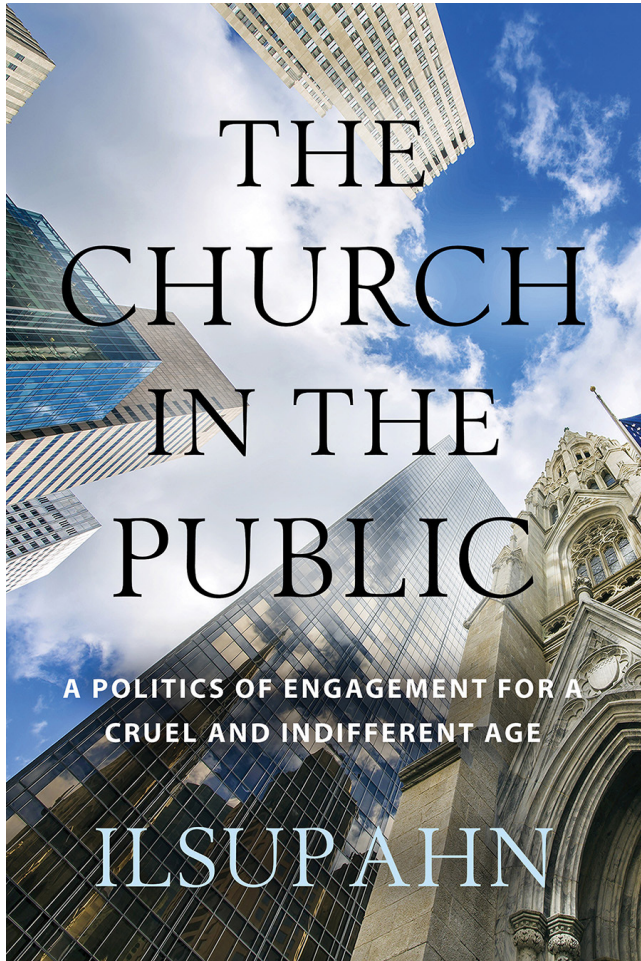


# Church and Small-Group Guide for Reading



*The Church in the Public: A Politics of Engagement for a Cruel and Indifferent Age*

by Ilsup Ahn

Group guide written by Michael Nabors and Spencer Nabors



Buy *The Church in the Public*

Il sup Ahn has written a vitally important and timely work on the role of the Christian church in today's "cruel and indifferent age." The work speaks volumes about the woeful lack of the Western church reckoning with its past. This past has supported and participated in the genesis, rise and development of colonialism (what Ahn describes as "colonial complicity) perhaps the most dangerous structural injustice and systemic violence in modern history (the past five hundred years). Ahn traces all current social injustices to the rise of colonialism which was either; 1) Shaped and led in part by the church, 2) ignored by the church or, 3) Partly supported by the church.

Identifying the historical roots of sin and relating it to complicity with colonialism, Ahn then introduces a path towards redemption and reconciliation, but not without reparations. The church must rediscover itself as a public church by engaging and deploying alternative politics which he calls "rhizomatic politics." Churches must work beyond themselves, forming partnerships with other community organizations focused on transformation. Ahn contends the Western church and the global church must rediscover their place in the public, rather than accepting the secular model of "church and state." Modeled after the redemptive ministry of Jesus, Ahn believes the shape, goal, orientation and outreach of the church must be in engaged public ministry.

In chapter one Ahn believes the Western church must reconstruct or reform itself in a way to address structural injustice and systemic violence, the most dangerous issues and sins in our contemporary world. In chapter two he explores the scope and nature of structural injustice by focusing on the perilous ideology of neoliberalism. As a result of neoliberalism, structural injustice is detected everywhere. Chapter three is devoted to laying out a biblical foundation for the church's rhizomatic politics by outlining the content of nomos as the biblical-theological basis that substantiates the church's nomadic thinking, vis-a'-vis structural injustice and systemic violence. Chapter four develops a new conceptual paradigm for the church's political-theological notion of rhizome. The movement is from church and state to church versus structural injustice. Chapter five presents the importance of rhizome organizers and identifies some current church leaders engaged in leading the church's rhizome politics. The final chapter argues the church should welcome working with other civic or nongovernmental organizations to resist or dismantle structural injustice and systemic violence.

*The Church in the Public: A Politics of Engagement for a Cruel and Indifferent Age* is an important roadmap for a church to become the church as it is called to be, re-establishing itself as a public church by practicing rhizomatic politics. In order for churches to reach a new generation, for pulpits to have purpose and for members to have meaning, there is an urgent necessity for change. To address injustice and violence that is so crippling in our day and age, we must understand the force we are facing. And we must also discover the force within. "Greater is the God who is in us, than the gods of this world." This handbook seeks to serve as a reading guide to the work of Il sup Ahn and is especially intended for churches filled with those who have historically and are currently, victims of structural injustice and systemic violence.

I especially encourage churches of black and brown people, those who have been most singularly taken advantage of and exploited by structural injustice and systemic violence, to recognize that faith, God, the gospel of Jesus and anointed leaders can begin the journey towards transforming today's Western church and making it the apostolic church it was always intended to be. In fact, for some, the journey has already begun.

It is a new day and time for a new way.

**Rev. Dr. Michael C. R. Nabors**

## Terminology

**Structural injustice** | a distinctive type of injustice caused by unfair rules, skewed cultural norms, and historical legacies, which typically entail an accumulative and perennial negative impact on victimized social groups of typically racial, political, or cultural minorities.

**Systemic violence** | Intrinsically interlinked with structural injustice because the victims of structural injustice experience their social sufferings in conjunction with systemized oppression, discrimination, and domination, which cannot be effectively tackled without changing the structural and systemic aspects of society.

**Colonial complicity** | The church's history of deep involvement with the expansion of Western colonialism and imperialism.

**Neoliberalism** | A political approach that favors free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending.

**Rhizome (rhizomatic politics)** |

**Pneuma (Pneumatology)** |

**Territorial thinking** |

**Deterritorial** |

**Nomos (Nomadic thinking)** |

**Hermeneutics** | The reader's interpretation of the Bible based upon her/his own cultural and life experience.

**Arborescent** | Resembling a tree in growth or appearance

**Apophatic** | Knowledge of God gained through negation.

**Imperialism** | The practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.

**Mimesis** | Representation or ruling of the real world

*Question: Why does the church fail to address the problems of structural injustice and systemic violence?*

Answers:

The church's self-exile or self-retreat from the realm of the public to that of the private and the local ignores its social and public responsibilities. The church effectively disappears from the public realm. It is reduced to a geographical or locational entity. The invisible wall between the church and the state, between the ecclesial space and political world, between private faith and public conviction is still in place. The most troublesome result of the localization of the ecclesial space and the privatization of Christian faith is the church's neutral and apathetic attitude toward various issues of the rising structural injustice and systemic violence. The localized church has lost its public voice and status due to its self-exile and self-retreat.

The reconstruction and reformation of the Western church are not possible without the church's rediscovery of itself as a public church.

One of the key aspects of the public church is that its congregants not only know how to engage and deploy its alternative politics but also practice it with other public or nongovernmental organizations to resist and dismantle structural injustice and systemic violence.

The church's alternative politics is called **rhizomatic politics** (in the words of the author). In biology, a rhizome (ginger root, for example) is a "root-like", underground stem, growing horizontally on or just under the surface of the ground, and capable of producing shoots and roots from its nodes.

- 1) A rhizome is invisible from the surface of the ground because it exists underground.
- 2) Rhizomes grow horizontally. The church's rhizomatic politics can spread into separate areas that might be demarcated by walls, fences, or barricades beneath the ground's surface. This broadens the church's network of collaborators.
- 3) Rhizomes regenerate. Church politics aims to transform unjust and dehumanizing social systems and structures.

The idea of rhizomatic politics is crucial because it substantiates the notion of a "public church." This is not a return to Christendom. It is a movement to reposition the church in the public rather than staying outside or transcending above it.

The Western church and the global church must rediscover and reground their place in the public. The church must recover its original yet forgotten model- the apostolic model. Must stress the church's place in the public rather than in the religious to promote justice.

Jesus' redemptive ministry was and is characterized as a public ministry.

The Western church must begin by reckoning its historical sin of colonial complicity.

- 1) Eradicate age-old thinking/territorial thinking
- 2) Give birth to nomadic thinking for the fundamental, structural change of the church's engagement in the world.

To do this the church will need a new paradigm:

- 1) The church versus structural injustice and systemic violence in the world
- 2) The church must work/worship/serve/lead in public spaces
- 3) The church must commit to rhizomatic politics. This will deterritorialize its mission, freeing it from ties to structural injustice and systemic violence. This moves the church to an apostolic capacity rooted in the words and acts of Jesus. The "least of these" becomes the central/core of the church's mission and existence.
- 4) This is accomplished through rhizome community organizers practicing rhizome politics, teaching rhizome theology, preaching rhizome gospel, and living all of this out in the community without losing hope or faith.

## Introduction Worksheet

What do you expect to learn and gain from reading, *The Church in the Public: A Politics of Engagement for a Cruel and Indifferent Age*?

Is your church already considered “a church in the public?” How do you think this work will assist your church in becoming engaged, active and participatory in changing structural injustices and systemic violence?

In thinking about rhizome politics, if your church is (or becomes) rhizomatic, will you be able to enlist other houses of worship and organizations in your community to also serve as rhizome organizers?

After 2,000 years and particularly over the past five hundred years, can the church be transformed so that its ministry is focused first, on changing structures to reach the marginalized?

## CHAPTER ONE

### Reckoning and Being Reckoned

The first chapter of Ahn's work focuses on the critical role of the church in extending apologies for historical wrongs. Ahn offers recent apologies that fall far short of being followed by action to repair historical (and current) damage that has been done. The chapter also names the church's complicity in the historical sin of colonialism. The chapter is divided into three sections; 1) The Church and the Historical Sin of Colonial Complicity, 2) Two Cities, Two Justices and Two Politics, and, 3) A Critique of Territorial Thinking and a Call for a New Political Theology.

