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Religions and the Search for the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies

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Religions and the Search for the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies

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INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to present in this special issue of *NGTT* a selection of peer-reviewed essays from the presentations made at four consultations that were part of a joint international research project from 2007 to 2010, on the role of religions in the search of the common good in pluralistic societies. The project focused on the development of religious concepts and practices in relation to three countries, namely Nigeria, South Africa and the Netherlands. All three of these countries represent pluralistic societies with different types of democratic cultures. Three research institutes – one each in Nigeria, South Africa and the Netherlands – that share a focus on public theology were involved in this project: the Institute of Public Theology and Development Studies (IPTDS) in Mkar/Gboko (Benue State), Nigeria; the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (BNC) at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University; and the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI) at the Faculty of Theology, VU University Amsterdam. The project was made possible by the financial assistance of the last-mentioned institution in reaction to a call for projects by its Centrum voor Internationale Samenwerking (CIS – Center for International Collaboration).

The program built on a previous successful joint venture by the IRTI and the BNC (2003 to 2005) that focused on the enhancement of research capacity from underprivileged groups in South Africa. As a result of this project, students were able to attend national and international conferences, resulting in a dozen publications in refereed journals. Because of the success of this first project and the resultant increase in the number of students to successfully complete their postgraduate studies in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, the latter faculty decided to take responsibility for part of the remuneration of the project's coordinator once the project ended.

The new project (2007 to 2010) continued the support of research capacity building for underprivileged students in the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology, and extended its efforts to include students at the Reformed Theological Seminary (Mkar) and at the University of Mkar in Nigeria. One student each from Mkar and from Stellenbosch were also invited to study toward a research master's degree at the VU University Amsterdam – one of these students is currently completing his PhD at VU University on ecumenical approaches to the fight against poverty.

A major addition to the new venture was the introduction of a common research project on the role of religions in the search for the common good. We decided to focus on three specific issues that have been and are still very controversial: the relationship between churches and the state (both being agents in the public domain claiming to contribute to the common good); the role of religions in the eradication of poverty; and the role of ethnicity in societies and religions. These issues were successively discussed at consultations at Mkar in 2007, at Stellenbosch in 2008, and again at Mkar in 2009. In a final consultation, held in Stellenbosch in March 2010, the results of the project and a multidisciplinary approach towards these issues were evaluated.

This publication is divided into four sections. The first serves as an introduction to the three sections that follow and comprises three essays, resulting from the final consultation of the project. Each essay reflects upon one aspect of the project's broader theme: Religion (Jan Nieder-Heitmann), the common good (Nico Koopman) and pluralistic societies (Gerrit Brand). Each of the sections that follow then concerns one of the three foci within the broad theme, as topics of the different consultations, namely religion and the search for the common good within pluralistic societies with regard to: (1) religion and ethnicity; (2) the relationship between church and state; and (3) the church and the eradication of poverty.

ETHNICITY

The first section – with contributions by Peter Versteeg, Martien Brinkman, Eddy van der Borgh, Godwin Akper, Emmanuel Usue and Saint Gbilekaa – reflects upon the concept of ethnicity, something that in recent decades has seen a deepening discourse among social scientists. This concept has replaced the concept of “race” in the second half of the twentieth century. Due to the fact that much interbreeding has always occurred between populations and because the boundaries between races are never very clear, modern genetics tends not to speak of races. “Race” is now generally understood to be a socially constructed categorisation used to identify specific groups. Nevertheless, “race” often exists in a real sense in the minds of people. The more recent concept of “ethnicity” often refers to a shared (whether perceived or actual) racial, linguistic or national identity of a social group. It can incorporate several forms of collective identity, including cultural, religious, national and sub-cultural forms. However, sociologists and anthropologists disagree in their understanding of ethnicity – is this to be viewed as an historic, or as a biological, essential aspect of humanity? The essentialist approach to view ethnicity as a “natural” and stable phenomenon is challenged by an instrumentalist approach, which claims that individuals pick and mix these aspects that can define the border between them and others from a variety of ethnic heritages in order to serve their own political or economic interests. A third position stresses the cultural aspects of ethnicity as a social construction, describing the process as “the invention of ethnicity”.

The focus on ethnicity is central to this joint project, as religions have in the past used ethnic arguments to strengthen religious adherence. And in some cases, religions have allowed themselves to be used to strengthen ethnic group identity. Sometimes religions have spoken out against racism, but in many other cases they have kept silent in the face of racism.

During the colonial era, theology in Europe and the United States was used as a justification for colonial domination in Africa and the Americas. In South Africa, the white majority used theology to legitimate apartheid as late as the 1980s – the argument was that God wanted races to live separately to avoid societal chaos.

The anthropological fact that ethnicity – in the form of a tribal group or nation – is a powerful identity marker, creates a challenge – especially for monotheistic religions – namely how to combine the “chosen people” or the “covenant” concept with universal salvation and how to acknowledge the catholicity of the Christian faith in the face of ethnification processes in current forms of contextual Christologies. Which theological discourse is used to support exclusive concepts of salvation and which elements contribute to a more inclusive approach? How can the unity of the church community be related to the abundance of ethnic groups? How important is one cultic language or a sacred book in one language, for example, Greek or Arabic? How important is the ethnic affiliation of religious leaders? In what way does ethnic affiliation of religious communities influence their potential for reconciliation in multicultural and multi-religious societies?

In post-apartheid South Africa, the term “rainbow nation” describes a future of religions and ethnic groups working together for the common good. In reality, many Afrikaners still have not come to terms with the new South Africa. They refer to security issues and the lack of job opportunities for their children and many have opted for emigration. At the same time, there are signs of new ethnic competition, strife and tension among various ethnic black communities. In May 2008, the sudden outburst of violence against foreigners in a number of South African cities took many by surprise. What is the role of religions in all of this? Does religious identity continue to be formed along ethnic lines? Do religions contribute to the hope of a rainbow nation? Has the theological self-understanding within the Dutch Reformed Church family changed over almost two decades since the official end of apartheid? What is the relationship between the unity between churches and their potential for working towards reconciliation?

In the anti-apartheid struggle the Christian approach to ethnicity had an arguably strong focus on overcoming the theological justification and the catastrophic societal results of racism. Within this framework, ethnicity was often equated with racism (discrimination on the basis of ethnicity). That the proclamation of the gospel was strongly opposed to it became more and more clear.

However, in post-apartheid times, other developments have prompted different approaches. Shortly after the end of apartheid, the new South African government recognised eleven ethnic languages as the country’s official languages. The officially-recognised legitimacy of ethnic differences can be considered the main implication of this decision by government.

Elsewhere in current South African society as well, one can observe a resurgence of the emphases on ethnic differences due to emancipatory identity reasons. The emphasis on the ethnic (Zulu) roots of the current president is a case in point. Often these differences are understood as beneficial effects of a multi-ethnic society and as an adequate way of dealing

with multiculturalism – the suppression of these differences being sometimes regarded as one of the many negative after-effects of the apartheid regime.

This radical change in perspective on ethnic differences confronts contemporary South African society and creates much confusion. The joyful discovery of the enrichment potential of ethnic differences stands in sharp contrast to the former struggle against the imposed differences. At the same time, it confronts South Africa with the drawbacks of this new emphasis – an increase in ethnic tensions – and prompts the call to identify common interests.

The situation, as described above, is ambivalent. In many cases, the benefits (emancipation, recognition of different identities, increase of self-esteem, etc.) and drawbacks (increase of tensions, lack of common interests, competition, etc.) can be observed almost simultaneously. For this reason, a critical analysis and theological interpretation is urgently needed.

Each context produces its own particular questions. In Nigeria, the federal state is keen to stress the unity of the state, despite the tensions and strife between Christian and Muslims. Is the pressure of the nation state changing the ethnic self-understanding of religious communities? Is the African concept of *ubuntu* an inclusive or exclusive concept? What is the role played by the Muslim concept of *ummah* in Nigeria? Could the Christian concept of *koinonia* play any role? How do economic developments intertwine with ethnic relations?

In the 2006 national census in Nigeria, questions on religious affiliation and ethnic identity were not allowed. It was feared that the outcome of such questions might be used by religious communities or ethnic groups to claim additional rights and, in this way, that the existing delicate balance of power between religious and ethnic communities might have to be renegotiated. However, most threatening was the prospect that in one or more regions the result of the census might be used to justify a breakaway from the existing state (Nigeria) on religious or ethnic grounds. This Nigerian example proves the power of religion and ethnicity as two very strong identity markers that are potentially divisive aspects of community life.

In Europe, after the nationalist violence of World War II, interest in the formation of ethnic identities seemed to fade and, in the atmosphere of the Cold War, religion became less important in the public sphere. The Balkan Wars brought both ethnicity and religion back onto the stage. This tendency has been strengthened by immigration by people from countries in which religion – especially Islam – is of major societal importance. The continuing process of secularisation has not led to the disappearance of religion, but to pluralism and multi-religious societies. How do migrant religious communities (Christian, Muslim, or Hindu) with a double national identification fit into this context? Are claims based on the Christian roots of Europe meaningless against the increasing cultural impact of Muslims undermining secular and multi-religious European discourses? Can national churches and established churches, often founded along ethnic lines, still be legitimated theologically? Will new ethnical identity markers arise in a Europe where several major cities such as Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, and London have more new North African and West African inhabitants (Muslim and Christian) in their inner cities than white Europeans?

It is obvious that it is impossible to deny or to neglect the issue of ethnicity in modern, pluralistic societies. The classic Christian option to downplay differences because of our

unity in Christ, in practice often constitutes the option to neglect or deny the issue. Are there any better solutions? Could there be a Christian concept of the body of Christ in which organs or limbs, in all their diversity, are needed without undermining the integrity of the body? Would that constitute real catholicity? All different parts are then asked to contribute to the unity of the body (1 Cor. 12:12-27). Their diversity itself is then no longer a problem, but their lack of willingness to contribute to that unity.

In order to serve unity, diversity need not be forsaken. Within the Reformed tradition we are used to ask the question pertaining to legitimate unity. The main concern being how much diversity unity can bear. We can, however, also change the question and ask how much diversity does the unity of the church need? The first question is a restricting one, the second one a liberating one. It might be that the body of Christ, in order to exercise all its functions, needs much more diversity than what we are used to thus far in Christianity worldwide. It confronts us, not only with the broad diachronic, historical catholicity of the church, but also with its synchronic, contemporary catholicity. Every local church is part and parcel of the church catholic. Hence the latter does not exist above any kind of particularity, but within it. This means that contextuality and ethnicity have to be interpreted within their ambivalent characteristics, namely as legitimate affirmations of God-given differences and as a critique of any form of absolutism. Time and again the main question will remain, namely what is the contribution to the common good and, in the church we ask, what is the contribution to the body of Christ?

CHURCH AND STATE

Christians have a long tradition of discourse on their role in the search for the common good in society. In his *De civitate Dei*, Augustine offers one of the earliest attempts to give a response to this issue in the context of the collapsing Roman Empire. As time went by, the shape of society changed and in these changing conditions religions have been challenged to reinterpret their sacred scriptures and traditions and to rethink their contributions to society.

In the wake of the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century (AD), a theory of church and state developed in Medieval Europe in the context of the relationship between two dominant institutions. The theological vision of the early church concerning divine rule in history and its eschatological outcome resulted in a perception of both church and state as subordinate to the will of God, and critically assessed existing socio-political realities in light of this.

In the second half of the Middle Ages, the development of the concept of the common good expressed the conviction that the rule of God and the hope of the world cannot merely be found in ecclesial forms. That era witnessed the emergence of a stronger sense of community and civil society. *Communitas* described a variety of forms at a level between national or imperial powers and those individuals whom they govern: the whole population of a town, associations based on the taking of an oath, corporations, colleges, confraternities and professional associations. These developments created widespread group awareness and a desire on the part of individuals to govern themselves in these communal forms. As a

consequence, the relationship between church and society could no longer be reduced to being simply related to the monarch, but also to social groups, organisations and institutions that shaped the lives of individuals in their search for the common good.

In that same period, Aristotle was rediscovered, and his description of the human person as a political animal naturally linked into a network of social relations with other persons where his use of the concept *bonum commune* as the expression of human fulfilment through exchange of knowledge, practices and goods, inspired Thomas Aquinas to write his theological anthropology. The purpose of the government was seen as being to lead human persons to those social goods that were essential to their social nature. The key concept of common good was linked to related notions such as order and justice. In promoting that common good, political society may exercise a role in fulfilling divine law as expressing God's providence in a way that exceeds Augustine's view of a limited, restraining function of secular forces. The emergence of new communities was accompanied by new emphases on popular sovereignty in the writings of theologians such as John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. The political community was to serve its members by seeking to advance the common good. Power was perceived as residing within the political community as a whole under the rule of God, and the needs of civil orders were understood as being best met by strong secular rule, free of ecclesiastical interference; and ecclesial rule was to be exercised on the basis of the whole community of believers.

The Lutheran Reformation affirmed the secular vocation outside the domain of the church as a sphere in which the divine will is to be fulfilled and the state had to play its role. The Reformed Reformation went a step further with its ambition not only to serve God in the secular realm, but also to actually transform that realm and to create a godly society. The Protestant Reformation was inspired by the biblical theme of God's dominion over all aspects of life. In order to achieve this, Calvin opted for a close partnership between church and state. God ordained the office of the magistrate for the maintenance of peace and justice within the boundaries of the state – with the use of force if necessary. The church had its own divinely ordained offices that ruled the church spiritually, rejecting state control. The magistrates had a duty to uphold not only the second but also the first table of the law, which concerns our duties to God. It entailed the civil protection of the Reformed churches, the suppression of serious heresy and the prohibition of the mass. The church took its responsibility for the secular realm by organising comprehensive education, poor relief and moral discipline of all citizens. The magisterial Reformation strengthened the awareness of the secular vocation, but at the same time kept the Medieval vision of an organic unity of church and state.

The political and religious fragmentation on the European continent during and after the Reformation led to the appearance of national churches, which marked the identity of Protestant nations. Since then, churches have lost their dominant position and their national status in Western European society. The terrible experiences on the continent with totalitarian states gave rise to the awareness that an active civil society is the best guarantee against monopolisations of the search for the common good by state forces, and against potential abuse of power. In pluralistic societies, local congregations and churches as religious institutions have become part of civil society contributing to the *bonum commune*.

