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Chapter 4

Being in But not of *the Powers*: Contours of Prophetic Witnessing Practice

Abstract

Through a critical dialogue with the selected works of Reinhold Niebuhr, John Yoder and Max Weber, this chapter aims to develop a practice of prophetic witnessing for discerning and engaging with Apostle Paul's notion 'principalities and powers' in this world (Ephesians 6:12). In tracing the narrated life histories of such exiled witnesses as Joseph, Esther and Daniel in the ancient Egyptian, Persian and Babylonian empires as written in the Holy Bible, I will argue that realism was the core spiritual logic of the three pre-modern imperial Powers in ancient Africa and Asia. This chapter then suggests that the modern statehood has been among the principalities and powers. This warrants an innovative approach to witness the Christian faith in it, which is dubbed as 'being in but not of the Powers'. By showing the dynamic and interactive nature between a contemplative life and realist power-structure, I will show that in the paradoxical co-existence of struggle and suffering, God's divine plan is fulfilled, especially when the here-and-now moment is faithfully connected with the eschaton.

Keywords: ancient Africa & Asia, Christian realism, Christian pacifism, prophetic witnessing

'[Jesus said], "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.[...] From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forcefully men lay hold of it."'

(Matthews 10:34 & 11:12)

4.1 Introduction

In these passages, Jesus did not sound like a pacifist. Other passages in the New Testament also speak of strife,

conflict and violence. However, it must be clear that this struggle is not to contend against the ‘flesh and blood’, but the ‘principalities and powers’ (hereafter ‘the Powers’) (Ephesians 6:12) (Ellul, 1970:161). The Scriptures states,

‘Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.’ (Ephesians 6:12, King James Version)

When struggling against the Powers, it is important to accurately identify them and know what they are. A few questions will be answered in this chapter. What are the Powers in our time? How can we identify, discern and make sense of them empirically? How can we witness the faith within their domains? These questions set the terrain of this chapter.

This chapter may be read as my confession as a Christian witness operating along the interface between international politics and the academia. For more than a decade, I have found myself caught in tensions and predicaments which were difficult to be comprehended by some others. As I recognize that it is actually not the fault of anyone but merely a lack of understanding regarding the operational logic of the Powers that we are all situated in either by chance or by destiny, I

hope by being open and honest about the contradictions experienced within the Powers, this chapter will hopefully make things a bit clearer, which would also be a clarifying critique of how the Powers work.

There is a burgeoning wealth of literature on contemporary Christian engagement cutting across theology, political science and ethics. Based on a selected critical dialogue with the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian pacifism of John Howard Yoder, I will tease out a knowledge gap to fill in: how do the Powers operate on the ground? My more specific key research questions are two-fold.

In the first place, I want to ask how could we, the Christian witnesses to the Powers, formulate a sound practice to study and capture, as well as perhaps more importantly, for us to live with the sovereign statehood as the pillaring Powers in this world? Secondly, to deliver us from the idolatrous temptations founded within the Powers, how could we conduct the Christian faith without losing our sight and hope upon the ‘already but not yet’ heavenly realm?

Here is a summary of the main arguments to be made in this chapter:

- At odds with Niebuhr’s Christian realism doctrine which tends to over-stress the ‘end’ (the intended outcome or impact of change in this world) over the ‘means’ (the Christian faith) of being the ‘salt and light’ of this world, I argue for an alternative practice in being open and acceptant to the tensions and agonies when witnessing the faith as the necessary venues connecting towards the heavenly realm.
- At odds with Yoder’s Christian pacifism doctrine which sometimes tends to stress the over-idealized congruence between the choice of the ‘means’ and the intended ‘ends’ when being the ‘salt and light’ within the Powers, I argue that the State is an inherently realist domain of the Powers, where means and ends are often decoupled

and ethical contradiction is usually generated, and where peace and violence are the necessary historical conditions of the Powers. There is a need to be completely disillusioned by any earthly ideals projected by the Powers, which also include pacifist idealism (Ellul, 1970: 119). Rather, we need to be the faithful yet inevitably agonized witness whereas the practice of non-violence is less intended to bring earthly peace but more as a witness of the eschatological hope as the only source to transcend the inevitable means-ends ethical contradiction within the Powers.

- Through the life histories of Joseph of Egypt, Queen Esther of Persia and Daniel of the Babylonian-Persian empires, I argue that there are clear patterns of here-and-now events and this-worldly transformations intervened by non-human, other-worldly entities. These happenings formed the bigger picture of both history and universe, which are beyond human senses but still under God's sovereignty. In summary, my central position consists of the following postulates:
 - (1) Christian prophetic witnessing practice is conceived in critical response to an epistemic current of our time – anthropocentrism in modernity (Bostrom, 2010; Wong, 2014a). By bringing non-human entities especially God, the angelic and demonic forces, and the Powers (especially the State) back to the center of scientific and theological analysis, I aim to develop a more integrative, non-anthropocentric and Christian science of the universe.
 - (2) It does not adhere to any form of idealism in this world, nor is it primarily intended to bring any ideal-driven progress and change to this world. Though progress and change can occur, they are seen as the works of God's sovereignty. In being neither attempting to justify violence (as Christian realism would tend to do) nor primarily aiming to bring worldly peace (as the Christian pacifism may seem to do), it holds that both this-worldly peace and violence are the lives of the Powers and their

historical developments, though apparently, peace may be preferable to violence.

