

## **Faith in the Agricultural Sector**

### **Introduction**

In this contribution we are reflecting on (broad and ecumenical) religious life today and its pastoral significance for contemporary people and society. I am asked to reflect especially on religious life as living in God's creation. I will give some thoughts and rough outlines about the light creation faith can shed on recent developments within the agricultural sector. I will support my argument with two actual examples.

This contribution is structured as follows. In the first section, I will sketch recent developments in the Dutch agricultural sector. In the second, I will reflect on a concept of creation faith set forth by Edward Schillebeeckx and especially by Jonathan Sacks. Section three highlights two actual examples: one in the mining sector in South Africa and one in the agricultural sector in the Netherlands. Section four raises some questions about religious self-understanding in relation to social involvement. In the last section I will offer some concluding remarks.

### **Recent developments within Dutch agriculture**

*Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope) was issued during the Second Vatican Council. The preface of the document reads: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ"<sup>i</sup> What are the joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties of the people in the Netherlands? What is going on in the Netherlands? Why did the farmers protest for weeks on such a scale that hundreds of tractors caused the biggest traffic jam ever in the Netherlands on October 1, 2019? Why did we see military trucks in the streets of The Hague two weeks later, preventing farmers from protesting at 'Het Binnenhof', the political heart of the Netherlands? What happened earlier this year, May 13, 2019, in Boxtel, where more than a hundred animal activists from the international organization 'Meat the Victims' occupied a pig farm in the municipality of Boxtel in North Brabant (Netherlands) for about 9 hours to draw attention to animal suffering. Farmers gathered to counter-protest and tipped cars that belonged to animal activists into a ditch. The police conducted negotiations between the animal activists and the owner of the farm for hours. What are these protests and conflicts about, and why now? Raising this question is much easier than answering it. The direct cause of the protests in October might be found in recent discussions about reducing the emission of nitrogen. In May 2019 the highest administrative court in the Netherlands ruled that government rules for granting construction permits and farming activities that emit large amounts of nitrogen were in violation of EU legislation.<sup>ii</sup> As a result, up to 18,000 infrastructure and construction projects have been put on hold. More recently, in September 2019, the Remkes Commission recommended that farms near nature preserves be bought out or else to be required to adopt measures to become more environmentally friendly.<sup>iii</sup> (Adviescollege Stikstofproblematiek 2019). The farmers were furious and went to The Hague with their tractors to protest on October 1. On September 28, the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* quotes Mark van den Oever, one of the protest organizers: "We feel as if we're being put in the dunces' corner by city types who come and tell us how things should be done in the country." This 'city type' can appear in many forms: the activist, the politician and the journalist. Van den Oever adds that farmers should not be blamed for the nitrogen issue.

But it is not the nitrogen issue alone that is at stake in the agricultural sector. A year earlier, in September 2018, Carola Schouten, the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, stated

that farming, horticulture and fisheries in the Netherlands are characterized by low-cost production and that there is an emphasis on cutting costs and increasing production, resulting in upscaling. The Minister argued that this production method has a price and leads to substantial imbalances or negative externalities – as when in an exchange the action of an agent negatively affects others not (completely) represented in the exchange – as it is called in economics. She highlights the following two imbalances<sup>iv</sup>. First, cost reductions and production increases result in small and sometimes even negative margins, which makes the sector economically vulnerable. This leads to substantial uncertainty for actors in that sector. Second, this has come at the expense of biodiversity, the environment, the climate, the quality of the drinking water, and the attractiveness of the landscape.

According to Schouten, these imbalances provide an argument for making a transition to circular agriculture.<sup>v</sup> She states that the entire supply chain, the government, and consumers have a role to play in this transition. To put it in the words of the Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur: “The inescapable need to adapt our food system provides an excellent opportunity to unite farmers, the food processing industry, the retail sector and consumers in a unique coalition for sustainable and healthy food.”<sup>vi</sup> A key question, however, is how cooperation in the transition to a circular agriculture can be stimulated, especially given the current tendency toward polarization as seen above.

