

# LAND, LITURGY & LIFE: OVERTURE TO THE 'COMMA' AND THE 'AND' IN A VERY SMALL DOGMATICS

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## Abstract

*This contribution observes a Trinitarian logic in the theme of 'Land, Liturgy and Life' addressed at the 2013 annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa. The Trinitarian mystery needs to be protected with the doxological language of the liturgy. In this contribution I will offer an overture (or prolegomena) to such a doxology, by weaving together four themes pertaining to the nature of the Christian confession of faith in the triune God. In a rather unreformed move I will give a certain priority to seeing instead of hearing and suggest a) that the Christian confession offers a way of seeing the world, b) that it sees the world (the land) as the beloved household of God, c) that this is best understood as a liturgical vision and d) that it is this vision that enables the resurrection of life.*

**Key Words:** Christian Confession; Household of God; Land; Liturgy; Life; Trinity; Vision

## Land, Liturgy and Life

You won't believe it, but it seems possible, after all, to write an entire church dogmatics in only three words: Land, Liturgy and Life. Consider the following thought experiment:

- Embedded in the term 'land', if juxtaposed with liturgy and life, are connotations such as ancestral land, an agrarian way of life, the blessing of the fertility of soil, the carrying capacity of land and ecological debates on sustainability, but also biblical narratives of landedness and landlessness, of being-at-home and homecoming, on the conquest, distribution, dispossession and stewardship of land. In short, the term land invokes a theology of creation, a hamartology and notions of providence. It invites theological reflection on cosmic and human history.
- Embedded in the term 'liturgy' are themes such as the celebration of the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, inclusion (and exclusion) in the body of Christ, holy communion, fellowship. In short, the term liturgy invokes a soteriology, an ecclesiology and a Christology.
- Likewise, embedded in the term 'life' is the confession that the Spirit is the 'Giver of Life', a theology of life (and death), human struggles over life and death (and destruction), the possibility of regeneration, the gift of new life in Christ and the hope for life in the world to come. In short, the term life invokes a pneumatology of creation, salvation and eschatological consummation. It invites theological reflection on the relationship between dogmatics (the God of life) and ethics (living before God). It also invites theological reflection on the inorganic and the organic, in conversation with the

natural and social sciences. How is the confession of faith in the 'God of life' related to life as we know it from collective experience, the arts, philosophy and the sciences alike?

A small, in fact a *very* small dogmatics indeed! Moreover, it is a church dogmatics and a deeply Trinitarian one at that, given the connotations attached to these terms and the perichoresis between them. The order of land, liturgy and life follows the customary Trinitarian structure of the Christian confession. Some may want to reorganise the logic in order to give a Christocentric priority to liturgy or may prefer to find common ground with other religious traditions and other forms of life by focusing on the category of life. There are already six possibilities to structure the order of land, liturgy and life in this very small dogmatics (abc, acb, bac, bca, cab, cba).

In my view only a deeply Trinitarian theology will do,<sup>1</sup> but it is far from easy to do equal justice to land, liturgy and life and to keep all three together. In a famous essay on "The necessity of a Trinitarian theology" Arnold van Ruler observes that "Simply recognizing the necessity of a Trinitarian theology does not mean that one succeeds in the project".<sup>2</sup> He adds that he has not found such a theology in the entire Christian theological tradition, suggests that Calvin approached that ideal most closely, and admits that he is not able to offer anything approximating that.

This warning should serve as a protocol against speculation on the mystery of the immanent Trinity and to focus on the economic Trinity (the work of God) instead. Only the doxological language of the liturgy will protect this mystery. However, theologians are typically all too wordy and curious. We therefore seek to penetrate the mystery with the handy excuse of seeking to protect it against distortions. We are not satisfied with reflection on each of the terms but wonder about their relatedness, about the logic that binds them together. We want to read between the lines to know more about the 'comma' and the 'and' (the fourth word!) in the phrase 'Land, Liturgy and Life'. In this contribution I will not attempt such a Trinitarian theology. Instead, I will offer an overture to the doxology, albeit that such an overture (or prolegomena on the nature of the Christian confession) is often disallowed and the subject of much suspicion in liturgy and church dogmatics alike. At least the notion of an overture should sound better than the image of 'sharpening the knives' often associated with a prolegomena!

This overture will weave together four themes pertaining to the nature of the Christian confession of faith in the triune God. In a rather unreformed move I will give a certain priority to seeing instead of hearing and suggest a) that the Christian confession offers a way of seeing the world, b) that it sees the world (the land) as the beloved household of God, c) that this is best understood as a liturgical vision and d) that it is this vision that enables the resurrection of life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion, see Conradie, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See Van Ruler, 1989:1.

<sup>3</sup> The rest of this contribution should be understood as work in progress. It is a somewhat abbreviated version of three sections of a chapter in a manuscript to be entitled "The Earth in God's Economy: Creation, Salvation and Consummation in Ecological Perspective". Here it is brought into relation with the theme of land, liturgy and life.

### **Is the Christian Confession *sui generis*?**

The Christian confession of faith in the triune God has to be understood on its own terms. The language of faith cannot be translated into other categories without reducing it into something that it is not. The liberal tendency to view the confession of faith as an example of something else – religion, the human search for meaning, the use of symbols, belief systems, credulity, wagers on transcendence, a form of life, a worldview and so forth – therefore has to be resisted. Abstract categories such as the Infinite Essence of finite things, the Supreme Being, Being itself or Ultimate Reality cannot do justice to the Christian confession. The ultimate ground of all being does not engage in speech acts, does not love or evoke love, does not pray on our behalf and does not answer our prayers. Nevertheless, the Christian faith is not unrelated to such categories, one may say primarily because the triune God is confessed to be not unrelated to the world in which we live. I suggest that Christian theology is situated within this tension, between the twin dangers of reductionism and disconnection.

