

**Living at the edge of empire:
can Christianity prevail and be effective?
A theological response to the historical struggle between
empire and Christianity**

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Abstract

This study is an historical delineation of the struggle between empire and Christianity. After presenting characteristics of hegemony, empire and Christianity, imperialistic tendencies and empire are described historically in terms of the domination of the private, social, economic and military worlds of nations. America's predispositions regarding empire and colonialism, South Africa's (neo-) colonialism and leanings toward empire in Africa, and the reactions of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Lutheran World Federation are researched and portrayed.

The historical research is underscored by a perspective on the concerns surrounding gospel and empire. The study concludes with a theological perspective on Christ's reign over the entire world, and a brief reflection on how the injustice and self-enrichment of the empire is conquered by his love, service and justice, and the transformative engagement of Christianity with empire.

Introduction

The ambiguity of the struggle between empire and Christianity

Christianity originated half a century after the founding of the Roman Empire, and throughout most of its over 2 000-year-old history Christianity has functioned inside imperial empires.¹ Going back to evangelical roots,

¹ *There were 60 intentional empires in recorded history over all epochs* (cf. Hall 2011: 9).

A few examples:

- The Roman Empire: It included the Celtic regions and the Mediterranean Hellenized states.
- The Mongol Empire was the largest contiguous empire from Southeast Asia to Europe.

Christianity as a life of service, love and justice was fundamentally incommensurate with a dictating empire. There was indeed something incongruent between early Christianity and the Roman Empire, with Christianity becoming the official religion in a short span of 300 years. In a sense, the crucified Christ almost became a symbol of the empire: conversely, “Jesus was crucified not only because He threatened the oppressive hegemony of Rome, but also because He named the hypocrisy of the religious who made an easy alliance with Rome” (Hall 2011:1). Empires have adopted symbols of power, success and control, as they signify rules of overpowering, jurisdiction, hegemony and supremacy. How, then, is this centuries-old ambiguous correlation between empire and Christianity to be explained? This question is the historical focus of this article.

The particular emphasis of this research is on the historical manner in which Christianity has often become “a servant” of “empire”; and the question then is whether Christianity can be saved from entanglement with, and the predicaments of, empire.² Can Christianity prevail and be effective in and despite an overbearing empire?

A protracted history of the entanglement between empire and Christianity

Characterisations of empire and Christianity – a strained relationship

An empire is a political and social organisation, indicating the realm under the dominance of a monarch, or monarchical government. Politics or the affairs of a state are the theory and practice of government, maintaining legislative and executive power. Empire consists of an authoritarian political

- The British Empire included a quarter of the world's population.
 - The US is the first global economic, military and cultural ‘empire’ (cf. Vance, LM 2004:1).

² *An historical characterisation of ‘empire’ vis-à-vis ‘hegemony’:*
Empire means internal political control in a country, *and* over other countries, with a system of administration, economics, technology, administration and militarism; this may be *via* indirect rule. *Empire* is the negation of political freedom and self-determination.
Hegemony means a dominant influence within a group of countries within international political systems, comprising autonomous countries, enjoying equality, sovereignty and rights.
 Historical lessons from the *empire/hegemony* dialectic:

- *Previously*, but especially over the last five centuries, *empires* produced instability, disorder and war.
- Leading powers can maintain durable, tolerable *hegemony*, achieving order, stability and peace.
- The US as a ‘wannaby’ *empire*, is not an ‘empire’ in the classical sense, but was on the brink during Bush’s presidency. The danger lay in the imperialistic tendencies to control other states economically, culturally and militarily – becoming a ‘modern empire’ (cf. Schroeder, 2003:1-4).

system of administration and dominating rule within a country, and in addition a dictating military, economic and cultural influence over other countries.

Christianity, the world's major religion, consists contemporarily of 2 billion believers, and stems from faith in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the world's Lord and Saviour. Faith refers both to the believers' act of trust in Christ for salvation, and to the content of their faith, renewing their life and their social and political domains completely through the Holy Spirit. Christianity is also more than a belief: it generates a "culture" of justice, equality and loving service, a set of convictions and ways of life. The representatives of Christianity are the churches, which comprise communities of believing Christians. Paul of Tarsus, Jewish by birth, Roman by citizenship and Greek by culture, was converted to Christianity after having an overwhelming vision of Christ, and he became Christianity's pre-eminent missionary and foundational theologian. As a small movement Christianity spread rapidly to Rome, Asia Minor, Egypt and Greece, and constituted itself as a "world church".

The relationship between empire and Christianity is the correlation between political and faith spheres. This affiliation shifted from the state (e.g. the Roman Empire) dominating religion, to religion (the popes of the Middle Ages) dominating the state; and to recent attempts to separate church and state. This is one of the most significant recurring historical themes.

Jesus' command to "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17) fostered the invalid interpretation of the development of separate rival church and state "institutions": the approach here is *not* that of Christianity as an institution in competition with the state as institution, but rather that of Christianity as a transforming influence. As Christ said, the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world". This rivalry of often "intervening" in the so-called "realm of the other", involving many disputes over power, property, law, education and authority, however, is a key feature of our history.

