradition make a difference as to “how we will preach our way through the twenty-first century”? There is a clear sense in which she is embodying the tension that Kunz, Marvin, Templeton, and Riglin describe. The present is a time of “spiritual unease,” searching, and empty pews. It may arguably be the age of the Holy Spirit, but the spirit is often associated with freedom and the unexpected, the surprising. What has the Reformed faith to offer in response?

Now Childers is conscious of how it is not difficult to parody the dignity of a Reformed sermon. It can be very easy to lose sight of its intent on delivering what Walter Brueggemann has described as “serious speech” to do with God and proclaim “a gospel greatly reduced.”¹² Brueggemann has identified how our capacity to hear (and then act as obedient and transformed selves and communities) has been compromised through use of a selection of hermeneutical filters that operate on us in our daily living. Those filters include the way in which we are shaped by economics, technology, and science. They are part and parcel of the “Enlightenment text,” against which Brueggemann places “liberating

possibilities of Scripture.” In his discussion of the Reformed tradition, Cornick emphasizes Brueggemann’s recourse to this “rescriptive” text upon which the preacher is summoned to proclaim the alternative reality of God’s kingdom. This is serious speech that plays upon the cognitive dissonance between what we experience and that “vague feeling that [life] shouldn’t be like this.”¹³

Childers reminds us that this dignity is designed to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and the majestic purpose of the divine activity. Far too often these days this emphasis is obscured because preaching is directed toward what the human subject might need to do—or the message becomes trivial or narcissistic. Even mere reference to God can disappear. It is not difficult to imagine why Fleur Houston then hangs her Reformed homiletics on the rather blunt question “Can a sermon be boring?”¹⁴ The question itself is a lever for her to focus primarily on the audience receiving the preached Word. Houston is assuming the pivotal place of Scripture and the sermon in Reformed worship. The dilemma she is seeking to address is how the sermon can be faithful to the Word of God (Karl Barth) while releasing meanings that engage the imagination of new audiences (Paul Ricoeur).

Here Childers invokes Calvin, whose “model seems uncannily timely.” In the face of so much trivia and narcissism, this dignity needs to be understood. It is grounded in the recognition of the majesty and sovereignty of God. It is a dignity that requires a “careful interpretation of the text,” “embodied preaching,” and sincerity. For this serious speech to be efficacious, there is need of the Holy Spirit. The distinctive contribution that the Reformed tradition can provide this questing and jaded age is the conviction that the Holy Spirit provides the entry point into the Word and seals its message.

The writings of both Kunz and Childers would be most appropriately housed in a collection on Reformed worship. Within that kind of setting they would contribute to a fuller critical exploration of a key concern for the Christian faith. They would also find themselves in the company of other scholars on worship who explore important themes not found in this volume. Harking back to Templeton and Riglin, their anthology also includes an extended historical account of Reformed worship as well as discussions over eucharistic understandings and lay presidency—and by extension the nature of ordained ministry—which this volume does not explore. Where the difference lies is in the company Kunz and Childers keep. Their cowriters are not confined to one area of a particular discipline. This anthology is bringing together a much looser company of interests and specialisms. The examples furnished by Kunz and Childers obviously illustrate a way into scholarly debates over liturgy and homiletics.

THE REFORMED IMAGINARY

This kind of comparison with single (sub)discipline collections masks a further distinguishing trait. The letter of invitation posed the occasional question to do

with a distinctive Reformed identity and contribution. There is a dual dilemma here. The first has to do with the label “Reformed”; the second has to do with the scope and self-understanding of what constitutes a practical theology—and by extension what is its relationship to pastoral theology and ethics. From the perspective of Kerr’s positioning question, the former has priority. The gathering in Stellenbosch assumed the dwelling within a common tradition or ethos.

Those most sensitive to the problems facing that tacit assumption came from South Africa. In the background was lurking the practice and legacy of apartheid. In this specific context, what did it mean to be Reformed in practice? Here we have a telling ambiguity that needs to be negotiated. It takes the form of looking for what might be distinctive in a Reformed practical theology and ethics when that same tradition can both inspire competing claims and raise the consequential stakes quite high.

Dirk Smit addresses these issues head-on. The immediate response to the organizing question is that a Reformed practical theology and ethics did indeed make a major difference to life in South Africa. The only trouble was that this difference was “disastrous.” The Dutch Reformed Church was complicit in the policy and cultural acceptance of apartheid. The extent of its complicity is most vividly demonstrated by *Denise Ackermann* in her “potted biography” of Beyers Naudé. The stated intention of her argument is really to consider whether Beyers Naudé should be regarded as a public theologian. In terms of the examples John de Gruchy has presented elsewhere, the response cannot be anything other than yes,¹⁵ but this answer is almost incidental to the drama Ackermann has related. Naudé was “God’s humble servant made reluctant prophet whose role was pivotal during fraught times.” His life bore witness to the cost of a Reformed practical theology lived with integrity: here his Reformed faith led him to stand in stark opposition to his own culture and church. The inevitable question arises as to how, and with what degree of coherence, can the label of Reformed be applied to other critics like Naudé and at the same time provide a canopy under which apartheid could take root and bear its fruit. That stark reality is captured by de Gruchy, who felt compelled to write of the need to free Reformed theology from alien influences and recover its liberating potential as an “alternative Calvinism.”¹⁶ Its “cry for life” needed to overcome all manner of contemporary temptations and powers, to deliver from tyranny, terror, idolatry, anarchy, and falsehood.¹⁷ On the basis of that experience of apartheid, de Gruchy later argued that a Reformed theology must be “liberated from various captivities, not least that of the dominating social groups and ideologies, in order to be a truly liberating theology today.”¹⁸

Now with the benefit of hindsight, Smit asks whether South Africa suffered from too much or too little Reformed theology. The present is a period of what has been called “postapartheid memory.” The implications of this recent history of complicity and protest are far-reaching. Smit has indeed wondered whether it is still possible to be Reformed in his own country in view of its having “failed dismally.”¹⁹ That is the difficulty with which *Etienne de Villiers* is wrestling:

How plausible can a Reformed calling to transform society in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ now be? The theological setting has changed radically under the new political dispensation ushered in with the collapse of the apartheid system. That vocation, de Villiers claims, is grounded in a central belief of a Reformed faith that “God the Creator and Governor is also Lord of history.” It is a core theological confession that cannot be ignored, yet what it might mean now requires careful attention.

The Reformed tradition is faced with one question tumbling after another. How credible is this calling when there has been division within the Reformed churches and theologians, in the first place, as to whether apartheid can be justified? How credible is it when the system collapses and it becomes evident that the biblical and theological case for apartheid cannot be justified? Is this calling capable of being refreshed and suitably reformed under a new regime, which reflects not just the collapse of apartheid but also a modernizing process that has changed the public sphere?

Thus de Villiers has written self-consciously in the wake of the loss of that former legitimacy. It could be argued that there is no role for a Reformed faith to play in the transformation of society, at least for some years. It is certainly not as “self-evident” as it was; the “structures of credibility have been dismantled,” there is “deep scepticism” about the social role of the Bible, and many members of the Reformed churches have undergone something of an “inward emigration” away from the public sphere to the private.

Yet de Villiers insists that the legitimacy of this call to transform society in the light of the gospel must be redeemed: there is still a need for a “contemporary Christian social ethics” that is “convincing” and different. Accordingly de Villiers makes a distinction between the purpose of this calling in the previous dispensation and in the new political era. The theocratic ideal upon which apartheid was based was ironically intended to “*Christianize* society.” Now, de Villiers argues, is a time for a social ethics that is inclusive, recognizes the pluralist nature of society, and seeks to *humanize* society.

Hence de Villiers has answered Smit’s probing question in a positive manner. For him an ethical and vocational imperative remains and overrides a problem of definition that Smit cannot ignore. That dismal failure should be set inside another recurring theme in Smit’s corpus of writings: the “story of Reformed Christianity in South Africa is in fact a story of many stories.”²⁰ Are all authentic? If so, on what basis? If not, what criteria can be invoked to discern the difference? Here the stakes are high. In less extreme situations John Leith stressed the important and difficult task of balancing gratitude with critical judgment.²¹

The way in which we define something has consequences. With reference to a particular tradition, it can mean endeavoring to stake a claim for authority and justification. The underlying assumption is that there are rival interpretations to the tradition, and the subsequent effects may be far-reaching and extend well beyond a disciplinary discussion. The nature of a living tradition of faith is that it can be both an intellectual abstraction and a way of life. Its confessional beliefs

can both shape social and cultural practice and to varying degrees be realized in that practice.

