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# PLAYFUL SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: TOWARD TRANSFORMING ACTION

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article demonstrates how re-imagining our understanding of the Holy Spirit in more comprehensive ways can be effective in moving Christians toward creative, transforming activities in the world. This article also provides some examples for undertaking systematic theology in a playful way by using the present ecumenical discourse of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on transforming spirituality.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Christian academic theology should and can have a transformative impact on the creative behaviour of Christians.<sup>1</sup> Creative behaviour is especially important in times such as these, where life is complex and human beings tend to seek a "good life". Therefore, we need theology that facilitates desirable social actions towards a transformative influence on the world's reality. Volf summarises a current challenge for theology:



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Barth (1977:62) also mentioned this when he wrote that theology needs to encounter, among other things, two key elements of theology, namely wonder or astonishment (Verwunderung) and concern (Betroffenheit). "Indem es in dem beschriebenen Sinne Verwunderung erregt, den mit ihm beschäftigten Menschen zu einem verwunderten Subjekt macht, wird er – und dieser weiteren Bestimmung der theologischen Existenz haben wir uns nun im Besonderen zuzuwenden – ein von ihm betroffener Mensch".

We need to revive a sustained truth-seeking cultural conversation about the flourishing life. We live in a globalized world where partly overlapping and partly contradictory visions of flourishing life coexist in the same public space. People of many diverse perspectives, religious and nonreligious, will need to participate in that conversation. Christian theology ought to become one such voice. ... By 'flourishing life' we mean the good toward which humans are meant to strive (Volf & Croasmun 2019:32.13).

The text of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Faith and Order Commission, "Come and see. A theological invitation to the pilgrimage of justice and peace", is an example of such rediscovery of theology towards transforming the actions of Christians:

This pilgrimage [of justice and peace] can be understood to imply and necessitate a *theological anthropology*, that is, to teach about and express the dignity and destiny of human beings as created in God's image, redeemed in Christ, and sanctified by the Spirit. Concern for justice, peace, and care for creation necessarily flows from the way Christian faith understands the relation of human beings with God, with one another, and with nature (WCC 2019:18).

The relationship between theological reflection and Christian life in the world must thus be vital, creative and impact on Christian behaviour. However, this involves not only ideas and concepts of a good life, but is also rather a matter of modelling life- and human-oriented theologies.

It is one of the most empowering approaches in pastoral care to help people articulate their deepest desires and find appropriate ways of adjusting their lives in that direction (Van den Berg & Ganzevoort 2014:181).

This task of theology is expected in the current ecumenical trend on the good life in terms of transforming spirituality. On this point, I want to highlight some potential links for the creative reimagining of the Holy Spirit towards transforming the activities of Christians.

The current ecumenical approach to transforming spirituality is permeated by a strong pneumatological dimension and shows a shift in the understanding of God's mission as the mission of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> This

<sup>2 &</sup>quot;Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation. The missionary God who sent the Son to the world calls all God's people (John 20:21) and empowers them to be a community of hope. The church is commissioned to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life-destroying forces, in the power of the Holy Spirit. How important it is to 'receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:22), to become living

includes an imagination of Christian activity from the perspective of the encounter with the reality of the Holy Spirit. Due to the difficulties in making an understanding of an encounter with the Holy Spirit comprehensible for human action, systematic theology is challenged to articulate the often inaccessible human imagination and perception.

# 2. THE ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSFORMING SPIRITUALITY

Understanding transforming spirituality is linked to the ecumenical approach to the economy of life. Theologically, the concept of the economy of life is understood as God's household emerging from his offering of abundant life for all, according to John 10:10. This fullness of life is modelled by the inner life of the Trinity.

Economy in God's household emerges from God's gracious offering of abundant life for all (John 10:10). We are inspired by Indigenous Peoples' image of 'Land is Life' (Macliing Dulag) which recognizes that the lives of people and the land are woven together in mutual interdependence. Thus, we express our belief that the 'creation's life and God's life are intertwined' (Commission on World Mission and Evangelism) and that God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). We affirm the "good life" (Sumak Kausay in the Kichua language and the concept of Waniambi a Tobati Engros from West Papua) modelled by the communion of the Trinity in mutuality, shared partnership, reciprocity, justice and loving kindness (WCC 2012:§§2.3).<sup>3</sup>

Due to the image of the intertwined relationship between God and creation, the principle of the inner life of the Trinity appears as a model of the good life of creation. Thus, the analogy of the inner life of the Trinity (community of Trinity) offers a fundamental theological concept of Christian ethos.<sup>4</sup>

witnesses to the coming reign of God! From a renewed appreciation of the mission of the Spirit, how do we re-envision God's mission in a changing and diverse world today?" (Keum 2013:4). "The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace not only has this Christological foundation, but also a pneumatological basis." (WCC 2019:18).

