

THE CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN FAITHFULNESS IN CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY
TRANSFORMATION PRACTICES

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is motivated by two contemporary debates. Firstly, the debate over public theology raises the question of whether public engagement is possible and what comprises this engagement. Secondly, the debate over the contribution of faith communities to community transformation work raises the question of the ways in which Churches can engage in this work and maintain a specifically Christian character. Both of these debates prompt reflection on how the theological academy and the Christian church can maintain identity and integrity in public involvement. This study offers a positive contribution to public theology and church engagement in discussing how contemporary practices of anti-poverty work expresses faithfulness and how academic theology can explore this. Jürgen Moltmann's work is significant for this consideration due to his interest in the political relevance and Christian identity of theology and the church. A case study is undertaken on four Churches in Glasgow that engage in community transformation work with support from Faith in Community Scotland, and anti-poverty organisation in Glasgow. The methodology for researching these Churches is established from postmodern feminist theology to determine the relationship between contemporary Churches' experiences and systematic reflection. The methods of research are semi-structured interviews that lead to thematic description of the contemporary situation and further reflection through Moltmann's work. The conclusion demonstrates how defining the distinctive characteristic of Christian anti-poverty work through participative, joyful relationships contributes to public theology and Christian community transformation.

6.6 SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

In using hope to characterise Christian practices, this chapter shows the way in which the relationship between hope and suffering orientates Christian practices to God's coming kingdom and that this orientation also requires attention to marginalisation. By presenting the dynamic coherence between worship and community transformation, it demonstrates that faith in God and love of neighbour are bound together in faithful practices. The defining feature of faithfulness derives from this coherence of worship and community transformation, which is seen as joyfully celebrating God together in everyday life. In this, faithfulness can comprise a variety of meanings, activities and reflections that are marked by both these characteristics – celebration of God's salvation and participation with others.

The difficulty in Moltmann's work is that it focuses on urging the church to *go* to places of marginalisation and to integrate itself in Christ's promised presence there, showing that these theological reflections are not already located in places of poverty. This is to recognise the issue discussed in the methodology of the relationship between the lived situation and systematic reflection and to acknowledge that systematic reflection struggles to represent adequately experiences economic marginalisation. This is precisely because there is a dislocation between places and practices of academia, and places of poverty with the practices that seek to transform poverty. As Paul Farmer notes, that suffering is studied, rather than endured, indicates academic distance from places of marginalisation and even implication in the structures that determine this inequality.¹ Reflecting systematically on the church's responses to poverty may provide a public dimension to theological enquiry, but can

¹ P. Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 224

it also enable systematic reflection to be involved in a curative, creative response to the harms that demand redress?

What this systematic reflection has offered is a way of resourcing this 'ethical inventiveness' of Christians involved in community transformation work by providing a constructive characterisation of the distinctive faithfulness of these contemporary transformative responses. This highlights where God is acting in these communities in the work of radically renewing and contradicting inequality and identifying with the poor and marginalised, and where the Churches are faithfully participating in this redemptive work.

7. CONCLUSION

In discussing the faithfulness of Christian community transformation practices, this dissertation has provided a clear contribution to the debates concerning the public engagement of the theological academy and Christian church.

Firstly, by reflecting on the ways in which contemporary Churches express faithfulness, this study provides a constructive portrayal of the distinctive character of this work as celebration of God with others. As this distinctive character is not expressed through opposition to other organisations involved in community transformation work or in defence of a bounded Christian identity, it provides an understanding of Christian communities' contribution that can be articulated whilst sustaining various partnerships in anti-poverty work. Furthermore, as this faithfulness is not located in either worship practices or in community transformation projects in themselves, it enables ways in which Christian communities can consider creatively the practical tensions and possibilities in supporting a worshipping community and engaging in community projects. Specifically, it encourages reflection on the ways in which certain Christian practices can do both through the participative quality of those practices.

Secondly, in demonstrating how academic theology can explore the faithfulness of contemporary anti-poverty work, this dissertation has demonstrated that a specific methodology is required for linking theological reflection on contemporary experiences with systematic forms of theology. This has shown how the guiding sensibility of interest in and expression of God's redemptive activity in the contemporary situation provides the theological character of this work, demonstrating the possibility and necessity of theology's public engagement. However, it has also shown the difficulty of systematic theology maintaining this

relationship to personal experiences, specifically those arising from places of poverty. Although Moltmann's work encourages the church to engage with poverty, these reflections are distant from these places of poverty. The interviewees noted the way in which the cerebral nature of Christianity in this culture continues to perpetuate forms of exclusion for those with low educational and literacy levels, specifically economically marginalised people. Academic theology also perpetuates this form of exclusion due to the highly intellectual nature of its practices and claims that maintain this distance and dislocation from marginalised communities. Alternative forms of the relationship between situations of poverty and systematic theology are needed for adequate theological reflection on experiences of poverty, for example in models of theological 'accompaniment' that see theological practices being performed together with marginalised communities. These practices of theological enquiry can become more inclusive and participative precisely by being reflexively reshaped and articulated by those who are excluded and marginalised.

Articulating these inclusive models for theological enquiry is not to seek an identity between theological reflection and faith as lived engagement with God. Theological reflection is constructive precisely in being a contextual, fragile sketching of God's work in the world that opens up new areas and agendas for transforming poverty, and resourcing how healing and redemption can be grasped more fully in these contexts. The present study offers a provisional representation of hope as communities' participating in God's work by attending to and transforming inequality, which opens up understandings of joyful, participative relationships as living out this hope more faithfully. 'Hope is lived, and it comes alive, when we go

outside of ourselves and, in joy and pain, take part in the lives of others. It becomes concrete in open community with others.’²

² Moltmann, *The Open Church*. 35.