

Between Cosmology and Community: International Conference on Religion and Sustainable Development

Equality

By Thorkil Rothe

William Storrar: *Planetary Thinking: Towards a New Cosmology of Equality*

As the *Global* or *Globalization* has come to be associated with the worldwide exploitation of the globe by a small minority, resulting in the majority's suffering, Mr. Storrar suggested that we move to rebalance the disparity by removing the "'godly' G", as he put it, that gives the *Global* so much power and importance. The *Lobal* then appears and offers a new planetary cosmology of equality. A reconfigured Universal, which thinks globally and acts locally as opposed to accepting the colonial logic i.e. the western habits inherent in the G(lobal): thinking locally and acting globally. This practice created the foundation for the age of the Anthropocene, described by William Connolly (2017, p.4) as: "a period of two hundred to four hundred years (...) during which a series of capitalist, communist, technological, militarist, scientific and Christian practices became major *geological forces*."

The interconnectivity between the state of the natural world and the actions of humans, Bruno Latour reminds us, is by no means a novel concept to many *non-modern* societies, the exploited majority, not causing, but rather being subjected to the Anthropocene. Industrialized powers however completely disregard this insight. The *Lobal act* offers a way of listening to and taking into account those *non-modern* discourses of interconnectivity. Indeed a point from which the establishment of equality between the *Local* and the *Lobal* can commence. Mr. Storrar added that in a Pentecostal perspective this equality resonates with the gospel of the Holy Spirit to whom one needs to listen in order to understand what to do. In his conclusion, using, as he said, a "playful" comparison, Mr. Storrar associated the *earlobe* with the notion of the *Lobal*.

Dr. Tanya van Wyk: *Examining South African Population Policies at the Intersection of the SDGs of Gender Equality and Climate Action: Perspectives from Ecofeminist Spirituality and Theology*

"What is water?" asks the swimming fish and "Why are you doing this to me?!" a husband asks his wife, who is protesting for women's equal rights.

Dr. van Wyk started her lecture by reminding the audience that the most obvious socially constructed injustices are often those hardest to see and the most difficult to talk about.

In 1994 South Africa adopted a population policy aiming at influencing the population along sustainable lines of which *gender equality* (equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities) and *equity* (fair distribution of opportunities and resources) were cited as cornerstones.

Dr. van Wyk described the non-racial policy as progressive for its time, yet criticized it for neither linking population to climate action nor presenting a strategy for breaking down binary and socially entrenched gender roles. The social status and recognition of women remain tethered to her reproductive actions and choices, what Dr. van Wyk calls *the woman-nature nexus*, whereas judgement of men is allowed a much wider scope of parameters. Ecofeminist theology works on the threshold between the woman-nature nexus and the deconstruction of this “natural” state of things.

Dr. van Wyk expressed reluctance in identifying with the *mother earth language* of the former position and mentioned at the same time the possible inadequacy of the perspective of her own “western eyes”. In concluding her lecture Dr. van Wyk pointed to instances of Christian perpetuation of patriarchy, but stressed her steadfast believe that policies are unable to fight socially entrenched gender roles without the transformative potentials of Christianity.

Jørgen Thomsen: *Religious Actors’ Role in Pro-Gender-Equality – SDG 5*

As a development practitioner and policy maker, Mr. Thomsen has followed the international debate on religion and development for several years. He points out that the role of religious actors in change, has gone from being a taboo two decades ago to being a trend today.

In his presentation Mr. Thomsens discussed the *side-by-side* movement, which was conceived in 2015 with the goal of advancing gender justice working towards the UN *Agenda 2030* and more specifically the SDG 5 on gender equality.