Traditionally, this confession of faith in the triune God invited further reflection on the relationship between the work of God and the person of God, on act and being, on the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, on God as revealed and as concealed. The emphasis of this study will be on the work of God, but the narrative cannot be told as a story of *God's* work without emerging clarity on the identity and character of God. This requires a constant interplay between two crucial questions that Christian theology addresses: 'Who is God?' and 'What is God doing?' A third question cannot be avoided: From where is this confession derived? How have Christians come to such knowledge of God? How is it possible to speak about and to God in the first place? Indeed, this third question will be the focus of this chapter.

To address this third question one has to reflect on the very nature of the Christian confession. More specifically, the question is what kind of knowledge faith entails:

- Can faith be expressed in propositional truth claims – as most forms of scholasticism, orthodoxy and contemporary forms of evangelicalism if not fundamentalism assume? Do such truth claims include historical and even scientific truths – as creationists might argue? If not, what kind of truth claims are expressed through faith?
- Is faith perhaps a form of warranted believing, a form of knowledge that is structurally similar to scientific hypotheses that cannot be verified but that can be supported with appropriate evidence? If so, what kind of knowledge is faith?
- One may also argue that faith is a credible form of witnessing – an account based on a cognitive recognition of what has been experienced that would stand up in court, nothing more and nothing less.
- Or does faith entail more intimate knowledge than that, so that it may be likened to personal knowledge that is embedded in an ongoing relationship of trust in God – as Martin Luther and John Calvin seem to have suggested? But how can one make cosmological sense of such a form of theism?
- Or is the cognitive content of faith to be understood in relational terms as the grateful recognition of God's word of forgiveness and knowledge of God's promises that are regarded as trustworthy, so that one's whole life can be based on trust in and living from God's promises? The cognitive content of faith is then understood as knowing what (or better; who) it is in whom one puts one's trust in matters of life and death.
- Or is the Christian faith primarily to be understood as analogous to grammar com-

petence, as knowledge of the rules that bind the community of faith together (George Lindbeck)?

- Or does faith express the cognitive content of religious experiences in a metaphoric symbolic way – as one may gather from Friedrich Schleiermacher?
- Or is the Christian faith like an all-inclusive interpretation framework, a way of looking at the world, a philosophy, a worldview – similar to the most basic assumptions, theories, models, paradigms and approaches used in science, industry and politics alike, but extended to become cosmic in scope?
- Or more than that, a wager (Pascal) on that which we do not know (yet), perhaps even a wager on that which transcends the world?
- Or does it express the specific content of a vision for a better future, portraying it as God’s vision?
- Or is it a way of putting one’s trust in something that is bigger than oneself, a way of expressing one’s deepest cluster of convictions, perhaps a symbolic way of committing ourselves to a particular way of life (Don Cupitt), or to work for emancipation, justice, democracy, peace?
- Or is it a reflective form of emancipatory praxis which is always already embedded in God’s mission to the world?
- Or does it constitute affective knowledge (Pascal) – expressing a basic attitude towards “life, the universe and everything,” inviting further reflection on the cognitive content of such affections?
- Or does it perhaps have as little cognitive content as knowing that one had a dream last night, at worst nothing but a ‘God delusion’ – as Richard Dawkins would maintain? Then claiming that God spoke to me in a dream amounts to nothing but saying that I dreamt that God spoke to me.
- Alternatively, one may suggest that the God of the Christian faith is nothing but a form of social construction. There was no such God before the notion of God appeared. God does form part of our language but is a product of such language, of the social construction of reality. The question is then how reality is constructed in this way.

It should be clear from these questions that quite a lot is at stake here. No one answer would suffice but no answer at all would imply that this confession is unrelated to all of these categories. In doing so there is a need to clarify the relationship between terms such as beliefs, trust, convictions and faith itself. Merely juxtaposing these options would not do either. One has to be bold enough to articulate one’s current assumptions.<sup>4</sup> In the confession of faith in the triune God, I will suggest here, Christians seek to express something of the ultimate meaning of the universe. *The Christian faith offers a way of perceiving the world, a way of seeing by seeing as,*<sup>5</sup> *a cosmological vision, an interpretative framework, a way of*

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<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on a cosmological/liturgical vision in the discussion below may lead to distortions (as would any one of the other options listed above). The underlying danger here is one of a Gnostic reduction of the gospel, where only the elite are able to see what others cannot. This privileges the emergence of a particular consciousness, a way of seeing. Although that can undoubtedly change the world, the possibility of false consciousness and the dialectic between the material conditions of human existence and human consciousness calls for further clarification.

<sup>5</sup> Note the way in which the visual is emphasised here. A lot is at stake here given the emphasis in the Protestant reformation on hearing the Word (the reign of the ear) and the emphasis on empirical evidence (the reign of the eye) in much of modernity. For the moment it might suffice to put a position on the table: there is

*making sense of reality around us.* Since we participate in that which we seek to interpret, it cannot be done as it were from a distance but only from within, as a way of being in. We cannot see the world but we need to position ourselves within it. There is no view from nowhere. Moreover, the world in which we find ourselves is in flux due to geological, biological and social evolution. It may therefore be better to understand this vision as a *dynamic system of co-ordinates required for orientation and navigation but then through an uncharted landscape* where at least a basic sense of direction is required.

Again, the Christian faith cannot be translated into other categories without reducing it into something that it is not, but this, I propose, is the best available analogy. The Christian faith is in this sense a philosophy, even a metaphysics, but with a specific focus, namely to make sense of the world as a whole, to fathom life's deepest mystery. In short, *it offers a re-description of the world as we know it by ascribing it to the triune God.*

### **Starting with the Doxological Conclusion**

Following these observations I will now outline some of the core features of the distinct way of seeing the world embedded in the Christian confession. This could have served as a doxological conclusion but may also offer a point of departure for further reflection. If knowing God is not necessarily where one commences one's life journey chronologically, a doxological conclusion would enable one to reframe the journey and the point of departure.

