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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v40i2.interview>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2020
40(2):1-10

Date received:
27 July 2020

Date published:
18 December 2020

INTERVIEW: PROF. RUARD GANZEVOORT



Ruard Ganzevoort is Professor of Practical Theology, Dean of the Faculty of Religion and Theology and Chief Diversity Officer at Vrije Universiteit. He is also a Senator in the Dutch Parliament. He has published extensively in the field of trauma, spiritual care, and practical theology. He is a research fellow at the University of the Free State.

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER:

Please note that this interview was conducted several months before its actual publication in this special section of Acta Theologica. Given the nature of this crisis – among others, the uncertainty and fluid nature to which we constantly need to adapt – it is important to state that we corresponded in writing during June for the publication of this interview. Thus, whoever reads this, please take note of the actual date and format in which we conducted this interview.



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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ML: Placing the Covid-19 pandemic into (theological) perspective is quite a challenge. On the one hand, it is only a virus, but on the other, it is also much more than just that. I guess one can start by saying "It is what it is." How would you reflect and elaborate on such a statement? What is the degree and nature of this "epiphany"? Is it possible to give us some general guidelines to place the current Covid-19 pandemic into perspective? What should we caution against and critically resist in making sense of this situation? What does it actually mean and constructively reveal on some deeper levels?

RG: It is indeed always a good starting point to look at "what is". That is the necessary perspective for a theological realism. But it should always be connected with the questions "what is not?"; "What could have been?"; "What if...?". Without those questions, theology becomes too much determined by the coincidental reality. I believe that theology should always build on the creative tension between the "what is" and the "what if", between reality and alterity. That tension is precisely the source of hope and of transcendence. Following Ricoeur, practical theologians like Heinz Streib and Henning Luther describe religion as not so much referring to a different world, but a different perspective to this world. They speak of "it could be otherwise" stories, which is, for me, a very powerful way to think of religion and of the task of theology.

Yes, this pandemic is a reality we had not anticipated. But it was not inevitable or predetermined. It could have not happened. It could have happened differently. And so on. In other words, the pandemic is highly contingent, and nobody can predict its vicissitudes. Many scientists, politicians, and makeshift prophets have seen their expectancies defied. So, one of the key topics to discuss from a theological perspective is uncertainty. There is a radical sense of not-knowing to it that should instil in us a humble attitude. We may think that humans rule the world, king/queen of the universe, crown of creation, but, in fact, we are utterly vulnerable, and we don't know what will happen. And then the choice is: do we embrace that uncertainty and vulnerability, or do we resist it? Do we see the present pandemic as revelatory of our human condition, or do we see it as an abnormality?

ML: It was strange not to celebrate the big Christian festivals of the past few months in the ways we have come so accustomed to in the past. However, given the witness of the New Testament and tradition of the early churches, does the current situation not lead us to a more authentic reception and more in-depth reading of the Christian narrative? What if the current situation does not separate us in "lockdown" or "distance us further away" from the heartbeat of these significant events within the yearly Christian pilgrimage, but actually brings us closer? What if it reveals some other insights which we would typically miss, given the "normal" circumstances? What is your take on such a reframing of the past couple of months' liturgical lived experience? And

secondly, how does such a reframed Christian narrative reframe our current experience and attempts to make sense of the crisis itself? In retrospect, what is there in this year's pilgrimage from Advent to Trinity Sunday that reveals something unique and significant about theology's witness amid the Covid-19 global pandemic?

RG: First of all, we witnessed a number of faith communities resisting lockdown measures, either based on their understanding of the freedom of religion or on their faith that God would protect them against the virus. Some preachers even claimed that we should trust God more than we trust science or politics. To them, I would say that stupidity is not a Christian virtue. The foolishness of which the Bible speaks is a relentless belief in goodness and a dedicated devotion to righteousness, to serve God and others. The thoughtless belief in tricks and miracles is much closer to the demonic temptation that Jesus encountered in the desert. I expect churches to be wise and sensible and to put the well-being of society before their personal spiritual ease and comfort.