- (3) It acknowledges that both peace and war are allowed (by God) to happen within His jurisdiction, which warrants the Christian witness' constant prophetic presence of not just in wartime, but also in peacetime. This ceaseless prophetic critique is essential for the Christian individuals and church to stand in the midst of the post-Enlightenment project of modernity, where its dark-side gave the State the necessary inroads to rule this world.
- (4) Realism is the core spiritual logic of the Powers. Political power and economic power constitute the essential operational conditions of the State as the most dominant Powers of our time, in which the international system of sovereign statehood and the global economic system of capitalism continue to dominate this-worldly lives.
- (5) Being in but not of the Powers, prayers and contemplative action are the salient forms of agency connecting the Christian witnesses with the non-human entities especially God.

4.2 Contours of Prophetic Witnessing Practice

4.2.1 Existing Approaches of Prophetic Witnessing to the State

To develop an exposition of prophetic practice to the State, two competing contemporary strands in the Western Christian circle are engaged. Given their significant contributions to the intersecting fields of theology, ethics, political science, sociology and peace studies, I will focus on the common theme of being the salt and light as the yardstick of comparison. How do Niebuhr and Yoder conceive the prophetic witnessing role of Christians as the salt and light in the contemporary world?

4.2.1.1 Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism

In the first place, to Niebuhr who experienced the rise of Nazism and the Second World War, his doctrine of Christian realism holds the indisputable reality of sinfulness in this world where evil reigns. Niebuhr was realistic in two counts. First, the root-cause of our topsy-turvy world has to do with the spiritual evil. Second, the most powerful instrument to perpetuate and resist evil is state power. Therefore, for the Christians to effectively serve as the salt and light in this world, they are best placed in the State – to be God’s instrument to resist evilness. Here are the main points of Niebuhr’s Christian realism (Niebuhr, 1969, 1977, 2005[1960]; Wong, 2016: 105-106):

- Christians should take active initiatives in witnessing their faith in various worldly secular sectors, including politics, military, economics and cultural affairs, and participating actively in national policy making.
- By encouraging Christian individuals to take active leadership roles in political, economic and cultural affairs, Christian individuals may make use of the secular institutions, systems, regimes, structures and customs to ‘Christianize’ the imperfect world and resist evilness.
- International order is anarchic and fallible in nature because of human sins and imperfectability. Christian leaders should therefore prevent the world from becoming evil, engage in constructing and maintaining the ‘lesser evil’ world order.
- Democracy is the best and most Christian-like political system because its check-and-balance mechanism can better prevent evilness to reign. State power is by nature violent. The restrained use of violence in international politics, i.e. ‘just war’ may be justified for promoting the causes of justice and righteousness.
- Communism is evil because it is atheist, same as other ‘un-Christian’ regimes in non-Christian lands such as Islam.

4.2.1.2 John Yoder’s Christian Pacifism

In contrast, Niebuhr's consistent critic has been the Anabaptist (Mennonite) theologian John Howard Yoder (1964, 1971, 1994). His Christian pacifism theology can be summarized in the following points:

- As the State is one of the pillaring Powers (together with social custom, institution, system, structure, ideology and culture) operating in the secular world, as a neutral agent keeping the world in order, the Powers have however been subject to the devil Satan's tempting influence since the fall of humans (Berkhof, 1962). For instance, after committing the first murder in human history, Cain was still blessed by God and then founded the first principality in history; the city-state of Enoch (Genesis 4: 17).
- The Church is the body of Christ. There hence should be a clear boundary between the Church and the State. The Church, as a collective entity (community) should only serve as a witness to the State from a distance, instead of mingling with and even making use of state power to attain Christian missions. Christian actions should be Church-oriented, not based on the Powers. Colluding with the Powers might render the Christian community to be subject to temptations.
- Because the State is by nature based on force and violence, to preserve a socially stable and just environment for the Church's evangelical mission and its calling to be the faithful witness to the heavenly kingdom and peace, the Church should restrain the State's violent tendency and to promote justice.
- The Church should also provide alternative non-violent resolutions when domestic and international political conflicts are likely to occur. Nonetheless, these resolutions should be provided outside the realm of the state in the public, for the Church should maintain a boundary with the State.
- While the Church may submit to the political authorities of the Powers such as the State, it should exercise non-violence and non-resistance to promote justice and preserve the necessary space for the Church's survival.

- Suggesting that democracy is Christian is biblically unsound. The Church should moreover prevent democracy to be idolatry, same as other such Powers as the ideologies and systems of nationalism, capitalism and socialism as well as fascism. Christians should prepare to suffer and be rejected by the Powers (Yoder, 1984).
- The only way to save humans is through God's grace; God's redemption via Jesus Christ's sufferings, death and resurrection as well as the second coming of God. There is no way for humans to 'defeat' evils by themselves in this world.
- Evangelization through Church work is the most proper ethic of Christian global engagement (Yoder, 1997).

4.2.1.3 A Comparison of Niebuhr and Yoder

Four main distinctions are identified between the two theologies. First, Christian realism suggests that Christian individuals should actively seek political, economic and military powers in the state arena to rein in evilness outside the Christian world. Christian pacifism however suggests that Christian communities should remain at the Church and based in the society to witness the faith by reining in evilness generated by the State at home.

