



Beliefs Research Program 2015 - 2020

Title: Transforming Life

Program Supervisor: Prof. dr. F. de Lange

Objectives and research area

The Beliefs research program will focus on the question: *how to understand the transformations of human life from the perspective of Christian soteriology?*

In religious traditions life in its givenness has been interpreted and symbolized as a divine gift, a transcendental absolute; in our times, it becomes an object of reflexive and responsible human acting, both on the micro-level in science and technology, as well as on an individual, societal and global scale in politics and economy. In the 21st century, life is being transformed into an object of human agency and control. The question is whether and how these transformations can serve the future of human life on earth and its well-being.

Religious soteriology also grants that human life does not stay unaltered in its givenness. Life, as understood in soteriological faith, is subject to a divine change for the better, a transformation towards the good. Human life is rescued, saved, redeemed, and delivered from evil, sanctified and transformed by transcendent powers. Life 'as such' means nothing, only life in salvation (*salus*) is real life.

Whether the transformations life is going through the 21st century, are a divine change for the better is questionable. Science and technology, engineering, managing and policy programs generally aim at an improvement of the life conditions of humankind by eliminating the evil of fateful adversities and contingencies (f.e. poverty, diseases, death). Regarded from a religious perspective, secular world views often reveal characteristics of a soteriological narrative. They are supposed to make human life a better life, even though they are not presented in explicit terms of 'salvation'.

How the current transformations of life are to be understood from a theological point of view? This new situation challenges old questions but also puts new questions on the table. First, fundamental questions will have to be dealt with: What is "life" and what makes a life human? How should "life" be understood? Who has the power to define? What do we say when we declare, together with biblical narratives and confessional traditions, God as the living God, as the Giver of life, its Creator and Replenisher? What does eschatological speaking about eternal life mean?

Is life as it is given sacred, does it deserve reverence as such? Or is only a life redeemed, eternal, fulfilled, improved, completed, transformed, and bettered – is only such a life a whole, a holy life? That is the question our research will focus on. What does 'salvation' mean in the context of increasing human responsibility for the future of human life? How does the understanding of redemption as a divine gift in religious traditions, on the one hand, and the engineering of life in science, technology, politics and on the level of the individual on the other, relate to one another? Are there any (post)secular soteriologies, philosophical understandings of salvation, opening up promising and challenging perspectives for theology? What happens when enhancement is interpreted as redemption and vice versa? Or transhumanism as theosis?

These questions cannot be taken up in a Europe centered way, they need a global and intercultural approach. In Western Christianity salvation has been largely interpreted in terms of (individual) guilt and forgiveness. Do non-western cultures and religious communities have broader and richer understandings of the fullness and wholeness of “life abundantly”?

The narratives, practices and discourses in which the understanding of life and salvation is articulated require a dialogical, interdisciplinary, and non-reductionist approach. The research group will exploit its developed hermeneutical skills in a open conversation with various philosophical theories, theological traditions, (inter)cultural practices and societal communities in a (post)secular setting, by exploring in particular Protestant traditions from a ecumenical perspective.

Organization:

The research group as a whole will approach the question *how to understand human life from the perspective of Christian soteriology?* in four different project groups (hermeneutics, dogmatics, intercultural theology, ethics), organized along methodological and disciplinary lines. They will take the lead in answering the following questions:

1. How to understand ‘life’ religiously in a (post-)secular culture? (the sacredness of life) [hermeneutics]
2. What does it mean to confess a living God for living a human life? (eternal life) [dogmatics]
3. How the Christian understanding of salvation is being transformed in a global, intercultural context? (the redeemed life) [intercultural theology]
4. Can life as given be good? (The good life) [ethics]

The questions will be taken up in four subgroup sessions and four group sessions as a whole yearly. Besides the group will organize consultations with representatives of several societal target groups (church, politics, education, health care) in order to sharpen the research questions and to explore the possibility for cooperation in view of relevant societal outcomes (valorization).