#### Introduction

The role of the church in extending apologies for historical wrongs.

Examples of apologies:

Pope Francis in Bolivia, 2015.

Pope John Paul II in the Dominican Republic in 1992.

"The church's gesture of apology cannot substitute for its long over-due work of reckoning—the reckoning with its historical sin of colonial complicity.

The bible teaches about the importance of apologies/repenting for sins.

*Mathew 4:17, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

1. Do you think the church should apologize for its horizontal wrongs? If so, why?
2. What does it mean for the Western church to reckon with its historical sin of colonial complicity? How might the church respond to this call?

Ahn offers examples of how the Western church can reckon with its historical sin of colonial complicity?

*The church must listen.*

*There must be a communal act of mourning.*

*There must follow a deep and surgical introspection into the core of the church's ecclesial structure, history, theology, liturgy, and beliefs.*



## The Church and the Historical Sin of Colonial Complicity

Ahn offers a sobering analysis; *For all of the church's 20th century theologians, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, none went far enough in holding the church accountable for its history of colonial complicity and sins. The reckoning work required today of the Western Church is repentance of its role as colonial victimizer and traumatized.*

### Question

1. *There is an undeniable historical linkage between the European church of the colonial period and the Western church today. How important is it to have this information?*

This is the starting point for the church in dealing with its historical sin. If your church is out of the western tradition of the Christian church, then it has reaped the benefits of colonialism and the additional sins incurred.

The dominant structural injustices of our world today- such as systemic racism, the neoliberal economy, and environmental destruction- can be genealogically traced to the structural injustice and systemic violence of European colonialism.

### Question

2. *What did the Protestant churches and the Catholic Church do about structural injustice during the colonial period? What is the nature of the relationship between religion and imperialism during that time?*

Colonialism which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implant of settlements on distant territory.

*Doctrine of Discovery provided the religious, political, and legal justification for Europe's imperial expansion and subsequent colonization of the non-European world. Its origins go back to the 1430's to the Spanish and Portuguese.*

The formation of the sin of colonialism.

- \* In 1436 Pope Eugenius IV issued a papal bull granting Portugal exclusive control of the the Canary Islands to "civilize and covert the Canary Islanders to the one true religion."
- \* Pope Nicholas issued a papal bull in 1455 to justify seizure of the land.
- \* In 1493 Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull which legitimized Spanish explorers' claims on land and waterways they allegedly discovered.

After acquiring the church's ecclesial-institutional support, Spain and Portugal applied the Doctrine of Discovery in Africa, Asia and the Americas.



Robert J. Miller identifies ten constituent elements that make up the Doctrine of Discovery, all of which explicitly upheld European superiority in religious, cultural and political aspects. Religious conversion and civilization of indigenous people are acknowledged to be the major elements of the Doctrine of Discovery.

1. First Discovery - The first European country that discovered lands unknown to other Europeans claimed property, commercial, and sovereign rights over the lands and the Indigenous Nations and Peoples. Consequently, the Doctrine created a race among European powers to discover and claim the non-European world.
2. Actual occupancy and current possession - To turn a first discovery into a full title of ownership that would be recognized by other European countries, England developed in the 1570s the element that a European country had to actually occupy and possess the lands it claimed via a first discovery. Occupancy was usually proved by building forts or settlements. The physical occupancy and possession had to be accomplished within a reasonable amount of time after making a first discovery.
3. Preemption/European title - Euro-American countries that claimed the rights of first discovery also claimed the power of preemption, that is, an exclusive right to buy the lands of Indigenous Nations and Peoples. This is a valuable property right similar to the modern-day real estate principle called a right of first refusal, which is the right to be the first person allowed to purchase another's land when they choose to sell. Under Discovery, the Euro-American government that held the preemption right could prevent, or preempt, any other Euro-American government or individual from buying land from Native Nations. Most colonial-settler societies still claim this property right over Indigenous Nations and Peoples today.
4. Indian or Native title - After a first discovery, Euro-American legal systems claimed that Indigenous Nations automatically lost the full ownership of their lands and only retained what is called the "Indian title" or native title, a property right to occupy and use the lands. These rights could last forever if Indigenous Nations never consented to sell to the Euro-American country that claimed first discovery and preemption. But if Indigenous Nations did choose to sell, they were to sell only to the Euro-American government that held the preemption right.
5. Limited Indigenous sovereign and commercial rights - Euro-Americans claimed that Indigenous Nations and Peoples lost other aspects of their sovereignty and their rights to engage in international trade and treaty-making after a first discovery. Euro-Americans claimed that Indigenous Nations could only interact politically and commercially with the Euro-American government that had discovered them.
6. Contiguity - Euro-Americans claimed a significant amount of land contiguous to and surrounding their actual discoveries and colonial settlements. For example, when European countries had settlements somewhat close together, each country claimed rights over the unoccupied lands between their settlements to a point half way between their settlements. Contiguity provided, for example, that the discovery of the mouth of a river created a claim over all the lands drained by that river.

7. Terra nullius - This Latin phrase means a land that is vacant or empty. Under this element of the Doctrine, if lands were not occupied by any person or nation, or even if they were occupied but they were not being used in a manner that Euro- American legal systems approved, then the lands were considered empty, vacant, and available for Discovery claims. Euro-Americans often considered lands that were actually owned, occupied, and being used by Indigenous Nations to be terra nullius.

8. Christianity - Religion was a very significant aspect of Discovery. Starting with the Crusades and then the papal bulls of the 1400s, Christians claimed that Indigenous Nations and Peoples did not have the same rights to land, sovereignty, self-determination, and human rights as did Christians. Furthermore, Europeans claimed a right and duty to convert non-Christians.

9. Civilization - European cultures and civilizations were presumed to be superior to Indigenous Peoples and their civilizations. European countries claimed that the Christian God had directed them to civilize Indigenous Peoples and to exercise paternal and guardian powers over them.

10. Conquest - Euro-Americans claimed they could acquire through military victories the absolute title and ownership of the lands of Indigenous Nations. Conquest was also used as a term of art to describe the property and sovereign rights Euro- Americans claimed to acquire automatically over Indigenous Nations and Peoples just by making a first discovery.

### Question

3. *The church must unearth the many untold stories of the colonized people, whose voices were never heard in the ecclesial space of the colonizers. The first step towards the church's reckoning with its historical sin is to recover victimized people's untold stories of suffering so that the whole church can hear them. Where and how do we find these stories and begin listening?*

### Two Cities, two Justices, and two Politics

Since the 5th century AD, Augustine's City of God, the fundamental framework of the church's political theology has been the duality of the church and the state.

Thomas G. Sanders writes, "Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy shares three fundamental elements of Christian political theory."

- 1) The dualism of church and state
- 2) The sovereignty of God over church and state
- 3) The evaluation of the state as both good and evil

Augustine's work shares that this world is divided into two cities; the city of man the *civitas terrane* (Babylon, or the earthly city) and the city of God *civitas Dei* (new Jerusalem or the heavenly city). The cities are inhabited by two different groups of citizens. They are oriented by two types of love. Citizens in the city of man love themselves to the exclusion of God.

Citizens in the city of God love God, and by loving God, they become aliens in the city of man.

Ahn explains these two concepts should not be understood in the simplistic way the church refers to the heavenly city while the state refers to the earthly city. They intersect with each other. They have two opposite orders of value. To see this more clearly, we are to at Augustine's idea of justice. Ahn defines it as "assigning to each his due" or "rendering to each his due". There is true justice and imperfect justice. For true justice we presuppose "the correct knowledge and worship of the true God." Augustine goes on to say "true justice is found only in that commonwealth whose founder and ruler is Christ."

### Question

1. *How important is it for the contemporary church to reanalyze Augustine's continued political and theological influence in the Western Church nearly two thousand years later?*

### **A Critique of Territorial Thinking and a Call for a New Political Theology**

Insights from Augustine includes:

- 1) The church is indispensable for the state to attain true justice, since "true justice is found only in that commonwealth whose found and ruler is Christ."
- 2) The existence of the church, however, is not necessary for the state to attain imperfect justice.

The church must reckon with its habitual way of thinking in engaging in matters of political and social justice- that is, its territorial thinking.

What is territorial thinking? Territorial thinking refers to a type of herd mentality that is oriented to protect the group's identity and integrity by territorializing the association of the group and its interests. For the church, this is a result of its lack of reckoning with its long legacy of Constantinianism (a formal alliance between the church and state) as well as the theological shortcoming to develop its critical and holistic and political theology.

The church's territorial thinking is characterized by two aspects:

- 1) As long as the state does not intervene in the church's territorial matters, the latter keeps its typical apolitical stance toward what it calls secular political matters. It does not engage in these because they are not relevant to it.
- 2) The church's territorial thinking tends to appropriate and apply moral dualism (spiritual value and worldly value) to culture and society.

## Questions

1. *What do you think are some of the results of the church's history of territorial thinking? Examples include; slavery and Nazis.*
2. *Do you believe the church must dismantle its territorial thinking? How important is such a task?*

Two major problems with the church's territorial thinking are its apolitical stance and the fallibility of the state. The result is the church engages in self-incapacity to face and engage in structural injustice and systemic violence.

The church must erase its own invisible borders and boundaries.

The church must be more transformative and prophetic as well as self-reflective and self-critical.

The church must contextualize itself in changing the world and history while focusing on others' stories and voices.

The church must listen to the will of God.

The church must engage in critical theological work to reform its old territorial habits in theology.

We must reform and renew the Western church so that it becomes an agent of true justice to address the structural injustice and systemic violence in our world.

The church must develop and practice an alternative politics; "Rhizomatic politics." This will include calling the church to not only address the social suffering of victimized people, but also the state's imperfect injustice.

## Questions

3. *How do we begin the process of moving the church from colonial complicity and territorial thinking, towards addressing and ending the suffering of victimized people and the state's imperfect injustice?*
4. *What Biblical references are there for territorial thinking?*
5. *What is God's response?*

## Conclusion

The problems of injustice and social suffering are as old as humanity. Structural injustice became much more prevalent and serious as society grew more systemic and complicated. If the Western church is authentically to face and engage with the rise of structural injustice today, it must begin completing its long over-due reckoning with the historical sin of colonial complicity.

