

**OMNIPOTENCE (FORCE) OR VULNERABILITY
(DEFENCELESSNESS)?**

**The significance of a theological interpretation of the category of
power on an ethic of conflict management**

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Abstract

Theology cannot avoid the issue of conflict management. It is therefore important to make clear what is the biblical meaning of the category of power and its significance for an ethic of conflict management. Theology is exposed to one danger: the danger of misusing the concept 'omnipotence', and to regard the Almighty category (God's force and authority) as a justification either to gain or maintain power. The translation of omnipotence with the Greek word 'pantokrator' could easily mislead the church to understand omnipotence against the background of either the Hellenistic gods involved in a power struggle or the militarized environment of the Canaanite world. Theology is in need of a new paradigm. The suffering God and the theology of the cross are the framework for such a new paradigm: the omnipotent presence and power of God expressed as vulnerable faithfulness and overwhelming love/grace. This assumption corresponds with the Hebrew phrase: 'el šaddaj'. The ethical principal in conflict management which corresponds with God's vulnerable faithfulness is the biblical principle of self-sacrifice.

The contemporary polarisation among churches on the issue of *apartheid* and liberation cannot be separated from the social and political tension in South Africa. The current debate on 'Theology and Ministry in Context and Crisis',¹ draws the attention of theologians to the conflict at present in our country. Whoever takes the

1. De Gruchy, J W 1987. Theology and Ministry in Context and Crisis. A South African Perspective. London: Collins. Although the word 'crisis', used in the title, has been overworked, De Gruchy uses it as an adequate expression for 'the moment of judgement that is upon South Africa at present' (13).

issue of reconciliation seriously, cannot stand aloof. Especially he who believes that biblical theology should be pastoral² (relating God's Word to the need of His people). According to de Gruchy, the pastoral responsibility and the proclamation of the Word of God require relating Christian faith to contemporary situations, a communicative task, best described as practical theology (1987:25).

Practical theology as a pastoral responsibility both to the Word of God and the suffering of people cannot avoid the issue of conflict management. To pick up this issue could be very difficult, even dangerous. Theology immediately presupposes a relationship with God and His revelation in Scripture. The question: who is God and what does He require of us here and now in the struggle for a solution to our social problems, becomes very complicated, especially when this problem is linked up with *apartheid* and the current power struggle. It is quite understandable why Loubser in his book *The Apartheid Bible* puts the following question: 'In essence both *apartheid* and liberation theology are a reflection on God ... who is God in South Africa? Is he a tribal god, a class god, or is he the god of Herder and Fichte, bearing the name "Absolute"?'³

Our assumption is that politics and the struggle for power are two inseparable entities⁴. Given this assumption, it is inevitable that the problem: God and power, should surface in this debate. Therefore an investigation into an ethic of conflict management cannot avoid a theological reflection on the category of power.

The past three years have proved that religion is going to play a crucial role in the approach of different political leaders (even church leaders) and their campaigns for change in South Africa. It is not an overstatement to assume that for many blacks the liberation struggle is now being channelled through the churches. Reactions on the recent restrictions on several political organisations prove this point. On the 29th of February 1988 Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a letter of protest to the State President.⁵ The restrictions were interpreted not only as an attack on democratic activity in South Africa, 'but as a blow directed at the heart of the Church's mission

2. Noordmans, O 1979. Het kerkelijk dogma, in *Verzamelde Werken Deel II*. Kampen: Kok. Pastoral Dogmatics, according to Noordmans, means 'nu komt het Woord eenmaal en in ene richting tot de mens' (178). After the symbolic and rhetoric stage, 'pastoral dogmatics' emerged. 'De echt-reformatorische dogmatiek echter is een pastorale, waarin het trinitarische Woord eenzijdig tot ons komt en waarin het met de correlatie volkomen uit is' (177).

3. Loubser, J A 1987. *The Apartheid Bible*. A critical review of racial theology in South Africa. Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 164.

4. 'Politiek wordt - bedreven in een wereld van geweld en machtsstrijd. Daarom is een definitie van politiek waarin de strijd om de macht niet wordt genoemd, so nietszeggend'. H Kuitert 1985. Alles is politiek, maar politiek is niet alles. Een theologisch perspectief op geloof en politiek. Baam: Ten Have, 166.

5. Tutu, D 1988. Letter to the State President and Members of Parliament, 29 th February. Cape Town.

in South Africa'. Archbishop Tutu regarded the activities which had been prohibited as central to the proclamation of the gospel in South Africa. He made it very clear that, no matter what the consequences, 'we will explore every possible avenue for continuing the activities which you have prohibited other bodies from undertaking'.

If it is true that the churches are going to get more involved in the political conflict in South Africa, the problem of conflict management becomes crucial. This problem enforces pastoral theology to make a thorough investigation into the question of whether any church involvement may make use of power, force or violence to bring about political change. An even more difficult question is how to distinguish between force as a controlling discipline of truth, justice and authority in action and violence as a principle of active resistance and destructive power. The problem, however, is that when the church resorts to either power or violence, thinking itself an instrument of divine or human judgement, it can easily ignore the unique character of both. Force usually brings about a negative reaction which can end in aggression; violence usually breeds further violence which can end in revolution. The complexity of the problem is illustrated by the following quotation: 'Someone of an establishment mentality, for example, will probably react in a violent situation by involving the first principle (using force), little realizing that he is stretching it to cover a post-Christian "force", which is nothing other than violence. Similarly, someone of a general radical persuasion, will probably react in a violent situation by involving the second principle (understanding violence) little realizing that he is stretching it until it covers the justification of revolutionary violence. Both are instinctual political reactions and not Christian responses' (Guinness) ⁶.

