

Theologische Universiteit Kampen-Utrecht

Flourishing Farming

A theological-agrarian evaluation of farming and rural life in
Transylvania, in view of the flourishing of the whole Creation

Master's thesis for the Master of Intercultural Reformed Theology (MIRT)

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I. Introduction

This thesis aims at bringing farming and rural life to the horizon of theological reflection. At first look, these issues may seem of marginal importance from the perspective of academic dialogue, and can hardly be encountered in mainline theological discussions. However, in the context of the Reformed Church in Romania¹ and Romanian society, I consider it important to engage with this topic theologically.

a) Relation to the topic

Regarding my relation to the topic, I find myself both in an objective, outside position as a researcher, and in a subjective, inside position as personally involved to an extent.

As a researcher, I am interested in social-ethical issues and searching for possibilities to integrate the Christian faith and everyday life. In this endeavor, I use my knowledge in systematic theology and eco-theology, as well as in agriculture as important resources.

My personal involvement stems, firstly from my family's history. I come from a family that has been farming for many generations. Therefore, I conceive it as a sort of heritage. Besides, through growing up partly around the farm, I have acquired many practical skills and moral values of farming and got insight both into modern, technologized agriculture as well as into the more traditional, 'old fashioned' way with its specific lifestyle, as seen and experienced in the life of my grandparents.

Secondly, I have a personal connection to the topic also through the Reformed congregation in Cluj-Napoca where I belonged since I was born and until I became a pastor. In one of the towers of the church building, situated close to the city center of the Transylvanian municipality, there is a memorial room bearing witness to the "*Hóstát*,"² a once flourishing

¹ The Reformed Church in Romania is a member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Its estimated membership is around 560 000, belonging to two districts having each a bishop, and 780 congregations. The church is concentrated in the North-Western part of Romania, in the region of Transylvania. By historical reasons, the Reformed minority (compared to the Orthodox majority) belongs almost entirely to the Hungarian-speaking population (as well a minority compared to the Romanian majority). The Reformed Church in Romania confesses the Apostolic Creed, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism. Source accessed August 7, 2022,

<https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/reformed-church-in-romania>

² The farmer community of the *Hóstát* (the word comes from the German *Hochstad*) which can be traced back to the 16th century, owned approximately 3000 hectares of land in the surroundings of the city of Cluj-Napoca, providing the population of the city and the entire region with fresh vegetables and other products. During the

farmer community that built the outstanding neoclassical church building between 1829 and 1851. Today, there is almost only the memory and some traditions left of this community. Their story not only tells an episode of the tragic consequences of communism in Romania but also demonstrates the close connection that once existed between farming and faith.

b) Understanding the context

The sad story of the *Hóstát* is not an isolated case. It is representative of a general decay of farming and rural life in Romania, which continued also after the end of communism. From 2015 to 2018, in only four years, the rate of people working in agriculture dropped by 4%.³ This number shows clearly how people, especially small-scale family farmers, tend to renounce farming. The difficulties in selling the products, the high costs of agricultural equipment, energy, and inputs made the lives of farmers more and more difficult. Instead of engaging in the physically demanding hard work that farming requires, most young people desire to study and make a career, to make their way from the land to the office. Emigration to Western European countries for a better livelihood is also a major reason for leaving the farm and the village. Moreover, through the years a negative public perception of farming and rural life emerged in Romania. The words ‘farmer’ and ‘villager’ (in Hungarian *falusi, paraszt*, in Romanian *țăran, agricultor*) got entirely negative connotations, symbolizing something shameful, of a lower dignity, connected to the lack of education and of good manners.

The situation of farming and rural life followed a similarly declining path also from a religious perspective. Until a few decades ago, it was almost self-evident that farming and the rural lifestyle had much to do with God and the church. The rain and the sunshine, the health, and the energy to work, everything was linked to God as the source of life. There was a harmony between the church calendar with the feast days and the agricultural and natural cycles of the year. The history of the church-builder *Hóstáti* community is a good example of this. However,

communist regime in Romania, their fields were nationalized after World War II., and in the forced urbanization and industrialization in the 70's and 80's even their household properties were taken away, now being crowded neighborhoods in their place. The families of these farmers were forcedly moved into flat apartments. Only a few families were lucky to keep their houses with a small garden where they could keep growing some vegetables. Even though after the fall of the communism, the restitution process has started and many families, mostly children or grandchildren of the farmers, got back a significant part of their properties, most of them didn't return to the fields and, profiting from the city's quick expansion, sold the properties instead. However, there are still a few families who, despite all the difficulties, continue the old tradition. The short documentary of the Hungarian National Television (Duna TV), entitled "*Volt egyszer egy Hóstát*" (There was once a Hóstát) offers a historical overview of these events in conversation with members of a Hóstáti farmer family. Accessed August 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0tKD20zlrE>

³ Tudorel Andrei, ed, *România în Cifre. Breviar Statistic* (București: INS, 2019), 23.

the understanding of farming life changed radically in the second half of the last century. Farming lost its connection to God. The atheistic industrialist perception of communism, the secularistic separation of religion from the other spheres of life, and the modern technological developments resulted in a view of the land as a natural resource that can be exploited, agriculture became a business (for those who do it on large scale), a hobby (for the ‘backyard’ gardeners), or an occupation, a profession that is inferior to intellectual or any other work.

c) Why does this topic matter?

The *Hóstáti* ‘memorial’ and the negative developments of the recent past mark neither the end of farming and rural communities nor the necessary rupture between farming and the Christian faith. In the following, I will argue why I consider both claims relevant and why their connection is worth considering from a theological perspective.

Firstly, concerning the situation of farming, and rural communities in Romania, statistics show that in 2018 more than 46% of the population lived in the rural area,⁴ while, in comparison, this rate in the European Union was 29%.⁵ Moreover, the trends of internal migration show an increasing urban-to-rural movement of the population,⁶ although this does not necessarily mean that those who move to villages will embrace a traditional rural lifestyle. Applied to the Reformed people in the country, we can assess that one of two church members lives in a village, and this rate is increasing. Therefore, the issues of rural life concern half of the Reformed Christians in Romania. The share of people working in agriculture is even more outstanding in Romania: around 26% of the active population works in this sector.⁷ Comparing this to the EU average of 4,5%,⁸ it becomes clear that farming still concerns a significant part of the population of the country and also of the Reformed believers.

But not only do the statistics show the relevance of the topic. Recently, a renaissance of farming and turning to the rural started in Transylvania. From a practical perspective, technology makes agriculture physically less and less demanding, while the agricultural subsidies and the available EU funding make this technology accessible to farmers in Romania.

⁴ Andrei, *România în Cifre. Breviar Statistic*, 10.

⁵ “Urban and Rural Living in the EU,” Eurostat, accessed August 7, 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20200207-1>

⁶ Andrei, *România în Cifre. Breviar Statistic*, 16.

⁷ Ibid, 23.

⁸ “Archive: Farmers in the EU - statistics,” Eurostat, accessed August 7, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farmers_in_the_EU_-_statistics&oldid=357532

More and more people move from overcrowded cities to nearby villages because of lower prices and costs of living, a healthier and natural environment, and higher independence regarding energy and food. At the same time, people are becoming more aware of what they eat, many want to produce – at least a part of – the food they consume. Such stories are becoming more and more common also in the media.⁹

The statistics, cultural trends, and also many personal stories show that farming and rural life are highly relevant topics in Transylvanian and Romanian society, including the Reformed Christians.

Secondly, we need to reconsider whether there isn't – or shouldn't be – a better-articulated connection between farming and the Christian faith. Besides the historical link as suggested by the *Hóstáti* case, an important reason for why theology – and particularly this thesis – should engage with topics such as farming and rural life, is provided by Miroslav Volf and his concern with ordinary human life, pursuing the flourishing life of humans and creation. As he formulates, “the purpose of theology is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

Why is it important to search, or even strive for the good, flourishing life here on Earth, when we confess with Apostle Paul that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), and follow his call to “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col 3:2)? For many, it could seem that a Christian worldview has more to do with the vision of the coming new world, of Heaven, rather than the world we live in. But does this mean that Christians should stay out of ‘fantasizing of’ or even acting for a better society, environment, and ultimately a better communal and individual life here and now on Earth?

Reading Volf, as we will discuss this in Chapter 4, and drawing on the development of Christian worldview-thinking in the recent history of the church,¹¹ the answer to this question must be a definite no. Because, if the Christian faith encompasses the entirety of reality¹² –

⁹ Reports like that of Sándor and Ágnes Bálint usually present in a positive light how the lives of people who decide to leave their urban existence and start a new life on the countryside changes in good. “Irodából a falu határába,” Maszol, accessed August 7, 2022, <https://maszol.ro/életmod/Irodabol-a-falu-hataraba-Sandor-gazda-es-felesege-hajnalban-kel-hogy-sajtta-dedelgesse-a-tehentejet>

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World – Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2019), 11.

¹¹ David K. Naugle, *Worldview – The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 4.

¹² Reformed theology, especially through the work of Abraham Kuyper, made an important contribution in the development of a holistic, comprehensive view of reality. Kuyper, long before Volf, gave a powerful impulse to

earthly and transcendental – in a comprehensive worldview, then the question of life – and especially good life – becomes much more important, inspiring Christians to bring all aspects of their lives under the horizon of the Christian faith, and to ‘live out’ this faith in the world and all its spheres. Volf promotes such an all-embracing Christian understanding of the world, a holistic worldview when he articulates his vision of the flourishing life. Following that, if Christianity as a worldview encompasses all spheres of life, it implies that farming and rural life are also constitutive elements of this worldview and as such must be considered theologically.

Therefore, I consider it a justified and necessary endeavor to reflect theologically on the topic. Based on the assertion that in Romania, a country with a significant rural and farming population (involving the Reformed Christians as well), there is a renaissance of farming that seems to have lost its religious dimension, my objective is to deliver insights that help and encourage Reformed people (and the wider society) to integrate religion into their everyday life, and to contribute to a positive change in the public perception of farming and the rural lifestyle, having in mind the flourishing of the whole of society and creation. Therefore, my main question is: How may theological reflection help to integrate faith and work in agricultural practice? To answer this question, I will follow several steps.

d) A preview

In the first part of the thesis, I present the main components of my approach to the topic, based on theological agrarianism (Chapter 2), ecological anthropology and the concept of stewardship (Chapter 3), and the vision of flourishing life (Chapter 4).

In the second part, according to Volf’s tripartite articulation of flourishing life as life led well, life going well, and life feeling as it should, I will present and reflect on the situation of farming and rural life in Transylvania¹³ (Chapter 5). For this, I will employ interviews made with four farmers¹⁴ from that context, and material from a closely related documentary. I will

Reformed Theology to engage with all aspects of life, stating that Christianity is a “unity of life-system” and “an all-embracing system of principles.” See Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Lectures of 1898* (West Linn: Monergism Books, 2015), 1.23, mobi.

¹³ Since from the perspective of farming and rural life, the context of Reformed Christians does not differ significantly from the non-Reformed population in Transylvania and the whole Romania, when I present the situation of Reformed Christians in Transylvania, in most cases it is valid for the wider society of the country.

¹⁴ See details in Appendix 1 and 2.

apply to the agrarian works of Wendell Berry, Norman Wirzba, Michael S. Northcott, and Ellen. F. Davis to reflect on the context, and then I will draw the conclusions.

Following that, as a practical conclusion and application of my findings, I will propose a way in which the theological insights can be put into practice in the Reformed, Transylvanian, and Romanian contexts, to integrate the Christian faith into the everyday lives of farmers and rural communities, having in mind the flourishing of the whole of society and creation (Chapter 6).

II. Theological agrarianism

In this chapter, we will briefly present the concept of agrarianism, what it stands for, and how it relates to theology, based on the works of Wendell Berry¹⁵, Norman Wirzba, and Ellen F. Davis.

To understand the concept of agrarianism as a philosophical, ecological, and theological movement, we have to go back to its root: the word agriculture. Even though it is commonly understood as plowing and harvesting, a profession or a sort of business, the etymology of the word reveals a much wider meaning. Agriculture comes from the Latin words *ager* (land) and *cultura* (cultivate).¹⁶ The literary understanding of the term already suggests that its major concern is for the land and culture. However, Berry, as one of the most important representatives of agrarianism, observes that the word cultivation is the root of both culture and cult,¹⁷ and, therefore the main interests of agrarianism also include religion. Wirzba defines agrarianism as “a comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the health of land *and* culture.”¹⁸ Davis has a similar interpretation, defining agrarianism as “a way of thinking and ordering life in the community that is based on the health of the land and of living creatures.”¹⁹ Health, in this context, means wholeness with the earth, with each other, and with God.²⁰

According to these, I consider that agrarianism as a worldview can be understood as seeing the world through three lenses put together, with the following focal points: land and creation, culture and community, religion and the triune God. Agrarianism, searching the path toward the wholeness and harmony of humans with creation, community, and God, is a search for the united focus of the three lenses. The organizing principle of agrarianism is the claim that

¹⁵ Wendell Berry (1934-) is perhaps the most important and influential representative of agrarianism. He is the author of more than 40 books, and a farmer living and working in his native village in Kentucky. Even though he does not have any formal qualification in theology, he inspired many theologians and philosophers, including Norman Wirzba and Ellen F. Davis.

¹⁶ Norman Wirzba, “Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters – Even to Urbanites,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 7.4, epub.

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015), 91.

¹⁸ Wirzba, “Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters,” 7.11 epub

¹⁹ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture. An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁰ Norman Wirzba, “Introduction: The Challenge of Berry’s Agrarian Vision” in *The Art of Commonplace. The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), x.

the health of human beings, human communities, and the created world can only be reached through the right, harmonious relationship between them, based on God's purpose for the world as He reveals it in Scripture and Jesus Christ.

Therefore, agrarianism implies also a specific reading of Scripture. This, according to Davis, "is not a distinct method but rather a *perspective* for exegesis; a way of viewing our world and the texts' representation of it."²¹ Scripture is the measure and norm of an agrarian worldview. This is indicated also through the points of congruence between some important biblical and agrarian principles, as Davis identifies them: the land comes first, wisdom and informed ignorance, a modest materialism, value beyond price.²² These principles will be explained in Chapter 5.

Based on an agrarian reading of the Bible, an agrarian *theoria* can be established.²³ This theory has two important concerns: a critical reflection on the broad cultural significance of the loss of agrarian ways, and a looking forward to how the recovery of agrarian principles, responsibilities, and practice can lead to personal, cultural, and ecological healing.²⁴ The critical reflection implies that agrarianism takes seriously, on the one hand, what we know and should know about the earth, which is knowledge informed by an ecological approach to the natural sciences, and on the other hand, what we know about ourselves and humanity, based on the social sciences and humanistic disciplines.²⁵ Looking forward in search of healing and wholeness implies finding a way and attempting to "live faithfully and responsibly in a world of limits and possibilities."²⁶

Wirzba offers an eloquent summary of such a reflection and looking forward, as he writes: "[t]o be an agrarian is to believe that we do not need the hypothetical promises of a bright economic future to be happy and well. What we need—fertile land, drinkable water, solar energy, communal support and wisdom—we already have, or could have, if we turned our attention and energy to the protection and celebration of the sources of life."²⁷ As this quote already suggests, one of the biggest concerns of agrarianism is the rejection of the desire for unlimited economic growth and well-being, provided by industrialism and technological

²¹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 3.

²² *Ibid*, 29-39.

²³ *Ibid*, 3.

²⁴ Wirzba, "Introduction: The Challenge of Berry's Agrarian Vision," x.

²⁵ Wirzba, "Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters," 7.9.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 7.9.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 7.25.

invention, and the return to appreciating and relying on what Berry calls the “givens: land, plants, animals, weather, hunger, and the birthright knowledge of agriculture.”²⁸

However, beyond any kind of knowledge and theorizing, as Wirzba asserts, agrarianism is above all a practice.²⁹ It is a practice that is not limited to agricultural skills but is a way of life driven by the responsibility to protect, preserve, and celebrate life.³⁰

I consider that agrarianism as above depicted, is closely connected to the Christian faith. The holistic approach to life, the belonging together of humans and the created world according to God’s purpose, and the commitment to protect and preserve creation and life on earth correspond to the Christian worldview. Furthermore, the agrarian vision enriches the way we read and understand the Bible which is extremely abundant in agricultural references, while it promotes a Christian interpretation of and influence upon farming, ecology, and community.

²⁸ Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 9.15, epub.

²⁹ Wirzba, “Introduction: The Challenge of Berry’s Agrarian Vision,” xvii.

³⁰ Wirzba, “Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters,” 7.18.

III. Dominion as stewardship. The relationship between humanity and creation.

1. Understanding the problem

In this chapter, we will discuss the relationship between humanity and the earth, based on ecologically sensitive interpretations of the most relevant biblical passages describing this relationship.

a) A Reformed approach

Before engaging with this task, however, it is helpful to situate the understanding of creation and the human relationship to it in the Reformed tradition. As Lane observes, “Reformed spirituality is generally perceived as a heady, abstract affair, hardly lending itself to beauty and desire, much less to ecological responsibility.”³¹ This is due to the continuous overemphasizing of the transcendental, otherworldly aspect and the eternal divine decrees of God and the Christian faith in the centuries following Calvin.³²

However, this does not mean that Calvin or the Reformed tradition entirely lacks the interest and wonder in creation. Even Lane, who was earlier suspicious concerning Calvin’s polemics about nature and the world, became surprised by encountering “his delight in the natural world, his uninhibited celebration of creation.”³³ Barth, probably one of the most important Reformed theologians of all times, had a huge influence on the Reformed Church in Romania, even visiting the Protestant Theological Institute in the 1950s. For me, and probably for many other students and pastors studying there since then, three of his words became memorable: *Nein!* and *ganz anders*. The first was the title of his renowned answer to Brunner’s natural theology, while the latter expressed his claim for God being entirely different than any worldly experience or perception of Him. Even though, as Lane observes “Karl Barth acknowledged the earth as reflecting the super-abundance of God’s glory.”³⁴ Without going

³¹ Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty. The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

³² *Ibid*, 26.