- 3 The call to action is the result of a six-year process of consultations and regional studies linking poverty, wealth and ecology, beginning with the Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) process, which concluded with the AGAPE Call presented at the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre in 2006.
- 4 The ecumenical text "The economy of life. An invitation to theological reflection and action" (WCC 2014:1) explains that the economy of life embodies God's vision of koinonia. Koinonia appears

Starting from the concept of the economy of life, one moves toward rediscovering and rethinking a new approach to one's spiritual life. The latter is not merely limited to inner spiritual experiences, but also to outward acts that can be transformative for every part of creational life. It is a transforming spirituality in terms of the creative culture of life. This transforming spirituality aims to transform "all life-destroying values and systems where these are to work in our economies, our politics and even our churches" (Keum 2013:13).

The concept of the economy of life can also broaden our traditional approach to understanding the Holy Spirit. The idea that God's economy gives abundant life to live in the Holy Spirit suggests that life will be experienced in all its fullness, namely holistically, in all dimensions of life. The new understanding of the mission towards the witness of God's economy, according to the ethical concept of the WCC,

provokes in us a renewed awareness that the Holy Spirit meets us and challenges us at all levels of life and brings newness and change to the place and times of our personal and collective journeys (Keum 2013:14).

The culture of a transforming life is understood to be the mission of the Holy Spirit. This means that the transforming activity of Christians toward the renewed world starts from the inner experience of encountering the Holy Spirit (Keum 2013:11).<sup>5</sup> This is the current language of the ecumenical approach to transforming spirituality, which forms a concept of transforming discipleship.

The churches are called to discern the work of the life-giving Spirit sent into the world and to join with the Holy Spirit in bringing about God's reign of justice (Acts 1:6-8). When we have discerned the Holy Spirit's presence, we are called to respond, recognizing that God's Spirit is often subversive, leading us beyond boundaries and surprising us (Keum 2013:11).

in the multilateral theological discourse as a key notion for the ecumenical understanding of life (WCC 2013:10).

<sup>&</sup>quot;Transformation of the world begins, first and foremost, with the individual, even though individuals are part of a community. The individual's transformation begins with their attitude, their desires, and their priorities. Their desires and priorities are to be focused on the covenantal relationship with God. All will be well with those who are focused on the communion with God. True happiness is an outcome of our focus on the experience of God. This is the core of the Beatitudes." (Jukko et al. 2019:15-23).

This new notion (transforming discipleship) was the focus of the last Missionary Conference of the WCC in Arusha (Tanzania) in February 2018. The main theme for this conference was "Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship". I would like to introduce some voices from this conference, in order to best express the meaning of transformative discipleship:

Discipleship is often understood merely in the sense of being in a loving, friendly relationship with Jesus. While this is a profound truth, the discipleship that we intend to emphasize is one that is not only a relationship but is actively engaged in continuing Jesus' mission in the world. To know Jesus is to follow him in what he did. In what the church's early theologians called 'theosis' or deification, we share God's nature by sharing in God's mission (Jukko *et al.* 2019:67).

We are called to be disciples who have a transforming effect, and as such we are privileged to join in the mission of the triune God, to move in the Spirit, to work together towards life, to live out the values of the kingdom of God, to engage in mission from the margins, and to humbly bear witness to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (Jukko & Keum 2019:10).

This quote indicates that a new view of discipleship extends beyond the traditional boundaries of what discipleship means. It is participation in God's life and in his mission. This implies Christian action with openness to the Holy Spirit.

# 3. WHAT ROLE DOES PNEUMATOLOGY PLAY IN THE APPROACH TO TRANSFORMING SPIRITUALITY?

From the Trinitarian perspective, and according to the third article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Holy Spirit is the life-giving Spirit. This means that the Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Trinity transmits life that is modelled by the inner life of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit makes it possible to live practically in a Trinitarian way. Through the Holy Spirit, we participate "in the mission of love that is at the heart of the life of the Trinity" (Keum 2013:9). Discerning the Holy Spirit and joining the action of the Holy Spirit is the core of our understanding of Christian mission (Keum 2013:11).

However, the main multilateral ecumenical texts do not interpret the individual encounter with the reality of the Holy Spirit from a theological

perspective. What does it mean that "the individual's transformation begins with their attitude, with their desire, and with their priorities" (Jukko et al. 2019:19)? Or, what does it mean that Christians should open themselves to Christ's influence in their lives? How does encountering the reality of the Holy Spirit work in a practical life? These questions show that an understanding of transforming spirituality needs to be extended to theological reflection, considering the issue of encountering the Holy Spirit from the perspective of a human being.