Being aware of the above complexity, our main objective will be to investigate the existence and disposition of the relation between the omnipotence of God and the churches' use of power. Hopefully our investigation will shed more light on the significance of a theological interpretation of the category of power, and help to highlight the ethical aspect of conflict management.

1. The ethos of the Bible

Our presupposition is that religion ought to be a source of ethical values in the personal, social and political sphere. The message of the gospel is of paramount importance in this regard. Reconciliation with God should inevitably establish itself in conciliating actions which try to achieve peaceful resolutions within a divided social context. It is very difficult to separate the Biblical concept of reconciliation from concrete actions, righteousness and justice. To do what is right and to love one another is the key to understanding social ethics in the Bible. 'Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; neither is anyone who does not love his brother' (1 John 3:10). The background of such an ethical finding is the fact that for the early churches Jesus was not only a figure of the past, but the present Lord who ruled and inspired their common life, and who was soon to return in glory as king

6. Guinness, O S 1973. *The dust of death*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 182.

and judge of all. 'Whenever this consciousness was strong, ethical teaching appeared as issuing from his authority' ⁷. The authority of the resurrected Christ and the eschatological context of the New Testament writings are crucial to any interpretation of Christian ethics. 'And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ; and to love one another as he commanded us' (1 John 3:23).

Faith in Jesus Christ can be seen as the essence of a Biblical ethos. 'Morality will only be for man's health when placed in the wider context of his standing in relation to God' (Houlden 73:125). The question: what should be done? can not be separated from the content of our faith. In this regard, Kreck makes the following statement: 'Von einer christlichen Ethik ist selbst verständlich zu ordern, dass der Glaube an den in Jesus Christus sich offenbarenden Gott für die Frage nach dem gebotenen Tun leitend ist' ⁸. De Villiers concludes that the love of God, manifested in Jesus Christ, should be viewed as the essence of New Testament ethics. Such a theological stand helps Christians understand the intention of the commandments better ⁹. According to Heyns the basic design for a theological approach should be founded in the revelation of God ¹⁰. God defines the essence of a theological ethics; in Jesus Christ He restored the ethical principle and through the Holy Spirit ethics is being completed in its eschatological fullness (Heyns 1982:54).

The previous position helps us to draw the following conclusion: ethics in the reformed tradition corresponds with our knowledge derived from Scripture. The source of ethical knowledge is the revelation of God. van Wyk concludes that the *sola gratia* is the basic incentive to true ethics; the *solo Christo* is the basic substance of true ethics; the *sola fide* the basic instrument and the *sola scriptura* the source of knowledge of true ethics ¹¹.

The primary constituents and characteristic traits of the ethos of the Bible can be summarized as follows:

(a) The ethos of the Bible has a religious base. Fundamental to the Bible's ethos is the conviction that a disturbance in the fellowship of men and women (as

7. Houlden, J L 1973. Ethics and the New Testament. Middlesex: Penguin, 102.

8. Kreck, W 1975. Grundfragen christlicher Ethik. München: Kaiser, 11.

9. De Villiers, D E 1978. Die eiesoortigheid van die Christelike moraal. Academisch Proefschrift. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 209. Sien ook 211: 'die ervaring van Gods genadige handele (by uitstek in Jesus Christus) het in die Nuwe Testament aanleiding gegee tot die formulering van korresponderende morele beginsels en veral tot vooropstelling, universalisering en radikalisering van die gebod tot naasteliefde'.

10. Heyns, J A 1982. Teologiese etiek. Deel I. Pretoria: N G Kerkboekhandel, 87. 'Die openbaring van God bring ons by die synggrond van die etiese, en die openbaring van God gee ons die kenggrond van die etiese'.

11. Van Wyk, J H 1986. Gesindheid en gestalte. Preoria: N G Kerkboekhandel, 28-30. 'Met die sola-scriptura-beginsel word duidelik stelling ingeneem teen 'n natuurlike en tradisionele etiek' (30). Christian ethics has therefore a theological - theocentric - character (20).

within the individual), is ultimately to be explained by a disturbance in a proper relationship with God. This finding links up with the assertion of Gerhardsson: 'For human beings and for human society to function properly and adequately, a sound relationship with God must be maintained'¹². The total outlook on life and the universe is determined by a faith in God the creator and sustainer of all things.

(b) The ethos of the Bible has often been described as a 'character ethos' (*Gesinnungsethos*). Although the term may be misleading, it is a fact that fundamental wrongs in people's behaviour and fellowship cannot, according to the biblical view, be cured effectively until people are 'saved' by a radical inner transformation, enabling them to live as they should. 'Perhaps one could say that the Bible's ethos is one of primarily inner-directed behaviour' (Gerhardsson 1981:119).

(c) Although the Bible's ethos corresponds with inner-directed behaviour, the norms which operate in this psychic process are theonomous. Further, those who function as they should must take the demands of human fellowship and of the rest of creation into account. This implies as well that the Bible's ethos is a social ethos. Fellowship is regarded as of fundamental significance for human beings. The Christian's uniting with Christ in his self-sacrificing concerns for human beings. As a *telos ethos* the goal is self-sacrificial service and other-orientated love. According to Gerhardsson, love serves as a summarising term for 'the proper ethos toward God and humankind' (Gerhardsson 1981:122). Love is the giving of oneself, a self-sacrifice in obedience to the will of God and for the benefit of others. It is therefore interesting to take notice of the fact that the word *agape* can for the most part be omitted and replaced with other words like righteousness, to hear and to do the gospel, to do the will of the Father in heaven, to be merciful toward, to show compassion for one's fellowmen.