- a) *According to the Christian confession, the triune God is the deepest secret, the mystery, the Geheimnis of the world.<sup>6</sup> Inversely, the world is the triune God's own household.* Or, more correctly, the history of the universe may be re-described as the story of God's householding. Christians find the best available clue to this ultimate mystery in the person and work of Jesus Christ and through the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit. In this way the Christian confession offers a specifically Christian interpretation of the world (of nature and of life) in conversation with other disciplines and perspectives that are also seeking to make sense of what we find around us. In this way the Christian confession plays a role similar to that of humour: by re-describing reality it suspends what is given and sees it in a different light, one that makes life bearable. The cosmic and the comic are deeply intertwined – the comic relieves the seriousness of the co(s)mic.<sup>7</sup>

The core content<sup>8</sup> of this cosmological vision<sup>8</sup> as expressed in the Christian confession, I

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a hierarchy of the senses in which feeling (touch) is the most important and the most basic but also the vaguest of the senses (see the image of navigation below: working our way through the world like a worm, also consider the role of water in baptism). Smelling and tasting (bread and wine) allow for more discernment and more immediate attraction (perfume) or aversion (stench). Seeing enhances such discernment exponentially. Yet, we do not always know what we are seeing (visualise the role of 'seeing God' in the liturgy). We require seeing in; we need to see the invisible. The word guides our sight in an appropriate direction. The ear may therefore be the highest (the most differentiated) of the senses but is also the least basic and requires all the other senses. My argument is that the Christian faith is best understood as a way of seeing by seeing the world as God's household. However, what is seen is not an object but a story (to be told and heard), namely the story of God's economy. The Light of the world is ontologically prior to our ability to see anything in the world or to see what cannot be seen, namely the mystery of the world.

<sup>6</sup> See Eberhard Jüngel's magnum opus entitled *God as the Mystery of the World*, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> See Berger (1970:72): "The gestures of the clown have a sacramental dignity. Religion reinterprets the meaning of the cosmic and vindicates laughter." Indeed, as Arnold van Ruler would also insist, the world is God's joke on us. It is such a good joke that it makes us cry with laughter. For references in this regard, see Van Keulen's introduction in Van Ruler *VW III*, 2009:15.

<sup>8</sup> To regard the Christian faith as a cosmological vision may be rather unattractive for some as it may well fall into the trap of offering a 'grand' and therefore a totalizing, imperial vision in a time when there is a

suggest, is that this world as we now know it in all its grandeur and misery, its ironies and ambiguities, its delights and its distress, its panache and its pain, its inadequacies and injustices, belongs to the triune God. Accordingly, the world is not an autonomous entity that has its origin, existence and destiny in itself.<sup>9</sup> It is God's own creation and beloved by God. It is nothing but the household of the triune God. The history of the universe is the story of God's economy (house holding). This suggests that in God's eyes that which is material, bodily and earthly is precious to the Father, is indeed worth dying for and is being sanctified by the Spirit.

- b) This way of seeing the world applies to the world as a whole and to all creatures, but it has a special significance wherever this is denied, for whatever reason. It is therefore always already a deeply polemic confession. The creation narrative found in Genesis 1 was polemic in this way (not only against the claims of the Babylonian gods): it affirmed, contrary to what was apparent in the experiences of the exiles, that this world was created by *Elohim*.

This intuition is perhaps best expressed in the *ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu. His affirmation of human dignity on the basis of being created in the image of God is never merely an expression of creation theology but has a polemic and indeed a soteriological intent, namely to affirm the dignity of those whose dignity have been violated – and of those who have violated the dignity of others.<sup>10</sup> To say that we belong to God's family (as Tutu never tires of reminding us), that this world is the household of God, that the story of the universe is the story of God's economy (householding) is therefore to offer an alternative, polemic way of seeing the world, a quite distinct cosmological vision.

Accordingly, to re-describe the world as God's creation is not merely to offer a theory about the divine origin or continuing dependence of the world upon God. Instead, the word creation can only be used from within the present situation as a re-description, and ascription of the world as we know and experience it. It offers a very specific interpretation of the world. The question is not 'What did God create?' as if we can position ourselves next to God to answer the question in general but "How should this world best be understood?" This is a question raised by scientists and poets alike, albeit that the question is a multi-levelled one that may be approached with very different presuppositions. It is one that Christians share with all other human beings: we are trying to make sense of the same world, although we are asking different kinds of questions and may come up with complementary or rival answers, given such presuppositions. For Christian theology two

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postmodern preference for particularity. The danger here is one of closed systems (whether neo-Platonic or massively modernist) where God is also captured within such a system. This is due to the metaphysical attempt to speak about being as such and as a whole, to render the whole of reality intelligible. This prompts the Heideggerian critique of onto-theology (the sacrifice of divine alterity on the basis of the correspondence of divine transcendence with human self-transcendence). Seeing the face of the other (Levinas) may therefore suffice, a vision with cosmic width is not required. If God appears, it is only through the face of the particular other. If so, how would one recognise that this is indeed *God's* appearance?

I suggest that the face of the particular other is indeed a more appropriate point of departure for theological reflection than elaborate metaphysical systems. However, the otherness of the other can still be perceived in different ways – as enemy, oppressor or as victim. The danger of radical distortion remains unless the vision is equally radical. The frames in which the particular is perceived make the difference. Then seeing the particular other as a member of a larger household, the household of God may offer an encompassing critique of radical distortions and the many secular surrogates for God. On this basis one may argue that avoiding a totalising vision may well be impossible. The only thing that may be worse than adopting such a vision is denying one that has been adopted already. The question is not whether, but which cosmological vision is adopted.

<sup>9</sup> See the World Council of Churches' document *Confessing the One Faith*, 1991:35.

