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On the limits of justice as eradicating ‘isms’

Brian Brock

Department of Divinity and Religious Studies, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT

Contemporary public discourse often defends the fight for justice and equality in western societies by offering a string of oppressive -isms to be eradicated. Presenting ableism as an example, this paper suggests that justice is best served when focusing on specific accounts of justice and can become superficial and misleading when many types of different injustice are placed in parallel. The paper asks about the similarities and differences between the fight for justice for learning impaired people and for people of colour. To fight ableism in any given society will entail different acts and sociocultural analyses than the fight against racism if it is to be pursued at more than a cosmetic level. This analysis is rooted in a distinction between justice as the actual doing of justice and procedural visions of justice common in liberal democracies which aim to progressively raise the overall level of justice in a society.

KEYWORDS

Ableism; Christian theology; social justice; idolatry; political concepts; racism

Are all biases equal?

What is more idolatrous than ableism? Just as racism is a set of cultural attitudes and sociopolitical structures that privilege the dominant race over ethnic minorities, and just as sexism is a similar set of cultural presuppositions and sociopolitical structures that perpetuate male domination over women, so ableism names the discriminatory attitudes, negative stereotypes, and sociopolitical and economic structures and institutions that together function to exclude people with disabilities from full participation in society. Ableism thus identifies the normative bigotry, evaluative chauvinism, and structural injustice that people with disabilities have to endure at the hands of the dominant (read: nondisabled) culture.¹

With this articulation of the injustices suffered by people with disabilities, the Pentecostal disability theologian Amos Yong channels the zeitgeist, a widely shared sensibility about how equality is to be achieved. The contemporary version of this Enlightenment quest to achieve justice – understood as universal equality – takes the form of a hunt to root out all pernicious -isms: not only racism, ableism, evaluative chauvinism but also patriarchy, heterosexism and gender essentialism. Put in the terms of this special issue, it is almost universally assumed in the modern democratic liberal space that when we (late-modern westerners) ask whether disability is a ‘driving force for change,’ we understand change as a process progressive of eliminating injustices. This paper probes the limits and blind spots of moral change so defined in order to raise one theological note of caution. Understanding moral change in progressivist terms carries a momentum – psychological and linguistically embedded – that that can carry

¹Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 11.

the moral drive for justice into a superficial and so problematic policing of language that can become unmoored from the more concrete work of investigating the mechanics of specific forms of lived justice. It is important to ask whether it is possible that well-meaning quests for justice can take forms that are idolatrous because they in fact excuse people from making real and costly concrete ventures to serve lived, actual justice.

When Yong highlights ableism as idolatrous, he rightly draws attention to an important set of injustices, and in a way that makes common cause with people of all faiths and none who find ableism morally repugnant. The question I want to ask is whether saying something is idolatry (a theological description) is wholly equivalent to saying that it is a pernicious ‘ism’ (a linguistic and moral description). This distinction matters because one fights idolatry primarily by confession and repentance, whereas the common liberal understanding is that one fights bias and prejudice by education and institutional reform. Yong holds these two sorts of response together by marrying idolatry and ableism, but it may be that the list of aspects of ableism that he lists (‘discriminatory attitudes, negative stereotypes, and sociopolitical and economic structures and institutions’) are very differently understood if taken to be signs of worship of a false power rather than as institutional structures and mental attitudes which make life harder for some people than others. There may well be forms of being educated about discrimination which exacerbate the spiritual pride that assumes people do not really need to change. If so, it is important to ask what is lost if we simply equate the very different descriptive registers of idolatry and discrimination.

