

# Hans Ferdinand Bürki's Challenge to a Church Accommodating Modernity: An Invitation to Creatureliness

## Abstract:

The modern, liberal Cartesian idea of the rational autonomous self is an impoverished notion of human being when compared to the relational and mystical richness accorded to the human person in the biblical anthropology of antiquity. This paper suggests that Hans Ferdinand Bürki's biblical theology of human identity, presented in three occasional papers published in the 1960s and early 1970s, stands in the biblical tradition of anthropology presented by earliest apologists such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Bürki's three papers challenged Christians in the Cold War era of scientific, technocratic certainty, to break with their culture of liberal individualism and recover the biblical, holistic ethics of the anthropology of antiquity. This paper summarises and analyses Bürki's three occasional papers to reveal the depth of his understanding of the essence of human being. The discussion will conclude that Hans Bürki's theology of human creatureliness, published at the climax of an age that had assumed the "death of the soul," was prescient of our late modern culture of strident globalized consumerism, which John Paul II called a "culture of death." Bürki's theological grasp of humanity's profound relational contingency offers late modernity hope for the difficult steps that will need to be taken by our contemporary world, to enter the era *after modernity*.

## Introduction

[T]he unbelieving marrow of the capricious man cannot perceive anything but unbelief and caprice, positing ends and devising means. His world is devoid of sacrifice and grace, encounter and presence, but shot through with ends and means. Martin Buber

See, I am making all things new.  
Revelation 21:5

The concept of "late modernity" has a range of meanings; among them it denotes that part of contemporary society that has difficulty with accepting its own failure to master nature - a mastery that modernity promised so confidently.<sup>1</sup> The South African government's sudden drive for nuclear and shale gas energy "solutions," in preference for taking the low road towards a sustainable energy future, may yet prove to be one of late modernity's greatest failed attempts to master nature.<sup>2</sup> As Jacklyn Cock's sociology research has shown, South Africa's "war against ourselves" is best understood as our failure as a modern society to achieve wellbeing for our environment and for the marginalized poor, in the nation's pursuit of economic prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens circumnavigates the quagmire of endless debate about how to define postmodernity: "Rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before. Beyond modernity ... we can perceive the contours of a new and different order, which is 'post-modern'; but this is quite distinct from what is at the moment called by many 'post-modernity.'" This is the approach taken in this article: A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (New York: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3. A theological perspective on the crisis in modernity's failed *mastery* of nature is Jürgen Moltmann "In the Ecological Crisis," in his book *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 23-32.

<sup>2</sup> A good introduction to the legal, environmental and faith issues surrounding Jacob Zuma's 2014 nuclear energy proposals is Kim Kruyshaar's article: "God gave us sun and wind & we won't be nuked!, <<http://safcei.org/god-gave-us-sun-and-wind-we-wont-be-nuked/>> (accessed 14 November 2014).

<sup>3</sup> So, Jacklyn Kock, *The War Against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007). Also see her earlier essay: "The Politics of Ecology" in *Restoring the Land: Environment and Change in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Mamphela Ramphele, ed. (London: Panos, 1991), 13-21.

What will it be like to live in a world *after modernity*? Such envisioning captures the imaginations of economists of various philosophical persuasions, who are deconstructing the myths that underpinned modern notions like “free markets” or “unlimited economic growth.” These scholars and commentators warn of a devastating cul-de-sac for Earth’s sustainability, into which the prophets of these myths have driven our planet.<sup>4</sup> There is growing consensus that the ecological, social and political landscape after modernity may unfortunately be the counterfoil of modernity’s *utopia* - a world of acidic oceans, extinct species, destroyed climate systems, forgotten languages and cultures, despotic kleptocrats, fractured communities, creeping ugliness, and the fading memory of creation’s once teeming and pristine biomes. How to negotiate such an imminent dystopia that is stripped of much of the significance of place which creation once had, has also begun to be imagined in late modern fiction and film.<sup>5</sup>

Not just in fictional creations, but in the current experience of millions, in countries and whole sub-continentals that have been devastated by economic collapse, famine, pollution, sectarian violence, or extreme climate events, a kind of dystopia is unfolding in the present. Climate science’s “tipping points” red-alert the imminent collapse of Earth’s delicately balanced ecological systems and the growing spectre of possible global pandemics are further reminders of modernity’s failed mastery of nature.<sup>6</sup> These empirical indicators are also reminders of humanity’s essential *creatureliness* - our created relational contingency.

Like Katniss Everdene, the fictional heroine of Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy, millions of today’s young people are realizing that hope for the future will be sorely misplaced if it is invested in the social, economic and political legacies of modernity which they are inheriting. Yet despite this growing disbelief in modernity’s promised utopias, even the young in contemporary society still cling to a late modern Cartesian understanding of human being – the liberal notion of the freestanding individual grounded in a rational self.<sup>7</sup> This modern definition of human identity is powerfully buttressed by globalised consumerism, which links human fulfilment to technologies, therapies and particular kinds of unrestricted

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<sup>4</sup> Among leading contemporary economists suggesting such a deconstruction are James Gustav Speth *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* (Yale University Press, 2008), Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Earthscan, 2009), David Korten, *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010), Joseph Stiglitz, *Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy* (Norton, 2010), Juliet Schor, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth* (Penguin Press, 2010) and Diane Coyle, *The Economics of Enough* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> An introduction to the genre of dystopia in literature since George Orwell’s *1984* is John Joseph Adams’ analysis: “Dystopian Fiction: An Introduction,” <<http://www.tor.com/blogs/2011/04/dystopian-fiction-an-introduction>> (accessed 12 November 2014). One of the first dystopic novels to champion self-abandoned hope amidst the ruins was Margaret Atwood’s bestselling *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London: Random House, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> The Fifth *Climate Change Synthesis Report* of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is an example of the latest climate research: “Fifth Assessment Report (AR5),” <<http://www.ipcc.ch/>> (accessed 14 November 2014). The World Health Organization’s “Global Alert and Response” webpage: <<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/situation-reports/en/>> posts the latest updates on global epidemics like the Ebola outbreak of 2014.