In the aftermath of the terrible experiences in the first half of the twentieth century referred to above, many people across the world hoped for a brighter future of free and just societies worldwide. The reasons for this hope were manifold and varied from place to place. In South Africa, apartheid – the principle of separate development through segregation of the Southern African populations on the basis of race – was abolished. Black majority rule finally became a reality and in 1994 Nelson Mandela was elected first black president of South Africa. Afrikaner nationalism became unpopular and equity became the watchword for all the races in the region.

While South African society was still pluralistic in the sense that, among its identity markers, there were and are several races, cultural values and belief systems, none of these in themselves was regarded as the main identity marker of South African populations. Europe experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. With these monumental events, wounds of the past were beginning to heal and people began to come together. There was a more deliberate effort to tolerate others and their cultures and countries – especially when Europe began forming political and economic ties and alliances in a way quite different from the situation experienced before and during the First and Second World War periods. How could such positive events not create the impression that the world was indeed becoming a safer and more just place to live in?

However, it was not long before the twentieth century saw a resurgence of ethnic and nationalistic violence in central Europe and in parts of Africa: the Rwandan genocide, the claims of Serbs and Croats made on religious grounds, the xenophobic attacks in South Africa and the disastrous land reforms in Zimbabwe, were all indicators that much of the world was not as just and that much of the world's population was not as free as people had envisaged. Central to some, the resurgence of some of these incidences of violence was the role played by religion, especially in the formation of identity. In Africa, this was also true of Nigeria. In this country's highly pluralistic society, religion is a major identity marker and it became only accentuated in the sudden rise of Islamic sects in northern Nigeria. Here, Muslim fundamentalists sought a separate state and existence from Christian ethnic groups. Adding to the country's woes is the militant competition in the Niger Delta for oil resources, a dispute that is also linked with ethnic and nationalistic identities.

In the light of the above examples, it is increasingly important to discuss the issues of ethnic identity within states and the role that religion has played and will play in societies that are pluralistic in nature. However, there is a need to re-examine the whole concept of the nation state and its relationship with religion, seeing that the latter is often a central identity marker in pluralistic societies.

In Europe, since the Religious Wars in Western and Central Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, major distrust persisted against religions as the cause of disunity and violence in society. The liberal concept of the reduction of religions to the private sphere is still strong – and voices in support of this have increased due to the global appearance of terrorism in the name of Islam. At the same time, the transformation of mono-ethnic and religious into multi-ethnic and -religious societies is the cause of much uncertainty, and even fear among large parts of populations. In the Netherlands, the place of religions on the

public square is not self-evident. During the consultation on the relationship between church and state that formed part of this joint research project, contributions from Europe reflected upon this, as well as on a wide range of issues, including ethnicity and traditions as identity markers, with specific reference to statements and declarations made by ecumenical bodies with reference to confessions. Two essays by Eddy van der Borgh are included here as being representative of these contributions.

In South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church for long held a privileged position and was a dominant partner and supporter of the apartheid government in the second half of the twentieth century. Since the official abolition of apartheid, the rainbow nation has become a pluralistic society in which many religions – among them Christian denominations and congregations – have to a greater or lesser extent become part of civil society in search for the common good. Contributions from South Africa attempted to define pluralistic societies in light of the present South African reality of an abolished state ideology and policy of racial segregation. Some contributions that are included here, like that of Jan Nieder-Heitmann, looks back at the issue of the “rise to power” of (white) South African Reformed churches. Given the changed political contexts and particularly the new South African Constitution – specifically with regard to its guarantees of freedom of religion – another contribution, Pieter Coertzen’s, reflects on the role of the state in this new context and the relationship between church and state within it.

Nigeria, as a relatively recently created country, has had to work hard to promote unity within its multi-ethnic and multi-religious populace, while at the same time developing its huge human and economic potential. Calls by religious groups to give the nation or some provinces a more specific Christian or Muslim identity are a sensitive issue in a country that has large Christian as well as Muslim populations. It remains a challenge to religious groups to contribute to the search for the common good in such a context. At a consultation in Nigeria, representatives from the state itself were invited to explain its position regarding ethnic consciousness in the context of a nation of many nationalities (more than 250 different ethnic groups that would in fact be regarded as separate nations in other parts of the world). The predominant view was that government in Nigeria should be in partnership with religious bodies and organisations and that this is crucial for promoting the common good. Partnership with churches in areas like education and health services are some of the ways that the state should and does contribute, it was felt, to the common good in this highly pluralistic country. One of the contributions made at that consultation was also from the perspective of a tradition other than the Reformed one, namely from the Roman Catholic tradition. It was made by Cletus Gotan and is also included in this publication.

THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY

There is a growing consensus that poverty can be defined as social exclusion. Social integration is therefore the aim of the fight against poverty. There is, however, less consensus regarding the causes of poverty. There are those who blame it on neo-liberal capitalism, whereas others

commend this as the solution to poverty. In South Africa this economic approach is embedded in the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR).

Some economists defend capitalism tempered by morality and ascribe poverty in South Africa to the fact that the poor black masses have not embraced capitalism and the industrial revolution sufficiently as a result of their exclusion under apartheid rule. Post-1994 South Africa, however, has a liberalised and growing economy. Previously excluded people currently reap the benefits thereof. Voices critical of capitalism point out that black labourers were not excluded from the industrial revolution and a capitalist economy. Rather, they became an exploited working class within that system. This exploitation, they state, is perpetuated in new forms amid the neoliberal policies promoted in the new South Africa. Another question is whether capitalist growth on the propagated scale is environmentally sustainable? Are the “green” (environmental) and “brown” (poverty) agendas reconcilable in a global neo-liberal economic order?

This contradiction is not only pertinent to capitalist but also to subsistence economies. Environmental degradation in Nigeria and South Africa is caused both by subsistence farming by the poor and by the exploitation of natural resources by capitalists and state officials.

The relation between a capitalist and a subsistence economy is problematic. Despite official data in Nigeria that regards subsistence farming as self-employment, subsistence farmers are growing poorer as population growth increases environmental pressure. Coupled with pollution and land reduction due to mining and oil extraction, subsistence farming is not only environmentally under pressure but it cannot sustain people in a monetary economy. These factors spell poverty. This contradiction is reflected by the fact that while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has reported some positive economic developments in Nigeria, government has attempted a series of poverty eradication programmes that attempt to include people in a cash economy.

This brings one to another cause for the persistence of poverty. A series of government failures regarding poverty “eradication” projects have failed due to political and administrative dysfunction and malfunction. The prevalence of corruption in Nigeria continually excludes the poor from the benefits of a cash economy. South Africa has also witnessed the scourges of inefficient public services and corrupt officials. Corruption in the Netherlands, on the other hand, is low. This is associated, by some, with the influence of Protestantism in that country. There is a relation between low levels of corruption and the success regarding the reduction of poverty. This raises the pertinent question regarding the legacy of Dutch Protestantism in South Africa, which as a modern state was birthed by a Dutch Reformed mercantile capitalist corporation – the VOC. What is the legacy of Cape Dutch Christendom with its corrupt practices of racially defined slavery? What is the heritage of a Christendom that cherished the charity and alms to the poor but failed to relate charity to the quest for social and economic justice? What imprint did the economic corruption that led to the demise of the mighty VOC leave on the general ethos of South Africa?

This raises questions with regard to the role of the churches and other faith communities. How do they interpret their holy scriptures and traditions within their particular cultural and

political contexts? Christians and Jews share the Hebrew Scriptures that have spawned rich traditions regarding the way the poor are viewed by God and how they are to be treated by others. This theme is also central to the teachings of Islam. These faith traditions have to construe their roles within contexts of secularisation, colonisation and post-colonial African states where the welfare state, elitism, and corruption are forces with which faith communities have to contend.

Contrary to the early centuries of Dutch Reformed Christendom, churches in the Netherlands are now left with only a limited role in public welfare. They largely therefore have to direct their attention elsewhere in the world. This reduction is related to modernity's dichotomy of matter and spirit and the ideological battles of the twentieth century that have challenged the public relevance of religions not only in Europe, but also in its former colonies.

In South Africa, faith communities along with other non-governmental organisations receive state subsidies for social welfare service delivery. While corruption is low in the Netherlands, the poor are affected by this scourge in South Africa and Nigeria. In the latter, corruption is so entrenched in all aspects of public life that churches have compromised their stance by referring to corruption in euphemistic terms and by budgeting for the payment of bribes in order to be able to function organisationally. Nevertheless, churches are generally the most moral bodies and therefore their contributions to development and charity are beyond their limited means. In this way, churches break the dominance of state and market with regard to the poor and their inclusion.

The global plight of the poor has also caused ecumenical bodies to produce influential texts that deal theologically with current economic challenges. A clear distinction between compassion and charity on the one hand, and (economic) justice on the other, has transpired from these.

Some ecclesiological developments define churches in terms of being alternative communities. Some churches in Nigeria for instance have communal loan schemes to assist their members to access capital in affordable terms. Others emphasise the Eucharist as a sacramental economic act that serves as an ethical pointer for public life. Church members are also called upon to influence public life accordingly through their secular callings.

Capitalism and the rich also receive attention. There are those that advocate an alternative form of capitalism that is morally sensitive with regard to the plight of the poor. Its proponents view capitalism as the most powerful and potentially moral way of eradicating poverty. The phenomenon that poverty alleviation is largely sponsored by the upper class in the Netherlands serves as an example, despite the suspicion that they are motivated by self-interest and the growing power of the poor. Rich Dutch, for instance, are content to pay high taxes for the sake of uplifting the poor. This is seemingly not the tendency in Nigeria, hence a call that the rich be taught to contribute towards poverty alleviation.

Christian NGOs, together with churches, are also to be understood and theologically dealt with as faith-based communities. Churches consider partnerships with NGOs that are Christian faith-based but also with NGOs and organisations of different kinds, whether religious or secular, within their own theological frameworks.

Partnering with the state is a topic that is much debated. Where some emphasise the importance of such synergy, others stress that uncritical cooperation with the state may cause churches to be co-opted by political agendas or to become party to state corruption, unaccountability and inefficiency, and thereby compromising their particular Christian witness.

The age-old state-church relationship of Christendom as one between two dominant institutions has been substituted for one in which churches are rather viewed as part of civil society – alongside other institutions, whether faith-based or secular. Churches in the Netherlands and South Africa cooperate with the state on such a basis. The Nigerian government on the other hand, some feel, ignores churches and their role with regard to poverty alleviation, despite the fact that the church has the capacity to administer state funds for poverty alleviation. Here as elsewhere, churches are often extremely well-placed to promote “social capital” – social networks of trust, cooperation and care. At the joint project consultation on poverty eradication as part of the role of religions in the search of the common good in pluralistic societies, these and similar issues were addressed as represented in this volume by the contributions by Allan Boesak, Nadine Bowers-Du Tiot, Rashied Begg, Joseph Antyo and Eddy van der Borcht.

After a successful project of three years and this publication as one of the fruits thereof, we as guest editors of this special edition of *NGTT* would like to express our sincere gratitude for all those who were involved in the joint project that lead to this publication, and to the three institutes who were part of this collaborative project, the BNC, IRTI and IPDS as well as their mother institutions, Stellenbosch University, the Reformed Theological Seminary (Mkar) and the University of Mkar and the VU Amsterdam. Additional special thanks go out to the last-mentioned institution for providing the financial resources that made this publication, and indeed the whole of the project possible. We would also like to thank *NGTT* and its editor, Dr Gerrit Brand for giving us the opportunity to publish in this journal, for Dr Len Hansen for the technical editing of the manuscript and coordination of all pre-publication processes and for Sun Press for assisting us in preparing the final manuscript for publication and printing. Last but not least we thank all our contributors who over three years were part of this project and who enriched our joint reflection with their enthusiasm for the project, their goodwill and their expertise.

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... IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY²

ABSTRACT

Questions on religion and pluralism are complicated by the fact that central terms in the discourse, such as “pluralism”, “religion” and the “secular”, can be interpreted in a variety of ways and are also seriously contested. A plausible argument can be advanced to the effect that the problem of religion in a pluralistic society cannot be solved by opting for a kind of secularism that suggests the possibility of a neutral, non-religious public space. An alternative model of pluralism is both conceivable and preferable. Within the latter model a specifically Christian motivation for supporting a pluralistic society has to and can be developed.

TWO MEANINGS OF “PLURALISM”

What is a pluralistic society and what is, or should be, the role of religions, specifically Christian faith, with regard to it?

The word “pluralism” can refer to the phenomenon of social plurality – the fact that societies consist of a variety of religious, cultural, linguistic, political, gender, professional, and other communities (see Brand 2011:122-123). In this sense, all societies are pluralistic to some degree – often to a much larger degree than is generally recognised.

However, “pluralism” can also refer to societies in which such plurality is consciously tolerated, welcomed, or even encouraged. By contrast, a society that regards plurality or diversity as something unfortunate that should ideally be done away with, or at least managed or contained in the way crime or disease is managed and contained, would then not be regarded as a pluralistic society.

The ultimate form of non-pluralism in this sense would be the evil plan of the alien Gallaxhar in the movie *Monsters versus Aliens*,³ who sets out to create an army of clones

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3 See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0892782/>

of himself with which to conquer Earth, having destroyed his own planet of origin due to a childhood trauma that left him angry at everything and everybody. Luckily, Gallaxhar does not really exist and no society has ever been, or can ever be, totally anti-pluralistic!

Likewise, no society can be totally pluralistic in the sense that it tolerates every conceivable kind of difference. There is always a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of difference. Most societies do not tolerate a culture of theft as something to be welcomed and supported, but rather as something that should be eradicated. Debates about pluralism typically turn on the question of which forms of plurality should be accepted. Pluralism as *habitus*, attitude or policy is therefore a matter of degrees (Brand 2011:120-121).

IMPLEMENTING PLURALISM

To add to the complexity of the picture it should be pointed out that pluralism as a way of dealing with plurality can take many different forms, and pluralists (those who welcome or promote plurality) often disagree about the best practical way in which to recognise diversity.

