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**READING THE BOOKS OF LIFE:
A PROPHETIC-PROTREPTIC-PROLEPTIC MODEL OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

Joas Adiprasetya

This article is an attempt to propose a new model of ecclesial presence that combines the prophetic, protreptic, and proleptic dimensions of Christian social engagement. Using the example of a Christian NGO named *Taman Bacaan Masyarakat* (TBM) or *Community Reading Garden*, I argue that their social works among religiously harsh areas in West Java, Indonesia, is best seen as the actual presence of the Church beyond its institutional structure. Such an idea of Christian and ecclesial presence in a non-institutional mode needs to be understood theologically. To do so, I propose an imaginative construction of Christian presence by employing several theories, such as James D. Hunter's faithful presence model and Leonard Sweet's DNA model of the church. The final reflection will draw an inspiration from Hans Urs von Balthasar's theodramatic idea.

[A]The Story of Two Disappointed Activists

Taman Bacaan Masyarakat (TBM) or *Community Reading Garden* is not a spectacular phenomenon in Indonesia. Not many people realize their activities in many poor areas in Indonesia, especially in West Java. However, I find TBM as a fascinating and unique model of Christian presence different from what have been done by most official churches or other Christian NGOs in Indonesia.

Josep Budi Santoso is the founder of Sanggar Rebung Cendani, a foundation that supports the opening of TBMs since 2001. He quitted from his ecclesial vocation as a Catholic friar for some personal disappointments with the rigid hierarchy of his Catholic

church tradition. The church, in his opinion, did not address the real social problems. Ester Jusuf, his long-time friend, joined him in 2011, after she had worked for years as a legal advocate for Chinese Indonesians who had been discriminated, especially those who victimized during the 1998 riot.¹ A Chinese Christian coming from a Reformed tradition, Ester was also unsatisfied with the minimalist approach of the Reformed churches in responding to social problems of poverty, racial injustice, and social conflicts in Indonesia.

TBMs are thus opened with a common social vision of two persons who changed their paths of life and entered a new possibility of engaging with their communities faithfully. Budi dan Ester also shared a common disappointment with the official churches, Catholic and Protestant respectively, which have kept silent on the overwhelming problems in society. In my interviews with both, I found out that, while Budi still maintains his pessimistic attitude toward the Catholic Church, Ester has been at peace with her church, although she decides not to let the church become the only Christian way to address the social problems.

How do they see social problems in Indonesia, especially in the West Java areas that are most populated with Muslims?^[33] They have a deep worry about the fact that there are many Islamic fundamentalist and radical groups in the areas targeting children and young people to be recruited as their new members. While Budi believes that the Catholic Church has failed to be active in such areas, Ester understands that her works in legal advocacy would be useless until the society is educated and being exposed to the wider and pluralistic world. Thus, they decided to work together in the most “dangerous” areas that potentially become the loci for nurturing Islamist radicalism.

In order to implement their project, Budi and Ester make connections with their Christians or Muslims friends, living in poor and less educated areas, who share their vision

¹ For her brave advocacy for the Chinese Indonesians who survived from the 1998 riot, Ester Jusuf has been awarded with the Asoka Award, Yap Thiam Hien Award, and many others.

for a better education for children coming from poor families. They both believe that the poor children are the most vulnerable members of society, who can easily be manipulated for the agenda of Islamist radical groups in the future. Both activists and their friends thus open up reading spaces in small and cheap rented rooms in the areas and fill the rooms with quality books for children. They carefully select books that are not explicitly religious in content and books that can promote inclusivity, moral values, and general knowledge. Periodically they rotate books from one TBM to another so that the children can have always fresh and new books.

The result has been beyond their imagination. Until September 2015, they have opened 121 TBMs, mostly in West Java areas. Thousands of children and young people have been reached out and become book-lovers. Through the readings and other activities created by local organizers, including playing together, watching movies, and outing, the children learn how to accept the religious and ethnic others. For example, Rama (8 year-old) and Chandra (10 year-old), both Muslims, visited and stayed overnight in our house to play with my Son, a Christian, although they had been told by their adult family members that Christians are infidels and “Zionists.” My son and them get along very well and become friends until now.