## Chapter One Worksheet

How can our church help other churches to reckon with their colonial complicity and to make changes?

In learning about the Doctrine of Discovery, what information surprised you the most? Why?

Which discovery did you find to be the most troubling? Why?

Are there continuing discovery issues existing in our nation and world today? Which one(s)?

Do you believe church and state must remain separate? Why or why not?

What first steps must be taken to deterritorialize church thinking?

## CHAPTER TWO

### Taking Structural Injustice Seriously

The second chapter focuses on naming structural injustice and holding the church accountable regarding its response to structural injustice and systemic violence. The author highlights the growth of structural injustice in our world and suggests that the church must have an alternative politics as an ecclesial response in order to respond to structural injustice, systemic violence...and socio-ecological suffering found in the world. The author divides the chapter into three sections; 1) Structural Injustice, Systemic Violence, and Social-Economic Suffering in the Civitas Terrena (an earthly city), 2) Secularization, Colonization and the Limits of State Politics, and, 3) From Territorial Thinking to Nomadic Thinking.

#### Introduction

The growing dominance and the social gripping of structural injustice are the most pressing and urgent problems in our world, and the church cannot sit without doing anything about it lest it should commit the same historical sin that the European churches did during the colonial period. If the Western states were the architects, engineers, advocates and managers of the current structural injustices that are so predominate in our world, we cannot think they will be the ones to resolve the problems of structural injustice in our world.

The church's alternative politics is not only possible but required as an ecclesial response to the structural injustice and systemic violence, and socio-ecological suffering of this world. A new paradigm; "Nomadic thinking" will take the place of territorial thinking as the correct alternative politics for the church.

#### **Structural Injustice, Systemic Violence, and Social-Economic Suffering in the Civitas Terrena**

Structural injustice is a distinctive type of injustice caused by unfair rules, skewed cultural norms and historical oppression, which usually bring an accumulative and perennial negative impact to some social groups (racial, political or cultural minorities).

Ahn offers three examples/stories of structural injustice:

#### **Questions**

Olga - Immigration

1. *What did you think about the Olga's story? How many Olga's have struggled with such structural injustice? Name other stories you may know personally, or have heard about.*

Donna Young - Environment

2. *What did you think about Donna Young's story? How many communities in the United States suffer from similar structural injustices as those in Vernal, Utah? Name other stories and situations you have heard about.*

Jason Yoder - Economic

3. *What did you think about Jason Yoder's story? How common is his story among students you may know? Has a similar story been a part of your own family?*

All three stories display individuals subject to biased structural forces; unjust social, cultural, legal or financial systems.

Ahn carefully denotes that it is not mistreatment by unscrupulous individuals. Rather it is systemic, structural forces whose areas of influence can easily transcend the boundaries of ordinary people's individual or communal lives, including their private, familiar, and communal relations.

### Questions

4. *Do you believe the church adequately addressed the structural injustice of systemic racism that led to the death of George Floyd? Why hasn't the church collectively named the sin of systemic racism?*

The growing economic disparity between the rich and poor and widespread proliferation of poverty and financial fragility in the United States is another example?

5. *Are you aware of the specific wealth gap existing between the Blacks and whites in your community? What is it? How did it get that way? Was the church supportive of the structural injustice and systemic violence that allowed for such disparity?*

Paul Farmer writes "structural violence is violence exerted systemically- that is, indirectly- by everyone who belongs to a certain social order."

According to Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, there are several features of structural violence;

- \* It is generally invisible or ignored by those who perpetuate it and or benefit from it.
- \* It cannot happen without the actions of individuals, yet operates independently of the goodness or wickedness of the people perpetuating it.
- \* It is passed on from generation to generation unless challenged.
- \* It becomes more devastating with a concentration of power in fewer hands.
- \* It consists of interlocking rather than isolated forms of oppression. Hence once may "benefit" from structural violence while being victimized by it along another.
- \* It may trap perpetrators by victimizing them in the very structural violence they perpetrate.
- \* It entails ideologies or worldviews, institutional policies and practices so embedded in society that they appear natural, normal, inevitable or divinely mandated.
- \* Ordinary people may end up supporting structural injustice without even recognizing it.



## Question

6. *Are you a victim of structural injustice? Do you support structural injustice? Does the church support structural injustice, even though so many members are victims of systemic violence? Cite biblical examples of structural injustice. What is God's response?*

## Secularization, Colonization, and the Limits of State Politics

How is the church's distinctive politics possible? Do we even need it? The answers to these questions are found in a larger historical and sociological context. That is, the secularization of Western society. Charles Taylor writes, "many people still regard it (secularization) as the privatization of religion in contrast to the publication of secular places (the economic, political, cultural, professional, recreational realms).

This attitude factors into the United States Declaration of Independence with its commitment to the constitutional separation of church and state. Taylor believes today's secularized Western society is marked not so much by the retreat of religious beliefs but rather by the mutual fragilization of competing religious and nonreligious, believing and non believing.

## Question

1. *If such a separation (between church and state) works and is effective, why has secularization failed to resolve the structural violence so predominate in the world?*

Roman Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh suggests the term "religion" was invented to subordinate ecclesiastical power to civil power and to eventually separate them. He writes, "The modern liberal state developed an effective strategy to delimit ecclesiastical power, and this strategy focused on creating coherent dichotomies between the private and public, religion and politics, the church and the state, resulting in the confinement of ecclesiastical power to their realm of private life, religion and the church."

## Question

2. *Do you believe religion has been responsible for structural violence in the world? Give examples.*

There are different kinds of secularist fundamentalisms. Market fundamentalism is particularly conspicuous. Roksana Bahramitash argues "despite empirical evidence about its problematic nature, market fundamentalism identified as the supremacy of the market, has become more like a religion rather than a sound principle. Market-oriented theory is the religion of the rich and the powerful whose preachers incidentally are among the very privileged. Fashionably dressed, they sit in the highest positions of the financial ivory tower institutions of Bretton Woods (the International Monetary Fund IMF, the World Bank). They may not look like monks, rabbis, or mullahs, but they operate on similar mindsets.

Not letting the church totally off the hook, Bahramitash's description of market fundamentalism also sounds like many modern churches and many modern clergies are actually pastors to "those in the highest positions of the financial ivory towers...".

Neoliberalism currently possesses global dominance with its massive and far-reaching social impact on secularist fundamentalism. David Harvey writes, "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market and free trade."

Student debt is a glaring example of neoliberalism's responsibility for structural injustice. Neoliberalism has now taken over almost every sector of American life- from education to health care, from journalism to the correctional system.

### Question

3. *What has the state done to correct and transform the egregious development of these structural injustices? What is the church doing to address these injustices and to eliminate them from society?*

### From Territorial Thinking to Nomadic Thinking

Ahn contends that *The growing crisis of the secular state's politics becomes the social- historical backdrop against which the church's distinctive politics is called to address structural injustice, systemic violence and social-ecological suffering. Such a call is an inevitable consequence of the church's critical reckoning with colonialism and secularization. How is the church's distinctive politics conceived?*

Political Scientist Cynthia Halpern writes, "The tradition of political theory in the West has never addressed itself to the problem of suffering, as a political or a theoretical problem." She goes on to say that the Western tradition of political theory emanates from the Western philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle. They divided the world into three realms; the world of nature, the world of the household and the public world of political theology. For the Greek philosophers, suffering had to do with the body, pains of the family, vicissitudes of the household, which is the realm of women and slaves, having nothing to do with politics considered the realm of men. The public and private realms were clearly distinguished.

Ahn writes, *In the West, especially since the mid-twentieth century, an ideological dismantlement of this territorial division has been manifested by various social movements; the socialist movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the feminist movement, the gay rights movement. These movements have and are seeking to strike down the line of demarcation between public and private as they address the problem of suffering. Thus, suffering is now placed back into the realm of politics in today's secular world. Halpern argues, "Suffering made an additional debut in this century at the center of politics- the suffering bodies and souls of millions of people, caught in unimaginable violence, the killing machines of mass murder and carnage, violation, massacre, and atrocity."*

## Question

1. *While social movements have been challenging secular authorities and institutions regarding structural injustices, has the church been doing the same? Why, or why not? Can the church (faith communities) follow social movements that are not grounded in or developed from our faith? Why, or why not?*

Halpern goes on to write “suffering is the most ancient question and the one that most urgently and intimately calls into question our moral or religious beliefs that there is justice and justification.”

Ahn contends that in developing a new framework for the church’s distinctive politics, we must dismantle *the age-old demarcation- the “public (realm of politics) versus the private (realm of religion and faith). The church must set itself free from its ecclesial habits of territorial thinking.* Ahn utilizes social philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their work around “nomad” to introduce nomadic thinking. The idea of nomad becomes politically relevant when associated with space.

A new habit of thought “nomadic thinking” must be developed. There are four characteristic aspects of nomadic thinking as an alternative model for the church’s politics.

- 1) It dismantles binary logic in political theology,
- 2) It leads people to resist the rigid identity politics of the same,
- 3) It promotes creativity in reforming or transforming the territorial space in politics, and,
- 4) It enables the establishment of the multitude and assemblages of transformative subjects.

Deleuze and Guattari focus on the concept of nomad (known as war machine). Not to be confused with modern machines of war, the philosophers use nomads “insofar as it is exterior to the state apparatus and distinct from its military institution.” Nomads also exist differently from citizens of the state and take on political significance because by inventing the war machine, the nomads disrupt striated space, undoing any inherent claim to ownership of sedentary space.

The philosophers write, “we are referring to religion as an element in a war machine and the idea of holy war as the motor of that machine. The prophet, as opposed to the state personality of the king and the religious personality of the priest, directs the movement by which religion becomes a war machine or passes over to the side of such a machine.” By renewing and reconstituting the ‘nomos’ (nomadic thinking), the church can deterritorialize the sedentary space of structural injustice by deploying its alternative politics. It then becomes a war machine to resist unjust ordinances of sedentary distribution and determination.