<sup>7</sup> The ideas I present in this paper about the modern rational self have formed by reading in William T. Cavanaugh’s work on political imagination, in Stanley Hauerwas’ work on the implicit violence of liberalism, and in James Houston’s work on baptismal identity, some of which be cited below.

self-gratification to satiate the “autonomous” self.<sup>8</sup> Another social expression of modern individualism is the structural marginalization of those who are structurally prevented from representing themselves on the “level playing fields” of democratic societies, such as the mentally disabled, the unborn, the last of earth’s forest peoples or the homeless urban or rural poor.<sup>9</sup> Nation states and more so, multinational corporations lever increasing powers to structure and regulate every aspect of ecological and human existence on our planet, with unforeseen impacts on the environment, the human person, and local communities.<sup>10</sup> Genome technologies, assisted suicide, community “repatriation,” abortion on demand, and “structural adjustment,” have had environmental, human and social impacts that are such a mark of late modernity that Pope John Paul II famously called them a “war of the powerful against the weak,” and, modernity’s “culture of death.”<sup>11</sup> Ironically, yet another social expression of the modern freestanding individual is state apologetics for *mastering death* itself. Many democracies disproportionately invest in medical care to prolong the last months or weeks of the individual’s life, whereas scant investment in these countries is made for quality of life in primary and preventive community health care. Craig Gay aptly calls these different expressions of modernity’s thwarted attempts to engineer community, on the basis of self-grounded individuality, as the “will-to-self-definition.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the purposes of this essay is to recall a way of understanding human identity that predates the relatively new Enlightenment notion of the rational self that has dominated the last three centuries. Such an older anthropology, derived from the Bible, underlay the almost unchanged Judeo-Christian cosmology of the human being from Abraham to Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>13</sup> Judeo-Christian anthropology understands human beings as primarily relational and embodied creatures who are dependent on God the Creator and creation, who are uniquely imbued with the image of their loving Creator and as such are mutually interdependent. In short, the anthropology of biblical antiquity understood humanity to be created in contingency and for *alterity*, the high calling unique to human beings of selfless love - love *for* the *other* and love *for* creation.<sup>14</sup> This biblical vision of personhood began to be recovered in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century by such theologians as Martin Buber and Dietrich Bohhoeffler. Among them was a Swiss educational psychologist, Hans Ferdinand Bürki (1925-2002), who, like

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<sup>8</sup> One of the first Christian philosophers to describe the impact on society of modern consumer technologies was Jacques Ellul in his *The Technological Society*, (Toronto: Random House, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> Here I draw on Stanley Hauerwas’ “The Politics of Gentleness” in Stanley Hauerwas & Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a VIOLENT WORLD: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 77-100.

<sup>10</sup> See William T. Cavanaugh’s chapter, “The Myth of the State as Saviour” in his *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 9-52.

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller analysis see “Exposing the Language of the Culture of Death: An Interview with Dr. William Brennan,” <[http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2009/wbrennan\\_interview\\_july09.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2009/wbrennan_interview_july09.asp)> (accessed 14 November 2014).

<sup>12</sup> So, Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (modern) world, Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 219-224.

<sup>13</sup> One of the most respected studies of cosmology from antiquity to modernity is Charles Taylor’s *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> The biblical anthropology that I describe in this essay is a summary of what I have learnt from graduate studies with Iain Provan and Bruce Waltke, whose Old Testament classes introduced me to the profound *who?* and *why?* questions of Genesis, and from James Houston and Eugene Petersen whose searching expositions on how *baptismal identity* has been shaped through the ages, have in turn shaped my understanding of personhood.

Bohnhoeffer, challenged the mid-century church to turn away from its detrimental cultural accommodations to modernity. This essay will introduce Bürki's theological anthropology, which was a prophetic invitation to the church in the milieu of high modernity during the Cold War, to break with the culture of self-constructing individualism and return to the humbling biblical ethics that are required to acknowledge humanity's relational contingency and essential creatureliness.

The Swiss theologian and educational psychologist, Hans Ferdinand Bürki (1925–2002) made three visits to South Africa between 1973 and 1976 at the invitation of the Students' Christian Association and the Students' Christian Movement, as General Secretary at Large for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). Bürki's first visits to South Africa were a small part of his prolific career in education, biblical scholarship, counselling and student evangelism, which unfolded on five continents over four decades among generations of tertiary student leaders in more than thirty-five countries. My recent article published in this journal serves as a retrospective study of Bürki's career and spirituality.<sup>15</sup>

The main purpose of the present essay is to introduce Bürki's theological anthropology and to show how three of Bürki's occasional theological articles, published during the 1960s and early 1970s were part of his wider ministry that confronted modernity's instrumentalist, self-grounded idea of human being. Firstly, the paper will describe Bürki's *implicit* ideas about "creatureliness" and "soul" in a summary of two of his early short articles: *Die Geistlich Armen - The Poor in Spirit* (1963)<sup>16</sup> and *The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship* (1967).<sup>17</sup> It will be shown that Bürki shares the Trinitarian and eschatological assumptions of the earliest Christian anthropology in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons. Their anthropology assumed that humanity's destiny is ultimately shared with the destiny of the whole of creation, through Christ, in God's ultimate *recapitulation* of all things through the Holy Spirit (Col. 1:18-20, Phil. 2:6-11, 2 Cor. 6:9-10).<sup>18</sup> Secondly, this article will discuss Bürki's *explicit* ideas about creatureliness and soul, presented in an "onion skin diagram" that he created in his widely mimeographed paper, *The Gospel and Human Culture* (c. 1973).<sup>19</sup> The analysis presented here will show that Bürki's writings were counter-cultural for the 1970s milieu of ebullient technocracy and secularity. Bürki challenged modernity's "culture of death" by resurrecting modernity's "dead ideas" - *creatureliness* and *soul*, and showed that these ancient ideas are grounded in eschatological hope - humanity and creation ultimately reconciled through Christ. Finally, it will be concluded that Bürki's anthropology was cannily prescient of late modernity's challenge to escape "the culture of death," the contemporary struggle

<sup>15</sup> So, Allen Goddard, "Hans Ferdinand Bürki in Retrospect: Theology as Spirituality, Through the Lens of Memory," *JTSA* 151 (March 2015): 24-40.