In an expert paper written for the Commission on Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Dutch Lower House, Katrien Termeer, Professor of Public Administration and Policy (Wageningen University), argues that in there have been several initiatives in recent decades toward transition in the agricultural sector, such as reducing livestock, the tension between consumer-citizen, and the weak position of the farmer in the chain. According to Termeer, these earlier initiatives all started with high ambitions and a lot of energy and then ran up against opposition and quietly died due to the presence of taboos strongly held convictions that are hard to change and barely subject to discussion. She states that, for a real transition, it is necessary to face these taboos and to talk about them.<sup>vii</sup>

In the next section I explore – in a maybe somewhat unexpected manner – how the individual and social needs can be supported to create some interaction between the several stakeholders in the agricultural sector in the Netherlands.

## **Creation Faith**

The Dutch public theologian and lay Dominican Erik Borgman starts his book *Zielen winnen*<sup>viii</sup> with a description of the profession of two young Dominican brothers in the Netherlands. During the ceremony, the choir sings “Do not be afraid” by Philip Stopford. The song is an arrangement of Isaiah 43, in which the prophet reminds us that, in the words of the song,

I am the Lord, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel  
the God who saves you.  
... I am with you.

It was the Roman Catholic (and Dominican) theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009) who described a concept of creation faith that developed within the Jewish-Christian tradition over a long period. This concept of creation faith concerns the absolute presence of God in this world: amid all suffering and failure, God remains in and with the finite. Schillebeeckx stresses that the absolute presence of God in this finite world stimulates the continual renewal of hope<sup>ix</sup>. It is striking that when Schillebeeckx refers to the concept of creation faith, he does not refer to the Christian tradition but to the Jewish-Christian tradition. One can argue that this reference corresponds to important developments within the Roman Catholic Church, namely, regarding its view of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. In 1999 the Dutch Roman Catholic bishops wrote a letter in which

they distinguish – alongside (1) the use of scripture; (2) liturgy; and (3) ethical and social questions – hope as one of the four areas in which conversation with Judaism can be fruitful for the church.<sup>x</sup> According to Schillebeeckx, creation faith stimulates the renewal of hope. Hope has thus been identified as one of the four areas for interaction between Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, I will now turn to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a British scholar and public intellectual in the Jewish tradition and chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (1991–2013).

In Sacks' writings we find a notion similar to what Schillebeeckx calls 'creation faith'. Sacks endeavours to restore faith in the idea that we are not alone in this world, God is with us<sup>xi</sup> (Sacks 2009, p.2). But what does that mean, i.e., that 'God is with us'? To deepen the understanding of the presence of the biblical God in our midst, Sacks refers to the narrative of the Exodus. Many readers of this narrative may think that this story is about the divine intervention that liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by means of ten plagues. God with us then means that God wills his creation by divine intervention. For Sacks, however, such a reading completely misses the meaning of the narrative and of what it means that God is with us. Sacks stresses that, to understand the Exodus, we have to look beneath the surface of the biblical text itself.<sup>xii</sup> Under the surface, the Exodus is a story of the transfer from divine initiative to human initiative.<sup>xiii</sup> During this transfer, people gradually learn how to become God's partners. In other words, the Exodus can be considered a learning process or transition. Elsewhere, I have argued that this transition is based on at least three assumptions: *emunah*, a certain type of trust, *chesed*, a certain type of love, and a change in identity. In addition to these assumptions, there are two institutions that stimulate the transition, namely the institution of the covenant and the institution of a public Sabbath.<sup>xiv</sup> Here I want to focus on the public Sabbath. The reason for this is that Sacks argues that the institution of such a Sabbath is a key institution toward a transition. This institution has the following characteristics:

