Peace Spiritualities in a Trinitarian Grammar: The Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Just Peace

Andrés Pacheco-Lozano

Abstract

This essay references the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. A peace spirituality rooted in a Trinitarian grammar invites pilgrims to become transformed as they confront the powers of violence and death. This framework makes a clear connection between self and community, self and public witness, and spirituality and ethics.

As I engaged with John Rempel's essay,[1] my attention was caught by one of his concluding arguments for the role of Trinitarian theologizing in ecumenical relations, both in its origins and contemporary implications. He contends, for example, that "Trinitarian theologizing is ecumenical by nature" (145). Concretely, I thought about the World Council of Churches' current programmatic initiative named the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (hereafter PJP), the centrality of Trinitarian language in its conception, and how this language can be a framework to reinterpret the spiritual dimension in witnessing to God's peace and justice. While Rempel's historical reconstruction seems to account for the Mennonite tradition in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, I will focus here on challenges that Historic Peace Churches (HPCs) are facing in their relations in ecumenical spaces, among which is the need to re-imagine a "transformative spirituality."

Conversations about the doctrine of the Trinity and its connections with classical and ecumenical theology on the one hand, and with Peace Church ecclesiology on the other, are not new. While A. James Reimer's explorations, as found for example in *Mennonites and Classical Theology* and *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology,* relate classical theology (with special

[1] This essay is a response to John Rempel, "An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?", *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 110-45. Page references to Rempel's essay appear in parentheses.

attention on the doctrine of the Trinity) to Anabaptist/Mennonite theology,[2] Fernando Enns has reflected on ecclesiological terms in the relations between the HPCs and the ecumenical family. In *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community,* Enns explores how the Trinitarian understanding embedded in the ecumenical movement "has provided correctives to apparent limitations in peace church ecclesiology."[3] Among these correctives is a reinterpretation of the church, the *koinonia*, as participation in the Triune God.[4] From this comes an invitation to rethink the boundaries of the church in respect to unity and ecumenicity, and to engage critically with the gap between the *experienced* church (what the church is) and the *believed* church (what the church ought to be), as well as the possibility of preserving a balance between personal belief/confession and life as a community without collapsing one into the other. Enns also accounts for how HPC ecclesiology has influenced ecumenical discussions by stressing the connection between theology, a non-hierarchical community, and the ethics of nonviolence.[5] I take as a point of departure this mutual relation between the ecumenical movement and the HPCs (particularly the Mennonites) as I engage with the PJP and its Triune grammar.

Three Interpretations of Spirituality

While there is a rich variety of ways to understand "spiritual" and "spirituality,"[6] I will consider three different sets of interpretation. First, spirituality as individual path. I have found this notion in Western-European circles: spirituality as a way to signal simultaneously a personal search for God or transcendence (expressed mostly in emotional and practical terms) and a disbelief of, or a disconnection with, the institutional side of religion,

[2] A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001); A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

[3] Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 232.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 243.

[6] For a more comprehensive and historical approach to uses of the notion of "spirituality" and the "spiritual," see Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

including "systems of belief." In a context often framed as secular or even post-secular, spirituality[7] seems to have become either the last element to hold onto in the search for ultimate meaning, or the product of living in a highly individualistic society, seeking a path for oneself but doubting meta-narratives.

Second, spirituality as disconnected from social engagement or public witness of the churches. I have come across this notion particularly in the Colombian context, where historically different churches have claimed to focus on "the spiritual life" rather than on "political matters,"[8] as if these are opposite elements on the spectrum: the individual or even the church on one end, and the social/public on the other. I have found a variant of this notion in Mennonite conversations both in Colombia and in the international community, where spiritual life is presented as separate from a peace witness in society, as if the latter would be simply a social project of the church but not part of its core identity.

Third, spirituality can also be framed in terms of transformation and decolonization. If one works with *campesinos* and women's groups in Colombia, it is almost impossible not to notice the centrality that spiritual practices and rituals play in their nonviolent resistance to violence and their active search for transforming realities of injustice. Rather than disconnecting spirituality and the peace witness, these groups embody the deep connection between the two. Yet the challenge on many occasions is to find a theological language to express and embrace that connection. Along similar lines, I have come across work on post-colonial theology by Susan Abraham, who sees in spirituality the potential of "decolonizing the spirit."[9]

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[7] "God in Nederland" (God in the Netherlands) is a study conducted every year since 1966 on the phenomenon of belief in that nation. The most recent one states that 14 percent of the population claim to be "theists," while 28 percent describe themselves as "believers of something," over against 34 percent agnostics and 24 percent atheists. For the full report and a nuanced and detailed differentiation between faith, belief, and spirituality, see Tom Bernts and Joantine Berghuijs, eds., *God in Nederland: 1966-2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016), 65.