The church has been part of the traditional territorial thinking of the secular world.

## Questions

2. *Is it possible for the church to move from territorial thinking to nomadic thinking? To do so is to then become participants in deterritorializing, which addresses and dismantles structural injustice and systemic violence. Does this mean war? If so, Ahn's use of the social philosopher's description of War Machine is important.*
3. *Is the church at war against structural injustice and systemic violence? Why or why not?*

## Conclusion

The church must develop its distinctive politics to address such overbearing problems as the structural injustice, systemic violence and social-ecological suffering of our world. The European church failed to do so and its legacy continues. The church refuses to have a critical appropriation of the secularization thesis and thoughtless submission to territorial thinking.

A new perspectival framework of nomadic thinking has been developed by Ahn for the work of the church. We are currently facing new, different kinds of colonialism that support or have instituted current, debilitating structural injustice and systemic violence.

The church must dismantle the sedentary logic of the neoliberal world because of its territorial privilege and status.

## Chapter Two Worksheet

In the examples given by the author, are you able to think of other structural violence issues in your own community/neighborhood?

Why do you think the church has failed to address structural injustices and systemic violence in recent years?

Is your own church addressing structural injustices and systemic violence? If so, how?

Is the church capable of developing its own politics without succumbing to the pressures of secularization? Why, or why not?

Is your church able to address secular issues in your community? If so, do they address secular issues? Give an example.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Bible, Political Theology, and Structural Injustice Introduction

In this chapter, Ahn utilizes biblical references to show that nomadic thinking and deterritorializing the current tradition of the church is found in scripture. Such references also outlines political theology from the covenant with Abraham, various prophetic voices, gospels and Paul's letters. Old and New Testament references shows how God's work has always been interwoven into God's people standing against, challenging and changing structural injustice. The chapter is divided into three sections; 1) The Bible, Political Theology, and Structural Injustice, 2) The Gospels, Paul's Letters and Structural Injustice, and, 3) Neo-Augustinian Political Theologies and the Justice of the Church. Ahn focuses on how we read the Bible, the way we think theologically and how we learn to practice deterritorial nomadic thinking. This will require the church to renew and reconstitute its noms by critically examining its old territorial conventions.

Ahn will engage in in-depth critical exploration of key biblical sources and major theological works in recent years. He will develop an argument that the biblical concepts of righteousness (*dikaiosyne*), covenant and gospel substantiate the nomos for the church's alternative politics against various forms of structural injustice in the world. Such work is indispensable and an integral aspect of God's covenantal community.

### The Abrahamic Covenant, Prophetic Voices, and Deterritorial Nomos

Genesis 18- The Lord appears to Abraham by the oaks of the Mamre as he sits at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham sees three men and invites them to his place and provides hospitality. As they depart one of them (the Lord) says "I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice."

Doing justly is a key element in the covenantal relationship between the Lord and Abraham.

#### Questions

1. *Why is doing justly such an important part of the Abrahamic covenant?*
2. *Why has the tradition of the church focused less on doing justly and more on individual relationships between God and human beings?*

Leviticus 25: 8-12 and the Year of Jubilee offers a detailed view of justice with specific action items such as; debt release, slave release, interest free loans, fallow years and land repurchase. Ahn contends these actions are focused on preventing and dismantling a social structure that may systemically perpetuate unjust, oppressive, and destructive relationships. Further, Ahn argues that covenant is part of Abraham's nomadic life. Thus, justice is what characterizes covenantal relationship and becomes the central ethos that characterizes the entire covenantal community called "a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5).

## Questions

3. *What did the Year of Jubilee actually celebrate and how was it carried out?*
4. *Can nations today actually begin a process of "Jubilee" based on Leviticus? Why or why not?*

David L. Peterson points out that there is a common thread woven in prophetic literature;

- 1) God's divine condemnation of widespread sins and social injustices,
- 2) The theological importance of Israel's covenant with God,
- 3) The international relevance of God's divine plan beyond Israel's national and ethnic boundary.

Amos Chapters 1-2 teaches that the nations are indicted for committing heinous crimes such as genocidal acts. Isaiah 5:1-7 ends with the pronouncement, "I looked for justice and found bloodshed, for righteousness and found a bitter cry." Micah 3:10, Jeremiah 22:17, Isaiah 3:14 continues the list of social oppressions named by the prophets. Ahn writes, Above all the prophetic judgments against social and structural injustice as well as the demand for justice and righteousness implies that addressing, challenging, and transforming the social and structural injustices are the covenantal community's collective responsibility to God.

## Question

5. *Dr. King once said, "We are all caught up in a mutual web of interdependence. The justice of God is for the entire earth, not just one country. How do we accomplish such a task?"*

## The Gospels, Paul's Letters and Structural Injustice

What does the church's deterritorial nomadic politics have to do with its Jesus and his gospels? This question is asked of Ahn as he begins looking at New Testament texts related to rhizome politics for the church. He reminds readers that *from Jesus precarious birth to his horrendous crucifixion, Jesus' life was deeply entangled with various types of structural injustice. From King Herod to Pontius Pilate, the ugly face of structural injustice and systemic violence was present.*

Jesus begins his public ministry with Luke 4:21 "Today this Scripture will be fulfilled in your hearing." For Ahn this is a correlation used by Jesus to identify himself as the realization of The Year of Jubilee. According to John Howard Yoder, The Year of Jubilee is also found in the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught his disciples. *Remit us our debts as we ourselves have also remitted them to our debtors.*

The author goes on to suggest Jesus witnessed the brutal infliction of structural injustice on innocent people and in the death of John the Baptist. Jesus also preaches about structural injustice in the parable of wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-46). In his final sermon in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus condemns nations carrying out structural injustice without aiding and assisting "the least of these." Ahn writes *If we fail to interpret Jesus' life, words and acts without contextualizing them against the backdrop of the structural injustice of his time, we may end up with an abridged and myopic understanding of his gospels.*



In the Black church tradition there is a saying that “the white man came along and gave us Jesus. Before we knew anything, the white man then took everything else.” In this larger sense, Ahn is detailing how this has been an issue with the Western Church and most regions of the world. Ahn asks how it is possible to overcome this abridged and myopic theological dualism? That is, how is it possible for faith communities today to reconstruct a holistic and balanced political theology that addresses and transforms structural injustice and systemic violence, rather than leaving these issues to the state? History and the tradition of the church has depoliticized Jesus the historical Jesus.

Horsley again is referred to as a *helpful guide*. He offers “three types of depoliticization that occurred; Jesus, Judea and Galilee, and the Roman Empire.” He asks the question, “Why is depoliticization in the standard interpretation of the historical Jesus problematic?” First, it prevents us from having a holistic understanding of who Jesus was and what his mission was for. Horsley analogically describes the methodological shortcomings of depoliticization, saying “Trying to understand Jesus’ speech and action without knowing how the Roman imperialism determined the conditions of the life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand Martin Luther King, Jr., without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African Americans in the United States.”

Now Ahn delivers a summary of the life of Jesus during the Roman Empire’s era of imperialism.

Romans controlled life conditions in Galilee.

Before Jesus was born, Roman armies invaded the area wreaking havoc everywhere. Romans appointed Herod as “king” and provided troops to use against the people.

Herod’s son Antipas was installed by the Romans to rule over Galilee. Herod’s building projects were accomplished by overtaxing Galileans (Jews). Romans appointed the highest officials to rule over Galilee’s religious leaders.

Jesus was born, raised and lived during all of these harsh conditions and realities. He constantly and constantly spoke against all of these examples of structural injustice and systemic violence. Ahn suggests that Jesus’ most dramatic confrontation was with the money changers buying and selling in the temple premises.

Caiaphas the high priest tells the council it is better for one person to die for the people (John 18:14). This is an example of how the church *justifies its social-religious sin by victimizing the innocent for their own sake*.

1. *Do you agree that Jesus’ ministry and mission must be understood within his social, economic and political context as a Galilean in the Roman Empire?*
2. *If you do agree, how do you reckon with the fact that most faith communities today do not preach or teach about Jesus from a nomadic prophetic tradition?*
3. *If we are able to sing with power “Jesus is Mine”, are we able to have that same power in speaking against structural injustice and systemic violence?*

Ahn now begins to explore other voices in the New Testament. Paul's political theology in constructing the idea of deterritorial nomadic politics, now unfolds. Ahn cites a "new perspective on Paul" coming out of recent scholarship in New Testament studies. Paul's usage of "be made righteous" ("be justified") is reviewed by E. P. Sanders and suggests that this term is about "getting in", not "staying in" the body of the saved.

*The new perspective possesses theological significance in that it can fundamentally change Christian engagement in structural injustices in the world because this engagement is recognized as works of the new covenantal community established by Jesus. N. T. Wright suggests, "Paul affirms that God's final judgment will be in accordance with the entirety of a life led- in accordance, in the words, with works." It is not enough to dismiss any talk of human responsibility in the process of salvation as 'synergistic.' Neil Elliot writes, "After all, according to Paul's own account in the letter to the Galatians, when he met with the apostles in Jerusalem, he declared that being continually mindful of the poor was the very thing I have made it my business to do." (Galatians 2:10).*

Ahn summarizes his review of biblical investigation by writing a *confessional resistance to structural injustice and systemic violence and an ecclesial engagement in healing and transforming the world should become the practical measures for the church's deterritorial nomadic politics.*

4. *After so many years of focusing on the critical importance of faith/righteousness, is it possible to begin the task of re-teaching the church about the equal importance of works? Why, or why not.*
5. *To "be righteous" is to not only possess faith, but to have actions that addresses and challenges structural injustice and systemic violence. Yet, society now views such actions as radical and non-Christian. Can you withstand the critique from society by showing your faith through being righteous and working within nomadic politics in the church.*
6. *Can our church be a thriving center where focus is on being righteous as well as working for justice and an end to violence?*

### **Neo-Augustinian Political Theologies and Justice of the Church (*Justitia Ecclesiae*)**

Ahn focuses on two political theologians William T. Cavanaugh and Luke Bretherton to review the dialogical consociation between Neo-Augustinian political theologies and the church's deterritorial political theology.