³³ *Ibid*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 243.

into more details, I consider that the Reformed Spirituality is not only compatible with an ecologic appreciation of and attitude toward the natural world, but it is also the source of such an endeavor. As Lane says, even if most of Calvin's descendants may not have grasped its implications, his theology of creation already contained the seeds of "environmental justice and an earthly spirituality."³⁵ This is best expressed through his concept of the created world as being a "theater of God's glory."³⁶ Therefore, I think that the following eco-theological reflections can, and should be considered in the framework of the Reformed tradition and spirituality.

b) Christianity and the ecological crisis – Gen 1:27-28

To actually engage with this topic, we find one of the most important – and at the same time most controversial – biblical passages in Gen 1:27-28. Here we encounter God's first commission to humanity: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen 1:28). The divine mandate to subdue the earth and rule over it is also called the commission of *dominium terrae*, which sparked heated debates over the last decades concerning the role of Christianity in the aggravating ecological crisis. Christianity and specifically the Christian view of the human uniqueness, or even supremacy, and the hierarchic relation to the non-human creation as supposedly evidenced in the first creation narrative received harsh critique both from non-Christian and Christian thinkers. Lynn White's strong statement that "the historical roots of our ecological crisis can be found in Christianity"³⁷ is widely sustained by ecologically disposed critics of the Judeo-Christian tradition, because, according to their understanding this commission lays down the intellectual background for two of the most devastating ecological factors: over-population and the subjugation of nature. Kärkkäinen gives a summary of the main complaints against the biblical view of this relationship, culminating in the commission of the *dominium terrae*: God's transcendence, the createdness of the world as an artifact of a divine craftsman, being the image of God as humanity's exclusive privilege, the dominion over nature given to humanity, the hierarchic and instrumental relation between humanity and nature.³⁸ Moltmann mentions also the legitimization of the human will to power as a legitimate critique against a certain Christian understanding of this relation, considering

³⁵ Lane, *Ravished by Beauty. The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality*, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 58.

³⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 218.

³⁸ Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 218.

the listed charges as mirroring an anthropocentric worldview according to which “heaven and earth were made for the sake of human beings, and the human being is the crown of creation.”³⁹

Another problem that arose through the interpretation of Gen 1:27-28 is, according to Conradie, the approach to defining the role of humanity “in terms of the difference between the human and the non-human.”⁴⁰ Even though, as he further assesses, this approach is inherently non-theological.⁴¹ Similarly, also Kärkkäinen admits that historical Christianity fell into the trap of misinterpreting the commission of subduing and ruling,⁴² but this does not mean that the Bible or the Christian faith itself is to blame. To the critics, he reproaches that the complaints are exaggerated and misplaced, for several reasons. Firstly, the Judeo-Christian tradition is thousands of years old, whereas the ecological crisis is at most a few hundred years old. Secondly, he asserts that the most powerful influence of exploiting nature comes from secular sources, mainly from the Enlightenment. Thirdly, removing God from the center of the modern worldview and introducing anti-Christian influences led to a significant distancing from nature and the exponential growth of abusing nature.⁴³

The above discussion shows that Gen 1:27-28 and the commission of *dominium terrae* is crucial in defining the relationship between humans and the earth on the base of Scripture and at the same time in an ecologically sensitive way. Further in this chapter, we will try to delimit this relationship in a contextual approach.

2. A contextual interpretation of Gen 1:27-28

The issues raised against Gen 1:27-28 start at the exegetical level, which is deeply problematic. The terms used in the commission of the ‘dominium terrae’ are the Hebrew words *kabash* and *radah*. As Conradie notes, the meaning of these terms “cannot be completely pacified.”⁴⁴ Besides its primary translation as ‘to subdue’, *kabash* also means ‘to bring into bondage’, ‘to force’, ‘to tread down.’⁴⁵ The word has even a violent connotation of bringing

³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1996), 31.

⁴⁰ Ernst M. Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 79.

⁴¹ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 79.

⁴² Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 221.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 220-221.

⁴⁴ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 205.

⁴⁵ Whitaker, R., Brown, F., Driver, S. R. (Samuel R., & Briggs, C. A. (Charles A. (1906). *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament: from A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles Briggs, based on the lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius*. Boston; New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

something or somebody under another's subjection.⁴⁶ It appears in contexts such as occupying conquered territory, slavery (Jer 34:11, 16), the subjugation of foreign nations (2 Sam 8:11), or even rape (Esther 7:8, Neh 5:5).⁴⁷ The word *radah*, usually translated as 'to rule over', suggests authority as well. Among its connotations are 'ordering', 'control', 'dominate', and it is used in descriptions of military conquest, sometimes accompanied by verbs like 'destroy' (Num 24:19) or 'strike down' (Isaiah 14:6).⁴⁸ Therefore, as Conradie concludes, Gen 1:27-28 suggests the supremacy of humans in relation to other species, legitimizing them to establish and maintain law and order in creation.⁴⁹ Given the powerful terms used in the Hebrew text, there is no point in attempting to soften or relativize its meaning just by calling on today's ecological awareness and the willingness to defend the Bible and God from the above-mentioned charges. As Conradie indicates, "[t]he question is not whether we have such power, but rather how such power is exercised. [...] it will be more honest and helpful to acknowledge the extent of human power and to focus then on the moral questions about the responsible exercising of such power."⁵⁰ We will apply a contextual approach to the discussed biblical text to search for this 'how'.

To explore the closer and wider context of this text, we need to consider the following aspects: a. human beings as the image of God; b. human beings in the community of creation; c. God as the ultimate ruler of creation; d. human dominion in light of Gen 2; and e. dominion in the shadow of sin.

a) Human beings as the image of God

As Conradie observes, the commission of the *dominium terrae* is usually discussed in association with the motif of *imago Dei*,⁵¹ which is also a key concept of Christian anthropology. In Welker's view, the commission of dominion is one of the most important aspects of the current discussion about the content of the *imago Dei*.⁵² This view is also sustained by Gen 1:26: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, *so that* they may rule over [...]." The conjunction 'so that' suggests that dominion over the rest of creation was

⁴⁶ Douglas J. Moo, Jonathan Moo, *Creation Care. A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 16.42, epub.

⁴⁷ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 205

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 205.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 116.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 79.

⁵² Michael Welker, *Teremtés és valóság*, trans. Ilona Orbánné Ágoston, (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2007), 112.

a constitutive and purposeful aspect of God's decision to create humans in his image and likeness. In this regard, Moltmann counts as an exception. He emphatically separates the question of dominion from the image of God, saying that subduing the earth and ruling over all creatures originally referred to the area of nutrition.⁵³ Following the majority view on the link between the two concepts, we will consider the question of dominion in the context of humans being created to the image of God. This is also required because, to get a clearer understanding of the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation, we need to ask first who human beings are? As Conradie indicates, "anthropology forms the crux of any ecological theology."⁵⁴

Concerning the content of the *imago Dei*, there is still an ongoing debate. The three major interpretations are the substantialist, functionalist and relational approaches.⁵⁵ The classic Christian ideas associated with the image of God are the uniqueness and inalienable dignity of human beings, a position of special status among the creatures, and responsibility before God.⁵⁶ However, as van der Kooi and van den Brink note, the Scripture does not offer any further explanation for the terms *celem* (lat. *imago*) and *demuth* (lat. *similitudo*).⁵⁷ In this case, the most valuable sources for interpretation come from ancient extra-biblical references. The concept of the image of God was well known in Israel's cultural environment, although not in the same form. There it was linked to kingship. In neighboring cultures, it was the king who, "as the bearer of God's image, was called to rule society and to care as God's representative for the part of creation that was assigned to him."⁵⁸ Analogically, the king also erected images of his own to remind people of his unique role as sovereign.⁵⁹ Because the king could not be present in all corners of his kingdom, he placed his image, which could have been material or a person, to represent him and to secure the application of his laws in the entire kingdom.

The biblical claim that human beings bear the image of God, together with the commission of dominion suggests a similar idea. But, in contrast to any other ancient culture, where the king was the only privileged human being to be identified as the image of a god, the

⁵³ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 230.

⁵⁴ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 80.

⁵⁷ Cornelis van der Kooi, Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics. An Introduction*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma, James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 261.

⁵⁸ van der Kooi, van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics*, 262.

⁵⁹ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.33

Hebrew Bible democratized the concept of the image,⁶⁰ as it is made clear in Gen 1:26-27 as well as in Psalm 8:4-6,⁶¹ suggesting that all human beings bear the image and likeness of God equally. Thus what the *imago Dei* entails does not require a certain physical or intellectual capability,⁶² nor anything that depends on us. Bavinck suggests that it is a gift that we do not and cannot deserve.⁶³ This way God establishes his human creatures, from newborn babies to dying old men, made all in his likeness, to reflect his sovereignty throughout the earth. This, as Bavinck has also suggested under the term of the threefold mandate, places a responsibility upon us: to reflect as prophets (proclaiming the truth of God), priests (dedicating ourselves to God), and rulers (exercising dominion and control over the earth), not only his rule but God himself.⁶⁴ Just as a material image reflects not only the work of the artist and his power over the material he is working with but also his personality and identity. Conradie's interpretation of the *imago Dei* as primarily a destiny and a vocation,⁶⁵ is similar to the main idea behind Bavinck's concept of the threefold mandate: both associate the image of God with the issue of responsibility.

As we can see, the views on the meaning of the image of God are very different. However, both the ancient kingship motif and the earlier and recent theological assessments suggest that the anthropological significance of this concept is the uniqueness and dignity of human beings in God's creation through representation (of God) and responsibility (before God). Concerning the link between dominion and the image of God, Pannenberg concludes eloquently: "our dominion has to be linked to God's own dominion. God's will as Creator is the standard against which the dominion which we exercise as God's image should be measured."⁶⁶ This means that human beings are not sovereign rulers above creation, and the dominion they exercise is not their own. The dominion was given to humans. The privileged

⁶⁰ Moltmann, *God in creation*, 225.

⁶¹ Gen 1:26-27: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Psalm 8:4-6: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet [...]."

⁶² van der Kooi, van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics*, 264.

⁶³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics 2: God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 577.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 577.

⁶⁵ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 171.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 206.

distinction that they are the image of God is a reminder of their vocation. However, from a Christian perspective, we know that the only perfect image of God is Jesus Christ.⁶⁷

b) Human beings in the community of creation

In addition to the concept of the image of God, Moltmann emphasizes that humans are not only *imago Dei* but also *imago mundi* – the image of the world – representing all other creatures before God.⁶⁸ This claim reminds us that humanity stands – at least in equal proportions – on the creaturely side of existence. As Conradie asserts, it is often overemphasized that human beings are created *in the image of God*, and the point that human beings have been *created* doesn't get enough attention.⁶⁹ However, the very first thing the Bible tells us about our identity is that we are part of a bigger whole. As both creation narratives in Gen 1 and Gen 2 testify, the emergence of humanity is embedded in the larger story of the creation of the earth and heaven. According to the Hebrew Bible, the first human being, Adam – both in the personal and in the general sense as a man – was created from the *adamah*, the earth.⁷⁰ This means that humans are substantially one with the earth. They have the 'breath of life' from the Creator but they share their bodily existence with the earth and all earthly creatures. The story does not start with human beings and it doesn't end with them. Humans were created on the sixth day of creation, alongside other land mammals (Gen 1:24-31). But not only does the createdness of humans as a biblical statement concerning the origins of mankind link them to the whole of creation but the entire existence of humanity makes them an organic part of creation. From the command to multiply and rule over the earth, to name the animals, to till and keep the earth, throughout the whole history of humanity and God's people in particular, through the incarnation of the Son and the redemption of creation to the new creation, as Conradie cites American feminist theologian McFague, "we are part of a living, changing, dynamic cosmos that has its being in and through God."⁷¹ This also means that, according to McFague, we are "radically interrelated with and dependent on everything else in

⁶⁷"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." Colossians 1:15

⁶⁸ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 190.

⁶⁹ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 23.

⁷⁰ Gen 2:7: "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

⁷¹ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 25.

the universe, and especially in the earth community.”⁷² Even through sin humanity is connected to the earth and the created world.⁷³

Besides the biblical arguments, even natural sciences point to the belonging together of humanity and the world. Evolutionary biology proves that humans are surprisingly closely related to other mammals, as scientists say that we share around 96% of our DNA with chimpanzees.⁷⁴ Insights from cosmology show that mankind is just a brief episode in the history of the universe,⁷⁵ reminding us of our relative insignificance to the grandiosity in time and space of the created world. However, this standpoint is not far from the Bible, since the prophet Isaiah, along with the psalmists, often reminds God’s people of the same idea of their place in creation, and their relative insignificance.⁷⁶ Considering all these different aspects, we can agree with van der Kooi and van den Brink that humans undoubtedly belong to the category of creatures.⁷⁷

For Conradie, this belonging together with the entirety of creation, is best illustrated by the metaphor of the house(hold) of God. As he formulates, “[t]he earth is the household (*oikos*) which human beings inhabit. Biologically and genetically we form part of this house and cannot understand ourselves in any way outside of this house.”⁷⁸ The image of the household will receive more attention in a later part of the chapter but now we will move to the next point of placing humanity and our relation to creation in its wider context.

⁷² Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 128.

⁷³ Gen 3:17-19: “To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken;

for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

⁷⁴ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.14

⁷⁵ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 27.

⁷⁶ For example, in Isa 40:6-8 the prophet says that: “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” As Isaiah suggests, humans are under the same laws of nature and earthly existence, sharing the vulnerabilities of other creatures. This passage is repeated in the New Testament in 1 Pet 1:24-25. Psalm 103:14-16 similarly reminds us in a more comforting way that “He [God] knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

⁷⁷ van der Kooi, van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics*, 260.

⁷⁸ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 44.

c) God is the ultimate ruler of creation

While the first point that mankind was created in the image of God could suggest – although in a false interpretation – the supremacy and distinctiveness of human beings above and over against creation, the second point, the belonging of humanity to the community of creation – backed up by science – could suggest that there is nothing and nobody above, or in control of the universe, the course of (evolutionary) history, the life of humanity and creation. At this point, we recall the fundamental Christian conviction that the ultimate, sovereign ruler of heaven and earth is the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one who gives dominion to humanity is ultimately the one who has dominion over the entire creation. Countless biblical passages make this claim clear.⁷⁹

This claim, together with the previous two points, helps us to see clearly that the relation between humankind and creation cannot be discussed separately from the threefold relation between God, humankind, and creation. As we previously assessed, this set of relations is characterized by God’s sovereignty over all of creation, the belonging of humankind to the community of creation, and the special role and vocation that humanity has to fulfill on earth. What it means in the Christian life to acknowledge this *status quo* is eloquently summarized by Rowan Williams:

“[...] only by our completely not wanting to be God can the divine life take root in us. Discipleship in the body of Christ is in one sense simply a matter of constantly battling to be a creature, battling against all those instincts in us which make us want to be God or make us want to be what we think God is. There, of course, is the catch. And that’s why discipleship challenges at every level those unrealities which distort humanity, which distort creatureliness.”⁸⁰

In light of the scientific and technological developments of the last century, it seems that it is more and more difficult to battle to be a creature, and against wanting to be God. Therefore, it is important to recall from time to time the biblical perspective of our place in creation and in front of God. However, knowing our place in front of God does not mean submission to a distant, tyrant-like ruler of the universe. The King, whose sovereignty human beings should reflect and whose rule they should apply in the world, is described in Psalm 145

⁷⁹ According to Ps 22:28 “Dominion belongs to the Lord.” Ps 47:2 says that the Lord is “the great King over all the earth.” Paul writes in 1 Tim 6:14 that God is the “only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords.” In Matthew 28:18, Jesus himself claims that “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

⁸⁰ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.16

not as a tyrant but as a Lord who is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (v.8), who “is good to all, has compassion on all he has made” (v. 9), who is “faithful and trustworthy” and “upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down” (v. 14). Psalm 104 tells that God as a King is also the great provider: “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand, and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (vs. 15–16). To know even closer who the Lord of this world is, I think that we should first of all look at Jesus Christ, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9).

d) Human dominion in light of Genesis 2

After briefly examining who human beings are in terms of their place and role in the world as created in the image of God, being members of the community of creation, of which the triune God is the sovereign Lord, or more simply put, we can move further to our main concern: how to interpret the commission to subdue and rule the earth? In this regard, the Yahwist, or the second creation narrative, offers some important insights. Gen 2:4b-25 gives a more detailed description of God’s plan for the relationship between humankind and the earth: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (v. 15). As Moo puts it, “in Genesis 2 we find a way of expressing God’s purpose for humankind that moves from what is potentially abstract and general to the rooted and the local.”⁸¹ This applies in particular to the commission of dominion over the earth. In this passage, there are two crucial terms related to subduing and ruling over the earth: to work (Hebrew *abad* - עָבַד) and take care (Hebrew *shamar* - שָׁמַר) of it. The verb *abad* is usually translated as ‘to work’ (NIV), ‘to till’ (NRSV), or ‘to cultivate’ (NASB). In its general sense, the verb refers to labor, work, and doing work. However, depending on the word combinations in which it is used, it can also be translated as ‘to serve.’⁸² This means that humans are not only rulers over the earth but also its servants. We can observe that while the term ‘to work’ has a connotation of considering the object – in this case, the earth and the rest of creation – of the work of human

⁸¹ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.45

⁸² Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles Briggs, *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), Logos 9 Bible Software.

The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament: from A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles Briggs, based on the lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius. Interestingly, *ebed*, the Hebrew word for the Lord’s Servant (Isa. 42:1-4; Isa. 53:11) comes from the same root as to work/till/serve (*abad*).

beings as something instrumental for their benefit and satisfaction, the term ‘to serve’ has a relational meaning, focusing on what is beneficial for the other.