For example, sociolinguists, whose insights can be drawn on by pluralists, distinguish between two different principles of national language policy, both of which are regarded by their supporters as being friendly towards linguistic diversity: the territorial principle and the personal principle (see, for example, Schürholz 2008:5). The territorial principle requires that the state establishes geographical territories in each of which a particular language will serve as the dominant language. Examples are the language policies of Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada. The personal principle, by contrast, demands that every individual should have access to education and other public services in the official language of his or her choice throughout the national territory. An example is the way English and Afrikaans were treated in South Africa during roughly the second half of the twentieth century: a bilingual civil service for the white minority, rather than separate territories for the two languages.⁴

A third possibility could be a *laissez faire* approach, where the state has no legally determined official language, but the right of individuals to use the language of their choice is recognised. In practice, however, *laissez faire* approaches are followed by governments with a negative, rather than a positive attitude towards linguistic plurality. The expectation – and then the aim – is, that linguistic plurality will not flourish under such a system, but that one language will “naturally” gain ascendancy in the linguistic “market”. The United States of America is the classic example of this.

Similar differences in approach among pluralists could be highlighted in several other areas as well: the rights of ethnic minorities, the diversity of religious-philosophical communities, codified versus indigenous law, etc. With reference to all such forms of plurality, those who claim to welcome the plurality in question disagree among themselves about the best way to deal with plurality fairly and realistically. Such debates can be fraught with very strong disagreements about fundamental values. In apartheid South Africa, for example, appeals to

⁴ Under the apartheid policy of the time, this principle applied only in the so-called “white” areas of the country. Outside this area, the territories of the so-called black “homelands” were mapped according to the dominant language and culture in a particular area, i.e. more in accordance with the territorial principle.

pluralism were among the arguments offered in favour of separate amenities for black and white, and for the policy of establishing independent so-called “homelands” for blacks. These oppressive policies went hand-in-hand with remarkable efforts by the state and financial investments to support the study, development, and active promotion of indigenous African cultures and languages. At one point the Department of Bantu Affairs was even renamed the Department of Plural Affairs (Pickles 1991:180), which resulted in many jokes, both racist and anti-racist, about encounters between whites and “plurals” ... This is one of the reasons why the very term “pluralism” is viewed with much suspicion by intellectuals from among the black majority, even in the present context. At the same time, the contingent historical link between apartheid and pluralist ideals is sometimes cynically used to delegitimise any demands for even the most modest recognition of cultural or group rights.

PLURALISM AND DISCOURSE

Pluralism is not only an idea to be considered, but is thoroughly embedded in the power plays of public discourse. In a broader global context, thinkers like Slavoj Žižek (1997) have pointed to the way in which the politically-correct celebration of difference and diversity in the West can function as the counterpart of a very intolerant, monolithic ideology of capitalism: as long as everyone worships the same global market, the differences between them do not matter. Personally, I have often been struck by how, in South Africa, class is sometimes listed alongside race, gender, religion, etc. as one of the types of diversity that should be celebrated by the rainbow nation. The implication is clear: inequality should not be eradicated, but embraced.

The concept of pluralism – whether meant in a descriptive or in a normative sense – is, therefore, a rather slippery one. This should be kept in mind when reflecting on “religions and the public good in pluralistic societies”.

PLURALISM AND “RELIGION”

It gets worse, however. For what is religion? Richard Dawkins, in his popular book *The God Delusion* (2006:20), defines it as belief in “supernatural gods”.⁵ Such a definition hardly includes Christianity, his main target, and certainly excludes Buddhism, yet both Christianity and Buddhism are typically described, in everyday English usage, as religions. Even a leading sociologist of religion like Peter Berger has on occasion defined religion as belief in “a reality beyond the reality of ordinary, everyday life, and that this deeper reality is benign” (Berger 2004:1, emphasis added; cf. Grossman 1975), but this would exclude Buddhism, for example, from the category of religion, which would run against conventional usage. What do these things called religions have in common, if not belief in spirits or gods?

The only characteristic I can think of is that all of them – from Judaism and Islam to Taoism and African Traditional Religion – deal with “ultimate concerns” (to borrow the phrase Paul Tillich (1957:1) uses), both ontological (Tillich’s “ground of being”, 1952:182)

⁵ Emphasis in original.

and axiological (Vincent Brümmer’s “primary determinant of meaning”, 1981:122, 134f., 220, 238, 257, 260, 282, 284). The problem with this definition of religion, however, is that it includes views of life that are not typically referred to as “religions”. Do not all human beings have ultimate convictions and ultimate values – whether consciously or unconsciously? Is not everybody then, simply by virtue of being human, necessarily “religious” in one way or another? Is this, perhaps, precisely what the modern term “religion” tends to disguise (see Brand 2011:133-134)?

PLURALISM AND “SECULARISM”

When the question about religion in pluralistic societies is raised, it is often done in terms of the modern, liberal distinction between the religious and the secular. The logic typically goes something like this: Although all the different religions have a right to exist in liberal societies, such societies also require a neutral public space, which is essential precisely because of the great diversity of religious convictions. Without such a neutral space the different religious communities will constantly be at each other’s throats, for they will only have their own traditions and authorities to base their arguments on, and will, therefore, never be able to have sensible rational discussions about issues that affect everybody.⁶

In a sense, then, this neutral public space is seen as a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance between religious communities – i.e. for a policy and culture of pluralism. For their part, the different religions should, therefore, respect the supposed neutrality and non-religious character of the public domain by restricting themselves to the private domain. Among other things this entails keeping religious arguments out of public debates about the common good. Only secular reasons – reasons that, in principle, could convince anyone, should be offered when discussing matters that concern everybody. (At stake here is not a specific political system, which differs between states, but rather a set of influential and popular philosophical assumptions that cross borders between differing states.)

Stanley Fish, in discussing Steven Smith’s book *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (2010), challenges the modern, liberal account of religious pluralism at its most fundamental level by asking the question, “Are there secular reasons?”, and answering in the negative. How so? Fish summarises Smith’s position as follows:

While secular discourse, in the form of statistical analyses, controlled experiments and rational decision-trees, can yield banks of data that can then be subdivided and refined in more ways than we can count, it cannot tell us what that data means or what to do with it. No matter how much information you pile up and how sophisticated the analytical operations you perform are, you will never get one millimetre closer to the moment when you can move from the

⁶ Probably the most influential contemporary thinker in this tradition is Jürgen Habermas. Despite the fact that, in more recent publications, like *An Awareness of what is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age* (2010), he has moved toward a greater appreciation of the public role of religion, he still maintains that “the religious side must accept the authority of ‘natural’ reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality”. On this, see the review by Stanley Fish, “Does Reason know what it is Missing?” (2010). For an account of Habermas’ changing thinking on, among other themes, the public role of religion, see also Dirk Smit (2007).

piled-up information to some lesson or imperative it points to; for it doesn't point anywhere; it just sits there, inert and empty.

Once the world is no longer assumed to be informed by some presiding meaning ... and is instead thought of as being “composed of atomic particles randomly colliding and ... sometimes evolving into more and more complicated systems and entities including ourselves” there is no way, says Smith, to look at it and answer normative questions, questions like “what are we supposed to do?” and “at the behest of who or what are we to do it?” (Fish 2010a).

As C.S. Lewis (1978:22) succinctly argued: “‘*This will preserve society*’ cannot lead to ‘*do this*’ except by the mediation of ‘*society ought to be preserved*’.” At stake here is the so-called “naturalistic fallacy”: drawing normative conclusions from factual premises.⁷ Smith puts it like this:

... the secular vocabulary within which public discourse is constrained today is insufficient to convey our full set of normative convictions and commitments. We manage to debate normative matters anyway — but only by smuggling in notions that are formally inadmissible, and hence that cannot be openly acknowledged or adverted to (Smith quoted in Fish 2010a).

ONLY ONE *RELIGIO LICITA*?

Going one step further, I would argue that this form of “smuggling” is not merely the inadvertent result of a mistaken philosophical analysis, but serves an ideological purpose. The very distinction between public and private domains, and between religious and secular reasons, serves to mask what amounts to a rather drastic anti-pluralistic move. The religion that then dominates public debates is that of the nation state and the market, of Caesar and Mammon (Cox 1999), which acquires its dominance over other religions, firstly by not announcing itself as religious; and secondly, by literally banning dissenting religious voices from all discussions that really matter. Other religions (called simply “religions” within this discourse) are allowed to exist as long as they have no significant impact on the way things go in society.

A helpful architectural symbol of how this might be understood is provided by the many so-called *schuilkerken* (hidden churches) that can still be seen in the Netherlands today – but only if pointed out by a knowledgeable travel guide.⁸ These churches, which look like normal houses, date from a time when Roman Catholicism was officially banned in the Protestant Netherlands, so that Catholics could only worship in secret. However, these *schuilkerken* were not really all that secret. The authorities were aware of them, but deliberately turned a blind eye. The idea was not so much to eradicate Catholicism as to prevent it from having any meaningful influence on society at large. Today we frown at such anti-pluralistic practices from the past. Yet, is the myth of the neutral public domain, where only “secular reasons” deserve a hearing, not structurally identical to it? (The point here is not to highlight the

⁷ For a survey and critical discussion of various versions of this fallacy, see Oliver Curry (2006).

⁸ An informative account in English is given in Rech (date unknown). See Brand (2011:134).

occurrence of such attitudes in specific legal or state principles differing among states, but rather to characterise a cultural attitude.) The official religion, or *religio licita*, involving the worship of, and sacrifice to, the nation state and the capitalist market⁹ is quite willing to turn a tolerant blind eye to other faiths as long as the latter remain hidden in private spaces so as not to interfere with the smooth running of things.

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?

What are the alternatives to this absolutism masked as pluralism? Should the separation of church and state be undone? Should the state simply openly adopt one religion, say Christianity or Islam, and enforce it while suppressing others? Should we just bite the bullet and accept that different religious communities will never be able to persuade one another or come to any agreements in public debates? The myth of the neutral public domain pretends that these are the only alternatives, but I am not convinced that they are.

Richard Rorty famously argued (for example, in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 1989) that liberalism is not the fruit of universally compelling philosophical arguments by the likes of Lock, Kant, and Jefferson, as is often fondly believed, but rather an unintended result of coincidental historical developments. To put it simply: Europeans grew tired of killing and being killed by one another because of religious differences and eventually just gave up the fight. Societies became more tolerant of religious plurality not on principle, but because they had no choice. It is only once this state of affairs was reached that intellectuals started to draw on all sorts of old and new arguments to defend it – to show that a liberal society is perhaps not all that bad and may even be preferable to what had preceded it.

The weakness in Rorty's analysis is its reductionism – the way in which he declares liberalism to be “nothing but” the result of blind historical chance, and completely disregards the possibility that ideas can have an influence, however modest, on history.¹⁰ He also ignores a point that any good postmodernist should be very much on the lookout for: the fact that the new tolerance of liberalism has served to mask the new intolerance to which I have alluded above with reference to the forging of the cult of the nation state and the free market into one *de facto* state religion displacing all others. Nevertheless, what we can learn from Rorty's analysis is that it is possible for some mutual agreement between communities, some social contract or *modus vivendi*, to come about without it being based on a single set of arguments and presuppositions shared by all concerned.

⁹ For an instructive theological analysis of “neo-liberal capitalist globalization” as a form of (idoltrous) religion, see the Accra Declaration of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now also endorsed by the newly formed World Communion of Reformed Churches). On the application of the concept of sacrifice to the contemporary political economy in African womanist theology, see my *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (2002:160-169).

¹⁰ In this respect Rorty's analysis is similar to those Marxist and capitalist analyses that reduce all social developments to purely economic factors. As such, it is vulnerable (perhaps ironically) to standard post-modern critiques of modernity's “grand narratives” in general.

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

Thomas Aquinas, who notoriously defended the right – even the duty – of Christians to suppress other faiths, could, nevertheless, countenance the possibility that a situation might arise in which it would be, as it were, the lesser of two evils to leave “infidels”, “heretics”, and “pagans” unmolested:

... the rites of ... infidels ... are not to be tolerated ... except perhaps to avoid some evil, to wit scandal or a division that could arise from this or an obstacle to the salvation of those who would gradually be converted to the faith if they were tolerated. On this account the Church has sometimes tolerated the rites of even heretics and pagans when there was a great multitude of infidels (Thomas Aquinas quoted in Noonan 1998:47).

However unpalatable we may (quite rightly) find this way of looking at things, the historical fact of the matter is that precisely the kind of situation envisioned by Aquinas – one characterised by “a great multitude of infidels” (*sic*) – did come about in Europe several centuries after Aquinas, towards the end of the religious wars preceding the rise of modern liberalism. It should be clear that when Catholics and Protestants decided to stop waging war against one another (and against Anabaptists and other so-called “heretics”) it was not because they suddenly valued mutual tolerance between denominations. They may even have made peace grudgingly.

However, further reflection on the stalemate that had resulted inevitably led many Christian thinkers on all sides of the divide to see the hand of providence in it, so that they were enabled to rediscover a more authentically Christian understanding of faith as a gift from God that cannot be forced down someone else’s throat, and of the church as a community that depends on God’s grace, rather than on worldly power, for its survival and victory – to the extent that today it has become a theological commonplace to condemn what John Howard Yoder called “Constantinianism” – the linkage of church authority and state power starting with the conversion to Christianity of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.¹¹ Such theological developments can be seen as analogous to the philosophical defence of liberalism after the fact, to which Rorty points.

A society that tolerates or embraces religious plurality can come about if, and only if, a large and determined section of that society is convinced that it is desirable, or at least preferable, to other available options. However, they need not be convinced of this for the same reasons. Some Christians, while believing that it would be better if everyone were Christian so that religious plurality no longer existed, might nevertheless accept a policy of tolerance because they also believe that people cannot be forced into accepting Christian faith (see Slenczka 2010). Others may have more positive Christian reasons for affirming a pluralist approach, such as the conviction that God may also have been revealed to non-Christians, so

¹¹ The classic critique of Constantinianism is found in John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* (1972).

that Christians have something to learn from them, and vice versa.¹² These are but some possibilities within the one, broad tradition.