Throughout Scripture there is a deep connection between the ethos of love and God's covenant love as a father for his people (Jer 31:3). 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness'. This love convinces God's people that He cares deeply for his people: 'Therefore my heart yearns for him (Epharim); I have great compassion for him, declares the Lord' (Jer 31:20).

(d) Primarily the world view of the Bible is not pessimistic. Although the Bible's ethos is realistic in regarding the world and the human race as under the power of evil (essentially man is a sinner) and therefore corrupted, the eschatological outlook places creation in the perspective of hope. The Bible does not ignore evil and sin. Nonetheless the fact remains that the dominating, fundamental view in the Bible is clearly positive toward life in the world which God has created. The fact that the world is being perverted does not eliminate the fact that the mediatorial work of Christ and His resurrection power conquered the world. Salvation puts history in eschatological perspective, which is the pivot for any reflection on the ethos of the Bible.

12. Gerhardsson, B 1981. *The ethos of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 117.

(e) Faith in God results inevitably in an ethos which reckons with the knowledge that there is 'at homeness' in God's governance. Being confident in God does not lead to passive acceptance: 'It leads to a vigorous pressing of the issues, an insistence on transformation that can only be wrought by God. Still in the midst of the disorientation, this persistent faith does not battle toward newness'¹³. Biblical ethos does not lead to resignation, nor to passive acceptance. Faith and love are an active process which trusts the promises of God and lead to a zealous insistence on change.

(f) Spirituality which is built upon a biblical ethos does not restrict the Christian¹⁴ to privatistic, romantic spirituality. 'Communion with God cannot be celebrated without attention to the nature of the community, both among human persons and with God. Religious hungers in Israel never preclude justice questions. Indeed, it is through the question of justice that communion is mediated (Brueggemann 1984:169). The fact that the Biblical ethos is a social ethos, does not reduce the gospel to a political document. It rather insists that our spirituality should respond to the God who is present where the questions of justice and order, transformation and equilibrium are paramount.

In the light of the previous exposition the findings of the Human Sciences Research Council on religion and intergroup relations and social change in South Africa are alarming¹⁵. The research proves that religion is supposed to be integrative both for an individual and society. Religion is supposed to bind people together within a shared sense of reality and in accordance with shared values (HSRC 1985:101). Religion should therefore be the primary motivating force in human life. Although religion can be a strong uniting force, the research indicates that it is often in South Africa a very divisive force. The research therefore recommends that 'churches should be sensitive to the fact that clashes between vital interests and religious convictions can give rise to rationalisations, which in their turn can lead to religion being used to support biased perceptions and ideological positions' (HSRC 1985:110). If the assertion is true that the biblical ethos places a heavy responsibility on the churches to build bridges in a deeply segmented society and to provide the context where conflicting perspectives can be confronted with one another without necessarily erupting, the following question arises: can a theological interpretation of the category of power play a decisive role or not?

It is clear that politics are intertwined with the power struggle. A theological approach to the issue of conflict management is immediately exposed to risks. One of them is the danger of misusing the concept 'omnipotence', and to regard the Almighty category (God's force) as a justification either to maintain or gain power.

13. Brueggemann, W 1984. *The message of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 113.

14. The following conclusion of W Brueggemann is noteworthy. 'The Psalms regularly insist upon equity, power, and freedom to live one's life humanely', 175-176.

15. Oosthuizen, G C et al, 1985. *Religion, intergroup relations and social change in South Africa*. Pretoria: HSRC. 101-112.

Necessarily the question should be raised whether a certain interpretation of the omnipotence of God (God as the Almighty) plays a role in the way different churches appeal to God for help and ask Him to side with them. It could easily happen that in the history of the church the omnipotence of God has been interpreted in terms of a cultural model and not within theological hermeneutics. For instance - the translation of omnipotence with the Greek word *pantokrator* could easily mislead the church to understand omnipotence against the background of either the Hellenistic gods involved in a power struggle, or the militarized environment of the Canaanite world at that time. By means of a methodology of induction and assimilation the church ends up with a philosophical or empirical construction which differs widely from the intention of revelation. It is therefore quite understandable that Pannenberg gives the following warning: 'Gerade die weitgehende Analogie des platonischen Gottesverständnisses zum biblischen brachte nun aber die Gefahr mit sich, dass die Anknüpfung an die Philosophie zu sorglos erfolgte'¹⁶. An uncritical point of contact could jeopardize the unique character of biblical revelation. 'Denn durch seinen Ursprung in der olympischen Religion mit dem spezifischen Immanenzcharakter ihrer Gottheiten war der philosophische Gottesgedanke (auch der platonische) anders geartet als der biblische' (Pannenberg 712:310). The relevancy of this warning for the current debate on 'doing theology', church involvement in intergroup conflict and ministry in context and crisis, is self-evident.

The previous remarks help us to realise that a theological approach to conflict management should be very careful in using the power-slogan. At the same time ethics should try to relate the omnipotence of God to the existing crises. In the meantime the church should realize that to build bridges does not mean in the first place the striving for doctrinal unity, but the commitment to a common framework of values which in time could create the context where differences can be raised and even confronted with one another without fear. It is therefore understandable that an interpretation of omnipotence as violent force could jeopardize any ethical model trying to develop a common framework for constructive conflict management. It could even be disastrous when the attitudes of Christians are being determined by doctrinal conceptions about God's omnipotence, deduced from an empirical reflection on force and violence, and not from Scripture (revelation). The power of the Christian's faith - God's faithfulness and the victory of Christ over sin and death, (resurrection power) is then being exchanged for the power of human rebelliousness-violence.