[8] Colombian sociologist William Beltran describes the tendency of protestant churches in their emergence in Colombia to focus on individual faith as their central focus. See William Beltran, "Pluralización religiosa y cambio social en Colombia" in *Theologica Xaveriana* 63, no. 175 (January-June 2013): 57-85.

[9] Susan Abraham, *Identity, Ethics and Nonviolence in Postcolonial Theory: A Rahnerian Theological Assessment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 170.

While colonialism is characterized by the rigidity of identities (of both the colonized and the colonizers), spirituality is a search for unity with God. It is "the *ekstasis* toward God, out of the rigidity of self-identity," says Abraham, and "the *ekstasis* out of the self-authorized position of power in the sincere empathy for the otherness."[10] The path of this search is translated into nonviolence as the only way that the rigidity of "victims" and "perpetrators" can be overcome, by persuasive actions leading aggressors to "recognize in the victims of their inhumanity, the humanity they have in common."[11]

In the midst of these different understandings of spirituality, I think that the ecumenical PJP could serve as a theological framework, with a Trinitarian grammar, to engage with some of these notions while providing a theological language to articulate others.

PJP and Trinitarian Grammar

In 2013, the World Council of Churches (WCC) embarked on the PJP initiative, which emerged as both a general programmatic guidance for individual activities within the WCC and an ecumenical theological horizon. Of particular interest here is the use of the pilgrimage metaphor as a way to stress the *spiritual* dimension of transforming injustices and building peace. The PJP has been framed as "a transformative journey that God invites us to in anticipation of the final purpose for the world that the Triune God brings about. The movement of love which is essential to the Triune God manifests itself in the promise of justice and peace."[12] The first invitees to engage in this journey from the perspective of the ecumenical fellowship were the churches themselves, implying that a transformative spirituality is not reduced to individual experience but can take shape in, and be nurtured and inspired by, a community.

The WCC—especially the Theological Study Group on this initiative—has considered three different dimensions of the PJP, building on the work of Dorothee Soelle[13] and providing Trinitarian language for understanding

[10] Ibid., 156.

[11] Ibid., 183-84.

[12] World Council of Churches, "An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace." https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace, accessed October 1, 2019.

[13] Soelle depicts mysticism (spirituality) as "*cognitio Dei experimentalis* (the knowledge of God

them. These dimensions are *via positiva, via negativa,* and *via transformativa*. Given that these dimensions have been described in more detail elsewhere,[14] I will present these dimensions briefly, paying attention to how the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, one of Rempel's chosen dialogue partners, gives more Trinitarian depth to the PJP.

The first dimension, the *via positiva*, highlights the image of God as creator.[15] This image implies that a transformative spiritual journey begins when we as pilgrims recognize ourselves—in a movement that can be described as "being amazed"—as interconnected with, and in relation to, God and creation. Following Moltmann's arguments in *The Crucified God*, it could be said that this expression of God as creator acquires new proportions and proximity in light of the incarnation, in which God's character and care for creation is ultimately expressed in the gift of reconciliation in Christ. This leads us to see ourselves as a reconciled creation (WCC sometimes uses the term "reconciled diversity") to be perfected in the eschatological promise of "God being all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).[16] Spirituality is in this sense a journey to recognize ourselves as broken-and-restored members of creation, a recognition made possible by the work of the Spirit, who guides us into community. In the midst of current divisions and polarizations, this path of searching and embracing a reconciled unity with God, with others, and with nature seems to be one of the most radical expressions of faith. This search counteracts individualistic notions of the spiritual, and therefore overcomes such apparent dichotomies as individual-community and spiritual-social.

The second dimension, the *via negativa*, is framed within the PJP in close connection with Jesus' way of the cross.[17] In the light of the cross, the

through and from experience):" in *The Silent Cry*, 45. Mysticism (spirituality) is a journey of searching for union with God and, through it, with the rest of creation.

[14] For a more detailed description of the PJP, see Fernando Enns and Andrés Pacheco-Lozano, "The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: A Fresh Ecumenical Approach in the Violent Context of Colombia in Global Mennonite Peacebuilding" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 308-22.

[15] See World Council of Churches, "Statement on the Way of Just Peace," https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/the-way-of-just-peace, accessed October 1, 2019.

[16] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993).

[17] See World Council of Churches, "Statement on the Way of Just Peace."

spiritual journey entails a certain sense of purge and purification, expressed in a confrontation with our own connection and identification with the powers of violence and death that are exposed at the cross, insofar as we visit the wounds that those powers have created.