The other term, *shamar* has even more nuances. Principally it means to guard, to watch, to keep (God’s commands), but it also has the meaning of preserving and protecting, as well as performing the service imposed by someone, or to have charge of a property in trust.⁸³ So humankind is given the commission to watch over, protect and preserve the garden, and generally the earth. This means more than accomplishing a task. Being in charge of a property in trust to protect and preserve it places Adam and humanity in special relationships with God and the earth. The guard does not own the property he is protecting but he is responsible before the one who put him in charge. He has limited power and freedom to work and use it for his benefit, but at the same time he has to serve the earth – and through it serve God.

Interestingly, the same two verbs and their abbreviates are used in different combinations to describe the service of the Levitical priests in and around the tabernacle.⁸⁴

The same verb *shamar* appears in a different setting in the Aaronic blessing, referring to what God does in His relation to the people of Israel: “The LORD bless you and keep (*shamar*) you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26).

Considering the rich meaning of the discussed terms, the responsibility of Adam in the garden of Eden, and its application to humanity on behalf of the created world, cannot be reduced to the mechanical task of tilling and working it to obtain food. This responsibility requires also a priestly attitude of service, as well as an imitation of God’s gracious and protective attitude towards His people. According to Moo, as *imago Dei* on earth, human beings should reflect God’s protecting love⁸⁵ and respond to it through priestly service on behalf of creation. Bavinck’s threefold interpretation of the *imago Dei* as prophetic, priestly, and royal (as a ruler) mandates⁸⁶ is in accordance with Moo’s view.

⁸³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles Briggs, *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), Logos 9 Bible Software. *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament: from A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles Briggs, based on the lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius.*

⁸⁴ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.47.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 16.48.

⁸⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics 2*, 577.

As we can see, the explanation of dominion in Genesis 2 offers a different or at least a much broader perspective on what it means to subdue the earth and rule over it as the image of God. Moo gives a good summary of this as follows: “Our human vocation is to work and take care of the place where God has planted us, to serve him in our rule in creation as priests in his temple. [...] The purpose of the dominion that we are given over other creatures is the peace and blessing that God intends for us and all his creation.”⁸⁷ Even though we, as humans affected by sin, are incapable of completely fulfilling our priestly calling on behalf of creation, we can also in this regard look at the only real high priest, Jesus Christ, knowing that he is the perfect mediator between God and creation and that he can empathize with our weaknesses.⁸⁸

e) Dominion in the shadow of sin

The problem of sin, or more precisely the theological discussion about it, is many times limited to the relation between God and humankind. Conradie calls attention to the fact that “[t]he impact of human sin on the whole earth community is undeniable. [...] sin has an impact on human relations with God (Gen 3), with other humans (Gen 4) and the whole earth (Gen 6).”⁸⁹ He even suggests the need for an ecological reinterpretation of sin.⁹⁰ For our topic, it is not needed to dig deeper into the features of such reinterpretation, but it is required to acknowledge and count with the tragic reality of sin also in the relationship between human beings and the earth. Concerning this relationship, one of the worst consequences of human sin is understood as alienation from nature.⁹¹ However, from the perspective of dominion over the earth and in general the relationship between humanity and creation, the most important task is, as Conradie suggests, to recognize that the primary problem we have to address is not natural suffering and human finitude but sin.⁹² Considering this, the theological discourse has to be reoriented from the tension between nature and grace (finitude and eternity, suffering and the

⁸⁷ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.49.

⁸⁸ “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,^[†] Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Hebrews 4:14-15.

⁸⁹ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 194.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 193.

⁹¹ This can be described in many ways, as Conradie picks from prominent authors in the field: “the disruption of universal connectedness (Leonardo Boff), the desire to be God and the denial of creatureliness (Bouma-Prediger), ‘to pollute and be polluted’ (Colin Gunton), the refusal to accept our place [...] (Sallie McFague), the ‘violent and dangerous *self-isolation* of human beings from the rest of creation’ (Michael Welker), [...] anthropocentrism (self-centredness), [...]. Conradie, 196.

⁹² Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 197.

almighty and loving God, science, and religion) to the tension between sin and grace.⁹³ This is not only important for the theological assessment of the place of humanity in relation to God and creation, but it is the fundamental reason why at the beginning of the chapter we assumed that the ecological crisis with its multifaceted implications, is in fact a religious crisis.

3. The stewardship metaphor

In the previous part, we could follow a wide-ranging reflection on the subject of the relationship between human beings and non-human creation. Therefore, a more comprehensive way of expressing the essence of this relationship is needed. Theologians have been searching for metaphors suitable for this task. Among others, Moo suggests that the stewardship metaphor is the most suitable.⁹⁴ The English word steward is the translation of the Greek *oikonomos* (*οἰκονόμος*), and it is rooted in the term *oikia* (*οἰκία*, -ς), meaning a house or household. As Conradie suggests, stewardship requires *oikonomia*, which refers to “the responsibility and accountability for the planning and administrating the affairs of the household (*oikos*).⁹⁵ Even though the term is not used in Scripture to describe our relationship to the creation, it appears in Jesus’ parable of the wise steward.⁹⁶ The parable has an eschatological character but it calls on the same responsible service as the calling of the first human being to serve and keep the land. On the other hand, the metaphor of the *oikonomos* is in accordance with Conradie’s view of creation as being the household of God, in which human beings have a special calling and destiny as responsible stewards of this household.⁹⁷

To give a wider theological assessment of the stewardship metaphor, Conradie mentions five dimensions of the concept as developed by Hall: a. The theological dimension refers to God’s ultimate authority over the earth, whose affairs the stewards are called to manage; b. The Christological dimension points to Christ as the prototype of stewardship, being the faithful Servant of God. His person, self-sacrificial life, and death are the example and source of stewardship; c. The ecclesiastical dimension shows that the church is a stewarding community, following the example of the Suffering Servant and existing to serve the needs of the world; d.

⁹³ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 197.

⁹⁴ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.82

⁹⁵ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 203.

⁹⁶ “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns.” Luke 12:42-43.

⁹⁷ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 183-184.

The anthropological dimension reminds us that not only Christians but all human beings have been called to be God's stewards in the world; e. The eschatological dimension calls on the watchfulness, trustworthiness, and blamelessness of being conscious of the coming End.⁹⁸

In the following, we will try to articulate the most important features of biblical stewardship, according to the five dimensions listed above. We follow Conradie's Christological and Trinitarian approach to stewardship, taking into consideration also Moo's exegetical observations based on Jesus' parable of the wise servant.

a) Theological dimension

Previously, we argued that the triune God is the ultimate ruler and sovereign Lord of the entire creation. As Conradie notes, one of the strengths of the stewardship metaphor is precisely that it accentuates that the earth belongs to God, and humans, as the representatives of God, are commissioned by him to serve, work, and protect the nonhuman creation.⁹⁹ The same idea is suggested through the parable: even if the master seems to be absent, he is the owner of the household, before him all the servants are accountable and he will judge their service and faithfulness in the end.¹⁰⁰ Just as the steward received his 'title' and was put in charge by his master, humanity also received the gift of the *imago Dei* together with the task and responsibility to rule over creation. Because the – limited – ability of the steward – and also that of humans as the image of God – to rule, control, and care is given by God, the Master, it means that they are accountable before him.

b) Christological dimension

Stewardship has its source and perfect example in Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of the prophecies about the Servant of God (Isa 42, Isa 53), and of the Old Testament ideal of the shepherd king who ought to care, feed and protect the sheep of God. Christ did not accomplish his mission through force but through emptying himself (*kenosis*, Phil 2:7), and giving himself for others.¹⁰¹ Therefore, Conradie's assertion that "[t]he only true dominium terrae can be that of the crucified and risen Messiah"¹⁰² is applicable also for the only true stewardship. On the other hand, stewardship has its source in Christ also through his teaching about the wise – and

⁹⁸ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 208-209.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 211.

¹⁰⁰ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.83

¹⁰¹ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 219.

¹⁰² Ibid.

wicked – servants, or stewards. Moo also emphasizes that the essence of stewardship is to care for those who were entrusted to the steward and serve them on behalf of the master. He is responsible for the lives of all members of the household, having the task to give them food at the right time, caring for them, applying the laws of the owner, and protecting them until his arrival.¹⁰³ Both perspectives point out that stewardship is a responsible service, where the steward is also a servant and a slave. Therefore, he is responsible before his Master, and he needs to give an account of his service upon his return. The parable approach makes this claim even more emphatic. Stewardship Christologically understood means that the purpose of stewardship is always for the sake of the household, in responsible service on behalf of the Master. That responsible service is essentially Christ's self-giving and self-sacrificial service. As Conradie formulates, "[h]uman responsibility is best understood as a grateful response to the story of God's salvific grace epitomized in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."¹⁰⁴

c) Ecclesiological dimension

This dimension emphasizes that the concept of stewardship is not only an ecological matter but it reflects the essence of the church's calling. As a stewarding community, it has been established through the Holy Spirit to exist for others, living from and imitating the self-sacrificial love of the faithful Servant of God, Jesus Christ. Taking seriously the human condition of being simultaneously *imago Dei* and *imago mundi*, the church has its vocation to intercede between the world and God. It is not a self-purposed community but a serving community, responsible for those entrusted to them. This idea is also at the center of the parable approach to stewardship. The ecological perspective accentuates that this responsibility of the church does not only consist of human beings but creation as a whole. Preaching the Gospel and caring for human communities cannot be and should not be separated from caring for the creation. As Conradie asserts, "[t]here can be no serious commitment to social and economic justice which does not include an ecological responsibility and vice versa. The well-being of human beings is inseparably linked with that of all life on earth."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 16.83

¹⁰⁴ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 202.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

d) Anthropological dimension

This dimension calls attention to the fact that responsible stewardship is not a special privilege and task of the church. Nor is it exclusively the concern of the agricultural industry or environmental activists. It is God's first commission to humanity. As we previously argued, all human beings share equally their existence as the image of God, as well as members of the community of creation. Concerning the parable, the servant is – prior to being a steward – a member of the household, together with all other members. They form one community which they all depend on, and which belongs to the Master. Being created in the image of God and belonging to the community of creation are fundamental anthropological features. The serving and protecting dominion associated with them is a commission to humanity as a whole and all human beings in part. While we, as Christians, confess that we are full citizens of the household of God (Eph 2:12-19), Conradie asserts that not just the human community but the earth itself is ultimately the larger house of God, inhabited by human beings together with other forms of life.¹⁰⁶ This is not an abstract theological statement but also a 'practical' observation, as McFague claims: "through human power and the impact of human culture and technology, the roles of humans have become crucial for the future health of the earth community. We have become, whether we like it or not, the custodians of the ecosystems in which we live. We no longer have a choice: we are responsible."¹⁰⁷

e) Eschatological dimension

This dimension reminds us that responsible stewardship is not only connected to the theology of creation but is embedded in the salvation history. In his *oikos*-theology, Conradie emphasizes that home is an eschatological concept.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, as stewards in the household of God, we live – and have to maintain – "the tension between the *already* and the *not yet* of God's acts of salvation from sin, liberation from oppression and victory of evil."¹⁰⁹ This means that there is a clear discontinuity between the house that we steward now and the home which will come with the day of Christ. To accentuate this distinction, Conradie uses – especially for the church – the term *paroikia*,¹¹⁰ which means a sojourn in a foreign land (having a similar

¹⁰⁶ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 221.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 128.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 224.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 225.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

meaning in the spiritual sense).¹¹¹ As 1 Pet 2:11 suggests, Christians are in a way foreigners and exiles in this world. Living in this world is not yet the final goal of creation and human existence. As foreigners and sojourners, humans are on the road, as Conradie formulates, “En route to the Father’s house.”¹¹² The eschatological aspect of Jesus’ parable accentuates the ethical responsibility of the steward in light of the coming judgment of his service. In accordance both with the hope of the coming real (eschatological) home of God and the ethical imperative before the judgment of the steward’s service, Conradie brings in the category of preparation, “preparing for the way of the Lord.”¹¹³

According to this, all of humanity’s managing, stewarding, and ruling activity in this world has this eschatological aspect. This suggests that the way human beings relate to the created world which was entrusted to them to take good care of it is connected to the way they prepare for the coming new world. However, the coming of the glorious new creation does not depend on any human attitude or activity but, as Conradie refers to Bonhoeffer, “preparation of the way is a way from the ultimate to the penultimate. Christ is coming of his own will, by his own strength, and out of his own love ... He is the preparer of his own way; it is this, and really only this, that makes us the preparers of His way...”¹¹⁴

4. Critiques of the stewardship metaphor and alternatives

As we already mentioned earlier, the steward metaphor is not a perfect conception either, and it has received criticism from many sides. Some scholars have criticized its use saying that it suggests the notion of a distant God and that it emphasizes too much the side of humans being separate from creation.¹¹⁵ Other criticisms include that it is too managerial, it assumes human supremacy among other species, it is too reminiscent of the ideals of colonialism, it gives the impression that humans can control everything, it reduces nature to an object given in the hands of humans, or that it is not suitable to include the multifaceted relationships between God, humanity, and the rest of creation.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, (Virginia: Clarendon Press, 1917), ed. Ed.

¹¹² Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 224.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 229.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 230.

¹¹⁵ Moo, Moo, *Creation Care*, 24.11.

¹¹⁶ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 211-214.

Facing the criticisms there were attempts to find better and more comprehensive metaphors, such as priests, gardeners, custodians, caretakers, or partners.¹¹⁷ From these, however, only the priest metaphor has received significant attention, especially within the Orthodox tradition. This priestly vocation of humanity on behalf of creation is central to the theology of the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, as Karkkainen reports: “the human being is not fulfilled until it becomes the ‘summing up of nature,’ as priest referring the world back to its Creator.”¹¹⁸ This idea is present also in Moltmann’s view of humans as *imago mundi*. However, the view of humanity as a mediator between God and creation, and through whom God manifests himself to creation and redeems it, as Conradie observes, is too anthropocentric, mistakenly presuming that God is dependent on humankind in his relation to creation.¹¹⁹

In the heat of the debates concerning the ecologically pleasing newer metaphors and approaches to the question, I think that it would be helpful to make a step backward from the human-centered metaphors (emphasizing the principal role of humanity either through its world-shaping responsibility or through the divine-mundane mediation) to describe our relationship to the earth, and return to Calvin’s conception of the world as a balancing point of reference. As Lane indicates, Calvin “conceived of the world as a theater for the contemplation of divine beauty, with God assuming the central role at the heart of the action on stage.”¹²⁰ This reminds us that even in the ecologic discussion about the earth, where the human possibilities and responsibilities are emphasized as decisive for the entire creation, humans are and ought to be in the world first of all spectators of God’s glory.¹²¹ In my opinion, this does not reduce the importance of responsible stewardship but it sets its limits because from the human possibilities to exercise dominion, being tempted to step forward into the principal role on earth, the metaphor of theater keeps the principle role of acting to God while reminds people, including us, that our main role is to praise and worship God, his glory and beauty reflected by his creation, and his loving act of creating, governing, redeeming and renewing the world.

¹¹⁷ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 215-216.

¹¹⁸ Karkkainen, *Creation and Humanity*, 221.

¹¹⁹ Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home On Earth?*, 210.

¹²⁰ Lane, *Ravished by Beauty. The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality*, 58.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 59.

5. Conclusion

Considering the biblical pillars of the relationship between humanity and the earth, we can conclude that the most suitable, although not perfect, metaphor to comprehensively express it, is that of stewardship. We came to this conclusion by identifying in the introduction the problematic nature of this relationship (rooted in the commission of dominion over the earth) in Scripture and then analyzing the context and the different aspects of the relationship between God, creation, and humanity. We highlighted the special status of human beings (as the image of God) associated with the responsibility to work, serve and care for the land. We indicated that human beings are members of the community of creation and that humans and non-human creation are interrelated and interdependent. We affirmed that the triune God is the ultimate ruler of heaven and earth. Finally, we pointed out that this relation is also affected by sin and is in need of renewal and redemption. In the second part of the chapter, we presented the metaphor of stewardship, which, however imperfect, gives a suitable account of the biblical vision of the relationship between humanity and creation. The most important features of this concept are its emphasis on the fact that the earth belongs to God, its Christological dimension (Christ as God's faithful Servant and Jesus' parable of the wise steward are the source and model of the concept), that the church has its mission to imitate Christ's self-sacrificial work in responsible service for the lives of others and of creation, that all human beings share in the same existence as members of God's household, and finally, that stewardship requires watchfulness and preparation, for this world is not yet the perfect house of God, which will come with the day of Christ.

IV. Miroslav Volf's vision of the flourishing life

1. Flourishing – what does it mean?

In this chapter, I will offer a brief overview of Volf's ideas about the flourishing life. What does the flourishing life exactly mean to Volf? One could associate flourishing with prosperity and link it to the prosperity gospel. However tempting this association seems, Volf delimits himself from it. In his understanding, flourishing life is interchangeable with “true life, good life, life worth living, human fullness, or life that truly is life.”¹²² Moreover, Volf's vision of flourishing exceeds the good life of humans by making it a universal scope of God's entire creation to which humanity's existence is closely tied.

Striving for well-being is not only a human feature but it can be found in the core of the Scripture, it belongs to the original, God-minded essence of creation. Thus, seeking the flourishing of humankind and creation is not only a worldly human desire longing for biblical legitimization but vice-versa. As Volf asserts, “[c]oncern with human flourishing is at the heart of the great faiths, including Christianity.”¹²³ However, he does not intend to articulate a syncretized account of flourishing, putting together all major world religions. His thought is deeply rooted in and controlled by Scripture. Volf does not only observe that the concern with human flourishing can be found in the Bible but he states that “the transcendent realm is superordinate to the mundane, [...] we can properly attend to and truly enjoy ordinary life only when our primary attachment is to the transcendent realm.”¹²⁴ The primacy of the transcendent realm, and ultimately of the Triune God in terms of human flourishing is a crucial statement throughout Volf's system of thought. As he further explains, “[r]eference to transcendence isn't an add-on to humanity; rather, it defines human beings... The relation to the divine becomes the axis of our lives. It shapes how we perceive ourselves and the world, what desires we have and how they are satiated. [...] to be free, full, and flourishing, life must be lived in relationship to the divine, which gives meaning, orientation, and unique pleasure to all our mundane

¹²² Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, *For the life of the world. Theology That Makes a Difference* (Brazos Press, 2019), 13.