Metaphors for the connection between empire and Christianity

Diverse metaphors portray the relationship between empire and Christianity

- The "knot"

Strehlow (2007:55) speaks about the "knot" between empire and Christian faith: "All my life I have had difficulty untying knots. Knots bother me ...". Indeed, in history it has been extremely difficult to untie the knot between Christian faith and empire, as the mistaken assumption is that there has to be a knot, or that one has to 'dominate' the other.

The link is a “secure knot that tied faith and citizenship together”. Such a knot satisfies a basic need of empire for a religious foundation for its claim to glory (Strehlow 2007:57). Strehlow (2007:59) explains: “I had found the knot of citizenship, faith and salvation knotted in and around individualism.” This seems as if faith is understood only in individual terms, not relating to the structures of society, and also as if citizenship is regarded only in singular terms, relating individuals to the state, ignoring the structures of politics. This is the major weakness of Christianity: addressing the relationship between politics and faith only in individualistic terms and not in the transformation of societal structures.

- **Captivity**

Pallmeyer (2005) suggests the theme of the captivity of Christianity. The author shows convincingly, however, that Christianity was not particularly coerced into “servanthood”, but was rather a “willing captive” because of imperialism, internalised within Christianity itself.

There are also metaphors which hide the disadvantages of the intermingling between empire and Christianity: “co-operation”, “compliance”, “teamwork” and “alliance” may at any time become ideological metaphors, concealing a dependency relationship regarding Christianity.

In the responses to empire by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) the metaphors “midst” and “shadow” of the empire are employed (Bloomquist 2007; Mateus 2006).

An historical perspective shows that whatever metaphor is used, whether we speak of a knot, captivity, midst, shadow or travel companions, the collaboration between empire and Christianity has assumed epidemic proportions over the centuries.

Here the “knot” between empire and Christianity focuses on how the anti-imperialistic characteristic of Christianity was lost under Emperor Constantine; the intermingling between colonialism and Christianity; the American “empire” as a special case; and exposing a possible ‘sub-empire’, South Africa in Africa.

Constantine: from anti-imperialism to captivity

Under Emperor Constantine, Christianity became a “servant” of the empire rather than something resisting authoritarian domination. Hofmeyr’s (2008:612) interpretation of Christianity becoming the Christian faith of the empire is perhaps too positive; he contends that the Emperor’s contribution to Christianity was greater than his authoritarian rule and his ulterior motives to dominate through “power games”.

Hofmeyr's conviction is challenged by scholars who lament the fact that the assimilation of Christianity under Constantine was virtually completed. Bosch (1980:102), for one, argues that the era of Constantine augured in some fateful years for mission. The measures got out of hand, culminating in 380 when the orthodox faith was declared the only religious form permitted; the co-operating role of the bishop of Rome and the patriarch of Alexandria are recorded. A stark consequence was that "the church lost its pilgrim character" and settled for selfish advantages (Bosch 1980:103, emphasis added).

Pallmeyer (2005:128) claims that the nonviolent and anti-imperial approach of Christianity ended in 313. Despite the counter-imperial approach of the gospel, the Christian transformative influence was co-opted, diluted and combined with imperial power (Taylor 2006:418). The church, in which all participated with equal status, regardless of gender, income and race, became a hierarchy. The status hierarchy of Rome had to be reflected in the church: "the *ecclesia* took on the shape of imperial Rome" and took on "the mind-set of empire. Its ministry and liturgy conjoin those of the imperial cult" (Howard-Brook & Gwyther 1999:193, 236, 261).

The question is whether the knot is so tight that it can hardly be loosened in two thousand years. Taylor (2006:418) claims: "Christianity has taken on an official form that has made ruthless, common cause with imperialism and repression".

It is undeniable that the Constantinian era saw a very powerful church, relying on support of the empire. Centuries on under colonialism, when European states took their turn in world domination, the church and the colonising state even collaborated in mission.

The intermingling of colonialism and mission was a new phase of "Christianity and empire":

Fellow travellers: colonialism and mission

The emergence of the American "empire", since the Second World War, resulted in an eclipse of the colonial empires of Britain, Portugal, Spain and Germany. The ambitions of European countries toward world domination are well documented. Here the focus is on empires' achievements through colonialism and mission.

Historically, the emergence of Euro-American empires started with Columbus in 1492 and da Gama in 1498: the same time as the modern missionary expansion. Western "imperium and mission" began with the Iberian Catholic colonisation, based on the division of the world into the Spanish West and the Portuguese East by the Pope (Amjad-Ali in Bloomquest 2007:26).

Spain and Portugal subjugated the Latin American peoples swiftly and brutally; it took a little more than fifty years to subdue the entire continent. The conquest of Latin America captured the “land of the Golden Fleece” with its gold and silver. “The essence of empire consists in the combination of the quest for glory, wealth and evangelisation.”

Not all Catholic missionaries agreed with the violent defeating of indigenous people, and then evangelising them. Las Casa started out as a colonialist and a “slaveholder”, a friend of Columbus, but he underwent a profound conversion (Thomas 1995:27).