<sup>16</sup> The title of Bürki's contribution to the Festschrift: *Abraham Unser Vater: Festschrift Otto Michel Zum 60 Geburtstag* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1963), 58-64.

<sup>17</sup> So, Hans F. Bürki, "The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship," *IFES Journal*, 20, no. 2 (1967), 1-5.

<sup>18</sup> For an introduction to *recapitulation* in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus see Peter Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 57-83.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Bürki, *The Gospel and Human Culture* (Mimeographed Paper, c.1973) and then distributed in the collected IFES General Committee papers of 1975.

to find more congruent, interdisciplinary, nuanced and mystical understandings of human identity, particularly regarding justice in society and our niche in creation, as creatures among the myriad living communities of planet Earth.<sup>20</sup>

### Hans Bürki's Anthropology of Creatureliness

He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*  
5.21.1

The theme of most of Bürki's first Anglophone writings in the 60s and early 70s was personal transformation through encounter with Christ by the Holy Spirit as the beginning and consequence of Christian discipleship. A noteworthy precursor of this topic in Bürki's German writings is his article *Die Geistlich Armen (The Poor in Spirit)* (1963), Bürki's contribution to Otto Michel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday festschrift. Characteristically in this short piece, Bürki's style is a personal conversation rather than a formal treatise.<sup>21</sup> His thesis in *Die Geistlich Armen* is that "poverty of Spirit is not only the beginning of the Beatitudes but it is a central point of all biblical thinking."<sup>22</sup> Bürki integrates aspects of mid-twentieth century existentialism with biblical theology to explore the meaning of "poverty of spirit" for Christian living.<sup>23</sup> By so doing, Bürki creatively restates the kernel of ancient Christian anthropology, the assumption that human dependence on God the Creator, in *creatureliness*, is the ground for human transformation by God the Son, through God the Holy Spirit.

*Die Geistlich Armen* takes seriously the quest of the modern existentialists to reduce human being to its simplest form, which, Bürki claims, is humanity's "ontological powerlessness" - the essence of creatureliness. Bürki makes two statements about this essential powerlessness at the heart of the human being: (1) a "human does not have life out of himself..." and (2) "this not-having leads to his dignity because it is a witness to human 'being' before God. Humans are before God, without having." Here, Bürki reveals a strong affinity with the challenge to modernity in Søren Kierkegaard's theological psychology.<sup>24</sup>

Bürki's biblical warrant for reducing human creatureliness to "being and not-having" is the non-autonomy of Jesus Christ himself in the Gospel of John (5:26, 30-31, 6:38, 8:28, 10:18, 12:49-50, 14:10, 17:2). Of Jesus' non-grasping powerlessness Bürki writes: "in this poverty of spirit Jesus said 'I can do nothing out of myself.'" Bürki's further warrant for the essential weakness of human being, he says, is *being* full of hope rather than *having* hope: "Where hope is had, there it

<sup>20</sup> Two scholars who address the seriousness of the current ecological crisis in a biblical theology of hopeful *recapitulation* are N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007) and Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the kindness of my friend Dr. Gunter Winkler for his translation of *Die Geistlich Armen*. So, H. Bürki, *Die Geistlich Armen* (1963), 58.

<sup>22</sup> Quotations in this paragraph and the following two paragraphs are taken from *Die Geistlich Armen*, 58, 61 and 62.

<sup>23</sup> In particular Bürki draws on Gabriel Marcel, the French existentialist.

<sup>24</sup> James Houston's chapter on Søren Kierkegaard's personalism is a helpful introduction. So, James M. Houston, *The Mentored Life: From Individualism to Personhood* (Colorado Springs, Col: Navpress, 2002), 87-106.

is not.” Finally, Bürki holds that the ultimate test of this hopeful “ontological powerlessness” is the human posture in the moment of death:

In dying, the poverty, laboriously hidden during our lives, is revealed (1Tim 6:7-17). In the inexorable stripping and alienating development of death, the decisive character of human life comes to light, if right at the end I give up all my having, including the having of myself.<sup>25</sup>

Bürki draws on a personal story to press the meaning of *poverty of spirit* to even deeper significance. He recounts the slow deterioration of a friend who was terminally ill and eventually succumbed to death, who “was rich in poverty, but in dying he became completely himself.”<sup>26</sup> In Bürki’s ecumenical spirit he relates this personal anecdote to an insight of the Jesuit, Ladislaus Boros, to articulate the very kernel of human poverty:

Christ in his death became present to the whole universe and the holiness of humanity, as the innermost and deepest of all worldliness. Therefore the material element of human death is Christ-pregnant (Christusträchtigt).” By leaving his life Christ found the power to take back life. In dying his death he broke sin and took away its power to cause “self-having.”<sup>27</sup>

To express the epitome of “ontological powerlessness” Bürki brings together Boros’ two ideas: “the holiness of humanity” and the “innermost and deepest of all worldliness.” These two ideas he says are embodied in Christ at the epitome of his incarnation, the “leaving of his life”. Thus, says Bürki, the Christian source of radical fearlessness of death is *Christ*, who can overturn modernity’s consuming individualism and begin the healing and restoration of humanity in creation. Christ’s “poverty of spirit” in death becomes the germinal of baptismal identity and with this, the kernel of socio-political healing and transformation:

We have thought too little, recognized too little that the Christian life starts in the unification with the death of Christ, and that it continues in repeated new-death-events. (2 Cor. 6:9-10) ... the poor in spirit can be described as those who have been convicted of their poverty by the Spirit. “Through the Spirit” means that turning consumerism into asceticism, being immersed in philosophy, and the practice of dying are pitiful attempts by humans, unless the Spirit of God brings the last and real proof of poverty – death. Jesus frees us through his poverty in death, from our attachment to the poverty of our sins, through our return into our creaturely poverty, which is our whole richness in God. (2 Cor 8:9).<sup>28</sup>

This, Bürki’s conversation with Otto Michel, anticipates his early Anglophone writings because Bürki’s orthodox anthropology, grounded in the contingency of creatureliness, presented more than a gentle challenge to modernity’s Cartesian re-working of Plato’s idealism. *The Poor in Spirit* also anticipates Bürki’s first

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<sup>25</sup> See footnote 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Die Geistlich Armen*, 63

<sup>27</sup> Bürki quotes Ladislaus Boros, *Mortis Mysterium: Der Mensch in der letzten Entscheidung* (1962), 171.

