

World Council of Churches
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

**Interrogating and Redefining Power
Consultation of Younger Theologians from the South**

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An Interpretative Report

In response to the call for a sustained process of theological reflection on power during the Decade to Overcome Violence and as a follow up to the Consultation in Crêt Bérard, Puidoux, Switzerland in December 2003, this consultation focused on “younger theologians from the south”. The purpose of this accent was to explore their distinct perspectives on power as those whose theology is shaped in contexts of intense struggles for life, justice and liberation. The co-sponsorship of this pioneering venture by the theological concerns desk of the Christian Conference of Asia, together with the partnership of the All Africa Council of Churches and the logistical support offered by McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Chiang Mai, and the Church of Christ in Thailand, all contributed to making this a very productive event.

The 27 participants - theological educators and social activists - came from Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific and brought with them their specific contextual and experiential perspectives as well as their distinct tools of analysis to interrogate and redefine power. This week-long exploration was initiated by two major presentations. Dr. Carolyn Medel-Anonuevo, from the Philippines, in her “Unpacking Power: From understanding to action” laid bare the complexity of the issues that are at stake in any discourse on power. Prof. Kim Yong Bock, from South Korea, in his “Theological reflection on power in the context of globalisation” highlighted certain necessary methodological tools for interrogating and redefining power, particularly in the shadow of the emerging empire. The consultation was preceded by an intensive preparatory process. Each participant came with a paper on the theme from his/her own contextual/ experiential perspective (see names and titles at the end). These were placed under three broad categories – *People’s power versus political power*, *Biblical and theological perspectives on power*, and *Power in interpersonal relationships* - and were discussed in groups for one and a half days. This process of listening to each other helped them to discern the points of convergence as well as of difference and to set a common agenda for further exploration. The challenges/issues thus identified were clustered into four main groups – *Biblical and theological perspectives*, *Faces and experiences of power*, *Unity and solidarity* and the *Power of religion and culture*. – which provided the agenda for the working groups for the rest of the meeting, culminating in a spirited discussion in the plenary on the last day. This process has resulted in outlining their common understandings for further exploration. The following are the highlights:

1. Confronting the empire: Need of a public theology

This discussion on power from the perspective of the south could not ignore the reality of the empire and economic globalisation - its most visible manifestation. The common experience that they identified was the continuing destruction caused to their people, communities, and environment resulting from the past and indeed persistent colonisation of their countries by the present military and economic superpowers. Reiterating time and again that macro-realities impact micro-level life, the consultation asserted that the theological task cannot afford to confine itself to the sphere of the individual, the local and the religious any longer but should interact actively with those forces which are resisting the empire and all other abusive and dehumanising powers. Affirming that the abuse and denial of life is contrary to the spirit of the gospel, the consultation pointed out that the challenges posed by neo-liberal economic globalisation, the war on terror, pre-emptive wars, militarisation, increasing poverty, religious fundamentalism, the culture of violence, etc. must be the subject matters of theology in today’s world. Theology must play its part in effecting positive changes in the way we live and relate with one another as human beings, pointing in the inevitable direction of political/public theology. In just the same way as the radical vision of God’s reign (*basileia tou theou*) confronted the oppressive power of the

Roman empire, the consultation asserted that confronting the hegemonic powers and their project of the empire is an imperative for Christians in the world today.

2. Assertion of subjecthood: Themselves as their own point of reference

While focusing on these realities participants were fully aware that their viewpoint stemmed from their countries of origin: Africa, Asia, Pacific, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Their perspective is that of the disempowered and the de-peopled in their own particular historical contexts. Informed by the Indonesian word *apakala* ("What time is it?"), they decided to call themselves AAPACALA, an acronym that does not only express their geographical locations, but also highlights the kairotic point at which to assert their subjecthood - an identity that does not refer to the north but to themselves as their own point of reference. It was their attempt to redefine the south as the geopolitical line of resistance to the empire. They were also conscious of and affirmed that there are elements in the north that also radically question the empire and therefore have committed themselves to build solidarity with such initiatives and to build an identity arising out of the dynamics of resistance.