These questions matter if the final aim of justice is effective social change. It is dangerous to assume that linguistic change alone can do this, a claim Yong would certainly reject. No one should doubt that we often find our way to real injustices by querying the behaviour of people who speak disparagingly of others, in this case, those with disabilities. Yet it is crucial not to lose the question of how successful or unsuccessful the work of rooting out discriminatory linguistic expressions has been in achieving changes to unjust practices on the ground. There are very practical differences in what it takes to combat ‘discriminatory attitudes and negative stereotypes’ in contrast to changing ‘sociopolitical and economic structures and institutions.’ If we call both sorts of work ‘combatting ableism’ we are lumping together very different sorts of activity, from the crafting of policy, to the analysis of cultural tropes to the revising of formulaic public speech to the investigation of people’s own identity structures.

Distinguishing idolatry and discrimination

Distinguishing between idolatry and discrimination matters because real change demands self-examination and repentance. It also demands personal investment in a very different sort of work, sociological research, policy formulation, legal clarification, engagement in the political process, forging alliances between different power blocks, and so on. It will always be tempting to reduce one’s investment in fighting injustice to the easiest of all these activities, the policing of language. What is dangerous about this narrowing of the quest for change to linguistic policing alone is that it can push some forms of injustice underground and so entrench them. It is fair to call the drift into linguistic policing alone intellectually lazy because it foregoes the hard and necessarily constant work of asking what is actually happening on the ground, what is the real

injustice people are suffering right now, and what we might concretely do about it if we are serious about bringing about a genuinely more just society? The modern liberal quest to root out -isms can sometimes proceed in ways that make it difficult to see if these investigative questions are being seriously asked. Language policing undermines its own moral authority if this more concrete and fine-grained analysis is not obviously being pursued.

For example, since the police killing of George Floyd in 2020 there has been an exponential rise in interest in rooting out racial bias among American white liberals. Yet despite this increase in intellectual comprehension of the implications of white privilege, those who think of themselves as white might still buy houses in places where they know racism gives them an unfair economic advantage, not challenge racism among family members and find reasons to resist sharing schools. Given the structural inequalities involved in racism and the personal costs of remaking these infrastructural barriers, crafting a ‘woke’ online profile and voting for progressive causes may seem like a reasonable and low-cost way of being an ally of victims of racial injustice while in fact being one of the more stable ways that racism is perpetuated.² As early as 1965 Martin Luther King himself had highlighted this dynamic in the American populace. The ‘silence of friends’ he pointed out, is a longstanding feature of American racism, and is held in place as the majority of enlightened liberals denounce racism elsewhere but explain it away in their own back yards, where admitting it would demand costly change. As he put it in 1967: ‘most whites in America, including many of goodwill, proceed from the premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap – essentially, it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects retain it.’³

Stated philosophically: the danger of calling a concrete injustice, against disabled people, for instance, an ‘ism’ – in this case, ableism, is to insinuate that the basic motor of justice is our work of classifying new sets of language and thought as pernicious -isms. The illusion is that moral change in society is essentially driven by the reclassification of specific acts from being morally neutral, to being morally problematic. Once something has been labelled a problematic -ism it is then subsumed within a general class of illiberal -isms that those who want to achieve a just society must now fight to eradicate or defend themselves from accusations of being morally suspect. But as the case of racism makes clear, this linguistic reclassification can blind us to our own culpability if we are not able to name concrete ways in which we are participants in ableism.

Those who have become content to denounce unjust -isms can often be spotted by the ease with which they compare and implicitly equate injustices. People who have developed the habit of verbally denouncing unjust -isms often find it hard to explain the details of concrete injustices. There is a symmetry between the equation of injustices and the superficiality of one’s emotional and intellectual engagement with them. For instance: are the indubitable injustices associated with the labels racism and ableism in fact morally or phenomenologically equivalent? There are a wide range of questions that would need to be asked here to even begin to answer the question of what it would mean to stamp out

²Holt, ‘White Clicktivism’; and Blake, ‘How “Good White People” Derail Racial Progress’.