<sup>28</sup> *Die Geistlich Armen*, 64

Anglophone writings which, as we shall see, creatively restated Trinitarian eschatology: the gift from God of renewed and whole persons, embodied, gendered, acculturated, and ecologically placed in communities, within socio-political contexts, vivified in Christ by the Holy Spirit.

### **Human Identity in the Symphony of Being**

Bürki's first Anglophone publication, *The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship* (1967) is important for our discussion because Bürki's *implicit* ideas about the "creaturely soul," the essence of human being, become evident in this publication as he discusses the nature of true Christian fellowship.

Bürki opens *The Symphony of Being* by stating a biblical appreciation of one of modern science's conclusions from Einstein's theory of relativity: "...The coherence of the entire universe, in addition to its existence, constitutes [the] primordial miracle of being. ...All existence has a certain affinity, and exists in communion. ...All things are interdependent and are related to one another and were made for one another..."<sup>29</sup> He also presents what modern science concludes about the essential biological and psychological aspects of human being: "...our biological affinity with the whole of creation and the web of subconscious influences ...the psychic ocean [in which] our heartstrings and life melodies [are played] in this symphony of being."<sup>30</sup> His next two statements are his thesis: Christians "...cannot realize a spiritual fellowship apart from the biological and psychological foundation of our being..." and "...we need a more fundamental approach to the meaning of fellowship."<sup>31</sup> In these statements Bürki's implicit ideas about the soul are immediately apparent. Far from a Cartesian understanding of rationally grounded existence, Bürki implies that the soul is inseparable from biological and ecological contingency, and equally inseparable from the affective dimension of human relationships.

Having stated his aim, Bürki turns to biblical foundations for understanding true fellowship, first in a discussion of Psalm 19, which he says "...opens our awareness to the undercurrents of our fellowship ...in the ...symphonic composition of the universe."<sup>32</sup> Bürki's exegesis proceeds along similar lines as the earliest Christian apologists, theologians and patristic and medieval writers who habitually interpreted the Old Testament using as a hermeneutical key the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> Also, Bürki concurs with the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:18, that Psalm 19 prefigures "...the preaching of Christ, which proclamation has sounded through the earth. ...preached to every creature under heaven..."<sup>34</sup>

In Jesus Christ the Creator communed within the coherence of the whole creation. In becoming a creature, the Creator revealed, re-established and

<sup>29</sup> Hans F. Bürki, "The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship", *IFES Journal*, 20, no. 2 (1967), 1a.

<sup>30</sup> "The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship", 1b.

<sup>31</sup> "The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship", 2a.

<sup>32</sup> "The Symphony of Being or The Meaning of Fellowship", 2a.

<sup>33</sup> See Paul Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (2008): 57f., for examples of Christological exegesis of Genesis by Ignatius of Antioch (d.108 C.E.), Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon.

<sup>34</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 2b.

sealed forever the symphonic responsive Creator-creature relationship. His life and death, His words and deeds, His solitudes and communions, His temptations and suffering, His manner of being, resounded throughout the universe. Indeed, all the words of His mouth and the meditations of His heart were perfectly acceptable in the sight of God. (Psalm 19:14) He was in tune with the symphonic coherence of the psycho-physic, the moral and the spiritual order of the created universe. "The law of the Lord" resounded fully in and through His whole being (Ps. 19:7), and because He was the only one without hidden faults (Ps. 19:12) he was concordantly related to all manner of being.<sup>35</sup>

Again Bürki voices orthodox Trinitarian assumptions about the nature of the human being, that Christ as creature, being God, "seals" humanity's "symphonic responsiveness" - the soul's created capacity for direct openness to God and eternity. Significantly, a theology of desire, encounter and frailty which Bürki lived out in his spirituality among students and colleagues, which is presented in my previous essay on Bürki, we see here expounded in *The Symphony of Being*, as Christ's desire for communion with the Father, Christ's true encounter with the Father, and Jesus' radical acceptance of his human frailty.<sup>36</sup> Thus human experiences of desire, divine encounter and frailty Bürki shows to be among Jesus' own capacities as he related with God and others - the *creatureliness of soul* of the incarnate Christ.

Bürki proceeds, saying that Christian fellowship is deepened only through the reconciliation and forgiveness that come through Christ, the "Voice" calling at the centre of the symphony of being. As Christians "...contemplate the symphonic beauty of nature and the perfect law of the Lord..." and "...become aware of unknown errors and hidden faults..." we become aware that we are "...the voice of the great multitude (Rev. 19:6) ... full of dissonant and clashing sound ... We are in need of being attuned to the all-prevailing and all-pervading Voice who has called us to our vocation that we as persons may be sonorously resonant in the symphony of being."<sup>37</sup>

Bürki says that this "dissonance" of human discord can be resolved only through the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation which Jesus commends to Peter in Matthew 18:19-22.<sup>38</sup> In other words, when "...two of us 'symphonize' (Mat: 18:19, the literal translation of the verb 'agree'), if we con-cord [sic] about any desire of the heart, then the Father will attune the earthly to the heavenly voice, and thus our desires will enter into vocal existence, our prayers are granted, our hearts attuned."<sup>39</sup> Like Peter who asked "...How often do we have to synchronize and 'symphonize' our hearts? Seventy times seven, he is told. ... So often, so very often

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<sup>35</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3a.