Some Muslims may want an Islamic state while realising that this is, at least for the time being, not feasible given their minority status in a particular society, so that freedom of religion is currently in their own best interest since it allows them to survive. Other Muslims may welcome pluralism because they have a different understanding of *jihad* – one that does not aim at acquiring political power.

Some “confessing atheists”¹³ like Dawkins may think it preferable that religion, or at least the religious education of children, be banned altogether (see Dawkins 2006:309-344), but realise that this might lead to such extreme conflict that one will just have to grudgingly accept tolerance of religion – a kind of “Thomist atheism”.¹⁴ Other atheists might be less hostile to religion and simply desire to be left alone in their unbelief, on which condition they are also prepared to let believers go about their strange business.

Some citizens may even believe deeply in the false doctrine of a neutral public space and support religious freedom on that basis.

Other examples of reasons why different groups of people may want to live in a society tolerant of religious plurality could be multiplied at will. My point, as I have already indicated, is simply that supporters of pluralism as a social ideal do not require a single, shared set of arguments based on incorrigible or universally-accepted premises stripped of all tradition or authority in order to realise that ideal. They can all agree – for reasons on which they will differ – that the state should not have an official religion, without thereby implying that public life can be religion free.

What is required is not a “one-step apologetics”¹⁵ for pluralism, but enough people who are willing to join forces in support of such pluralism for reasons based on their diverse, and often even contradictory, fundamental commitments. Those involved need not assume a universal, non-religious starting point (whatever that may be) on which to build their co-operation, but can *discover*, through (often strained) dialogue with one another, that they share certain assumptions, while recognising the differences that remain.¹⁶

I as a Christian, for example, might share numerous social aims with a Buddhist, and even understand the Buddhist’s reasons for her commitments to those aims, without those reasons being my reasons and vice versa. In fact, I could even try to persuade the Buddhist of, say, a particular policy on the basis of some of those very Buddhist reasons I do not share – i.e. I could provide reasons for her that are not reasons for me.

12 See, for example, John Stackhouse Jr (2002:228): “... we can recognize that God may have given them some things to teach us, and we gratefully receive them in the mutual exchange of God’s great economy of shalom.”

13 I borrow the phrase “confessing atheists” (Afrikaans: belydende ateïste) from the literary scholar J.C. Kannemeyer (personal communication).

14 See Aquinas quoted above by Noonan.

15 On “one-step apologetics” (in a completely different context), see John Frame (2000:132-134).

16 A similar logic lies behind Denis Beckett’s playful but very readable novel, *Magenta* (2008), and its non-fiction sequel, *Themba’s Head* (2009).

We should also guard against an essentialist understanding of religious identity. It is always a simplification to speak of what “Buddhists” or “Christians” or “Jews” believe, as if all those sharing a certain tradition believe the same things, and as if the beliefs of individual members of the species *homo religiosus* remain unchanged throughout their lives. When people interact, even if they participate in very different religious traditions, they inevitably rub off on one another. A Christian need not convert to Islam for him or her to be influenced by the Islamic tradition. Christians can even gain new insights into their own faith by understanding Islam better.

The same dynamics apply at levels other than the religious. A society will tolerate, welcome or actively support cultural, linguistic and other forms of plurality only if enough members of that society see this as desirable. Those who support it will do so with varying degrees of enthusiasm and without necessarily agreeing among themselves on the reasons for doing so, but one thing that all those reasons will have in common is that, ultimately, they are religious in nature. Here, as in the case of explicitly religious plurality, agreement on “what needs to be done” (to quote Fish again) will not rest on a universally shared foundation, but on the always shifting overlaps between different ways of looking at, and being in, the world.

PRECARIOUS PLURALISM

One possible objection to this understanding of pluralism is that it makes tolerance and mutual respect seem very precarious. What if the different reasons why different groups of people subscribe to a more or less liberal arrangement lead, at some point, to a parting of the ways and a collapse of the social contract?

That is indeed an ever-present danger, but it is also an inescapable part of the human condition. Have not humane societies always been precarious, always tottering over the abyss? Was there ever really a single set of reasons shared by all so-called secular thinkers for supporting liberal democracy over, say, communism or theocracy?

A related objection might be phrased by means of the question: What to do with those who do not support a pluralistic arrangement? They will have their reasons for not supporting it, just as pluralists of various stripes will have their own reasons for supporting it. “So it goes” (to quote Kurt Vonnegut). But again, it is no different with the myth of a neutral public space: There have always been, and probably will always be, people who do not want to respect or even tolerate others and who will therefore not play by the agreed upon rules. Surely no-one ever believed that the discovery of a knock down argument for liberalism, based on incorrigible premises, would lead to everyone falling in line with the rules of civility?

CHRISTIAN REASONS FOR PLURALISM

If my analysis is correct, it follows that it is one of the tasks of Christian theology to look for, and to explicate, convincing Christian reasons why Christians should support social arrangements that are plurality friendly – rather than buy into so-called secular reasons that are in fact disguised religious reasons. Whole books can be, and have been, written about this,

but let me point very briefly to three perspectives that seem fruitful to me: one Christological, one ecclesiological, one linked to the doctrine of God.

Christ and pluralism

In answering the question, “How can one speak of Jesus theologically in the face of the accusation of intolerance?”, Ralf Wüstenberg (2009)¹⁷ makes a number of points that can assist in developing a strong Christian case for pluralism. First,

Those who accuse Christology of being in principle incapable of dialogue, overlook the fact ... that the question of Jesus Christ appears in diverse ways in domains outside Christianity.

That is to say, Christians do not own Jesus. Jesus is also known and appreciated, albeit in different ways, in other religious traditions, and in philosophy, literature, arts and forms of popular culture that do not reflect a Christian outlook. What Christians have to say on the basis of their commitment to Christ is therefore of interest also to non-Christians (and the other way around).

Second, supposedly pluralistic objections to the “absolutist claims” of Christianity “cannot be satisfactorily dealt with either by relativism or by moralism”. For Wüstenberg, the principle of tolerance is “hidden in faith itself”:

Faith is a gift and therefore not absolute; for Christian faith only God, whose essence is truth, is absolute. All truth, wherever it appears, is relative in relation to that truth. There exists, therefore, no absolutist claim of *Christianity*, which one would need to defend on theological grounds (Wüstenberg’s emphasis).

Third, Wüstenberg appeals to the biblical tradition, which “significantly strengthens the notion of the value and dignity of the human person”. The fact that faith in Jesus Christ does not depend on itself, but on God, opens, “from the inside” (“arising from the nature of faith itself”), a door to religious pluralism:

The impossibility of achieving faith autonomously implies a faith based freedom from all powers and authorities; it is also the reason why, in Christian faith, the temptation must be withstood to try and force others to believe.

Finally, “for Christian faith the possibility cannot be excluded that God may also have made himself known to others in different ways”. The same point is made differently by Hendrikus Berkhof (1979:199), when he writes: “the knowledge of God in Christ is not *exclusive*; it is *normative*”.¹⁸

Thus, Christologically, it is precisely from the point of view of Christianity’s “absolutist claims” that a case for pluralism can be made. Faith in Christ, depending on how it is construed, may even translate into an “absolutist” commitment to a radical form of pluralism.

¹⁷ All English translations from this book are my own.

¹⁸ See also the references to Stackhouse and Slenzcka above.

Church and pluralism

At this point, Wüstenberg's argument resonates strongly with Christoph Schwöbel's suggestion¹⁹ that the church is called to be "a school of pluralism". The church, according to this view, is a "cultural space"²⁰ characterised, among other things, by pluralism. Therefore, Schwöbel (2003) can even speak of "Christian faith in pluralism". The church is the embodiment of faith in the God-given possibility of living in solidarity with the other.

From this kind of perspective, the problem of pluralism is not one that confronts the Christian community only secondarily. On the contrary, the church exists for the very purpose of expressing unity in plurality, and as such to function as a radical critique of unredeemed humanity's inability to establish true pluralism. It is a "school of pluralism", not only in the sense that it teaches Christians a truly pluralistic outlook and trains them in the requisite skills, but also in the sense that, by its mere existence, it bears witness to what it has learned.

Ecclesiologically, then, it is precisely from within a particularistic community of believers that vistas are opened up towards an eschatological future of universal unity in plurality.

Pluralism and the Other

A central theme in the theology of C.S. Lewis is "the taste for the other".²¹ Throughout his work he interprets salvation and sanctification, and consequently Christian ethics, in terms of a looking away from oneself towards what is outside and other than oneself. By contrast, damnation or "hell" is conceived, by Lewis, as being turned completely into oneself (like Gallaxhar in *Monsters versus Aliens!*²²). (Herein, Lewis clearly stands in the Augustinian tradition with its concept of *homo incurvatus*.)

A healthy "taste for the other" would involve both a love of nature and of simple pleasures, as well as interest in and concern for other people. However, all these "others" point to the divine Other, of which they are reminders. In his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* (1966), Lewis tells the story of his discovery that "joy" can only be had when one is focused neither on it, nor on other persons and things associated with it, but on the One to whom it bears witness. And even then "joy" is itself a longing, an absence which points to the Other as the future of uninterrupted union with God.

According to this view, an outward orientation, an interest in and passion for what is different – "the taste for the other" – is what men and women are made for. Ethically, this has the implication that there is no place for egotism, chauvinism or intolerance, for these vices all reflect a love of oneself and what is *of* oneself, rather than a taste for the other. Otherness then becomes not a threat to one's identity, but that which needs to be given space to exist in order for one to become who one truly is.

¹⁹ In a lecture at the University of Groningen in 2000. See also Christoph Schwöbel (2000).

²⁰ See previous note.

²¹ For a detailed study of this theme as a central key to understanding Lewis' work, see Gilbert Meilaender (2003). A similar line of thought is developed by David Kelsey (2009).

²² See the introductory section of this article.

Thus, theologically, it is precisely from the starting point of a radically transcendent otherness – one with a “habitation and a name”: that of Triune God – that believers are freed from selfishness and sameness towards not only tolerance of difference, but an eager taste for it. Much more needs to be said of this, but what has been mentioned is offered as mere suggestions of directions in which some theological themes might be developed.

CONCLUSION

In short: The celebration, defence and promotion of plurality are not *adiaphora* (“indifferent things” from the point of view of the gospel), but a central part of the Christian faith. Pluralism is not a modern “problem” with which Christianity is unexpectedly and unhappily confronted. It lies, rather, at the very heart of the gospel itself. This gospel is to a very large extent a message *about* pluralism.

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THE COMMON GOOD AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Some very preliminary remarks²

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to give a description of the use of the notion of “the common good” in theological discourse. A brief historical analysis of the idea of common good is offered. A distinction is made between so-called thinner and thicker modes of the common good. It is argued that consensus on the thinner and thicker versions of the common good is plausible and possible. Guidelines are offered for dealing with situations where disagreement and incommensurability exist with regard to effectively serving the common good. Suggestions are made for realising the common good, e.g. the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies and practices, as well as the formation of people of virtue and character. In conclusion, three functions of the common good are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Within the context of this collection of essays on the theme Religion and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies, this essay briefly reflects on the notion of “the common good”. My intention is not to offer an exhaustive account of either the notion of common good or of all the ways in which this important concept has been used over centuries. Instead, I shall emphasise the way in which I think this notion might be employed.

In a first round I shall offer a very brief historical, and indeed oversimplified, outline of the historical development of the notion of the common good (1). The second round reflects on so-called thinner and thicker versions of the notion of the common good. Human dignity with its constituent features of equality, freedom, justice, and equity, in the context of the integrity of creation, is portrayed as a specific way in which the common good may be described (2). In a third round, the making of decisions and policies based on the common good, the challenge of consensus and dissensus, as well as the embodying of the vision of the common good by people of virtue and character, is discussed (3). The final round focuses on

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three main functions of the common good, which affirm the importance of the notion of the common good for contemporary public theological discussions (4).

THE COMMON GOOD? A BRIEF SURVEY?

David Hollenbach (2002) offers a brief and very helpful historical outline of the notion of the common good. He links the development of the idea of the common good to three periods and three major figures, namely Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius Loyola – other figures like Cicero and Augustine also contributed to earlier common good discourses, however, these three are the main thinkers about the common good in pre-modern times.

Aristotle's concept of ethics was built upon the central conviction that a good life is one devoted to the pursuit of good ends and purposes. Moreover, the good that people should seek is the good shared with others, the common good of the larger society of which one is a part. The good life of a single person and the quality of life of broader society are linked. The individual good and the common good are inseparable. The common good, however, enjoys primacy over individual good. It sets the direction for the lives of individuals. In Aristotelian thinking the common good is a higher, nobler, and even more divine good than the particular good for private persons. Hollenbach (2002:3-4) summarises Aristotle's position:

Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard. The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine ... It is clear ... that Aristotle envisioned the larger good realized in social relationships as superior to the goods that can be achieved in the life of a single person considered apart from the community.

Thomas Aquinas builds on the thinking of Aristotle and also emphasises the divine nature of the common good (cf. Hollenbach 2002:4). He relates the common good directly to God and argues that God, as the supreme good, is the common good, and that the good of all things depends on God. The good of each person and the good shared with others in community find their fullest expression in the communion with God who is Himself the highest good. In my own words: in Trinitarian communion we enjoy the highest good, the good shared with others and the individual good. For Thomas the pursuit of the common God constitutes obedience to the biblical double-love commandment of love for God and neighbour.

In the sixteenth century, at the dawn of modernity, Ignatius Loyola draws on both Aristotle and Thomas to develop his understanding of the common good (Hollenbach 2002:4-6). In the founding document of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit Order) that he established, he wrote that all the activities of the order should be directed to what seems to be expedient to the glory of God and the common good. The pursuit of the common good included practices such as witnessing, preaching, administration of the sacraments, education of youth and the illiterate, reconciling the estranged, and compassionate assistance to those in prison and hospital. The missional character of the Jesuit Order is attributed to Loyola's conviction that the common good is universal in scope and that it requires fresh definition and application in different contexts.

Hollenbach (2002:7-9) explains that in the centuries following Loyola, the notion of the common good was replaced by concepts such as “general welfare”, “public interest”, and “public goods”. None of these, however, reflect the emphasis on relationship and communion, care and compassion, affection and love – so central to pre-modern and early modern notions of the common good. Aforementioned notions, unlike the common good, focus on goods external to this intimate communion.