Secondly, I am always cautious not to read too many positives into a situation. Like you said before: it is what it is and that is not necessarily beautiful. Moreover, COVID-19 is not the same for different people. For some, it may be an invitation for a monastic journey that facilitates meditative practices and spiritual experiences. We know that a life in peace and quiet and a degree of sensory deprivation can contribute to mystical experiences. But not all of us have that luxury. For those losing their income or living in a small apartment – or worse: on the streets – with young children, it is a nightmare. It is always good to remember that space and emptiness can be the same reality with completely different affective and spiritual meanings. But let me turn it around, maybe resonating with what you say. We sometimes presume that the narratives and rituals of our religious tradition have a fixed and positive meaning and that it is up to us only to apply it. I would argue that, instead, all of the stories and all of the religious ceremonies are deeply ambivalent and polyvalent. They can have many different meanings and not always nice ones. We tend to celebrate the sunny side of Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost. But these also constitute a repertoire of traumatic stories of exclusion, torture, abandonment, and what more. That should not come as a surprise. The sacred is always ambivalent, life giving and devastating at the same time. Perhaps our ambivalent experiences with COVID-19 invite us to explore with more openness these ambivalent narratives in our tradition. Perhaps Christmas and Easter should sometimes not be celebrated, but mourned to fully understand that ambivalence?

ML: Thus far, scientists in the medical profession have had a lot of air time and public influence, but we also know the crisis is more than a mere medical challenge. We need a multidisciplinary response to how we want to address

our common future together. Against this backdrop, I have two closely related questions: Firstly, how can we overcome the seeming gulf between global political leadership and the public significance and input of science (academia) in general? And secondly, what is the unique role and contribution of theology in all of this?

RG: If I see it correctly, the first stage of responses indeed included a strong presence and influence of only the medical sciences, followed by a more interdisciplinary debate on economy, international relations, law and human rights, psychology, and so on. That interdisciplinary approach is indeed essential in a multifaceted crisis as we are facing. Until now, however, I think it is more multidisciplinary rather than inter- or transdisciplinary. The conversation between the disciplines seems rather limited, thus leaving it to the politicians to balance the various insights and interests. But in reality, that is not only a political choice. A truly interdisciplinary approach would analyse this complexity more profoundly, for example by looking at how the virus spreads, medical systems, cultural and religious assumptions and practices, economic disparity, political power dynamics, and public governance intersect both within and across countries. That may help us to understand the different developments and outcomes and contribute to long-term solutions. Unfortunately, I fear that we should not expect too much from politics. Obviously, the ideal would be that the leaders of our countries would overcome their differences and join forces, but usually politics is rather short-sighted. The average politician takes the next election date as the horizon for her or his actions and is interested only in the directly felt interests of her or his voters. By implication, they don't take responsibility for the global community or for the next generation. This is silly when you think of COVID-19; it is downright scary when we look at the much more structural climate crisis.

Does theology have a role here? I think it should, but it all depends on how you envision the nature of theology. I tend to differentiate between three types of public theology. The first type is missionary theology, identifying the needs and desires of people in a specific situation and then inviting them to commit to a particular faith. This can be important especially in times of heightened uncertainty, where it claims to offer answers to fundamental questions. In the end, the effect is more individual or at most communal than societal. It benefits the faith community (one of the three audiences David Tracy identified for theology). The second type is critical prophetic theology, bringing theological and ethical normativity to the analysis of society, as we have seen especially in liberation theology. In the present crisis, this should include an eye for social injustices exacerbated by the crisis or the lack of international solidarity visible, for example, in how health risks in refugee camps are largely ignored. A theological analysis then would look at our views

of humankind, of countries and borders, of the hegemony of economic factors, of the modes of authority and leadership, and so on. This type targets the public debate of society (the second audience). The third type is theology as cultural hermeneutics, as practical theologian Wilhelm Gräß has done in much of his work. This approach aims not at converting people or changing society, but at understanding. What are the fundamental values at stake in our societies? What does this tell us about what is “sacred” to people? How do we deal with the competing truth claims, conspiracy theories, elitism and populism clashing with each other, essential polarization, and so on? What does the faith in vaccine development, facemasks, and social distancing tell us about our ways of dealing with contingency and fragility? All these efforts to understand primarily target the Tracyan audience of the academy, but indirectly, of course, they may also influence policies.