³Quoted in Theoharis, ‘Martin Luther King and the “Polite” Racism of White Liberals’. Thanks to Sarah Shin for her feedback on this paper, and especially for her suggestion of the examples in this paragraph.

these two -isms. Is the racism of one society equivalent to that of all others? In a society that had chattel slavery in living memory, should we prioritise the fight to eradicate racism, or should we acknowledge that disabled people have been disparaged and mocked for most of human history, and so deserve to receive priority in formulating our campaigns for justice and our calls for better social policies? Should we even ask whether some injustices are more severe than others? If we cannot ask this question, how will we focus our efforts in fighting injustice? I am not taking a position on any of these questions, but raise them in order to highlight how the classing of all injustices under labels that appear to set injustices in a single conceptual cluster may produce false equivalences that make it difficult to investigate and admit morally important differences between disparaging language and actually enacted injustices.

The limits of identity politics

These critical questions are ultimately queries about one of the reigning frameworks of modern democratic liberal societies, identity politics. Identity politics has emerged in democratic societies that order the governing process by majority rule. The only way that minorities who feel they suffer injustice can change the majority is for interest groups to band together in order to move social policy through the mechanism of persuading their legislative representatives that change is needed. Moral change in a given society can only begin when those who have been victimised by injustices form alliances in order to make their voices heard and raise the public profile of an injustice. Identity politics is based on the assumption that the progressive amelioration of injustice in democratic societies will come through the recognition of new injustices, and the putting in place of policies that will bring the liberation of the oppressed. In principle an endless process, the motor of this progress in justice is the willingness of some to identify themselves as victims of injustice and the ability of the majority to hear their articulations of pain and respond.

This is not only an important but a tried and tested aspect of democratic politics. Some disability activists have embraced this political landscape, even going as far as to propose that disabilities should not be defined by the medical establishment, but in terms of those conditions that gather pressure groups around them in order to speak up for their legal recognition as important justice markers.⁴ Yet this alliance of disability activists with identity politics is distinctly complexified if we ask how justice is to be achieved for people with intellectual disabilities. Stacy Simplican has recently documented in some detail the problems identity politics creates for those who are incapable of articulately stating their victim status and so constituting themselves as an identity pressure group.⁵ There are good reasons why some adults with learning difficulties also resist being represented by others, such as their parents or legal guardians, who they may very legitimately take to be overruling their own judgements about the life they choose to lead. Furthermore, people with learning difficulties may not even experience themselves as victims, or wish to present themselves publicly as victims.

⁴Barnes, *The Minority Body*.

⁵Simplican, *The Capacity Contract*.

The reliance of identity politics on the assumption of victimhood status therefore threatens to further disempower some of those who are indeed treated with injustice even in modern societies. People with learning difficulties have disproportionately negative healthcare outcomes even in developed western societies, to take one concrete example. The 2013 UK study, *Confidential Inquiry into premature deaths of people with learning disabilities* (the CIPOLD report) sought concrete data on whether mentally disabled or learning impaired individuals were being systematically discriminated against by the National Health Service (NHS).⁶ The report found that learning impaired people die much earlier and more unexpectedly than the majority population. They also found that the more severe the learning impairment, the higher the likelihood of an early death from a preventable cause. Broader analysis revealed, in addition, that people with intellectual disabilities were statistically underweight (a contributor to early death), suffered from more preventable conditions than the general population (such as pressure sores or acid reflux) and were unlikely to have had regular health checks or health plans. For the minority of individuals who had been given integrated health plans, the commission found that the use made of these ‘personalized health plans’ was more often to hold patients to account for self-care than for the purpose for which they were originally designed – to coordinate disjointed healthcare provision. Most importantly, ‘reasonable adjustments’ to the normal ways of providing healthcare for those with special needs were rarely and certainly not routinely made, meaning that a whole range of practical barriers often derailed effective diagnosis and treatment.