2. The influence of civil religion, state theology and church theology

The term civil religion refers to a situation in which symbols of religious power play an essential role in the expression of political positions and the church's influential power within a certain social context and cultural environment. In the history of the

16. Pannenberg, H 1971². *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 310.

church the unique authority of the church (the authority of God expressed in His gracious sovereignty and exercised through His Word and the sacraments) was often confused with state authority (force and strength). The discipline of the church was easily misused to maintain the position of individuals or certain political groups, and was exercised in the interests of people. A good example of this danger is the recent publication *Geloof en protes*.

The church is regarded as indigenous (part of the nation). The church should therefore develop a form similar to the identity of a certain group (the 'volk')¹⁷. Faithfulness to the Word of God includes the protection of Afrikaner-identity (*Geloof en protes* 1.13, 1987:3). This approach is reflected in a letter written by a minister in *Die Kerkbode* (19 Febr 1986:5), the official publication of the Dutch Reformed Church: '... in duidelike taal moet die kerk sy verbondenheid met die lotgevalle en die stryd om voortbestaan van die Afrikanervolk uitspel ... Dit vereis nie besondere profetiese insigte om te voorsien wat sal gebeur wanneer die Ned Geref Kerk nie meer bereid is om openlik sy lotsverbondenheid as kerk vir die Afrikanervolk te stel nie'.

In 'civil religion' it is very difficult to distinguish between national identity and church identity. 'Civil religion' refers to a situation in which there develops a congruence between religious attitudes encouraged by the church on the one hand, and nationalism on the other'¹⁸. Endowed by God, the church exercises its power over groups (paternalism), leaving the impression that the laws of the state are being safeguarded by church authority. Political convictions, based upon theological presuppositions, easily lead to exploitation and misuse.

Exploitation usually takes place on the level of justification. When a man has to choose between what he perceives as his vital interests and what his normative system prescribes, he finds himself in a dilemma. 'Consequently, an elaborate system of self-justification or rationalisation develops. Basically, this is a defence mechanism of the mind. But the more it succeeds in convincing both its perpetrators and its social environment the more assertive it becomes' (HSRC 1985:77). Through the process of self-justification convictions are easily identified with a system of norms. In due course they are absolutised. At this stage it becomes ideology and because of its theological linkage gives the impression of omnipotence (sanctified force).

A good example is the theological justification of *apartheid*. Domination and white supremacy are being upheld by 'civil religion' which results in the idolatry of racism. White Churches are therefore being criticised and blamed for racial prejudice and playing God. The accusation is reflected in the following criticism of Boesak: '...since

17. *Geloof en protes*, 1987. 'n Antwoord namens beswaarde lidmate op sekere aspekte van 'Kerk en Samelewing'. Pretoria: Aurora, 1.9, 2.

18. HSRC 1985:38.

it is the reformed tradition which has been so effectively and ruthlessly used to justify black oppression and white racism in South Africa'.¹⁹

It is the conviction of the Kairos Document that the name of God is misused in South Africa in a blasphemous way. As a result of the close connection between state policy and 'church theology', 'state theology' develops. For example: one finds in the preamble to the new constitution the following: 'In humble submission to the Almighty God, who controls the destinies of nations and the history of peoples ...' Within the context of state policy, shaped by 'church theology' omnipotence becomes an 'Almighty God' who suppressed the underdog. 'It is the god of superior weapons who conquered those who were armed with nothing but spears. It is the god of the Casspirs and Hippos, the god of teargas, rubber bullets, sjamboks, prison cells and death sentences'.²⁰ 'State theology' is not only heretical, it is blasphemous: 'it is the devil disguised as Almighty God - the antichrist' (Documentation 1985:67).

The weak point in 'Church Theology' is that it does not really attack 'State Theology'. Nor does it identify itself at grass roots level, 'from below, from the people'. It disguises itself by using the following stock ideas: reconciliation, justice and non-violence. In the meantime the so-called criticism of *apartheid* and renewal campaigns seem to be only superficial because of the tacit support given by many church leaders to the growing militarisation of the South African State.

The link between 'state theology', 'civil religion' and 'church theology' brought about a counterreaction: 'black theology'²¹. In the struggle to find a theological basis for its aspirations, black theology is exposed to the same danger as the other categories, namely to the elaboration of a system of self-justification through a process of rationalisation. Religion again comes to play a powerful motivating role in the activity of black groups. 'In contemporary Black Theology we are seeing the process repeated' (HSRC 1985:42). The biblical appeal of black theology is primarily to the God of the exodus and the Christ who stands on the side of the underdog and the down-trodden. The paradigm of the Almighty God is now being exchanged for a new paradigm: the suffering God. This paradigm leads to a new sort of authority and power: the omnipotence of the oppressed. The Church of Jesus Christ, seen as a

19. Boesak, A 1982. He made us all, but ... Racism and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. General Council study guide for delegates, no 2, 17-27 August. Ottawa.

20. Documentation 1985:66. The Kairos Document. Challenge to the church, in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no 53, 61-81.

21. The background of Black Theology is African culture, which seeks to express its philosophy in Black Theology. Black Theology corresponds with Black Consciousness. The latter seeks to liberate people not only from psychological alienation, but also from physical oppression. 'The means Black Consciousness chose to realise its objective, was that of "conscientisation": blacks began exploring their situation in order to raise their awareness of the dimension of oppression in South African society'.

Leatt, J, Kneifel, T & Nürnberger, K 1986. *Contending ideologies in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 109.

bastion of caution and moderation (Civil Religion), is replaced by the Church of Jesus Christ, seen as a liberation force which sides with the oppressed.