Incensed by the exploitation and murder of the Indians, he made a commitment in 1514 to challenge the injustices of the system. Evangelisation should be through peaceful means only. In resisting the empire that he helped create, he exposed the Spanish crime: they had invaded a foreign country, establishing a “tyranny”; their control had been illegitimate; they had established an unjust servitude; and by the violation of another people’s country and freedom, they had betrayed Spain’s missionary vocation as a “Christian country”. We have to claim: “the emancipatory and counter imperial power of the Jesus movement never was completely eclipsed” (Taylor 2006:418, emphasis added).

Christian mission and empire became travelling companions as part of “the global expansion of Western Christian nations” (Bosch 1991:302-313). The “high imperial era” of 1880-1920 reveals the disastrous entwinement between expansionism and mission.

Livingstone in Africa addressed Christianity and commerce:

My object in going into the country ... was to instruct the natives... of Christianity, but... circumstances prevented my living amongst them more than seven years, amongst which were considerations ... of the slave system carried on by the Dutch Boers. I resolved to go into the country beyond, and ... for the purposes of commerce, it was necessary to have a path to the sea. I might have gone on instructing the natives in religion, but *as civilization and Christianity must go on together*, I was obliged to find a path to the sea... that I should not sink to the level of the natives ...

Those two pioneers of civilization – Christianity and commerce – should ever be inseparable ... (Thomas 1995:67-68, emphasis added).

South Africa has not been colonial in the classical sense, but similar sentiments were echoed by a cabinet minister, De Wet-Nel, in 1958 in his propagation of ‘separate development’. “One of the reasons why ... people

are ... indifferent to mission, was their inability to grasp the political significance of mission work.” Only if and when “we”, the white Afrikaner Christians, succeed in incorporating blacks into Protestant churches, “will the white nation and all other population groups in South Africa have a hope for the future”. If this does not happen, “our policy, our program of legislation, and all our plans will be doomed to failure”. Consequently, “every boy and girl who loves South Africa, should commit him- and herself to active mission work, because mission work is not only God’s work, it is also work for the sake of the nation” (Bosch 1991:304).

This was not always true of all imperial powers, however, that mission started simultaneously with the colonial enterprise. The Germans, initially anyway, had a “pristine innocence” (Bosch 1991:308), which disappeared, however, after the Berlin Conference of 1884 when the scramble for colonies began.

It was also not true of all missionaries that they uncritically colluded with the colonial authorities. John Philip in South Africa was an “indefatigable champion of the oppressed coloured peoples of the colony and often clashed with colonial officials about their policies”. The self-same Philip, however, stated: “... *our missionaries ... are ... extending British interests, British influence, and the British empire*” (Bosch 1991:307, emphasis added).

After a bleak picture of the collusion of Western mission with colonialism Bosch (1991:312) challenges us:

The issue is more serious than that of the collusion of mission with the colonial powers ... we might ... believe that the colonialist traits of Western mission belonged only to a particular period. We would then ... overlook ... that this relationship is ... part of the ... serious project of the advance of Western technological civilization ... such a narrowness of perspective may fail to do justice to the implications of neo-colonialism, which is ... a continuing and more subtle form of Western dominance.

The American “empire”

America is indeed seen as an “empire”. This is a consensus between strange bedfellows, neoconservatives and leftists alike. “... in the mainstream media and political discourse the concept of “empire” and “*Pax Americana*” are mentioned frequently and prominently” (Koshy 2006:335).

For now the focus is on Christianity and empire, and also on neo-colonialism and religion, in reference to the US. Our attention is on the moral and theological justification of America as “empire”.

Firstly, statements regarding liturgical elements have emerged, creating a mythical world in which America is regarded as the prime 'good', commissioned by God, to fight 'evil' using military strategy.

Secondly, Crossan (2007), Chernus (2007), Horsley (2003) and Pallmeyer (2005) introduce theological arguments:

America with a mission

President Bush advanced a kind of "missiology", which is an aberration, a sort of political "mission". "... and that mission", says Bush, "comes from our most basic beliefs. We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is a democratic peace – a peace founded on the dignity and rights of every man and woman. America acts in this cause ... yet we understand our special calling: This great republic will lead the cause of freedom." This reminds one starkly of the Roman Empire and its *Pax Romana*, and markedly, this "mission" was in response to the attacks of 9/11: "Our responsibility ... is clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil" (Pallmeyer 2005:1, 17, 103).

This was Bush's shocking political "mission" which included military power:

The advance of freedom is more than an interest we pursue. It is a calling we follow ... As a people dedicated to civil rights, we are driven to define the human rights of others ... America seeks to expand, not the borders of our country, but the realm of liberty (Pallmeyer 2005:103, emphasis added).

Bush's political "mission" is in a bizarre fashion a mix between the noblest of values and the brutal exercise of military power:

Great harm has been done to us ... And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment ... The advance of human freedom ... now depends on us ... The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain (Pallmeyer 2005:103).