<sup>10</sup> See the study by Michael Battle, 1997.

statements have to be kept in paradoxical tension: a) We do not know what God created or how it was created (see below); and b) *This* world, in which we now live, was, is indeed and will remain God's own beloved creation.<sup>11</sup>

This implies the need for a critical creation theology,<sup>12</sup> one that has no independent interest in what God created, but one that can affirm that this world is God's creation. To say, "I believe that God created this or that" may easily become detached and speculative, while confessing "This or that, I believe, is God's creation" cannot become detached in the same way. One still needs to explain words such as 'God' and 'creation', but the polemic dimension is unmistakable, especially if 'this' or 'that' happens to be a rapist *and* his victim, the slave owner *and* the enslaved, the murderer *and* the healer, the ruthless producer *and* the relentless consumer, the industrial developer *and* the destroyed habitat, the hunter *and* the hunted.

This confession cannot be domesticated because it creates an intolerable tension. In the context of economic inequalities and injustices and the attendant ecological destruction, this simple message to regard something as God's beloved creature may be affirmed with respect to all creatures but it has profoundly different implications. To discern such implications requires a sophisticated theological understanding of the doctrine of human sin – one that resists an easy classification of humanity into perpetrators and their innocent victims (on the one hand) and an equally easy universalising assessment that we are all sinners before God (on the other). Any distinctions can become inverted: victims may victimise others, while perpetrators may be transformed by the grace of forgiveness. As the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped us to see, there are also willing and unwilling beneficiaries and some not always innocent bystanders. It may be true that we are all victims of structural violence and have all contributed to it, but the responsibility and the burdens are not equally distributed. Moreover, the interplay between the natural and the human roots of evil calls for further investigation.

The polemic thrust of such a re-description of the world as God's beloved creation should not be underestimated, especially in an age of ecological destruction. It is one thing to see the world in a romanticised way as a source of beauty and inspiration (focusing one-sidedly on a sense of beauty and harmony in the world), or as a threat and a source of fear (focusing one-sidedly on the conflict in the world, the problem of natural suffering, seeing nature as 'red in tooth and claw', inviting a struggle for the survival of the fittest also amongst human communities), as a commodity that can be traded (as nothing but 'real estate'), as a set of resources available for human use if not exploitation, as something so sublime that it is to be worshipped, or as something that is essentially inferior and to which

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<sup>11</sup> As I noted in *Saving the Earth?*, the problem I have with the neo-Calvinist followers of Bavinck is that they affirm the first part of the confession too quickly without realising that this is a counter-intuitive claim – and then make deductions from 'nature' as to how God's work of re-creation may be understood. The problem I have with some followers of Barth is that they are too hesitant in coming to the first part of the confession – so that the critical power of the gospel can no longer be related to the materiality of God's creation. See Conradie, 2013:354.

<sup>12</sup> The notion of a critical concept of creation is derived from the theology of Oepke Noordmans, most notably his book *Herschepping* (1934). However, I am following a quite different path here. While Noordmans was always keen to remind us that we do not know what God created, that creation implies judgement and separation, and resisted any emphasis on forms, my aim is to remind us that this distorted world in all its materiality is indeed God's creation. Noordmans would probably have concurred, but would not have been keen to say it since his rhetorical context was very different. For a discussion, see chapter 5 of my *Saving the Earth*, Conradie 2013.

value must be added, as something in need of being elevated or spiritualised.<sup>13</sup> The same applies to the re-description of life suggested by the phrase ‘God of life’. It counters both nihilist and hedonist views of life. It also questions anthropocentric views of humanity as the crown of evolution (if God is the God of all life) and modernist temptations to view humanity as autonomous, self-sufficient or self-explanatory. As Klaus Nürnberger notes, seeing the world through God’s eyes leads to an inner freedom from reality and a responsibility for reality:

... seeing reality ‘from above’ as it were ‘with the eyes of God’ induces an awareness of reality as a whole and our place within it. This is of critical importance for gaining an integrated society, an equitable socio-economic dispensation, a sustainable utilisation of scarce resources and a restoration of the dignity of non-human creatures – all of which are absent in the dominant modern civilisation and its popular postmodern offshoot.<sup>14</sup>

Compared to such alternatives, seeing the world in terms of the Christian confession is highly attractive, at least from an ecological perspective. In the biblical roots of Christianity this conviction is expressed in images suggesting generation (God as our Father or Mother and the disputed notion of the world as God’s beloved child),<sup>15</sup> emanation (the overflowing fountain of life), fabrication (the potter and the clay), intimacy (the world as God’s own body),<sup>16</sup> or artistic expression (the world as the ‘work’ of God). One may add the images of play, perichoretic dance, composition, directing a symphony orchestra, staging a drama or choreographing an opera to capture the creative interaction between God and the world (*opera Trinitatis*). In ecumenical circles the dominant image is perhaps that of the world as the whole household of God, thus linking inhabitation, political economy and ecology through the common root of ‘oikos’, suggesting rights and responsibilities for all the members of this household. For humans this way of seeing the world implies attachment rather than ownership, a sense of belonging and participation that addresses any form of alienation and exclusion.

- c) The re-description of the world as God’s creation is not only deeply polemical; it is also by no means self-evident, as if ‘creation’ may be used almost as a synonym for ‘world’ or ‘nature’. It cannot be reduced to a statement on the world’s divine origin or dependence upon God.<sup>17</sup> This confession cannot be offered in the form of an independent preamble or in terms of what various religious traditions share in common. This is, in fact, a deeply counter-intuitive claim given the tension that we as humans experience between the grandeur and the misery of our existence.

Why counter-intuitive? Here several levels have to be recognised as indicated in the following questions: How would we know that the world is indeed *created*, and not the product of chance, necessity or some or other blueprint, plan or evil complot? How do we know that it is created by some or other *deity* if we cannot capture or fathom this God ‘from

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<sup>13</sup> See the discussion of various ‘warped views’ of nature as identified and described by Howard Snyder, 2011:42-45.

<sup>14</sup> Nürnberger, 2010:112.