¹²³ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2011), 63.

¹²⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing – Why we need religion in a globalized world* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 44.

experiences and endeavors.”¹²⁵ The vision of the good life that Volf is attempting to articulate is based on and according to God’s revelation through His Word and the Word incarnated of the creation, redemption, and new creation of everything by God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.¹²⁶

However, in the 18th century occurred an anthropocentric shift that distorted the direction of seeking the good life: human interest was redirected “from the transcendent God to human beings and their mundane affairs.”¹²⁷ Even though this new humanism rejected God but it still kept the moral obligation that linked people together in solidarity and love as articulated in Marx’s vision of universal beneficence in a communist society. But at the end of the 20th century, another shift occurred: the goal and means of human flourishing became experiential satisfaction.¹²⁸ Thus, after losing connection to the transcendent realm, the vision of flourishing lost also its communal aspect based on solidarity and public consciousness. However, the strive for experiential satisfaction – as a sinful distortion of the created desire for a flourishing life – paradoxically ends in even greater disappointment and melancholy,¹²⁹ fueling an increasing nihilism.

This is why we have to return to the biblical understanding and foundations of the flourishing life and offer a better (and the only true!) alternative to all the stranded attempts to find it elsewhere.

2. Flourishing in the context of creation-fall-redemption

As we step back to the very beginning, on the evening of the sixth day of creation, “God saw all that he made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:30). By creating everything good, God also intended that all his creations should live well. Even though, Volf is careful not to fall into any millennialist or historical positivist account of flourishing that could reach its fullness in this life, so instead of the created order, he focuses on the moltmannian hope concerning the ‘advent’ character of the future.¹³⁰ According to this, the condition and possibility of the flourishing life consist in belief in a partly realized eschatology.¹³¹ We should strive for the flourishing of all

¹²⁵ Volf, *Flourishing*, 81.

¹²⁶ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 43-51.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 58.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 59.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 61.

¹³⁰ Volf, *Flourishing*, 70.

¹³¹ Volf, Croasmun, *For the life of the world*, 156-159.

creation because of the coming Kingdom of God, through which God Himself is coming to dwell in His creation and to bring it to consummation through creating everything anew. The fact that God has already started his new creation in Jesus Christ, and that the Kingdom of God came near in Christ means that we can hope and strive for flourishing life already in this life.

The relation between God and human flourishing in Volf's assessment is most strongly marked by two central biblical verses. According to 1 John 4:8 "God is love." This is the Alfa and Omega for the flourishing of creation: because God is love and He loves His Creation. Secondly comes the great commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Volf writes that "Love has always primacy in the realization of flourishing life under the unfitting conditions of the present age."¹³² Thus, flourishing life is ultimately a life of love.

In his search for the flourishing life, Volf takes seriously the whole dynamics of the salvation history: God's initial will for his creation to flourish, the sinful deviation from God's initial plan, and the renewal to the conformity of Christ. He makes this dichotomy clear when he writes that "Flourishing requires the transformative presence of the true life in the midst of the false, which requires that the true world come to be in the midst of the false world, that the world recall, recover, and for the first time fully embody its goodness as the gift of the God who is love."¹³³ The same tension comes to expression also when he writes about the advent character of the Kingdom of God. He acknowledges the unfitting present conditions of life but at the same time, his account of the partly realized eschatology enables a renewal of the world – and our worldview – to the conformity of Christ, even though the Kingdom cannot be fully realized in this world.

The essence of the Christ-like renewal of human flourishing is summarized by Volf in his reference to Augustine. According to this, "human beings flourish and are truly happy when they center their lives on God, the source of everything that is true, good, and beautiful."¹³⁴ This centering on God is realized in being aware that we are loved by God – because God is love –, and in response, loving God and neighbor. This means that the only way to properly relate to and love the created things is "to love and enjoy them in God."¹³⁵ This is the only true

¹³² Volf, Croasmun, *For the life of the world*, 167.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 150.

¹³⁴ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 58.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*.

alternative to today's widespread (distorted) account of flourishing: the strive for experiential satisfaction and the "follow your dream!"¹³⁶ madness, where it is pretended that there is no absolute or normative way to live life to its fullness but only original individual paths can lead people to joy and fulfillment.

In my opinion, defining the good life, or flourishing life as the life all human beings strive for, and which can only be reached by reference to the transcendent and through living from and in the love of God may seem a little generalizing, but considering Volf's context and purpose, seeking a vision of flourishing life in a globalized and religiously pluralistic society makes this generalization understandable. For this reason, he is searching for the points of congruence between the universal human desire for a good life and the Christian understanding of it. But, in this endeavor, he does not give up the particularities and exclusiveness of the gospel, and he places his entire reasoning in the context of the great biblical narrative of creation-fall-redemption.

3. The threefold articulation of flourishing life: righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit

According to what has been said earlier, Volf suggests a threefold articulation for the vision of flourishing life. He relies mainly upon the Kingdom of God imagery, as it is elaborated by Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul. Especially one verse from Rome 14 is very significant for structuring his thoughts: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rome 14:17). From this sentence emerges the tripartite articulation of the flourishing life: life led well, life going well, and life feeling as it should.¹³⁷ Life led well corresponds to righteousness, life going well is associated with peace, while life feeling as it should, refers to joy in the Holy Spirit.

The three terms do not only cover different aspects of the flourishing life but they refer to the three dimensions of it, as we will discuss briefly in what follows. Volf's tripartite articulation of the flourishing life offers also the framework for our later assessment of the farming life.

¹³⁶ Volf, Croasmun, *For the life of the world*, 24-25.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

a) Life led well

Life led well, or righteousness is the agential component of Volf's account of flourishing: "from the right thoughts of the heart and right acts to the right habits and virtues."¹³⁸ To put it very simply, we lead our lives well when we love God and neighbor, and align ourselves with God who loves.¹³⁹ But this righteousness through loving God and neighbor is not only a theoretical matter, or a question of confessing that we love God and our neighbor. For Volf, righteousness means taking up our public responsibility. Even though he does not encourage any sort of revolutionary action, Volf asserts that "[w]e are not utterly powerless in the face of social structures we have created, whose existence depends in part on norms we embrace, and whose functioning our daily participation sustains."¹⁴⁰ As righteousness, or justice, seems almost interchangeable with love for Volf, the flourishing life concerning life led well means "a universal exercise of love generously given and gratefully received."¹⁴¹ This indeed has to start in the church, but it must exceed it towards the world. Because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for it. And God's love commands us to love as well. By claiming that a good life requires righteousness and acts of love toward others, including humans and creation, Volf urges the putting into practice of the Christian moral principles, which are required for the well-being of others, but also the flourishing of the believer.

b) Life going well

Life going well, in association with peace, refers to the circumstantial component of the flourishing life. This means that to have a good life on earth, certain external, or relational conditions have to be fulfilled as well. As Volf points out, the Greek term for peace, *eiréné* is more than a spiritual condition, as people often interpret it. In light of the Hebrew term *shalom*, it is a state of the world, a state of well-being, including the individual, social, and communal levels.¹⁴² We, as bodily creatures, only live well "when our basic needs are met and we experience that we are loved as we (properly) love ourselves."¹⁴³ However, this does not mean that fulfillment and a good life ultimately depend on whether our needs are all satisfied or if others love us enough. Because, for Volf, peaceful circumstances, on any level (natural, social,

¹³⁸ Volf, Croasmun, *For the life of the world*, 14.

¹³⁹ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 71.

¹⁴⁰ Volf, *Flourishing*, 57.

¹⁴¹ Volf, Croasmun, *For the life of the world*, 167.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 170.

¹⁴³ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 71.

economic, political, personal, etc.) are rooted in a set of peaceful relationships: with God, other people, and the created world.¹⁴⁴ This means that peace is not the result of suitable circumstances but it is the condition of good circumstances. Inter-ethnic conflicts, many family dramas, the ecological crisis, and so many other poisoned relationships demonstrate that peace and fundamental solutions don't arise from political, technological, or any other partial or mechanically planned attempts. These spoiled and corrupted relationships, whether between persons, communities, or humanity and the creation, can only be rectified by the peaceful relationship with God that can transform all the other relationships: to humans, to creation, to material goods, and so on. However, living in the tension of the 'already' and 'not yet,' we know that not all circumstances will be as happy in this life as we would desire. Volf is not ignoring this issue. He acknowledges that suffering and the indignities that accompany it have been and continue to be part of our lives. However, he considers that these experiences function as the main motor for both the search for a vision of life that is truly worthy of human beings and for the struggle, personal and social, to turn that vision into reality.¹⁴⁵

c) Life feeling as it should

The third component of the flourishing life, life feeling as it should, associated by Volf with joy in the Holy Spirit, refers to the affective dimension of flourishing life. As Volf asserts, "true joy requires an intentional object over which one ought rightly to rejoice, and the superlative "object" – the superlative cause – of Christian joy is the presence of God."¹⁴⁶ Therefore, Christian joy does not ultimately depend on material goods, or any other external circumstances, but on the Triune God who is himself the source of joy. The social-relational understanding of joy sheds a new light also on the creation and the material things. It helps us understand things as social relations. Just like a pen that someone gets from his father, that small object gets an entirely different significance and value, because, through it, the son relates to the father.¹⁴⁷ The same can be true if we relate to the created world and the material goods as gifts from God. Instead of treating people like things that can be thrown away when we get bored of them, we should learn to relate to things and ultimately the entire creation as social relationships: through them relating to the Father who gave them to us as presents. However, in reality it is not that simple to live accordingly. Volf asserts that for today's people, one of the

¹⁴⁴ Volf, Croasmun, *For the life of the world*, 171.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 176.

¹⁴⁷ Volf, *Flourishing*, 203.

most general accounts of joy is pleasure and experiential satisfaction. People (pre)tend to be happy and experience joy when they experience pleasure. However, as Volf comments, “When we place pleasure in the center of our life and decouple it from the love of God and of neighbor and the hope for a common future, we are left ‘with no way of organizing desire into a structure of meaning.’”¹⁴⁸ He continues, inspired by Augustin, that the human striving for satisfaction and joy can only find proper rest only when we find joy in something infinite – that is, for Christians, the triune God.¹⁴⁹ However, this does not mean that Christians should only be happy while praying. It means that, according to the ‘pen’ illustration above, Christians should experience joy in things by enjoying them in God.

4. Conclusion

Perhaps the best summary of this chapter, and how the human desire for the good life on earth relates to God, as expressed in the concept of flourishing life, comes from Volf himself, who writes that “in principle, there is no opposition between striving after God and working for food [...]. For in striving after and enjoying God, the source of all things – of ourselves, of things [...] – all other striving and enjoyment is encompassed and ordered; with God’s righteousness, the things of ordinary life, necessities as well as conveniences, are given and genuinely enjoyed.”¹⁵⁰ By offering a biblical assessment of the flourishing life, Volf inspires Christians to view their everyday lives and even the most ordinary things in them from a different perspective. God is not indifferent concerning our earthly affairs. He is not a distant God hidden in his transcendence, but as He demonstrated in the incarnation of the Word, he has come “that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Therefore, the vision of and striving for flourishing, good life, the life that is worth living, is indeed central to the Christian faith. By putting the God of love and our relationship with him in the center of this vision, whether it is about righteousness, peaceful circumstances, or enjoyment of life, he avoids any suspicion of promoting a sort of prosperity gospel. At the same time, he raises the value and meaning of every aspect of human life by bringing them under the light of God’s grace and love. Volf articulates a holistic view of life in the hope of the coming Kingdom. Moreover, Volf’s account of flourishing is not only a theoretic or utopic description of an imagined good life. He takes equally seriously both the created structure of life, as well as its

¹⁴⁸ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 62.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Volf, *Flourishing*, 73.

directional distortion through sin and its renewal – partly in this life and entirely in the new creation. But, in this meantime, he also articulates a clear imperative: to act as citizens of God’s Kingdom for the good life of God’s creation: we, who have known God’s love, should share it and act accordingly in justice, search for the peace that the peace of God is working out through and among us, and enjoy the ordinary life and the things of life by enjoying through them the One who gave us everything as gifts. I think that Paul had something similar in his mind when he wrote: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

However, applying these to everyday life, including the life of farmers, has some major challenges that need to be overcome. Perhaps the most difficult is to explicate how God relates to human flourishing regarding the many concrete issues we are facing today,¹⁵¹ or more simply, what is God’s relation to such concerns as land usage, technology and tradition, multinational agri-companies and rural communities, local or global economies. The most fundamental challenge is “...: to really mean that the presence and activity of the God of love, who can make us love our neighbors as ourselves, is our hope and the hope of the world – that this God is the secret of our flourishing as persons, culture, and interdependent inhabitants of a single globe.”¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 73.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 74.

V. Flourishing Farming

In this chapter, we will try to apply Volf's tripartite articulation of the flourishing life to the context of farming and rural life, with a special interest in the Transylvanian situation.

For a better understanding of the context, we utilize interviews with farmers,¹⁵³ and for an agrarian-theological evaluation, we rely mainly on the works of Wendell Berry, Norman Wirzba, Ellen F. Davis, and Michael S. Northcott. In the first part of the sub-chapters, we will summarize the main ideas of the interviews concerning the specific aspects of flourishing life, then an evaluation will follow based on the mentioned literature, and in the end, we will draw the conclusions.

Volf's threefold understanding of the good life will serve as the organizing and structuring force of this part. According to his partitioning of the vision of good life, we will discuss the topic in three sub-chapters: 1. Farming well; 2. Farming going well; 3. Farming feeling as it should.

At the first point, we will try to answer the question: What does it mean to farm well? Here we will focus on the farmers' understanding of the land and their attitude toward it in agricultural practice, aiming at righteousness in cultivating the land. At the second point, the question we will attempt to answer is: What does farming going well mean? Here we will address the social-political-economic concerns of farming, searching for peaceful circumstances. At the last point, the question will be: What does 'farming feeling as it should' mean? Here we will focus on the different levels of experiencing joy and fulfillment in farming and rural life.

We start this endeavor from the idea that the theological claims concerning the three dimensions of flourishing life, in general, must be true for every area of life in particular, such as farming, for example.

¹⁵³ The respondents are all members of the Hungarian Reformed community in Transylvania, even though most of their issues are common with the majority of farmers in Transylvania, or even the entire country of Romania, regardless of their ethnicity and religious affiliation. The respondents are farming between 20 and 80 hectares of land (mainly privately owned, and also rented fields) and cover a wide range of agricultural production, from cereals to dairy and vegetables. In the Romanian context, all four interviewed farmers count as small- to middle-scale farmers, being the owners of their farms, and relying almost exclusively on their own workforce and family members.

1. Farming well

In chapter 3, we presented an ecologically focused biblical evaluation of the relationship between human beings and the earth, concluding that this relationship is best illustrated by the stewardship metaphor. Relating to Volf's vision of the flourishing life, we presume that to achieve flourishing in the farming life, one must do it rightly: to relate and act righteously. According to this, we will examine this relationship in the agricultural practice of some Christian farmers.

a) Interviews

- **Faith and agriculture**

Asking about the link between faith and agriculture, all respondents gave similar answers: faith matters. Although from different aspects, their beliefs play an important role in the way they view the land. DD asserted that there are mainly two ways of understanding the soil: that of the farmers who have only profit and numbers in their minds, having a material understanding of the land, and that of the farmers who view the soil as a living organism, as he also does. BA, who is only a part-time farmer, serving as a pastor, emphasized the importance of respect and mutuality toward the land. For him, the divine command to take care of the land and protect it is decisive. For DJ, the land is, first of all, a gift from God that we must take good care of so that it can bring fruit. GYJ views the land as the source of our daily bread. Three out of the four farmers considered their relationship to the earth defined by their relationship to God. Trying to put together these views, we could say that from a farmer's perspective, the land, as a living organism, is a gift of God that people should take good care of so that it can be and remain the source of our daily bread.

- **The value of the land**

Asking about the value of the land, all respondents agreed that it cannot be made equal to its price. As DJ holds, the land is not just a commodity. It is also a shared view that farmers care more for the fields they own in contrast to those, usually industrial-scale farmers who rent hundreds or thousands of hectares. The reason lies in the different philosophies of farming. For the big farmers, who are more like managers than farmers, and don't even have physical contact with the soil, the land can be translated into numbers, and the most important factor is to get maximal profit in the shortest time and the least investment, usually regardless of the long-term

consequences. For others, like GYJ, who have partly inherited their land from the preceding generations, and bought other fields through years of hard work and self-restraint, the value of the land cannot even be put into numbers. Being part of a multi-generational farming chain, they also intend to preserve and keep the land for future generations, even if their children don't follow them in this heritage.

- **The agricultural practice: sustainability, chemicals and fertilizers, biodiversity, technology**

The respondents shared also how their understanding of the land and soil direct their agricultural practice, in the given conditions, referring both to the way they actually farm and how it could improve. Two important principles can be observed in their views: thinking in the long-term, and giving the land what it needs. Long-term sustainability is prior to short-term profit for all four farmers. However, DJ considers that for most farmers in the Transylvanian context short-term profit is the only that matters. BA argued that we should not live as parasites, exploiting the land, but giving it what it needs. For this, he brings up two main reasons: one religious (our responsibility before God) and one practical (the soil can bring fruit only if it gets what it needs).