*Dialogical means "relating to or in the form of dialogue."*

*Consociation means "the art of living together."*

Cavanaugh attacks liberal the liberal theopolitical position by sharing the neo-Augustinian paradigm of theopolitics. He shares that the "liberal paradigm is problematic because 'political theology' and 'public theology' both have assumed the legitimacy of the separation

of the state from civil society, and tried to situate the Church as one more interest group within civil society." Ahn contends that *Cavanaugh attacks such a position because it excludes Christian theological discourse from putative public forum in the name of a secular neutrality, marginalizing the body of Christ in favor of a false public body centered in the state.* Cavanaugh goes on to suggest "the church's role is not to "influence the public" but simply to be the public (*res publica*). The church is the public thing and the *imperium* has forfeited any such claim to be truly public by its refusal to do justice, by refusing to give God (*his*) due."

Ahn goes on to show that Cavanaugh is not in favor of either a Constantinian or privatized political space. The church must be shaped by its own theopolitical imagination, enabling it to create its own spatial story. Christians then perform stories which transform the way space is configured. Ahn then describes the difference between place and space quoting from Michel de Certe, a Jesuit social theorist. Thus, viewing Augustine's two cities is not suggestive of conflict, but a potential capacity of coexisting and occupying the same place with two different stories.

Liturgy, and particularly the Eucharist becomes the core theological notion, symbol and imagery that substantiates the spatial story of *res publica*. Cavanaugh writes, "Rituals enact our debt to the past, which we cannot pay via ritual, but only via fresh sacrifice. In contrast, the Christian liturgy is not merely cyclical but points forward to the eschatological consummation of history in which violence and division are overcome....The Eucharist directs us to the overcoming of violence and division." For him, the Eucharist does not mean re-sacrificing Christ or presenting new blood sacrifice from us. Cavanaugh offers a vision of faith communities, "The kind of church I dream of goes out into the world and helps to bind wounds by taking on the suffering of others into the suffering body of Christ. All people, Christians or not, are members or potential members of the body of Christ." He goes on to say that the "primary political task of the church is to become a field hospital in a wounded world rather than to dismantle the structural injustice that causes wounds to this world and its inhabitants."

#### 7. *What does it look like to take the Lord's Supper into the public square?*

Luke Bretherton's political theology is "characterized by his democratic political vision." Bretherton also distinguishes between secularity and secularism. He writes that "as a theological term, secular is that which is not eternity....It is a Christian innovation that the current age is demarcated to be secular. He goes on to offer a specific definition of secular by writing, "If something is secular, it can be both sacred and profane, rather than sacred or profane." Thus, "the church and the state coexist in a dyadic, not binary manner." Bretherton views secularity as a fruit of the entangled histories that shape processes of modernization around the world". Secularism is a "governmental and hegemonic project that generates specific configurations of divisions between people and private...."

Bretherton's definition of politics and democratic politics is an important part of his theology;

*Politics* "refers to forming, morning, and sustaining some kind of common life between friends, strangers, enemies, and the friendless amid their ongoing differences and disagreements and as they negotiate asymmetries of various kinds of power."

*Democratic politics* "is characterized by the radical extension of who is considered capable and worthy of being political agents."

Thus, democratic politics extends politics from being the preserve of the few to something undertaken by the many for the good of the whole. Bretherton also distinguishes between democratic politics and democracy. "Democracy refers to a mode of statecraft or structuring government- such as voting systems, parliamentary forms of government, etc.- democratic politics emphasizes a set of practices for generation nonviolent forms of relational power and cooperation by way of such acts as community organizing, unions, cooperatives, demonstrations, etc."

Regarding Bretherton's focus on democratic politics, Ahn fails to see robust critical self-reflection. Bretherton fails to apply his radically biblical political theology, grounded in the transforming power and political possibility present in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, to the earthly structures entrusted to teach and uphold such radical hope.

Bretherton points to African Americans' Black Power movement as a representative "case" for his democratic politics. Ahn writes that the most regrettable corollary of Bretherton's democratic politics is that the problem of structural injustice is not considered a key political-theological issue. Rather, Bretherton blames the moral status of the people for the existence of social sin.

*Dyadic* - In sociology a dyad is a group of two people, the smallest possible social group. Dyadic is an adjective which describes their interaction.

*Binary* - Of or relating to, composed of, or involving two things.

*Hegemonic* - Ruling or dominant in a political or social context.

## Conclusion

Ahn has explored Biblical sources to uncover the gnomes for the church's deterritorial nomadic politics and examined the possible consociation between neo-Augustinian political theologies and the church's deterritorial political theology.

- 1) The Biblical notion of righteousness (*dikaiosyne*) especially God's righteousness that condemns and dismantles structural injustice, constitutes the gnomes for the church's deterritorial nomadic politics.
- 2) An in-depth theological examination of Cavanaugh's and Bretherton's political theologies help us see more clearly why we need to develop further the church's deterritorial nomadic politics.

The first task of the Western church is to engage in thorough and full historical reckoning. Until all the stories of the colonized people are told, it should keep reckoning with its historical sin no matter how long it takes.

## Chapter Three Worksheet

Does your church celebrate its own hermeneutic/interpretation of the Bible?

Do you believe Jesus's mission was to confront the structural injustice and systemic violence of his day? If so, how did he do so?

Can you cite examples in Paul's writing about challenging structural injustices during first century Palestine?

The church must undergo major re-orientation, moving from territorial thinking to deterritorial thinking? If the church has not done so for 500 or 2,000 years, how is can it take place now?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Church and Rhizomatic Politics Introduction

Ahn begins this chapter with examples of structural injustice and consequent systemic violence. The largest oil spill in history occurred April 20, 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico on the BP-operated Deepwater Horizon oil rig. Over 130 million gallons of oil leaked into the Gulf. *BP was categorically excluded from the full environmental analysis.* The company poured over two million dollars into federal lobbying in the first months of 2011. In October 2018 the nation was struck by seeing thousands of Central American migrants (known as the migrant caravan) who were walking, taking buses, and wading through rivers in a cross-continent effort to arrive at the southern US Border. The Southern Poverty Law Center shared that nearly two thousand children were separated from their parents or legal guardians in just over one month.

Ahn seeks to *develop a new practical-conservative paradigm for the church's political theological engagement in the structural injustice world by critically appropriating Deleuze and Guattari's seminal notion of a rhizome.* The chapter will share how *the church's primary political theological task is to resist and confront structural injustice rather than to strike a balance between itself and the state.*

### The Church, Rhizome, and Ecclesial Politics

The focus of the book now centers on Ahn's use of rhizome as a model for the church and its ecclesial politics. Deleuze and Guattari expands the definition of rhizome from biology to "an image of thought to describe an alternative way of conceptualizing the world." They go on to share that "rhizomatic structures refer to acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other; the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their state at a given moment- such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a central agency."

The authors share that "various forms rhizomes cannot but be interlinked with the process of deterritorialization." Ahn writes, *One of the key features of structural injustice is that it commonly parasitizes the existing arborescent systems such as governing, regulating, or justifying mechanisms for its sustenance and further expansion. Structural injustice does not come into being out of nowhere; it, rather, evolves itself by parasitically exploiting the existing arborescent systems, entailing systemic abuse and social sufferings.*

Ahn offers an example of structural injustice citing Michelle Alexander's 2010 book *The New Jim Crow*. Between the mid-1960's to the late 2000's the number of people locked in U.S. prisons and jails increased from eight hundred thousand to over seven million. The American Civil Liberties Union shares "One out of every three Black boys born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime and one of every six Latino boys - compared to one of every seventeen white boys."

Using the Rhizome influence in its political theology the church develops a new ecclesial-political framework to address structural injustice and systemic violence.

### **Apophatic Theologies and Rhizomatic Politics**

In this section Ahn wants to theologially justify and substantiate the church's rhizomatic politics. He will theologially justify and share how it is ecclesiastically required of churches to have rhizomatic politics to fulfill itself as Christ's church. Ahn will address three questions; 1) What is apophatic or negative theology, 2) Why is the church's rhizomatic politics established and operated apophatically?, and 3) How does apophatic theology specifically support and substantiate it?

*Apophatic or negative theology is a name given to a tradition within Christianity that confesses God to be so utterly transcendent, so beyond our concepts and names of God, that we must in fact 'negate' them to free God from such cramped categories.* Ahn goes on to describe how apophatic theologies have existed from early Christian history with; Gregory of Nysa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Maximus the Confessor, and Nicholas of Cusa. Apophatic theology is the opposite of *Cataphatic Theology- Knowledge of God obtained through affirmation.* Though having different vantage points the theologies are not independent and separate from one another because, 1) The practitioner must have something to negate, 2) Negative and affirmative theologies are inseparable because negation is not an operation performed once, but rather is a commitment to the perpetual affirmation and negation of God's revelation.

One major contribution of apophatic or negative theology is that it has brought to the church is that it helps the church critically distinguish its deterritorial political theology from the types of onto theology.

The role of the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) is an important one in helping the church consistently recognize the mission of Jesus encompassed addressing structural injustice and systemic violence, to the point of his crucifixion.

1. Can the church adjust its theological views and appropriate rhizome politics in order to address structural injustice and systemic violence?
2. Are there churches engaged in such work today?
3. Is this move to rhizome politics in the church one that "bring down" existing church tradition that supports current secular structures perpetuating injustice and violence?

### **Apophatic Incarnation, Becoming the Church and Rhizomatic Politics**

Maximus contends the naked human mind is not able to engage naked spiritual realities (the Naked Word). Thus, we must encounter the Word made flesh. According to Maximus the incarnation of Christ is understood in two ways; cataphatic and apophatic. Cataphatic view of the incarnation is for those who cannot with their name mind reach naked spiritual realities, and because of this given limitation, God the Father ruses their familiar ways, such as stories, enigmas, parables and dark sayings to convert with them. This is how the Word becomes



flesh. "First encounter." Unlike cataphatic, the apophatic view helps us under the "naked Word" as such, not the Word made flesh."