<sup>36</sup> So Allen Goddard, "Hans Bürki in Retrospect. Theology as Spirituality: Through the Lens of Memory", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 151 (March 2015): 24-40.

<sup>37</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3a

<sup>38</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3a. Bürki rightly interprets the literary context of this portion of Matthew as presenting the need for reconciliation in relationships through forgiveness. L Gregory Jones echoes Bürki's exegesis of this passage in his *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 182-197, as does John Paul Lederach in his *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 118-140.

<sup>39</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3 a.

are we in need of this reaccordance [sic], so swiftly is the symphonic balance upset, so lightly a discord struck, so easily is there sin."<sup>40</sup>

Bürki then creates three metaphors to describe the ethics of self-denial which Jesus exhorts Peter to practise "seventy times seven" times. These three pictures says Bürki, illustrate the prerequisites for deeper fellowship: (1) the "symphonic diffusion of being," (2) the "fellowship of suffering," and (3) the "measure of holiness."<sup>41</sup> Bürki's three symphonic images describe, each in greater depth, what the Gospel writers call repentance: *metanoia*. Early Church theologians and later mystics of Christian theology described this *metanoia* as the threefold way of "purgation, illumination and mystical union."<sup>42</sup> *Purgation* is an about-turn from self-groundedness that is necessary for spiritual growth, if the Christian person is to be directed by the Holy Spirit towards *illumination* by God, and ultimately, towards *mystical union* with God.

Bürki contrasts these three metaphors for repentance with their opposite - the Christian's temptation to "...simulate cordiality where none exists."<sup>43</sup> He says "...the price we pay for such deception is high: the more superficial and restricted our fellowship is ...the greater our isolation and loneliness becomes. ...We know sometimes how much we long to share in the symphonic diffusion of being, but we are afraid of the dissonant confusion that may come out of such deep-level communications."<sup>44</sup> Bürki identifies this as the fear "...of the 'fellowship of suffering,' the companionship of compassion that is implicit in all unrestricted participation of this kind."<sup>45</sup> Unsurprisingly, the way through this dilemma, out of falsehood into true communion, is by participating in Christ's great act of reconciliation, the climax in the symphony:

...we know better than ever before that we cannot have affection without affliction, nor compassion without passion. And passion embraces both the utter agony of helpless suffering, and the strongest kind of affection. The Passion of the Crucified is the Passion of the Creator for and with and by His creature. In the Passion the agony of the dissonant and discorded universe rent the heart of the Saviour. And it was this breaking of His heart which restored to the universe the affectionate resonance of the Voice of Love Divine. And through His Passion he draws us into the communion of His Passion (Phil. 3:10), to love and to suffer, to be resonant and to resound, to share the renewed symphony of being.<sup>46</sup>

This description of Christ, making resonance in the symphony of being possible through the gift of repentance and reconciliation bears a striking resemblance to what Irenaeus called "recapitulation": the healing, transformation and bringing to

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<sup>40</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3 b.

<sup>41</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3 b, 4 b.

<sup>42</sup> See Rowan Williams' introduction to Christians' experience of sanctification, which he calls the "*un-selfing involved in union with Christ*" in his *The Wound of Knowledge* (London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1999) pp. 13ff.

<sup>43</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3 b.

<sup>44</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3 b.

<sup>45</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 3 b.

<sup>46</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 4 a.

completion of humanity together with all other created things, through Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection

Bürki now concludes the treatise by describing how Christians progress to even deeper resonance in the symphony, into truer fellowship and communion:

...we present our minds to the understanding of the written Word of God. We subdue our hearts to the Living Voice, the attuning Heart of the universe, the passionate Christ. We yield our innermost being to the comforting and concurring groanings of the Spirit. In His sight both the conscious and the subconscious streams of our existence are clarified, purified, attuned. He makes the conscious words of our mouth and the meditations of the depths of our hearts to be acceptable in His sight. And he does all of this through the communion of the Holy Spirit, the communion of the saints, the communion of the created universe. The measure of communion is the measure of holiness. The breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ leads us into the fullness of communion, the "fullness of being, the fullness of God himself." (Eph. 3:19)<sup>47</sup>

Implicit here is Bürki's assumption that humanity's restoration to wellness is inseparable from justice, the healing activity God the Trinity within obedient and sacrificial human agency – ethics – which must take place in particular social and political contexts to bring not only humanity, but all created things to wholeness and communion. In Bürki's closing paragraphs he exhorts the church to break with "willed apartheid" through these ethics - "true love" that lead to what he calls the "ultimate solitude,"<sup>48</sup> true fellowship and communion that becomes a doorway into the deepest, ineffable dimension of the symphony of being:

...a solitude not of sin and separation, not of discord and willed apartheid, but the solitude of the Divine Presence. In each one of us is a place, a throne, a shrine, where no one can ever enter except He who made us...True love honours the central solitude of each human being, true love knows of an ultimate distance even in the most intimate nearness and communion. It is a knowledge not of regret, but of awe and reverence. It is a foretaste of the reality to come when each one has a name written in his heart that is only known by God and by the one who has this name, (Rev. 2:17) and yet all shall bear His Name on their foreheads and shall see Him face to face.<sup>49</sup>

Bürki's *Symphony of Being* is like a storehouse of theological treasures in which is hidden the key to deepest fellowship with God and fellow human beings. The foundation of Bürki's storehouse is his implicit Old Testament anthropology: humanity created as a dust and spirit somatic whole in creatureliness. Humankind is created perfect, yet incomplete, for communion with God, and harmonious relationship with the other creatures. This foundational anthropology, humanity's identity in communion with God in Eden, Bürki contrasts with the existential

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<sup>47</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 4 b.

<sup>48</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 5 a.