Second, Christian realism regards the statehood as an instrument to institutionalize Christian values and further Christian goals in the world. As a result, coercion (violence) and international war (against evil) may be justified. Christian pacifism however conceives the State is within the province of the devil Satan's sovereignty on earth. Coercion (violence) is however a source of injustice. Christians cannot rein in evils by themselves, only through Jesus Christ they can.

Third, at a deeper level, Christian realists consider that Christians can change the world through state politics. Christians can witness the faith through changing this world and rein in evilness on earth. Christian pacifists however insist that the Christians' main mission is to witness the faith through the work of Church at the societal level. As the earth

is temporarily under the influence of devil Satan, it is natural to see evilness sometimes reigns on earth.

Last but not the least, whereas Christian realists mainly see evils as something reigning outside the hosting Christian country, Christian pacifists see evils actually existing within the Christian countries and communities.

Table 4.1: Comparison of Niebuhr and Yoder.

<i>Theologian</i>	Reinhold Niebuhr	John Howard Yoder
<i>Position</i>	Christian realism	Christian pacifism
<i>Key witnessing agent</i>	Christian individual	Christian church
<i>Means-ends ethic</i>	The lesser evil principle; coercion can be justified	The least evil principle; coercion is unacceptable
<i>Core practice</i>	Christianization of the world, just war and democratization	Faithful witness, non-violence and evangelization
<i>Witnessing Domain</i>	State and secular domains of significant influence	Primarily the church and then society, state is the minimal
<i>Nature of the State</i>	Instrument of witnessing	Province of the devil Satan
<i>Nature of the international system</i>	Anarchic but a lesser evil order should be built	War and peace are both under God's sovereignty
<i>Location of evilness</i>	External – non-Christian regimes	Internal and external – the state and its violence
<i>Goal</i>	Increase Christian influence in state and other secular affairs, to change and rein in evilness in the world	Restrain state violence from within to maintain a just social environment for church building
<i>Source of</i>	This-worldly change	Eschaton; the

<i>hope</i>		second coming
<i>Main criticisms</i>	Constantinianism; enmeshed church-state relations	Being passive and apocalyptic; unrealistic church-state demarcation

4.2.2 Realism and Ethical Paradoxes of Being in the Powers

The sources of contention between the positions of Niebuhr and Yoder are illustrated in Table 4.1. But in what sociological ways are their practices different from each other? Max Weber’s insightful analysis is instructive.

After being badly defeated in the First World War, Germany did not only lose its colonies overseas to other colonial and imperial powers. She was also forced to comply with very harsh treaty conditions imposed by other colonial powers, rendering its post-war economy and society in depressive rumbles. At this critical historical juncture, the German intelligentsia struggled very hard to find a solution in order to rebuild a strong post-war German nation-state without a colony. Having founded the ‘German Democratic Party’ (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei*) but lost in the parliamentary election during the Weimar Republic period, in 1919, which was one year before his death, the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) gave a rather unusually religious and confessional lecture entitled ‘Politics as a Vocation’ (Weber, 1948: 77). This lecture might have highlighted the internal tensions of himself. I think these ethical contradictions are reminiscent of those faced by the Christian witnesses who operate in the Powers, in which realism constitutes the most dominant spiritual and cultural reality.

In the first place, Weber recognized the Christian spiritual concept of ‘vocation’ might have an indispensable connection with state politics. He further conceived that the

charisma of the statesman has to do with his socially recognized identity as the ‘innerly “called” leader’ (Weber, 1948: 80). Such inner calling from the spiritual realm therefore constituted the virtue and personality of the statesman. As Weber did not reject the inherently Christian meanings of the concept ‘vocation’, he applied it to state politics. He further suggested that a calling may stem from the deep spiritual realm of a human person, which constituted the charisma of the prophets, politicians and war-leaders. This is because a calling should come from the mysterious and spiritual forces, which should not belong to this world.

In the actual practice of government, the policy decision-making of the statesman is therefore anchored upon and determined by the vocation of another world resultant of the spiritual interaction and discernment with God. In other words, when a Christian decided to join state politics, s/he actually responded to the inner vocational calling from God. This actually can be problematic because the ethics of state politics and the ethics of the Christian church are in irreconcilable contradiction.

Because ‘a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ (Weber, 1948: 78), a statesman who is ‘active in politics strives for power either as a means in serving other aims, ideal or egoistic, or as “power for power’s sake”, that is, in order to enjoy the prestige-feeling that power gives’ (Weber, 1948: 78). One just cannot practice government effectively without negotiating, competing and fighting for power and more power because power is the essential instrument in statecraft, may it be policy-making or implementation. In other words, it is the rule of instrumental rationality that dictates matters in state politics, i.e. the ends justify all possible means.

Weber therefore stated it clearly, the ‘decisive means for politics is violence’ (Weber, 1948: 121-122). What does it really mean? Because state politics justifies all possible means by its ends, using violence naturally violates morality and

ethics. Violence is therefore the most creative, lawless, and destructive and the freest – unconstrained by any moral code and ethical standard but only dictated by the pursuits of power and interests. The practice of violence is therefore paradoxically essential in statecraft when defending state sovereignty, especially against the ‘enemies of the state’. One cannot just rule out the option of using force when s/he is delegated the authority and responsibility to protect the lives and properties of the others.

In other words, the ethics of state politics is always found in an anarchic political order and an amoral environment where actors have to:

- (1) fight for power and enjoy the prestige-feeling and other rewards that power gives them;
- (2) use coercion or violence;
- (3) use all possible means to achieve the intended ends;
- (4) adopt instrumental rationality (i.e. to treat the peoples and matters as the mere instruments to achieve ends);
- (5) violate morality and justify one’s action retrospectively with moral-ethical causes.