Our assertion that omnipotence has often been interpreted as a liberation power, is proved by the following prayer published in *Kairos Liturgies*²². 'All-powerful God, raise us all up from this death. Give new life to these dry bones and may the uprising of your people in South Africa today take us forward to the new society, the new humanity and the new world that is promised by the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1986:23). It is very clear that this new paradigm chooses the suffering God as partner. 'Jesus was killed, because in the name of God He sided with the poor and the oppressed and opposed their oppressors. Jesus stood with the people in their sufferings and therefore He himself was made to suffer. He himself became a victim of oppression. He was killed violently and mercilessly, because He took a stand against the forces of evil in His society at that time (*Kairos Liturgies* 1986:5). The conclusion is clear: the suffering God will help the oppressed people to free themselves and gain power; 'today is a saving act of God. It is our passover from death to life. It is our Easter experience' (*Kairos Liturgies* 1986:19).

The paradigm of the suffering God regards omnipotence as assistance in resistance²³. The present crisis challenges the church to move beyond a mere 'ambulance ministry' to a ministry of involvement and participation. 'Obedience-theology' is now being exchanged for 'doing theology'²⁴. The category of the 'omnipotent god' which leads to church-detachment, objectivity and neutrality, is replaced by the category of the 'suffering God', which leads to church-involvement, passionate solidarity and actual resistance. Emphasis is placed on orthopraxis (the right practice) rather than on orthodoxy (the right doctrine or teaching); on social analysis rather than on philosophical metaphysic.

3. Omnipotence as a paradigm of God

It is a question whether omnipotence should be described as an attribute of God (telling us something about the being of God - His essence), or as a metaphor, portraying God's unique faithfulness and steadfastness in relation to His covenant people. Attributes denote God's active deeds encountering creation and human beings in the history of salvation. They do not necessarily describe God's essence as such but God's relational revelation to sustain the world and His deeds of salvation to save mankind. 'What we may say is that what we call attributes denotes the

22. *Kairos Liturgies* 1986. Southern Transvaal Kairos Liturgy Group, 2 March. Braamfontein, 23.

23. Throughout the Bible God appears as the liberator of the oppressed. He is not neutral ... God takes sides with the oppressed. Documentation 1985:74-75.

24. Theology is not detached, cool, objective and neutral any more, but rather passionately involved: 'there is the new methodology, expressed in the phrase "doing theology", which is emerging as a dominant methodology in the Third World'. Chikane, F 1985. *Doing theology in a situation of conflict*. Villa-Vicencio, C & de Gruchy, J W (eds), Resistance and hope. Cape Town: Philip, 98.

manner in which we meet God as singular-plural, in His revelational history' (Berkhof)²⁵.

When an attribute like omnipotence is extracted from revelation and the covenantal encounter, it can easily fall prey to a philosophical and one-sided transcendental concept of God. Being aware of this danger, Berkhof tries to connect omnipotence with the concept defencelessness (the latter does not indicate inability or impotence, but rather grace that can make room for sinful man). In His love, God's loving power is vulnerable and prepared to take a risk with mankind. Defencelessness²⁶ describes God's patience and long-suffering. 'Defencelessness does not as such exclude an active exercise of power; it does exclude a forcible exercise of power (*geweldadige wijze*) which wipes out the power of the opposite' (Berkhof 1983²:134).

What is at stake here is the very special way in which God makes His omnipotent power felt: not as violent force (*geweldadige dwang*) but as loving compulsion (*liefdevolle drang*). This defencelessness is demonstrated when Jesus, renouncing all earthly power, becomes the victim of the indifference and even hatred of his environment. Defencelessness reaches its nadir on the cross where the vulnerability of God is revealed as the salvation of the world. God becomes weak (powerless) and *ohnmächtig* (Bonhoeffer). According to Berkhof, defencelessness should be qualified. As an adjective it does not denote powerlessness as such. 'The defencelessness is the expression of His superiority' (Berkhof 1983²:138). The actual Dutch is difficult to translate: *weerloze overmacht*. Actually, *overmacht* does not mean superiority. Berkhof uses the term *overmacht* to describe the overwhelming faithfulness and loving steadfastness of God²⁷. Instead of 'defenceless superior power' (English translation), 'vulnerable faithfulness' would be a better translation of *weerloze overmacht*. With *overmacht* Berkhof tries to explain that the power of God should be regarded as 'overwhelming grace', not as destructive and hurtful violence.

Berkhof's viewpoint impels us to make sure whether the term 'almighty' (which occurs only a few times and mostly in eschatological context) is understood as denoting superior power in the sense of strength (God as warrior) and oppressive authority or overwhelming faithfulness in the sense of gracious sovereignty and unique righteousness and justice. A power then which conquers death, overcomes God's enemies and triumphs over the destructive powers of evil and darkness, hatred and injustice. (God as Bearer of the Word.)

25. Berkhof, H 1983². Christian faith. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

26. 'Defencelessness'- 'By this we understand that attribute by which he leaves room for his "opposite" and accepts and submits himself to the freedom, the initiative, and the reaction of that "opposite". It has to do with the passive and receptive, the enduring and the suffering in God'(1983:134).

27. Note the Dutch 'maar dat God in zijn trouw blijvend handhaaft'; 'Vooral echter on de opstanding van Christus komt de overmachtige aanwezigheid van God ten overstaan van zonde en dood naar voren'; 'Ten slotte is ook de Heilige Geest op zijn eigen weerlozen wijze overmachtig bezig'. Berkhof, H 1973. Christelijk geloof. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 146.