3. The predicament of the resistance movements

In its attempt to analyse the power of the disempowered, the consultation took note of the way many people's movements all over the world are resisting oppressive powers in non-violent ways and making a difference. However, it was also concerned about some people's movements and initiatives - their fragmented nature, diversified pursuits, incomplete notions of justice and equality, inability to sustain themselves during prolonged struggles, vulnerability to the manipulation of the powerful, and their lack of ideological cohesion. It also took note of the way the hegemonic powers often use social identities such as tribalism, nationalism, ethnocentrism and religious loyalties to counter the emerging solidarity among the poor and the powerless across religious, ethnic, racial, etc., boundaries. As part of this reflection, one trait that was pointed out by many was the lack of a shared understanding of ideological goals. For example some women's movements, in their struggle for equality and justice for women, tend to ignore the clamour for justice and fair treatment of those oppressed by the evils of racism, casteism, etc. Similarly, in contexts such as South Africa where the power of the disempowered successfully overthrew the apartheid, classism seems to be making its way and is finding itself legitimised by the value orientations of the market economy. The exclusion of the powerless, the weak and the numerically small continues to be overlooked even as larger struggles against systems and structures of domination and discrimination continue.

The consultation therefore agreed that since movements can lose their sense of purpose and direction and also turn oppressive as long as they operate with limited goals and incomplete notions of justice and liberation, the mutual affirmation of goals is necessary to counter the onslaught of the hegemonic powers. Dialogical interaction with these ideological struggles of peoples is perhaps a necessary step in the direction of discerning the purpose of theological vocation in the world today in order to support and enhance the signs of God's reign wherever these are visible.

4. Instrumentality of religion and culture in redefining power

Religion being a decisive factor in all human dynamics in all the participants' contexts, many examples were shared of how religion and culture have been both sources of oppression and liberation. The consultation warned of an impending threat to the ethical integrity of our generation in view of the rise of the religious right all over the world, the way religious language and symbols are abused to serve the interests of empire and other hegemonic powers and to legitimise oppressive structures, traditions and cultures.

This discussion was based on an extensive reflection on Jesus' alternative of the power of service to power that dominates (Mk.10.35-45) and on the awareness of the way that this has often been misinterpreted in order to justify or glorify subjugation and submission. The concept of servanthood as a whole was criticised since it seems to suggest a reversal of roles that does not actually aim at eliminating unequal relationships. Participants also emphasised that Jesus' assertion needs to be seen essentially as a call to those in power to make the served ones their masters and to affirm and safeguard their subjecthood. Leaders are given the responsibility of making people subjects and therefore any leader or system that does not make people subjects

is an abusive power (cf. Kim Yong-Bock). With the understanding that the victims of any form of violence are those whose dignity as human beings is denied or of whom such a denial is legitimised by religious and social structures, the consultation emphasised the need of religions to uphold the dignity of all human beings together with the integrity of creation and to purge themselves of all derisive and defective anthropologies which discriminate and dehumanise. It pointed out that rebuilding the subjecthood of those who have developed fatalistic attitudes towards their predicament of poverty and misery is a challenge that any religion cannot turn away from if it claims to be one that affirms life and justice for all.

Bringing together people from a variety of rich cultural traditions that have a deep respect for the sanctity of the created order and sharing stories of victims of many natural and man-made disasters, the consultation highlighted the need to shift from anthropocentric theological methodologies to the eco-cosmic, affirming and taking other epistemologies into account in the task of doing theology. In a fast-changing and pluralistic world, Christian theology cannot remain insular but must be engaged in a creative dialogical process. Realising the essential mutuality and interdependence of all forms and expressions of life is what God's power is all about and the theological vocation must be pursued in this direction. The images of "weaving" and "tree" figured prominently in the discussions as models of shared power and of the self-limiting nature of such power.

5. A new ecumenical vision from the south!

With the purpose of discerning new theological directions from the experience of the churches and people in the south, this discussion could not overlook the role and relevance of the ecumenical movement and its organisational expressions in today's world. The consultation acclaimed the way these have responded with courage and creativity to the demands of the time. However it took note of their formative factors - the backdrop of the Cold War in an ideologically divided (bi-polar) world, and the theological accompaniment of western Christianity, its assumptions and priorities. It argued that the challenges of the 21st century must impact the processes which determine the future shape and direction of the ecumenical movement. These are: the uni-polar world driven by the ideologies of the empire and market forces, the increasing institutionalisation of injustice, the commodification of life and earth resources, the rapid fragmentation of human communities in a pluralistic world, the culture of violence, the continued plunder and degradation of the planet on the one hand, and on the other hand the growing and large scale mobilisation of people – the disempowered and the excluded -, their new allegiances and their ideological struggles against the forces of injustice and oppression. This implies that partnerships with all expressions of Christianity and with people of other faiths and ideologies need to be sought on the basis of their commitment to "life and justice for all". Openness to such partnerships has the potential to impact our cherished notions of ecumenism and its purposes. Since the world is guided by the ethic of dominating power (power over) it is perhaps necessary to develop these partnerships on the principle of shared power with those who yearn for precisely this kind of power (power with).