<sup>15</sup> See Fensham (2012). Christians are used to thinking about themselves as God’s children. But what if the universe itself is God’s child – which requires nourishment, formation, education, respect and wonder from the parent? Consider the agony over a sick, injured or a lost child. Indeed, this would then become God’s mission (not ours), namely to find the lost child: Adam from *adamah* (humus), where are you? There are dangers in adopting the notion of generation as has often been highlighted in the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, this may be worth some further exploration.

<sup>16</sup> See the various models of creation developed by Daniel Migliore, 2004:109-113.

<sup>17</sup> See the argument of chapter 1 of Michael Welker’s book *Creation and Reality*, 1999.

below'? How would we know that the *triune* God is the Creator – and not another deity? More pertinently, how could *this* world be the creation of a loving God? How could it be the creation of *this* God? Once the identity and character of this God is affirmed, it is by no means self-evident that this world may be ascribed to such a God. It is even less self-evident that this God could be the Creator than the claim that this God is a Saviour – which is far more palatable for many. Knowledge of the Creator cannot be derived from innate knowledge or observing the world.

Indeed, the confession that the world is the work of a loving Creator is all but obvious from human experiences. To say that this world – with all its pain, misery, violence, injustices and the many manifestations of evil – is the work of a triune God of love, is indeed an audacious confession of faith. One cannot focus one-sidedly on whatever is perceived to be beautiful in order to affirm that this world is God's good creation. The test case is to describe a malformed child, a villain like Adolf Hitler or Eugene de Kock, or a devastating tsunami as God's own creature. When one is confronted with the rape of a child, with Auschwitz or apartheid, one simply has to tell the rest of the story of God's work: God created the world, we messed it up, God made a plan in response and the story of God's work is not yet completed. Or, in short, the confession that this world is God's creation is inseparable from the confession that this (human) creature is a forgiven and sanctified sinner.

- d) The polemical nature of the confession of faith in the triune God immediately prompts further elaboration, precisely because it is so counter-intuitive given our experiences of pain, suffering, injustices and evil. This would not be evident if only an idealised picture of what God created is portrayed, where only what is deemed beautiful and acceptable is ascribed to God. Instead, the Christian confession is that this is the world that God created – with its many manifestations of destruction and death. This confession creates an almost unbearable tension. When one confesses that this world is the work of a triune God of love, one simply has to tell the rest of the story of God's work: God has not left the world to its misery. In Jesus Christ we discover that from God's point of view the world is worth dying for (John 3:16). Moreover, through the Spirit, the world is being transformed towards God's vision for it. The core content of this cosmological vision as expressed in the Christian confession is indeed threefold.

Given such embedded tensions, the vision expressed in the Christian confession is story-shaped. What is seen is not merely an object, but a story, an episode embedded in a narrative; a motion picture, not a snapshot. Through mimesis (and thus re-description) a story uses the contradictions and tensions between images by placing them within a narrative sequence and a particular plot (Ricoeur). In order to gather the meaning of such images and to detect the direction of the plot we are aided by words, thus implying a dialectic between image and word. These words may be in the form of sub-titles<sup>18</sup> but may also develop a life of their own without the images, for example in a narrated story or in a text. A narrative thus transforms our experiences of time.

- e) Multiple levels of seeing are therefore required here, namely seeing and appreciating forms at the surface level, perceiving (seeing an object as something else by filling in some missing details), seeing connections between events (as in seeing a movie, not only a series of frames), developing deeper insight (not what is seen but what is seen in) developing an

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<sup>18</sup> Consider the difference between a silent movie, one with music only, one in a foreign language, one with sub-titles, one with a transliterated soundtrack and one where the original soundtrack is in an accessible language. With each step one is able to follow the plot better.

overview and having some foresight. This is the difference between observing data, gathering information, gaining knowledge, developing insight and finding wisdom. One has to see, but not with one's eyes only. This need to recognise the invisible is widely recognised in the biblical roots of Christianity, in Greek philosophy, Patristic Christianity and in indigenous African culture alike. It is also part of common human experience. After all, one cannot see someone's personality, friendship, love, a university, a country or indeed the world as such. One may watch soccer but one cannot see 'soccer'. One may adopt a world-view but one cannot the view the world. Each of these aspects of seeing assumes the role of the human imagination so that faith cannot be reduced to intellect, emotion or commitment (guarding against distortions in each case) but transcends all three in imagining and hopefully imaginative ways.

Moreover, there is a tension between seeing what something is and sensing what it should be (e.g. knowing God's will). In English this ambiguity is embedded in the word 'vision': it captures what is visible, seeing in a wider perspective and an attractive moral vision for the future. Likewise, there may well be a tension between seeing reality from different perspectives. There is a world of difference between seeing someone as a hardened gangster and as a child loved by his parents,<sup>19</sup> between seeing a piece of land as nothing but a toxic rubbish dump or seeing it nevertheless as God's own garden. One may say that the Christian story is called forth by such tensions. It enables us to see that the seeing can be blind and the blind may be able to see.<sup>20</sup> I suggest that the core Christian confession may therefore be understood as a way of seeing the world, a cosmological vision, if such connotations are kept in mind.

- f) On the basis of all these considerations I propose that the confession that this world is God's household – and not the doctrine of justification by itself – may be regarded as the article by which the Christian faith stands or falls.<sup>21</sup> This confession may be regarded as a restatement in cosmic and non-anthropocentric categories of the Lutheran paradox that the human creature is a forgiven sinner. It holds together and radicalises these two poles of the paradox by insisting that the sinner (or scoundrel) is God's creature and that this is the reason for the forgiveness rendered. The affirmation of the creature is therefore not merely to be understood in the contemporary psychological jargon of self-affirmation – whether on the basis of a common notion of human dignity, African notions of *ubuntu*, Abrahamic views on being created in God's image, liberal assumptions about inherent human benevolence or in the categories of black consciousness. It maintains the paradox that the one who is affirmed may well be deformed, violated, victimised and guilty all at once (and then there is no need to claim innocence for the poor and oppressed), but is either way beloved, especially by God, simply because that one remains part of God's household. Or better: God does not love us because we are lovable; we become lovable precisely because

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<sup>19</sup> Desmond Tutu comments: "People really are wonderful. This does not mean that people cannot be awful and do real evil. They can. Yet as you begin to see with the eyes of God, you start to realize that people's anger and hatred and cruelty come from their own pain and suffering. As we begin to see their words and behaviour as simply the acting out of their suffering, we can have compassion for them." See Tutu, 2005:97.