Concerning the issues of fertilizers, chemicals, energy use, and other practical questions, the respondents have mostly shared concerns. While they all agree that chemicals and artificial fertilizers are harmful to the soil and the entire ecosystem, they confessed that they are dependent on them; it is impossible to completely avoid their use. The reasons are mainly the many different pathogens, weeds, harmful insects, and the lack of human workforce. However, DD and DJ, who are growing crops on a bigger scale, assert that it is not enough trying to reduce the use of harmful agents to the minimum, there is a need for a change in the mentality of farmers. As DJ tells, we need to change from one type of farming to another, and change is always difficult because at the beginning it involves a decrease in production and the entire process takes 2-3 years until both the farmer learns how to do it differently and also the land has to get used to it. DD mentions that turning to a more responsible and sustainable type of farming has a very high cost, both in financial terms and also concerning time and energy. One example is to replace artificial fertilizers with livestock manure. While fertilizers are relatively simple to use, spreading animal manure requires expensive equipment and much more time because of the volume. GYJ complains that while they are not allowed to grow livestock living in the city, it is nearly impossible to buy enough animal manure at acceptable prices.

Another important aspect is biodiversity. DD considers crop rotation and resting the soil crucial for healthy farming, but he faces difficulties in putting this into practice. In Romania, more corn is needed than other crops, so it happens that for two years in a row there will be corn in the same field. As for resting the soil, preferably every 7 years, he complains that more fields would be needed. Not only the Sabbath year but also the weekly rest day is considered crucial by DJ, referring to his grandfather, in whose days farmers didn't have advanced machinery but could keep the Lord's day even in the busiest farming season and still do everything in time. As DJ says, plant cover between harvesting one and sowing another crop is very important, although not yet common in Romania. Even though there is financial support for applying it, DD considers that it is too expensive for most farmers. Concerning diversity, BA tells that farmers in the different regions of Transylvania should pay attention to the local geographic conditions and grow what is suitable for that area. For example, farmers in his region cannot expect good crops but the conditions are excellent for growing livestock. This means relying more on the natural resources of different areas than on forced production.

A further important issue is that of machinery and equipment. Even though all respondents agree that performant equipment is needed, especially to replace human work, DJ is convinced that in an attempt to return to the original way of farming – to a certain extent –, iron should be avoided as much as possible and the roots of plants used to loosen the soil instead. BA considers it important to make technical improvements such as investing in irrigation and automatization.

- **Individual responsibility**

Asking the farmers about the responsibilities they think small-scale farmers have facing the ecological crisis we live in, they agreed that everyone has a role to play. However, DD considers that it would be easier to persuade one big farmer than hundreds of small ones, but still, they have to give a good example to the farmer society. According to DJ, big polluters have much more responsibility in combating the crisis, while the small farmers have much fewer possibilities, being conditioned by external factors. The main responsibility, he thinks, is that of the policymakers: if they lead things in the wrong direction through the rules and laws, we cannot expect good things. But he is confident that things could be different in the future.

- **Summary**

As a summary of this part, we can say that according to the respondents, the land, as a living organism, is God's gift for our well-being, and a heritage that we received, and taking

care of it we must keep it for future generations. The two most important principles in farming are to think in the long term and to provide for the needs of the soil. For this, and to fulfill our ecological responsibilities, a change is needed both in mentality and in practice. This change requires contentment, sacrifice, respect toward the land, and faith in God, who, as GYJ reminds us, takes even greater care for us than for the birds which don't sow and harvest and still have their food.

b) Agrarian literature

In the following, we will reflect on the issues raised in the interviews based on agrarian literature.

- **The gift of land from a post-fall perspective**

Concerning the meaning and value of the land, Berry accentuates that, first of all, it should be considered a divine gift.¹⁵⁴ In addition to the theological assessment of the relation between humanity and the earth in Chapter 3, Berry calls attention to the story of the giving of the Promised land to Israel as a paradigmatic narrative for this relationship. As he argues, the Garden of Eden, as a gift to Adam and Eve, and the commission of dominion refer primarily to a pre-fall state of humanity, while the Promised Land is a gift to the fallen mankind, and for this, it is especially relevant in our context.¹⁵⁵ Davis suggests that we should all consider the place where we live to the same extent as our home – and a gift of God – just as considers Israel the promised land to be its home. This way of thinking raises the importance we give to the biblical texts related to land care and also raises our awareness of how we treat our environment.¹⁵⁶

- **Alienation**

Why is it important to consider our relationship to the land from the post-fall perspective? Because, as Davis cites Richard Manning, we practice a “catastrophic agriculture.”¹⁵⁷ Sin affects all spheres of life, including farming, and our behavior toward the land and creation. The most devastating effect of sin in our relation to the land is what Davis

¹⁵⁴ Wendell Berry, *The Art of Commonplace. The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 295.

¹⁵⁵ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 295.

¹⁵⁶ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

calls the rupture.¹⁵⁸ Berry as well considers alienation from the land as the primary source of the ecological crisis and the wrong ways of doing agriculture. Berry interprets this alienation in the correlation of the rupture between the body and soul,¹⁵⁹ the estrangement of the sexes in the modern failure of marriage,¹⁶⁰ and ultimately the rupture between people and land. This last aspect is most visible in the way people are disconnected from the source of their bodily life. From the perspective of consumers, people no longer know the earth from which they come, and from which their food comes, and therefore they no longer have respect or feel responsible for it.¹⁶¹ From the perspective of the producers, including many farmers, this rupture can be observed in the way “we began to mechanize both the Creation itself and our conception of it. We began to see the whole Creation merely as raw material, to be transformed by machines into a manufactured Paradise.”¹⁶² Northcott calls modern industrial farming based on this idea *hydroponics*, which means that the only function the soil is meant to perform for the crop is “to hold it up towards the sun and provide a medium for the uptake of rainwater and nutrients from artificial fertilizers.”¹⁶³

- **Specialization**

A further aspect of our sinful use of land is in Berry’s view specialization, characterized mainly by disintegration¹⁶⁴ and total control, or agricultural totalitarianism.¹⁶⁵ It means the fragmentation and disintegration of responsibilities, knowledge, workmanship, and ultimately character, which were once personal and universal.¹⁶⁶ Thus, farming, which was the first and most important commission of humanity, is turned into a concern of specialists in the fields of agri-science and economics. Berry’s understanding of this agricultural totalitarianism refers to the desire for independence both from the unpredictability and order of nature, and creating instead a technologically and chemically controlled environment. But, as he asserts, “[i]f the world’s people accept the industrial premises that favor bigness, centralization, and (for a few

¹⁵⁸ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 8.

¹⁵⁹ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 100-101.

¹⁶⁰ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015), 128.

¹⁶¹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 55.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 60.

¹⁶³ Michael S. Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred. The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities* (London, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015), 138.

¹⁶⁴ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 21-22.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

people) high profitability, then the corporations will control all of the world's land and all of its wealth."¹⁶⁷

- **A wrong morality**

In closer connection to Volf's agential component of the flourishing life, the agrarian writers suggest that at the heart of the problem there is a wrong morality. Beyond our exploitative and ruining attitude toward creation and the farmland, there is the productionist ethic,¹⁶⁸ or as Berry puts it, the moral order of production and consumption expressed by the term agribusiness.¹⁶⁹ Through this transformation, agriculture is divorced from morality and the only thing that matters will be to produce as much and as cheap as possible, regardless of ecological and social costs. Moreover, this approach to farming gives the impression that food is ultimately an industrial product, a product of science and technology. According to Davis, this contrast has a parallel in the Old Testament. She considers ancient Egypt's food industry as a metaphor for today's agribusiness, and sets it in opposition to the counter-morale of the manna in the wilderness, which teaches Israel that food, and agriculture as its source, is, more than anything else, an expression of God's sovereignty over creation and generosity towards humankind, thus a gift.¹⁷⁰

As we can see, the effect of sin on our relation to creation has indeed very practical implications for farming. Through the above-mentioned aspects, modern agriculture is responsible for some of the most enormous ecological damages: depletion of water resources, desertification and soil erosion, and the contamination of water sources (by fertilizers and pesticides), food, and the atmosphere (mostly by ammonia and methane).¹⁷¹ Therefore, it is appropriate to consider the meaning and value of the land in the context of the fallen humanity.

- **"Terms and conditions"**

Land, both in the sense of the Promised Land to Israel and the land we live on, must be understood as a gift because humans have neither created it nor deserved it, but it was given to them.¹⁷² However, this giving - and also receiving - is linked to a set of terms and conditions,

¹⁶⁷ Wendell Berry: "The Agrarian Standard" in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 9.42, epub.

¹⁶⁸ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 23.

¹⁶⁹ The term agribusiness was invented by former US Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, and interpreted by Berry as the confusion of agriculture with industry. Berry, *Unsettling*, 153.

¹⁷⁰ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 73.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁷² Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 295-296.

warning against the folly of saying that “My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth” (Deut 8:17).¹⁷³ The severity of these conditions is emphasized also by Northcott, who notes that the gift of the land was not only a place of blessing but potentially also of curse, for “[t]he fruitfulness of the land and the guarantee of Yahwe’s blessing on it depended upon Israel’s covenantal faithfulness”¹⁷⁴ in worshipping Yahwe alone and keeping his commands. The stories of the Old Testament prove that by turning away from these conditions, Israel had to bear the tragic consequences of the land being invaded and taken from them, and most of the people being forced into exile. According to Berry, behind these conditions, there is a severe warning against *hubris*, which he considers the great ecological and political sin.¹⁷⁵ Since people are not gods, they must not assume godly authority over the land they received from God.

Furthermore, the Promised Land is not a permanent gift, it is only for so long as it is appropriately used.¹⁷⁶ The Pentateuch expresses several times that “the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the Lord’s thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is” (Deut 10:14), and that “The land shall not be sold forever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev 25:23). Therefore, the land is ultimately God’s land and what is given to Israel is not ownership, but “a sort of tenancy, the right of habitation and use.”¹⁷⁷ In Berry’s view, one important function the Sabbath, and of the Sabbath year, is that it symbolizes the acknowledgment of the limits of human control over the land.¹⁷⁸ Keeping the Sabbath, thus allowing the land to rest and leaving it fallow, should therefore remind the farmers that the land, even if it is their legal possession, ultimately belongs to God, who is the sovereign Lord of the entire Creation. Even if people fail to give the land its Sabbath rest, and ignore God’s sovereignty over the earth, as Davis formulates “the land is a semi-autonomous moral agent [...] and it remains accountable to God even for the defilement it suffers at human hands. [...] The land, which retains its healthful instinct for God, must finally expel the unhealthful presence and make up the Sabbath years that Israel failed to observe.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷³ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 295.

¹⁷⁴ Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*, 17.

¹⁷⁵ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 296.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 99.

As a gift, temporary and bound to conditions, Berry also views it as an inheritance, which does not only exist in space but also in time.¹⁸⁰ As such, the land and the community that uses it in the present, exist in the net of multidimensional links: to God, the past and the future, other people with whom they share it, and also those who will inherit it after them. This aspect was important also for one of the respondents, to whom the small parcel inherited from his parents also symbolized the responsibility to faithfully care for that inheritance so that it can be inherited by the coming generation, even if their children were not likely to take over the farm. According to Berry, the moral predicament to prove worthy of the gift of the land has to be fulfilled through good husbandry, and stewardship that requires long-term courage, perseverance, devotion, and skill.¹⁸¹ It does not require achieving technological breakthroughs and new inventions, but it has more to do with the everyday issues in the practical use and care of the land and all created things.

However, in the reality of farming, putting this idea of stewardship into practice has many difficulties. Not only had Israel failed to fulfill the conditions of receiving and keeping the gift of the land but today's (farming) society has also failed at many terms. As Berry puts it, "to live undestructively in an economy that is overwhelmingly destructive would require of any one of us,

or of any small group of us, a great deal more work than we have yet been able to do."¹⁸²

- **Four principles**

What can we still do? Or better said how can we practice agriculture more responsibly? Davis offers four principles that reflect the most important points of congruence between the biblical perspective and contemporary agrarian writers. The most important one is the claim that the land comes first.¹⁸³ This claim overwrites any productionist ethic and the economic rule over farming. As we discussed earlier, we, as humans, are commissioned to protect and serve the earth while we use it.

In contrast to the rules of production and consumption, this claim leads to the moral idea expressed, in Berry's view, by the Wheel of life,¹⁸⁴ which draws on the natural cycles of birth,

¹⁸⁰ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 297.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 299.

¹⁸² Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 20.

¹⁸³ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 28.

¹⁸⁴ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 86.

growth, maturity, death, and decay. From here comes the organic unity of production, consumption, and return – this, third element missing from the opposing moral.

The second principle is that of wisdom and informed ignorance.¹⁸⁵ This means that caring for the earth does not only require knowledge and skills but also the ability to admit that our knowledge is finite and affected by sin and therefore to rely on God’s wisdom. As Davis reports, “wisdom is about trying to integrate knowledge, understanding, critical questioning and good judgement with a view to *the flourishing of human life and the whole of creation*. Theological wisdom attempts all that before God, alert to God, and in line with the purpose of God.”¹⁸⁶

I think that, based on agrarian thought, this is on the one hand the denial of the hegemony of the specialists and a return to the biblical and practical wisdom of generations of farmers, and, on the other hand, a humble recognition that not all problems can be solved through scientific and technological means.

The third principle is that of a modest materialism,¹⁸⁷ referring to the need for farmers to become intimate with the land, and the restoration of good workmanship. This idea responds to the rupture between body and soul, and the alienation of people from the land.

The fourth principle is that of value beyond price.¹⁸⁸ From an agrarian perspective, the value of a piece of land is not reflected by its commercial price. As Davis notes, agricultural land was literally invaluable in ancient Israel: there is no historical record of any Israelite selling land voluntarily. It was the possession of the family, which was held as a trust and transmitted from one generation to another. Moreover, the real worth of the land was accentuated by the memory of being landless.¹⁸⁹

In my opinion, considering both the biblical evaluation of land and creation, and also the contribution of the agrarians, above all, the priceless worth of land is given by the recognition that it is a gift of God.

In addition to Davis’ principles, Berry sketches more practically the terms and limits which rule our relationship to the land.¹⁹⁰ He considers that for the land to be properly cared

¹⁸⁵ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 33.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁸⁹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 40.

¹⁹⁰ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 195-196.

for by people, several conditions need to be fulfilled: people must know the land intimately, must know how to care for it, and also be motivated to do so, and they need to be able to afford it. From all these, motivation is the most problematic issue because, as Berry observes, people won't be motivated to care for the land neither because they agree with general principles of ecology, nor because somebody pays them for it. People will only be motivated to care for the land if this directly affects them, in a dependable and permanent way. This implies that there must be a sense of mutual belonging: they belong to the land and the land belongs to them. Berry argues that people will be adequately motivated to care for the land if they can expect to live on it as long as they live, or even better, that also their children will be able to live on that land. However, as he continues, this belonging must be limited by the double fact that the bigger the size of land and intensity of use is, the higher the need for care is, while the quality of attention decreases with the increase of the size. For this, he thinks, every nation should "foster in every possible way the sort of thrifty, prosperous, permanent rural households and communities that have the desire, the skills, and the means to care properly for the land they are using."¹⁹¹

c) Evaluation of farming well

Concerning how the respondents relate to the land, we can observe that there are many points of congruence with the agrarian writers. The first important congruence refers to the meaning and value of the land. Interestingly, both the respondents and the agrarians emphasize understanding the land as a gift and an inheritance, which is worth much more than its price and which has to be preserved.

Secondly, it seems that the farmers are aware of the moral aspect of farming, and they also distinguish between the two types of moralities described by the agrarians: a productionist ethic, which is represented by the farmers who prioritize short-term profit and tend not to care for the land, and an ethic that is defined by the care for the land and its long-term sustainability. Accordingly, the interviewees try to apply the ethics of care in their agricultural practice.

Thirdly, as Berry also pointed out, the respondents also consider that just the knowledge of the right way, for example knowing the benefits of green cover or crop rotation, will not motivate them to do so. Even the farmers who feel responsible and motivated to practice

¹⁹¹ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 196.

farming in a just way, in many cases, are dependent on damaging things like fertilizers and pesticides.

However, in contrast to the agrarian writers, the respondents don't view specialization as a threat, but instead as a source of modernization and adaptation to today's challenges.

Referring back to God's righteousness and love as the agential component of the good life, we can assess that even in farming – just as in any other area of life and work – the compass that directs us, from our feelings and thoughts to the goals we pursue, from our everyday routine to the big decisions we make, should be God and his revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture. This means that our understanding of the soil, the work, ourselves, and the entirety of creation, and our attitude towards them, based on that understanding, has to be based on what God says about them. One cannot act righteously with something or somebody if he does not see it as being worthy of a righteous attitude. The same can be said even more strongly about acting lovingly. If a weedy field somewhere on an eroded Transylvanian hillside is just a lifeless material or an instrument to access EU funds, we will not be able to work that field justly, caring for its needs, for the health of the environment, or the long-term effects of the technologies and chemicals that we use for our short-term profit. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to understand the world as God's good creation and a gift to humanity, to understand the dynamics of sin and redemption, and to understand our responsible calling to take care of the earth. If we are capable of seeing through the lens of the Scripture, we will have the moral skills to deal with the most specific issues of farming that need to be addressed today.

As it follows both from the interviews and the agrarian-theological writings, there is a need for a fundamental change of perception followed by a transformed practice among the farmers. But even with the best intentions, many of them are limited by their circumstances. Even though this responsible transformation of how we do agriculture has to start from below, from the individual farmers and their relationship to the land and the entirety of creation, some external conditions also have to be fulfilled. In the next part, we will focus on the peaceful environment as the second dimension of flourishing life, and especially its application to farming.

2. Farming going well

As in the previous part, we will start by summarizing the answers referring to this subtopic given by the respondents. These answers cover mainly the social, economic, and political aspects of farming that determine the agricultural environment.¹⁹²

a) Interviews

- **The public perception of farming**

Asking about the public perception of farming and farmers, and the way in which people see farmers and relate to them, the answers were similar. Even though they consider that there is still a negative general view of farming, rooted either in disregarding physical work and rural life or in considering the financial assistance from the EU and the government as a source of undeserved wealth, as DJ points out, there are more and more people, especially those who care what they eat, who appreciate the work of farmers. GYJ, who is selling her products in a city market and also delivers to clients, tells that people who know farmers personally, usually have a positive attitude toward them. Even though, most people seem to be indifferent towards them and the issues of agriculture in general.