Although the term defencelessness and vulnerability sound very strange in connection with the revelation of God, a close look at the so-called 'God theophanies' sheds new light on the whole issue of omnipotence. The theophanies of God as warrior should be read in context. The history of salvation is the predominant issue. Primarily God is revealed as the Bearer of the Word. The presence of God is an overwhelming fact in Israel's history. God's appearance in human form reveals the reality of his presence in such a way as to make Him vulnerable. Appearance in human form 'suggests an entering into the more vulnerable life of the world where the response can be derision (see Gen 18:12-13) or incredulity (Judg 6:13-17). It is to put oneself concretely into the hands of the world to do with as it will. It is revealing of the ways of God that the Word is enfleshed in bodies of weakness within the framework of commonplace everyday affairs and not in overwhelming power'²⁸. T E Fretheim's conclusion is remarkable: 'For, even in those instances where the vestments of God's appearance are threaded with lineaments of power, they clothe in vulnerable form. There is no such thing for Israel as a nonincarnate God' (1984:106).

The suffering of God is not foreign to the Old Testament. According to Fretheim, God's suffering in the Old Testament is threefold. He suffers because of the people's rejection of Him as Lord; He suffers with the people who are suffering. Texts like Jr 4:14, 13:27, Hs 6:4, 8:5 and 11:8 describe the pathos of God in His struggle for the future of His covenant people. God is revealed as one who is not vindictive, legalistic, or exacting as to matters of judgement. God wants life and not death (Ezk 18:23-22). Although God is deeply wounded by the broken relationship and is revealed as one who does not remain coolly unaffected by the rejection of the people, the process of internalization corresponds with something which is permanent and stable: the faithfulness of God. 'God's salvific will does not waver; God's steadfast love endures forever' (Fretheim 1984:124)). God remains gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

God's response to Israel's judgement is to take up the cry of a mourner, or, where suffering without judgement is in view, an empathetic presence (Jr 31:20). The most remarkable text in this regard is Lv 17:11 where the life of the flesh is seen as being present in the blood; 'and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls'. Especially striking here is that the life in the blood has been given by God. It is God who provides the key element in the sacrifices, namely, the life. 'Human beings thus bring not only their repentant and trusting selves to the sacrificial act, but they are bearers of life from God. If all things belongs to God, then it may be said that God gives of Himself to make forgiveness possible. In some sense God's life is expended for the sake of the life of the people' (Fretheim 1984:139).

The previous exposition makes the following assertion possible: several texts suggest the theme of divine humiliation (Ps 78:61, 18:35, Is 63:9). The humiliation stands in connection with the eschatological character of covenant history. Therefore, any

28. Fretheim, T E 1984. *The suffering of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 106.

birth of a new order can come about only through what God does, and God can accomplish such a creative act only by way of a *via dolorosa*. This assertion corresponds with the topic of Jürgen Moltmann: God's suffering as a *theologia crucis*: 'Das Leiden und Sterben Jesu, verstanden als Leiden und Sterben des Gottessohnes, aber sind Werke Gottes gegenüber sich selbst und darum zugleich Passionen Gottes'²⁹.

The suffering God and the theology of the cross are the framework for a new paradigm: the omnipotent presence and power of God interpreted as vulnerable faithfulness and overwhelming pathos. Although it sounds new, its roots can be traced back to Martin Luther's thesis: 'The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross, does however deserve to be called a theologian'³⁰. For Luther, the cross indeed reveals God - but that revelation is the *posteriora Dei*. The important thing about Luther's assertion is that the cross of Christ, in which God is to be found revealed, and yet paradoxically hidden in that revelation, becomes the sole authentic *locus* of man's knowledge of God. The implication of his thesis is that God's strength (omnipotence) is revealed in apparent weakness, and His wisdom in foolishness.

It is our conviction that this thesis of Luther should be applied in the current debate on God's presence in a situation of intergroup conflict. It should give birth to a new paradigm about the omnipresence of God. It is also applicable to contemporary theology which is looking for a new theological approach to the ethics of conflict management. A *theologia crucis* can help rid the church of a lot of theological misconceptions about God's omnipotence and presence in history. It is the conviction of McGrath, that the *theologia crucis* 'passes judgement upon the church where she has become proud and triumphant, or secure and smug, and recalls her to the foot of the Cross, there to remind her of the mysterious and hidden way in which God is at work in His world. The scene of total dereliction, of apparent weakness and folly, at Calvary is the theologian's paradigm for understanding the hidden presence and activity of God in His world and in His church'³¹.

In theology God's omnipotence has often been interpreted not in soteriological and salvational terms but in hellenistic terms: κυριος παντοκρατωρ. The latter is the Greek version of the Hebrew phrase 'el saddaj (Hieronymus used the Latin version: *deus omnipotens*). It is a fact that God revealed Himself several times as the Almighty. Gn 17:1 'the Lord appeared to him (Abraham) and said "I am God Almighty"'. (See Gn 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 49:25; Ex 6:3). The etymology of 'el Saddaj is

29. Moltmann, J 1972. *Der gekreuzigte Gott*. München: Kaiser, 180.

30. Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit.

31. McGrath, A E 1985. *Luther's theology of the Cross*. Martin :Luther's theological breakthrough. Blackwell, 181.

very complex and uncertain³². From an exegetical viewpoint, eight possibilities exist:

- (a) $\overset{\vee}{Saddaj}$ = the terrific and strong one;
- (b) the sufficient one;
- (c) a positive being which could be connected with an Arab word for Lord;
- (d) $\overset{\vee}{Saddaj}$ could be seen in close connection with a Semitic word for breast, which is a name for a fertile god;
- (e) it could be derived from a verb which means to throw/cast or pour out;
- (f) there could also exist a close link between $\overset{\vee}{Saddaj}$ and an Accadian word for mountain - the one who comes from the high place, or from the mountain;
- (g) there could exist a link with a Sumerian word for God meaning: the one who knows your heart;
- (h) several scholars suggest an Ugaritic connection with Astarte: somebody from the veld or the floor.