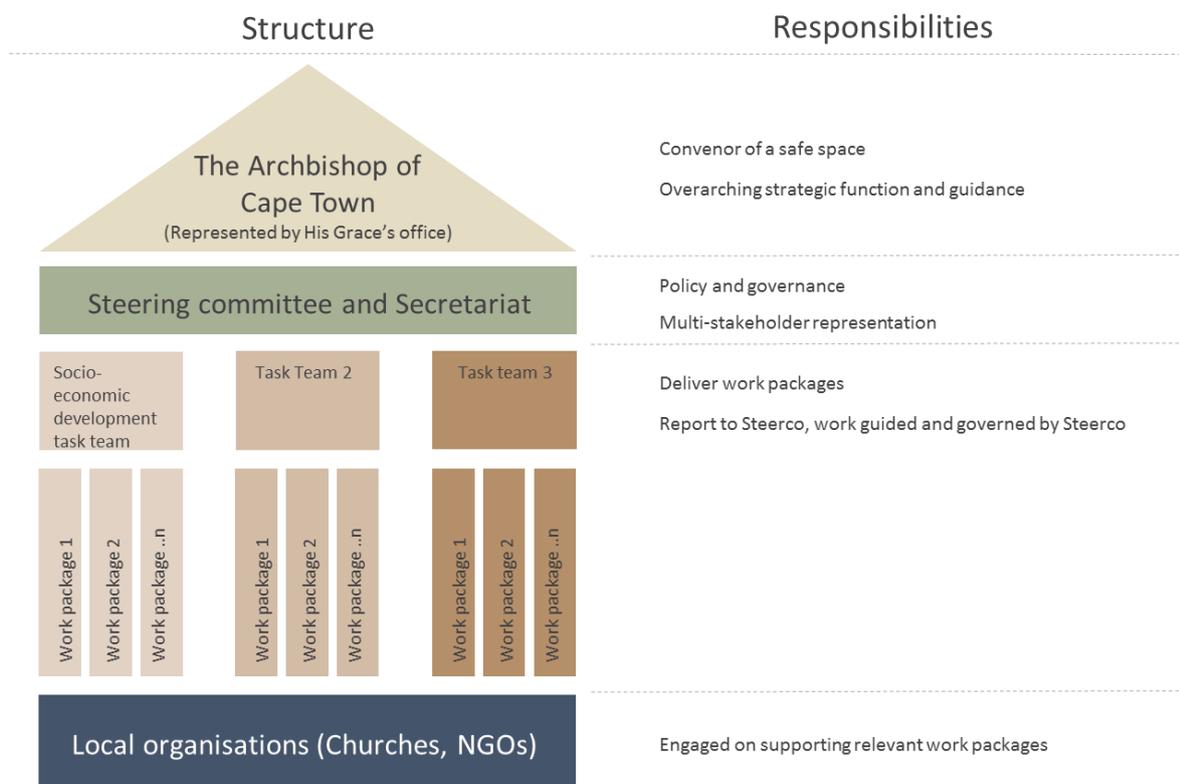
- 1) The public Sabbath celebrates the liberating perspective in the present so that we will not get lost in the transition, that we will not forget that the present situation is no longer our identity and that we will be reminded of what they are aiming for.
- 2) The public Sabbath is a neutral space because it values the dignity of difference among the participants. The experiences of these differences can make people aware of their own perspective and has the potential to open them up to the possibility of developing a new and common identity
- 3) The public Sabbath is intended to stimulate positive other-regarding behaviour, especially relations of trust and love, that seek to honour oneself and the other, especially those who are still excluded. These relations can never be taken for granted and have to be developed, because they are never immune to fear, free riding, cynicism and power games to gain influence.
- 4) The public Sabbath is an embodied performance that can bring in the power of symbol, music, memory, narrative, poetry, prayer, ritual, art and imagination in order to create and shape a common identity.

Thus far a theoretical description of a public Sabbath. But if such a Sabbath is considered a key institution in a transition, what does it look like in real life? Can we trace examples of such a public Sabbath? By highlighting two real-life sketches, I acknowledge as entirely justified the objection raised by Sebastian Kim that 'the danger' of (public) theology is that it is done exclusively in academic circles.<sup>xv</sup> The sketch also fits the tendency in today's economics to demonstrate argumentation with real life cases or experiments.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Public Sabbath

In recent years, courageous conversations have started in the mining industry in South Africa. This initiative is derived from the Vatican's Day of Reflection (2013). These courageous conversations are organized by, among others, Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop of Cape Town and Metropolitan of the Anglican Church of South Africa. The conversations aim to provide a safe space dialogue (SSD) in which managers, unions, NGOs, the government, and religious leaders can bring their unique concerns and contributions to the conversation honestly in order to create a purposeful gathering for the common good. The parties, with often conflicting interests on the shared issue, are invited to try putting themselves in the shoes of the other. The objective of SSD is to establish a platform for transformative discussions between representative actors in the mining sector in a way that takes the interaction beyond narrow self-interest, positioning or antagonism and aims at a transparent, honest, and constructive dialogue reflecting on the complex challenges and opportunities that this sector faces. To make these SSD possible, SSD is supported by a steering committee. The composition of the steering committee represents the interests of the various stakeholders involved in the project. SSD is also supported by several task teams, for example, a team on socio-economic development (SED). These teams meet regularly to facilitate, implement and oversee the programmes in the mining communities. The diagram below presents the management structure of the courageous conversation project in South Africa, including the role of the steering committee and its involvement and relationship with the various task teams.