- **Political circumstances**

Referring to the political environment and the EU and state laws, all four respondents agree that most policies favor big-scale farmers and corporations. As DJ observes, in the higher political representation of interest there is hardly anyone to stand up for small farmers who, although farm on much less area but outnumber big farmers. The most important disadvantages for small family farms are the difficult access to funds and the efficiency in using them (in contrast to big farms where it is easier to plan and invest in developments), the struggle to fulfill the different conditions and regulations,¹⁹³ and the bureaucracy, which for a small farmer is not only a complicated task but, as DJ tells, most of it has to be done when the work on the field is the most intense. While big farming companies can afford to pay an employee for these tasks,

¹⁹² It is noticeable that the spiritual dimension is absent from the responses. In my opinion, the reason for this is related to the mentality of distantiating God from daily labor and the social-political-economic aspects of life, specific of a secularized and post communistic society.

¹⁹³ GYJ, for example, did not get the licence to build a small pickled-vegetable processing workshop because she lives in the city – in a place of the city which, ironically, was part of the former Hóstát. Without the licence she could neither access any funds. Moreover, to be allowed to legally operate a family-owned food-processing mini-factory, they would need to fulfill the same requirements as the industrial factories.

a small farmer has to do it on his own. However, BA considers that neither should the small farmers be prioritized by the laws and subvention systems but all those who really farm the land. Since the advantage of the size is evident, he finds it a good idea in terms of efficiency that more land should be gathered in the care of fewer professional farmers, or that small farmers should unite in farmers' cooperatives. All in all, it seems from the experiences of the respondents that small farmers are to a large extent left on their own in terms of agricultural policies and assistance.

- **Economic circumstances**

The situation is even worse on the economical side. The respondents all agree that small-scale farmers are in an extremely vulnerable and dependent situation. The market is ruled by multinational corporations (in every area of the agricultural and food-industrial sector). As BA observes, these multinational trading companies determine the prices and they get two-thirds of the profit, without assuming any risks, while the small producers, facing the risks, barely get one-third of the profit. This is the case in the big trade, where, besides the artificially deflated selling prices, a large quantity is needed to get in and to be able to at least negotiate.

One solution to this problem would be, as DJ considers, for farmers to form cooperatives to be able to negotiate on significant quantities of products. Even though there are several good examples of this in entire Europe, most farmers in post-communist Romania are distrustful of any attempt at collective thinking and acting in agriculture. DD considers that the construction of large grain stores could be a solution for small agricultural producers to stay in the big grain trade and avoid the harvest-time low prices; another solution could be to reintroduce custom duties on cereals exports.

The second solution is for farmers to sell their products in small quantities, usually from home or at producers' markets. However, there are fewer and fewer clients for this kind of small trade from home, and the time and work it requires is not always worth the difference in the selling price. At producers' markets, GYJ complains that companies are driving small producers out of the market, they take the better tables and places, which are anyways so expensive that fewer and fewer small producers can afford to pay for them. Moreover, as GYJ observes, more and more people prefer to buy their food from large shopping centers where they can park easily and get all they need in one place. However, in BA's view, there is a growing interest and demand for local and healthy products but the supply network is not yet suitable.

According to all four respondents, the most desirable solution would be to establish local economies with local production and consumption. The two missing keys to this, beyond the need for legal regulation, are creativity and processing units. BA tells that while some farmers find creative ways to meet the demands of the consumers with their products, both by processing and marketing, others prefer to waste their products at selling prices that do not even cover the costs of production, or by feeding them to the animals, just because they don't have the creativity and willingness to adapt. On the other hand, the lack of processing industry and local processing units is responsible for the fact that most of the raw agricultural products of the country flow out of the country at the prices of raw materials and return after being processed in other countries, by multinational corporations, which then import and sell them taking most of the profit. As DJ observes, the supermarkets in Romania are filled mostly with food processed in other countries, even the freshly baked bread is made of imported frozen bread dough.

The solution to this would be the establishment of local end-producers, like a mill and a bakery. There are many good examples to prove that everyone would benefit from this.¹⁹⁴

Another issue concerning the farming environment in Romania is the role of the input providers. As DJ assumes, these multinational companies have a monopoly, while the small-scale farmers are hugely disadvantaged and dependent. DD says that there are more and more pests and insects and farmers are forced to buy the newest pesticides and other chemicals, because, otherwise, there would be no harvest. Today, as a farmer, you are dependent both on the seed and pesticide producers, while earlier they could sow the same seed for years, even if the production rates were not as high as today. But, as DD continues, today's hybrids are made in a way that they can be used for only one or two years.

To summarize the thoughts of the respondents referring to the farming circumstances in Romania, it seems that small-scale farmers are in a highly vulnerable and dependent situation. The general indifference of the population does not help to make farming and the situation of farmers a topic of public discussion and interest. The political sphere is ruled by the representatives of the interests of multinational corporations and industrial-scale farmers while they put small-scale farmers in a difficult situation through complicated bureaucracy, limited

¹⁹⁴ BA tells about a pastor who serves in the small village of Magyarókereke, in Transylvania. After an important milk-processing multinational company stopped buying the milk from the local farmers, mostly older people with 1-2 cows, the local pastor decided to pay double the price the company paid for the milk and started producing artisanal cheese. Getting known for the quality of his products, he is now unable to produce as much as it is demanded, while he sustains the local farmers and provides healthy food for others.

access to funds, and high requirements. The economic environment is also harsh to them. They either try to compete – without a chance – in the big trade or struggle to sell their products little by little, while they are totally dependent on multinational input providers. The solution would be to provide the political and economic conditions for local production, procession, and consumption.

b) Agrarian literature

- **A somber image of farming communities**

Throughout his works from the 1970s until the 2000s, Berry presents a somber image of the situation of the land, farming, and rural communities. What the agro-political leaders of the USA considered the triumph of technology, and progress that should be an example also for other countries, claiming that one American farmer could feed 56 other people, for Berry seems a source of great despair: the ruining of farmland and the farm people.¹⁹⁵ Because, as he writes, the farmers are not the winners of this progress but its victims; the merit is of the ambitions of merchants, industrialists, bureaucrats, and other specialists while dividing all farmers into two kinds: “those who have sufficient “business sense” and managerial ability to handle the large acreages necessary to finance large machines and those who do not.”¹⁹⁶

As Berry depicts, villages once filled with families who produced their own food, who still had pride in workmanship, and whose farms were highly diversified but not mechanized, are now decaying. The holdings become larger, the owners fewer, the number of part-time farmers and ex-farmers is increasing¹⁹⁷, while the young people expect to leave, for the cost is too high, the work and worry are too much, there is hardly any market for their products, and it is not even fashionable anymore.¹⁹⁸ Even though, the statistics show that the rural population is actually growing, this data is not representative of the situation of farming communities, because this growth is given by city people moving to the country, as Berry puts it, “commuters replacing farmers.”¹⁹⁹ Most of the effects of destroying farming communities cannot be measured and there is neither much willingness to do so, but there are some severe measurable signs of this tragedy, as Davis reports: the lack of jobs and schools, higher suicide rates, higher

¹⁹⁵ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 37.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ “between 1950 and 1955 more than a million workers migrated out of the agricultural sector into other sectors of the economy.” Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 166.

¹⁹⁸ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 43-44.

¹⁹⁹ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 197.

rates of depression, substance abuse, and domestic violence.²⁰⁰ How can this happen when agricultural production, export numbers, and multinational agricultural companies are growing and flourishing?

- **A colonial economy**

Agrarian writers argue that the specialist-instrumentalist view of land, the productionist ethic, and the technological developments of the last 50-70 years led to a so-called colonial economy that is now ruling agriculture globally. As Berry asserts, “[a]ll along—from the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the New World, to the domestic colonialism of American industries, to the colonization of the entire rural world by global corporations—it has been the same story of the gathering of an exploitive economic power into the hands of a few people who are alien to the places and the people they exploit.”²⁰¹ This means that agricultural products and so the sources of wealth are flowing out of the local communities and are centralized by multinational corporations, while all necessities and pleasure are imported.²⁰² In these circumstances, the American agricultural policy of the ‘50s is more relevant than ever: “Get big or get out!”²⁰³ As Berry asserts, this has two major consequences: losing economic independence and making the source of food dependent on other than agricultural means.²⁰⁴

- **The economy of Egypt and the *nachala* economy**

However, this colonial economy is not a modern invention. The archetype of the two types of economy and agriculture can be found in the Old Testament. The Hebrew understanding of the land as *nachala*, translated as inheritance, gift, or property, is the source of the economic independence and freedom of the families, which is granted by God, the giver of the land as a gift.²⁰⁵ It means that the land was gifted to the people of Israel and its tribes and families so that they can sustain themselves from and on it. The jubilee year described in Lev 25:8-17 was meant to provide for the livelihood and independence of those who lost their land for different reasons. In opposition to this, there is the model of Egypt, where the land is owned by the ruler, while the farming people are no more than enslaved workers, totally dependent.

²⁰⁰ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 105.

²⁰¹ Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” 9.9.

²⁰² Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 203.

²⁰³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 45.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

²⁰⁵ Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*, 123.

But, as the prophets testify²⁰⁶, the economy of the *nachala* was corrupted even among the Israelites, and the land was managed in a way that it become the property of the few.²⁰⁷ The most prominent example of the clash of the two economies is the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-15). Ahab, the king of Samaria, takes advantage of his position and power, willing to take Naboth's vineyard as a simple real estate, while, for Naboth, the vineyard is not only more valuable than a vegetable garden, but it is almost priceless as an inheritance from his ancestors.²⁰⁸ While the story of Naboth's vineyard is a paradigmatic narrative of the undermining of the subsistence economy, Psalm 37²⁰⁹ presents the opposite of it, through its concern for the vulnerable and a change in matters of land tenure.²¹⁰

- **A somber projection**

In today's confrontation of the two kinds of economy and land use, Kirschenmann asserts that "If the [current] pattern holds, farming as a way of life will mainly disappear within the next 50 years, large swaths of the country will be virtually depopulated."²¹¹ Drawing on Berry's thoughts, he makes a projection of the present situation and envisions major changes in the future of agriculture.

Future farms, according to him, will function like any other franchised systems²¹²: the farmers will be forced into contractual agreements with multinational corporations; the management decision-making will be transferred from the farm to the consolidated firms, serving exclusively their financial interests; livestock species and patented seed crops will be owned by the firm, raised by the farmers for the firm, following the firm's plans, and using its technology and inputs, while the products will be parts of distant supply chains, with the profit being taken by shareholders.²¹³ Unfortunately, this is already becoming reality.²¹⁴

²⁰⁶ Especially Micah, who writes: "Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance." Micah 2:1-2.

²⁰⁷ Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*, 124.

²⁰⁸ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 111.

²⁰⁹ "For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land. [...] But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity." Psalm 37:9,11.

²¹⁰ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 114.

²¹¹ Frederick Kirschenmann, "The Current State of Agriculture. Does It Have a Future?" in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 16.3, epub.

²¹² Kirschenmann, "The Current State of Agriculture. Does It Have a Future?," 16.21.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ As Shiva reports, the trading giants like Pepsi and Cargill, which are controlling a huge part of the agricultural sector in India, exported hundreds of thousands of rice, gaining millions of rupees in profit, while people in India

The farms of the future will probably be large industrial complexes, specialized in one or two large, uniform cultures.²¹⁵ These will not only have devastating ecological effects but will also constitute immense social risks. A society relying on a few industrial mega-farms and long-distance transport, is extremely vulnerable, especially from military and energetical perspective.²¹⁶ In the case of many small farms that produce locally, if their production is disrupted by any means, the general food supply will not be disrupted because of the many other producers. But if production or logistics are disrupted in the case of a few industrial farms with long-distance transport chains, the entire system will fall.

Perrow calls attention to another high risk that is caused by mega-farms. He argues that “as any system becomes increasingly complex and more tightly coupled, normal accidents, which inevitably take place in *any* system, become catastrophes.”²¹⁷ Based on this theory, in the future, while our industrial food system will get more and more complex, we should expect more food-related catastrophes.

- **Change is required**

As the agrarian writers indicate, the present and the anticipated future circumstances of farming are not very bright. Berry suggests, in accordance with other agrarians, that the present colonial economy cannot be the economy of a healthy community based in agriculture. To be healthy, he says, “land-based communities will need to add value to local products, they will need to supply local demand, and they will need to be reasonably self-sufficient in food, energy, pleasure, and other basic requirements.”²¹⁸ This would mean returning economic self-determination to the people.²¹⁹

To eliminate, or at least decrease the vulnerability and dependence of farmers upon the agribusiness elite and multinational corporations, there is plenty to do: safeguarding the private ownership of farmland, the food that is consumed locally should be also locally produced on

faced starvation. This is only one example from the countless cases. Vandana Shiva, “Globalization and the War Against Farmers and the Land” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 17.30, epub.

²¹⁵ Kirschenmann, “The Current State of Agriculture. Does It Have a Future?,” 16.23.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 16.44.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 16.45.

²¹⁸ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 203.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 204.

small farms, processed in locally owned, small, and nonpolluting plants, making it possible for local capital to work locally while using the land justly and building local communities.²²⁰

Besides the advantage of returning the economic self-determination, and therefore the opportunity for self-sustaining, as Berry argues, “a highly diversified, small-farm agriculture combined with local marketing is literally crisscrossed with margins, and these margins work both to allow and encourage care and to contain damage.”²²¹

- **New opportunities on the horizon**

Kirschenmann presents some positive ecological and economic opportunities emerging on the horizon which could lead to a positive change in the direction marked by Berry.

The first opportunity lies in the emerging new market climate, marked by three features that favor the small and vulnerable producers: a. the conversational marketplace refers to the way conversation and relationship is getting more important for consumers in contrast to the conventional one-way marketing communication; b. there is a growing demand for trustworthy and authentic producers and products while trust in the mass-produced products of multinational companies is decreasing; c. for more and more people the close-to-home connection is a priority.²²²

The second opportunity comes from an emerging new production paradigm, being defined by ecological rather than technological principles. This new paradigm “[u]sing nature as the model, mentor, and measure, seeks to achieve production goals by making use of nature’s own free ecosystem services.”²²³

The third opportunity is offered by new public policies, which are lately directing public support away from subsidizing a few powerful firms, and toward the support of the public good and well-being of communities. It is also starting to be recognized that farmers produce more

²²⁰ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 204.

²²¹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 228.

²²² Kirschenmann, “The Current State of Agriculture. Does It Have a Future?,” 16.48-60.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 16.61.

A remarkable example of this new paradigm is the farm of Takao Furuno in Southern Japan which became renowned through his integrated duck-rice system. His 6 acres farm is one of the most effective and productive in the world. His concept is “to produce a variety of products within a limited space to achieve maximum overall productivity. But this does not consist of merely assembling all of the components; it consists of allowing all components to influence each other positively in a relationship of symbiotic production.” Kirschenmann, “The Current State of Agriculture. Does It Have a Future?,” 16.62-65.

than raw materials and food but also fulfill a wide range of public services. Through properly farmed soils they help filter water, provide habitat for wildlife, and help restore biodiversity.²²⁴

As the agrarian writers suggest, the social-political-economic aspects of farming form a complex system that is almost impossible to completely see through. What they find the most worrying is in an agricultural system motivated by the desire for higher profit, more control, and technological innovation, the social costs are ignored. Ironically, the health of the land, and thus the security of agricultural production, is assured by human care and stewardship, and thus, by healthy farming communities. Therefore, the agrarian writers equivocally urge the need for sustaining these communities by protecting the local ownership of farmland, decreasing the influence and monopoly of multinational agribusiness companies, creating local economies by providing the legal and financial means of local production, processing, and consumption, and assuring the long-term prospect of suitable circumstances of independence and self-sustainability. However, at the end of the day, as Berry indicates, governments and officials do not really care about these issues, so “[t]he real improvements must come, to a considerate extent, from the local communities themselves.”²²⁵

c) Evaluation of farming going well

- **Assessing the situation**

It is surprising, and in a way also sad, that most concerns of the respondents who are farming in a region of an East-European post-communist country can be recognized in the works of agrarian writers and farmers from different continents, and written in around 50 years. It is surprising because it shows that Romanian farmers are not alone facing the challenges and threats that harden their lives, and it is sad because it shows that these issues are not only local problems of particular communities and countries but they are the symptoms of a global system ruled by the economic and political interests of a few powerful corporations.

The ignorance and indifference of the population, as experienced by the farmers in Romania, rooted in the disruption between people and the land, humans and the source of their bodily lives, as explained by agrarians, prevent these issues from getting enough attention in the public sphere, while governments are neither interested in dealing with them. This can be

²²⁴ Kirschenmann, “The Current State of Agriculture. Does It Have a Future?,” 16.68-69.

²²⁵ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 204.

recognized in the way agricultural policies and laws function. Not only do farmers feel that the laws and regulations favor the big-scale farmers and companies, from the system of subsidies to the complicated bureaucracy and sophisticated requirements, but the agrarians also highlight this problem, which is best expressed by the “Get big or get out” policy in America.

Despite the many differences between the American and Romanian contexts, the effects on traditional rural communities are very similar: the abandonment of small family farms, young people fleeing from the villages to cities, high rates of alcoholism, depression, local raw products flowing out and everything else being imported. Even if the population of villages is growing, this is because of the city people who move to these, mostly suburban locations for economic and comfort reasons while being parts of the urban economy.

- **Community**

However, it seems that the respondents from the Romanian context do not give such importance to the communal aspect of the agricultural sector as the agrarians do. This is in a way understandable in a post-communist country, where the memory of forced collectivization is still haunting many farmers, the majority of whom belong to the older generations who experienced it personally. In this regard, Berry’s emphasis on the importance of healthy farming communities could be an inspiration for farmers who struggle to subsist on their own. However, to restore the trust in the community and strengthen cooperation, more is needed than the knowledge of mutual benefit. This ‘more’ is depicted by Volf as reconciliation and forgiveness, as the fundamentals of peace in communities. For this, it is necessary to deal with the past wounds, with the cultural, ethnic, religious, and personal differences, and through reconciled relationships seek the well-being of the whole: personal, communal, and that of the entire creation.