With this, the ecumenical ethical discourse of transforming spirituality shows that there is an enormous demand for re-imagining the Spirit's work in more comprehensive terms. This is also the case for most of the confessional traditions that have not yet elaborated on a strong explicit link between theological pneumatology and practical Christian life. Theological thought on the Holy Spirit is restricted, generally speaking, to the dogmatic formulations of how and where the Holy Spirit acts as a mediating Spirit of Christ's work. However, how and where human beings act towards a direct encounter with the Holy Spirit is not always discussed in detail. One of the reasons for this could be the centrality of redemptive-forensic Christology in the Western theological tradition. McDonnell (1982:142) writes:

In the west we think essentially in Christological categories, with the Holy Spirit as an extra ... we build up our large theological constructs in constitutive Christological categories, and then, in a second, nonconstitutive moment, we decorate the already constructed system with pneumatological baubles, a little Spirit tinsel.

This indicates a need for re-imagining pneumatology as a theological foundation for practical life. It requires a process of re-orientating pneumatology toward *practical pneumatology*.

# 4. AN EXAMPLE OF DOING THEOLOGY PLAYFULLY

I suggest that the most creative attempt to re-imagine the work of the Holy Spirit toward *practical pneumatology* lies in composing several confessional pneumatological traditions. This coherent way requires a readiness to think in a *playful* manner. Being *playful* simply means to play around with ideas, to broaden the established and sometimes smaller confessional images of the Holy Spirit, and to bring them into a *playful* mutual conversation. Other perspectives on pneumatology offer a greater variety of ways of understanding the Holy Spirit, which awakens a creative way of thinking. This way of doing theology mirrors the pneumatological dimension of the church of Christ, namely *unity in diversity*.

At this point, I would like to introduce an example of the pneumatological approach as an illustration of ecumenical theological thinking about the Holy Spirit in terms of encountering the Holy Spirit as a mode of existence.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of encountering the reality of God as the reality of the Holy Spirit could be addressed within a Trinitarian concept of the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit acts as a person who transmits the power and principle of intra-Trinitarian love, which is self-giving and passionate. This idea of Trinitarian love is strongly emphasised in the understanding of the Trinitarian person (hypostasis) within the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The concept of life, as a self-giving and passionate turn toward God, is not only rooted in the intra-Trinitarian model of life as mutual relationships of the persons (hypostasis) within Trinity; it can also be found in Scripture.

And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.' (Matt. 22:37-38, English Standard Version)

... that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:21-23, English Standard Version).

The emphasis of the first commandment lies in the word "all". From this, we can conclude that the first commandment "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" does not solely mean affections, but rather the wholeness of human life oriented towards God's personal reality. The second reference, "You, Father, are in me, and I in You", mirrors the same principle of mutual devotion to each other. Moltmann (2016:189) relates the understanding of glory in John 17 to the principle of *self-giving* as a principle of the relationships within Trinity.

Based on this approach, the fullness of Christian life in the Holy Spirit could be expressed in terms of the Trinitarian analogy through anthropological notions such as desire or passion. One finds this Trinitarian image in the German word *Hingabe*, meaning that someone gives him-/herself to another person or to an object of desire. In this sense, desire can be understood in terms of love.

In this concept of love, the Holy Spirit acts as a Godly person who transmits the power and principle of the intra-Trinitarian love that is selfgiving to God, thus creating a basis for the pneumatic existence of new creation. The Holy Spirit lets human beings participate in this love as a giver of love to God. On the human side, this love could be experienced as an inner and immediate turn to the reality of God, suggesting openness to his personal presence, namely to the Holy Spirit, This active personal turn toward the presence of God as a self-giving and passionate mode of existence mirrors the same trajectory of the inner life of Trinity. The Holy Spirit could be discerned both as a subjective power of devotional effectiveness and as a God of immediate presence (Haudel 2006:472-473).6 Thus, the participation of the koinonia of Trinity, through the Holy Spirit, could not be restricted to the eucharist or baptism, but also in an active personal life toward God's presence in the world. Through this activity of Trinitarian mutual love, the Holy Spirit lets Christians participate in the community of Trinity through their turn toward God. From this perspective, life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit interrelates with an understanding of life as love to God. This life can be understood as "the fullness of pneumatic existence" (Macchia 2010:318). This happens through the Holy Spirit's personal presence within the human conditions of life. Therefore, the encounter with him initiates the transformational process of life.