This is an example of the sort of investigation which is needed if we are to understand what ableism actually means on the ground. These injustices do indeed flow from ‘discriminatory attitudes, negative stereotypes, and sociopolitical and economic structures and institutions,’ and they do so in a very particular way that is directly intertwined the critique of ableism. As with racism, such concrete lines of investigation will raise questions about whether we should understand it as ableist to unquestioningly support liberal democratic political structures, given the ways that they systematically disempower those citizens intrinsic reliance on citizens’ ability to self-articulate one’s victimhood. What is clear, however, is that it is not intrinsically racist, nor heterosexist, to support democracy. Drawing parallels between the crusades for suffrage for non-white people, and for women, run up against a wall when we meet people who will never be able to argue their case in public. There can be morally relevant differences between different forms of injustice. And if we refuse to recognise these differences, the refusal has direct implications for our political presumptions and practical engagements to bring justice about. The use of the language of ‘rejecting ableism’ will only have moral weight among those who are engaged in finding practical and effective ways to reverse these longstanding and very concrete injustices. This moral weight will accrue to those who use it in this practically engaged way because they will show that rejecting ableism unsettles some of the most deeply held beliefs of the modern world.

⁶Heslop et al., *Confidential Inquiry into Premature Deaths of People with Learning Disabilities*.

Two visions of justice

The example of learning difficulties thus highlights ways in which understanding the quest for justice as the pursuit of rooting out all pernicious -isms can easily obscure morally significant differences between types of oppression. The rise of intersectional methods is a welcome recognition of this problem, but one which also accepts the parameters of identity politics. Intersectionality aims to achieve more justice in society by ensuring that the voices of those who experience more *forms* of injustice, and *overlapping* forms of injustice can make their voices heard. While this attempt to boost the voices of the minority who are the recipients of multiple forms of disadvantage and injustice in modern liberal societies, as we have seen, those who are incapable of claiming and articulating their claim to be victims of injustice will be unable to speak up for themselves. Having seen how identity politics cannot easily ameliorate the injustices suffered by the intellectually disabled, we may be led to notice other sorts of similarly disadvantaged outsiders, such as undocumented workers or international refugees. In all such cases the rules of identity politics prove directly limit the participation of those who might well be most afflicted by high levels of intersectional injustice.

The difficulties presented by the psychology of admitting one's own guilt combined with the capacity of political concepts to also hide relevant moral distinctions points to the relevance of a distinction that recurs in Christian scripture. Jesus' famous and influential story of the good Samaritan offers an account of justice that is structurally very different from the progressive nature of justice assumed in liberal democratic politics. Jesus is asked about justice in the form of a question about what it takes to be a good neighbour. He chooses as the subject of his story someone who is manifestly the victim of injustice, a man who had been robbed and beaten because a vulnerable traveller, one who has been so disabled as to be unable to express his victimhood in its intersectional ramification. Jesus' story does not propound a vision of justice achieved through the construction of a better policing policy and staffing on this remote highway threatened by thieves who pick on the vulnerable. Justice is presented as real, as the justice that matters, only when a victim was actually helped, concretely and in his time of need. This justice is contrasted with the definitions of justice upheld by the elite members of society who pass by the hurt man, in the name of social order, safety, and religious purity. Jesus thus points to a definition of justice that is wholly outcome, not process oriented, and he does so in order to remove all excuses people use to defend some injustices as unfortunate side effects of a generally good and steadily improving social order.

Modern liberal justice is always focused improving net levels of freedom and justice across a populace, not concrete acts of justice. For Jesus a society is not better or just because it gives more people the chance for economic self-improvement, or incrementally improves people's wellbeing or happiness quotient. Justice is justice *actually done*. 'If you have *done* it to the least of these, you have *done* it unto me' (Mt. 25:40). The force of Jesus' story of the good Samaritan is to draw attention to what is necessarily left out of all visions of structural justice and righteousness. Those who pass by the wounded man are not bad, let alone evil – it is only that their visions of structural justice trade off a greater good for stopping to help the one wounded man before them. They are content to leave some victims behind, victims who perhaps deserve help, but whom – all things taken together – we can justify letting languish in their suffering. Jesus is intent on closing the

moral loophole through which the concrete injustices which we still do are hidden by our belief that we have stood on the side of the reduction of net social injustice. Jesus' justice is different in form from the incrementalism of liberal justice, grounded as it is in modern moral progressivism and almost always ending in consequentialist cost-benefit calculation.⁷