Faith carries an important role because 84% of the world’s population identify as religious and as Mr. Thomsen stated, “if the aim is to change the inequality between women and men, then effective policies and practices need to be rooted in beliefs, values and ideas”. Religion is ambiguous and harbors both productive and counterproductive potentials, yet a recent study has shown that working with a theological and scriptural approach to change has great effect with religious leaders and communities. Gender based injustice is often connected with misinterpretations of holy scriptures according to Mr. Thomsen. Accordingly the effective commissioning of an SDG 5 policy or practice in a community, relies on a partnership and cooperation between development and faith actors.

Madlen Geidel: *Perspectives on Homosexuality in AICs*

Ms. Geidel is writing her master thesis on the topic of perspectives on homosexuality in African Initiated Churches (AICs) and presented an insight into her qualitative material.

In 37 interviews conducted in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, AIC leaders were asked about their views on homosexuality.

Whereas homosexuality remains illegal in Ghana and Nigeria, same sex marriage has been legal since 2006 in South Africa, eleven years longer than in Germany.

An interesting perspective emerging from the material was the fluctuations of the definitions of homosexuality. The three most common definitions describe homosexuality as: 1. an active choice of life, 2. the practice of non-binary gender roles or 3. a biological phenomenon. These views were however, not necessarily mutually exclusive and also not tied to national policies on homosexuality.

Additionally, between the two extremes views “it doesn’t exist” and “it is welcome” the religious leaders expressed a wide range of attitudes towards homosexuality.

Ms. Geidel thus concluded that so far, the analysis of her qualitative material draws a very mixed and multilayered picture of perspectives on homosexuality in African Initiated Churches.

Distinguished church leader lecture

Rev. Olubunmi Olushola Monye: *Gender Equality in African Pentecostal Churches*

Western informed and widely secular definitions of feminisms seem to dominate the progressive discourse on how to advance societies towards social, economic and political gender equality. In Rev. Monye’s talk on gender-equality in Pentecostal churches however, a fundamentally different experience was voiced.

Every person has a gift from the Holy Spirit in her or him and touching her earlobe Rev. Monye stressed the importance of feeling and listening to the Spirit and working towards the realization of this unique gift, regardless of the opposition and oppression one might encounter on the way. Having been a shy person herself, she realized her own gift at a prayer meeting, when she was encouraged to lead a prayer. Her gift was to preach the Gospel and be a leader of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). However, this would never have happened without someone encouraging her, believing in her and empowering her and that is the Pentecostal message: to be a voice for the voiceless.

According to Rev. Monye, today's leaders are the voice of themselves and no one else. Consequently, sustainability and equality remain unsolved issues.

Something else, which seemed to materialize between Rev. Monye and her audience is not easy to recount in writing, yet its significance calls for an attempt. Echoes of Rev. Monye's evangelizing experience became increasingly articulate and occasionally her speech departed the literal domain of words and entered a space where the audience engaged with and responded to the intensity and rhythm of her talk. At the end, people appeared ready to turn away from stiff academic routine and follow the call of Rev. Monye, in one way or the other...

Conclusion

In conclusion these presentations leave us with some different perspectives on equality:

According to William Storrar we should use resources in both science and theology to re-establish an equality between the *Lobal* and the Local and between the few powerful and the many powerless in the world.

With her critical approach to eco-feminism Dr. Tanya van Wyk criticized the socially entrenched woman-nature nexus that is judging women on the basis of their reproductive behaviour.

The development practitioner Jørgen Thomsen reminded us that development actors need to work closely together with faith actors in seeking to promote gender equality and Madlen Geidel problematized terminologies surrounding homosexuality by showing that it is understood in very different and multilayered ways in different African Initiated Churches.

According to Rev. Olubunmi Olushola Monye equality is a question of women being allowed and encouraged to find and utilize their unique gift. To achieve that, people need to listen to the Holy Spirit, the powerful have to empower the weak and to be a voice for the voiceless. Finally, Rev. Monye's talk hinted that not only the literal meaning of words, but also orality might harbor great capacities when it comes to moving people towards greater equality.

Reference:

Connolly, William E.: *Facing the planetary. Entangled humanism and the politics of swarming*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017.