One of the most telling exposures of this power of beliefs in the profession of faith is the work of Douglas John Hall, writing in the immediate wake of 9/11. In this particular instance Hall was arguing the case for taking up the “thin tradition” of a theology of the cross: he believed that theology to be more preferable in the circumstances than a more triumphalist rendering in a theology of power and glory. Hall was wanting to argue that “theology matters” and that there is a complex relationship between beliefs and deeds. The practice of faith cannot disregard theology as if it were only an intellectual abstraction. Hall observed that “the actions of believers are usually the acting out of foundational beliefs, whether in conscious or unconscious ways.” One way or another, “the foundational beliefs of a religious faith will find expression . . . in the deeds and deportment of its membership.”²² For that reason there is a critical necessity for any religious tradition to possess a capacity to distinguish between “authentic and inauthentic expressions of that faith.”²³

This act of distinguishing implies an ability to define, name, and select the particular distinctives or habits of a tradition. Where there are competing claims, is it enough for either or both sides simply to invoke, in this case, the label “Reformed,” as if that resolves the matter? This dilemma is one part of the series of issues that Smit is seeking to address. Were those who drew upon their Reformed faith to justify apartheid, and what is now regarded as bad practice, simply and faithfully representing the tradition in which they stood? Here Hall’s wise counsel about deeds and deportment hovers a little too close for comfort. Smit is well aware of how controversial the claiming and owning of a tradition can be. So much can depend on who is telling the story and, one might add, in whose interests and for what purpose. The level of intensity surrounding competing claims can lead to the tradition itself becoming a site of struggle. That there was a strong and well-respected cadre of theologians able to draw upon the Reformed tradition in order to oppose apartheid is itself most telling.

There have been numerous attempts to define who is Reformed and why. The difficulty is reflected in David Cornick’s metaphor of a “theological umbrella which lends shelter” to a diversity of individuals, confessions and churches.²⁴ The presence of so many variables has led to a number of introductions that have sought to identify a handful of “distinctives.”²⁵ The problem is compounded because of “the characteristically Reformed absence of any representative voice.” John Calvin is the most obvious choice but, as Smit notes while writing on the Trinity elsewhere, “not even Calvin could be regarded as speaking for the whole doctrine.”²⁶ The 500th anniversary of his birth (2009) led to many studies and conferences dealing with Calvin²⁷ and his legacy to the Reformed tradition²⁸ and, one might add, also to modernity.²⁹ It is fairly common to appeal to Calvin for “roots” and “origins,” but whether that claim then inspires a coherent dogmatic and practical tradition is another matter. Richard A. Muller

is adamant: “The Reformed tradition is a diverse and variegated movement not suitably described as founded solely on the thought of John Calvin or as either a derivation or deviation from Calvin,” as if his theology were the norm for the whole tradition.³⁰ Muller is writing as an historian with a specific intention of discarding the “dross” of earlier “dogmatic narratives.” It is time to “deconstruct (those) master narratives” that might set Calvin against the Calvinists or interpret him as a “founder of a uniformly Calvinistic Reformed tradition” by various ways and means.³¹

The rhetoric of tradition can, of course, be ambiguous. It can so easily become a means by which a deposit of belief and expectation can become closed and staid. It loses its living voice. Leith is mindful of how a tradition can become “out of date, rigid, fixed, past-oriented.” It can become a refuge for those who seek to “isolate themselves and live according to their own principles.”³² It is indeed possible for a tradition to become all played out and somehow cling to survival beyond its use-by date.

That lack of match between a received tradition and current needs can lead to what John Reader has identified in practical theology as a process of “de-traditioning” and “disimagination” or organized forgetting.³³ Faced with the effects of globalization on established practices of pastoral care, worship, and congregational life in general, Reader has made the case for a reconstruction. The world has changed, our sense of place has altered, and how we work in a global economy is no longer the same. We are faced with a rapid rise of new ethical issues presenting themselves in the field of biotechnology, for instance, for which there are no precedents.

This ambivalent sense regarding tradition surrounds the Reformed faith in some parts of the world represented at Stellenbosch. The above references to “our” and “we” need to be handled with contextual care: Hence, once again, we need Kerr’s positioning question and the indigenous practice of welcome and recognition. The relevant vitality of the Reformed faith around the world is uneven. For *Clive Pearson* it is in deep trouble in his “slice of theological geography,” Australia. The source of that trouble does not lie in the kinds of complexity with which Smit and de Villiers have had to wrestle in South Africa. The problem lies in how its “tradition of a robust confessional theology and practice has not been able to protect its representative churches from the general demise of the Christian faith in a skeptical democratic society.” There has been an apparent dissolution of milieu. The present context is now more culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse than ever before. It has become one of varying forms of agnosticism and apathy existing alongside a surprising resurgence of interest in a spirituality often defined in categories opposing organized religion. The history that gave place to a Reformed faith in a previous Christian landscape is giving way to the practice of “transconfessionalism” and a “competitive piety.” The former strengths of a Reformed faith—its confessing nature, its reputation for thoughtfulness, its practice of justice, and the vocation and integrity of its ministry—run the risk of becoming points of vulnerability. The “Australian

soul” is now more likely to privilege what feels right at the expense of what appears to be more rational and institutionally bound.

In a somewhat similar vein *William Storrar* is likewise concerned with the relative eclipse of the Reformed faith mediated through a mainline denomination. In his case the denomination is the Church of Scotland and the dilemma with which he is dealing is the empirical evidence for the rapid decline of the Reformed churches in Europe. The decline is not just in terms of numbers; it also involves sustainability of the church’s institutional and bureaucratic nature and its fitness for purpose in a postmodern society.

It is evident that the issues facing the Reformed tradition in these sites are not slight. The type of pressure these representative churches are under is not likely to abate through being on the receiving end of a number of critically tested and agreed-upon Reformed distinctives or constants. Nor is any sense of obligation to Calvin or his peers from long ago likely to reverse a gathering momentum of numerical decline. There is no obvious right plan or agenda to follow. In such circumstances the desire accompanied by a sense of ecclesial responsibility to survive and maintain the structures can take priority, come what may. Without being able to vouchsafe the future, the alternative to Leith’s understanding of a closed tradition might, nevertheless, furnish some perspective. Leith felt obliged to reflect on what he identified as the “traditioning of faith.” The emphasis here is established in the etymological origins of the word “tradition.” The Latin verb *tradere* is active and lends itself to Leith’s idea of an “open tradition.” There is a coming together of the actual act of “passing on” and “handing over” as well as to “what is passed on.” For Leith this process of traditioning is “very human” as well as “indissolubly linked with the gospel”—Jesus Christ “is the tradition”—and is “the work of the Holy Spirit.”³⁴

The situation before Leith at the tail end of the twentieth century is a far cry from the prospects facing Storrar and Pearson and those for whom they write. Embedded within this recourse to an open tradition and a process of traditioning surely is “gratitude for a heritage that has shaped and nurtured” individuals and communities of faith; there is recognition that the tradition provides “resources, clues, and inspiration for life.” There is also a potential freedom. There is that which is received; there is that which is handed on in and through a confessional and liberative spirit. How will that now be managed and adapted to diverse contexts in an unfolding future?

Storrar’s example is full of interest inasmuch as it provides a nuanced and differentiated reading of the received tradition. There is, first, a tacit acceptance of a Reformed theology that breaks the surface in and through reference to how the Reformers had bound together theological and organizational leadership. Storrar situates this kind of innovative leadership alongside two other legacies of the Reformers: neither Luther nor Calvin set out to be prescriptive about how localized expressions of the church should necessarily be replicated elsewhere: they ascribed a priority to the worship of God in whatever endeavors were to be observed. That emphasis warrants closer scrutiny. For our period in time, Storrar

is placing worship ahead of and at the foundation of any ecclesial practice of mission, pastoral care, or social justice. The reason for such lies in the nature of the asymmetrical relationship between divine agency and whatever innovative human enterprise is undertaken. The risk of a collapsed ecclesiology is thus mollified.