The only conclusion to be derived from the above exposition is that the phrase '*el saddaj*' should be traced within the context of the various texts. In the meantime it must be born in mind that it represents the uniqueness and greatness of Jahwê who reveals Himself as a Father³³ and covenant God. However, it still remains a critical question whether Hieronymus' translation (omnipotens) and the παντοκρατωρ conception which so deeply influenced the Western thought, was a correct translation.

Van der Zee, in his book *Wie heeft daar woorden voor? comes to the conclusion that omnipotence as such does not play an important role in Scripture*³⁴. The concept almighty God is a complex one. God's omnipotence is in biblical terms the unique way in which God is present amongst his people. 'Liever zou ik zeggen: God is andersmachtig' (Van der Zee 1983²:80). Suurmond makes the remark that the Christian God must always be a strong God. Christians would very seldom think of God as vulnerable and weak. The point is, vulnerability does not indicate that God is powerless. The important thing is: it indicates that God's power is God's love; love =

32. 'Ein Konsens ist bisher nicht zustande gekommen'. Weipert, M 1976. *Saddaj* (Gottesname), in Jenni, E & Westermann, C, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Band II. München: Kaiser, 875.

33. Weipert, M 1976:882. 'Es ist somit wahrscheinlich, dass einer der "Vätergötter" tatsächlich der ('el) gewesen ist, und P hier, wie öfter, altes Gut benutzt und generalisiert hat'.

34. Van der Zee, W R 1983². *Wie heeft daar woorden voor?* 's-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 79: 'Het woord "almacht" komt helemaal niet voor in de bijbel. Het woord almachtig wel, althans in de gangbare vertaling. Niet vaak, maar toch, en dan voornamelijk in het boek Job en in Johannes Openbaring. In het hebreus staat er dan El-Sjaddaj en dat betekent ongeveer: de hoogste God. Het grieks geeft dat weer met pantokrato (Hy die over alles regeert), en Martin Baber vertaalt met: der Gewaltige (de machtige)'.

omnipotence³⁵. Omnipotence becomes then the overwhelming power of love and faithfulness which makes an appeal to every human being's responsibility³⁶. 'Overwinnende liefde die niet overdondert, maar bevrijdend overreedt tot een overgave die bevrijdt!' (Suurmond 1984²:45). According to Häring³⁷, God is not a Pantokrator; neither should He be seen in terms of Aristotle's *potentia*. God's power is his redeeming vulnerability and powerlessness; omnipotence is God's loving invitation to a relationship and covenant encounter which guarantees real freedom. 'Macht in de oorspronkelijke zin zou dan zijn het bindende en waarheidontsluitende karakter van iedere bestaanservaring. "Macht" in deze betekenis bemiddelt dan de ervaring van zich met iets te kunnen inlaten, uitgedaagd te worden door wat vanzelfsprekend is, opgenomen te worden in een ruimte van beaming en van goede verstandhouding met de werkelijkheid. Noodzakelijkerwijze zijn dat' tegelijk ervaringen van liefde, trouw en solidariteit. Ik stel nu: de ervaring van zulk een macht geeft vrijheid' (Häring 1986:369).

According to Van de Beeck, behind the concept omnipotence lies the motive to see God as the absolute one, the super king with a driving force (*despotes*). Behind every event God functions as a *prima causa*³⁸. Van de Beeck is convinced that more fundamental than Berkhof's 'weerloze overmacht' is the overwhelming phenomenon of God's majestic highness and splendid glory. 'Primair is de gestalte van de majestueuze heerlijkheid, waarin God heerst' (Van De Beeck 1984:90). The dominion and sovereignty of God exists in the interest of man and history; its aim is to conquer the evil powers of sin and darkness. 'De christologie is de grote onruststoker in alle almachtsgeloof' (Van de Beeck 1984:103).

We conclude that omnipotence should not be interpreted against the background of the Hellenistic *pantokrator* (strength and violent power); neither in terms of the Roman Caesar (*despotes*). Omnipotence describes God's unique revelation (His sovereign majesty and splendid glory) which portrays Him as overwhelming love and steadfast faithfulness. Omnipotence describes a power which stands in close connection with God's covenantal encountering. Omnipotence corresponds also with righteousness and social justice. A good example of this connection can be found in Deuteronomy 10:17-19. 'For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

35. Suurmond, P B 1984². God is machtig - maar hoe? Baarn: Ten Have, 42.

36. 'Elk denken dat uitgaat van een goddelijke almacht als domweg "alles-kunnen", omdat dat pas Gode-waardig zou zijn, reduceert de menselijke vrijheid tot illusie'. Suurmond, P B 1984²:45.

37. Häring, H 1986. Het kwaad als vraag naar Gods macht en machteloosheid, in Tijdschrift voor theologie, 26 no 4, 351-372.

38. Van de Beeck, A 1984. Waarom? Over lijden, schuld en God. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 83. Van de Beeck comes to the conclusion that it is very difficult to eliminate the concept omnipotence. The Almighty God is indeed a biblical concept. The only problem is that God's dominion and sovereignty was misused by many people. It is therefore difficult to correlate His dominion with the suffering and injustice in history (91-92).