Holding that the south is the hub of experience of the empire's destructive potential as well as of resistance to it, the consultation opined that the south needs to be the locus of engagement for any exercise to re-vision the ecumenical movement. However, the consultation also took note of the fragmented nature of Christianity in the south. Even if one claims that Christianity today is predominantly a religion of the south and is growing, the consultation warned that much of the theological orientations of the churches in the south are rooted in traditional as well as modern western Christianity and that there are hardly any points of convergence. Here lies the challenge for the theologians in the south, the consultation pointed out: to encourage and assist churches and communities to understand and express their faith rooted in their context and on the anvil of their collective experience and to facilitate ecumenical convergence on the issues of life, people and the world.

While challenging the ecumenical movement to be creative in proposing alternatives, the consultation also warned about the tendency to work towards global/uniform solutions to complex issues and challenges. Effective and necessary though these might seem, the consultation said that standardisation is a term of the dominant powers and in a divided, unjust world, globalisation or one common vision can only serve the interests of the preponderant. It therefore warned that the ecumenical movement bear this reality in mind and refrain from imposing or absolutising solutions formulated in one context with distinct tools of analysis and vantage points on the rest.

What is needed instead is an affirmation of the varied expressions and pursuits of ecumenism and the fostering of ecumenical partnerships which grow in a spirit of solidarity that includes mutual learning and mutual affirmation.

The consultation was also critical of the way ecumenical organisations at various levels continue to be monopolised by a few which as a result remains unseen and unheard of at many local levels. Women and young people feel excluded. Some of these organisations, it said, seem more concerned about preserving the ecumenical tradition than strengthening up the movement so that it becomes an agent of change in the world.

6. Re-imagining God

The consultation wrestled with the question: “How do we still hold on to the inherited images of a ‘powerful’ God?” Considering that these were conceived in politically and economically powerful western contexts, it said that cherishing these notions of God in a world where the majority are the victims of power is not only a theological aberration but also a betrayal of their hopes of justice and liberation.

“A gracious God or a powerful God!”, was the title of one of the presentations. Agreeing with the Crêt Bérard consultation, participants insisted that it was time that we gave up the images of a powerful and triumphant God which were used as mascots for colonial expansion and continue to be used by the forces of the empire. Holding that traditional theologies have always tended to pacify those who are hurt or suffering rather than to liberate and restore the victims of power structures, the consultation asserted: “We have witnessed the pervasiveness of death in the south, and the death of Jesus on the Cross points to God’s *sobra na, tama na* (a phrase popularised by the Filipino people’s movements meaning, “enough is enough”). This also testifies to the participants’ determination to search for new ways of doing theology from their experiences of suffering and of overcoming the same. The consultation then pointed towards the need to reconstruct the images of God in ways that affirm the finer, life-affirming and life-enhancing attributes of God and God’s purposes for the created order. They echoed the Crêt Bérard assertion which stated that we must not only talk about Christ as “the slain lamb of God” but also as “a hen gathering her brood under her wings (Mt. 23: 37)”. Womanist / feminist and many people-based theologies in the south have been offering creative possibilities to re-image God and to re-read the Bible, they pointed out.

7. Discerning the nature of political witness of Christians in multi-religious contexts

Since most participants came from predominantly multi-religious contexts or from situations where there is hostility towards Christianity, the churches’ inability to be involved in or associated with political struggles was an issue that figured prominently in the discussions. A sense of powerlessness or a form of pragmatic realism often seem to dominate churches’ responses to socio-political challenges in these places, resulting in their opting for traditional forms of *diakonia*. The consultation held the view that in a power-driven world, the search for new and imaginative ways of practising Christian faith cannot be given up for easy and established ways. Power needs to be understood not in terms of physical or numerical strength but perhaps as a moral and spiritual resource enabling each individual to be an agent of transformation and healing in all situations. Reaffirming the call to transform and to be transformed, the consultation said that power should not be qualified by what we have but by the extent of transformation that it is able to effect. Aligning oneself with the progressive forces in such situations was pointed out as a necessary step in this direction.