Ahn seeks to explain the difference between the one who knows the "Word" or the "pure Christ" from the one who knows the "Word as flesh." The first "Word" group of people are those who live in Christ and have gone beyond the righteousness of both the Law and nature..."For in Christ there is neither circumcision or uncircumcision." The church should be those in the "Word" or "pure Christ." Thus, *the church is to go beyond legally justice and religiously sanctioned moral righteousness. The genuine church of apophatic incarnation stands against injustice, especially structural injustice, which religious institutions and politics fail to address by their moral and legal standards. Ahn writes that structural injustice exploits systems governing, regulating or justifying mechanisms for its sustenance and further expansion.*

A biblical example is of Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers at the temple ("Chief priests and scribes" are included in this group). Later when the Council hands him over to be tried, Pilate sees the whole process has been set up by the chief priests out of their jealousy.

### Conclusion

Ahn has outlined the concept of *the church's rhizomatic politics as an ecclesial response to the rising structural injustice of this world. The church has long been trapped by the traditional binary logic of the church and state separation and the Western church has long been confined by this ideological straitjacket. Ahn has laid theological groundwork for the church's rhizomatic politics. Apophatic theology is indispensable to develop the idea of rhizomatic politics because without it, the church may tend to turn a blind eye or even take sides with systems of religion and politics supporting structural injustice.*

Who will be responsible of the work?

## Chapter Four Worksheet

The church must produce a new ecclesial-political framework in order to face, address and bring down structural injustice and systemic violence. Yet, the church has not been quick to change. What can be done to move the church towards this new paradigm?

If the church is currently bound to the status quo and its structures of injustice, what steps must be taken to end the current relationship in order to offer a prophetic voice?

Ahn asks the church to reconsider its traditional understanding of God and to move towards apophatic theology. Is the current membership of your church able to begin visioning God anew? If not, what will it take?

To know the damage that structural injustice has done and is doing, is critical for churches to begin transforming. How can your church teach about the damage that has been (and is currently being) done?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Church and Rhizomatic Organizing

#### Introduction

The author begins examination of the church's agential aspect of rhizomatic politics. Without rhizomatic organizers there can be no such thing as rhizomatic politics. Various terms are used; rhizomatic organizers, rhizomatic leaders, community organizers, etc. What does it mean to be a rhizome organizer? What are the key qualifications to become a rhizome organizer for the church? How could we theologically ground this idea? Ahn names four rhizome organizers, offering information regarding their work in local faith communities in various parts of the United States.

Ahn first focuses on two historical cases;

- \* Housing apartheid
- \* Japanese American internment

1. *What did the church and its leaders do, say about each of these structural injustices? Why did the church act, not act in each situation?*
2. *Why have churches and their leaders being silent regarding structural injustices?*

He then examines four church leaders through in-depth interviews held in early 2021;

- 1) Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, Co-chair Poor People's Campaign and Director of the Kari's Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary in NYC.
- 2) Rev. Dr. Michael Nabors, Senior Pastor of Second Baptist Church and President of the Evanston/North Shore National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
- 3) Rev. John Fife, former senior pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona and a founding organizer of the Sanctuary Movement.
- 4) Rev. Kaji Dousa, senior pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City and chair of the New Sanctuary Coalition New York City.

By what biblical and theological foundation could we formulate church leaders as rhizome leaders?

#### Pastors as Rhizomatic Organizers

Ahn begins by sharing *one of the key structural injustices in the United States is the racially engineered wealth gap between Black and white households*. Quoting from a 2020 Brookings Institute report, Ahn outlines that the net worth of a typical White family is nearly ten times greater than that of a black family (171k compared to 17k). The author then outlines how such a wealth gap exists by reviewing the Federal Home Owners Loan Corporation,

redlining, color-coding maps to designated certain neighborhoods from “best” to “worst”, etc. Many black families purchased homes under predatory contracts that eventually led many to be evicted. Ahn asks, *where was the Christian church during this historical period of systemic housing discrimination?* Often enough, they were complicit in this systemic injustice because the property and value of their buildings and their parishioners homes were beneficiaries.

In fact, Christian ethicist Joe Petit writes “there was explosive growth of the white churches during the period of housing apartheid..... Opportunist positions were taken and individual churches and church leaders took active roles in advancing Whites-only communities and denying housing opportunities to Blacks.” In short, white churches did not speak up against housing apartheid because of their own increased wealth, due to the structural injustice. Petit further concludes that these “white churches and their leaders allowed the consciences of their members to rest easy.”

1. *White churches were directly involved in and have significant responsibility for the housing apartheid (racism) that was and has been part of the United States. White churches must play a role in repairing the damage done against Black families.*

Ahn now focuses on Japanese American internment during World War II. May would call it imprisonment rather than internment. In 1942 Executive Order 9066 was issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to round up 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast and relocate them to concentration camps for the duration of the war. They were perceived as a threat to American security. The government justified such action as a “military necessity.” Ahn rightly writes that the action was motivated by anti-Japanese xenophobia.

Ahn compares such action to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, another explicit anti-immigration policy targeting nonwhites. The Supreme Court upheld Executive Order 9066 with a vote of 6-3. Systemic injustice was entrenched in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

There was some response from white churches. Quakers tried to prevent Executive Order 9066 from being missed. Individual faith organizations also responded; The Seattle Council of Churches, Portland Council of Churches, a panel of white Protestant leaders in San Francisco and Christian Century magazine all commented but none of them were outright in their condemnation and most supported the decision “if it there was a military necessity.”

2. *In this instance we can see how militarism supersedes faith communities. The separation of church and state, it appears, was the excuse for churches and their leaders remaining silent when such structural injustice was occurring around and among them. Has anything changed?*

In nearly every instance the church and church leaders remained silent when two of the largest structural injustice issues of the 20th century unfolded. Ahn is stating the case for the crucial and urgent need for Rhizome organizers and rhizomatic politics to occur in today's church. Ahn writes *church leaders must accept and acknowledge that they are more than*

*priests, more than storytellers, and more than caregivers; they are ordained as well to become story makers, community organizers, and activist theologians.*

3. *Do you agree that your pastor/church leader must do more than just preach, teach, visit the sick and shut-in and lead church ministries? Does your pastor/church leader have a responsibility to be involved in affairs and issues involving structural injustice and systemic violence?*

### **Real World Rhizome Organizers of the Church**

In this second, Ahn offers examples of rhizome organizers, what they are up to and how they practice rhizome politics. This part of Ahn's book is plays an important role in helping contemporary churches learn from models who are;

- 1) Currently engaged in challenging and working to deterritorialize church tradition
- 2) Engaging in the important work of reckoning with historical sin
- 3) Listening to the stories of victims
- 4) Organizing, working and networking to engage in nomadic thinking leading to nomadic politics

*Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis* - Theoharis is founder and co-director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, Coordinator of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Cochair of the Poor People's Campaign and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Ahn writes Theoharis's ecclesial grassroots movement and leadership have demonstrated three aspects. 1) *Being very clear about specific forms of structural injustice to address and dismantled through rhizomatic activism.* 2) *Constantly reaching out to and building grassroots alliances with other organizations and communities across the country, even beyond national borders.* 3) *Highlighting the importance of theological reflection and engagement in biblical and sacred texts.* Theoharis shared that her early work of community organizing began when she worked with homeless families with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in the winter of 1995. The group broke into St. Edward's Catholic Church in North Philadelphia to demonstrate the embodiment of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "a proactive response to the failure of organized religion to take poverty seriously either theologically or poracytally."

Theoharis also shared that the Poor People's Campaign mean that "we really believe we need moral revolution of values that are rooted in our constitutional and sacred texts and values.

1. *Does your church belong to the Poor People's Campaign? Why or why not?*
2. *Does your church have external relationships and a network with other community, national or international organizations focused on naming and ending structural injustices?*

*Rev. Dr. Michael Nabors* - Nabors is senior pastor of Second Baptist Church in Evanston, IL, president of the Evanston/North Shore National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and adjunct professor at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. He also sits on community boards for St. Francis and Evanston North Shore Hospitals, Chiaravalle

Montessori School, Shedd Aquarium and is a member of Evanston Own It, Evanston Interfaith Clergy and Leaders and Evanston Fellowship of Pastors clergy organizations. Ahn notes the importance of matching pastor and congregation to be “a good fit” when it comes to social justice ministries and addressing structural injustices. Nabors chose to address systemic racism. Ahn quotes the pastor, *On the first Sunday in January, 2018, I stood before the congregation after having written something to them and stated, “I am declaring an all-out war on racism. And I will not stop in my battles against racism until racism has ended or until my voice has ended.”* The “good fit” between pastor and congregation allowed for community to take a central position in the congressional-social ministry and in his practical theory. Nabors also shared part of the historical relationship between the Black church and the NAACP. The pastor has been very involved in Evanston Reparations, the first municipal program of its kind where 10 million dollars has been set aside to repair damage to Black residents caused by racism.

According to Ahn, Nabors has a striking theological view regarding church and state, or religion and politics and believes that the Black church has never focused on or accepted such a separation, due to their very genesis as a reaction to state sponsored social injustice, slavery. Nabors named three theologians who influenced his theological perspective; James Cone, Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson.

Interestingly, only Cone is a theologian while both West and Dyson are public intellectuals with deep roots in the Black Baptist church tradition.