- **Economics**

Another aspect in which the agrarian literature supports the concerns of the farmers is that of economics. The respondents struggle between what the agrarians call a colonial, totalitarian economy and a local economy. Not only the Romanian market is ruled by multinationals who control the prices, squeeze small producers out of the market, extract raw materials, and import processed food while taking most of the profit, but this is happening globally. This means that the capital is extracted from the farmland and rural areas and concentrated in big cities and the hands of the ‘agribusiness elite,’ while in the hands of the farmers there is left only enough to survive and buy more: equipment, seed crops, fertilizers,

pesticides. The colonial economy leads to the total vulnerability and dependence of farmers upon state subsidies, big trading companies, and multinational input-provider corporations.

- **Toward better circumstances**

Although many farmers see no other way out than selling the land and quitting, others are willing to survive and even optimistic. The desired goal of Romanian farmers and agrarians is identical: the establishment of an environment based on local economies, economic independence, and self-sustainability for local farming communities. As the respondents suggested, there would be solutions, and most of their ideas are compatible with the new opportunities. What is most needed are creativity and willingness to cooperate: creativity to recognize the opportunities and start initiatives, and cooperation to be able to implement them and bring about systemic changes.

The new marketing climate that is emerging, demanding personal relationships over one-way marketing, places small farmers in a favorable position. Direct markets, home delivery, and social media give farmers space for personal-commercial relationships and building up market networks. For this, both creativity and financial means are required to turn the raw agricultural products into processed, ready-to-consume products. The new marketing paradigm also includes increasing demand for trustworthy, traceable products from close-to-home sources. For this, there is a need for quality, high standards, and mobility on the side of the farmers and an increase of interest in responsible and healthy eating on the side of consumers. As both the respondents and the agrarians assume, this is an important opportunity that must be seized by the small-scale farmers.

The new production paradigm is also helping small-scale, traditional farmers, who can turn much easier to organic farming methods implying biodiversity than big farming companies that produce large monocultures and are more dependent on agri-chemical and technological means. The energy crisis affecting powerfully the international food chain based on long-distance transport, and the war in Ukraine which threatens with the starvation of millions of people depending on Ukrainian and Russian grain exports, also raise the issue of the importance of local food production. The biological risks of food-related catastrophes, like the destruction of tens of thousands of livestock on industrial farms in case of an outbreak of virus epidemics like the African swine pest or the bird flu, accentuate the same urgent need for small, independent, farm-based local production. Not only farmers and rural communities would benefit from this but the whole population of a country and the global food security.

- **Toward better ‘theologizing’ the public life**

I think that if we try to simplify these social-political-economic ‘equations,’ at the root there will be the question: who owns (and profits from) the land, and who will pay the price for it? Based on reading Davis and my own reasoning, the Bible has a major concern for these issues. If Christians would start reading those ‘less spiritual,’ or more practical passages of Scripture not only as historical data but as practical insights of a biblical worldview, they would discover that these texts are more relevant than they thought, and that the Bible has more to do with our modern concerns that we would expect. Such a reading would reveal that the strong opposition regarding the Egyptian system of centralized land-ownership (and the vulnerability and exploitation of the people implied by it), the long and detailed descriptions of the division of the land into tribal and family *nachalas*, Ahab’s abuse of power to take the land of the poor, the warnings of the prophets, and also the positive examples show that the political and economic factors, which are decisive in the question of land ownership and usage, are also important theological concerns. Therefore, I think that these – among many other passages – should call our attention to the importance of dealing with these issues on a theological base, engaging in constructive and honest (self)criticism, and looking for solution patterns in Scripture. From the perspective of a Christian worldview, these issues do not – or should not – only concern the economists, politicians, or sociologists but theology as well. And not only liberation theology should engage with such issues but all theology that considers human life, ordinary life important, following the example of Jesus Christ who came “that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Ultimately, being followers of Christ, these are the issues of every responsible Christian.

Furthermore, learning from the Scripture’s deep engagement with these ‘worldly’ issues, we, living in the world, also have to engage with it responsibly. A Christian worldview is not only a vision of the biblical world but also a biblical vision of the world. This is the vision that embraces our reflections through the interviewed farmers and the agrarian writers, on the context of farming life.

The respondents and agrarian writers as well highlight that Volf’s claim about the necessity of peaceful, suitable circumstances for a flourishing life is true also in the case of farming. These suitable circumstances can only be achieved if we keep in mind the well-being of the entire creation. By placing the accent on the primacy of social issues and the importance

of the communities over profit and technological development, they remind us of Volf's ideas about the essence of peaceful circumstances: right relationships – with God, earth, and each other – and not the dependence upon material goods.

Although we are not in control of a big part of our circumstances, as Volf Suggests, “[w]e are not utterly powerless in the face of social structures we have created, whose existence depends in part on norms we embrace, and whose functioning our daily participation sustains.”²²⁶ This means that, based on the agential component of the flourishing life, our public responsibility as Christians, we can also influence the social-economic-political context we live in and which highly determines our circumstances. In the case of farming and rural life, these factors should not be left out of the theological reflection. Here, the relationship to the earth can make the difference between exploiting the soil or living peacefully together with it, from it, and on it. In contrast to the colonial economy of Egypt, the Old Testament gives an account of the land as a gift and an inheritance to the people and the families to assure their livelihood, the independence and security of communities, and the only dependence upon God's gracious providence.

Therefore, the health and fruitfulness of the land depend on the health and responsible stewardship of the communities living on it. The way societies relate to small communities and farming people, determines whether they will be sacrificed for the sake of higher profit for the agribusiness elite and specialization, through the exploitation and destruction of the land, or they deserve a chance to continue their traditions and keep their heritage while providing the health of the land and food for other people.

3. Farming feeling as it should

The third part of the interviews with farmers focused on the affective side of farming life, following Volf's tripartite understanding of flourishing. Through this aspect, we consider the issues of character, farming and household, marriage, and family, health and fulfillment, connecting to nature, and faith. These concerns, although not complete, are important elements of life integrity, life feeling as it should from a farmer's perspective.

²²⁶ Volf, *Flourishing*, 57.

a) Interviews

All the respondents confessed that farming is much more than a job or a profession. It is not only connected to the economic and professional level of their lives. As GYJ puts it, farming involves ‘everything’. Therefore, it does not only require competencies and technical skills but first of all character. How could we reconstruct the Transylvanian small-scale farmer’s character according to the interviews?

- **Farming as a vocation**

Asking about what farming means to them, all respondents put vocation²²⁷ in the first place(s). DD believes that at least small-scale farming cannot be practiced only for money. You have to enjoy it and you need a sense of vocation, otherwise, you will soon quit doing it. With vocation also comes responsibility and commitment. DJ, being an agrarian engineer, felt responsible to serve in the agricultural sector through his knowledge and competencies. BA, being a pastor, started farming out of responsibility for the abandoned lands in the propriety of the church. Farming also requires hard work and perseverance. GYJ tells that sometimes 25 hours are not enough a day. It is not like a regular job where you start at 8 in the morning and leave at 4 in the afternoon. Farming also involves sacrifice and restraint. Those who keep livestock, cannot just close the door and go on holiday. To be able to buy land, to modernize, it takes giving up on many pleasures and even necessary things. It took GYJ and her family years of hard work and restraint to be able to buy first a workhorse, and many years later a tractor. Farming requires also humility and willingness to learn: from nature, and about new techniques. In the end, to experience joy and fulfillment, as GYJ asserts, farming requires contentment. If it is never enough, one will never be happy.

- **Household, marriage, family**

Concerning the relationship between farming and family, the opinions differ from each other. DD considers that while earlier farming activities, like haymaking, for example, involved

²²⁷ It is to mention that the Hungarian term “*hivatás*” has different meanings in colloquial language. Besides the religious meaning (vocation as a calling), it can express dedication to a profession/occupation, or more simply a profession or career. The particular meaning is regularly defined by the context. Based on multiple responses, 3 of the interviewees used the term in the context of a Christian worldview, while one respondent emphasized the dedication that farming requires. For the different meanings of the word in Hungarian, see “A magyar nyelv értelmező szótára,” Arcanum, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/search/?list=eyJmaWx0ZXJzIjogeyJNVSI6IFsiTkZPX0xFWF9MZXhpa29ub2tfMUJFOEiXX0sICJxdWVyeSI6ICJoaXZhdFxlMDBlMXMifQ>

the whole family of farmers, now, since almost every activity is mechanized, it only takes two men and two tractors. GYJ believes that in farming, the family is together, it takes at least two persons: only one is nothing. For her, farming and marriage are almost synonyms. As she confesses: “at work and at home, we are there for each other to sustain, love, and respect each other and ask together for God’s help.”²²⁸ GYJ also thinks that in farming, you cannot ‘cheat,’ referring both to work and marriage, you must be faithful both when you are up and also in difficulties. In contrast to this, she refers to what a teacher relative of her told: during the almost two-year COVID-19 closure, the majority of the parents of the children in her class divorced. They did not resist being closed between four walls, working from home, and watching their children. BA tells that farming creates harmony in his family. They work together and everyone knows his or her task. Moreover, it is also an excellent means of education for the children growing up in a farmer’s family: they learn responsibility, the appreciation and love of work. VI recalls in the documentary about the Hóstáti community that already as little children, they were brought by their parents to the vegetable fields, and as soon as they could walk, they were taught to water the cabbage or do what they could. However, as DJ confesses, farming can also create conflicts and tension between spouses, if they are not working together.

- **Health**

Even though many people try to avoid physical work, the interviewed farmers consider their work as good for their physical and mental health and recreation. As DJ puts it, he rather does some useful physical work than lift iron weights in a gym. This way he does something productive while keeping his body fit. BA says that working in the field or with the animals is like a psychological remedy for him, it always calms him. DD emphasizes the benefits of diversity at work: while in the office you must do the same thing for eight hours a day, in farming you always do something different. GYJ mentions also that going out to the fields, is always a relieving experience of escaping from the pressure and noise of the city. BA confesses that physical work and all that farming requires, made him much more than he was before.

The connection with nature turns out to be crucial for a joyful life. As GYJ points out, the COVID-19 closure demonstrated it, while so many people were closed in their city apartments. But for them, being in the midst of nature, with deer, foxes, birds, and rabbits, is something natural. While their friends can’t wait for the weekends to evade the city and spend

²²⁸ “Mi ezt valljuk, munkában, itthon: azért vagyunk egymásnak, hogy támogassuk egymást, szeressük egymást, tiszteljük egymást, és kérjük a jó Isten segítségét.”

some time in nature, they experience that every day, without having to go anywhere. BA tells about the special relationship that is formed between humans and animals in their care, and the way animals reward their owners for it. Farming also transforms the relationship between people and wildlife. While before starting to farm BA was often tempted to pick the wildflowers, he can now admire them where they are. DJ tells that the land and the house are both like home to him. One of the best experiences for him is working together with nature, like plowing in the night and seeing foxes around the tractor catching mice in the traces of the plow. He believes that you can work together with nature without damaging it.

- **Faith**

Last but not least, farming involves faith. According to DD, in farming, there are so many uncertainties that one must have faith to deal with them. It is a big trial that you never know what to expect. You cannot see the end but still, do it, trusting that your work will be rewarded. The other interviewed farmers experience faith as a personal relationship with God. For GYJ, faith in God's providence is a fundamental element of how she understands and practices farming. It is a family heritage that she learned from her parents and an everyday experience: together with her husband they start every morning with prayer and end the day with thanksgiving. As she tells, it gives them peace and a sense of security knowing that they do their job and expect blessing from God. Trusting in God's providence as Jesus taught about it, helps them not to worry. But, as both DJ and GYJ confess, the real miracle of faith is experienced in times of trouble, when humanly speaking they see no way out, for example when it seems impossible for a crop or vegetable field to bring fruit, and God always provides. BA highlights the joy of experiencing that he is a part of God's wonderful creation and that by fulfilling the divine commission of caring for the land and preserving it, his life is more fulfilled. But not only is the Christian faith an important part of the farming life but, as DJ tells, farming also helps to understand the Bible better. An illustration of this is provided by him paraphrasing 1 Cor 3:6²²⁹ as the essence of his work and faith: "It is for us to plow and sow, and God gives the growth."²³⁰

²²⁹ "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

²³⁰ "A mi dolgunk az, hogy mi szántsunk-vessünk, a növekedés az Úrtól van."

b) Agrarian literature

- **Character**

Berry considers that at the root of the crises we are facing today, is a failure of character.²³¹ Agriculture, which is an important part of these global crises, also implies character. This agrarian moral character is described by Berry as “the sort of knowledge that might properly be called familiarity, and the affections, habits, values, and virtues (conscious and unconscious) that would preserve good care and good work through hard times.”²³² From a biblical perspective, the agrarian character is rooted in the fact that farming is the primary human vocation: serving and preserving the land.²³³ Therefore, vocation is a key element in the lives of farmers and farming as a global enterprise. However, as Davis observes, “[a]mong the many costs of the total economy, the loss of the principle of vocation is probably the most symptomatic and, from a cultural standpoint, the most critical. It is by the replacement of vocation with economic determinism that [...]destroy the character.”²³⁴ This leads to the fact that without a vocation, farming will only consider productivity and profit as its ethical code, while the sense of vocation as caretakers and stewards in God’s creation implies responsibility, attention, and patience, as Wirzba considers.²³⁵ Besides vocation, Davis asserts that one of the most important features of an agrarian character is restraint. From a biblical perspective, the ban on hoarding and keeping the Sabbath in the manna stories teaches the people of Israel the virtue of restraint, through which they can learn to remain dependent on God as the One who provides their daily food. In addition to this, in the modern context, it is an important warning against “a culture of unprecedented hoarding, consumption, and waste.”²³⁶ Therefore, practicing restraint helps to distinguish between important and unimportant, and helps reduce, or even eliminate the production of so much waste, while shaping dependence upon God. Another important element of the agrarian character is wisdom, which, in Davis’ view, “inspires and directs work that honors God, confers dignity on humans, and shows knowledge and respect for the material world as God’s own well-crafted work.”²³⁷ As Berry sums up, the character of a farmer requires good intention, good knowledge, and good work.²³⁸

²³¹ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 33.

²³² *Ibid*, 188.

²³³ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 104-105.

²³⁴ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 257-258.

²³⁵ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 104-105.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 142.

²³⁸ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 188.

- **Household, marriage, family**

In Berry's view, one of the central elements of farming and life integrity is the traditional rural household. The traditional household was in earlier times the bond between marriage and the earth.²³⁹ Once, people were born, lived, and died in the same house(hold), which united work, rest, and pleasure. It was a self-sustaining center of production and consumption.²⁴⁰ As Berry asserts, "The household is the bond of marriage that is most native to it, that grows with it and gives it substantial being in the world. It is the practical condition within which husband and wife can enact devotion and loyalty to each other."²⁴¹ The household is thus not only a unifying ideal, or a place for living together, but it is the practical environment of mutual dependence, which requires skill, moral dependence, and work.²⁴² The spouses are dependent on each other while they not only live in and from the household but they sustain and keep it going.

However, the concept of the household, and all that it meant, is being disintegrated by the idea of modern homes, which promotes the fragmentation of life.²⁴³ The concept of home is being emptied by separating home from work and pleasure, and by turning it almost exclusively into a place of consumption. This, according to Berry, is the main reason for two ruptures in human life: the estrangement of the sexes, and the estrangement from the earth.²⁴⁴ The estrangement of the sexes means a crisis in the institution of marriage. As Berry assumes, without the household, husband and wife have "a scarcity of practical reasons to be together."²⁴⁵ The estrangement from the earth, on the other hand, comes with the moral implications of not knowing the earth as the source of our bodily existence, and therefore, having no respect and no responsibility for it.²⁴⁶ In contrast to this, as Shiva reports, "home gardens in Indonesia are estimated to provide more than 20 percent of household income and 40 percent of domestic food supplies."²⁴⁷ This estimation shows how a small garden around the house can be a source of food production and at the same connect the people to the land, nature, and the source of food.

²³⁹ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 119.

²⁴⁰ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 57.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 136.

²⁴² Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 112.

²⁴³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 55.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 128.

²⁴⁵ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 112.

²⁴⁶ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 56.

²⁴⁷ Shiva, "Globalization and the War Against Farmers and the Land," 17.67.

- **Health**

As Berry observes, the Indo-European words ‘health’, ‘heal’, ‘whole’, and ‘holy’ come from the same root.²⁴⁸ Therefore, health, wholeness, and holiness are closely related. From this standpoint, he considers that the root of many illnesses and health issues are rooted in the fragmentation and disintegration of life.²⁴⁹ This fragmentation is caused by the departmentalization and specialization of every area of human life, and the loss of a holistic approach to it. He considers that “[i]t is wrong to think that bodily health is compatible with spiritual confusion or cultural disorder, or with polluted air and water or impoverished soil.”²⁵⁰ Therefore, it is also wrong to think that these issues can be solved apart from each other like the specialist approach suggests. Instead, as he continues, “conviviality is healing.”²⁵¹ From this approach, farming life proves to be a life of integrity, because it connects people to the land, to themselves, and to the community. Health and healing, as earlier mentioned, can only be realized in wholeness and in holiness. This wholeness means that human life must be interpreted and lived not apart from but as part of the whole, in the unity of body and soul, man and woman, individual and community, as parts of nature and the created world, and in peaceful coexistence with it. In this regard, rural farming life is a healing lifestyle. Northcott brings scientific evidence that time spent by children outdoors, and interaction with non-human species is an important source of child development, and mental and physical health, or that patients who can see trees and not buildings from their window recover faster from operations; while a lot of physical and mental illnesses, self-harm, suicide, eating disorder or obesity can be traced back to lack of interaction with nature.²⁵² Holiness, on the other hand, means that in this harmonious conviviality humans can fulfill their roles and vocation according to God’s will. As Berry puts it, “by understanding accurately his proper place in Creation, a man may be made whole.”²⁵³ Farming understood and practiced under the criteria of wholeness and holiness, is a source of healing and health, while, if a farmer fails to understand this, his farm will become unhealthy, he will produce unhealthy food, and make himself and the community as well unhealthy.²⁵⁴

In this interpretation of health, (physical) work has a special significance. Berry, referring to thoughts of ancient wisdom, indicates that “work is necessary to us, as much as a

²⁴⁸ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 144.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Northcott, *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*, 3.