<sup>20</sup> See Lathrop, 2003:34.

<sup>21</sup> See Van Ruler, *VW III*, 2009:122. Of course, one may identify the core content of the Christian confession in different ways. Some would insist that it lies with Jesus as Lord over the forces of death and destruction, or with the Trinity itself, or with the message of salvation, or with transformation through the Spirit, or with the community that keeps the mystery alive, or with a vision of hope. Considering these possibilities the proposal that the Christian confession offers a re-description of the world is clearly not innocent. I trust that the plausibility of this approach will become evident in the discussion below.

God loves us.<sup>22</sup>

One may therefore say that creation (as *creatura*) is more fundamental than salvation. The aim of God's work of salvation is to allow creation to be what it is and to become what it could be. In other words, the final goal of salvation is not salvation, or about 'being saved', or even about the Saviour, but about the being of the saved, that is, about creaturely life.<sup>23</sup> We are not human in order to become Christian; we are Christians in order to become human again. Culture is not subservient to the gospel; the gospel is necessary so that human cultures can flourish. The church is not an aim in itself; it is an interim measure that is necessary so that the whole earth can be filled with the knowledge of God and where this mystery is kept alive for the time being. God's purpose with the world cannot be the salvation of the world (or for that matter the formation of the church) as an aim in itself, but relates to God's joy in the being of the world. All of God's work may be understood in terms of God's sustained loyalty to God's own creation.

- g) To see the world as God's beloved creation cannot but inspire an ecological ethos, praxis and spirituality. The source of inspiration is at its core a different way of seeing. Perception matters. Such seeing may be transformative, perhaps even more than hearing or doing. The mere presence of the Holy One and the awareness of such presence (epitomised by Isaiah 6:3 and Ezekiel 1), eliciting a different cosmological vision, may change the world. The true prophet is completely overwhelmed by such a vision and falls prostrate.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, if the rector of a university is present (without doing or saying anything), staff members tend to act in ways they would not otherwise. The reassuring presence of the mother allows the infant to fall asleep.<sup>25</sup> Being together with the ones whom we love suffices. Then words give way; they are superfluous and totally inadequate. Sitting in silence may be indescribably satisfying (but also pure agony!).<sup>26</sup> God does not need to meddle with the laws of nature to change the world. Transformative seeing suffices – seeing the world God's way, or inversely seeing God's translucent presence<sup>27</sup> in that which is material, bodily and earthly.

What enables this way of seeing the world in a different light? What is needed here is clearly not merely good eyesight, instruments for seeing better (glasses or microscopes) or the inherent intelligence and wisdom to see deeper. What is needed is to see what others cannot see – even though something may be right in front of one's eyes – in Christian terms, a form of revelation. Revelation is not so much an aid for seeing or a spotlight on a dark object. It is the luminosity of something that glows from God's presence so that it becomes a bearer of light (Matt 5:14, Phil 2:15). Retrospectively, one may say that such luminosity is possible because God created light in the very beginning (Gen. 1:3). Because the world was created by God in the first place it can indeed glow with the Creator's particular presence. Seeing something is therefore not an objectifying sense that creates distance between seeing and the seen. Seeing is to be immersed in light, at best it is to be illumined by the Light of the world. Or rather, "where love is there is vision" (*ubi amor, ibi oculus* –

<sup>22</sup> See Tutu, 2005:31-41.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Van Ruler, *VW III*, 2009:315.

<sup>24</sup> See Tutu, 2005:109.

<sup>25</sup> See the analysis of such reassurance by Peter Berger, 1970:53-57. He observes that mothers would reassure infants by saying 'everything is all right' even in situations where this is evidently not the case. The world that the child is being told to trust is the same world in which the mother and the child will eventually die, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> See Tutu (2005:103), quoted almost verbatim from his discussion on meditation.

<sup>27</sup> See Tutu (2005:93), with reference to the luminosity of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ.

Richard of St Victor).<sup>28</sup> Love desires to see the beloved because it is desirable (eros); because it is beloved it becomes lovely (agape). Or, as Jüngel sees it, “The look of love is not there before the lover is seen; rather that look is ignited by the sight of the beloved.”<sup>29</sup> This should not be domesticated. God loves the distorted creature not only despite its distortion but also because it is and remains a lovely creature despite such distortion. God’s love is also erotic: it desires the object of love because it is desirable. What is remarkable about God’s love is that it can see something desirable in a dehumanised victim and in an even more dehumanised oppressor. Because it is beloved that something becomes radiant with the presence of the Lover and is transfigured. The victim and the victimiser alike may thus be recognised as members of God’s household.

More importantly (as Protestants would insist), what is needed is that the illusions and systematic distortions of reality (in the form of seduction or deceit) be removed in order to see through God’s eyes, to recognise in scoundrels other than oneself nothing but the image of God. Our problem is not merely bad eyesight or limited insight but that we do not really want to see what is so evident. The blindness of our eyes is not the problem; the blindness of our protest against God’s grace is. The problem is not that we have been born blind or that we suffer from optic delusion but that we have become blindfolded.

What, then, can enable us to see? The answer may be found in the structure of the Christian liturgy.