These quotations expose a superficial and misguided political understanding of political "mission". Probably these types of statements have disappeared from the scene with President Bush. What will not go away, however, are the deep theological roots of empire:

A nation with a profound Christian theological foundation

“American foreign policy is built on a deep foundation of Christian theology” (Chernus 2007). The “theology of empire” contains a type of “identity theology” in the American understanding of being a “biblical people” (Horsley 2003). There is also the “theology of the dichotomy between good and evil”; furthermore, there is the “theology of realism”; and there is the “violence of God theology” (Pallmeyer 2005).

- Theology of identity

The identity of the Americans has to do with their self-understanding as a “biblical people” (Horsley 2003:1-5). They modelled themselves on Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the covenant with God on Mount Sinai. On this basis President Jefferson proposed that the “Great Seal of the US” should display Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea.

This questionable modelling based the American identity upon a “manifest destiny”, a belief in a “preordained God-sanctioned mission to fulfil”. It is captured in statements like, for example, “the last, best hope of Earth” by President Lincoln (1862). Pallmeyer (2005:129) summarises the “theology of identity”:

... the idea of a particular people being chosen by God; the notion that God works through an exceptional nation to accomplish divine purposes; the association of salvation with defeat of enemies ... the belief that historical prominence is a sign of God’s blessing ... (emphasis added).

The only time seemingly that an American president used the term “manifest destiny” *expressis verbis* was in 1920 after World War I in a message to Congress:

*... we all realize that ... Democracy is being put upon its final test. The Old World is ... suffering from a wanton rejection of the principle of democracy and a substitution of the principle of autocracy ... without the authority and sanction, of the multitude. This is the time ... when Democracy should prove ... its spiritual power to prevail. It is sure the *manifest destiny* of the United States [is] to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail (emphasis added).*

These approaches have inculcated in Americans the identity of being a “chosen people”, the “New Israel”, the *Nova Roma* (Crossan 2007:2; Horsley 2007:137-140, 404-414; Koshy 2006:339).

- Theology of good and evil

Emanating from this kind of self-understanding is the dichotomising of the world between good and evil. Pallmeyer (2005:42) speaks of “Our Goodness, Their Pathologies”. In Bush’s interpretation, speaking after 9/11, “they” were the terrorists and “we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world” (Pallmeyer 2005:43). Bush’s discourse often contains biblical allusions “in which the enemy is characterised as outlaws, murderers and terrorists. *By converting secular political speech into religious discourse America’s adversaries are identified as enemies of God*” (Pallmeyer 2005:125, emphasis added).

- Theology of realism

America followed the “theology of realism”. The theology of Reinhold Niebuhr is heavily implicated and reference is made to Niebuhr’s construction of original sin. Chernus blames Niebuhr for his attack on liberal Christianity in the 1930s and, in particular, the Social Gospel movement, which, according to Chernus’ interpretation, has powerfully influenced American foreign policy in the first third of the 20th century. Chernus shows how Niebuhr’s understanding of original sin, as all people being born naturally selfish and impulsive, has been distorted by neoconservative Americans to suit and to satisfy their desire for “empire” (Chernus 2007:78).

Americans found a strange comfort in the world as Niebuhr described it. They perceived “a jungle” where evildoers had to be hunted down and destroyed. Though frightening, this world would become the stage for simplistic dramas of good against evil. The moral certainty of being on the side of “good” – the side of God – can provide security that makes up for constant terror.

Chernus points out that that was not what Niebuhr had in mind. He says that it is particularly when neoconservatives apply their views to international relations that they deviate from Niebuhr’s teaching.

The neoconservatives assume an often vaguely defined “hierarchy of nations”. At the bottom are the enemies of America, irrational monsters. Above them are ‘neutral’ nations, and then US allies near the top; at the top is the US because its national motives are pure, somehow untainted by original sin.

Chernus typifies this as a mythical world into which the likes of President Bush have tapped, calling war against terrorism “a monumental

struggle between good and evil. But good will prevail ... we all know that this is one nation, under God". The amalgamation of Christianity and a nation on this basis amounts to appalling idolatry.

The anatomy of empire

Koshy (2006:335-347) offers a fairly helpful structure for analysing the global empire. For him the question is not whether the US is an empire, but only what type of empire it is. This is debatable in view of endnote 1, where it seems that one can regard America not as a classic example of "empire", but as an overpowering state with hegemonic and imperialistic trends. Koshy (2006:335-347), however, argues that as much as the mechanics of implementing empire might have changed, the underlying logic remains the same:

Empires operate, not in terms of conducting relations with states, but in terms of prevailing over the relations among states; that is, empires try to abolish the structural anarchy of the international system by assimilating states into an overarching order.

Koshy differentiates between the military doctrines, the ideology and the economics of the empire. He makes a forceful comparison between the Roman Empire and the American "empire": regarding America's invasion of Iraq the similarities with Rome are the military occupation, regime change and 'direct' control of economic resources. There is a lesson from the "Roman handbook": "It is not enough to have vast military strength, it must also be feared by the rest of the world."