In the past few decades, Jean Porter (2005:94) argues, the notion of the common good enjoyed renewed interest. Although Porter focuses on the revival of the common good in Roman Catholic thinking, it is clear that a renewed interest in the concept can be found in various churches, amongst theologians from a variety of backgrounds, and in different parts of the world. In the field of theology, the variety of publications on the common good, in the USA especially, confirms this renewed interest. A few years ago, scholars from various theological disciplines undertook a three year research project on the common good under the auspices of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. The results of this project were published in 2005.³ In Germany, Heinrich Bedford Strohm of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Research Centre for Public Theology at Bamberg University is engaged in interesting work on the *Gemeinwohl*.

A THICKER AND A THINNER VERSION OF THE COMMON GOOD?

a. The so-called pre-modern and early modern versions of the common good are indeed thicker versions of the common good. It does not refrain from a thicker theological substantiation of the idea of the common good. Various objections are formulated against this thicker version of the common good.

Hollenbach (2002:9-17) refers to various objections to the notion of the common good in the contexts of modernity and postmodernity. According to him, some scholars argue that the ideals of a thicker common good can only be achieved in simple homogeneous societies such as the Greek city-state of Aristotle and the medieval society of Thomas. In modern-postmodern complex pluralistic societies where people from a variety of religious and secular world views live together, consensus on the common good, on an agreed vision of the good life, is not possible.

For others such a common vision is also not ideal, since the consensus is normally the expressed will of groups with the most social, political, and economic power in societies. They blame Aristotle for the fact that the common good of the Greek city-state excluded women, slaves, and resident aliens and that it was, therefore, an expression of the interests of the males of that society. This autocratic and exclusivist version of the common good should, according to many, rather be called a “common bad”.

³ P.D. Muller and D.P. McCann (eds), *In search of the common good* (2005). Another helpful publication on the common good is the one of Martin Marty. See M. Marty, *The One and the Many. America's struggle for the common good* (1997). Some other publications relate the notion of the common good to specific issues, e.g. to the economy, see H. Daly and J. Cobb Jr, *For the common good. Redirecting the economy toward community, the environment and a sustainable future* (1994).

With reference to the religious wars in Europe, and the contemporary religious-based conflicts in the world, as well as the growing conflicts in societies that become increasingly multi-religious and pluralistic, for example, in the Netherlands and France, a plea is made for abandoning all attempts at achieving such a common good. The best that we can achieve, it is argued, is to live in tolerance towards different particularistic views of the good life (cf. Hollenbach 2002:24).

b. The path to follow is perhaps not to abandon the idea of the common good. To address the immense social challenges of contemporary societies we need to formulate some form of joint understanding of the type of life that we as citizens from a variety of backgrounds agree upon. The notion of a thinner version of the common good might provide us with a concept of a good life together that is not susceptible to the three points of criticism mentioned above, namely: (1) that it is something that only a homogenous group of people can agree upon; (2) that it is something that is forced upon the less socially, politically, and economically powerful ones in society; and (3) that it is a something that provokes conflict and even bloodshed amongst adherents of a plurality of religious and secular world views, i.e. groups with their own particularistic versions of the thicker ideals for the good life.

Gaudium et spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) was promulgated by Vatican II in 1965. For Porter (2005:94-95) the definition of the common good given in this document remains its classic modern description:

Everyday human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result, the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race.

This definition, which provides a set of conditions necessary for the flourishing of life, constitutes a thin version of the common good. The advantage of such a thin conception of the common good is that it does not fall prey to the criticisms addressed to thicker versions of the common good. It might indeed be helpful to distinguish between thinner and thicker conceptions of the common good. Objections to the idea of the common good that might be levelled against thicker conceptions of it might not apply to thinner conceptions of the common good.

c. The idea of a thinner version of the common good is, however, not enough. We need to seek ways to build thicker versions of the common good in contemporary pluralistic societies. Porter (2005:95) argues that lessons should be learned from the thicker common good of pre-modern times. According to Hollenbach (2005:15) the so-called tradition of civic republicanism (with representatives like Cicero, Machiavelli, and Rousseau) with its emphasis on civic virtue, is an example of a secular tradition that advances the idea of a thicker version of the common good. Concrete public discourses in South Africa, like the one within the Ethical Leadership Project (ELP), might also assist our thinking about this quest for a thicker public good.

The ELP was launched about seven years ago in the Western Cape. Role players from various religious and secular traditions participated in this civil society initiative that aimed to build ethical leadership in various sectors of South African society. In line with the so-called national Moral Regeneration Movement instituted by president Nelson Mandela in the mid-nineties, the ELP set as its aim the advancement of the vision of the common good spelled out in the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution by way of conferences, workshops, discussions, and publications. One might argue that the South African Bill of Rights constitutes a consensus about a thinner version of the common good, about the minimum conditions of a good life that South Africans agree upon. This vision of the common good entails a life of dignity for all. Constituent elements of this common good of dignity are equality, freedom, justice, and equity. The plurality of participants in the ELP embarked on a journey where inputs were made from a variety of religious and secular orientations on a richer and deeper understanding of these constituent elements of the common good.

A typical Christian input would, for instance, be that equality is not synonymous with uniformity, but it is equality in worth, value, and dignity that has its roots in God's equal love for all his people; freedom is not only freedom from enslavement and limitations, but also freedom for service to God and fellow human beings and the rest of creation; justice is compassionate justice, both the forensic *mishpat* and the sacrificial *tsedakah*; equity means that equilibrium can only be achieved if an ethos of sacrifice that is based on the supreme sacrifice of Christ is adhered to. A Trinitarian description of human dignity would entail that dignity is based in the love of the Triune God who creates us in his image, who sends his Son to die for us for the sake of our reconciliation and salvation, and who sends his Spirit to dwell in us for the sake of our transformation and renewal.

In this ELP initiative, it was so very enriching to see how many points of convergence were discovered among participants from a plurality of world views when they tabled their thicker understandings of these ingredients of a common good of dignity. Participants also realised that this was a more honest approach. They argued that our definitions of concepts such as justice and freedom cannot be separated from the traditions, communities, and stories that shape our lives. Although we think our definitions are impartial, neutral, and objective, they are influenced and determined by these external factors.

The input of various religious and secular traditions does not only influence the contents of the common good of dignity, but it also provides a variety of meaning-giving frameworks within which we act, ends that we strive toward, and motivations that we build upon and that inspire us.

So we might conclude that we need thinner versions of the common good for the sake of a common point of departure for a journey together as fellow-citizens in pluralistic societies. The journey, however, requires that we table our thicker versions and that we discover points of convergence on this level as well. The direction is one of: discovering the thin common good that we agree upon; seeking a thicker version of the common good through inputs from various religious and secular traditions; and discovering the surprisingly high level of convergence and consensus on the level of this thicker common good as well.

ON REALISING THE COMMON GOOD

a. We also need ways to make the notion of the common good more concrete, to translate the vision of the common good into concrete decisions and policies. We need to concretely embody and internalise the vision of the common good.

The consensus on broad vision and principles need to be converted into consensus about concrete decisions, policies and practices. With regard to the common good of dignity, the question is about what human dignity, equality, freedom, justice and equity mean in concrete situations and contexts. It is on this level that it might become more difficult to reach consensus. What does justice mean for land reform initiatives in South Africa? Or, what does it mean for role players in the debates about abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, gender, etc.? What type of reparative and restitutive measures best serve the quest for equity? What level of entrepreneurial freedom will benefit society and what level of state control is required to stimulate growth that will be to the benefit of all? How does one define equality in contexts of vast inequalities? What form of marriage expresses human dignity the best: monogamy, polygamy, or polyandry? In a multilingual society, what policies would best serve the dignity of all? In a context such as this, the quest for consensus becomes a moral quest. The choice to engage in open and frank dialogue, where dialogue partners take each other seriously enough to try to persuade each other, becomes a moral choice in itself.

b. Situations may also exist where consensus does not materialise. This might happen when one deals with so-called “incommensurable positions”. People might reach a point where they say that their world views, their meaning-giving frameworks and basic presuppositions differ to the extent that reaching consensus is simply not possible. This happens, for instance, when sets of human rights come into conflict. The right to cultural expression and the right of control over one’s own body, for instance, come into conflict when we discuss female circumcision/clitoridectomy/female genital mutilation. The definition of what constitutes human dignity becomes contestable in this situation. Is dignity served by the recognition of the right to cultural expression, or through the recognition of the right to autonomously decide on what happens to one’s body?

c. When only dissensus remains on the concrete and specific application of the common good, the challenge is to practise an ethos of tolerance and embrace. This ethos opens the doors to continued dialogue and collaboration amidst deep differences. From the continuous dialogue and exposure to the other, new, creative and surprising possibilities might come to the fore.

North American theologian, David Cunningham (1998), identifies so-called “Trinitarian virtues” and “Trinitarian practices” that enable us to oppose our craving for violence, our neglect of children, and our misguided quest for homogeneity. The three Trinitarian virtues are polyphony, participation, and particularity. The three Trinitarian practices are peacemaking, pluralising, and persuading. These Trinitarian virtues and practices can help us towards peaceable living in pluralistic societies, especially when we are faced with incommensurable positions and dissensus.

Drawing amongst others on the work of Bakhtin, Cunningham (1998:156, 164) describes polyphony as a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combined but not merged. This polyphonic unity is informed and underwritten – and I would add, called into being – by the Trinitarian union within the Triune God and between God and his people and creation.

Cunningham (1998:180-183) bases our participation in God on the incarnation of Christ. He argues that the Chalcedonian formulation has cosmic significance, namely the formulation that the divine and humane indwells each other without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. Christ is the focal point for this co-inherence, mutual indwelling, mutual and reciprocal participation, *perichoreis*, of God and humans, of this intimacy, *koinonia*, between God and his world. Cunningham especially employs the notion of *koinonia* to describe the intimacy and participation in each other's lives amongst humans.

The *koinonia* within God, and between God and his creation is, according to Cunningham (1998:183-186), the communion that human beings are called to live in amongst each other. The sharing of common meals shows that we participate in significant ways in each other's lives. It entails that we take account of dietary restrictions and the aesthetic and gustatory preferences that each person brings to the table. Common meals reflect a participation in each other's lives that require patient listening practices, careful discernment of the needs of others, and the observance of culturally-encoded rituals like table manners.

The Trinitarian virtue of particularity makes room for difference and individuality, without paving the way towards isolation, separateness, individualism and autonomy. Particularity creates a space for difference that is equally constituted by mutual participation and a rich polyphony. Particularity recognises and validates subjectivity, contextuality, and difference, and cannot accept the reduction of human life to a homogeneous economy of the same (1998:197-230).

These three virtues (polyphony, participation, and particularity) enable us to practise peacemaking since they oppose the root of violence, namely the drive toward homogeneity, that is expressed in the subjugation and elimination of the other, and the destruction of the otherness of the other. These virtues pave the way for practices of pluralising, since they make room for and are defined by multiple modes of discourse and practice. These virtues foster the practice of persuading, i.e. foster a definition of authority and power that is not informed by coercive power, but which is modelled on and formed by the persuasive power of the Triune God (Cunningham 1998:234-335).

These Trinitarian virtues and practices can be helpful indeed in our quest to effectuate the common good amidst dissensus and incommensurability.

d. The vision of the common good also needs to be embodied by so-called good people, i.e. people of character and virtue. According to American theologians, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen (1989:124), an etymological study of the word "character" indicates that character has to do with the engraving of particular principles into a person. They refer to the Greek roots of the word which means "engraving tool", and by extension the marks made

by an engraving tool. And hence, character contains the notion of values which are engraved into a person, over time, so that they become assimilated, incarnated, and embodied in the person. Character, like virtues, therefore, develop over time in communion with God and other human beings.

The North American ethicist J. Philip Wogaman (1989:29) offers a valuable description of virtue. He describes virtue as

... a disposition of the will towards a good end, as a tendency to think or behave in accordance with goodness, as a habit of the will to overcome a threat to our ultimate good.

A virtue is a predisposition, a tendency, an intuition to be and to act in a specific way without prior reflection. It almost happens instinctively. To some extent it has an element of unavoidability. The Greek word for virtue, *arête*, refers to the divine power that we do have to be and to act in accordance with goodness. Virtue also has a dimension of *habitus*. This implies that virtue is acquired in a process of consistent and collective habitual behaviour. For David Cunningham (1998:123), virtues are dispositions that God has by nature, and in which we participate by grace. Virtues are characteristics of the Triune God that are freely bestowed upon us.

Greek philosopher Aristotle identified four so-called “cardinal virtues”. “Cardinal” is derived from the Latin word *cardo*, which refers to the hinge of a door. The four cardinal virtues are, therefore, the hinge on which all virtues turn. These virtues are justice, moderation/self-control, discernment/wisdom, and courage/ fortitude. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas added three theological virtues to these four, namely faith, hope, and love.

Social and political scientists in various parts of the world argue that democracies with human rights cultures that serve the common good cannot become a reality without leaders and citizens of civic virtue and character. Societies hunger for people of public and civic virtue: public wisdom in contexts of complexity, ambiguity, tragedy and *aporia* (dead-end streets); public justice in the context of inequalities and injustices on local and global levels; public temperance in the context of greed and consumerism amidst poverty and alienation; public fortitude amidst situations of powerlessness and inertia; public faith amidst feelings of disorientation and rootlessness in contemporary societies; public hope amidst situations of despair and melancholy; and public love in societies where public solidarity and compassion are lacking.

e. All institutions of society have a role to play in actualising the common good. Churches in various forms (as institution and organism) at local, regional and global levels and in partnership with institutions in various spheres of public life (politics, economy, civil society, the formation of public opinion), participate in the quest to realise the common good.

CONCLUSION: THE NOTION OF THE COMMON GOOD IS HELPFUL

After the above analysis I conclude by citing three sets of reasons why common good discourse might be very helpful.

First, the notion of common good has a descriptive function. In complex contemporary societies it is offered as one of many central categories when discussions take place about the types of societies that we want. Various sectors of complex modern societies strive to embody the common good.