This Trinitarian explanation of human life, from a pneumatological perspective, considers the human being from the perspective of not only human life as a product of God's creation, but also of the creational condition of each human life in a dynamic relationship with God as a lifegiving Spirit. Surrendering one's self to encounter God can be understood as an anthropological metaphor to describe the nature of a human being. By seeking the experience of the encounter with God, human beings experience their creational basis. Barth (1947:472) noted this condition in Genesis 2:7 (English Standard Version):

then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

<sup>6</sup> German Lutheran theologian Matthias Haudel speaks of the specificity of the Holy Spirit as *Nähe* und Gegenüber [nearness and opposite].

<sup>7</sup> See Althaus (1948:81): "Er [human] ist in seinem Wesen diese Bestimmung. 'Gottes Bedürfen ist des Menschen höchste Vollkommenheit' (S. Kierkegaard), ... Denn er ist wesentlich Hunger und Durst nach Gott. Darum muss er kranken, wenn er an Gottes Liebe nicht hingegeben ist."

Barth claims that this story is a prototype of all biblical applications of teaching about the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

A model of explicit thinking arising from an encounter with God can be observed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, namely as a mode of life. According to Yannaras (1991:129), the Orthodox tradition understands the transformational work of the Holy Spirit in changing not nature, but the mode of existence of nature. The true life of a person consists of devotion to God, and participation in God's life through receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift is the Eucharist, which is understood as nourishment for human life. Yannaras (1991:125) also suggests that the Church

takes nourishment not within the framework of the individual demand for life, but in order to realize life as a reference to God and communion with him.

In the Orthodox paradigm of the transformation of life, a change of life takes place when a person realises new possibilities, namely in the "liberation of the possibilities of life" (Yannaras 1991:127). The Orthodox approach makes concrete the understanding of the unfolding capacity of life; the latter means realising life with reference to God.

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I describes this principle of life from the Eastern Orthodox perspective as eucharistic ethos (Chryssavgis 2012:34, 111-112).<sup>9</sup> What does this mean? The Eucharist mirrors the cosmic dimension of salvation, because the human being turns to God and receives the gift of life from God. One can say that the celebration of the Eucharist as a devotion toward God reveals the goal of creation as a whole. Alexander Schmemann, an Orthodox theologian, also supports Bartholomew's understanding of the relationship between the Church and creation.

In other words, in the Orthodox experience, a sacrament is primarily a revelation of the sacramentality of creation itself, for the world was created and given to man for conversion of creaturely life into participation in divine life ... and if it is so, then Christ accomplishes the salvation of the world by renewing the world and life itself as sacrament (Schmemann 1963:26).

<sup>8 &</sup>quot;Man wird als Prototyp für alle biblischen Anwendungen der Rede vom göttlichen pneuma die Stelle Gen. 2,7 betrachten dürfen, wo es von Gott heiß, dass er dem Menschen ins Angesicht gehaucht habe den Hauch des Lebens und dass der Mensch so, erst so, lebendig geworden sei: et inspiravit in faciem eius spiraculum vitae et factus est homo anima vivens." (Barth 1947:472).

<sup>9</sup> See also Schmemann (1988:34).

According to this quote, the mystery of creation is hidden in the Eucharist, namely in its goal towards the participation in God's world. Schmemann thus describes the Eucharist not only as participation in Christ in the sense of a medium of salvation, but also as "our ascension in Christ, our entrance in the world to come" (Schmemann 1988:34) or, as an experience of new creation. It makes the centrality of the real participation in the new world of God the experience of an encounter with God.

The anthropological approach of pneumatic existence resonates with the model of life of the Trinity as well as with the current ecumenical paradigm of the economy of life. The anthropological aspect of this construction reveals the human being as one who discovers and creates diverse forms of life due to meeting the real presence of the Spirit. The soteriological mission of the Holy Spirit could be considered a restoration of God's plan, which includes the basic condition of human existence, namely full devotion to God. It could also be understood as a passion for God's reality. Seeking the experience of an encounter with God, human beings experience their creational foundations. With this in mind, I would like to complete the pneumatological picture of the story of creation with an image from the New Testament from Mark 5:21-34. It is about a woman who desired to touch Jesus. The belief that human beings were created by God indicates that our dependence on God as the life-giving and living God is a constituent of human life. This finds full expression in Jesus' life as well as in the human demand to experience the presence of the living God. This condition of life became visible in the life of the first Church as a fellowship of persons who experienced the Holy Spirit and lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