Now I will return to the agricultural sector in the Netherlands. We saw above that all earlier initiatives for a transition started with high ambitions and a lot of energy, but got stuck and quietly die. Sacks'



understanding of creation faith accentuates a public Sabbath as a key institution in times of transition. Therefore, in May 2019, first steps were taken at a round table in which the combination of Sacks' understanding of creation faith, including the institution of a public Sabbath, was explored in the agricultural sector in the Netherlands to overcome situations of paralysis as experienced in earlier

transitions. This round table was initiated by the Rabobank, the municipality of Ede, and an interdisciplinary research group that included economists, theologians, and political researchers from the Amsterdam Sustainability Institute of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. During the round table, farmers, representatives of environmental organizations like Greenpeace, bankers, politicians (local, regional and national), clergy from the Protestant and Old Catholic churches and scientists reflected critically on the possible role of hope and a public Sabbath in the transition to a circular agriculture. The round table was structured by three rounds. Each round included perspectives that were intended to give input for the discussion in that round. In the first round, challenges in the agricultural sector were explored from the perspective of a farmer, the perspective of an environmental organization, and from the perspective of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL). In the second round, the perspective of hope as a contribution to the challenges in the first round, was explored from a scientific perspective and a perspective from the region. The last round explored the usefulness and necessity of the next steps forward of developing hope as a catalyst for furthering responsible and broadly supported decision making in the context of the transition to a circular agriculture. At the moment, further steps are being investigated with the parties involved.

Up until this point, I have reflected on what religious insights, here creation faith, can contribute to society and its challenges, here imbalances in the agricultural sector. I have argued that creation faith highlights something like a public Sabbath as a key institution in times of transition. But engaging with contemporary society and its needs also leads to challenges to our understanding of religious life and faith today. Before I conclude this article, I want to raise some questions.

### **Religious Self-Understanding**

The first sub-theme of this article started with reflection from the perspective of society and its challenges and explored what religious insights can contribute to these challenges. This approach is derived from the Monastic Pastoral Care project and its reflection on religious life today and its pastoral significance for contemporary people and society. Engaging with contemporary society and its needs, however, also leads to challenges to our understanding of religious life and faith today. It raises similar questions but starts from the self-understanding of the church (including religious life). What does it mean to be church? What, theologically speaking, is the calling of the church, given the challenges of our time? These questions ask for profound theological explorations of how the church and institutions like a Sabbath should relate to society. Should the church contribute to civil society and the 'common good'? Or should it form a 'counterculture' over against the powers of the world? Should the church adopt a prophetic role and be ready to criticize political and societal injustice? Or should the church perhaps be present in a more 'priestly' way, fully aware of its marginalized role 'after Christendom' but still devoted to the well-being of the world? These kinds of questions were also recently raised by leading church leaders and theologians.

Bishop Sithembile Sipuka, president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC), gave a speech at the start of the SACBC plenary assembly in South Africa (August 2019). In this speech he refers to the political situation of South Africa and states:

Part of this violence is due, I think, to our absence as Church leaders. When people are left alone in desperate situations, they resort to emotionally desperate and destructive measures. If we journey with them, we can facilitate more constructive engagement with elected leaders. Some may recall during Apartheid how some potentially destructive protests turned constructive, thanks partly to the presence of Church leaders. As Church leaders, we are not with the people in their struggle, at least not as much as we used to be during Apartheid. We have retreated to the sacristies and occasional pastoral statements. <sup>xvii</sup>

Another example is the manifesto *For the Life of the World* by Miroslav Volf.<sup>xviii</sup> Volf argues that there is a crisis in theology, also in relation to politics. Part of the external dimension of the crisis is that people do not look to theologians for answers to social issues. This has much to do with the internal dimension of the crisis, i.e., that theologians are hardly able to answer the question of what theology actually has to offer. Many theologians cling nostalgically to past convictions and ways of life, often combined with a complaint about the demise of Christian values. More progressive theologians add in religious idiom what can also be said by other disciplines, often with better arguments and greater rhetorical power. So, this raises the question: Does theology matter when it comes to politics? Volf seeks to answer this question by developing a middle ground position. According to him, theology should recover its original concern with the question: How do we live a flourishing life with others in this world? The task of theology is then to articulate a perspective on this question in the light of God-with-us.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to give some thoughts and rough outlines on the interaction between creation faith and recent developments in the agricultural sector. Creation faith as a learning process based on trust, love and change of identity highlights the importance of a public Sabbath as a catalyst for furthering responsible and broadly supported decision making in the context of the transition to a circular agriculture. In this interaction between creation faith and agriculture new vantage points appear for enabling cooperation between religious traditions on the one hand, and societal and secular parties on the other. This kind of cooperation has the potential to lead not only to social innovation but also to innovation in religious life.