3. *Can Evanston reparations be duplicated and modeled in other parts of the country?*
4. *Would your church be willing to serve as an advocate, and participant in building a reparations program in your community?*

*Rev. John Fife* - Fife is a retired Presbyterian minister in Tucson, Arizona. He is also a key figure who helped launch the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980's, helped start the Samaritan Patrol along the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona in 2002 and was president of the NAACP in Tucson. Ahn recognized Fife's Southside Presbyterian Church *was not accidental in becoming the beacon of the Sanctuary Movement*. It was an extension of Fife's earlier community-building ministries. Fife's role as a pastor included the effort to “get the people in the congregation in a relationship...with the community and the people who need our help.” Fife's leadership at Southside Presbyterian Church allowed for donations of land for the first Native American housing program in the country. He also focused on city initiatives that were excluded businesspeople and bankers from being engaged in the needs of the people. Fife recalls how he became a leader in the Sanctuary Movement by listening to a request from a Quaker, Jim Corbett who asked him to join a legal aid strategy. Corbett talked about the abolition movement to end slavery and the failure of the church to protect Jewish people in Europe in the 1930's and 1940's. Hearing about the stories of others, prompted Fife to correlate the information into the present challenge facing refugees from Central and South America.

Fife also mentions having a “complete conversion experience” because of his personal experience and involvement with the persecuted church in Central America.

5. *Would you become involved in the Sanctuary Movement and encourage your church to also become involved? Why, or why not?*
6. *Is your church willing to aid and assist refugees? Why, or why not?*

Rev. Kaji Dousa - Dousa is senior pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City and chair of the New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City. Ahn recognizes her family background- grandfather was the first Black man to graduate Boston University's School of Theology with a PhD who helped Dr. King's civil rights movement in Greensboro, NC, her mother was a field organizer and national communications director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and her father was one of the people at Morehouse College who took over the administration during the 1960's. All of this would impact Dousa as she grew up in the family.

Dousa talked about being targeted with deportation during the Obama administration, being involved with a "congregation who had someone rejected from every New York City social service/immigrant service organization." Since the person received no help, Dousa became involved with the New Sanctuary movement who became involved.

Dousa highlights the danger between the church's confusion between forgiveness and reckoning. She says, "the problem that the church causes is that it confuses forgiveness with reckoning." Dousa goes on to say that the work is not about "making friends", "currying favor", "getting money or contracts". "It is about picking up your cross and following him, and making sure nobody else gets hung on a cross like that. Reckoning may lead to some forms of restoration...but it doesn't mean that we gloss over something." Dousa then contends that the church's practice of forgiveness is "glossing over something" and is dangerous.

7. *Is your pastor involved in other organizations in your town? Why, or why not?*
8. *Does your church celebrate its heritage/history, along with the pastor and other church leaders' heritage/history? Are they an important part of your church's identity.*

Ahn concludes that each of the rhizome leaders have three things in common: 1) A very clear goal of their rhizome politics, 2) Deeply involved in community organizing participation in protecting and advocating the rights of people who victimized by structural injustice and systemic violence, and, 3) Equipped with clear and strong theological viewpoints on various subjects, including the church's role and responsibility related to social justice and solidarity.

### **Becoming a Rhizome Organizer**

In this section Ahn argues that *the way Jesus died and the reason he died are inseparable. Critical thinking about the crucifixion becomes an indispensable backdrop against which the idea of a rhizome organizer is conceived as an ideal type in conjunction with the church's rhizome politics.*

Utilizing the work of Rene Girard, Ahn seeks to help the church gain a new perspective of the crucifixion so that the focal point is not individual sin/original sin. Rather, the focal point is "offers a new perspective regarding the structural aspect of sin..." Girard shares that "one of the key functions of human life is desire, and it is deeply social, in that humans do not simply



desire a certain object, but instead, they learn to desire specific objects through a process of imitation." He employs a Greek term to go into further detail.

Girard's focus on human desire transformed into mimetic desire creates a triangular relationship involving subject, model and object. "We identify in someone else a model that we are inclined to imitate, This model can be their parents, elites, leaders, etc."

The triangular structure of mimetic desire then implicates two different aspects; 1) desiring a particular object or dissing a general goal (status, acclaim, or a level of competence). Girard names the former "acquisitive mimesis" and the latter "metaphysical mimesis."

Jesus's passion is an act of resistance to collective violence unjustly inflicted upon him. Ahn continues, *The purpose of revealing and unmasking the structural injustice of scapegoating violence is to reject and stop it so there will be no more victims. He asserts, One of the key missions of the kingdom of God must be fulfilling this purpose. Unless the church would practice this mission, then it may exist only as a physical entity, but it cannot be the church established by the Christ of resistance and liberation.*

*No Christian church is exempt from the call to become churches established by the Christ of resistance and liberation.*

A vital trait to possess in order to become a rhizome organizer of the church is the virtue of *parrhesia* (speaking the truth in the face of risk). In the Black church tradition this is called "speaking truth to power."

The philosopher Michel Foucault writes, in other words *parrhesia* is a virtue, duty, and technique which should be found in the person who spiritually directs others and helps them to constitute their relationship to self." Ahn traces such virtues to the prophets and to Jesus who says, "I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret." Ahn also contends the Bible testifies that *parrhesia* is a gift of God and not a demonstration of an individual's willpower. The church's rhizome politics must be organized and practiced by those who are spiritually awakened as well as theologically renewed. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

1. *Not everyone is a rhizome organizer. Does your church have a rhizome organizer? How do you know? What are her/his characteristics?*
2. *If your church is not engaged in rhizome politics, led by a rhizome organizer, what steps should be taken to move it in that direction? Can it be done? Why or why not?*

## Conclusion

Ahn concludes by sharing the ideal type of church leader is the rhizome organizer who organizes the church's justice ministries against structural injustice and systemic violence. Theology matters. Year's of community engagement experiences as well as spiritual growth and maturation are required. It take the whole church to raise a rhizome organizer. Jesus and his ministry serve as the ideal type of rhizome organizer.

## Chapter Five Worksheet

In thinking about the examples of structural injustice at the beginning of this chapter (Housing Apartheid and Japanese American Internment) were you surprised that each of these were conducted and supported by the U.S. Government? Why?

With each of the rhizome organizers interviewed by the author, what struck you by the common themes in each story?

Is it possible to move the church's historical vision about sin being personal, to sin being equally structural and systemic?

Does your church have the gift of parrhesia? How is it being used?

## CHAPTER SIX

### A Public Church for a Post-Christendom Era Introduction

Ahn begins this chapter with a tragic accident occurring in 2004 in Wise County, Virginia. A stray boulder from an A&G Coal surface mine rolled down into a home and killed three year old Jeremy Davidson in his sleep. It was learned that stray boulders had been a continuous problem in the area- both dangerous and damaging property. The tragedy revealed a much larger problem "mountaintop removal coal mining." Activists mobilized after being moved by the death of Jeremy Davidson, calling for a public memorial. Later they mobilized the first Mountain Justice Summer, a turning point in the resistance movement to surface mining in Appalachia. A private and tragic moment became a public issue (moral) which prompted national denominations to issue official statements opposing the practice of corporate mining practices from the perspective of ecological justice.

### The Church and Community Organizers

*Community organizing is an essential part of the church's rhizomatic politics because it is profoundly theological in its foundation and can be politically effective.* Katie Day explains, "Community organizing has benefitted over the last decades from the human resources and social capital of communities of faith, but less so from the attention of public theologians."

Social philosopher Saul D. Alinsky is highlighted by Ahn for his fieldwork on community organizing as an artist and political theorist. Critical for Alinsky is the word "change." The outline for his work is for those "who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be." A basic requirement for the work is to recognize the world for what it is. "We must work with it on its terms if we are to change it to the kind of world we would like it to be. We must first see the world as it is and not as we would like it to be. We must see the world as all political realists have, in terms of *what men do and now that they out to do* as Machiavelli and others have put it.

Change comes from power. Power comes from organizing.

Two elements characterize Alinsky's community organizing; 1) By community he does not mean a physical community, such as town, counties, and so on. Instead, he says that we must understand that in a highly mobile, urbanized society, such as a cosmopolitan city, the word *community* means *community of interests*. 2) Community organizing is more than a goal-oriented strategic action; it should be also ethical from the beginning to the end. The ethical principle employed by Alinsky is "means and ends." "Does this *particular* end justify this *particular* means?"

Ahn shares that *Alinsky did not develop his community organizing and social activism for the church or religious institutions*. However, the church is able to utilize *inspirational visions and mobilizing tactics* within its rhizomatic politics.

1. Can the church utilize and benefit from secular forms and models of community organizing? Why or why not?

Ahn believes the answer to this question is a resounding yes. He adds, *but the church needs to do so with a grain of salt*. Referencing the work of well known Christian organizer Rev. William Barber II, Ahn shares that while Barber has taken advantage of the model developed by Alinsky, "It does not always have the answer needed for a new moment." *Barber's ability to learn from Alinsky, while also maintaining specific moral authority according to his own faith, helped with his own community organizing. Alinsky's community organizing work is based on a pragmatic-realistic calculation determining goals and means. For Barber, community organizing is based on moral dissent that is deeply rooted in the African American Christian traditions of Black spirituality and faith.*

A basis for Barber's moral dissent is found in Psalm 94, "Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers?" Thus, Barber's mode of community organizing moved beyond Christian realism whose focus is on Alinsky's "pragmatic-realistic calculation determining goals and means. Moral dissent for Barber means, "We don't just stand with Moses against Pharaoh. We stand with William Lloyd Garrison, the nineteenth century abolitionist who denounced slavery when its abolition was a political impossibility." Barber contends *the true origin of Christian community organizing is Jesus... "a practitioner of moral dissent."* Realism is not thrown out of the window, in that it shapes strategy, according to Barber. "Yet, realism cannot determine the goals of our faith." Ahn writes *Barber inherits Alinsky's ethical framework of means and ends but injects into it a theological and spiritual moral power and urgency.*

Barber focuses on a "fusion of coalitions." *This is the inclusion and solidification of all people across all lines to uphold justice.* The fusion of coalitions is established in various forms and manners such as "formation of an interfaith coalition", "the coalition of secular and ecclesial authorities." Barber says, "Only a fusion coalition representing all the people in any place could push a moral agenda over and against the interest of the powerful." A fusion coalition is; 1) a matter of organizational skill, 2) capable of strategic action, and, 3) theological as well as organizational. Barber sums up his pneumatological understanding by paraphrasing a well known text, "The Spirit blows where it will, working in, through, and beyond the church."