The dimensions of empire are as follows (cf. Koshy 2006:335-347):

Military doctrines and wars of aggression

Under Bush and Rumsfeld, military policy transformed from a "threat-based strategy" into a "capabilities-based approach". This was organising the US forces against unfamiliar enemies (Koshy 2006:340-341). With this major restructuring of America's global forces they became a "globo-cop", policing the world in a grandiose imperialistic style.

This was the doctrine of a "pre-emptive war" (Pallmeyer 2005:46, 55, 61); the "right" of the US whenever there was a *perception* that the interests of the US might be threatened. Former Vice-President Al Gore claims remarkably that this was "a ... unilateral US right to ignore international law ... and take military action against any nation, even ... where there was no imminent threat" (Pallmeyer 2005:55).

The ideology of empire

In the LWF publication on *Being the Church in the midst of empire*, the LWF General Secretary, Noko (2007:7) refers to the “overarching ... empire”, which “... can be ... part of who we are and how we think that we do not even realize how much it shapes and influences us”.

An important aspect is that “... the most conspicuous ... feature of the empire’s approach to international affairs is its universalistic and monopolistic claims”. In its ideology “the empire uses ‘democracy’ as an umbrella term for the kind of political regime that it would like to see installed all over the world” (Mateus 2006:433-450).

Values compelled to create a global hegemony are liberty and a free society (Koshy 2006:342). The extensive use of force is justified ideologically to achieve a so-called “better world” for humanity.

This important LWF publication on *Being the Church in the midst of empire* highlights the importance of anti-imperial and nonviolent approaches in the Bible. The shock is that empire makes fundamentalism and totalitarianism more attractive. Consequently, it is vital that a theology of the Cross is at the heart and not at the margins of this issue.

The emphasis is on the inverted Messiah, with Jesus being identified not with the highest in society, the sovereign, but with the lowest, as a criterion for countering empire. This witness calls for “repentant patriotism”. The need to cultivate lifestyle and church identities and practices as alternatives to empire is emphasised. The Holy Spirit shapes the Christian’s identity in society and in the churches.

What is most important is that criteria are set forth for discerning when the churches face a time for confessing and especially when the gospel itself is at stake: “otherness” is stressed, making Christ and his followers totally different regarding the consumer-centredness of the empire.

The church has often been complicit in the dynamics of empire. Nonetheless, it also needs to critique and embody alternatives to it, especially in and through communities of faith. Here, theologians are to take up the daunting challenge of developing constructive theological responses, grounded in the Triune God, which have the potential to counter, transform and nurture long-term resistance to empire today. An example is the USA and a call to resist the USA’s insatiable quest for domination under the guise of freeing the world. Much of the Bible was written in contrast to, if not in protest of, the ways of empire.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches is also making invaluable contributions. Imperialism is a cultural hegemony of the US, called “soft power”. WARC referred to cultural hegemony as “a slow, yet sure way of making people accept the role, function and reality of the empire as indispensable, normative and ideal. The minds of the subjects ... of the empire are

made to believe ... that there is no alternative ...” (Mateus 2006:441). The cultural hegemony manifests in the homogenisation of cultures and the spread of a “triumphalist Christianity” globally.

The Accra document of WARC has important enunciations against empire: the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral system defended by empire. In using the term “empire” the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests is indicated. The document narrates the story from classical liberal economics to global neoliberalism, with less of a role for states and the growth of international finance and trade institutions using political, economic or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of the capital owners. This is a global system that defends and protects the interests of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon. This approach is significant in the next section.

The economics of empire

Names given to economic domination, based on military rule, range from global capitalism, consumerist capitalism and neoliberal capitalism to neo-liberal capitalist globalisation. Capitalism is one characterising constant. The complex network of economic power relationships is the US on top, followed by the European Union as a kind of collective “sub-empire”.

Another constant is the inextricable link between American free market economics and American security. On 9 May 2004 Bush mentioned, in a triumphalist tone, the war against Iraq in the same breath as he did the ambitious plans of creating the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA). These are the two faces of empire: global militarisation and neoliberal capitalist globalisation (Mateus 2006:442).

Kistner (2008:69) shows in a strident fashion how the ‘free market’ operates, using South Africa as an example:

... free market principles are implemented after the interests of particular political or economic interest groups ... In South Africa, the process of colonization, which has led to the dispossession of ... Black communities of their land, was one of the basic presuppositions for the inauguration of free market principles ... After ... dispossession, protagonists of the free market system are ... demanding the protection of private property in a ... Bill of Rights.

The comparison drawn between former world empires and modern global economic systems is important. Both accentuate the concentration of vast political and economic power in the hands of mighty rulers. This was true of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic empires, as well as the neoliberal capitalist system. In addition “the new global economy ... has transcended the boundaries of the modern state. ... *it constitutes a return to the world domination formerly practised by the world empires*” (Kistner 2008:73, emphasis added).

The hegemony of empire: South Africa

The question is whether it is avoidable for a country, for example South Africa, with all the ingredients, to develop into a little “sub-empire” on the continent. What are some of the ingredients, and why would they be applicable especially to the African continent? Is South Africa becoming a type of intermediary “empire”, having to absorb the economic and political injunction from the North, but simultaneously exercising economic domination over large zones of Africa? (Stewart 2007:136).