Instead of rejecting evilness in entirety, the Christian statesmen choose to engage with evilness and adopt the ‘lesser evil’ option to make decisions and face the consequences. Weber said, ‘He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: “Here I stand; I can do no other”’ (Weber, 1948: 127). However, this ethics fundamentally contradicts the ethics of the Christian church and gospel. Weber continued:

‘Whoever wants to engage in politics at all, and especially in politics as a vocation, has to realize these ethical paradoxes. He must know that he is responsible for what may become of himself under the impact of these paradoxes. I repeat, he lets himself in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence. The great virtuosi of acosmic love of humanity and goodness, whether stemming from

(Jesus of) Nazareth or (St. Francis of) Assisi or (the Buddha Siddhartha) from Indian royal castles, have not operated with the political means of violence. Their kingdom was “not of this world” and yet they worked and still work in this world. [...] He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence. The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner tension with the god of love, as well as with the Christian God as expressed by the church. This tension can at any time lead to an irreconcilable conflict.’ (Weber, 1948: 125-126).

Weber clearly stated that state politics operates within a realm of anarchism and amorality where power is the object and the constituent of all acts. Realism, being the core logic of state politics, causes the following inherent and irreconcilable ethical contradictions against the Christian faith:

- (1) The ethical core of the Christian church is the gospel, which is featured in ‘the Sermon of the Mount’ (Mathews 5-7). It expects the Christian disciples to love the enemies as one self, renounce one’s possessions and not to judge others. Whereas its ethical guidelines are in line with pacifist and self-restraining practice, it is not the way that state politics is organized. In state politics, one has to resort to pressurizing tactics (work-strike), mobilizing violence, launching revolution, issuing deterrents and threats, and make war. State politics are characterized by realist (power-seeking), economic-calculative (self-interested) and self-actualization (egoistic) ethics in which expanding one’s territories, claiming supremacy and pursuing self-interests are the normal desirable goals. Christian ethics and state politics ethics are therefore contradictory to each other (Weber, 1948: 119-120).
- (2) State politics tends to justify all possible means by the ends. Since violence is the decisive means to achieve the desired ends, such instrumentalist ethics contradict the

two usual Christian ethics. First, the means need to comply with moral teachings of the Christian faith. Second, the end-results of one's deeds will be determined and provided by God, which is in line with the doctrine of divine providence (*divina providencia*).

- (3) In line with the early reformer Martin Luther's 'two kingdoms doctrine' which suggested that 'the world is governed by demons' (Weber, 1948: 123; Wright, 2010), Weber conceived the Christian statesman would have to contract with the 'diabolical powers' (Weber, 1948: 123). Though it remains unclear what sort of 'powers' that Weber was referring to, the described scenario would easily expose the Christian witness to the amoral and anarchic realm that 'it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true' (Weber, 1948: 123). Again, the realist logic of this realm contradicts the Christian ethics.
- (4) State politics emphasizes this-worldliness. Actors engage in ceaseless struggle for power and interests in this world. However, the Christian church and its ethics emphasize other-worldliness. The tensions between two ethics would naturally lead to irresolvable conflicts (Weber, 1948: 125-126).

Apart from the Anabaptist theological circle, it was unsurprising that the Christian (realist) witnesses in the State would have to face the criticisms from other Christian denominations and church contemporaries. For example, the Methodist pastor Kellermann scored the following criticism against the Christian witnesses within the Powers:

'The insidiousness of the temptations lies in the integrity of how and who. Power and person are the topic. The one crouched ready to gobble up the other. Power may consume, corrupt, inflate, distort, dissipate, or simply deaden the person. The Confuser's scheme is for Jesus to forget who he is by getting lost in how he'll work, so that the One

who is the beginning and end will be swallowed up in the means. [...] It seems to be more and more widely recognized that each of the temptations is for power: the first is to economic power, the second is to military/political power, and the third is to religious power. In all, we're granted a concise and compact exchange on issues at once very concrete to the life of Jesus and pertinent to our own. Remember that at the conclusion of the encounter the tempter doesn't slink off into oblivion forever defeated; he withdraws "until an opportune time." Such times present themselves repeatedly to Jesus and his followers.' (Kellermann, 1991: 159-160)

In a similar vein, the lay American theologian William Stringfellow issued the following critique against the Christian leaders of the U.S. state and society during the Cold War period:

'In truth, the conspicuous moral fact about our generals, our industrialists, our scientists, our commercial and political leaders is that they are the most obvious and pathetic prisoners in American society. There is unleashed among the principalities in this society a ruthless, self-proliferating, all-consuming institutional process which assaults, dispirits, defeats, and destroys human life even among, and primarily among, those persons in positions of institutional leadership. They are left with titles but without effectual authority; with the trappings of power, but without control over the institutions they head; in nominal command, but bereft of dominion. These same principalities, as has been mentioned, threaten and defy and enslave human beings of other status in diverse ways, but the most poignant victim of the demonic in America today is the so-called leader.' (Stringfellow, 1973: 89)