[A]Models of Christian Presence

The story of Budi and Ester and their TBMs has inspired me to rethink of the social engagement of the church in the midst of Indonesian pluralistic society. The central idea of this paper is to reflect on their activities and discuss their social engagement by using the triadic lens of prophetic, protreptic, and proleptic model of Christian presence. However, I need to lay out the theoretical bases for such engagements. Three perspectives are of importance here. First, I will discuss James Davison Hunter's models of Christian presence in

the world to lay out. Secondly, I will demonstrate how Leonard Sweet's DNA model of the church is beneficial in demonstrating the ecclesial nature of TBM.

Hunter's seminal work, *To Change the World*, has disturbed many social theologians as he gives harsh criticism to some Christian strategies to change the world and social theories that support them.² Writing from the American context, he argues that most Christians in the States misunderstand how cultural change occurs, since they always think about cultural change in a more individualistic way, that is, that culture is regarded as values or worldviews ^[9]“found in the hearts and minds of individuals.”³ To be sure, we can easily find Hunter's main target: the evangelicals! However, Hunter demonstrates that the mistake has occurred in three models: the evangelical “defensive against,” the liberal “relevant to,” and the neo-Anabaptist “purity from.”⁴ All those models, Hunter contends, have failed to answer two important problems of the modern world: *dissolution* and *difference*.

By dissolution Hunter means “the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality,” in which any attempt to connect our discourse to understand the reality of the world has been challenged if not negated.⁵ The three models have failed in dealing with the issue of dissolution, since they “resisted the separation of word and world simply by renegotiating the meaning of the Word in ways that were more plausible to modern secular circumstances” (as in the *relevant to* model), or they “have sought to resist the erosion of the truth-claims of Christianity by attacking the world's efforts to undermine the integrity of the Word of God,” while in the same time engaging in “practices that contribute to the very thing they want to resist” (as in the *defensive against* model), or they resisted the dissolution between word and

² Hunter, *To Change the World*.

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Hunter contends that it is only the Neo-Anabaptism that rejects the secular politics, but Hunters criticizes them as being strongly political by being separatists without advancing their theologies beyond politics. Ibid., 166.

⁵ Ibid., 205.

world “by simply retreating from all that would undermine the integrity of the gospel and the practices that enact it” (as in the *purity from* model).⁶

The second problem, difference, refers to the question of ^[23] “now do we think about and relate to those who are different from us and to a world that is not our world?”^[26] Again, Hunter is of the opinion that the three models have failed to answer the difference issue, since they simply see the “other” as “a potential ally (through conversion) or as an enemy” (as in the *defensive againts* model), or they “downplay any difference between themselves and the ‘other’” (as in the *relevant to* model), or they “tend to construe difference as ‘darkness’ ... and separate [themselves] from darkness as a community of light” (as in the *purity from* model).⁸

Hunter's own proposal, “faithful presence,” is intended to transcend the problems left by the three models. Such a model provides a ^[7] “constructive subversion of all frameworks of social life that are incompatible with the shalom for which we were made and to which we are called.”⁹ It is in the incarnation of Jesus Christ that Hunter finds the best answer as to how Christians can engage with the culture of dissolution and difference—the two main problems of society, according to Hunter. His further explication of how incarnation is the best answer to the two problems is worth quoting at length.

^[13] It is in the incarnation and the particular way the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ that we find the only adequate reply to challenges of dissolution and difference.^[3] If, indeed, there is a hope or an imaginable prospect for human flourishing in the contemporary world, it begins when the Word of shalom becomes flesh in us and is enacted through us toward those with whom we live, in the tasks we are given, and in the spheres of influence in which we operate.^[9] When the Word of all flourishing— defined by the love of Christ—becomes flesh in us, in our relations with others, within the tasks we are given, and within our sphere of influence—

⁶ Ibid., 221–223.

⁷ Ibid., 200.

⁸ Ibid. 219–220.