Storrar provides a congregational example of a church that has been able to put into practice these three principles going back to the Reformers themselves. It has managed to negotiate its way through a raft of competing models for what it means to be a church. The future sustainability and habitability of the church means taking leave of a way of being a national church that demands too much of local congregations to satisfy institutional and bureaucratic requirements. Storrar has recognized that the current mode of membership and being a church is a hybrid mix of models: the communal (and territorial), the activist (evangelical and missional), and the recreational. Each of those models has a different and discrete way of being a disciple and member. The future Reformed congregation will require theological and organizational leadership, freedom to express its way of being without undue institutional constraint, and clarity about how its life and witness are held together in worship within the walls of the church.

Storrar has thus argued the case for a level of flexibility and perhaps a certain lightness of being in this traditioning business. Faced with similarly daunting prospects, Pearson invokes Peter Matheson's understanding of the role of "iconopoiac energies" in the Reformation. This turn of phrase refers to the images, symbols, metaphors, and allegories that generated a refreshed "imaginative architecture" for societies from which an older order was passing. There is a likely association here with William Dyrness's work on visual culture and the Protestant imagination.³⁵ There is also a potential link to a rather select body of Reformed thinking that might then lead to the possibility of imitating Charles Taylor's work on modern social imaginaries.

The imaginary is a category taken from contemporary sociology. It has to be admitted that Taylor's primary interest here is in describing how Western culture came to be what it is. Religion transmits an ambiguous legacy and role: it clearly belongs to a more "enchanted" world. The "long road to modernity" embraces a "Great Disembedding" away from a God-given purpose for society and transcendent reference point. And yet this long road can look back to the initiative of the Reformation, which situates the individual in altogether different space. For Taylor, that which comes to constitute modernity is "an unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms, . . . new ways of living, . . . and new ways of malaise."³⁶ The moral order that then legitimizes these new practices, forms, and ways is a political concern for the individual, for ordinary life rather than the transcendent, for mutual benefit, security, rights, and freedom. In this terrain of modernity Taylor posits three central forms of the social imaginary: the economy, the public sphere, and "the practices and outlook of democratic self-rule."

What is perhaps of more interest for the present purpose lies not in these specifics so much as how Taylor understands the imaginary per se. The social

imaginary is “something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes.” It refers to “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”³⁷ The social imaginary is a set of self-understandings, background practices, and horizons of common expectations that are not always explicitly articulated; nevertheless they give a people a sense of shared group life. The social imaginary is thus “not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.”

The difficulty in determining the distinctives of Reformed practical theology and ethics raises the question of whether the case Taylor makes for his modern social imaginaries might furnish an appropriate analogy. Leith’s traditioning process presupposes lines of continuity and discontinuity with earlier representations of being Reformed. Cornick’s theological umbrella creates both space and shelter for commonality and a diverse form of Reformed imaginaries. Matheson’s iconopoiac energies identify metaphors and images that can then be set alongside de Gruchy’s call for a “retrieval of Reformed symbols,” in this case for the sake of liberation and justice. The purpose here is not to “retell the story” in the interests of “a set of theological principles or cultic acts remote from reality.” The symbols after which de Gruchy aspires seek to keep alive “a dangerous memory” that is restated in “fresh and evocative terms.”³⁸ Those symbols, those energies, are to be “embodied in the narrative of the community, the narrative etched in flesh and blood, struggle, suffering, celebration and hope.”³⁹ Perhaps Daniel Migliore comes close to capturing the heart of a capacious imaginary through his acknowledgment of the spirit of a Reformed faith and theology. There remains a revolutionary energy, a dislike of disorder, a passion to participate in the renewal of God’s world, a transforming zeal, and a willingness to be fearlessly contextual. What we have here is the spirit of a movement, a dominant tendency or character, peculiar emphases and “animating features.”⁴⁰

REPOSITIONING THE QUESTION

The pragmatic benefits of opting for a potential Reformed imaginary are several-fold. The most obvious advantage lies in the priority assigned to an ethos and a way of living; the focus does not fall on a table of more formally defined beliefs and principles. Here is not the same pressure to determine whether one style of Reformed expression of pastoral theology or ethics is more authentic than another. Scope remains for several variations of an imaginary to be at work at one and the same time, each with its own particular strengths and weaknesses. The discerning of difference becomes a bit more fluid, flexible, and relational. In some ways it depends on the company that is kept and where there are echoes of resonance and identity.

There is a tacit assumption here. Those who gathered to discuss whether there was something distinctive and different about a Reformed view brought awareness of a shared living tradition and no doubt harbored certain expectations. The present may well be a time of global flows of people and knowledge; the historic boundaries between theological traditions may now be softer and housed within an ecumenical rendering of belief and practice. Michael Welker is also surely right in his description of how “we are witnessing the slow collapse of the old and the emergence of a new world, which theology . . . has not yet fully diagnosed.”⁴¹ Reader prefers to think of a “strange, interim location.” Yet there is a capacity to respond to Kerr’s positioning question and perceive dimensions of personal and relational identity across interdisciplinary and cultural borders. The extent to which this affective recognition can be assumed and perhaps celebrated is readily gauged by way of a comparison made within the discursive field of a practical theology.

Now there is no need to simplify and resolve some of the tensions intrinsic to the discipline. The tracing of origins back to Schleiermacher and his division of theology into separate disciplines is well known. The subsequent need to define practical theology over and alongside pastoral theology, and perhaps ethics, has been well canvassed.⁴² The argument over whether a practical theology should be primarily concerned with the ministerial functions and technical know-how of a “clerical paradigm” or something more academic, more public, is equally well rehearsed.⁴³ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Francis Ward have helpfully described how the practice of theological reflection has evolved through six stages in history, thus situating us in time.⁴⁴ There is no need to doubt the credentials of several fine anthologies: the most notable would include that edited by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra.⁴⁵ There is no need to prove that the discipline is “properly theology.”⁴⁶ There is no need for a detour.

The comparison can be made with the intention of a recent anthology edited by Claire Wolfteich.⁴⁷ None of the writers in this Stellenbosch volume would expect to find themselves in Wolfteich’s company. The reason lies in the particular tradition she represents. Wolfteich is willing to concede that the discipline of a practical theology is largely Protestant.⁴⁸ She is self-consciously writing as a Roman Catholic: the contents about “shared work of intellect, spirit and imagination” are divided into three parts. The first may be seen simply as an invitation to consider the discipline. Here the emphasis falls upon the historical and the conceptual framing of a Catholic perspective. It is designed at one level to “help readers gain an initial understanding of key terms and issues.”⁴⁹ There is the standard provision of a definition: “practical theology” entails critical thinking about what we do and how we live out our faith: it engages in the “study of practices, contexts, cultures and communities in dialogue with faith traditions and informed by the best human knowledge available.”⁵⁰ The purpose of this first section is also designed in such a way that the reader might become familiar with what Wolfteich discerns to be “the emergence of a distinctively Catholic practical theological synthesis”: that synthesis embraces spirituality and the

prophetic work for justice and aesthetics.⁵¹ The second section is devoted to the “concrete practices of faith” by way of a “range of disciplinary pathways.” It sets out to explore the Catholic tradition in terms of a “dynamic practice of handing on the faith.” The particular issues through which a theory is worked out have to do with a mix of ritual, popular religious practices, and the prophetic character of missiology. Here we have certain themes that are not peculiar to the Catholic tradition but that one might expect to find in an invitation into its concrete practice: the Eucharist, spiritual direction, and family life. The self-reflexive nature of this invitation is further expressed through a concern for the “ebonization” of the American Catholic church and for youth ministry with Latino/a. The third and final section is centered on teaching and research.

There is a deep sense of purpose behind the way in which Wolfeich has named her anthology in terms of its being an “invitation.” The intention is to encourage further the development of Catholic “voices and visions.” Wolfeich is mindful of how the discipline “historically has been seen as a largely Protestant guild.”⁵² This collection of essays is destined to “fill a void and provide a stimulus to research and graduate theological and ministry programmes.”⁵³

Wolfeich’s invitational approach excludes those who dwell within a Reformed imaginary. It is like a *via negativa* though the exclusion zone is not confined to them. It is arguably the case, of course, that being Catholic is more transparent than being Reformed: through papal encyclicals like *Laudato Si’* there are official positions with regard to beliefs and moral codes. The Reformed imaginary cannot lay claim to such authorities, but its proposed rhetoric of spirit, ethos, and animating features is consistent with Wolfeich’s voices and visions. Through that practice of welcome and response to Kerr’s positioning question, it becomes possible to hear how, why, to what extent, and for what purpose those present stand inside a common living legacy. The core imaginary lies behind both the summons and the desire to be present. It permeates the spirit of the subsequent discussion.