8. Exercising the power of interpretation

The Chiang Mai consultation held the reclaiming of the power of interpretation as a key instrument in the struggle against the hegemonic powers. A similar point about these powers that manipulate systems of knowledge and overwhelm the common sense of communities, was made at Crêt Bérard. Participants, therefore, upheld the interrogation, deconstruction, demystification, and unlearning of inherited hermeneutics of the Bible and the re-reading of the Bible as a story of struggle against powers and principalities. In doing so, it said a re-appropriation of the Bible as God’s word from the perspective of AAPACALA is possible. Acknowledging the life-affirming potential of the scriptures of their neighbours, the participants also called for a re-reading of the Bible alongside texts of other established religions and indigenous traditions. (The Ecumenical

Hermeneutics study of Faith and Order has also identified life-giving practices as the bases for a meaningful discourse to understand each other.) Commitment for justice and life for all were seen as the lens through which this re-reading must take place. However, it also said that the task of interpretation must be mindful of non-literate communities and their social locations which are often on the margins of the mainstream and also attempt to draw on their tools and mechanisms of interpretation.

The consultation described AAPACALA as an initiative of concerned younger theologians from the south, who realise that responding to the geo-political challenges of our time through a constant interaction with them is an essential function of theology. AAPACALA, to that extent, is a new ecumenical space that facilitates this perhaps long exploration for a new ecumenical vision from the perspective of those who are disinherited and disempowered. The participants in the end have committed themselves to the task of continuing this conversation, of sharing information and experiences and developing bonds of solidarity and partnership. They have also urged the ecumenical instruments – the World Council of Churches, Christian Conference of Asia, All Africa Council of Churches, Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), Pacific Conference of Churches and the Caribbean Conference of Churches to encourage and support this endeavour.

Names and titles of the presenters and their papers:

1. People's power versus political power

- George Buenaventura, Philippines:.....*Reflections on ecumenical mass movements in the Philippines*
- Chan Ka Wai, Hong Kong:*Power is not defined by what we have: A reflection on the recent political incidents in Hong Kong*
- Shiluinla Jamir, India:*Deprivileging hegemony in the context of saffronisation in Northeast India: Weaving alternatives through people's resources*
- San No Thuan, Myanmar:*A spirituality of social involvement in the light of the oppression of Christian ethnic minorities in Myanmar*
- Ramathate Dolomo, South Africa:.....*How political power can be used to serve rather than to dominate people: South Africa yesterday and today*
- Kanku Tubenzele, D.R. Congo:.....*Towards a new ethical order of power in Africa*
- Alvin Gongora, Colombia:*Engaging the powers: Reflections on resistance from the Andean region in South America*

2. Biblical and theological perspectives on power

- Muriel Montenegro, Philippines:.....*Shall still cling to the old rugged cross: A feminist critique of the atonement theories*
- Yani Yoo, S. Korea:.....*How the powerful play their Bible games: A reflection on Numbers 12*
- Jayachitra.L., India:*Deconstructing Christ-Church power model: Affirming the dignity of Dalit women*
- Deonal Sinaga, Indonesia:*Biblical resources on the responsible use of power*
- Aye New, Myanmar:*Empowerment and disempowerment in the perspective of women in Myanmar*
- Leslie Shyllon, Sierra Leone:.....*God's power in God's Church: facing the realities of the times*
- Apelu Poe, Samoa:*Biblical reflection on the world situation from the perspective of the Pacific*
- Kamabti Uriam, Fiji:*A Gracious God or a powerful God: Rethinking theology in the light of contemporary issues in the Pacific Islands*

3. Power in interpersonal relationships

- Yuri Horie, Japan:.....*Power in relation to the structure of 'heterosexism': through the perspective of Lesbian / Gay Christians in Japan*
- Chanaporn Jaisaodee, Thailand:*Power in interpersonal relationships*
- Surasakk Kittiruangseng, Thailand:*Deconstruction and reconstruction of Biblical models in the light of contextual challenges*
- Valentin Dedji, Benin:*Liberating power versus alienating power: A Christological reflection*
- Arnold Temple, Kenya:.....*Empowering for the fullness of life: In search of the Church's prophetic voice*
- Eunice Karanja, Kenya:.....*From competition to complementarity: Gender Reconstruction in Contemporary Africa*
- Joy Abdul Mohan, Trinidad:.....*A Caribbean women's perspective on empowerment as an alternative to dominating power*
- Luciana Rodriguez, Argentina:*Power over the Invisibles: Reflections on my work with disabled children*