⁹ Ibid., 235.^[2]

absence gives way to presence, and the word we speak to each other and to the world becomes authentic and trustworthy.^[2] This is the heart of a theology of faithful presence.¹⁰

Moreover, the “faithful presence” model enables Christians to be present creatively and imaginatively in the world in two ways: antithetically and constructively. He succinctly maintains, “antithesis is not simply negational. Subversion is not nihilistic but creative and constructive.^[7] Thus, the church—as a community, within individual vocations, and through both existing and alternative social institutions—stands antithetical to modernity and its dominant institutions in order to offer an alternative vision and direction for them.”¹¹

How can Hunter's “faithful presence” model help us give theological meaning to the TBM Project? I have to begin by arguing that the problem of difference is more prevalent in Indonesian context than the problem of dissolution, which I believe is more relevant to Hunter's context. TBMs are opened in the areas where the radical groups have indoctrinated Muslim youngsters to become harsher and more rejective toward their non-Muslim neighbors. It seems true that poverty and lack of education are two main factors in the increase of religious radicalism.¹² My interviews with Budi and Ester gave me a strong impression that they fully recognized how the issue of poverty and lack of education are closely related to the radicalization of Muslim young people in West Java. Opening TBMs thus becomes a very promising strategy to confront radicalization, since TBMs offer spaces for young people to realize that the world is much wider than their own religion and that living amidst religious diversity is not threatening, but nurturing, their faith.

¹⁰ Ibid. 252.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² One study of the relationship among poverty, education, and religious terrorism in six Muslim countries, including Indonesia, finds out that the poorer and less educated the people are, the easier they get involved in religious radical groups. Cf. Gottlieb, *Debating Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 60.

[A]The DNA of the Church

One of the latest ways of constructing contemporary ecclesiology is by using the metaphor of human DNA and making an analogous observation to the life of the church. Not only is the approach fancy, it is also beneficial especially for the Protestant churches that always struggle with the problem of denominationalism. The constant question asked by and to the Protestant churches has always been:^[18] To what extent are we sure that the vast diversity of Christian churches, globally or locally, can still connect each and every one of them to the universal Church.^[19] This is, therefore, a question of the nature of the Church. Howard A Snyder, in his *Decoding of the Church*, argues that the classical marks of the Church (*notae ecclesiae*)—one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic—do not do justice to the dialectic of local and global faces of the Church.¹³ The classical marks rather express the hierarchical and institutional character of the church due to the context of its formulation.^[18] Moreover, he is of the opinion that the classical marks are also more defensive than missional.^[18]

Leonard Sweet takes up Snyder's clue of the importance of the Church being missional, by proposing the threefold strands of the Church—the DNA of the Church—which determine the very nature of the Church. They are missional, relational, and incarnational (MRI).¹⁴ In his view, the MRI identity deeply reflects the Trinitarian nature of all reality, including the Church. He maintains, “A trifecta of truth comprised of a missional God, a relational Son, and an incarnational Spirit is what makes orthodox Christianity distinctive and is at heart of Christian exceptionalism.”¹⁵

¹³ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*.

¹⁴ Sweet, *So Beautiful*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.^[21]

The first *missional* strand expresses Sweet's belief that the nature of the Church is not found in its institution.^[19] The Church should rather be seen as a moving community—a movement. He argues at length,

[EXT] To be sure, the MRI paradigm is a shift from institution to movement, from “withinforth” to “withoutforth” (medieval language for the “inner” and the “outer”), from planning to prayer and preparedness, from strategic thinking to prophesying your way forward, from invite them in to interact with them out there, from increased market share to increased world presence, from living in to living out the gospel. Besides, how can you do evangelism unless you're out there and living out the gospel?¹⁶[/EXT]

Thus, the missional character of the Church validates the presence of the Church within (with and in) the world.