<sup>49</sup> "The Symphony of Being," 5 a.

breakdown of communion in creation after humanity does evil. The treasure in Bürki's storehouse is the Christological prism of ancient hermeneutics that Bürki holds up to Psalm 19 - the promise that reconciliation with God and restored community in creation is made possible through Christ, the risen and glorified "Voice" of Revelation. The way Bürki "time-travels" from creation to new creation, through the device of his hermeneutical prism placed onto the person of Jesus Christ, communicates Bürki's profound grasp of the Bible's vision of creaturely souls healed and restored with creation.<sup>50</sup>

The hidden key in Bürki's store of treasures, opening the door to deepest communion with God is what he describes last as the "ultimate solitude." This is the synchrony in the symphony of being, between the "Voice" of Christ whom St John heard himself on Patmos (Rev. 2:17), the "Name" which Christ's followers bear together in the now, and the "new name" which each disciple is yet to receive (Rev. 3:12). The existential reality of "ultimate solitude" is the possibility that Christians may hear, understand and live out the meaning of corporately bearing Christ's name, as well as each living into their "new name," beginning in true communion now, and so moving towards God's ultimate renewal of the soul, together with all living communities in creation.<sup>51</sup>

While Bürki draws on Old Testament anthropology and New Testament teaching about Christ's redemption of the whole of creation, with reasoned arguments, his treatise's focus is not an appeal to reason or a "systematic theology". In the tradition of mystical theology Bürki addresses the heart, the whole person in the whole of life, to deepen desire for communion with God, to inspire faith for encounter with God, and to heighten awareness of humanity's creaturely frailty and need for grace. Bürki gently confronts the modern church in *The Symphony of Being* to realize the reconciliation of Christ socially, politically and environmentally, through ethics. This is his prophetic confrontation to a modern church tempted to accommodate itself to forms of systematized individualism. For Bürki, only real encounter with Christ in *metanoia* can lead humanity into the harmony and alterity of true fellowship.

Thus far, we have discovered Bürki's implied understanding of the soul. Now we turn to Bürki's explicitly stated ideas about the nature of the human being.

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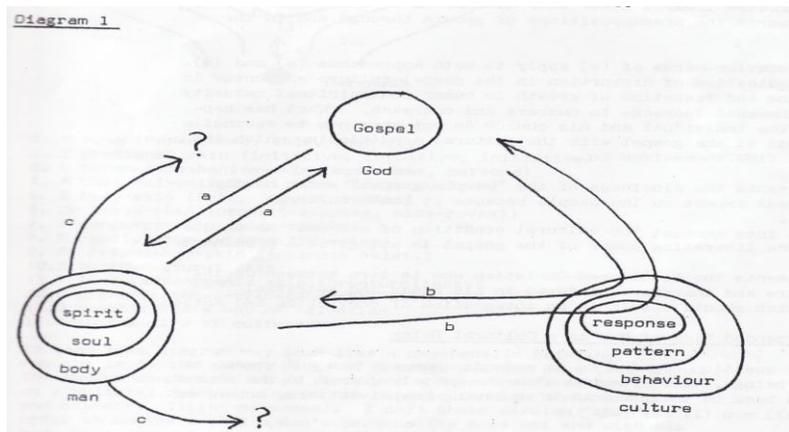
<sup>50</sup> Stanley Grenz alludes to the personal transformation described in 2 Cor.3:18, which he calls "Paul's midrash of Exodus 34.29-35," to describe the prolepsis, the actualization in the present of aspects of the beginning and the ending of salvation history, in God's purpose to restore the whole of creation: "... this building up of character occurs through the new narrative that is inaugurated at conversion and reaches its climax at the eschatological resurrection. Yet, envisioned here is no private beholding, leading to an individual 'me-and-Jesus' ethic. Rather, the metamorphosis involves the reformation of relationships and the creation of a new community of those who share together in the transforming presence of the Spirit and who thereby are, as A. M. Ramsey notes, 'realizing the meaning of their original status as creatures in God's image.'" See Grenz's essay "The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of the *Imago Dei* in Paul L. Metzger, ed. *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (New York, T&T Clark, 2005), 92.

<sup>51</sup> See, Richard Bauckham's searching discussion of the cosmic significance of the resurrection. So Richard Buckham *Bible and Ecology*, 141-178.

## Hans Bürki's "Map" of Creatureliness of Soul

Bürki's widely circulated "onion skin diagram" was created for his discussion *An Extended View of Man as a Cultural Being*, in the mimeographed paper, *The Gospel and Human Culture* (c. 1973). Here Bürki aims to correct a flawed understanding of gospel, culture and human soul, as *neatly separated compartments*, to show, "How ... the gospel, with all its distinctiveness and uniqueness, [is] related to the complex and dynamic ways of life which we call culture..."<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly, Bürki commences this paper with an introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr's famous theses and antitheses about Christ and culture.<sup>53</sup> Bürki proceeds by presenting two diagrams to contrast a compartmentalized and a holistic view of the relationship between the gospel and culture.

Bürki's *Diagram 1* shows an enclosed circle labelled "Gospel" at the apex of a triangle.<sup>54</sup> Two more enclosed circles labelled "man" and "culture" are placed at the left and right base corners of the triangle. The latter circles are compartmentalized further, concentrically from the centre, with "man" divided as "spirit", "soul" and "body."



These neat separations which Bürki maps, between God and gospel, gospel and humanity, between spirit and soul, soul and body, and between everything and culture, portray the neo-platonic understanding of human being that was prevalent in mid-twentieth century evangelical churches. For Bürki this set of dualisms in contemporary evangelical spirituality caused a deep contradiction in the mission of the church. He describes this as a contradiction between "saving souls" and "growth through and in the gospel," or put another way, between a "phenomenal increase in numbers and outreach," and "growth in human and spiritual maturity."<sup>55</sup>

What follows in Bürki's treatise is *Diagram 2*, Bürki's "onion skin diagram," with twelve concentric rings, interpenetrated by two flowing lines to represent the unique agency of God via the Gospel and via culture.<sup>56</sup> Bürki introduces this diagram with his characteristic tentativeness that always shied away from definition, to make room for mystery:

<sup>52</sup> Hans F. Bürki, *The Gospel and Human Culture* (Mimeographed Paper, c.1973), 3.