ML: The concept of “social distance” has become normative in the media, but somehow, I think it is a deceptive slip of the tongue. Should we not temporarily speak of “physical distancing” and explore more critically and constructively the “webby-ness” and “ambiguous vulnerability” in living together towards a common future?

RG: You are, of course, right that, from an epidemiological perspective, we need physical distancing rather than social distancing. At the same time, it turns out to be quite complicated to establish or maintain social bonds while preserving physical distancing. We humans are first of all bodies with physical needs and we bond also in physical ways. When we touch, that happens quite literally, but also when we see each other, we engage in a physical way of bonding. See, for example, how two friends or lovers start to mimic each other's gestures and postures. All this is more complicated in mediated communication like video-conferencing. So, in the end, I fear that physical distancing also implies social distancing.

This could also be a reminder for theology. In my view, theologians usually take a too idealistic and cognitive approach, especially in western Protestantism. We have a propensity for ideas, we focus on words, we love books. But all that is disembodied, depersonalised, decontextualised. I am more and more convinced that what really counts is our physical existence, the sensory experiences, the smell and feel. Perhaps we should reread John 1, showing us that the Word became Flesh, thereby validating our existence as creatures, as bodies. Physical distancing is, in that sense, a painful example of disconnectedness, highlighting our need of graceful and energising touch.

ML: Following from the above and closely related, I find it strange that we are confronted with a global pandemic, but the response thus far has been very local and national. Though we need the latter, it is as if walls and borders

are becoming more dominant and present again in our world. Are we not currently served with further breeding ground for nasty nativism and other forms of populism to “flourish” even further? And to complicate the matter even more, how critical is the role of capital surveillance in addressing all of this? Thus, what are the hidden assumptions and temptations we should be concerned about in the emergent shaping of the “new” world? What kind of global leadership and agenda do we need for the emergence of a really new and different world?

RG: I certainly agree with you that this short-sightedness, as I called it earlier, is deeply problematic. But at the same time, I sympathise with the people who resort to that. For many people, life is already quite complex and their access to global news doesn't make that easier. When they see their world threatened by a virus, economic adversity, and so on, the first response is to move to survival mode. This comes at the expense of empathy and wider responsibility, but I think we should not judge too harshly when it regards people who just try to survive. I have much less sympathy for the religious and political leaders who capitalise on such fears to strengthen their political leverage, using hatred and bigotry and thereby doing the exact opposite of what we need to build in this world. Real leaders do not amplify the fears of the people, but they make courageous efforts to rise above their natural tendencies. They should envision what comes beyond survival. They should invoke dreams of a new world after COVID-19, rather than merely trying to get back to normal as soon as we can.

You see, the simplest approach here is crisis management. That is obviously complex in itself, but it is simple in its aims: return to the world as we knew it. The more challenging approach is to see this crisis as an opportunity for spiritual growth and change. We should ask what this crisis means for our travelling habits, for our instrumentalisation of nature and environment, for our acceptance of economic injustices, and so on. This is a time for radical rethinking our ways. So far, I don't see many leaders with such a vision and the will to make it happen. The way European and global leadership get stuck in competition and conflict while dealing with the crisis, makes me quite pessimistic. We probably will see a return to our “normal” destructive and dysfunctional world as soon as a vaccine is available.

ML: According to many public intellectual commentators, Covid-19 has presented us with the grounds and opportunity to do some very basic thinking. In the same breath, we also heard we cannot go back to business as normal, because “normal” was actually in so many ways “abnormal”. As dean of one of the top theological institutions in the world, how would you respond to a comment like this? What kind of change would you like to see in higher theological education in and through this crisis? Can we also imagine

that theological education is at a gateway between a particular past and the dawning of a new future?