It is not my intent, however, to advance arguments that indeed my country is starting to show imperial ambitions.

There is of course a strong suggestion by Lesufi (2006:32-35) that the ambitious program NEPAD, if executed as planned, will constitute a form of imperial dominance. Whether one agrees or not, South Africans should be wary of well-meaning notions, for example the “African Century” or the “African Renaissance”, being subverted by forces that are overtly or subversively showing imperialistic tendencies.

The concept “empire” affects South Africa on three levels: the nation-state, society and the academy.

Firstly, the *nation-state* is affected adversely by what Duchrow (1995:69-75) calls the trans-nationalisation of markets. It has become possible for trans-national companies to transfer capital speedily across borders without any political interference. This weakens the nation-state considerably. South Africa has been interacting with the global monetary institutions, suggesting to be compelled to satisfy the dictates of the IMF, for example as far as structural adjustment was concerned. (But South Africa never did accept an SAP – there is a contradiction here which must be explained.) The “anxiousness” of the South African government to arrange the economic fundamentals in terms of its macroeconomic strategy, “Growth, Employment and Redistribution”, could be construed as yielding to the dictates of ‘empire’. (Does China, the other superpower, not guard its economic fundamentals equally carefully? Is China opting for a *different* global system, or just attempting to rule over the present one?)

Secondly, the influence of empire is, for example, in *the consumerist culture* that has permeated society. This has to do with the “unceasing hunger and anxiety to have more” (Daniel, quoted in Hoffmeyer in Bloomquist 2007:149). Consumer culture, however, is not merely an obsession with material things: “Consumer culture challenges Christian faith not by drawing people away from spiritual concerns, to material ones, *but by forming dreams, longings, hopes – ultimately spiritual desires – in alternative ways*” (Daniel, quoted in Hoffmeyer in Bloomquist 2007:153, emphasis added).

Thirdly, the way in which empire makes an impact upon *the academy, on higher education, on tertiary institutions*, has been shown excellently by Stewart (2007:131-147), a professor at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Development Studies. He argues that the manner in which institutions are run contemporarily, including Unisa, is overwhelmingly informed by a business model. The strategy that is applied increasingly is “corporate managerialism”, running the university like a business, a corporate company; the aim is to centralise power and to “bureaucratise” the institution. “Knowledge creation”, as a consequence of the differential identities of academics, is substituted by “knowledge production”, resulting in the progressive commodification of the academy, which may lead to the dwindling of academic standards.

Stewart (2007:136) shows how universities worldwide, under the pressure of “informational capitalism” in neoliberalism, have turned to the corporate business model as the proven private sector means of managing cost-cutting and profit-making while externalising costs onto society at large. Professor Jansen (2004), Rector of the Free State University, extensively cited by Stewart (2007:137), indicates the changes to the academic work environment in South Africa as the increased need for competition, erosion of job security, fears of employment equity, surveillance through performance management, and students being seen as “clients” and resources to be pursued.

Anti-imperialistic theological discourse

Here, we deal with three clusters of theological responses to empire. We are indeed facing “an overall systemic reality ... overall worldview ... (which) needs to be countered theologically (Bloomquist 2007:13).

Informed by the publications of the LWF and WARC, the focus is on how particular metaphors function theologically in response to empire, instead of presenting a survey of the articles. One of the main aims of the study is kept in mind, namely “the long-term challenge of forming and shaping people differently”, regarding the question: “*How might they live out their faith in contrast to the ways of empire?*” (Bloomquist 2007:14, emphasis added).

The metaphor in the LWF compilation is “margin/s”:

Marginality and empire

Peterson (2007:71-90) draws a distinction between whether one speaks of the church in ontological terms, *to be the church*, or in praxiological terms, what the church should do in the face of empire. The thrust of her input is on the identity of the church as ... (to be) community ... in the midst of empire. She emphasises: “our proclamation (to do) ... of God’s Word to the world” (Peterson 2007:76-77). There is a need for a public defence of the gospel in the midst of empire, which resembles the church struggles in Germany under national-socialism and in South Africa under apartheid. The church is to resist empire as neoliberal globalisation.

Philip (2007:94-106) interprets the church as “space in-between spaces”, in other words an understanding of church as ‘marginality’. “The margins are the limits of the empire and at the same time they border the kingdom.” The margins are then identified as “sites of oppression”, *and* as locations of “vitality, tenacity, promise and hope”. The church should also be a “pest”; she uses this metaphor in the sense of creating a “pestilence, disturbs the order of things, threatens the *status quo*. It calls the centre into question. The church “is to be socially dysfunctional in order to signal the kingdom that is not of this age”, and to be “upsetting ... to put the empire’s nose out of joint” (Philip 2007:100).

The church might be thought to have a hybrid function. Hybrids inhabit the in-between spaces. They are neither “in” nor “out”, and exhibit characteristics of both the inside and the outside.