IMAGINING A WAY

That reference to a living legacy is taken from Smit. It was made in response to Calvin’s influence upon the Reformed faith and its ethics. Smit is most aware of differing interpretations of Calvin’s own understanding of a particular theological doctrine and how that understanding might be converted into practice. For the sake of clarifying what it means to be Reformed, he suggests that it would be “helpful to remind ourselves of some very general and well-known characteristics of Calvin’s own vision.” What Smit reckons as beyond dispute is Calvin’s conviction that theology is concerned with the realities of everyday living. It is a *theologia practica*. It is pastoral and practical rather than speculative or scholastic in intention. If this is the case, then the Reformed imaginary will need to play itself out in the issues presenting themselves in the contemporary period.

It now is an invidious task to nominate which issues those might be. Reader has presupposed that this “strange interim location” will naturally give rise to some “emerging themes.”⁵⁴ In terms of ethical considerations, the present is bearing witness to a raft of issues for which there is no long-established precedent. How will Kerr’s positioning question and this talk of a Reformed imaginary handle matters arising out of biotechnology and robotics, for instance, not to mention the prospect of paradigmatic shifts brought about by an increasing recognition of this Anthropocene epoch and whatever might be the longer-term consequences of the Pluto flyby into the beyond?

Even those seemingly routine matters of Reformed practice, like preaching and pastoral care, are being subjected to great pressure merely by the present being a time of intensifying globalization. The sense of place and belonging is altering away from the more stable congregational pattern in which Reformed confession and practice arose. Reader argues that globalization is like an empire that forms an enclosure around us, leaving us at the mercy of its “full spectrum dominance.” The (Western) world is now “a place of blurred boundaries where the new and the old, the global and the national, exist alongside each other: they permeate, enhance, transform and colour each other.”⁵⁵ Reader is relentless: the discipline of a practical theology finds itself inhabited by too many “zombie categories.” These are the living-dead practices and conceptual frameworks, which Reader argues “have served us well for many years and continue to haunt our thoughts and analyses, even though they are embedded in a world that is passing before our eyes.”⁵⁶

There is not too difficult a risk hidden within this setting. The most obvious has to do with the fear of becoming anachronistic and the flight to being relevant. Sometime ago now, Leith warned the Reformed faith of this ambivalent myth of relevance: “We are in danger of being relevant, without a message.”⁵⁷ At the time Leith was writing about what he perceived to be a decline in preaching and was conscious of theology as the only skill the preacher has, or for that matter the church, that is not found with greater excellence somewhere else, in particular the skill to interpret and apply the Word of God in serious teaching and pastoral care.⁵⁸

What is evident in the work of the contributors to this volume is a deep awareness of a changing world and the pressures that are brought to bear on a Reformed ethics and a practical theology. It manifests itself in a willingness to name that shifting context while delving deeply into the Reformed imaginary for the sake of retrieving core ideas, symbols, and practices. How those iconopoic energies then manifest themselves in specific practical themes and issues becomes the critical feature of the response made to the occasional question that brought this particular group of scholars together in the first place: Does being Reformed mean doing practical theology and ethics in a distinctive and sometimes different way?

Following are eight categories of particulars: the praxis of care; race; other faiths; social and cultural justice; the common good; climate change

and the Anthropocene epoch; economics; genetic engineering, cloning, the post(trans)human.

1. THE PRAXIS OF CARE

That desire to be true to the principles of a Reformed faith is made plain by *Cynthia Jarvis* in her determination not to offer psychological banalities for the Word of God in the delivery of pastoral care. There are, of course, all manner of issues and situations in which a Reformed reading of pastoral care and the cure of souls might be applied—and perhaps make a difference. The particular point of entry into this field that Jarvis makes is through examples taken from care of the dying. It is a context now full of expert medical care and professional technique. It has become a scene in which those called to an ordained ministry can be very unsure of both their role and their identity. Often psychological banalities constitute the words addressed to a patient who did not really want to be asked how he was feeling, managing, and whether he wished to talk about what was happening. Jarvis makes a quiet aside to the reader consistent with Leith's warning: "Either we come to bear witness to a word not our own or we might as well not come at all."

The difference a Reformed understanding of pastoral care might assume is set initially over and against a professional model of counseling, CPE training, and technique. Jarvis takes a step back from verbatims and current practice and delves further into the Reformed tradition. She draws out a distinction between "how we are saved" and "who saves us." Jarvis is able to receive wisdom from the past in order to configure for the present. The intention is to show how pastoral ministry is not about our own gifts, our own psychological capacities, nor what we can do for ourselves. That is the risk the contemporary world puts before us. Jarvis seeks to show that pastoral ministry is designed to place the individual and congregation into the presence of God. The salvific work belongs to God and not us. The pastoral care enabled by the Reformed ministry sets the cure of souls inside a practice of ministry that includes preaching, thus in a sense placing people inside the narrative of God's purposes.

This emphasis Jarvis places upon a theological rendering of pastoral ministry complements the way in which *Cornelius Plantinga* follows through with the practical implications of doctrine. The biblical idea for which he has a concern is the image of God and, more specifically, its place in the redemptive work of God. The pastoral dilemma he addresses has to do with how the renewal of the image of God might be a source of hope for the depleted self. This self is the self that already feels itself to be "half dead" or emptied. It is the self for which life's circumstances have led to a sense of having "too little self."

This coming together of the image of God and the self is rather timely in Western cultures. For them the present is a theological setting where common reference to the self often attracts the qualifying categories of self-development,

self-assertion, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-fulfillment. Plantinga's pastoral interest lies in the shadow side of this contemporary phenomenon made available through Donald Capps's work on the depleted self and the prevalence of shame over guilt. That practical intention is made possible through his reading of the biblical tradition of the image of God through a theological lens of both creation and redemption. It means that Plantinga can situate being made in the image of God alongside the renewal of that image in and through Christ. The pastoral task now becomes one of how this self should be seen in the light of a relationship of dying and rising with Christ. On what basis can these depleted selves be invited to take up their cross in a spirit of self-denial? Is this not simply an improper request?

Through this coupling together of creation and redemption, Plantinga distances himself from the various attempts made to define the image of God. What capacities, what set of attributes, what lines of relationship are privileged? These issues have been subject to change from one period to another. In relatively recent times, being made in the image of God has been used to support various forms of human rights and the gracious bestowal of a dignity that does not depend upon the accidents of birth, race, and status. John Kilner has rightly observed that this is indeed a powerful image, bringing power to liberate and demean.⁵⁹ Plantinga is nevertheless reluctant to press the image of God "into too narrow a mold." There is no expressed intention to discern how humankind "resembles" God. Plantinga is content with acknowledging that the image of God is a "rich multifaceted reality." The "often cryptic appearance of the phrase" in the Bible possesses the capacity to "epitomize the human relation to God.

Plantinga's desire to address the issue of the depleted self is just as important as his proffered response. In so many ways what constitutes personhood, individuality, and sociality are pressing questions for a globalized world caught up in so much digital and biotechnological change. Kerr's positioning question *Where* are you from? could equally easily take the form of *When?* or *What time* are you from? For the sake of its own plausibility a Reformed imaginary needs to be able to engage with critical contemporary matters as they arise. The depleted self is one such presenting dilemma and can serve as an entry point into a much larger debate surrounding the efficacy of a theological anthropology that is Reformed in character. Through his attention to redemption in tandem with creation, Plantinga is able to make a case for "reposing" and "resting" in God's grace. That otherwise overly daunting call to self-denial and imaging Christ lies beyond the person whose sense of self has been so compromised.

2. RACE

The image of God has been invoked by writers like James Evans Jr. in seeking to address racism.⁶⁰ The tendency has been to focus upon race and culture being constituent elements of being human and thus being "made" in the image of

God. In a manner of speaking, belonging to a particular race becomes an inalienable gift of creation. Our race as much as our culture is part of our answer to the question Where do you come from? From the theological case made by Evans on behalf of black African Americans, it is evident that the denial and abuse of race represent sin. For those gathered in Stellenbosch, the necessity of coming to terms with apartheid was matched elsewhere with what is really an inner theological imperative for the Reformed tradition to deal with racism in general. It is a worldwide problem and manifests itself in many forms. Its overt expression is found in the foundational sins of colonizing settler societies and policies of ethnic cleansing, racial profiling of offenders, the shooting of unarmed citizens (too often, it seems, by police), and the rhetoric of fear and hard-line responses to those seeking asylum. In these patterns of racism, hatred and discrimination are quite obvious. Such overt racism contrasts with the hidden biases of *aversive* racism, critique of which lies at the heart of *Nancy Ramsay's* vision for honoring cultural and racial differences while dealing with racism as sin.