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<sup>i</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>ii</sup> Raad van State, “*PAS mag niet als toestemmingsbasis voor activiteiten worden gebruikt*,” 29 May 2019. Available at <https://www.raadvanstate.nl/@115651/pas-mag/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Adviescollege Stikstofproblematiek, “*Niet alles kan: Aanbevelingen voor de korte termijn*”, 25 September 2019. Available at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2019/09/25/eerste-advies-adviescollege-stikstofproblematiek>.

<sup>iv</sup> Carola SCHOUTEN, *Landbouw, natuur en voedsel: waardevol en verbonden Nederland als koploper in kringlooplandbouw*, 2018.. Available at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/beleidsnotas/2018/09/08/visie-landbouw-natuur-en-voedsel-waardevol-en-verbonden>, pp. 11-12.

<sup>v</sup> IBID., p.21.

<sup>vi</sup> Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur, “*Duurzaam en gezond: Samen naar een houdbaar voedselsysteem*,” The Hague: Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur, 2018. Available at [https://www.rli.nl/sites/default/files/duurzaam\\_en\\_gezond\\_samen\\_naar\\_een\\_houdbaar\\_voedselsysteem\\_def\\_1.pdf](https://www.rli.nl/sites/default/files/duurzaam_en_gezond_samen_naar_een_houdbaar_voedselsysteem_def_1.pdf).

<sup>vii</sup> Katrien TERMEER, *Het bewerkstelligen van een transitie naar kringlooplandbouw*, Wageningen: Wageningen University & Research. Available at [https://www.wur.nl/upload\\_mm/e/e/a/b06a9128-a8dc-4fd7-9b58-d8e3a89aca4c\\_Expertpaper%20bewerkstelligen%20transitie%20kringlooplandbouw.pdf](https://www.wur.nl/upload_mm/e/e/a/b06a9128-a8dc-4fd7-9b58-d8e3a89aca4c_Expertpaper%20bewerkstelligen%20transitie%20kringlooplandbouw.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> Erik BORGMAN, *Zielen winnen. Op zoek naar kerk buiten de gebaande paden*, Baarn: Adveniat, 2017.

<sup>ix</sup> Edward SCHILLEBEECKX, *God among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed*, (trans. J. Bowden), New York: Crossroad, 1983, pp. 91-98.

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<sup>x</sup> I have written more extensively elsewhere on the Second Vatican document *Nostra Aetate*, which concerns the relationship of Christianity with non-Christian faiths and its implementation, see Jan Jorrit HASSELAAR, (2017). *The Good News About Climate Change*, in S. VAN ERP, C. CIMORELLI & C. ALPERS. (eds.), *Salvation in the World: The Crossroads of Public Theology*, London, Bloomsbury T&T Clark., pp. 162-179.

<sup>xi</sup> Jonathan SACKS, *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Schocken Books, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>xii</sup> ID., *Covenant & Conversation, Exodus: The Book of Redemption*. Jerusalem, Israel: Maggid Books, 2010, p. 15.

<sup>xiii</sup> ID., *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, p. 155.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jan Jorrit HASSELAAR, *A Hopeful Response to Climate Change: Public Theology and Economics in Interaction on Radical Uncertainty*, (Doctoral dissertation Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen). (forthcoming 2020), p. 46.

<sup>xv</sup> (Sebastian C.H. KIM, *Theology in the Public Sphere. Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate*. London: SCM Press, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>xvi</sup> Dani RODRIK, *Economics Rules: Why Economics Works, When It Fails, and How To Tell The Difference*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 23.

<sup>xvii</sup> P. SAMASUMO, *SACBC President urges Bishops not to be detached from ordinary South Africans*, 1 August 2019. Available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2019-08/sacb-president-urges-bishops-not-to-be-detached-from-ordinary-so.html>.

<sup>xviii</sup> Miroslav VOLF & M. CROASMUN, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019.