Jesus might also be thought of as a hybrid, born of the union between the divine and the human, who lived at the periphery. He challenged boundaries, whether social, religious, cultural, and ethnic or gender, constantly challenging and calling the centre into question (Philip 2007:100-101).

This is the space shaking the empire by living within the body of the empire and at the same time “gnawing at its very foundation and venturing into the promises of its peripheries” (Philip 2007:101). Hence, our theme: “Christianity living at the edge of empire.”

Third-world theology

In 1983 the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians included a theological analysis in the final statement of the Sixth Conference of the Association; this exposes the use of religious language by the “empire”.

This shows how the loyalty that is demanded by the empire for its values is tantamount to worship and idolatry. The conflict between oppressors and their victims is interpreted as a *spiritual battle*. “At the heart of the profound social conflicts which divide our world, there is a battle of the gods” (Fabella & Torres 1985:187). The present economic system is identified as “an immense idol, the beast of the Apocalypse (Revelations 13) ... covers the earth with its cloak of unemployment and homelessness, hunger and nakedness, desolation and death ...” (Fabella & Torres 1985:188).

Third-world theology exposed the characteristics of the global empire to the bone, and replaced this with an anti-imperialist discourse that feeds on the values of the gospel as care, mutuality, inclusiveness and classlessness.

Victimisation under the global empire

The WARC Journal, *Reformed World* (56:4), contains the declaration entitled, “An ecumenical faith stance against global empire for a liberated earth community”, emanating from the consultation on, “Theological Analysis and Action on Global Empire Today”.

The WARC declaration claims: The “signs of the times theology” is used as the hermeneutic tool for analysing the “age of empire”. This theology is introduced from the perspective of “the suffering and cries of human persons and other living beings throughout the world” (Mateus 2006:434). This victimisation “proceeds in a systematic and unprecedented manner under the global US empire/market regime” (Mateus 2006:434).

A profound focus is the devastation caused by the “Christian religion of empire” (Mateus 2006:437). This treats others as “gentiles” to be conquered, as the “evil empire” to be destroyed. The “goodness” of the empire must overcome these “evils”. The empire’s false ‘messianic spirit’ is imbued with the demonic. These deceitful claims destroy the integrity of faith and radically erode the identity of faith in Christ. The ‘spirit’ of empire penetrates human lives. “Lord” of its domain, the empire builds temples for the global market to serve “Mammon”, money.

The declaration exposes the effects of empire on human beings as well as the earth: “destruction of people and the earth” (Mateus 2006:437). “The ravages of the neoliberal market economy, driven by the insatiable quest for profits, have led to massive ecological destruction, climate change, and the daily extinction of animal, plant and fish species, diminishing the earth’s life-

giving biodiversity” (Mateus 2006:437). “Today, we see ... the complex oppression of women through the ... imperial patriarchy, the vicious use of rape and violence against women as a military tactic of domination” (Mateus 2006:437).

The resurgence of the global peace movement, however, is a hopeful sign; people worldwide obtain the vision of “a civilization of convivial life of all living beings” (Mateus 2006:438).

Conclusion: the victorious gospel and empire

Ambiguity

The Bible appears to be ambiguous on empire. Pallmeyer (2005:109-117) evaluates the competing biblical perspectives, using the narratives on the Egyptian and Babylonian empires in relation to the stories of Abraham, Joseph and the Babylonian captivity, as well as the liberation of Israel.

Distinguishing between a pro- and an anti-imperial approach, Pallmeyer regards the Abraham and Joseph narratives as pro-empire, and narratives on divine and human violence as anti-imperial. In his interpretation Abraham was called to be “the father of empire” since the promise of God was about “a great and mighty nation” (Gen. 18:18). In response to Abraham’s willingness to kill his own son, Isaac, there is a remarkable promise by God that Abraham’s offspring will possess the gates of their enemies (Gen. 22:17). Pallmeyer’s (2005:111) take on the Joseph story is equally intriguing, showing that indeed Joseph “has a cosy relationship with the Egyptian Empire and is blessed by God”. Indeed, he was made “a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over the land of Egypt” (Gen. 45:8). There is no sign of God being adverse to “empire” in the Joseph narrative, much as He was to liberate oppressed people from the empire.

In turning to the anti-imperial approach, Pallmeyer (2005:114) contends that it is rooted in promises and expectations of God’s “violence”. God is pictured as a “warrior” who liberates his people from the Egyptian Empire by casting Pharaoh’s chariots and army into the sea (Exod 15:3-4). The violence of God manifests particularly in the domination of Israel by other nations or empires. The most obvious example is the manner in which God perceivably used a foreign empire like Assyria to punish Israel, much as God would also crush these empires and liberate Israel (Isa 10:5-6; 10:12, 16), which is quite ambivalent.

Can Christianity be saved from empire merely if Christians start taking the gospel seriously again? We have to agree that the ambiguous manner in which the history presented in the Bible speaks of empire is hardly empowering. Is there a way out? Is Jesus once again the answer? The reply must be “yes” and “no”. The answer is a resounding “no” if Jesus is meant to

be the answer in a fundamentalist, literal sense; or in the sense of the “prophets”, of what Pallmeyer and others call, legalistic Christianity. For example, Falwell and Robertson who claimed two days after the 9/11 attacks that an angry God has allowed the terrorists to succeed (Pallmeyer 2005:121).