In this instance Ramsay is writing as a self-confessed Reformed pastoral theologian. Her particular interest here is in paying attention to “the systemic and structural dynamics that shape and distort the context of care.” She is seeking to participate in the process of reclaiming the “theological integrity” and “theological intentionality” of the discipline within the interdisciplinary “web of care.” The specific themes she draws upon are housed within a theocentric center of professing the sovereignty of God. Its broad shape embraces Reformed perspectives on being made in the image of God, with due weight being given to original, actual, and social sin; then she presents a vocation of loving the neighbor.

Ramsay shares de Villiers's commitment to a Reformed emphasis on the transforming of culture. That transformation is to be understood in terms of responding to God's redeeming love. For Ramsay the presenting issue is the discrepancy that exists between “a biblical vision of life together” and the various ways in which “racism continues in our daily lives.” The critical step for Ramsay is her mode of definition: racism is not simply a matter that is external to us personally or an issue of personal prejudice. Rather, racism is “an interlocking system of advantage (as well as disadvantage) based on race.” It leads rather easily into a process of “internalizing a privileged identity” and “a learned indifference to the fact of racial discrimination.” Ramsay concludes that such “internalized privilege” is “even more insidious than overt racism.” It is aversive racism.

That term was first used by Joel Kovel in his psychohistory of white racism.⁶¹ It was then developed into a more comprehensive theory by John Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner. In their seminal work on *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism*,⁶² they worked their way toward a definition of aversive racism as “a form of prejudice characterizing the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the majority of well-intentioned and ostensibly nonprejudiced” citizens. Dovidio and Gaertner had thus accepted the relative decline of overt racism in the wake of civil rights legislation; they argued that racial prejudice has “given way to near universal endorsement of the principles of racial equality as a core cultural value.”⁶³ Racial

biases are now “less blatant than in the past.” Dovidio and Gaertner have, nevertheless, also recognized a more subtle and indirect form of prejudice among those who are willing to accept egalitarian standards.

The effects of these forms of bias and prejudice are potentially visible in evidence of persistent racial disparities, such as in a range of health indices including infant mortality rates.⁶⁴ They are also likely to be found at work in the decision-making and social interactions of various institutions, such as the legal profession and education. In a somewhat similar vein Ramsay herself has written on how “white allies” should seek to address hidden discrimination based on race in the formation and practice of a faculty of theology.⁶⁵ These forms of prejudice can also be manifested in what Derald Wing Sue has described as “the microaggressions of everyday life.”⁶⁶

For Dovidio and Gaertner these indices and practices are symptoms. They are the consequence of “inadvertent” and “subtle biases,” the origins of which are to be found in the unconscious mind. They described their aversive theory as an “unconscious type of racial bias.”⁶⁷ There is thus a contradiction between “having egalitarian conscious or explicit attitudes but negative unconscious, or implicit, racial attitudes.”⁶⁸ This work on aversive racism is effectively seeking to delve into the psychology of diversity and give an account of how stereotypes, caricatures, and an implicit racism form “outside of awareness.”⁶⁹

Dovidio and Gaertner probed into this otherwise unacknowledged, indirect, hidden form of discrimination by means of various methodologies and experimental paradigms that measure and assess implicit attitudes.⁷⁰ The way in which this unconscious practice operates has been further described by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald. Their book *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* is a psychological inquiry into how and what we see. There are ingrained habits of thought and “mindbugs” that lead to errors in how even the “good person” perceives, reasons, remembers, and make decisions.⁷¹ Then it becomes relatively easy for these unconscious inferences and hidden biases to be framed in “shades of truth,” “truthiness,” and “stereotypes”: we become unaware of how we become *homo categoricus* with regard to the Other. Ramsay’s use of experimental social psychology tests in the field of employment reveals the same.

Dovidio and Gaertner have subsequently strived to develop models and strategies which might reduce intergroup bias. This kind of social psychology works toward a common motivational identity for in-groups and out-groups in order to reduce bias and the distorting effects of categorization. Christena Cleveland has drawn upon this work of Dovidio and Gaertner for a theological purpose. Her work on *Disunity in Christ* is designed to expose and overcome “the hidden forces that keep us apart.”⁷² It is clearly a form of racism that needs to be contested practically because it is “pervasive” and “persists because it remains largely unrecognized and thus unaddressed.”⁷³ This evident form of good intentions and hidden bias lies behind the kind of outrage and frustration felt by Jennifer Harvey. Writing for justice-minded white Christians, she argues the case for

moving away from a reconciliation paradigm to one that is based on confession and reparation.⁷⁴

It is arguably the case that Davies as well as Ramsay are both dealing with aversive racism. Ramsay also tells of her experience of growing up and gradually becoming aware of a problematic white history and a condescending practice of pity and charity. Ramsay reflects on how seemingly good people become “embedded in a sinful practice” and how that practice is transmitted across generations. There is a hidden effect to aversive racism: the wound that is inflicted upon the disadvantaged race returns and places in peril the soul of the ones who have reaped the benefits of such. For a frame of reference with which to engage this form of racism, Ramsay relies upon a Reformed theocentric ethic and piety. It is shaped by a due recognition of the sovereignty of God, the reality of sin, the gift of the *imago Dei*, and the vocational call to the love of neighbor.

3. OTHER FAITHS

It is evident that a Reformed faith must come to terms with its capacity for becoming complicit in apartheid, aversive racism, and subsequent variations of such. The present period is one of globalization and increasing interconnect-edness across cultures, ethnicities, faiths, and worldviews. The category of the Other, with a perceived sense of difference, exists alongside and in some degree of tension with the “huge homogenization process” that *Piet Naudé* attributes to globalization. That otherness manifests itself in diverse forms with which a Reformed imaginary must necessarily engage. The radical urgency of responding to escalating numbers of refugees and asylum seekers displaced by civil war and terror insurgencies is a case in point. Fleur Houston has captured here the category of otherness through the biblical themes of stranger, exile, and hospitality. The imperative for providing protection is set within a mimetic rendering of Scripture that reflects the compassionate possibility of these themes. Writing out of an English Reformed background, Houston significantly invokes the practice of a duly constructed ethical imagination between “the world as it is and the world as it ought to be.”⁷⁵ That language of ethical imagination is especially apposite for our purposes. It evokes the capacity of images, symbols, stories, and themes embedded in a tradition to address contemporary issues afresh and offer an alternative perspective to “the posturing of politicians and the ideological arguments that are so often a feature of national discourse.”⁷⁶

It is not difficult to see how the plight of the Other expressed through the pressure to seek asylum is likely to foreground cultural and religious difference. The clash of otherness can so easily morph into various forms of fear, a concern for social cohesion, and outbursts of popular prejudice surrounding policies to do with borders, security, and citizenship. Susanna Snyder refers to the “new racism” that can accompany the fear of migrants who come from former colonies and were somehow deemed to be inferior as well as the fear of those who

threaten a Judeo-Christian civilization.⁷⁷ The Stellenbosch conference did not directly address such issues, which would now demand attention. It touched rather too lightly on the way in which differing faiths relate to one another around the Reformed world. The occasional question that led to these addresses could perhaps now be reframed in order to ask, Does being Reformed mean relating to other faiths in a distinctive and sometimes different way?