RG: COVID-19 is a wake-up call, also for my own faculty, and it is not the only one. We are in the midst of fierce debates about racism and inequality, and the impact of climate change is looming over us. This requires us as theologians to take our starting point much more in the concrete issues our world is grappling with. For me, theology's first responsibility is not the church or the faith community, but the world and the world community. This means – among other things – that we need to further develop our dialogical and hermeneutical skills. We need to learn to bridge the divide that keeps us from working together for the common good. Theology for that reason should be interreligious at heart. Yes, it is important to have profound knowledge of particular traditions, and it is deeply meaningful to be personally rooted and engaged. But the challenge of theology is to bring together the wisdom of religious and secular traditions in a joint quest to meet today's needs. We should engage in dialogue not to find out which religion is "the best", but in a shared desire to serve the world. One of the most valuable contributions we can make is to train and equip leaders with the skills to build bridges between groups and to make the repertoires of age-old traditions available for people today. Issues of inequality, injustice, vulnerability, and leadership should be higher on our agenda. Not by replacing the study of scripture, history, or doctrine, but by targeting those academic skills in such a way that we start to understand how our contemporary issues resonate throughout these traditions. Added to this, I think theology will be at its best when it doesn't isolate itself from other disciplines and doesn't claim any privileged position or unique knowledge. Theology should be part of the academic debates, clarifying implicit and explicit religious, quasi-religious, and spiritual assumptions and practices, and rigorously asking ethical and prophetic questions about the nature of life. Religion and theology are, as Paul Tillich said, about the depth dimension of our existence, and theology will become meaningful in the university and in society if we prove able to shed light on that depth dimension rather than on an isolated "spiritual" domain.

ML: It seems as if the virus (too) has a "preferential option for the poor". For some, the pandemic is inconvenient; for others, it is undoubtedly life-shattering on so many levels. On the one hand, we know the virus does not discriminate, but on the other hand, we see that different groups of people do suffer more than others. It is not the virus which does this, but the dredged fault lines and ever-growing divisions in our societies. In short: What would it mean not to return to this abnormal past, or distance ourselves socially even further from the most vulnerable in our society? How can this crisis not go to waste and strangely enough produce a more just common future? I know this a loaded

and open question (which builds on the previous questions), but how can we instead of re-turn, re-open and re-set our lives and world to what we became so used to, rather re-envision a new and different world? Where would you start to respond to such a question, and what kind of markers can you provide to guide our response in the years to come?

RG: If the consequences of COVID-19 are divided unequally, specifically targeting the poor and vulnerable, then our responses should be unequal too, serving primarily those most at risk. Given the medical connotations, it might actually be more to the point to reflect on the biblical stories about the lepers than about the poor. There is a dimension of taboo and stigma that easily leads to efforts to keep the vulnerable outside our safe havens. Those who can afford it withdraw from exposure into their protected houses, communicating safely by digital means, while those who cannot afford it are sentenced to a life of increased health threats. But make no mistake. COVID-19 only illustrates the fundamental inequity that is already there. And social-economic status is only one of the factors in that inequity. Age, race, gender, social inclusion, (dis)ability, and more all play a role. The global debate on race, discrimination, and decolonisation highlights the need to think critically about inclusion and exclusion. In the dilemmas that we face, there are no easy answers and there is no simple way in which we can resolve the issue of inequity. What we can and should do, is think radical and act with meekness. There are many examples in religious history where zealots, intending to bring heaven on earth, actually created hell. We need to learn to live with the burden that we cannot make the world as just, peaceful, and graceful as it should be, and that we still need to take steps in the right direction. And to do so also means we have to consider our privileges and ask how we can use them for the benefit of others.