Stringfellow continued,

‘Among all the principalities, in their legion species and diversities, the State has a particular eminence. The State, in this context, names the functional paraphernalia of political authority in a nation, which claims and exercises violence, within a nation. The precedence of the State hierarchically among the principalities is related to the jurisdiction asserted by the State over other institutions and powers within a nation. Practically it is symbolized by the police power, taxation, licensing, regulation of corporate organization and activity, the military forces, and the like. The paramountcy of the State among the demonic powers is probably most readily recognized in tyrannical regimes, ancient or modern.’ (Stringfellow, 1973: 109)

Instead of soothing the internal tensions and ethical dilemma which the Christian witness would have to face, these criticisms exacerbated them and insinuated the Christian witnesses in the State as false prophets and demonic heretics. However, these criticisms have accurately pointed to the main temptation of the Christian witnesses who strive to conduct statecraft within the sovereign statehood; the temptation of power. The Christian witness would therefore need to find a new ethics to conduct Christian statecraft, especially how to deal with their desires and pursuits for power and the contentious power struggle within the Powers.

4.2.3 The Art of Being in But Not of *the Powers*

4.2.3.1 *Stranger, Sojourner, Pilgrim and Alien*

There are biblical verses which emphasize that Christian presence in this world is of stranger and sojourner. For example,

‘For we were strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a

shadow, and there is none abiding.’ (1 Chronicles 29:15 King James Version)

‘Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.’ (1 Peter 2:11 King James Version)

Since life in this world is just part of a much longer journey entering into the already but not yet heavenly kingdom, our existence as stranger or sojourner is also deeply participating in this pilgrimage towards the eventual union with God (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1989). Being a pilgrim or ‘resident alien’ in this world would mean that one does not necessarily attach with and become solely dependent on the Powers of this world. While the Powers and their realist logic will continue to constitute the essential establishment and dynamics of our political, social, economic and cultural lives in this world, the Christian witnesses know very well that the Powers are neither their destiny nor object of desire and yearning.

On one hand, we need to live in and manage to deal with the Powers which keep the world in certain order. Otherwise, our lives in this world would fall into chaos without them. On the other hand, we know well that the Powers do not necessarily occupy the very central position in our spiritual being. As we actually belong to the heavenly kingdom which is yet to come, our spiritual belonging and identity as the citizens of the heavenly kingdom would entail the necessary tension between this-worldly presence in the Powers and other-worldly yearning for the heavenly realm.

4.2.3.2 Hopeful, Contemplative Agency

As reflected by the exilic movements in the Old Testament, this tension brought both agony and hope to the Israeli exiles after Jerusalem was seized by the foreign empires of Babylon and Mede-Persia (Brueggemann, 1986[1992]). While the exiles grieved for the loss of the Davidic kingdom and the sufferings of their people, they

waited for the nation to be eventually restored by God. Various prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel however prophesied that the restoration was to be achieved in a very different manifestation beyond the imagination of the Jewish statehood, which was actually the universal salvation of mankind brought by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The Christian notion of hope was then radically transformed from a hope of this-worldly state-centrism to the hope of an eschatological coming anchored in the kingdom of God. As such, we are all being in but not of the Powers of this world because our hope is anchored in the heavenly kingdom already but yet to come. How to live this new ethics within the Powers? Contemplative agency is the key that I can think of.

Contemplative action refers to the Christian witness' everyday soulful agency to proactively discern God's will through actively listening to the Holy Spirit (Wong, 2010). While the Christian witness can always honestly communicate her/his thoughts to the Holy Spirit, a prayerful witness is also open and sensitive as well as receptive to God's will in which s/he is willing to flexibly change his/her course of action. Prayers and contemplative action therefore constitute a two-way communication channel connecting the earth of the Powers and the heavenly sovereign. It happens in the uncertain contact zone somewhere between heaven and earth. The archetype of such prayerful action was established by Apostle Paul's vision and unplanned journey to Macedonia and the historic moment when the Christian faith was brought with him entering from Asia to Europe (Acts 16:6-10) (Wong, 2015).

4.2.2.3 Duality of the Powers

Striking a balance from the 'fatalism vs. accidentalism' dualistic debate in Christian theology, contemplative agency highlights the Christian witness' proactive agency in dealing with the realist structural reality of the Powers, which is hard to be changed solely by human will. Whereas fatalism suggests that God pre-determines the fate and destiny of His

followers to the extent that they do not have any say and only submit themselves to God's rule, accidentalism rejects that God has any plan for the individual humans at all (Yeung, 2000: 181).

To effectively address this debate, the notion of the 'duality of the Powers' is introduced here (Giddens, 1984; Wong, 2014a). By the duality of the Powers, I mean the Powers can be both constraining and enabling as much as blocking and diverting the Christian witness's actions (even without his/her own making and knowing) towards one's destination in God's larger historical plan. While the Powers continue to shape and be informed by the structures limiting the agency of the Christian witness, the Christian witness can still actively communicate to God through prayers and prayerful action.

The Powers therefore have dual properties: (1) to shape and constrain human will and action, (2) to facilitate and enable human freedom and action. Duality of the Powers suggests that in living with the two sides (i.e. constraint and enablement) of the coin (i.e. the Powers) prayerfully, the Christian witness actually enjoys the capability and privilege to negotiate what to get from the already given circumstances and to re-make the bigger historical picture with God. This practice strikes a middle-way between fatalism and accidentalism.