The way in which that revised question might be answered is likely to be informed by the time and place in which it is posed. The Reformed faith shares a Christian heritage that extends from demonizing the Other through evangelism and mission to various models of interfaith dialogue and concern for the common good. It can matter whether the question is posed in contemporary Europe, where those other faiths are likely to be in a minority and confront a widespread mix of agnosticism and indifference: Linda Woodhead has observed that dialogue is often then conducted in the abstract, with little concession being made to the inequality of power and a lack of what might be called a level playing field.⁷⁸ The situation is in reverse in Asia, where the Christian faith is in the minority. It has often been associated with colonialism, trade, and a missional imperative. Certainly here is an ambiguous legacy for a postcolonial world. In what ways can the Christian faith be expressed in and through Asian symbols and modes of knowing that may be in some degree of tension with Western missionary practice? How plausible and attractive is a Christian faith that in the past has often been associated with privilege and makes exclusivist revelatory claims in a context of multiscriptural religiosity? This list of questions could easily be extended.⁷⁹ Where investigation of a Reformed understanding of practical theology and ethics might sit with regard to the religious Other or indigenous custom calls for a volume in its own right. The shift of Christianity's "center of gravity" away from its historic centers in Europe and North America to the global South demands such.⁸⁰

In the present volume this very large field of inquiry is covered by what amounts to a case study. The matter of whether or not the Reformed faith makes a difference was tackled by *Hmar Vanlalaauva* through a reading of Calvin in "the pluralistic Indian context." There is a need to be more specific and once again consider Kerr's positioning question. Vanlalaauva's particular interpretation of Calvin is informed by the legacy of the Presbyterian mission to his homeland of Mizoram, India. Relatively recent work has been done on a Mizo contextual theology, seeking to make use of indigenous beliefs and spirituality.⁸¹ That is not Vanlalaauva's concern here. He is writing self-consciously in the wake of the radical transformation wrought by "mission and missionaries coming to our local land who were all rooted in the Calvinistic faith and tradition" within the "short span of 50/80 years." When writing later on this legacy, Vanlalaauva identified the following areas where the coming of a Reformed mission made a clear difference: the rejection and removal of animistic practices, improvement in the status and role of women, abolition of slavery, establishing primary education, developing a written form of language through the translation of the Bible and

Christian hymns, the practice of medicine, an emphasis on the virtue of work, and a ban on excessive drinking.⁸²

The present task before him is more daunting. Vanlalauva sets out to provide an “appraisal” of how distinctive key features of Calvin’s theology may relate to the pluralist context of religions in India. The focus of attention is on the “contemporary” context rather than on earlier missionary periods through which Calvin’s theology effectively became “part of the Christian faith and tradition in India.” Vanlalauva is faced with a complex hermeneutic. The presenting issue is how to negotiate adverse criticism suggesting that Calvin’s theology is likely to encourage an exclusivist understanding of the Christian faith, which is out of kilter with the pluralism to be found in India.

What Vanlalauva (and any other Reformed apologist in India) is dealing with here is the shadow side of making a difference and bequeathing a legacy. The issue that can nag away at any form of self-confidence is whether the Christian faith is bound to do “interpretive violence” to the cultural traditions of India (in this case). Ankur Barua asks whether the Christian worldview cannot but help demonstrate religious aggression and situates this question alongside the received understanding of Hindu tolerance. The underlying assumption is that Christianity is authoritarian and dogmatic and “breeds intolerance.” The comparison can be made with Hinduism, which “represents a universalistic religion which breathes the air of open-minded tolerance.”⁸³ Barua’s argument examines Hindu responses to standard inclusivist Christian typologies of other faiths⁸⁴ and much more closely scrutinizes its claim to tolerance.⁸⁵

The first step in Vanlalauva’s response is simple enough. Calvin’s theology needs to be understood in terms of the time and place in which it was generated. It is directed toward a particular sociology, and that theological setting was not one of having to respond to multiple other faiths that bore little or no resemblance to a Christian structure of belief and practice. Vanlalauva recognizes that Calvin needed to respond to “the demand of his age.” The second step is the selection of doctrines that might illustrate the benefits or otherwise of Calvin’s theology in this very different context. Vanlalauva opts for the knowledge and sovereignty of God. Both of these areas of belief are likely to be to the fore in an ongoing Reformed imaginary. But, as Vanlalauva shows, these “two important issues,” which are “central to Calvin’s theology,” carry a high risk. The first problem lies in the distinction made between a knowledge of God that is natural and one that is mediated through Christ and is attested through the primacy of Scripture and the interior witness of the Holy Spirit: “In the eyes of a number of Indian Christian theologians, Calvin’s view of the knowledge of God appears to have lost its relevance.” The second problem lies in the way in which the sovereignty and providence of God become vehicles for a theory of predestination that seemingly limits the grace of God and human freedom and responsibility.

Vanlalauva is in no doubts as to the benefits of the Reformed mission to the indigenous Mizo people. In terms of a hermeneutic retrieval of Calvin in much-changed circumstances, he is a sympathetic critic. The Indian context exposes

some “weaknesses” in Calvin’s theology that are either then modified or justified for the sake of that theological setting. Vanlalauva follows the way of those Indian theologians who are inclined to opt for a cosmic Christ or discern the presence of Christ in other faiths. The manner in which Calvin arrives at his understanding of predestination is explained in terms of the exigencies of the complex social, political, and economic pressures of the time. Vanlalauva is really exploring the Reformed legacy through a reading of Calvin in the presence of the Indian religious “main line.” How a Reformed imaginary might play a future role in the practical theology and ethics of the Indian subcontinent may well be rather different from this tradition’s historic centers. In the meantime Vanlalauva believes that the mainline religious traditions will find in Calvin a “good partner.”

4. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL JUSTICE

The way in which a Reformed imaginary will need to engage with other faiths is a rather complex business. There are multiple settings in which this imperative will occur. Vanlalauva has demonstrated how a Reformed faith should address both its legacy in an indigenous mission field and its potential role among the company of theologians addressing the religious plurality in India. Barua refers to the encounter between the Indic and Abrahamic faiths, which operate from very different philosophical and metaphysical assumptions. In this kind of setting the Reformed imaginary comes in the form of what Hindu critics describe as a “foreign religion.” From a Western experience, Barua’s encounter no longer needs to happen “overseas.” The global flows of people in recent times has led to culturally and religiously diverse neighborhoods throughout Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Some time ago, Diana Eck wrote of how a “Christian country,” the United States, had become the “world’s most religiously diverse nation.”⁸⁶ This coming into the everyday experience of each other invariably raises matters to do with integration, assimilation, and the rhetoric of unity and diversity.

The presence of so much difference within particular nations has led to an increasing concern for whether or not a liberal multicultural society can actually deliver social justice.⁸⁷ The issue is no longer simply one of whether special rights for disadvantaged cultural groups or programs of affirmative action are justified. From the perspective of political philosophy, David Millar is addressing a different kind of question: “Does the very idea of social justice still make sense when societies become multicultural?”⁸⁸ The question is deceptively simple. For Millar the critical issue is not a case of society becoming socially just “through the distribution of resources according to valid principles of justice.” The issue is whether or not there is reasonable agreement among the members of a culturally diverse society as to what those principles are. The moment a culture becomes more varied in its composition, the less “bounded” it becomes. In a variation on this theme, Naudé seeks a particular form of cultural and aesthetic justice based on identity. The need for such is established through effects of globalization.

The tendency is for the emphasis to fall upon the “mass,” the worldwide, co-opting, and assimilating power of the seemingly universal. It can become ideological, requiring the Other to become like us. The irony of this irrepressible pressure is how it also marks out difference. Naudé has rightly identified how globalization is not simply about a free market and a digitally interconnected world: it is also a cultural force that has a profound effect upon “personal and national identities, social cohesion, and human coherence.” What Naudé shows concern for is the prospect for cultural justice and the process through which personal identity is formed. The rise of globalization as a cultural force threatens the way of life of many peoples: it possesses the power to undermine patterns of cultural justice that are embedded in local cultures and through “what people take for granted.” It can readily create the illusion that globalization’s values are the only values now worth having. The aesthetic values of a culture as found in its national symbols of identity run the heightened risk of being taken away.

This way of thinking and behaving can easily become a contemporary equivalent of a survival of the fittest. The ethical dilemma Naudé has identified is one of what then ensues from such asymmetric power. The loss of what can be taken for granted is a burden unequally shared, deepening personal and communal “subjugation and humiliation.” In the face of this threat of sameness, Naudé is defending the “right to be different” and “the right to [a] life unself-consciously” lived. Those most at risk are being asked to make the most far-reaching shifts for the sake of development and participation in this transnational power.

The cosmology lying behind globalization and its effect on cultural and personal stories sits uneasily with a Reformed imaginary. During the apartheid regime, Naudé wrote a number of essays about a Reformed perspective on apartheid, essays frequently cited by others. Yet on globalization’s influence, there is no overt discussion on how a Reformed ethic might make a difference. Its presence is hidden away in a “few [concluding] biblical perspectives” surrounding “the challenge of who is Lord” and a reading of “the household of God in which difference is welcome.”

5. THE COMMON GOOD

The emphasis on the future, on what might be, is more overtly opened up by *Max Stackhouse*. The emergence of a whole raft of new ethical issues surrounding sexual orientation, cloning, and ecology has Stackhouse posing a penetrating series of questions. Those issues lie at the intersection of evolution and theology. What should be a Reformed understanding of the doctrine of creation? It is evident that the human subject now has the capacity to alter what formerly appeared to be pre-given patterns of life. On what basis, then, do we seek to preserve some aspects of creation and yet alter others?