By considering the principle of pneumatic existence, pneumatology could be re-discovered in the context of theological disciplines such as anthropology or moral theology.<sup>10</sup> I suggest the following application for introducing theological pneumatology in terms of practical pneumatology:

If a passion for experiencing the reality of the Holy Spirit stimulated people to transform their lives as well as their surroundings, then the Holy Spirit appears in this life-changing act as encourager of life that expresses his being as 'another Comforter,' according to John 14:16

The Pentecostal theologian Daniel Castelo provides an approach similar to the demand for God's reality. He conceptualises the Pentecostal principle as an epicletic existence. His two keywords, "waiting" and "abiding", describe the Pentecostal ethical orientation. The epicletic community means a life of waiting for God's action in the world. "Abiding" means to "adhere ... press through ... circumstances to do all in their power to inhabit the implications ensuing from the divine encounter" (Castelo 2012:26).

King James Version - 'And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter.'

The reference "another" could be understood as in the same mission as Christ, just as Christ could be interpreted in the sense of his life-giving Godly presence within humanity. To be a Comforter could mean providing encouragement and motivation for life. Therefore, the Holy Spirit initiates motivation for realising, actualising, optimizing and unfolding the new life from and to Christ. God reveals himself by being the Spirit of abundance of life, which expresses the reality of the resurrected living Christ.

My construct of openness for a *playful* composition of the pneumatological approaches in the economy of life could offer further perspectives for theologically re-imagining the work of the Holy Spirit, in order to provide a contribution to the question as to how Christians change and transform the world in a positive way. For instance, the anthropological approach to pneumatology, as a mode of pneumatic existence, can help several confessional traditions integrate their distinctive understandings of the Holy Spirit in terms of soteriological anthropology, which makes pneumatology more understandable and theologically closer to other theological denominations and churches.

# 5. CONCLUSION

The pneumatological perspective helps us rediscover a practical side of Spirit Christology, which understands the presence of Christ as the resurrected Lord who acts through the Holy Spirit here and now. It helps us reimagine the approach to Christian life as a life open to the reality of the Holy Spirit. In other words, personal openness to the Holy Spirit must be integrated into the praxis of Christian belief as one of the central tenets of achieving a relationship with God. This approach to the Christian life of the Eastern Orthodox tradition is best articulated in the words of the Eastern Orthodox Monk, Serafim von Sarov: "The only aim of Christian life is to acquire the Spirit." A similar statement by Athanasius regarding the relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit reads: "Being given to drink of the Holy Spirit, we drink Christ." Such pneumatological reimagining of the goal of Christian life encourages us to think of pneumatology in terms of practical pneumatology.

Rediscovering the goal of a Christian life, from the pneumatological perspective, as well as a Church life, from a pneumatological and Trinitarian

<sup>11</sup> Quotation from Georg Florovsky at the meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, Bossey (Switzerland), 1953. Minutes of meeting 1953:18.

point of view, can help some ecclesiological traditions (especially among the young non-confessional churches) develop a new theological basis for rediscovering new modes of practice connecting the spiritual life of the Church and social and environmental issues. It could be, for instance, an ecological project initiated by the sacral perception of creation. This is what the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I called *eucharistic ethos*. In other words, Christian life in the world is understood as *liturgy after liturgy*. It could also be several social projects leading to improved living conditions for underprivileged people. We may not create a new spiritual world; however, we can create a small reality of heaven in every concrete situation. If you asked me what the specific Christian content is in this instance, I would answer that such actions are spiritually motivated, arose from a personal transformation initiated by an intensive openness for a space for the Holy Spirit to exist in the real world.

The pneumatological approach of life helps awaken practical sensibilities for the world as a sphere of life, where the Holy Spirit guides creation as a whole to the eschatological fulfilment of salvation. The inner orientation toward God's presence in the world could be interpreted as a capacity to begin. With the capacity to begin, Pentecostal theologian Nimi Wariboko (2012:11) attempts to describe a demand for God as an ethical principle. Wariboko suggests that the passion for God is understood as a passion of being, in the sense of an ontological category.

The phrase 'passion of being' is used here to designate a general attribute of being and not emotion or affection. It is part of the eros of being (Wariboko 2012:11).

The Pentecostal principle is the power of emergent creativity that disrupts social existence, generates infinite restlessness, and results in novelty. The notion of the Pentecostal principle rethinks the idea of the Protestant principle as the spirit of creativity, the creative transforming energy that operates within the structures and throughout the process of creation as its law of motion (Wariboko 2012:44).

The openness to the Holy Spirit could be described as a continuous effort to unfold the potential of the present reality between creation and humanity.

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