²⁵³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 102.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

part of our condition as mortality; that good work is our salvation and our joy; that shoddy or dishonest or self-serving work is our curse and our doom.”²⁵⁵ The practical way in which health and work belong together can be illustrated by the example of gardening, where physical work makes the body hungry while it makes healthy food for it and keeps it fit without causing problems, as typical industrial solutions usually do.²⁵⁶ As Donahue assumes, eating good food and having good work, are natural requirements of the human body. But if these two are separated, they can cause mass pathology, which, in its turn, is highly profitable to some.²⁵⁷ Berry sums up eloquently the question of work and health, by writing that “[w]hen all the parts of the body are working together, are under each other’s influence, we say that it is whole; it is healthy. The same

is true of the world, of which our bodies are parts. The parts are healthy insofar as they are joined harmoniously to the whole.”²⁵⁸

- **Faith**

Starting from the principal idea that farming is the primary vocation of human beings to care for the land and to preserve it, the saying “to work is to pray”²⁵⁹ becomes significant. Being responsible stewards of the earth, humans can fulfill their divine commission through their everyday work. As many earlier mentioned biblical texts and agrarian works testify, the intimate relationship to the land implies a relationship with God. This does not only apply as a moral predicament to prove worthy of the gift of land,²⁶⁰ but also the experience of gratefulness and authentic rest through “the palpable, concrete understanding that God provides.”²⁶¹

c) Evaluation of farming feeling as it should

The question of joy and life integrity in the context of farming and rural life seems to be more difficult to define than the agential and circumstantial dimensions of flourishing life – and farming. This is partly because it is almost impossible to isolate the affective dimension

²⁵⁵ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 15.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 143.

²⁵⁷ Brian Donahue, “The Resettling of America” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 10.12, epub.

²⁵⁸ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 115.

²⁵⁹ Berry, *The Art of Commonplace*, 258.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 299.

²⁶¹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 79.

from the other two, and also because real joy is neither rooted in the external things of life nor a purely spiritual state but it is, as Volf suggested, enjoying things – of the world – *in God*.²⁶²

Despite the difficulties, the interviewed farmers and the agrarian writers help us to shape those aspects of the farming life which contribute to the feeling of being at the right place, experiencing the integrity of one's life, and, ultimately, to have joy.

- **Character**

Both the interviewed farmers and the agrarians find the right character as crucial for a good life in agriculture. The agrarian character stems on the one hand from a biblical worldview, understanding ourselves in the right relationship to God and creation. This is the source of the farming vocation. On the other hand, it is something gained, or even learned 'on the way.' Among these elements of the agrarian character are responsibility, perseverance, restraint, and practical wisdom. The character of a farmer will determine the attitude of a farmer, especially in times of trial. But the right character is not only a way of coping with the challenges of farming. It is also a source of joy. Being devoted to this calling, able to make sacrifices and practice restraint for a better cause, wise enough to make the right decisions, persistent in waiting and in doubt, and finally content and grateful for the outcome, ready to start again, will make the farmer joyful and fulfilled.

- **Household, marriage, family**

The connection between farming, household, and family, and their significance concerning joy, is an even more delicate question. In Berry's agrarian writings, the traditional household is a central concern, as the core of the unity between man and wife, humans and the land, and an expression of the integrity of life. However, I consider that it is difficult to define what a traditional household means in 2022. If we consider all the features that Berry attributes to the traditional household, its applicability will narrow down to an insignificant minority of today's farmers in the Romanian context. One such feature is the link between household and work. While in Berry's context the household is also locally situated in the center of the farmland, in the case of the interviewed farmers, the home place and the farming location are not the same. From a somewhat wider perspective, the household is still highly relevant in terms of marriage and family. But, in contrast to Berry's unilateral assessment, the respondents were of different opinions about the harmony between farming and marriage. GYJ reflected Berry's view by emphasizing the mutual dependence and reinforcement of their work and marriage,

²⁶² Volf, *A Public Faith*, 62.

both directed by support, respect, and love. BA also affirmed the harmony-creating effect of sharing the tasks in farming. In contrast to this, DJ pointed out that in the same way as farming and the rural household can strengthen the marriage, it can also be a source of conflict and estrangement, in the case when not both spouses have the same interest or understanding of farming. Another opinion was that the household on a mechanized farm does not anymore has that constructive effect on the life of the family, because work on such farms does not require other family members. The last two perspectives are especially relevant in light of two interrelated trends characteristic of farming life in Romania: farms are getting more and more mechanized, and more and more farmer's wives follow their own careers or are (economically) forced to get a job apart from housekeeping.

Therefore, even though the traditional household depicted by Berry, and partly affirmed by farmers undoubtedly has important benefits and can be viewed as desirable, it cannot be claimed to be the only way of achieving harmony and integrity in farming life. In that case, not only urban citizens but also a large part of farmers would be excluded.

- **Health**

Both the interviewed farmers and the agrarians agree that health is a key issue in farming. The respondents bring physical and mental health in connection to their work: doing physical work, which is intensely required in this field, is beneficial for the fitness of the body, even though most people try to escape it out of comfort and the general perception that physical work is something inferior to intellectual work. Berry depicts health in the context of wholeness and holiness. This means that, according to him, our lives and well-being should not be interpreted and cared for from a specialist approach, separating body and soul, humans and their environment, focusing only on particular issues of health and illness. Instead, as it is becoming more and more popular among people, Berry suggests the holistic approach to life. This is, on the one hand, in accordance with the biblical perspective on the unity and integrity of human life. This unity refers, as described in detail in Chapter 3, to the belonging together of the bodily existence and the soul, the belonging of human beings to the community of creation, and ultimately, the belonging of both humans and creation to the triune God. On the other hand, farming life offers an environment to live this integrity in the everyday life. However, Berry's emphasis on traditional farming life as almost the exclusive comprehensive life-set for this kind of holistically understood health may be exaggerated, even though there is scientific evidence to prove the health benefits of living in interaction with nature, which is a key element of farming and rural life. Berry attributes most health and other problems (like depression or

substance abuse) in the rural area to the ruining of traditional farming life, some 2015 statistics from Romania, for example, show that the most intense alcohol consumers are in general male farmers aged 50 to 64 living in villages.²⁶³ Thus, even though the chances of a ‘whole’ life in the countryside are significantly better from the analyzed aspects, in itself it is not a warranty for it.

- **Faith**

A healthy, whole, and holy view and ‘practice’ of life can only spring out of faith. The biblical understanding of ourselves, the world, and our responsibility for it before God, the countless references to farming life in the Bible, which are so relevant even in the economic and political aspects of today’s agriculture, or the ‘palpable’ understanding of God’s providence, all point in the same direction: a fulfilled, peaceful and joyful life in farming is only possible by faith. Life feeling as it should – or farming feeling as it should –, means to enjoy the things of life in God, who is the source of joy.

²⁶³ “Harta Alcoolului: Cata Bautura Consuma Romanii,” accessed August 5, 2022, https://adevarul.ro/economie/stiri-economice/harta-alcoolului-cata-bautura-consuma-romanii-arata-portretul-bautorului-aprig-celui-prudent-infografie-1_559559d4cfbe376e35ccf402/index.html

VI. Conclusion

1. Final thoughts

Through the chapters of this thesis, I tried to bring the topic of farming and rural life into the light of theological reflection. I found that theological agrarianism is a suitable approach and comprehensive enough to embrace this multifaceted topic.

My objective was first to evaluate the situation of farming in the complexity of its different aspects, starting from a theological description of how humans should understand the earth as God's creation, and how to relate to it according to God's will and purpose.

I found that the concept of stewardship is the most suitable metaphor.

After briefly presenting Volf's vision of the flourishing life, I engaged in the description and evaluation of the situation of farming and rural life, in dialog with interviewed farmers from Transylvania and agrarian writers from across the ocean. Surprisingly, I found many similarities and connections between these sources. It became evident that in essence, the issues that farmers in Eastern Europe are facing, are to a large extent identical with the issues of farmers in America and perhaps most parts of the world.

As I found out, at the heart of the problem lies the transformation of agriculture, which originally was deeply rooted in culture, religion, and community life, into what the agrarians call agribusiness and agriscience. Replacing the biblical ethic of responsibility and harmonious conviviality with nature with the standardless productionist ethic of big technology and big economy had, and continually has dramatic consequences on humans, communities, humanity, and creation.

Even though, drawing on the Christian hope, there is a way out of this self-destructive pattern. This way out can only lead through the restoration of the broken and corrupted relationships: with the triune God, with each other, and with creation, and through the intentional pursuit of the healing and flourishing of all Creation. Humanity must reconnect its life with all its spheres – including farming – to the source of all life. A responsible relationship must be established with the land, which involves attention to its needs instead of exploiting it. Healing must include the local communities through reconciliation, through establishing the conditions for freedom, independence, and self-sustaining.

These, and all the desired changes for healing and the common flourishing of the entire creation community, must start from below, from the margins, by taking our responsibilities as Christians seriously. Starting from the individuals who share this vision, from the family households, through local communities, and raising attention in the public and academic life to these issues, could lead to significant changes.

2. Application

a) Motivation

As formulated in the introduction of the thesis, my intention was not only to offer an assessment of the relationship between humans and the earth, and to reflect theologically on the context of farming and rural life in Transylvania, but also to offer insights on how to integrate the Christian faith and work in agriculture. Given the social and cultural embeddedness of agriculture – as emphasized by the agrarians – and the perspective of the flourishing of all humanity and creation – as accentuated by Volf –, I consider that it is not enough to articulate the theological vision of ‘flourishing farming’ on a theoretical level and provide it as a source of inspiration to pastors on the countryside, farmers, and rural Christian communities. Even though, as the agrarians assert, it is hardly possible to transform the economic and political systems that shape the agrarian sector and the lives of farmers,²⁶⁴ there are still ways of acting for positive changes.

The motivation to engage in this attempt is rooted in assuming our public responsibility as Christians toward the flourishing of God’s good creation. This implies, on the one hand, identifying ourselves as responsible stewards of creation, and, on the other hand, becoming active members of the society, shaping its cultural-political-economic paradigms according to God’s self-revelation in Scripture and Jesus Christ.

In this regard, I consider that (theological) agrarianism should not play the role of a counter-culture, barricading itself on the edges of an expanding urban society, as the impression Berry often gives, but it should engage in a constructive dialogue with other elements of the public sphere. Therefore, instead of isolation, searching for partners and seeking cooperation seems a more appropriate solution to me.

²⁶⁴ The fact that 45 years after the first publication of Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America* (1977) it is still one of the most relevant agrarian writing, shows that the issues he addressed are still with us, and even worsening.

From this standpoint, I suggest one concrete possibility to ‘practically and publicly’ integrate faith and farming in the Transylvanian context. This would require cooperation between the Reformed Church in Romania (and possibly also other churches), individual rural congregations, volunteering experienced farmers, and young ‘farmers-to-be.’

b) Envisioning a flourishing cooperation

Usually, Reformed rural congregations in Transylvania have significant farmland. The original purpose of the farmland belonging to the parishes was to provide a living for the pastor’s family. But since pastors are paid a statutory salary, the farmland is either used by members of the congregation, rented to (usually bigger-scale) farmers, or simply left to fallow. Often, these fields are not properly taken care of, and create conflicts between church members concerning their use and benefits. However, there could be a better purpose for them.

In the heart of the Transylvanian Mezőség region, in the village of Válaszút (Răscruți) there is a large cultural and educational complex called The Kallós Zoltán Foundation. Although it is not a specifically Christian organization, its mission has much in common with the Reformed *Volkskirche*: conserving and transmitting Hungarian and Transylvanian folk culture and tradition to younger generations, uniting and strengthening the Hungarian diaspora.²⁶⁵ The institution has also a three-year agricultural education program where secondary school graduates can apply for integrated theoretical and practical studies in agriculture. Currently, there are around 50 students following these studies. The graduates of this program will either return to their parents’ farms (if they come from farmer families) or try to find a job in the agricultural sector, which can be very difficult.

I consider that there could be mutually beneficial cooperation between the Reformed Church and the Kallós Zoltán Foundation. The Christian worldview and values could be integrated into the Curriculum to enrich the study program and call attention to the cultural and religious aspects of farming. From the part of the Church, there could be established a kind of scholarship program, where every year a few congregations would offer a defined part of their farmland to graduates of the agricultural school to establish their farms there. This would require a well-defined system of application with terms and conditions on all sides:

- the congregations would provide the farmland freely for 7-14 years.

²⁶⁵ “About the Foundation,” Kallós Zoltán Alapítvány, accessed August 6, 2022, https://kallosalapitvany.ro/en/home/#az_alapitvanyrol

- the Kallós Zoltán Foundation would integrate religion into its curriculum, and supervise the farming practice of the graduates during the scholarship.
- the graduates – and perhaps their families – would become active members of the local congregation and community, and commit to responsible farming methods based on theological-agrarian principles.
- local, experienced farmers with Christian backgrounds (many of them having nobody in the family to take over the farm) could also be involved as mentors.
- by creating a legal context for this cooperation, the young farmers could also gain access to EU or state funds addressing young farmers and start-up businesses.
- an extra option would be to involve the local authorities to provide housing for the young farmer.

What would be the benefits of this?

The Christian faith would be integrated into agricultural education, providing a Christian worldview and moral values to a new generation of farmers. The Foundation would be able to offer a secure long-term perspective for its students, and this way become more attractive. There would be a new and better purpose for the church-owned farmland, which would be farmed on the principles of good stewardship and Christian responsibility. The local church and village communities (which are getting smaller and older) would welcome new, young, and hopefully dedicated members, and perhaps families, who would probably be settled in the community after the expiry of the scholarship. These young farmers would get the chance to establish their independent farming lives, sustained by a community and the church, instead of paying rent for the land or bank loans, or getting employed as machine operators at industrial-scale farms, increasing their productivity and profit. The young farmer could be enriched by the experience and character of his mentor, and possibly become his ‘successor.’ The community and the local authorities would get a new local producer, and benefit from his/her work, products, and taxes.

Moreover, this initiative could serve as a good example for:

- young farmers to continue or start farming – with God! –,
- the churches to engage in mutually constructive and at the same time missionary endeavors with other spheres of public life, and also with other denominations,
- schools to integrate faith in the education and provide perspective for the future of students,
- experienced farmers to sustain young farmers, and

- the entire society to work together for the flourishing of individuals, communities, humanity, and, ultimately, of Creation.

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VIII. Appendix 1.

To understand better the context of farming and rural life in Transylvania, I interviewed 4 farmers.

The respondents are all members of the Hungarian Reformed community in Transylvania, living in a 35 km radius of Cluj-Napoca. Most of their issues are common with the majority of farmers in Transylvania, or even the entire country of Romania, regardless of their ethnicity and religious affiliation, therefore, the interview material is not only relevant in the Hungarian Reformed context of Transylvania but also in the wider farming community in the country. The respondents are farming between 20 and 80 hectares of farmland (mainly privately owned, and also rented fields) and cover a wide range of agricultural production, from cereals to dairy and vegetables. In the Romanian context, all four interviewed farmers count as small- to middle-scale farmers, being the owners of their farms, and relying almost exclusively on their own workforce and family members. None of them has employees.

GYJ is the only woman among the respondents. She is a 57 years old farmer, living in the former *Hóstát*, now part of Cluj-Napoca. Her husband is growing crops on 22 hectares outside the city, and they are producing vegetables together.

DJ is a 61 years old farmer and mechanical engineer, the president of the local Farmers' Association. He is living in Cojocna (Kolozs) village, 25 km from Cluj-Napoca, where he is farming on approximately 80 hectares, growing crops and hay. He is promoting alternative and ecological farming methods, like no-till farming. He does not raise livestock.

DD is a 28 years old farmer also from Cojocna (Kolozs). Together with his father they are running a diversified farm: growing crops on 35 hectares, raising livestock and being engaged in beekeeping.

BA is a 47 years old Reformed pastor in a rural congregation, 35 km from Cluj-Napoca. He started farming 10 years ago when 30 hectares of farmland were restituted to the congregation, and no one in the community wanted to take it in use. He is engaged in raising livestock and keeping horses. Farming is only a secondary occupation for him.

IX. Appendix 2.

I made the interviews in Hungarian language, via video-call, between 2-11 June, 2022. With the consent of the respondents I recorded the conversations, and stored the files safely. To be able to use the interview material in a correct and verifiable form, I made transcripts from the voice recordings.

The structure of the (semi-structured) interview followed Volf's tripartite articulation of the flourishing life (agential, circumstantial, affective), applied to farming and rural life. The questions focused on the context of family-based, small-scale farmers, and rural communities, requiring both reflections on the current situation and envisioning better solutions.

The first set of questions was related to the agential component of farming: how can they do it rightly? The questions included the role of faith in agriculture, the understanding of land, the primary principles and motivations in farming (profit, sustainability), ecological farming methods (technology, chemicals, fertilizers, biodiversity, crop rotation), responsibility.

The second set of questions was related to the social-political-economic circumstances of farming in Transylvania, as experienced by the respondents, and their suggestions for more suitable conditions. The questions included: the public perception of farming, the role of local communities, the economic environment (does it favor small or big-scale farmers, what are the advantages and disadvantages), laws and administration, the role of multinational agricultural corporations and input-providers, market for local products, independence and dependence.

The third set of questions focused on the affective dimension of farming and life-integrity, including: what does farming mean to the respondents, sources of joy and fulfilment, connection between farming, household, marriage and family, connection with nature, farming and religious experience.