Stackhouse’s interest lies in what he deems to be prior questions. Is there a “right knowable order of things in the biophysical universe”? Is there an “ethical

connection to creation”? For the success of his argument, Stackhouse assumes an open rather than closed system of nature. There is an apologetic side to his thinking as he seeks to express a doctrine of creation where nature and what exists are open to the transcendent. Stackhouse is writing while fully aware that this Reformed tradition, and what it might want to say on these matters, now finds itself within a mix of global and local cultures; it would be easy to say that a Reformed view might simply be an act of special pleading in a forum of voices that include the secular public, tribal religious practices, and other major religions. In this increasingly complex setting, Stackhouse argues for a plausible form of public theology established in the idea of common grace.

Geoff Thompson presses harder. The Reformed traditions of common grace and civil responsibility lie in the background. The dilemma resides in a wrestling of what constitutes the basis on which a Christian social ethic might participate in the quest for the common good. It is not self-evident. The very idea of the common good can harbor significant injustices, “hidden prejudices and unacknowledged strategies of exclusiveness”; there is the core issue of whether a distinctive tradition can contribute to that which is common: Will it be accepted in the public forum? Will it be true to the actual tradition it is representing? There is also the ever-present risk of the church’s sectarian withdrawal from the world into a position of ecclesial isolationism. Regarding that risk, Thompson is clear: he has no desire to establish a Christian commitment to the common good in theories of natural law or orders of creation. Nor should such activity beyond “the walls of the church” be seen as “an additional practice that the church might take up once it has been morally formed.” Thompson makes the case, rather, that the church must engage with issues beyond its own walls as a consequence of its own formation as a Christian community. That word “formation” is critical since it assumes a process. The means by which socially involved Christian communities are formed is initiated not through the mere “replication of all of [the New Testament’s] specific beliefs and practices; rather, a Christian social ethic is “initiated by hearing and responding to the proclamation of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.” Thompson draws upon the work of Richard Hays in order to promote a moral vision that is grounded in three foci in the specific sequence of community, cross, and new creation. This is a community that seeks to “embody an alternative order” and be a “sign of God’s redemptive purposes for the world.” It acts out of an understanding of the cross that calls those with power and privilege to account. It recognizes the eschatological framework and prospect of a new creation, though we live in this time and place.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Stackhouse made reference to some specific issues that must be addressed in the wake of a Reformed commitment to a doctrine of creation. One of those has to do with the care of the environment. With the passage of time, that

ecological concern has increasingly become more concentrated upon climate change and the common good. Writing in the *International Journal of Public Theology*, Clive Pearson has argued that the present time is a *kairos* moment for theology: our capacity to read “the signs of the times” (an interesting hermeneutical problem in its own right)⁸⁹ cannot but identify climate change as one of those “occasional issues” with which theology must engage and do so for the sake of the public good.⁹⁰

It is arguably true that the problem has deepened with the advent of the Anthropocene epoch. It does not necessarily matter whether the relevant working group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy wishes to recommend the planting of a golden spike to determine whether we are now living in a new geologic epoch rather than the Holocene period. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne have identified how the Anthropocene has become an umbrella term that also covers Earth systems sciences and the social sciences. The critical assumption upon which the Anthropocene is based is the claim that there has been a “step-change” in the relationship between humanity and nature. The human species has become a “geologic agent” and has profoundly affected the interconnected Earth systems of climate, oceans, air, biological life, rocks, and atmospheric chemistry.⁹¹ The haunting question has become whether or not, through human agency, we have already sealed the likely requiem for our species.⁹² From a theological perspective the matter becomes one of endings and how we live justly in an interim period.⁹³

The term “climate change” is a vexed label; it can easily lend itself to talk of what is described as a “(super)wicked problem”⁹⁴ and become a politicized naming in which great stakes are at work. How to encompass this transdisciplinary problem within an adequate conceptual framework is a widely recognized dilemma.⁹⁵ It could indeed be one of those umbrella terms that Ernst Conradie wrestled with in dealing with the problem of relating the universal to the particular (and vice versa) in the discussion about climate change and the common good.⁹⁶ Mike Hulme has declared that the term “climate change” should be seen more as an umbrella term that gives shelter to a number of discrete problems: global warming, rising sea level, loss of biodiversity, and population growth.⁹⁷

For a Reformed faith one of the key questions must be, How are the doctrines of creation and salvation to be related to one another?⁹⁸ The threat of climate change and ecological deterioration necessarily puts pressure on how we understand the purpose of creation in the light of the sovereignty and redemptive grace of God.⁹⁹ The issue is not one of what can we do “to save the earth”; nor is it a case of hoping for an intervention of God in order to do the equivalent of a reset of creation.

Jong-Huk Kim is not dealing with climate change per se. He seeks to situate threats to “the delicate balance of the ecosystem” inside a Reformed “faith and lifestyle.” The environmental crises he identifies are not merely crises of the environment. They are “deeply rooted in the fallen race and creation,” which stand in need of reconciliation and a new way of living. Without using the language of

God's economy, Kim nevertheless invokes a Trinitarian view of the redemptive work of a sovereign and gracious God, to whom all gratitude is due.

7. ECONOMICS

This debate on caring for creation is being played out in a global context of many competing pressures. For some time Sallie McFague has drawn a contrast between a market-driven economic framing of the world and an ecological-economic framing of the world.¹⁰⁰ These two world views are deemed to be dramatically different in terms of their underlying values. They are the “mirror opposites of each other.”¹⁰¹ McFague argues that market capitalism is motivated by self-interest. It is a “type of economics that allocates scarce resources . . . on the basis of an individual's successful competition for them.”¹⁰² It does not necessarily consider the needs of the planet or all of the planet's inhabitants.¹⁰³ The contrast McFague makes is with the ecological-economic model, which “recognizes that we are both greedy and needy, even more so.”¹⁰⁴ The axiom upon which it is built is the awareness that we require an economic agenda not focused upon individual selves. Our well-being is “seen as interrelated and interdependent with the well-being of all other living things and earth processes.”¹⁰⁵

Of particular significance for effecting a bridge with Kim's concerns and those of *Cameron Murchison* is McFague's more recent writing on consumption and the practice of restraint.¹⁰⁶ Murchison's intention is to examine the relationship between a Reformed theology and the capitalist economic order. That is not, of course, McFague's particular aim. She is seeking to respond to an “economic and environmental breakdown of more serious proportions than any generation of human beings before us.”¹⁰⁷ Murchison's focus lies on a Reformed practical theology by which we might live in cultures that are embedded in consumerism. McFague's horizon is a planetary agenda. It is now time to put in place a “communal spirituality” that takes seriously the questions, Where are we? and, How might we live well in a context where there are “too many human beings using too much energy and taking up too much space on the planet?”¹⁰⁸ McFague proposes a countercultural kenotic, self-emptying, way of life rather than one that aspires to self-fulfillment on the basis of consumption.¹⁰⁹

Murchison is effectively dealing with the legacy of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹¹⁰ The Weberian thesis assumed that “certain attitudes and habits engendered by Calvinism contributed to the development of capitalism.” For his review of the theory, Murchison relies upon a rereading of Calvin himself and the distinction between production and consumption. The underlying assumption is that Calvin's emphasis on industry and frugality naturally led to capital accumulation, which would then provide the “launching pad for capitalist production.” Murchison takes issue with potential consequences arising out of this implicit practical theology. The core question becomes, What, then, is the purpose of wealth? Is it, for

example, to promote individual well-being and perhaps the pursuit of luxury and abundance? Writing in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, Stackhouse asks, “Whence came the impulse to buy all the stuff produced?” And again, by way of comment, How did this “productive system” break free from “its earlier doctrinal underpinnings”? What influences were at work that “led not only to shopping for goods as a kind of entertainment connected to self-image, but [also] made religious ‘shopping’ for feel-good experiences an evangelical event”?¹¹¹ Welcome to the branding of cultures immersed in and dedicated to “affluenza.”¹¹²