Second, the notion of the common good has a rhetorical and inspiring function. It triggers the imaginative and visionary dimensions of our lives. It encourages us to dream, and not to make peace with the status quo of injustice, inequality, oppression and the manifold ways of the violation of dignity. Common good language enables us to imagine a different world. Things need not be as they currently are. Dehumanisation and injustice do not need to have the final word. Common good discourse, therefore, encourages us to offer courageous criticism of the wrongs of our societies. It inspires us also to look for what is common to us all, for communion in the midst of societies where too many people, through their attitude and practices, betray that now is not a time for unity, for social solidarity, for social cohesion, for building social capital, for reciprocal responsibility.

Finally, the notion of the common good has a normative function. It does provide moral insights and material with which to envisage a new society, for the formation of people of character and virtue, as well as for the making of decisions and policies that will enhance a life of dignity for all, for both human and non-human forms of life.

And, this threefold role fulfils the common good in local societies (national common good), in international contexts (global common good), as well as in the context of the hospitality of humans to show to the rest of creation, i.e. in the context of the integrity of creation (cosmic common good).

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CHRISTIANITY AMONG OTHER RELIGIONS AND SECULAR WORLD VIEWS IN THE QUEST FOR THE COMMON GOOD IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES

ABSTRACT

Amid a plurality of religions and secular world views, some of which claim to serve the common good while others restrict themselves to the private sphere – and yet others deny Christianity and other religions’s relevance in the public sphere – the church has to constantly reinterpret its own claims, as well as those of other religions and secular world views. The church has to do this in order to ascertain its relationship with other religions and world views, and their adherents in general, but more particularly with regard to specific public issues. Public theology needs to be intra-disciplinary with the theology of other religions, and in conversation with the science and philosophy of religion.

INTRODUCTION

In the West, since the Enlightenment, there exists a broad consensus that a plurality of religions in one society creates the potential for conflict and, therefore, that religions are detrimental to the common good, to unity, and to peace. Hence, religions has to be kept in check by and within a neutral state. The reason for this, it is felt, is that conflicting religious commitments cause intolerance, strife and war, and this should disqualify religions from participation in the public sphere. According to Slenczka (2010), Christians at least have more tolerance due to their awareness of their own imperfection, sinfulness, and guilt. Yet Christians, like others, should refrain from participation in public life on the basis of their religious commitments (cf. Slenczka 2010:1). Current inter-religious tensions and war in Europe tend to strengthen this conviction, and hence the constitution of the European Union grants religions only scant scope for participation in public life.

Clashes between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and the insistence that Shari’a law be generally enforced also strengthen this view of religions. In colonial times, tribal religions that used to bolster the political claims of tribal heads were also proscribed in order to combat tribalism and its undermining of the state. This is one of the reasons why, for example Nigeria, like European countries, adopted a constitution that entrenches a secular state.

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South Africa has a colonial history in which Christianity was initially awarded established status, unlike African traditional religions, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and other religions. Over time, the exclusion of the other faiths from public life became intolerable. With secularisation at much lower levels than Europe, the new South African Constitution guarantees a secular state that is religiously neutral yet affords religious organisations the right to participate in public consultation.

Therefore, one could ask whether the church – in its various institutional modalities and as an individual believer in secular vocation – should and can be involved in public life to the benefit of all on the basis of its faith commitments in plural societies? And, can the church do so in conjunction with the adherents of other religions? Furthermore, how is the church – and other religions for that matter – to respond to secular world views that deny religious participation in the public sphere?

By phrasing our topic in this manner, we simultaneously touch upon two issues that have been intricately intertwined throughout the history of Christianity, namely the relationship between Christianity and other religions with regard to public life, as well as the relationship between religions and secular world views that claim to promote the common good.²

It is not possible to consider the role of *religions* in the search of the common good from a Christian perspective without considering the theological interpretation and evaluation of other religions. On the other hand, considering the role of religions *in the search for the common good* has to deal with secular world views that deny religions any public role. To rephrase: Christian theology has to assert a role for the church in the public sphere against the exclusion that secular world views impose on it; and, to assess whether and how the church can cooperate with people that also claim a public role on the basis of non-Christian religious commitments, including those that base their claim on secular commitments.

A broad historical and theological outline of how these issues have been dealt with in the past, especially with reference to the Netherlands, South Africa and Nigeria, follows below.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND THE COMMON GOOD AMID A PLURALITY OF RELIGIONS AND WORLD VIEWS

Early Christianity

During the first three centuries of its existence, the church saw itself as a missionary community with a missionary task towards society (Goheen 2000:192). However, Christians were persecuted minorities in constant conflict with political society (Newbiggin 1991:68). A salient characteristic was their self-designation as *ecclesia* (public assembly) as opposed to the array of other private cultic communities that existed with the blessing of the Roman Empire that understood themselves to be *thiasos* or *heranos* (private religious communities).

² These twin issues pertain to two of the most pressing problems facing the Christian church and on which little or no consensus has been reached in a secularising and religiously pluralistic globalised world: Some decades ago already, Hans Küng (1978:25) and David Bosch (1991:476-477) had stated that the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and the relationship of Christianity with world views that promise this-worldly salvation, pose the two major unresolved issues for the world church.

The latter were not in competition with the public Imperial cult. The church was, however, not part of the spectre of private religious societies competing with one another to present personal salvation to their members. It viewed itself

as a movement launched into the public life of the world, challenging the *cultus publicus* of the Empire, claiming the allegiance of all without exception (Newbigin 1980:46).

This confession was based on the good news of the incarnation that provided the clue to all of history. For claiming universal significance, the early church paid a high price in terms of persecution and suffering as it collided with the established powers, especially the Imperial cult (Newbigin 1986:100).

During the first three centuries, there were two divergent tendencies in the church regarding the theological interpretation of non-Christian religions. Both appealed to Scripture. Some supported a more positive and inclusive attitude. Justin and like-minded theologians believed that Christianity was superior to Greek philosophies and religions. The difference was, however, not absolute but rather relative. The “heathen” possessed germ cells of the truth, part of the truth. The Logos of John 1 functioned like a seed in all people and was also reflected in non-Christian religions and philosophies. Those who lived according to the principles of the Logos were by implication Christians, albeit it anonymous ones. Christianity was seen as the fulfilment of that which was partly present in heathendom. The latter served as preparation and pedagogue for the gospel in a way similar to that of the Old Testament.

Others drew a sharp distinction between Christianity and other religions and philosophies. Tertullian exposed the repulsive practices of heathendom and the foolishness of Greek philosophers in no uncertain terms. No relationship was possible between Athens and Jerusalem – between an adoration of reason and Christian faith. No one is born a Christian but becomes one through rebirth (Bosch 1976:36-38).

These early positions have kept recurring in different forms and combinations up to the present. The question regarding truth has obviously played a vital role in the relationship between Christians and non-Christians, and amongst Christians that hold divergent positions. For the purpose of this paper, the truth regarding humanity and the common good of society is the focus.

Christendom

Constantine and Theodosius

Emperor Constantine’s declaration of religious freedom for all religions (313 AD) was followed by Emperor Theodosius’ declaration of the Christian religion as the sole official imperial religion (380 AD), followed by the banning of all non-Christian cults in 391 AD. This brought a change in the church’s views regarding its relationship to both the public sphere and to other religions.

The church’s acceptance of its legal establishment, however, had its roots in the courageous insistence of the pre-Constantinian church that the incarnation was the clue to all of history and that Jesus is Lord of all. Hence, Christianity could not be a privatised cult, but

served as proclaimer of Christ's universal rule. Did the church have much of a choice when the ancient classical world became spiritually bankrupt and turned to the church to provide it with a centre? Being faithful to its origins in Israel and the ministry of Jesus, the church simply had to assume responsibility for the political order as the culture of antiquity faded and the gods and cults of the empire failed to keep it together (Newbigin 1986:129).

Augustine

Augustine, however, still wrestled with being Christian in a pluralistic society. Inwardly and spiritually the classical world view had disintegrated, outwardly it was matched by Alaric's pillage of the Eternal City. As an old man Augustine set himself his greatest task, namely to interpret secular history in the light of the gospel. He painted a picture of the relationship between church and world that shaped thought and practice in Western Christianity for a thousand years. Not only did he provide an approach to knowledge that related science and revelation in a "synthesis" that enabled a common understanding of reality, but also related "the city of God" to "the earthly city" in a vision that was to control the relationship between church and society for another millennium in Western Europe. This vision acknowledged the coexistence at all levels of public life of pagans and Christians, the latter as "resident aliens". Even though the church was no longer persecuted and enjoyed established status, the kingdom of God had definitely not arrived in its fullness. Two commonwealths with two internal logics lived side-by-side, the one ruled by the love of self, the other by love of God. The dividing line, however, was not simply between Christians and non-Christians. The former also found themselves torn between conflicting allegiances. Christians, as resident aliens in the earthly city, were nevertheless compelled to seek the latter's good order and when called to responsibility as rulers, would have to accept it in the spirit of servants of the common good. Thus the citizens of the heavenly city would actively seek the peace and good order of the earthly city, not seeking to forestall, but patiently awaiting the final judgment when the two would be visibly separated and the heavenly city would appear in all its beauty. Meanwhile the monastic communities, such as the one to which Augustine belonged, were visible signs and preliminary realisations of a world ruled solely by the love of God in the midst of a world ruled by the love of self (Newbigin 1986:102-105).

Newbigin, similar to Bonhoeffer in his *Heritage and Decay* (Bonhoeffer 2005:89ff.), was particularly interested in the role played by Christian theology in shaping the understanding of reality of Christian Europe. It was much more than a new alliance between political society and Christianity, state and church. Theology took on the task of defining the relationship between the Christian understanding of reality and the failing classical world view of the Empire. It meant more than a new ethic. It entailed an alternative ontology and epistemology to the floundering ones of the Roman Empire. Not that it simply discarded Roman antiquity. The theologians of first-century Christianity provided the Empire and Europe with a new way of understanding by providing a new *arche*, a new starting point for the *logos* of the classical world, namely the Christ event, as vividly narrated in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Ultimate reality was no longer unknowable, but revealed in the person of Jesus Christ in the

text of the New Testament and the preaching of the church. This was captured in Augustine's famous slogan *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to know). In his *Confessions* he narrates how he had to give up the classical prerogative of being the subject in his failed quest for truth as he became the object of the Other who sought and found him through "the Word made flesh in the actual history of Jesus Christ". This would "henceforth be the foundation for all the great intellectual and spiritual striving which filled the remaining years of his life" (Newbiggin 1995:7). Hence, "a world view which sees ultimate reality as in some sense personal" now replaced the classical world view that regarded "ultimate reality as impersonal" (Newbiggin 1995:7).³ By faithfulness to the reality of Jesus Christ, we would be led by the Spirit to full knowledge of the Father — *in via* at present, but in its fullness at the end. This overcame the paralysing dualisms of the classical world and liberated classical thought to advance in the scientific way that it did. This "synthesis" – or rather enculturation as it may be more appropriately called currently – mainly ascribed to Augustine – sustained Europe for the next thousand years. Although it did not end the tension between the classical and the biblical ways of understanding reality, the Christian story did play the greater part in shaping Europe as a coherent political, cultural and spiritual entity (Newbiggin 1995:7-14).⁴

Later generations of theologians, however, operated in a Europe in which the remaining vital elements of non-Christian religions had faded. Christians no longer shared common cultural and religious roots with adherents of other religions. Christians were regarded as being civilised whereas those of other faiths were considered heathen, barbarians, and a threat to the state – a position that has retained much of its appeal to many.

The rise of Islam hardened attitudes. This religion was regarded as the Antichrist that had to be conquered by the sword. Other religions, from which Europeans were cut off by Islam, were eventually viewed in a similar way. Papal permission given in 1454 to the King of Portugal to subdue Muslims, pagans, and other enemies of Christ by force, to confiscate their possessions, and to permanently turn them into slaves, set the scene for the sacking of mosques and temples by colonists and missionaries in subsequent centuries. Rome's doctrine of "no salvation outside the church" meant the eternal damnation of all others. This led to their (the adherents of other religions) temporal damnation by Christian armed forces (Bosch 1976:38-40).

However, before Muslims were expelled from Latin Christendom, their presence presented a fundamental challenge to Christendom and the millennium-old Augustinian

3 Bonhoeffer also picked up the theme of reality being ultimately personal – im-personated in Jesus Christ. This crucial understanding of reality was transposed upon antiquity to form the basis of the Christian West. Any break with this – whether represented by ancient Greek thinking or the modern revival of the pre-Christian European world view – was merely mythology.

4 Newbiggin approvingly refers to Christopher Kaiser's work on the dialogue between Christian theologians and science. The Cappadocian theologians at the end of the fourth century developed four fundamental principles based upon the creation of God and the incarnation of Christ that were to shape the development of science throughout the ages up to the present. In this way the biblical revelation redeemed and rescued classical thought from its *cul de sacs* and provided the basis for the subsequent development of science in Europe. It was this Christian basis that caused Europe to advance scientifically well ahead of the "far more brilliant thinking of India, China, and the Arab world ... They were part of the whole reconstitution of thought necessitated by the new fact, the action of God, the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ." (Newbiggin 1995:7).

enculturation of the gospel into the culture of Roman and Greek antiquity. Muslim scholars introduced the philosophy of Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas developed a synthesis to accommodate the new epistemological challenge that it posed.⁵ In Aquinas' "double storey" construct he distinguished between the "lower storey" of knowledge which is accessible to all people through nature, philosophy, natural reason. Knowledge about God's existence and the fact that God is one can be obtained here, as can the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil. This is also where the non-Christian religions fit in. The "top storey", which is the terrain of the supernatural, revelation and faith – of grace – "builds" on the lower one. It is in the top storey where Christianity is located. Non-Christian religions and philosophies therefore become the "preparation for the gospel" (Bosch 1976:41-42).

The encounter between Augustinian Christendom and Aristotelian philosophy, however, created a dualism in Western epistemology that would eventually widen to the point that all religions, including Christianity, were eventually denied participation in the public sphere.