In my view, relating the *via negativa* with the cross does not mean reducing the Christ event to the *via dolorosa*—as if the only meaning of Jesus in the world is his death—but rather points to a God whose love for creation has led God to make space in Godself for mourning, suffering, and feelings of godforsakenness.[18] This understanding of God, Moltmann would argue, is only possible when thinking in God in Trinitarian terms.[19] We are to consider a Son who feels forsaken; the Father's mourning for the death of the Son; and the work of the Spirit, who brings life out of death and in whom the godless and godforsaken are justified—for the Spirit is the giver of faith. Thus, the "purification of the self" cannot be for selfish reasons but rather is the result of letting go of the ego in order to open up and be in solidarity with the other. The way of the cross, then, signals a call to walk in radical solidarity with the victims, echoing God's expression of solidarity at the cross, while allowing their experiences to inform and reshape our own spiritual journey. Without taking seriously both evil and the wounds it creates, it is impossible to nurture a spirituality that leads to healing and the transforming of those very structures. In this sense, spirituality and public engagement and witness cannot be opposed or disconnected.

The third dimension, the *via transformativa*, is inspired by the transformative action of the Holy Spirit, according to the WCC's framing of the PJP.[20] The work of the Spirit leads pilgrims into transformation in at least two directions: (1) resisting violence and injustices, and (2) becoming "healed healers." By embracing being part of creation and by letting go of the connections to violence and oppression, we gain space for a renewed ethical commitment to witnessing to peace and justice within the realities of injustice and oppression. The *via transformativa* is a form of resistance to those destructive forces.

In the midst of a yet-to-be-perfected world it is the crucified Christ,

[18] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 19.
[19] Ibid., 203, 244.
[20] See World Council of Churches, "Statement of the Way of Just Peace."

Moltmann argues, who is the "compass" that enables us to "test" our witnessing.[21] This is a reminder that the pilgrimage involves constantly re-rooting ourselves—reinterpreting our identity and decisions in light of a God whose love becomes intelligible in the most radical form on the cross, embracing in it all creation and making transformation a possible path for us. When rooted in a Trinitarian grammar, transformation takes place as we open up to the Divine other and to others, inspired by the making-space-in-the-self and the opening-up-to-the-other[22] that characterize the relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is in this framework that pilgrims can become "healed healers." Thus, rather than simply becoming "activists," they will find that a spirituality rooted in a Trinitarian grammar invites them to be become transformed as they confront—in themselves and in the world—the powers of violence and death. This framework provides a theological language to articulate spirituality in terms of transforming the realities of oppression while simultaneously decolonizing the spirit, in that it counteracts rigid identities (even when "peace" is alleged to be a central aspect of our identity). It becomes a lens for looking critically at reduced or limited notions of spirituality while offering a language and an imagination to relate spirituality and ethics as well as spirituality and witnessing to peace and justice.

Towards Spiritualities of Peace and Justice Inspired by a Trinitarian Image

By embracing God's gift of creation, letting go of the ego, visiting the wounds (the cross of Christ), and healing/transforming the realities that cause these wounds (empowered by the work of the Spirit), we can gain a more complex and encompassing image of spirituality. Moltmann's theology helps us take a step in that direction by showing how each dimension of the transformative journey cannot simply be referred to one person of the Trinity, and how the community of the Trinity becomes intelligible in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Christ, providing guidance for our transformation.

[21] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 3.

[22] Building on Moltmann's Trinitarian theology, Miroslav Volf claims that at the center of human reconciliation is the question of how the Triune God and the relations of the persons of the Trinity can become a model for their framing and reconstruction. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), especially 100 and 126.

A triune image of God, then, is (1) an invitation to participate in the life of the divine community and to participate in, and anticipate, God's promises of justice and peace, and (2) a model that signals the different dimensions that a spiritual transformative journey must consider. With this image it is impossible to advance a spirituality disconnected from public witness, and equally impossible to assume to be peacemakers without being self-critical and willing to walk a path of self-transformation. Such a Trinitarian framework enables us to see a clear connection between self and community, self and public witness, and spirituality and ethics.

I have tried to stress how Trinitarian theology not only connects the ecumenical fellowship but also provides a corrective and an inspiration to the HPC witness. In this particular case, the connection I am making includes addressing the dimension of spirituality, which has often caused internal division between "spiritual" and "social" focuses. The approach I am suggesting will help widen the understanding of peace by exploring the spiritual dimension and, with it, create spaces for dialogue within the Mennonite community.

Andrés Pacheco-Lozano is a Ph.D. candidate at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a Research Assistant for the Amsterdam Center for Religion, Peace and Justice Studies.