The divergence between definitions of justice (procedural vs. outcome based) directly effects how activism for justice is understood. The liberal democratic process of achieving justice presumes that the arc of history moves towards justice. Without this premise, why should victims have any hope to change society by speaking up to call the majority to change its social order in order to ameliorate the injustices that beset them?⁸ It is this understanding of the progressive historical unfolding of justice through history that leads many contemporary theologians concerned about bringing about justice to speak up for victims of injustice. I opened with a quotation from Yong because it offers a typical form of the theologian's agreement with the non-theological moralist. Both deploy a hermeneutic of suspicion in order to eradicate all concepts and forms of thought which foster negative -isms. The task of the theologian is positioned as the work of combing through contemporary culture to root out bias and negative stereotypes. It is a quest that almost inevitably leads in turn to a further grim coming through the whole of Christian tradition and scripture in order to root out all thought forms that lead to lived oppression.

The Neo-Kantian Ernst Troeltsch's 1931 book, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* is the paradigm of the progressivist cleansing of bias from the religious tradition. This work finds quite a lot of unjust belief needing be rooted out of the churches, and he insinuates that the sheer bulk of these unjust beliefs in the churches implicates the deepest roots of the biblical tradition. Abraham was a patriarchalist. The Jews were racist, sometimes genocidal, and heterosexist. Things get better in the New Testament, but there is still a good bit of sexist descriptions of God on view, as well as in some descriptions of the well-ordered church. The deconstructive justice hermeneutics of modern liberal identity politics was a solvent bound to penetrate the Christian tradition down to its roots, as subsequent waves of feminist, liberationist, and queer interpretation have amply displayed.

Two visions of activism

The alternative definition of justice presented by Jesus does not demand, or even allow, this progressivist dissolution of tradition. It also points towards a different politics, one in which human agents are beholden to the single criterion that they in fact serve justice becoming real in the lives of real people. Justice may be done by people who are in some respects unjust. In the cultural and religious context in which Jesus told his story, his hero, the Samaritan, represented individuals, peoples, and histories which were violent,

⁷Doherty, *Theology and Economic Ethics*, ch. 3.

⁸As Theoharis observes, Martin Luther King had substantial reservations about this assumption, leading to widespread misrepresentation of his central point in his use of 'arc of justice' language. 'Martin Luther King and the "Polite" Racism of White Liberals'.

abhorred, and despicable. The rhetorical point Jesus is getting across is that, ‘the one you think of as unjust has done justice, while the ones you think of as the paragons of justice walked on by the real victim.’

We might therefore say that Jesus has a sense that real justice – justice done and not just talked about – may emerge out of people groups and traditions which perpetuated injustice in the past. People may be set up institutions that are just in some moments of history, yet changing economic or political circumstances may render them purveyors of injustice. Individuals may wax and wane in their doing of justice. Christians may fall back into unjust ways of living and speaking and require challenge from other Christians (as Peter receives from Paul in Galatians 2:11–21). When the actual doing of justice is established as the criterion of what needs to be done in our lives and our societies, we will be paralysed if we cannot admit that history does not progress in its levels of doing justice, but is more and less just in a richly variegated pattern across different fields of justice. A society may be economically just and egalitarian in its gender relation, but only for people of a certain race, for instance. We may find the moral energy to confront ableism in our own family, and yet be contributors to economic, educational and political systems which perpetuate it. What matters is that justice is done, and this is an either-or proposition, not a linear more-or-less progression.

