

## Responding theologically to Populism

*To celebrate 50 years of Toronto School of Theology, an ecumenical consortium affiliated with the University of Toronto, Trinity and Knox Colleges organized a virtual forum debating the actual problem of populism. The aim was to respond to that political tendency on a theological basis.*

*Below is the contribution of the dean of the FPTR Prof. J. Temmerman during this meeting.*

First of all thank you for inviting me. Also congratulations with 50 years Toronto School of Theology.

In my contribution I use the following definition of populism as a starting point: populism is a polarizing political discourse, in which the interests of the people are juxtaposed with those of the elite. Populism divides people into good and bad. How can one answer this theologically?

As requested I present three propositions and work out the third a little further. I combine three biblical theological principles. Starting from the prophetic basis of the Hebrew Bible and a Christian interpretation of it, I look at the spirit of reconciliation as an answer.

1. First proposition: The basic prophetic principle of the Hebrew Bible reads: God has chosen the people to live righteously together through connectedness (the covenant). This model of coexistence serves pars pro toto for all peoples.
2. Secondly: The imminent return of Christ and the new heaven and earth asks not to resist the authorities, according to Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, for the authorities have been instituted by God.
3. My third proposition is: the spirit of solidarity and urgency encourages reconciliation among the people and the elite.

This third thesis should make it possible to provide a theological answer to increasing populism. In doing so I see two thresholds or stumbling blocks: (a) a theological and (b) a political one.

- a) The theological principle of 'the chosen people' threatens to radicalize religious consciousness by calling for anticipation of the eschatological separation between good and evil. This allows religious communities to recognize themselves in a political populist discourse. Theologically, it is possible to consider the prophetic election as a historical and

temporal vocation, something that was completed with the liberation of biblical Israel. This vision was substantiated on a rational and linguistic basis by Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* of 1670. With this theological reasoning he anticipated the political thesis that freedom is the goal of the state. The tendency of religious communities to respond to political populism can be nuanced by a sketch of the historical framework of the chosen people in the Bible. Religious identity does not take shape in a struggle between good and evil because the theological concept of the chosen people is completed. The struggle between good and evil in mankind was settled in Christ.

- b) The second stumbling block relates to the growing gap between rich and poor worldwide, both between the rich north and the poorer south and inside the globalized societies themselves. A large part of the population feels discriminated against or abused in their good will. But political populism relies solely on the promise of material well-being, while the prevailing feeling of injustice has both economic and ecological causes. It is, therefore, a theological challenge to refer to the need for both solidarity among ourselves and humanity's solidarity with the planet as God's will. Inspiration for this can be found in the work of Paul Tillich and contemporary theologians such as Catherine Keller.

In short: expressing the spirit of reconciliation between people and with the planet offers, in my opinion, a theological answer to growing political populism.

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