### **A Liturgical Vision: The Re-description and Ascription of the World**

Where does the Christian confession of faith in the triune God come from? One may offer an anthropological (philosophical) or a historical account in response to this question. One may also give a theological account with reference to God’s revelation, the role of the biblical witnesses and the work of the Holy Spirit in leading people to faith. These accounts do not need to exclude each other. I would suggest that such a theological account offers a re-description and ascription of the genesis of the Christian confession. This allows for a certain dialectic that is best understood in terms of the Christian liturgy.

Although all talk about God comes from below (Harry Kuitert), viewing the world from God’s perspective prompts an inverse theological logic where viewing God on the basis of human and worldly categories is no longer deemed appropriate (viz. the critique of natural theology). The world is viewed in God’s light. This is captured in the liturgical vision according to which Christians learn to see the world in the light of the Light of the world. The Spirit enlightens us to see God’s delight in the world.<sup>30</sup>

In the Christian liturgy there is a dialectic at work between the world and God and between church and society. When the people of God are gathered together in the liturgy worshippers carry with them all their experiences from the past week, all their sorrows and joys, all the burdens of life, their needs, anxieties, interests and desires, their moods, habits, customs and cultures, in short their whole lifeworld. They also bring with them their own notions of what makes the world go round, their worldviews, together with their notions and images of God, their natural theologies, together with their lived and twisted spiritualities. We can only talk about God on the basis of our experiences of the world. We inevi-

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Jüngel, 1983:318.

<sup>29</sup> Jüngel, 1983:323.

<sup>30</sup> See Norman Wirzba (2003:176): “But as we learn to see creation in God, that is, as we come to see creation as God sees it, our delight approximates the delight of God.”

tably construct God in our own image; we therefore bring all our idolatries, if not heresies with us into the liturgy. Yet, even in rejecting God, we can do so only by way of distorting categories that belong to the world that God has given us. According to the Christian confession, this world and whatever participates in it (its heretics and its oppressors alike) belong to God.

In focusing on God alone through Christian worship we cannot leave the world behind completely because we carry the world with us in our hearts and minds. However, when we then enter the liturgy, the congregation is confronted with and ritually reminded of God's identity and character. We are led to meet the triune God, to see God's face (*visio Dei, coram Deo*). We are confronted with the accumulated wisdom of the biblical texts and the slow process in the biblical narratives of gradually and with considerable agony coming to an understanding of who God is. Put differently, the liturgy is the place where we learn anew to recognise God, to challenge our images of God in the given light of what is recognised to be nothing but God's self-disclosure.<sup>31</sup> This takes place through giving exorbitant praise in worship but also through preaching and teaching and is re-enacted through the celebration of the sacraments. This involves all the senses: the water that is poured, the food and wine given and received and the word that is heard,<sup>32</sup> not to exclude sensing the bodies gathered, the lure of music and the encompassing buildings and works of art that provide a sense of place and the birds who also have a home there (Ps 84).

In these ways the images of the world (and of other human beings) that we see before our eyes are subverted, corrected and guided by the Word until we are enabled to see the world through God's eyes. Such reorientation is already expressed in the cosmic language employed so widely in the biblical texts (and is so often missed by modern readers). These diverse biblical portrayals of the world, what Gordon Lathrop terms 'broken cosmologies', challenge any dominant cosmology and lure us to see the world in terms of the mercy of the triune God.<sup>33</sup> Without the guidance of the Word we may see the sign but may not gather where it is pointing to. One's ears have to direct one's eyes. Thus a dialectic is required between seeing and hearing, between image and word, between letter and spirit, between incarnation and inhabitation.<sup>34</sup>

One may conclude that the liturgy entails a dialectic tension between orientation, disorientation and reorientation. There is no reorientation without disorientation and no original stable state of orientation. This reorientation is no easy process since it may take rather lengthy services to remind us that the dominant power structures do not actually make the world go round. This is especially the case in congregations situated on the margins of economic power. It may take even longer in upper-middle class congregations but they may not feel that they have time for that. Some processes (raising an awareness, changing perceptions, fostering attitudes, forming habits, changing cultures) may indeed be

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, the opposite may also happen, namely that the liturgy perpetuates and even legitimises ideological distortions in society so that malformation instead of Christian formation is the result. Where this happens, ecumenical relationships are needed to remind one of the ecclesial marks of catholicity and apostolicity. See Lathrop, 2003:179-197.

<sup>32</sup> See the comment by Gordon Lathrop, (2005:34): "Words may be heard, coming from outside ourselves, giving us a new story or reinserting us in an old story, whereby we may understand ourselves and our world anew."

<sup>33</sup> See Lathrop (2003:44). Along similar lines Paul Santmire (2008) speaks of the liturgy as being counter-cultural.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion on the dialectic between word and image, between seeing and hearing, in Calvin's theology, see Zachman (2007). His insights are behind the formulations in the text above.

slow, perhaps demanding a lifetime or centuries in the case of reorientation or reformation. Even in the midst of the most urgent of environmental disasters such slow work may need to continue unabated.

When Christians then think back on this process of reorientation, we confess that this understanding of God's identity and character (called 'faith') can only come from God's Spirit – who is not reluctant to get her hands dirty.<sup>35</sup> Through word and sacrament we become grateful recipients of God's grace. This is the pneumatological genesis of the Christian confession, namely as a collective response of the congregation to the experience of seeing God, facilitated through the liturgy.

We thus learn to see the world as we know it in the light of the Light of the world. This is the Christological focus of the Christian vision. This is misunderstood if the focus remains on the uniqueness of Jesus the Christ. The divinity of Christ does not only say something about Jesus but also about the identity and character of God. The Light of the world helps us to see the God of Light. Jesus's self-giving love enables us to see the God of love. It is seeing God that enables us to see the world in a new light: the confession that God sees us through the eyes of Jesus' self-giving love.