ML: During these days, we have again come across that (theological!) idea that the politics of hope is not without a people who mourn and lament. Christian hope has (especially now) less to do with an opportunistic “Yes, we can!”, and perhaps more acutely to do with lamenting and mourning the fact that our current suffering has a deep and shared history. Please reflect a little bit on this idea of the politics of hope which emphasise the need for lament, repent, remorse and mourning.

RG: I think this resonates nicely with what I said before about ambivalence and realism. I believe that hope should not be understood in a temporal sense, describing a time that is to come. Such hope will always be defied, because it moves away from reality. Real hope, in my view, is the electrical spark that we see when we bring a positive and a negative pole in each other's proximity. The negative pole of the “what is” and the positive pole of “what if” don't create energy, unless they are within reach of the other. Sometimes we witness

religious escapism instead, not taking seriously the “what is”. Mourning and lament invite us to fully embrace the “what is”. Hope embraces the “what if”. One without the other is meaningless. This also means that I don’t believe that lament, repent, remorse, mourning, and hope would, in any sense, constitute a sequence or a logical linear order. For some time, the linear Kübler-Ross model of mourning was widely thought to be valid, but we now know that life is much messier than that. These are dimensions that will always be with us, not stages we should move through. Until the end of my days, I will keep mourning the losses of my life, keep repenting from my wrongdoings, keep hoping for what could have been.

ML: In the South African context, there are currently some mixed feelings and ambivalence with regard to the church’s response thus far to the crisis. It fluctuates mainly between being full-on state-church who immediately endorsed the government’s response to the crisis; migrating at ease into virtual spaces, and providing food parcels to long breadlines. These responses are not without merit, but the critical question is whether the current crisis does not ask for a more thick, nuanced and imaginative public witness from the church. Please provide us with your take on this theme in your context. How do you reflect on the church’s response to the crisis in The Netherlands thus far? And what kind of public theological witness do you long for to come through this crisis?

RG: Churches are not separate from society. They are part and parcel of contemporary culture and politics. Even if they believe to be countercultural, they do that as part of that culture. I feel that the initial responses, developing virtual and diaconal ways of communicating, have been wise, just as I feel that the blind faith in spiritual protection against the virus has been stupid. But the real question at stake is indeed what “church” is. I like the notion of “*societas perfecta*”, perfect society. That does not mean that the church is a better community – because it usually is not. It means that the concept of church helps us understand what kind of community is needed for society as a whole. Spiritual notions like grace, sacred space and time, loving care and mutuality, the priesthood of all believers, the body of Christ ... all of these can and should be read as markers of the community we long for in our villages, our cities, our countries, our world. Over against the neoliberal and meritocratic systems we have built, the antagonistic nation-states with their artificial borders, the populist polarisation, and so on, the whole idea of church begs for a different narrative. So apart from all the practical things churches and other faith communities can do and have done, their main challenge is to embody this *societas perfecta*.

ML: Lastly, during the past couple of weeks, we have learned some new phrases like “social distancing”, “herd immunity”, “RO”, “self-isolate”, “to flatten

the curve”, “personal protective equipment”, and “WFH”, to name only a few. Are there any specific theological words or phrases one could introduce and redefine anew within this current discourse? Stated differently, how can we (re-)incarnate our theological vocabulary in the current public discourse where people are actually (consciously or unconsciously) dealing with deep religious questions?

RG: Indeed, I don't think we necessarily need new words. But some of the key concepts that we might want to bring back to public awareness are embracing fragility, following our calling, perseverance, and the interconnectedness of all God's children. For me, those concepts come together in the fundamental and transreligious concept of compassion. Compassion is not the soft notion of friendliness. It is the hard and cumbersome work of acknowledging our interconnectedness, engaging with the others that I did not seek out myself, allowing myself to be touched and hurt by the other, and taking responsibility. Compassion requires courage, and perhaps the most daring and radical example of that was Jesus' willingness to hold on to his belief in the Kingdom of Heaven, so radical that it meant more to him than life itself. Perhaps that compassion is what theology could help rediscover in a world of COVID-19.