I called this prophetic agency the contemplative agency, which is neither fatalist nor accidentalist. In the present discussion, the Christian witness' contemplative agency refers to two types of action and an intended outcome. First, it is the discerning realization of the realist-structural constraints of the Powers where s/he operates. This realization informs her/him about what is possible and impossible within the Powers. Second, it is the prayerfulness to be pro-actively receptive and sensitive to God's plan in such a way that s/he can agilely change the course of his/her action within the Powers. The intended outcome of the contemplative agency is to re-make the destined history with God together. Being in

but not of the Powers can be equivalent with being ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ (Mathew 6:10).

In the following section, I shall use the exilic life histories of Joseph, Esther and Daniel to illustrate what I mean by contemplative agency (Wong, 2014b).

4.3 ‘On Earth as It is in Heaven’: Exilic Prophetic Witnessing in Ancient Imperial Africa and Asia

If a Christian witness is being put into a position of the Powers such as in the state hierarchy, how could s/he conduct the self properly? What would be the Christian witnessing practice of it? Here are my assumptions before answering these questions.

- (1) The delegation of political authority and state power is by God, the operation of human power struggle within the Powers is also shaped by God. In other words, the performance and success/failure of the Christian witnesses do not only fulfil God’s larger plan in history, they are also part of God’s strategic deployment in the gradual actualization of the ‘already but not yet’ heavenly realm in this world, where Christ is the true sovereign, neither the Christian witness nor any human and non-human.
- (2) The specifics of state politics within the Powers are essentially realist, which is inevitably of intrigues, schemes and other dynamics and elements of anarchic and amoral darkness. But the actual operational effectiveness, achievements and the performance of the Christian witnesses are resultant of God’s grace and intervention. In other words, the performance of the Christian witnesses within the Powers is part of God’s plan. Hence, one’s success and failure in the Powers are only historically participating and contributing to His heavenly sovereignty on earth where He works in and through the Powers.

- (3) Although the Christian witness mainly operates within the earthly domain of the Powers, there is still a fine line between the heavenly kingdom, and the present world of the Powers. Despite that the Christian witness apparently submits to the temporal rule of the Powers, s/he is actually and only accountable to God and heavenly kingdom. This ‘heavenly accountability’ notion would be able to articulate the spiritual gist of prophetic witnessing in statecraft – ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ – ‘your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthews 6: 10).

Let’s find out what could be learnt from the three exilic witnesses’ life histories. For various circumstances that God allowed to happen, they were sold, taken hostage and exiled to a foreign imperium against their own will. They however became the witnessing ‘aliens and strangers’ in the foreign statehoods of the ancient Egyptian, Persian and Babylonian empires (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1989). My purpose is to show how God’s sovereignty still worked through these Powers wherein grace, love, justice, forgiveness and hope were witnessed and intersected with suffering, agony, injustice and griefs. Hereunder are the conceptual signposts that guide my interpretation of the text:

- Contemplative agency – by going with the flows of the given circumstances and its embedded structures, the Christian witness prayerfully discerns what the reality is. However, as s/he is not entirely ruled by the reality, s/he exploits the circumstances and defies the order of necessity of violence within the Powers. S/he therefore constantly makes history with God as destined to be.
- Duality of *the Powers* – the Christian witness is not only constrained by the Powers, but is also enabled by them to participate in God’s larger plan.
- Prayers and prayerful action – the Christian witness communicates with God through prayer and taking prayerful action. This two-way communicative process allows the given circumstances and the Powers to be possibly re-structured predictably and non-predictably.

- God's divine providence – only time can explain why and what a given circumstance occur and really lead to. Prayerful patience and waiting of the Christian witness allows God's divine providence and timing to be gradually unfolded as destined to be.
- On earth as it is in heaven – Christian witnessing is conducted within the uncertain contact zone connecting the heaven and earth. This form of radical discipleship is neither aggressive nor militant, but constantly re-making history with God. In other words, the Christian witness is in but not of the Powers (Wong, 2017a).

4.3.1 Joseph: Divine Providence in Ancient Egyptian Statecraft

Although the life of Joseph's prosperity and success in ancient Egypt was widely attributed to the fact that 'the Lord was with Joseph and he prospered' (Genesis 39: 2-3; 23), I actually consider Joseph's success and prosperity within the Egyptian Powers were only secondary in God's larger historical plan. In actuality, Joseph's life in Egypt was not always pleasant. For example, he was unjustly put into prison resultant of a false charge fabricated by Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). In the prison, after he accurately predicted that the cup-bearer was able to return to his office whereas the butler could not, the cup-bearer forgot Joseph, causing him to stay in the prison for at least two more years (Goligher, 2008: 69; Wong, 2017b). These amoral happenings reflected the deeply realist ethos of the Egyptian state hierarchy.

Joseph's core experience after he was sold to Egypt was for him to experience God's grace to Egypt and Israel. With God's grace, before he died in his 110th years, Joseph was able to forgive all his brothers who sold him to Egypt. This ending of Joseph's life concluded God's dual grace to the two states (Egypt and Israel) and Joseph as a wounded statesman (Genesis 50: 15-21). From being sold to Egypt to attaining genuine forgiveness, it had taken Joseph more than ninety years to heal his deep wounds. Although many would naturally admire Joseph who possessed much political power

and economic prosperity, Joseph himself actually saw Egypt as his land of suffering. For example, when Joseph named his first son ‘Ephraim’, he stated that ‘It is because God made me fruitful in the land of my suffering’ (Genesis 41: 52). It was obvious that Joseph had been long tormented by the deep wounds and persistent sorrows from being sold by his own brothers, reluctantly expelled from his homeland and taken down to Egypt.