The liturgy therefore has cosmological significance: It is located in and situates itself within the world portrayed in a particular way. It offers a proposal of the kind of world we live in.<sup>36</sup> In order to offer such reorientation the liturgy cannot offer a view of the world that is completely disconnected from what we know about the world from other sources. It has to see *this* world in the light of God's delight. Only then can we gently invite others to that mercy that floods the cosmos through all the fractures of our systems of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> This does not require scientific expertise but it does require rudimentary knowledge of the world and spiritual discernment of what seems to make the world go round. Such reorientation is possible if the liturgical space is positioned with reference to a particular geographic and cosmographic location, with appropriate undermining current constellations of power. Likewise, the liturgical year and liturgical time has to be related to the flow of the seasons and to the social construction of time (e.g. clock time). Only then would it be possible to discern a moment of truth (*kairos*). Only then would it be possible to resist the restriction of 60 minute services. Only then would it be possible to avoid a separation of God's work of salvation and God's beloved creation.

Through the emergence of a liturgical vision we are enabled to recognise that the soil on which we are standing is holy ground (Ex 3:1-5).<sup>38</sup> One may say that it is only then that we are enabled to see how degraded, eroded and desecrated this very soil has become. The soil has become defiled with the ways, deeds and idolatry of its human inhabitants (Ezek. 36:17). The emergence of the knowledge of sin is also the genesis of lament, namely the cry of God's people over what has gone so horribly wrong. However, despite such distortions, we also learn to see the world as being 'very good' in God's eyes – in the way that parents would welcome a new-born child into their home despite whatever shortcoming the child may have or develop. We learn to see the distorted world as *nevertheless* blessed and sanctified by God. After all, the culmination of creation was not in the 'good' or even the 'very good' (but not 'perfect') of the first six days, but in the blessing of the seventh day

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<sup>35</sup> See Van Ruler, 1989:86.

<sup>36</sup> See Lathrop, 2003:5.

<sup>37</sup> See the phrases adopted by Lathrop (2003:163). See his remarkable discussion of the relationship between astronomical cosmology and liturgical cosmology, 2003:153-175.

<sup>38</sup> See the title of Lathrop's study namely *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology*, 2003.

and in the sanctification of the world. Indeed, it is not only that we are able to see the world in a different light through the liturgy; the world itself becomes a different world through the blessing taking place in the liturgy. The liturgy itself therefore calls into being the envisioned world. The redemption of the world is celebrated in anticipation. As Belden Lane puts it, "If God's desire in beautifying and restoring creation is a work still in process, then the whole earth lives in expectation, straining (along with God) toward a reality not yet fully realized. In worship (as liturgical action) we boldly proclaim and call into being the redeemed creation God envisions."<sup>39</sup>

Gordon Lathrop observes that the Christian liturgy, at its best, therefore elicits cosmic reorientation:

The liturgy has been a place where ordinary expectations of God have been invited into the surprise and transformation of grace, where our god-projections have been met by judgment, the grace, and the life of the Holy Trinity, where our attempts at exchange with the deity have been invited instead to become occasions to give ourselves to our neighbour ... the liturgy has turned its participants toward God's beloved world, oriented them in a cosmos held in mercy: in intercession for all things, in sending food and money to those in need, in sending the community itself to be the body-of-Christ for the world.<sup>40</sup>

For Lathrop such liturgical reorientation does not imply a comprehensive view of the world, an all-organising closed structure. In a summary statement that is worth quoting at some length he says:

In the mercy of God, Word and Sacrament, enacted in assembly, do hold us on the holy ground, before the Holy One. Celebrated faithfully, they do cast a new light on the world, suggest cosmic meanings, relativize structures that misconstrue and misuse the world, propose paths for us to walk, reorient us in the material and social realities of our context. ... Word and Sacrament do not give us a full cosmology, finally revealed in detail. They do not give sanction to some or the other cosmic ideology, one or the other all-embracing metanarrative, one or the other all-organizing closed structure. Rather, they set their proposals, their cosmological sketches, in crucially helpful dialogue with the many cosmologies by which we live. They do so simply by doing what they most basically do hold us before God and bring us to faith in God.

Liturgical poetics ... will be 'knowing something a little'... But the 'little' of the Christian liturgy will be enough for us to walk in faith and love upon the holy ground, enough continually to reorient our basic views of the world, while we freely admit that they do not know everything of the mysteries and power that surround us.<sup>41</sup>

When we (as a people on the way) depart from the liturgy with God's blessing we therefore look at the world through new eyes, having been trained to see it through God's eyes, with what Desmond Tutu calls the eyes of the heart, with delight, grief and compassion – and therefore with a sense of justice, again as something so valuable that it is worth dying for (John 3:16). We return to the world and our daily lives seeing the world as God's world. We insist that "The Earth is the Lord's and everything within it" (Psalm 24:1). We return to the world carrying with us the cognitive dissonance between exultation and lamentation experienced in the liturgy. When we return to the world we are able to view the world from this perspective. The confession of Christian faith in this context always has an immediate social significance precisely since it is always polemic. As Bonhoeffer noted, this cannot

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<sup>39</sup> See Lane, 2011:92.

<sup>40</sup> See Lathrop, 2003:48.

<sup>41</sup> See Lathrop, 2003:217-218.

imply the “shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, that shows discipline and constant knowledge of death and resurrection.”<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

Such a liturgical vision therefore suggests the need for a dual epistemological movement from the world to God and from God to the world. This would invite a dialectic between a theological ecology (moving from an interpretation of the world/nature to address questions about the identity and character of God) and an ecological dogmatics (moving from the Christian confession of faith in God to address questions regarding the world/nature).<sup>43</sup>

Since I cannot offer such an ecological dogmatics here, the very small dogmatics embedded in the theme ‘Land, Liturgy & Life’ would need to suffice. I cannot even explore the logic of the comma and the ‘and’ since this constitutes the very mystery of a Trinitarian theology. I hope at least that the four themes of this ‘overture’ would help those participating in the liturgy to anticipate the music, the perichoretic dance to follow.

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<sup>42</sup> See Bonhoeffer, 2010:541.

<sup>43</sup> See Bergmann, 2005:47.

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