Jesus’ account of justice done allows us to admit that sometimes injustices may be mislabelled as virtues in a society, even to the point of becoming one of the crucial mechanisms through which injustice is perpetuated. The assumption of moral equivalency between all forms of oppressive -isms is a classic example of the operation of modular language. The modularity of modern technocratic and managerial language here plays into this problem in systematically linguistically privileging relationships of generic equivalence.⁹ To take one example, in a society in which heterosexuality is considered morally normative, homosexuals may be labelled sexual deviants. It is an understandable social move for those so marginalised to try to achieve a more just society in the response that all claims that heterosexuality is normative are ‘heterosexist’. The quest for justice expressed in this move is its recognition of experience of those who were formerly labelled deviant. Yet this cry for justice, precisely because embedded within the linguistic space of modern progressivist identity politics, represents an investment of hope in the mechanisms of progressivist politics. Justice is sought as a victim affixes this label to highlight an injustice, so catalysing the historical movement towards new social forms and institutions in which this injustice is eradicated, alongside the progress that is also being made in eradicating all other oppressive -isms.

The problem is that the claim of victimhood can be made without asking what concrete justice would look like in a particular domain of human life. The particularity of what justice might look like in a given domain is not advanced by paralleling one moral injustice with another very different type. If racism is an injustice beyond – and more concrete – than the denigration in speech of other racial identities, it deserves to be eradicated. For it to be eradicated in the lived world, we need a clear description of what a world in which it is eradicated would look like. The injustice of racism is analytically independent and practically important on its own terms, without comparison with other

⁹Poerksen, *Plastic Words*.

admitted forms of injustice, such as ableism. In a given society, achieving racial justice may mean building new hospitals in different parts of town, rewriting discriminatory drug and housing zoning laws.

Some forms of justice may be harder and more important to articulate than others. In any given society it may be easier to describe what society looks like in which racism is eradicated and racial justice real and concrete. Recent decades may have given some western societies new vocabulary for concretely describing what racial justice looks like in detail, while still being relatively inarticulate when trying to describe what a world will look like beyond the injustices of heterosexism or ableism. The work of describing justice in all its concreteness cannot – and must not – be evaded if achieving justice is a matter of bringing justice to concrete people’s lives. The eradication of disparaging and demeaning speech can be a component of justice, but can also be a barrier to it if, as already discussed, people have cleaned up their ways of speaking but still engage in unjust practices which can now no longer be publicly discussed and challenged. The progressive amelioration of injustice is also welcome, but only when we openly admit that we embrace some actual injustices when it is achieved through the consequentialist balancing of benefits and harms.

Ideology as the modern form of idolatry

We end then where we began. Yong is indeed right, ableism is idolatrous. Yet precisely because it is, it is a resistance first to God. All resistance to God ends up perpetuating injustices against specific human lives that are destructive of their integrity. Christians should fight this destruction and its rooting in misdirected human action. The question is *why* is ableism idolatrous? All idolatries are equivalent in one single respect, scripture suggests. Every idolatry wrongly treats some creaturely good as having divine-like powers. In the Old Testament, for instance, Ashtaroth is the personification of war and the power of sexual love, while Baal was the name for the awe-inspiring power of storms and fertility. Mammon is money mythologised as an independent power.

Because idols are mystifications of different creaturely goods, such as the weather, fertility, the power of exchange or political rule, each idolatry takes different forms and produces descriptably different harms. A culture that is organised by the worship of war will not be structured in the same way as a society organised around the ritual worship of sexual ecstasy, and so on. Children are sacrificed to fertility and war gods, while the poor are sacrificed to the gods of money. In biblical terms, therefore, it is linguistically misleading to suggest that because ableism is idolatry it can be combatted in the same ways as other forms of idolatry. This is emphatically not the case, which we will only begin to see if we ask which injustices a specific form of idolatry is hiding and sustaining. Justice for African-Americans may require the remuneration of their descendants for stolen labour. Justice for Native Americans may require the restoration of stolen land. Justice for ostracised sexual minorities may require public renunciation of their demonisation. And justice for people with disabilities hidden away for generations by a society that valorises performance and productivity requires: What? That is the real question that must be asked in full concreteness, with and in engagement with real people.