However, because God was with Joseph, the bitterness of the wounds did not poison his measured decision-making, his upright attitude and integrity. For instance, because God’s spirit was with him, when he interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, he was able to bring messages of peace to the Pharaoh. When the Pharaoh asked Joseph to interpret his dreams, Joseph replied humbly with peace, ‘I cannot do it’, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires’ (Genesis 41: 16).

Moreover, when his elder brothers were driven by the famine in Israel and came to ask for grains from Egypt, they did not know Joseph was already appointed by the Pharaoh to be the governor of Egypt. Although Joseph was intended to see if his elder brothers truly regretted how they treated him many years ago (Genesis 42: 19; 22-24), he did not intend to take revenge. In contrast, when he revealed himself to his elder brothers about his true identity, he spoke about God’s plan and purpose in regards to why Joseph was sold to Egypt:

‘Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years here will not be plowing and reaping. *But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*’ (Genesis 45: 4-7, italics added)

‘So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.’ (Genesis 45: 8)

In sum, as the ancient Egyptian empire’s foreigner-statesman, on the one hand, although Joseph did not actively seek power and position in the Egyptian principalities and powers, God’s arrangement was beyond Joseph’s imagination – God made him an effective and reliable servant of the Powers of the Egyptian empire, who then brought peace to the peoples of both Egypt and Israel. On the other hand, his daily, intimate and soulful contemplation with God had granted him the heavenly wisdom to discern God’s will for him to endure the suffering in Egypt.

This is the first ethical postulate in being *in but not of* the Powers: to proactively contemplate that all circumstances, grace and sufferings experienced within the Powers are ultimately originated from God. A witness would be able to see the circumstances to be a part of God’s larger salvation plan *on earth as it is in heaven*.

4.3.2 Esther: Peaceable Struggle in Ancient Persian Powers

The Persian and Median king Xerxes (486-465 B.C.) reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. His vast empire stretched from India of South Asia to Cush of North Africa (Esther 1: 1-3). In Susa, there dwelled the Jewish people who were taken hostage by the Persian and Median armies from the land of Israel. Among them, Mordecai adopted his uncle’s daughter, Esther, to be his own daughter. Because Xerxes decided to find a new queen, Mordecai advised Esther not to tell anyone about her Jewish genealogy. Concealing her Jewish identity, Esther was sent to join the harem in the palace of Xerxes, where the eunuch Hegai took care of the girls for the king. Esther pleased Hegai and won his favour. He assigned seven maids selected from the king’s palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem (Esther 2: 9).

The Bible did not detail what was in Esther's mind when she was selected into the king's palace. However, the Scriptures briefly highlighted Esther's take:

'When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she *asked for nothing* other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.' (Esther 2: 15-17, italics added)

State affairs in the Persian Powers were not just darkly realist in nature, but interwoven with God's intervention. When Mordecai came to know that two officers of the king conspired to assassinate Xerxes, he told Queen Esther. On behalf of Mordecai, Esther reported to Xerxes. When the report was validated to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. Credits were given to Mordecai on the king's official records (Esther 2: 21-23).

Later, the king promoted Haman the Agagite to a seat of honour higher than all other nobles and officials in the Persian Empire (Esther 3: 1). This however triggered the bitter power struggle for political supremacy between Haman and Mordecai, and therefore laid the root-cause for Haman to plot a Holocaust against all the Jews in Susa. When Haman's genocidal plan was approved by king Xerxes, all the Jews in Susa were frightened. At this critical historical juncture, Mordecai requested Queen Esther to go and meet the king and pledged for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people. The Queen initially resisted (Esther 4: 10-11). Mordecai then sent his answer back to Esther,

‘Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you along of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?’ (Esther 4: 13-14)

After fasting for three days and three nights, the contemplative Esther decided to risk her own life and went to see the king in person. As the realist power struggle between Haman and Mordecai was escalated into zero-sum, Haman plotted to have Mordecai killed. *God intervened at this juncture. He made the king sleepless at one night.* In this particular sleepless night, Xerxes reviewed the official records and recognized that Mordecai actually saved his life from an assassination plot. Xerxes decided to honour Mordecai. This indirectly deterred Haman’s plan to eliminate Mordecai. As Haman went to attend the banquet organized by Queen Esther, he was summoned to death by the king there. This did not only save the lives of the Jews, it also promoted Mordecai to be the ‘second in rank to King Xerxes’ in the Persian and Median Powers ‘because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews’ (Esther 10: 3).

In such an emergency, the pure-hearted Esther decisively participated in the bitter struggle between Haman and Mordecai. Due to God’s intervention in the developmental course of this power struggle, Esther became the key historical instrument causing the fall of Haman. She did not only save her own people, she also actualized the domestic peace within the Persian Empire. Although Esther was not publicly known as a prophetic witness, her critical role as the Queen and prayerful action to join the power struggle had enabled her to mark a historic difference in bringing peace to the entire land of Persia. She indirectly realized God’s salvation plan in this drama of political intrigues and deadly power struggle.

This is the second ethical postulate of being *in but not of* the Powers. In a critical historical juncture, the pure-hearted witness would contradict her/his usual attitude of being indifferent to state politics, s/he can actively participate in the realist struggle within the Powers, yet with a contemplative heart and prayerful action. Her/his purpose is therefore not driven by fear and self-interest, enabling her/him not to win the struggle for his/her own reason/interest, but to participate in the larger peace-making and salvation plan on earth as it is in heaven.