Sweet relates the *relational* strand of the Church to the Son. Criticizing the practice of contemporary churches that focus on buildings and doctrines, he states that the Church is “a network of relationship ... with God, with the Scriptures, with each other, with creation.”¹⁷

He continues,

[EXT] We need to learn to play the spaces ... All space is God's space. Church is God's space. World is God's space. Sunday morning is God's space.^[21] Jesus is at work in the eighty-year-old Sunday-school teacher as well as in the atheist or in the Buddhist. But the real God-space is in the relationship space between you and another person.¹⁸[/EXT]^[21]

Regarding the third strand, the *incarnational*, Sweet takes an interesting turn, when he suggests a cross-culturalist presence of the Church in the world. By “cross-cultural” he means, “the gospel doesn't ‘counter’ cultures but ‘crosses’ culture with the gospel ... piercing

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷ Ibid. 140.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the heart of every culture with the divine so that we can be human again.”¹⁹ Incarnation, as the very heart of Christianity, enables Christians to say “No!” to the world, while simultaneously say “Yes!”^[29] to the world through its relational strand. “Incarnants,” Sweet argues, “are people who are skilled at saying ‘NO!’ If we are in touch with the culture but in tune with the Spirit, embracing and estranging the culture simultaneously, there will always be an atonal identity that disturbs the world at the same time it exposes the world for what it is: shattered and in need of salvation.”²⁰

Sweet's MRI or DNA approach sounds paradoxical to me. It tells us the clearest nature of the Church, which could be hold only if we live in a dialectical relationship with and in the world. Such a paradox, I believe, cannot be fulfilled only by the Church as institution. We are in need of more complex ways of being present in the world ... and the MRI model provides us a fresh and lively perspective to do so.

The works of TBMs in the West Java areas are the proof of such a MRI presence, not institutionally but culturally. They confront the radicalists' religious homogeneity precisely by being friends with the people. They do not speak up the gospel from within the Church, but enlivening it—incarnating it—through a relation engagement with the people and their cultures. The TBMs, by definition set by the non-incarnants, thus are not churches. Nevertheless, the Church can never be more present in the West Java areas than through the space created through their works of love.

I also find a very close affinity between Hunter's “faithful presence” model and Sweet's MRI model. On the one side, Hunter seems to summarize what Sweet elaborates in a more complex (and popular) way. On the other side, Sweet has been able to enliven and concretize Hunter's straightforward call for the Church today. Both, however, would agree in

¹⁹ Ibid., 178.

²⁰ Ibid., 176.

two basic things that I exercise here.^[22] First, there must be a dialectical relationship between the Church and the world, between faith and culture. Second, the dialectical relationship can only be maintained creatively if we enlarge our understanding of the Church beyond its rigidly institutional form. The TBMs meet both aspects.

[A] Prophetic, Protreptic, and Proleptic Engagements

I can see clearly that the TBM Project provides three dimensions of Christian presence. The first is *prophetic* dimension.^[19] In being prophetic communities, the TBMs expose the failure of the official church to be faithfully present in the midst of religious radicalism.^[19] At the same time, it is also faithfully present to offer to society a new way of engaging with religious difference that is hospitable and welcoming. In so doing, it implicitly rejects religious radicalism that has been growing in society. Thus, the prophetic dimension of TBMs is directed toward the official churches and society. Like the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, such a criticism is not done from inside, but from outside, the church, precisely by being present faithfully in the midst of society. In so doing, TBMs demonstrate two inseparable functions of prophetic engagement: religious critique and social solidarity.^[29] In this case, it is not the official churches but the TBMs that function as the prophets forth-telling the truth toward the troubling society.

Unlike the official churches that often express their prophetic voices from inside the churches, TBM is another form of ecclesial community that stands in solidarity with the people outside the churches, Christians and Muslims, and in being such a community, they can criticize both the churches and the society. Unlike many other NGO activists, who do not

²¹ Mukdani, *An/Other Praxis*, 98.

want to be associated whatsoever with the churches, TBM demonstrates an ecclesial presence beyond the official churches.

The second dimension is that of *protreptic*, by which I mean a presence that persuades and invites others. The protreptic function of TBMs is evident in their being present in a non-offensive and non-intrusive way. They are present faithfully merely to invite the people to embrace a wider view of reality and to acknowledge religious others. The protreptic dimension is best demonstrated through their daily life—reading, playing, hanging out, etc. Both Muslim and Christian children offer a symbol of what kind of life the grown-ups should try as a more human alternative to their fanaticism. In some TBMs, we witness the increase of adults supporting the project for the sake of their children.