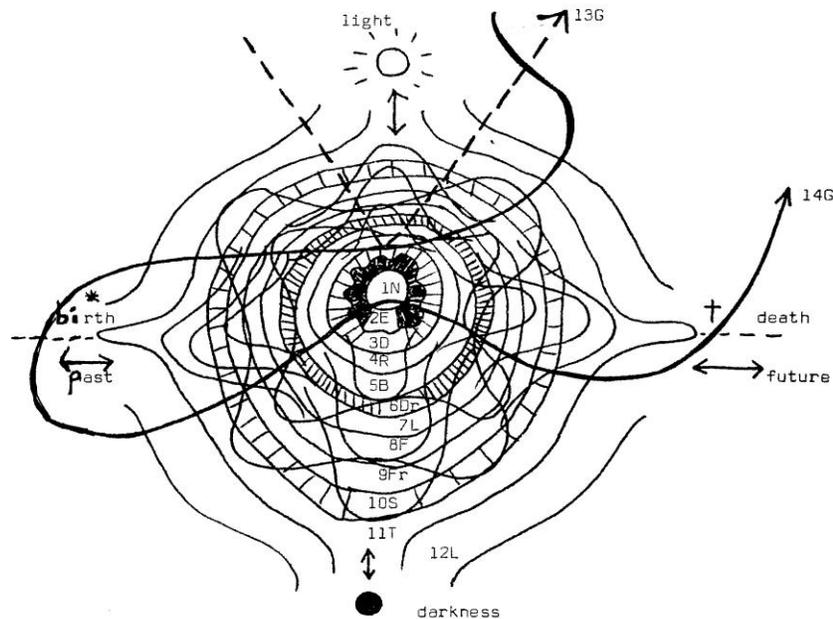
<sup>53</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).

<sup>54</sup> Bürki (c. 1973) *The Gospel and Human Culture*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Bürki, *The Gospel and Human Culture*, 6

<sup>56</sup> Bürki, *The Gospel and Human Culture*, 7. Bürki does not supply a label called *Diagram 2* on his diagram, however, he does refer to it as *Diagram 2* on page 10 of this treatise.

The twelve concentric rings represent a comprehensive view of man as a cultural being living in the dynamic tension of time-space and eternity, (light-darkness). I call these circles “skin” in order to indicate that a man’s personality does not end with his body-skin. One might also call them “belts”, using the analogy of the numerous atmospheric and magnetic belts which surround our planet earth. The wave-like lines across the rings represent the complex undercurrents and interactions within the micro-cosmic universe of each human being. Now a diagram has only a limited function; it only helps to illustrate certain main features.<sup>57</sup>



- 1..N Name (Personhood, self, identity)
- 2..E Emotional skin (imitative, intuitive, initiative)
3. D Defence-mechanism-skin (ego, mask, persona)
4. R Rational-volitional skin (consciousness)
5. B Body-skin (face, figure, senses)
6. Dr Dress-skin (protect-express, hide-reveal)
7. L Language-skin (hide-reveal)
8. F Family-skin (hidden life-plan)
9. Fr Friendship-skin (intimate relat.)
- 10.S Socio-cultural skin
- 11.T Time-space-cosmic skin (creatureliness)
- 12.L Light-darkness-transcendental skin
- 13.G Gospel: God's way of salvation
- 14.G in the life of culture-man

A full exposition of the diagram in the context of Bürki’s treatise is not possible here. The following discussion will merely introduce this, Bürki’s schematic representation of human identity, his *explicit* theology of the “creaturely soul.”

### The Transfiguration of Creatureliness

Five short observations about this diagram bring to light Bürki’s unique conception of the soul. First, in the qualified and loose sense that Bürki motivates this second diagram, he conspicuously omits “the soul”. This is because his soul-

<sup>57</sup>

Bürki, *The Gospel and Human Culture*, 7.

spirit-body circle of *Diagram 1* is intended to contrast with *the whole* of this less defined diagram. For Bürki then, the soul is not a separate entity but is wholly infused throughout twelve interrelated “skin circles” or “belts” of human being, starting with “name” as the innermost dimension of personal identity, and including affections, reason, volition, embodiment and dress, language, social relations, time, place and eternity. A second observation is Bürki’s use of the word “creatureliness,” to qualify the description “Time-space-cosmic skin” at 11.T.<sup>58</sup> Bürki understands “creatureliness” to include humanity’s necessary placement in history and eternity, on earth and in a universe, and within the nexus of contingent relationships between God and every personal and impersonal creation of the cosmos. A third significant observation is that Bürki also omits to label “culture” as one of the “skin circles” of human being. He prefers to leave “culture” undefined, implied, and therefore suffused through all of the “belts” that interact in human being. A fourth feature that can be observed in what I have called Bürki’s “map” of the *creatureliness of the soul* is as mysterious as the whole. He shows “creatureliness” at 11.T to relate most closely to the transcendental “belt” at 12.L: the openness of humanity to divine light and the susceptibility of humanity to spiritual darkness. In so doing Bürki presents human creatureliness and transcendence together as the only dimensions of human being that open innately into eternity! Thus there is immediate resonance between this part of Bürki’s “map” of the soul and Boros’ “holiness of humanity” and “uttermost worldliness” of Christ - the epitome of human desire, encounter and frailty in the soul-creatureliness of Christ’s life and death - which Bürki showed as opening the way for creaturely humanity into eternity in *Die Geistlich Armen*, and as the central reconciliatory act in *The Symphony of Being*.

A final observation is Bürki’s portrayal of a paradox in the closed-yet-open design of all the belts or skins of the soul inside of 11 and 12. Two lines representing God’s transcendence and immanence move directly or fluidly, into or through every dimension of human existence.<sup>59</sup> God encounters humanity from without and from within, at every level of the soul, by means of the eternal Gospel and God’s saving actions at 13.G., and by means of culture, or “culture-man” at 14 G. God speaks and moves, from without or within, whether through creation, conscience, Scripture, or humankind – all are recipients and agents of culture.<sup>60</sup>

Hans Bürki’s literary purpose for including the “onion skin diagram” in *An Extended View of Man as a Cultural Being*, sheds yet more light on his *explicit* ideas of the soul. For Bürki, the transcendence in human creatureliness, the soul’s innate points of openness to God, or the mysterious points where a person experiences God in deepest encounter through the Gospel and through God’s presence in culture, is where “...the first decisive operation of the gospel....confronting culture-man with God...” takes place “...to cut him free from his cultural umbilical cord.”<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Further research is necessary to ascertain the role Dr. Bürki might have played in coining this word from German into the English. The first time I heard of *creatureliness* was as a young graduate, while reading this treatise.