4.3.3 Daniel: Exilic Witnessing across *the Powers* in Heaven and Earth

In the third year of the Persian-Median King Cyrus (559-530 B.C.), the Jewish statesman Daniel who was taken from Israel received a vision. This vision was about the war among the Powers on earth and in the heavenly realm. Indicated by various verses in the Bible, though Daniel was in a powerful position within the Persian empire, he regularly confessed, prayed, petitioned, fasted, pleaded in sackcloth and ashes, and mourned (Daniel, 9:3; 9:20; 10:2-3). His persistent inner agony perhaps had to do with his communication with the prophet Jeremiah in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:2). Despite that they were both agonized by the loss of their country – Israel, they knew it was part of God’s judgement and revival plan in history.

What was this clash of the Powers about? Seemingly, it was about the ceaseless realist strategic competition, conflict and war between different worldly nations. However, it was actually about a historical spiritual warfare. When Daniel was standing on the bank of the river Tigris, a certain heavenly ‘man’ came down and spoke to him:

‘Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me

twenty-one days. Then, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.’ (Daniel 10: 12-14)

‘Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come; but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth. (No one supports me against them except Michael, your prince. And in the first year of Darius the Mede, I took my stand to support and protect him.)’ (Daniel 10:20-11:1)

Who was this ‘man’ from above actually? This ‘man’ could be a messenger of God. He should be among the team of the angelic powers. He seemed to be a staunch ally of the angelic prince, St. Michael. He and Michael had however engaged in a protracted war with the demonic Powers and fallen angels which had governed Persia and Greece. The involved conflicts and warfare between these good and evil angelic Powers constituted the changes, standoffs and conflicts among the regimes in international politics. According to the prophetic envisions and predictions of the future international dynamics in Chapter 11 to Chapter 12, apart from describing the rise and fall, demise and uproot of different nation-states, Daniel also anticipated how God intervened within the usually realist patterns of power struggle found within and among the Powers. For example,

‘His successor will send out a tax collector to maintain the royal splendour. In a few years, however, he will be destroyed, yet not in anger or in battle.’ (Daniel 11:20)

‘He will be succeeded by a contemptible person who has not been given the honour of royalty. He will

invade the kingdom when its people feel secure, and he will seize it through intrigue.’ (Daniel 11:21)

‘The two kings, with their hearts bent on evil, will sit at the same table and lie to each other, but to no avail, because an end will still come at the appointed time.’ (Daniel 11:27)

‘The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place.’ (Daniel 11:36)

Although Daniel had known about these angelic forces and demonic powers already, he was not able to fully comprehend the final outcome of the revelation. The messenger of God therefore continued,

‘Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.’ (Daniel 12: 8-10)

‘As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.’ (Daniel 12: 13)

This is the third ethical postulate of being in but not of the Powers. Although the witness may be able to contemplate something concerning the operation of the Powers and the heavenly future, s/he is unable to fully understand them. As long as s/he will concentrate on the present, accomplish what should be done properly in this world, and wait patiently for the journey to unfold towards the eschaton, his/her eternal happiness in the heavenly kingdom will finally be attained.

4.4 Conclusion

In his honest examination of the two halves of life, the Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr honestly acknowledged a realist pattern among the modern successful people who strive for secular success:

‘Most people are trying to build the platform of their lives all by themselves, while working all the new levers at the same time. I think of CEOs, business leaders, soldiers, or parents who have no principled or ethical sense of themselves and end up with some kind of “pick and choose” morality in the pressured moment. This pattern leaves the isolated ego in full control, and surely represents the *hubris* that will precede a lot of impending tragedies.’ (Rohr, 2012: 27, italics original)

Father Rohr’s revealing observation about the inevitable ethical-moral tensions generated from the realist logic of the Powers of our time does not necessarily contradict what Joseph, Esther and Daniel experienced in ancient Africa and Asia. Actually, Rohr (2012: 36) also admits that the “[p]rimitive” and native societies might well have held this tension better than we do today’ and that ‘[t]here is much evidence that many traditional societies produced healthy psyches and ego structures’.

Based on the exilic life histories of Joseph, Esther and Daniel, the foregoing pages have elaborated what I mean by a prophetic witnessing practice to the State as a pillaring power of our time. While it aims to address the valid concerns of the Christian pacifists regarding the problematically realist logic of the State, I did not dismiss the Christian realist’s discernment that there were Christian individuals who were indeed assigned by God to witness the faith within the Powers by destiny. Striking an intricate balance between the two competing theological and social-ethical tenets, I have contoured an alternative position which is dubbed ‘being *in*

but not of the Powers’ – a prophetic witnessing practice for those who are destined to live with the Powers in their life journeys, which should contribute to the larger picture in the advancement of the heavenly realm. This practice reflects the deeper identity and goal of the Christian witness as a

‘person who has found his or her True Self has learned how to live in the big picture, as a part of deep time and all of history. This change of frame and venue is called living in “the kingdom of God” by Jesus, and it is indeed a major about-face. This necessitates, of course, that we let go of our own smaller kingdoms, which we normally do not care to do. Life is all about *practicing for heaven*. We practice by choosing union freely – ahead of time – and now. Heaven is the state of union both here and later.’ (Rohr, 2012: 101, italics original)

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