I am inspired by the writings of some church fathers, who employed the protreptic style of writing, especially the author of *the Epistle to Diognetus* as well as the writings of Clement of Alexandria. In Book 5, the writer of the epistle talks about the dialectic presence of Christians in the non-Christian culture,

[EXT]^[16] they dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners.^[16] As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners.^[16] Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. [/EXT]

The Christians, in the text, have a hyphenated identity as sojourners-citizens precisely by enlivening the “Yes” and “No” of the Christian relation with and in the world. Here, I follow David Aune, who explains that typical protreptic discourses contains three features: a negative tone in critique of rival ideas, a positive tone that praises certain ideas, and a personal invitation to the hearers to accept the exhortation.²² The three features seem to be evident in the TBM Project. They criticize both the official churches and Islamist radicalism, although they do it in silence but through their work and presence. They also appreciate the

²² Aune, “Romans as a Logos Protreptikos,” 279-296.

willingness of their local Muslim and Christian friends who have the same vision of renewing their society. Finally, they open up the TBMs as an invitation to the people to embrace a new way of living together peacefully for the future of their children.

The third dimension is that of *proleptic*. In my engagement with Budi and Ester, I never see their frustration, as if their works among the children in the West Java area have thrown them into an abyss of meaninglessness. I believe, they have their strength in their anticipating the coming of the better future for the children and their society. Any good yet small fruit that they receive day by day is seen as the beginning of the divine promise coming true. While the protreptic dimension is based on their *faith* and the prophetic dimension expresses their *love*, the TBM activists endure the hardship of their works because of their *hope* in the future reality.

The creative combination of prophetic, protreptic, and proleptic engagements seems to be very much relevant to the situation where Christians are minority religion, who live in a society threatened by religious radicalism. There are four characteristics that I would like to emphasize. First, the triadic prophetic-protreptic-proleptic presence is a *critical* voice against the religious hegemony occurs in Islamist radical movements as well as against the mediocrity of official churches who are not willing to get fully involved in the struggle of society in West Java. Such a critical position, secondly, is shown through an *open, welcoming, and hospitable* presence, which is simultaneously Christian and interfaith. Third, theologically, we could also say that TBM is demonstrating the MRI of Christian life and church. It is also *missional*. The initiators of TBMs are aware of that fact that the mission they are pursuing deliberately in the midst of such fanatical areas in West Java is not a mission of soul-winning; it rather is a mission of humanization. It is *incarnational*, in the sense that it presents and re-presents the Incarnate Word through the creation of new communities celebrating humanity across the religious lines. Finally, it is *relational* in their

willingness to make connection between the church and society, between parents and children, between Christians and Muslims, between God and creation.

[A]A Concluding Reflection: Towards a Theodramatic Presence

The work and presence of the TBM Project lead me to reflect on the meaning of being the church today, especially in the context of religious unfriendliness. It is much easier to think of the absence of the official churches and the presence of non-Christian radicalism as the binary contestation between the church and the world. However, the “faithful presence”^[23] of TBMs helps us revise our understanding of the church in the perspective of “theodramatic ecclesiology,” as Nicholas M. Healy suggests, borrowing from Hans Urs von Balthasar.²³ In such an ecclesiology, we should not understand the world as independent of God's work.

Healy succinctly maintains,

[EXT]The non-church world is thus not only the place where the church is to witness to its Lord, it is also the place from which the church may learn about its Lord and about true discipleship. The tension that should always exist between church and non-church is thus not only something to be endured, but also something to be acknowledged as a gift. The church benefits from the non-church world, even as the world benefits (whether it thinks it does or not) from hearing and seeing the gospel of Christ truthfully embodied.²⁴**[/EXT]**

TBMs, in this sense, are the church and non-church in the same time. They become the loci of God's active presence and work, which *prophetically* criticize the church and the world altogether, *protreptically* invite Christians and non-Christians to enter a new atmosphere where humanity and difference are celebrated, and *proleptically* invite everyone

²³ Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 24, 76. See Chapter 3 for Healy's discussion of Balthasar ecclesiology and its implication for his own position.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.^[22]

to believe in the better common future. The TBM Project is thus a *vox clamantis in deserto* that cries out and invites everybody to believe that the children in West Java deserve to read the books of life and to have a better future.

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