It was only after the acceptance of the Thomistic synthesis that a change to the age old approach of the Church of Rome towards other religions appeared – at least in a certain section and also only for a limited period. The first sixteenth-century Jesuit missionaries to Asia had a much milder approach towards the religions and cultures of Japan, China, and India. This ended dramatically when the Pope recalled them all in 1773 on the insistence of other orders that vehemently opposed this approach. It was only once a similar approach had emerged in Protestant missionary circles that it again found acceptance in Roman Catholic circles (Bosch 1976:41).

Christian humanism, which is currently being revitalised among public theologians of the likes of John de Gruchy, is normally associated with the Renaissance. In a sense it revived the inculturation of Roman and Greek antiquity in Christendom. The acceptance of and respect for the common humanity of all regardless of physical and cultural differences, including religious commitments, is one of the salient traits of Christian humanism (De Gruchy 2006:30) and an important premise for life together in plural societies.

The Reformation – religious pluralism and a divided Christendom

Leading Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and many of their close associates were all products of Christian humanism. Apart from producing theologians and scholars, Christian humanism also produced others who were deeply involved in public life – Erasmus of Rotterdam was one of the leading figures.

With the advent of the Reformation, for the first time in the history of the church now witnesses the development of an actual theology of religions. What the apologists, the church fathers (excluding Tertullian) and scholastic theologians offered was rather a Christian philosophy of religions (Hendrik Kraemer in Bosch 1976:42). The three leading Reformers all accepted the possibility of revelation as well as knowledge of God outside of Christianity.

⁵ Aquinas' construct may rightfully be called a synthesis of the gospel and philosophy as the two systems are connected in such a manner that the conflicting commitments of both are retained. A synthesis of this kind inevitably has to come apart, as eventually happened with the Thomistic construct.

Luther knew little about Islam and interpreted it negatively. Zwingli, who essentially stayed within the tradition of humanism, was of the opinion that Greek philosophers and Roman poets will share ultimate salvation together with Old and New Testament believers. This enraged Luther to the point that he branded Zwingli a heathen. Calvin spoke in a more nuanced way of natural knowledge of God via an innate “sense for the divine” (Institutes I.3.3) or a “seed of religion” (Institutes I.3.1). Tragically, due to human corruption this does not lead to true religion but rather to people’s own religious fabrications, which cannot but bear bad fruit (Institutes I.11.8). Calvin also refers to a second general source of knowledge of God, namely “general revelation”, which is disclosed in God’s works. This knowledge is also suppressed (Institutes I.5.4) due to human beings’ unstoppable craving for creating new religions (Institutes I.6.3) since the human spirit is a factory of idols (Institutes I.11.8) (cf. Bosch 1976:42-45).

The Reformers, especially Calvin, taught the public relevance of the gospel and basically held on to this Christian ideal. Only the Radical Reformation broke with this ideal and rather viewed the church as an alternative society within a non-Christian world.⁶ The Reformation, however, shattered the unity of Latin Christendom and resulted in religious wars that undermined Europe’s trust in religion to supply the basic commitments towards the quest for the common good. The story of the Netherlands and the Cape of Good Hope as refreshment station of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) is part of the above history.

Reformed Christendom in the Netherlands and at the Cape

The Republic of the United Netherlands was born in the context of religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. This strife got a further ethnic colour with the Spanish monarch as protagonist on behalf of Roman Christendom. This lay the basis for the development of Dutch nationalism. The Dutch Reformed Church won established status as privileged church in the Dutch Republic. However, Catholics, other Protestants, and Jews enjoyed varying degrees of tolerance depending on the specific province and period they found themselves in. The States General convened and sponsored the National Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) to promote unity in its privileged church for the sake of a stable political dispensation.

This synod requested the States General to exert itself “with Christian earnestness” to promote “the procreations of the holy Gospel” in the East Indian countries where it held authority. The motivation of the Synod was that all true Christians ought to strive for the extension of God’s honour among all people and desire the salvation of their neighbour. Therefore it was the States General’s duty to use all means at its disposal to further this goal as the Lord had opened up countries that lacked the true and saving knowledge of God (Biesterveld & Kuyper 1905:287-288). This is in line with Article 36 of the the *Belgic Confession*, which upholds civil government as agent for caring for and watching over the public domain. Its task also extends to maintaining the sacred ministry with a view to

⁶ Newbigin, Bosch, De Gruchy and others hold on to both the Reformed ecclesiology of accepting secular government and bearing public witness to the reign of God in public life, as well as an Anabaptist ecclesiology of the church being an “alternative community”.

removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; all to the end of God being honored and served by everyone as God requires in God's Word.

The VOC unilaterally initiated a chaplaincy service consisting of Dutch Reformed predicants and sick-comforters. The Company drew up its own church orders, which regulated religion in the very pluralistic contexts of East India and the Cape. The Company also employed people from various European ethnic groups, which also meant people from different nationalities and religious affiliations. Slaves and political captives from diverse ethnic backgrounds were imported or sent to the Cape. Some were Muslims. Others, like the Cape's indigenous peoples, had primal religions.

The 1624 Batavian Church Order of the VOC prohibited Chinese and other "heathen" from practising their

pagan superstition and serving the devil in public, especially in the streets, since in no Christian republic such incursions of the honour of God are to be tolerated (Church Order of Batavia, 1624, in Spoelstra 1907:572).

Non-Dutch inhabitants were thus prevented from joining such "pagan practices". Van Riebeeck's prayer on arrival at the Cape reflects this understanding of Company patronage of religion. The Classis of Amsterdam also shared this sentiment: "May the Lord of the harvest bless your [Church at the Cape] ministry among the blind heathen of the Cape so that their eyes will be opened to kiss in faith the Lord and commander of the heathen, and will walk in his ways" (Missive 180, in Spoelstra 1907:37) and that his kingdom would grow among "the heathen" and that many souls would be won for the Lord Jesus Christ (Missive 181, in Spoelstra 1907:38). Here, in quintessential Reformed fashion, we see that the winning of souls and the confession of the private and public Lordship of Christ through word and deed being kept together.

At the Cape, political society only allowed the Dutch Reformed Church to institutionalise itself. This church welcomed and cherished this privilege. It exerted its political influence to stop Lutherans from establishing a congregation or to publically propagate their faith for more than a century. Lutheran men were also not allowed to have their Reformed wives and children join the Lutheran Church as it would reportedly cause much harm to the congregations and weaken the offerings needed to help the poor. Many poor people who received diaconal assistance were neither Reformed nor Lutheran colonists, but were slaves and their children who were baptised and freed. These people would remain the liability of the diaconate of the Reformed Church once the Lutherans had formed their own congregation (Missive 220, in Spoelstra 1907:112).

Roman Catholics were also kept in check. Muslims were not allowed to practice their faith in public. The indigenous Khoina were not regarded as having any religion at all, but as being under "the reign of darkness and in the hands and bonds of Satan" – a "wretched, pitiful people" (Missive 1, in Spoelstra 1906:4) – a "nation [that] simply resists our religion" notwithstanding all efforts to convert them (Missive 10 in Spoelstra 1906:28-29).

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The privatisation of religion

The religious wars that followed in the wake of the Reformation caused the already existing dualism between reason and revelation to intensify. No longer was religion to be trusted with the common good. Modernity with its faith in reason and empirical experience and its alter ego, modernism, with its romantic idea of the nation, became the new leading lights in the quest for the common good. Religions, including Christianity, were relativised and viewed as expressions of an underlying common natural religion. Christianity was at most the highest evolutionary form, the crown, and fulfilment of other religions.

Nineteenth-century historical criticism relativised Christianity even further by regarding it the best religion for the West. Mission was reduced to the contribution it could make towards civilising people of other religions, whether through education, medical work, social upliftment, or the struggle for social justice. Christian missions, according to Troeltsch, had to refrain from attacking established religions and from trying to replace them (Bosch 1976:45-47).

Religion was classified under the rubric of beliefs and “values” that essentially belong to the private sphere whereas science and all its applications have to do with “facts”, which properly belong to the public sphere.

The French Revolution popularised the ideas of the Enlightenment in Europe. Napoleon’s conquest of the Netherlands resulted in the formation of the Batavian Republic. A sharper division between state and religion was drawn. Religions became voluntary faith-based organisations that were free to exist outside the public sphere. Under Batavian Republican rule Islam and other religions were unbanned at the Cape. Christian missions in colonies such as the Cape and Nigeria were welcome to contribute towards “civilising the heathen” and to counter the advance of Islam in the case of the latter. As the church and its missions had already been restricted from political and economic involvement in Cape-Dutch Christendom, so it also tended to be in other colonies in the nineteenth century. Missionary proclamation and practice strengthened this tendency with its other-worldly and individualised eschatology (cf. Mbiti 1971).

The new non-Western converts were the first to intensely experience religious pluralism. As minorities their experience was similar to those in pre-Christian or early Christian Europe. They had to contend with a plurality of religious claims and commitments. Christianity became the entrance to a world culture and a God who deals universally, unlike the localised and kin-bound traditional deities. Traditional African religions functioned on tribal or kinship level. Hence, Xhosa Christians tend to hold on to more than one religion by letting them function in different contexts, or to syncretise them (cf. Pauw 1975:336).

South Africa, however, witnessed a number of church initiatives aimed at serving the common good. However, the *common good* in a pluralistic society such as South Africa is often readily compromised by sectarian, group interests. So, for example, the DRC followed the views of its Afrikaner membership in the rebellion against British rule. This eventually

resulted in the support of this church for apartheid and a regime that decided on behalf of other ethnic groups what was deemed to be good for them. Many church bodies took the side of those suffering under apartheid – both inside South Africa and ecumenically. The then Dutch Reformed Mission Church's declaration of a *status confessionis* and subsequent Belhar Confession ushered in a new era in the role of the church with regard to the common good. Hitherto the church had not spelt out the public relevance of gospel and church so forcefully in confessional terms.

Decolonisation brought a new dimension of inter-religious encounter. The post-colonial African states adopted new policies regarding religion. As mentioned earlier, under the new South African Constitution, for instance, the state is no longer Christian but a liberal democracy that is neutral with regard to religion. Religious communities and organisations of various persuasions can, however, participate in public processes. Nigeria's federal constitution is similar. However, some northern Nigerian states have obtained the right to function under Shari'a law.

The influx of non-Western Christians and adherents of other religions into Europe from former colonies and other countries has influenced Europeans' religious and cultural views. Non-Christian religions, which seemed to be in decline a century ago, have been reasserting themselves – also in Europe.

Despite a long history of secularisation, religion is currently very much alive in Europe. The war that ravaged the old Yugoslavia served as an indication that the old religions of Europe – Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam – are forces to be reckoned with. Europe's imperial past, the collaboration of Western missions with colonial forces, and Europe's history of anti-Semitism and crusades contribute to a guilty conscience and reluctance if not an aversion on the side of Europe's dwindling numbers of Christians to bear witness to the gospel or to regard the gospel as the sole truth for all. European paganism is being revived. Katzenstein (2006:7-8), quoting Peter Berger, describes the European way with religion as a

strong survival of religion, most of it generally Christian in nature, despite the widespread alienation from organized Churches. A shift in the institutional location of religion, then, rather than secularization, would be a more accurate description of the European situation.

Newbigin points out how relativism has resulted in widespread religious pluralism in Britain. This ideology entails

the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of religious beliefs as true or false is inadmissible. Religious belief is a private matter. Each of us is entitled to have – as we say – a faith of our own (Newbigin 1989:14).

Judged by a survey done for the European Union in 2005, pluralism also seems to be common in the Netherlands. One can assume that the 37% that believe there is some sort of spirit or life force (compared to a European average of 27%) are adherents of different religions. This "new religion or spirituality" is more noticeable in certain Protestant countries, such as Sweden or Denmark, as well as in the Czech Republic and Estonia. Among Dutch respondents,

34% believe that there at least is a god (52% EU average). The remaining 27% believe there is not any sort of spirit, god of life force (EU average 8%) (Social Values, Science and Technology 2005:9, 11).

In Africa the name of Nigerian theologian and Methodist churchman, E. Bolaji Idowu looms large in this respect. In his *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief* (1962), he reflects upon the relationship between Christianity and his ancestral African traditional religion in relativist terms.

Since 1910 the theology of religions has been an important theme at numerous world mission conferences. The latter can be typified as follows: Edinburgh (1910): Christianity as “fulfilment”; Jerusalem (1928): a common front of religions against secularism; Tambaran (1938): emphasis on the discontinuity between religions and divine revelation. Since 1955 there has been a growing tendency to return to the position of the apologist Justin and to emphasise the idea of “fulfilment” (Bosch 1976:29-30). John Mbiti is the quintessential advocate of this position among African theologians (Cf. Nieder-Heitmann 1981). It has become customary to classify this view regarding the relationship between Christianity and other religions as “inclusivist”.

In reaction to this development, some Evangelical Christians have assumed an exclusivist position, which argues for complete discontinuity between Christianity and other religions. Important for our discussion is that behind their assessment of other religions lies the belief that Jesus Christ is in reality only the head of the church and not also of the cosmos, whereas the reigning ecumenical theology can partly be ascribed to the Reformed doctrine of the universal reign of Christ (Bosch 1976:211). Evangelicals largely give up on the present world as being under the spell of evil and all hope is placed on the consummation with the return of Christ. The search for the common good here and now is seen more or less as support services for proclaiming the gospel of ultimate, future or heavenly salvation. Of a quest for the common good in conjunction with the adherents of non-Christian religions or secularised people there is little or no evidence.

The exclusivist position is currently associated with the rise of fundamentalism – not only on the side of Christians, but also on that of other religions. Positivism and scientism essentially assume the same fundamentalist and exclusivist position towards religions and their public claims.

A fourth interpretation of the problem regarding the relationship between Christianity and other religions, with which I concur, is the paradox that there is both continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and other religions. This interpretation took form at the 1928 Jerusalem missions conference as a result of Karl Heim’s contribution. Emil Brunner held on to the paradox of religions being the products of both God’s primordial revelation and original sin. Hence, Jesus is both the fulfilment of and judgement on all religion. Hendrik Kraemer, especially in his later phase, reached a similar conclusion along a different train of thought. These and other theologians claimed that they represent the best of the tradition of the Reformation as well as biblical theology. First, they held on to the exclusivist claim of the unique truth of the revelation in Christ and the sufficiency of Christ alone for salvation, which rules out non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. Second, they maintained the

inclusivist claim of the universality of God's grace that keeps the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians open and acknowledges God's gracious activity in the lives of all human beings. The latter is reflected in our common religious awareness and quest for God – which, due to human sinfulness, however becomes misdirected towards idolatry. Beyerhaus insisted on a third pole in a biblical theology of religions, namely an acknowledgement of the sphere of influence of demonic powers (Bosch 1976:128-129, 170-174).