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are alien, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt'. It is clear that God's transcendence stands in close connection with His condescendence. Omnipotence reveals itself in history within the context of a social reality. It gives a new dimension to the concept: humanity. God shows no partiality (rendered literally, the Hebrew idiom means '... who does not lift up faces'³⁹ to man and the basis of his social or economic standing in the community. The impartiality of God indicates judgement and justice as well as love for the resident alien, a person within the community who did not share full civil and religious rights with the Israelites. This finding corresponds with the assertion of Von Rad that the Deuteronomy texts should be understood in the light of the writer's effort to gain a theoretical understanding of the relationship to Jahweh and to prove His trustworthiness⁴⁰. This trustworthiness of God is reflected in his loving care which safeguards his people. 'Heeft Abraham de naam *Šaddaj* voordien gekend, van nu aan krijgt deze voor hem een nieuwe inhoud; die van "machtige beschermer"' (De Groot, Hulst)⁴¹.

4. Towards an ethical model for constructive conflict management

The idea is not to develop a final program for conflict management⁴². Our task is to decide whether the two existing models, each based on a specific use of the concept omnipotence, are a hindrance to a constructive conflict management model or not. Our conclusion is that both the authority model (omnipotence interpreted as powerful strength which manifests itself in law and order) and the resistance model (omnipotence interpreted as identification with suffering and the oppressed, an identification which manifests itself in resistance and protest) end up with the same ethical problem: the problem of self-justification.

The current tension and polarisation between State Theology (militarisation) and Kairos Theology (resistance and violence) have two things in common.

(a) Both are based on an ethics of self-justification. And self-justification makes use of a strange methodology: the 'cowboy technique'. The cowboy technique is based upon the principle of self-overestimation. In the process of justifying yourself, you forget that you are yourself a fallible human being with 'dirty hands'. In the meantime you start to divide the world into 'the good guys' and 'the bad guys'

39. Craigie, P C 1976. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 206.

40. Von Rad, G 1966. *Deuteronomy*. London: SCM 84.

41. De Groot, J 84. Hulst, A R 1950. *Macht en wil*. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 117.

42. See Louw, D J 1987. *Versoening in geweld*. Stellenbosse Teologiese Studies no 15. Kaapstad: N G Kerk-uitgewers.

making sure that you are one of the good guys. 'Dat is een zeldzaam oppervlakkig cowboy-christendom, keerzijde van de zelfoverschatting' (Kuitert) ⁴³.

(b) When the church becomes involved in politics, Christians should remember that the essence of politics is the struggle for power (Kuitert 1985:166). Both the authority model (force) and the suffering model (resistance) are involved in the struggle for power. The authority model tries to maintain power with the aid of the God of law and order; the suffering model tries to gain power with the aid of the pathetic God. The only difference is that the one group is to be blamed for siding with the authoritarian oppressors (militarisation of the oppressors) while the other group is to be blamed for siding with the violent oppressed (aggression of the oppressed, suffering of injustice).

It is our conviction that the only ethical principle which corresponds with a true biblical ethos and which can help all the churches in South Africa to overcome the current impasse, is the biblical principle of self-sacrifice. The real ethical issue is not the problem of how to divide our country into 'good guys' and 'bad guys' and to start a resistance-program of accusation and damnation. The real issue is the ultimate contrast: Cain/Christ; hate/love. 1 John 3:12: 'Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother'. Cain is related to hate and the death of human relationships. 1 John 3:16: 'Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers'. Christ is related to love and life. 'This then, is the ultimate contrast: Cain's hatred issued in murder, Christ's love in self-sacrifice'. ⁴⁴

Any attempt to start a program of conflict management, based upon co-operation and reconciliation is doomed to failure unless it corresponds with the ethical principle of self-sacrifice. 'Hatred characterizes the world, whose prototype is Cain. It originates in the devil, issues in murder and is evidence of spiritual death. Love characterizes the Church, whose prototype is Christ. It originates in God, issues in self-sacrifice and is evidence of eternal life' (Stott 1983²:144).

The Kairos Liturgy (1986:24) states clearly 'We pray for victory over all our enemies who slander our name by oppressing your people'. The new ethic of self-sacrifice prays for the change of the enemy not victory over the enemy. Prayers for victory over the enemy are an Old Testament version: to pray against the enemy. 'An diesem Punkt können wir einen bestimmten Bestandteil der Psalmen nicht mehr zu unserem Gebet machen, weil in diesem Punkt durch das Wirken Christi etwas anders geworden ist' (Westermann) ⁴⁵. Before we start a program for social change and justice the overwhelming faithfulness of God (God's omnipotence) demands us to pray for ... 'Wenn einer in einem Konflikt sich selbst und seine Seite für absolut

43. Kuitert, H M 1985:216.

44. Stott, J R W 1983². The epistles of John. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 143.

45. Westermann, C 1986. Das Beten der Psalmen und unser Beten, in *Die Zeichen der Zeit*, Okt, Jr 40, 247.

gut und den Gegner für absolut schlecht hält, dann kann er kein Christ sein, solche Verdammung des Gegners kann nicht im Namen Gottes geschehen. Feindschaft, Gegnerschaft wird es immer zwischen Menschen und Menschengruppen geben; daran hat auch das Werk Christi nichts geändert. Anders ist durch ihn geworden, dass im Gebet Gott nicht mehr gegen die Feinde angerufen zu werden braucht; das Schicksal der Gegner und der Feinde wird damit allein in Gottes Hand gelegt' (Westermann 1986:247).

The starting point for an ethic of self-sacrifice is the prayer for ...; this prayer manifests itself in an attitude of sensitivity and loving empathy. It shows its credibility in a love which tries to place itself in the enemy's situation. This important step is the first stage of an ethic of self-sacrifice which realises that conflict management without a pastoral approach will always stumble over self-justification and its co-partner: other-accusation. Pastoral care in conflict management starts with forgiveness - the real starting point to radical change.