Murchison stays with Calvin and, in particular, with Calvin’s own theological understanding of creation and calling. Individuals are directed to give their energies to work: that is their calling. The focus is on frugality and temperance in economic matters. What is left over is not meant for luxury, but for “relieving the needs” of others in the church community. Calvin always alludes to the communal framework for faithful Christian living. The purpose is fellowship, not the acquisition of wealth. On the other hand, there is a later “supplementary Protestant work ethic” that enabled the creation of “the longings that would undergird consumption.”¹¹³ In a rather strange way some of the impulses released within this Protestant ethic prepared a way for “the pleasures of . . . modern consumer hedonism.”¹¹⁴

Murchison is distancing Calvin from a full capitalism in favor of a nuanced embrace. The dilemma that this implicit Reformed practice now needs to negotiate is the sheer level of change and difference between our world and that of the early Christians. Here then is a variation on the theme of consumption and the accompanying “moral paralysis” with which McFague deals. The alternative theory with which Murchison contends is John Schneider’s argument on behalf of “luxuriating wantonly in abundance.” This theory looks upon the present as providing a new species of acquisition that can liberate other human beings. Capitalism creates wealth that did not exist before and can initiate an improved lifestyle for many who otherwise would be left in poverty. Murchison is thus faced with the case that Schneider makes for acquisition and its enjoyment becoming desirable goals. This way of thinking is, of course, the “polar opposite” to McFague’s emphasis on kenosis. Murchison is equally mindful of how this emphasis on creating wealth ignores costs other than economic. Writing self-consciously from within the Reformed tradition, Murchison invokes Calvin’s understanding of reciprocity in matters of wealth.

8. GENETIC ENGINEERING, CLONING, THE POST(TRANS)HUMAN

Schneider was nevertheless accurate in one of his predisposing claims: the period in which we live is qualitatively different from the world of the early Christians. Nowhere is that more evident than in the field of theological ethics. The present

is bearing witness to a remarkable range of fresh questions for which there are no direct precedents. The dawning of the Anthropocene epoch and its ecological challenges are matched by those arising out of genetic research, the emergence of artificial intelligence, and even the possibility of extraterrestrial life captured in the whimsical query about whether Pope Francis would baptize such aliens.¹¹⁵ For Brent Waters the convergence of biotechnology, nanotechnology, robotics, and medicine ushers in a “brave new world” and the prospect of being posthuman.¹¹⁶ The more recent discussions have raised the bar further to consider the relationship of theology to transhumanism, or *h+*.¹¹⁷ What is the likely end of an ever-increasing array of “improvements” made possible by cell regeneration and “implantable devices that interact directly with the brain”? It is no wonder that *Kang Phee Seng* has likened the twenty-first century to “another planet” in comparison with the preceding centuries.

Kang’s particular interest lies in the intersection between genetic engineering and a Christian theological ethic. This field is intrinsically complex due to a number of factors. The most obvious lies in the very nature of faith and how it makes up its moral mind. Here the dilemma immediately presents itself. On what basis can a Reformed or even a Christian position be put when there is no obvious link back from stem-cell research, for instance, to Scripture and the way in which it bears witness to the Christ event? The absence of such should come as no surprise. Neil Messer has rightly drawn attention to how there are multiple issues that modernity simply assumes but that biblical writers could not possibly foresee.¹¹⁸ The hermeneutical problem is only sharpened the more we follow in the wake of Rachel Muers and consider what might constitute a theological ethics for coming generations.¹¹⁹ In the circumstances it is valid to ask how a Christian ethic can be constructed on the basis of Scripture as a key source.

That line of inquiry likewise begs the question, What makes a Christian ethic Christian? Victor Lee Austin has identified several qualifying quests regarding method, authority, and definition as characteristic of any ethic that bears the name Christian or theological.¹²⁰ It is not work that can be ignored in the public spaces in which a Christian ethic must necessarily play itself out in practice. For the present purpose it is sufficient simply to recognize that this quandary exists; now is also not the time to make a detour into differing types of Christian ethics. The prior task is to acknowledge that the raft of dilemmas emerging out of biotechnological research and application are not peculiar to the Christian faith or any one of its constituent traditions.

The field is full of questions for which there are no precedents. Some of those have to do with levels of risk and for whose benefit and at what cost a genetic decision is made. It is not difficult to identify particular kinds of risk, like the practice of eugenics with a racist intent or perhaps in the service of more gifted children. The complexity is compounded because it is possible to identify what might be designated as a therapeutic benefit over and against a designer lifestyle option. Therese Lysaught observes how images of children suffering from a genetic disorder understandably become “icons of biotech research.” The

advances in biotechnology repeatedly put before us a highly contested “ethical dilemma,” which is often then reduced to silence before the face of such a child.¹²¹ Messer observes that it is also easy to list the apparent benefits for infertile couples, those who suffer from genetic disease, and those who are in need of an organ or tissue.¹²²

These kinds of dilemmas can put pressure upon a further point of tension brought about by the sheer speed of discovery and the opening up of new possibilities. The implicit or explicit acceptance of some forms of genetic research and engineering can quickly lead to the possibility of one process paving the way for the acceptance of another, or indeed a way of changing the very nature of the moral framework within which the biotechnological possibilities arise.

The subject of this research and practice must eventually lead to the question What does it mean to be human? This type of question can be posed in a number of ways. It is present in the debate over the status of the embryo and its relationship to human life as well as the fate of surplus embryos. Would the one who is cloned be any less a human?¹²³ Lysaught wonders what it would be like to know you are an “imitation” or a replacement for a dead sibling?¹²⁴ Does not a child have a right to their own genetic identity? The discussion over what it means to be human is not just one of function and the possible commodification of human life. It is also an ontological question. The standard questions over what constitutes personhood, personal identity, and individuality have now become sharpened. What role does our genetic blueprint play alongside the equally important determinative factors of environment and experience? The technical advances necessarily lead to questions over the relationship between being human and the body. Can we photocopy or Xerox the soul?

The public context in which the Reformed imaginary must engage these debates can be highly emotive. The technology of genetic reproduction is not infrequently likened to playing God. For that to be plausible requires a loss of theological transcendence. For Kang, that balance is furnished through his drawing upon Reformed and ecumenical understandings of the Trinity and the incarnation. The ethical position he adopts is premised on a desire not to let human procreation be transformed into a “mere biological operation.” The ease with which that can happen is through seemingly innocent shifts in language. Procreation becomes reproduction; babies are made rather than begotten. This latter distinction is taken from the work of Oliver O’Donovan. The act of begetting preserves the delicate balance of a child truly coming from us yet being different. It is a “chanced combination” rather than one which is manipulated and controlled. Kang’s Reformed imaginary is applied for the sake of preserving that covenantal sense of a child being a “gift” given and received regardless of certain genetic qualities sought for and attained. The way in which the sovereignty of the triune God is invoked allows the prospect of a relationship between equals, between parent and child, rather than one of client and commodity.

AN AMBIVALENT VALUING

The invoking of an imaginary is a form of traditioning. The imaginary draws upon the past for the sake of establishing a principled framework; it does so also in order to understand and interpret the present for the sake of the future. It is likely that the themes and issues that a Reformed ethic and pastoral practice will need to engage in that future will stretch the ecclesial tradition. How plausible and attractive will a Reformed imaginary be for generations whose identity, sense of intimacy, and imagination are shaped by a network of apps¹²⁵ is a moot question. One thing that can be said is that the Reformed faith does offer a well-developed repository of theological beliefs and biblical ideas for attending to the tasks of a practical pastoral care as well as responding to life in the Anthropocene and biotechnological era.

To varying degrees the writers in this volume have positioned themselves inside a Reformed tradition and ethos. There has been a shared assumption of how a Reformed faith is called to participate in the transforming of an unjust world as well as to nurture the private faith and well-being of the individual. It is a self-critical appropriation of this tradition, however. The personal stories told by Davies, Ramsay, and Ackermann especially have testified to an ambivalent valuing of the Reformed legacy. There is a recognition of how its conversion into practice can mask blind spots that play themselves out in the denial of what a Reformed agenda would actually prize. The South African experience of apartheid serves as a stark warning. And yet, even at such times, there is scope and an inner impulse within the ethos that can furnish a refreshed and redemptive direction. This ambivalent experience is revelatory. It demonstrates that a Reformed expression of faith presupposes both a hermeneutic of suspicion as well as one of a retrieval of hope and charity.

The imaginary that has emerged with the way ahead in mind has prized the sovereignty of the triune God, a deeply realistic awareness of sin, a costly love of neighbor, and a central role assigned to Scripture. It is an imaginary that aspires after a common good and a civil society yet also is mindful of a deep disorder in human life, a disorder requiring the grace of God.