<sup>59</sup> For an introduction to transcendence and immanence in modern theology, see Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God & The World in a Transitional Age* (Carlisle, The Paternoster Press, 1992), 11-13, and following.

<sup>60</sup> Bürki’s lines 13 and 14 “map” a mystery, that humanity is the object of God’s address through encounter.

<sup>61</sup> Bürki, *The Gospel and Human Culture*, 8.

Bürki's point is that the Christ of the Gospels has power to set humanity free from any false or dehumanising aspects of culture; God intervenes from without and within, through history, to induct disciples into a new baptismal identity, set free *for* God's transformation in the present, and *for* the present and ultimate future transformation of every aspect of identity, culture and contingency in creation. The rest of Bürki's discussion in *The Gospel and Human Culture* expounds this mystery, which as we have seen, is also Irenaeus' mystery of *recapitulation* - the "old" person transformed in new covenantal or ecclesial bonds, in communion with other disciples, beginning with name, thoughts and motives, self image and sexuality, and reverberating in the transformation of cultural norms, family bonds, friendships, socio-political allegiances and ultimately in a transfigured relation to every created thing in the cosmos. This diagram, Bürki's astounding tentative representation of the ineffable depth and breadth of humanity's contingency with God, others and creation, lies at the heart of Bürki's prophetic challenge to modern Christians, tempted as we are to accommodate modernity's compartmentalised and individualistic cosmology.

### **Conclusion: *Being Hopeful at Modernity's Final Crossing***

The theological analysis presented in this essay has expounded Hans Bürki's creative restatement of ancient theological anthropology. We have seen that Bürki's robust integration of biblical theology, philosophy and science stands in the ancient tradition of mystical theology, because what he wrote was not just cognitively reasoned, but it identified existentially with the Bible record of Jesus' own creatureliness of soul and was grounded in Bürki's own encounter with the living Christ. Bürki's theology of *creatureliness* and *soul* was also a particular challenge to his milieu of modernity, because of its celebration of contingency within creation, because of its profound emphasis on alterity, and mostly, because of its *fearless acceptance of death*. We can therefore also conclude that Bürki's theological anthropology is pertinent for our current era of late modernity, whose technological prowess and economic utilitarianism have ushered in a "culture of death" which has progressively stifled, where it has not already damaged or destroyed, biodiversity, community, societal cohesion, personal freedom and cultural identity.

Jacklyn Cock's keynote address to the *Land Divided* Conference which marked the centenary of the 1913 Land Act at the University of Cape Town in 2013: "The 'green economy:' a sustainable development path or a wolf in sheep's clothing?" is a poignant example of recent sociological, environmental and historical evidence pointing to this contemporary crisis of late modernity, with application to South Africa's increasingly precarious environmental, social and economic sustainability.<sup>62</sup> This sample of Cock's current research echoes findings for the planet as a whole by other respected contemporary climatologists and sociologists as sketched in the introduction to this essay. These researches, among them George Monbiot and Wendell Berry, solemnly

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<sup>62</sup> Find the full text of Jacklyn Cock's keynote paper at "Land Divided Conference 2013: Conference Papers" <http://www.landdivided2013.org.za/papers> (accessed: 31 March 2015).

warn that unchecked current trajectories of environmental destruction make it reasonable to conclude that Earth will cross the threshold of an era beyond scientific predictability, a dystopic era which by modern definitions could be described as an epoch *after modernity*.<sup>63</sup> In prescient resonance with our contemporary conundrum Hans Bürki's anthropology presaged the possibility of a hopeful, reconciling way of being, the rebirth through Christian ethics of biblical *creatureliness* and *soul*. Bürki's compassionate, prophetic spirit, which embraced "ontological powerlessness," contrasted with modernity's hubris and its profound mistake in proclaiming the "death of soul." Bürki's restatement of the ancient Judeo-Christian understanding of human persons, in contrast to the modern, liberal, rational, self-grounded individual, remembers ancient truths, that human creatures *receive* everything as a gift from a gracious Creator, including *hope*, and that through Christ, transformation is possible in the now; all things *can* be made new.

Bürki's transcendent theology may be especially poignant for the world *after modernity* because a posture of human weakness, grounded in God's grace and strength will be an essential life-skill for today's generation, who, in the face of great darkness will have to take purposeful steps across the threshold into an epoch of dystopia that is finally "postmodern".<sup>64</sup> Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Hans Bürki's theology of *creatureliness* and the way he embodied it as his spirituality were an affront and challenge to his modern milieu. The vitality of his relationship with God, expressed in desire, in encounter and in unflinching acceptance of human weakness, anticipates the posture that will be indispensable to inhabit and transform the fragmented, unpredictable space that this "postmodern" world is likely to be. Most of all, Bürki's *creatureliness of soul* is a resource in this challenge because he lived what he wrote. By relinquishing *self-having* he was grounded in the transcendent hope and transforming presence of the gracious God who is Trinity.

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<sup>63</sup> George Monbiot's latest statement for a world *after modernity* is his *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Wendell Berry's recent reflection on "Damage" and "Healing," on "Practical harmony" and his "A Poem of Difficult Hope" envision a surprisingly hopeful path into this uncharted epoch. So, Wendell Berry, *What are People for?* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> For an inspiring visualization of this life-skill of hope for a world after modernity, from the perspective of vocation, see David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 31-61, 182f. For a biblical theology of hope for the healing of creation, see my essay, "A River Runs Through: Water in God's Purpose for Creation" in CRUX 43.2 (2007): 14-20.