An answer in the affirmative would require a particular reading strategy:

Jesus and empire

Scholars like Crossan, Horsley and Myers suggest that strategies for reading the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, John and the early church fathers might reveal a nonviolent, anti-imperial approach (Pallmeyer 2005:128).

What Horsley (2003:55-78) suggests is important: “A relational approach to Jesus is taking seriously the historical and cultural traditions of the time.” He looks at the conditions under Roman Empire rule and states: “Peasants are by definition under the political-economic rule and exploitation of landlords” (Horsley 2003:60).

Crossan (2007:108-110) describes how a rebellion led by a certain Judas was brutally put down, with the city of Sepphoris being captured, burnt and its inhabitants reduced to slavery. This is the matrix into which Jesus was born in the village of Nazareth; where he grew up was only six kilometres from Sepphoris.

One aspect or dimension, to speak with Saayman (1991) in his breakdown of the mission of Jesus in terms of dimensions based on Luke 4, is the ‘healing’ of the effects of imperialism. For the imperial elite, Roman military power had created a “new world order” of peace and security, yet the downside of the *Pax Romana* was devastation for subject peoples (Horsley 2003:106). People who attempted resistance were slaughtered, enslaved and their homes and villages destroyed. People were heavily indebted, hungry, plagued by physical and social paralysis, despairing about their circumstances. Alien demonic forces had taken control, driving people to self-destructive behaviour.

In debunking the modern individualistic projection, Horsley (2003:107) contends that “Jesus was dealing with people in their social contexts”. In healing the effects of imperialism, Jesus performed such healings in the context of village gatherings with relatives and friends.

The exorcisms Jesus performed in exposing, defeating and expelling the demonic forces were aimed at “exposing Roman imperialism with which these demonic forces were associated” (Horsley 2003:107). As part of a larger healing ministry, bodily and social healing, the healings performed should not be construed to be acts of individual mercy. The healings were aimed at instilling hope in a hopeless situation (Horsley 2003:109). Horsley claims that the work of Jesus in village communities and what he calls the

renewing of covenantal communities were all aimed at offsetting the debilitating effects of imperialism.

Paul and empire

The anti-imperialistic stance of Paul finds illustration in his letter to the Romans with the use of “the grace and peace of Christ”, which emerges almost like a slogan.

Crossan (2007:146, 148) asks how the peace of Christ is different from the *Pax Romana*. Historically the *Pax Romana* is traced back to the famous victory of Octavian at the battle of Actium (northwest Greece). In being acclaimed as “saviour” who had brought about “peace” throughout the Roman Empire, Octavian’s name was changed to Augustus, which means “revered, highly honoured”, similar to “gospel, good news”.

In responding to the *Pax Romana*, Paul profusely uses the term “peace”, integrating it with “grace” in reference to Christ (Haacker 2005:252-254). This is Paul’s allusion to the ideology of Roman imperialism’s emphasis on “peace”, *pax*. Haacker interprets Romans 3:17, which states “they do not know the way of peace”, as a critique of the Roman ideology on peace. At the same time Paul was responding with Christ’s gospel to a deep-seated longing for peace among ordinary people.

John’s worldwide victorious message, also for the empire

Nowhere is the situation of anti-imperialism of the gospel as clear as in the case of the apostle John. He was a prisoner of the Roman Empire, banished for life to the island of Patmos. Christians were exposed to the seduction and domination of the Roman Empire (Howard-Brook & Gwyther 1999:xxii). Christians were also challenged to accept the emperor cult and the concomitant emperor worship.

What was John’s reaction to these horrific circumstances? The worldwide resounding message of John in the Apocalypse, God’s Revelation, was exceptionally powerful and victorious for the Christians and people of the Roman Empire:

God, the Ruler of the world, overcomes the dominating Satan, endeavouring to usurp God’s position; Christ conquers the self-enriching anti-Christ who tries to take over the position of Christ, the Saviour of the world, proclaiming his peace and justice; the Holy Spirit defeats the violent evil spirits, who resist the influence and power of the Holy Spirit, instilling justice, peace and love in Christians and society; the Christian church triumphs over the brutal empire, the self-enriching worldly “church”.

The reign of God “has come”, “is coming” and “will come” through reconciliation, peace and justice between individuals and with the trans-

formation of the structures of society, the Roman Empire, and all emerging empires.

John's message in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, proclaims:

God conquers Satan; Christ defeats the anti-Christ; the Holy Spirit overpowers evil spirits; and the Christian church overcomes the empire, the militarist, capitalist and false "church" of the world.

God so loved the empire that He gave his Son as Saviour ... up to the death on the cross, and to the resurrection of new lives and renewed societal structures of justice and love. This is the victorious message of Christianity today, proclaimed by the churches in word and deed.

Daniel prophesied about these historical epochs: a rock, Christ, was released and it destroyed the empire image made of iron, gold, clay and bronze, and filled the whole earth with peace and justice.

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