In comparing and outlining both Alinsky and Barber, Ahn writes, "Although the church's rhizomatic politics cannot be reduced to the work of community organizing, the church's prophetic and liberate ministry is not possible without its proactive participation in community organizing. Alinsky's pragmatic-realist framework cannot determine the goals of our faith, but it is able to help the church share its strategy in movements of dissent. Ahn contends "the church's rhizomatic politics is about building relationships and connections among all the related parties across all the dividing lines."

2. *How can the church take advantage of Alinsky's pragmatic-realist framework for community organizing?*
3. *How can the church sense Barber's urgency in addressing current structural violence by creating fusion coalitions with secular and spiritual partners?*

4. Should such fusion coalitions be national and international in scope, or should focus be on closer issues in local communities?

### The Great Commission and the Ends of the Earth

In this section, Ahn seeks to address what he describes as the most daunting stumbling block residing inside the church, rather than on the outside. Ahn writes it is *quintessentially theological*. **It is a narrow and reductive understanding of what is known as the Great Commission, which is the direct instruction given by the resurrected Christ to his disciples to spread the gospel to all the nations of the world.** Ahn writes the significance of this particular passage cannot be overemphasized concerning the formations of Christian theology, biblical scholarship, ecclesial mission, liturgical tradition, seminary education, and so on.

Barber contends fusion coalitions have existed; from the early abolition movement to the civil rights movement, from the suffrage movement to the more recent Black Lives Matter Movement. Barber learned about “the awesome power of what happens when people come together...and I was learning it in the church.”

For Ahn, church tradition has focused almost solely on the passage with a narrow meaning of evangelism and mission as its central task. At the same time, the works of social transformation and different types of rhizomatic politics are relegated to the back seat...Two issues are at stake (a theological problem); 1) the problem of how the church interprets the Great Commission and, 2) the problem of how it appropriates such an interpretation (an ecclesial problem). Ahn contends that the church must reinterpret the passage because the traditional interpretation fails to capture a hidden yet more holistic aspect of Jesus’ Great Commission due to its narrow and reductionist understanding.

David L. Turner is struck with the repetition of the word “all.”

Jesus has been given *all* authority.  
Disciples are to be made of *all* nations.  
Such disciples are to be taught to obey *all* that Jesus commanded.  
Jesus will be with the disciples *all* the days until the end of the age.

For Turner, the emphatic use of all means disciples and by extension, all the followers of Jesus are expected to imitate him in *all* aspects of their lives by modeling after his acts and teachings. The key verb/words (going, baptizing, teaching) do not exhaust the list of Jesus’s thoughts and actions, which we are to imitate. Now, Ahn brings to light the importance of reinterpreting the Great Commission in light of his focus on the rhizomatic politics of the church. He asks, *What about Jesus’ bold act of confronting his adversaries (Pharisees)? What about his conscientious act of resisting Roman rulers (Pilate) in Jerusalem? What about his advocating act of defending children who were coming to him?* This list could go on and on in describing Jesus’s direct confrontation with structural injustice. All of this, according to Ahn can be listed with Jesus’s words *everything that I have commanded you.*

Raising Girard's reinterpretation of the crucifixion, Ahn says that the theological view is not that Christ's death was a sacrificial one. Rather, the cross is to be viewed as the final sacrifice "the termination and annihilation of the unjust practices of scapegoating violence (that is, finding victims to sacrifice to uphold structural injustice and system violence).

**This will be a big ask for those in the African American historical tradition. For us, we have contended (and rightfully so, I believe) that the cross is the centrality of our faith and we sing songs such as, "At the Cross", "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone", "I'll Cherish the Old Rugged Cross." In fact, the history of the Black Church in America is very closely associated with the symbol of cross being one of suffering. Our own suffering was made bearable and to a degree, understandable because of seeing Jesus suffering on the cross.**

Ahn is not asking us to forego the centrality of the cross. Rather, through Girard's hermeneutic of the crucifixion, we are asked to reinterpret the Cross, as perhaps, Jesus's strongest action that symbolizes a confrontation with the structural injustice and systemic violence of his people. The cross is not just the gold and glitter highway leading to personal salvation. But it is also a rugged road leading us to confront empires, religious authorities in high places and in our contemporary times- leading to board rooms, Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court, police departments, school board meetings, city council meetings, state offices and more.

Thus, Jesus is the Christ of resistance and liberation, whose death on the cross puts to an end any form of mimetic violence and the scapegoating mechanism that has become part of the core of Christian tradition. While it may be difficult for churches out of the African Diaspora to move from the church's traditional view of the cross, Ahn gives us ample reasons why such a reinterpretation is so important. *Under the guise of the Great Commission, the Western church during the colonial period played the role of contributing to issues of inequality, traumatic experience, and injustice as well as the influence of these factors on the indigenous African people.*

With this new understanding of the Great Commission, Ahn is ready for the church to *renew its theological pedagogy and reform its educational programs, from children's Sunday school to Bible classes for adults.* He quotes Paulo Freire's statement, "No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors." Jeffrey Stout writes, "The church must hold the people and their rulers responsible for the injustices they have perpetuated and permitted. At times, it is a pastor's responsibility to speak prophetically on the church's behalf."

### **The Collapse of Christendom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity**

Quoting Richard Hutter, Ahn shares that in order to move the church from its privatization to its rightful place in the public, it must have two things; *dogma* and *pneuma*. Hutter contrasts church dogma with the ancient polis of Plato and Aristotle as having surrounding walls and its laws that were made public. So too, the dogma of the church becomes the defining walls that establishes a public for the church. Also *pneuma* (the Holy Spirit) "is precisely who



creates - as *Spiritus Creator* - that which makes the church possible as a public in its own right. Hutter continues "The church is nothing less than the Spirit's creature in time, the Spirit's announcer, and interpreter, then the Spirit's activity can easily be seen and claimed everywhere...the Holy Spirit's publicity goes beyond the church's limits in that the Spirit creates new things and can act as a critic of the church from both within and without." Ahn then critiques Hutter's "dogma-centered ecclesial model" arguing it is inadequate to the idea of public church.

Next Ahn reviews Jennifer M. McBride as *she offers us a new way of helping the post-Christian church become a public church with her theology of public witness*. McBride contends the church's public witness is not only the reconstruction of dogma but also "Confession of sin unto repentance." She writes, "By repentance I mean the church's concrete activity in social and political life that arises from its accepting responsibility and acknowledging its complicity in such sin." McBride then contends the church's relevance and place in the world originates with Christ's solidarity with sinners. "Christ not only dies for humanity's sin but publicly lives with our sin." McBride outlines three ways Jesus builds up solidarity with sinners; 1) As God incarnate, he assumed sinful flesh, 2) Jesus begins his public ministry by being baptized with sinners in response to John the Baptist's call to repent, and 3) Jesus refuses to be called good, but instead, accepts responsibility for sin as a convicted criminal on the cross.

For McBride, "Repentance is not the private, self-focused aim of the individual before God but is participation in the Christ event and thus existence for others and a sharing in God's kingdom come. The church's repentance transforms its public role and responsibility and reconfigures the type of Christianity from the religious to the religionless."

Repentance alone does not mean "becoming engaged" or "fighting the powers that be." *In my view, Ahn writes, what should matter more for the church is not its responsibility to live up to a call to repent but its responsibility to address the sufferings of those who are victimized by structural injustice and systemic violence.*

Ahn focuses on Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity and asks "how can it help the post-Christendom church to reestablish itself as a public church? Two parts; 1) Emphasizing its role of dismantling theological triumphalism, and, 2) Focus on religionless Christianity ultimately referring to the early church of the apostolic age. Ahn believes the early church became itself in a pluralistic non-Christendom social context.

## Conclusion

Ahn concludes by calling for the church to become a public church in a post- Christendom era by modeling after the public ministry of the early church of the apostolic age. The western church should first reckon with its historical sin of colonial complicity. Then it may reestablish itself as a public church whose origin goes back to the early church of the apostolic age. *The future of the Western church lies in becoming a public church, and the church's rhizomatic politics is a vital aspect of this transformation.*



## Chapter Six Worksheet

Is your church currently collaborating with other organizations in your city to stand opposed to structural injustice?

What do you learn about the Poor People's Campaign?

Is your church a partner/involved in the Poor People's Campaign? Why or why not?

Are you ready to stand up and be a witness? Not just for the Lord, but for the dismantling of structural injustice and systemic violence, wherever they are found?

## CONCLUSION

Ahn's conclusion reiterates the important points he has made in each chapter. He has created an argument for a church to become a church it is called to be in an age of rising structural injustice and systemic violence. The church must become a public church practicing its distinctive type of ecclesial politics- rhizomatic politics.

Ahn discovers and highlights deeper historical and theological reasons behind the church's apparent ecclesial quiescence to issues of structural injustice and systemic violence. This falls under territorial thinking and its swift propagation during the colonial period...inevitable outcomes of the Western church's decontextual approach to political theology. This became a convenient yet self-destructive sickening habit with paralytic thinking mechanism that is more deadly in the twenty-first century. The western church has overlooked its homework. The church may not move on because it cannot become itself for failing to fulfill its intrinsic mission to become the body of Christ in this world.

The church's historical sin of colonial complicity must be named and reckoned with. It will take the whole village for the church to finish its deferred work. It may do so with a new way of thinking- nomadic thinking, designed for the fundamental and structural change of the church's engagement with the world. We move from the traditional church and state approach to church versus structural injustice.

For the church to become a rightful agency of the kingdom of God in the public, its political engagement is inevitable. The church must engage in rhizomatic politics that is theological at its core. Nomadic thinking must unfold in leading the church forward. To have successful rhizomatic politics that is theological at its core, the church must also have particular types of leaders who are rhizome organizers/community organizers. They will lay out and articulate their theologies that undergird rhizomatic politics. *The church becomes the good news itself for those who are desperately in need of it in this broken world. It is the church's business to live out this sacred call because it is the body of Christ.*