The theologian Karl Barth first articulated the importance of thinking about -isms in the context of the cold-war rivalry between capitalism and communism, in which it was increasingly demanded that everyone choose a side. The prompt for his speaking out on the topic was the demand that he denounce communism and side with the western nations on pain of being branded a supporter of totalitarianism. Barth responded that this was linguistic coercion, and more importantly, overlooked the reality that Christians are not primarily in the business of defeating all ideologies.¹⁰ From the beginning of his career, Barth had insisted that being a Christian is fundamentally a matter of responsibility to a divine person, not the system of ideas and institutions that this divine person's self-revelation has spawned.¹¹ Because Christians are not even defenders of Christianity, but instead are followers of a living God, they have good reason to be suspicious of all linguistic -isms. 'Isms' are ideologies, and ideologies are the forms idolatry takes in our times. Each ideology lifts up some creaturely power to the status of a divinity.

It is God's good grace that is the promise that creaturely goods on which idolatries base their false appeals to divinity are never entirely absorbed into the hopes of humans to elevate them into cosmic powers or magic talismans. In the end, Christians are liberated by a rival Lord into a world shorn of its gods, in which the weather is just the weather, sex and reproduction are just part of life, and war a sad aspect of human enmity writ large. Ideologies can only fascinate for a time, they lose their power, and are displaced by others. Creaturely goods cannot bear the weight of being the rulers of fate. It is therefore empowering of the quest to do justice when human beings confess the Lordship of Christ, Barth suggests, in allowing us to suspect that 'wherever we find "ism" there lurks an ideology, and it is well to be on guard if it is not too late.'¹² We should be on guard because ideologies do not encourage genuine investigation of phenomenon creative moral thinking, but demand conformity. Instead of getting into this game of ideological conformity, Barth, replied, Christians must pay close attending to the one they serve and the context in which their service is rendered.

The church must not concern itself eternally with various "isms" and systems, but with historical realities as seen in the light of the Word of God and of the Faith. Its obligations lie . . . towards its living Lord. Therefore the Church never thinks, speaks or acts "on principle". Rather, it judges spiritually and by individual cases.¹³

Barth is not claiming here that systemic realities should not be judged unjust in individual cases, but that true justice and injustice cannot be grasped at the level of intellectual systems. This claim presumes that the justice that comes from God's merciful love of humanity never needs to be propagated by linguistic coercion. To confess Jesus as Lord of Lords is, yes, to become a witness to the limits of language and the linguistic embedding of ideology. But beyond this witness, those who seek God's own justice will be pursuing committed and concrete investigation of particular injustices, investigations that catalyse morally creative and nuanced responses. A church that recognises the perennial temptation to minimise the claim of the justice it is prepared to enact is one prepared to engage in the repentance that alone leads to substantive combat with the

¹⁰Barth, *The Christian Life*, 226.

¹¹Keedus, 'The Snake Biting Its Own Tail'.

¹²Barth, *The Christian Life*, 226. See also Barth, *Against the Stream*, 183–4.

¹³Barth, *Against the Stream*, 114.

lived injustices all -isms purport to name.¹⁴ To follow a living Lord of history means to remain permanently attentive to the tendency of ideology to deflect moral engagement away from the amelioration of concrete injustices in favour of the politically correct speaking that is prone to passing by on the other side of the road.

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Notes on contributor

Brian Brock is Professor of Moral and Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He has written on disability theology, the ethics of technological development, and the use of the Bible in Christian ethics.

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¹⁴Halbach, *Bonhoeffer and the Racialized Church*.