This interpretation rejected the relativist, pluralist position by maintaining that each religion is unique, indivisible, and incomparable. Therefore no synthesis can be successful. Each religion revolves around its own axle (Bosch 1976:174-184). Religion entails commitments pertaining to the ultimate question of truth and these commitments are mutually irreconcilable (Slenczka 2010).

This does not exclude the experience of many a missionary and new Christian convert of having been challenged and enriched by other religions causing them to reinterpret their Christian faith. You have not understood other religions

until you have been compelled to interpret your own Gospel in entirely new terms. You have not really understood another religion unless you have been tempted by the insights of this other religion (Walter Freytag in Bosch 1976:219).

TOWARDS A PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS AND IDEOLOGICAL PLURALITY

The task of public theology is to ascertain what the public relevance of the gospel is. Is it simply a matter of ethics, or is it inherently part of the essential faith commitments of the church? In pluralist societies, public theology needs theology of religions to discern the public role of the church. Theology of religions has unfortunately been focussing on the issue of salvation. This is not necessarily wrong, as salvation in Christian terms indeed is a crucial issue. However, in concurrence with Newbigin, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, and De Gruchy, salvation should be viewed as entailing more than ultimate salvation associated with the consummation but should also be understood in penultimate terms, having to do with humanising people, the socialising of humanity, restoring justice and peace for all of creation, etc. (Newbigin 1989:176; Moltmann 1967:329; cf. De Gruchy 2002). The Reformed concept of universal grace is also useful in this respect (cf. Bavinck 1895:238-240). Collaboration with or, when called for, resistance to people of other religious and secular commitments has to do with bearing witness to both the penultimate and the ultimate salvation in Jesus Christ.

Newbigin (similar to De Gruchy) bases public cooperation between Christians and non-Christian believers on the Christian premise that all people share in the human story. Although Christians know the meaning and end of the story according to the gospel, the grace of God also works in others with whom we share the human story. These others may be Christians, Muslims, Hindus, secular humanists, Marxists, or of some other persuasion. We have to continually decide what our role in this story is. These decisions we cannot take without others of different persuasions (Newbigin 1989:181). This does not mean that Christians compromise the truth of the gospel with regard to the human story. Cooperation is the locus for dialogue and for Christians to give account of the faith that inspire them

towards serving the common good. This faith is to be offered in bold humility as the common story that holds the promise of the penultimate and ultimate salvation of the world. Christian humanism affirms the essential importance of our common humanity on the basis of the incarnation. Our being Christian means that we have claimed the restoration of our humanity in Christ. To participate in the restoration of human dignity means to be proclaiming God's salvation of humanity.

Theologians have also dealt with the claim of the modern scientific world view, which denies all religious commitments the status of public truth and hence deny people participation in the public sphere on the basis of their religious commitments. The story of the hegemony of this world view in Europe is well known. It has also made deep inroads into South Africa and further afield in the African continent (cf. Nieder-Heitmann 2002, 2003).

A wider rationality that overcomes the Enlightenment's radical distinction between facts and values and that leaves room for a fiduciary framework is needed. Commitment, tacit or personal knowledge, is important not only in the case of one's religious paradigm, but also for a particular scientific world view or ideology (Bosch 1991:352-355, 358-361; also see the summary of Newbigin's position in Goheen, 2000:376-389). Hence, the Christian interpretation of world views bear resemblance to the Christian interpretation of other religions.

The church is entitled to participate in the public sphere and should claim this right while it simultaneously defends the same right for people of other commitments. The days are past when Christianity could coerce others into agreement with Christian commitments and the policies into which these commitments are translated.

It is important that the church should be mindful that their's is also *a religion*, which bears all the imprints of human sinfulness as Barth and Kraemer have rightfully pointed out. We are also subject to culturally determined world views and ideologies and these varying and often conflicting commitments reside together in a variety of ways. The story of the Dutch Reformed Church (in South Africa) and apartheid is telling of the folly of synthesising the gospel and ideology – in this case nationalism.

Pluralism which disregards the importance of religious and scientific commitment, which marks the post-modern condition, results in "anarchic pluralism" and does not bode well for the common good of society. Instead of this, Newbigin propagates what he calls "committed pluralism" where Christians participate in public debates and action on the basis of their commitment to the gospel together with the adherents of other religions and supporters of other ideologies. Christians have to convince their interlocutors that positions they take regarding specific public issues serve the common good better than the positions that others take. However, they should also be open to all signs of God's grace at work in the life and work of people that do not know Jesus as the Christ – whether they live by commitments that are either religious or secular in nature (cf. Newbigin 1989:180). This does not mean that non-Christians or secularised people will accept Christian premises. But, as Stephen Neill advises, we should rather seek "common areas of concern rather than greater or less agreement in concepts and ideas" (in Bosch 1976:184).

Christians are needed who achieve the highest standards of excellence in all fields of public life by being shaped by the story of the Bible – a large number of people who form groups in which to reflect on the implications of the gospel for their respective public spheres and to set the tone in them. For this the church as a whole needs to recover its nerve and risk proclaiming the truth from a perspective of faith, despite the disapproval of modernity or the possibility of the “developing world” accusing Christians of cultural imperialism (Newbigin 1991; 1994:74, 157, 167-168, 173-176, 183; 1953:5-6). This reminds one of how Bonhoeffer viewed the freedom of the church, namely as faithfulness to the gospel, notwithstanding the price in suffering that sometimes has to be paid. Not simply freedom from state interference as Liberal Anglo-Saxon Christians that supported the church struggle, but rather as active participation in the business of this world (cf. Nieder-Heitmann 2007:40). Christians should

be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian’s understanding of God’s purpose in history (Newbigin 1989:181).

CONCLUSION

Christian public witness in a context of a plurality of religions and world views compels the church to reflect upon the relationship between the all-encompassing gospel it professes and other religions and secular world views that also claim to serve the public interest. This calls for a Christian theological interpretation of particular religions and world views in a manner that dialectically holds on to both the contradictory forces of divine intervention, as well as the part played by demonic powers. This corresponds with the tension between the human story as one of being created in the image of God, of being endowed with a sense of the divine on the one hand, yet also being totally deprived on the other hand. This kind of interpretation takes place as Christians assume their place in the public sphere on the basis of their faith commitment alongside people who do not share this commitment but have their own. Where different commitments allow for cooperation with regard to particular public issues, Christians should participate in accordance with their commitment to the gospel and in so doing bear witness to the gospel through word and deed. Conversely, where different commitments result in divergent views of the common good and how to pursue it, Christians should voice and advance their views in ways that are ethically justifiable in plural societies.

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THE DISCOVERY OF DUTCH IDENTITY

A critical exploration²

ABSTRACT

Since 2001, questions of national and cultural identity have become central concerns in the public debate in the Netherlands and in Dutch politics. Although the culture and lifestyles of migrants were socially and politically recognised as a distinct identity over the years, Dutch identity was hardly definable. Gradually, things seem to have turned around. Post-2001, Netherlands migrant identities have become problematic, particularly the identities of people from a Muslim background. At the same time, a substantial number of Dutch have started to emphasise Dutchness, along with a call for an assimilation of difference. In this paper, I trace how and why identity formation in the Netherlands has changed. The Netherlands thus prove to be an interesting example of the understanding that identity is situational and contextual. I conclude with the remark that our understanding of how identity formation works, without precluding a critical judgment of that process.

INTRODUCTION

Processes of identity formation are often studied by focusing on minority groups. This is the case particularly in situations of migration where immigrant groups form the subject of research. This emphasis on the minority fails to see that processes of identity formation are always contextual and involve multiple actors, including, and not in the least, the host society. Host societies are clearly faced with questions of identity as well, and the Netherlands is a case in point. In the course of several dramatic events, which in popular memory are nowadays almost remembered as a *chain of events*, the Netherlands has seen some attempts at radical redefinition of cultural identity in the last seven years. Whereas cultural identity for a long time was foremost implicit, it is now a topic of societal and political interest. Crucial for this change is what many see as the failed integration of migrants, in which feelings of

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2 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Religious and Ethnic Identity, 24 February 2009, University of Mkar, Nigeria. Lorraine Nence kindly allowed me access to a draft version of a forthcoming article (Davis & Nencel 2009).

fear and resentment against Islam plays an important role. Seen from this perspective, we could see it as a struggle of the Dutch becoming integrated in a transnationalising world as well. This in itself may seem surprising since the Netherlands, as a highly modernised, wealthy and safe country, is an economically successful player on the global scene. However, this economic success does not translate in an attitude that is open to cultural plurality, although the expression of this closed attitude appeared only relatively recently. As such, these sentiments are linked to the constitution of a certain populist group in the Netherlands that not only distrusts the influence of “the world outside the gates”, but which is also strongly anti-establishment. We therefore speak of the populist revolt to describe these political and cultural changes. Important for this discussion is the fact that the populist voice, represented first of all by new political movements, has made Dutch identity problematic. In the process, a Dutch ethnicity has emerged that is largely defined in contrast with, and in opposition to, the presumed ethnic and/or religious otherness of migrants. In this paper, the way this changing view of national and cultural identity has developed will be discussed. This will include a discussion of the process of identity formation. It will be argued that the Dutch example shows how identity – ethnic, cultural and religious – is always situational and contextual. It will then be shown that this observation has implications for the way in which researchers can look at identity before concluding that one must look with empathy at the way people cherish their identities, without being afraid to confront these as potential strongholds of exclusion and violence.

QUESTIONS OF DUTCH IDENTITY

One has a variety of choices when looking for definitions of identity formation. Take the following description, which is actually about ethnicity but which easily can be applied to other forms of identity as well:

To know one’s *origin* is to have not only a sense of provenance, but perhaps more importantly, a sense of *continuity* in which one finds the personal and social *meaning* of human existence to some degree. It is to know *why* one behaves and acts in accordance with custom. To be without a sense of continuity is to be faced with one’s own death (De Vos & Romanucci-Ross, quoted in Fawcett 2000:3).

In the context of Dutch society, the above quote would have been very problematic for a long time. Dutch identity was seen as invisible, unobtrusive, and implicit. In the mid-1990s, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs could say without any problem that he felt like a European rather than a Dutchman. Identifying with Europe meant identifying with a philosophical and political tradition of humanism – and indeed, many intellectuals would agree with him. The Netherlands was simply seen as being part of that stream of thought, going back to the Renaissance. If there was a sense of origin, continuity and meaning, it would have been this humanistic tradition. In turn, others would perhaps point to the Christian history of

the country, telling their own story of origin and continuity.³ This situation seems to be a remnant of the so-called “pillarisation” of Dutch society, i.e. the organisation of society in different ideological subcultures. Although pillarisation has died down since the waves of democratisation in the 1960s, aspects thereof, in this case – accepting that every subculture in Dutch society has its own view on national history – were still visible until recently. Thus, for a long time there were virtually no real public debates on questions of identity. There are some implicit yet strong cultural notions that people will recognise as Dutch such as, for example, the demand to be ordinary (“*gewoon*”) as a way to deal with social and economic differences.⁴ However, in general, Dutch identity cannot be clearly articulated. For a long time, national or cultural identity was not an issue that was discussed, and it was only felt to be present in such festive symbols as Queen’s Day and the colour orange at football matches.⁵

It was only after 2001 that an awareness of a weak Dutch national identity started to grow. The year 2001 was of course also the year of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September. These were felt by many as real threats to their way of living. Those aligned with the “free world” were faced with an enemy that was prepared to kill and be killed to bring across its message. However, the effect of 9/11 was not political and military isolation of Islamic terrorism, but a heightened consciousness of Islam and Muslims in Dutch society. Discussions gradually shifted to questions of the loyalty of Muslim citizens and the growing doubt about the compatibility of Islamic values with Dutch democratic values.⁶ In 2002 the Netherlands saw the unprecedented growth of a populist movement that was expected to turn the political landscape on its head. This movement was led by the politician Pim Fortuyn, who became immensely popular over a very short period of time by way of his confrontational debating style and the fact that people felt that he dared to address the real political issues.⁷ With quotes such as “Islam is a backward culture” and the promise that he would stop Muslim immigration to the Netherlands should he be elected Prime Minister, Fortuyn became very controversial (see Colombijn 2007; Van der Veer 2006). However, Fortuyn was murdered shortly before the 2002 elections.⁸ This dramatic event put the spotlight

3 The awareness that the Netherlands was a country organised according to several ideological subcultures (so-called “pillarisation” [“*verzuiling*”]), which reflected the situation until the 1960s, has not stimulated these debates. There would, for example, have been at least two Christian stories about the nation’s origins: a Protestant and a Catholic one.

4 Individual success or talent has to be compensated by presenting oneself as being ordinary/common. This perhaps partly explains other Dutch cultural notions such as behaving very informally in public, and the widespread preference for casual dress.

5 Orange is the Dutch royal colour. On Queen’s Day (30 April) it is also common to wear orange.

6 Muslims were continuously asked about their views on the attacks on the Twin Towers and felt pressured into constantly condemning Islamic radicalism.

7 Fortuyn’s populist agenda has been more or less copied after his death by several other political parties, including some mainstream parties. This agenda includes at least some of the following issues: reform of government and civil administration, an anti-establishment attitude, the call to restore authority in society (from school teachers to law enforcers), defence of freedom of expression, anti-Islamist rhetoric and xenophobic tendencies.

8 Fortuyn was shot by a radical animal rights activist. His party made tremendous strides in parliament and became part of the government, but was not very successful and disappeared altogether after the national elections in 2007.

on the fact that there was now an identifiable feeling among the Dutch of being dissatisfied with established politics, concerns about the possibility that the Netherlands might disappear in the sea of an ever more globalising world, and of anxieties about a “failing” multicultural society. With the killing of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch Muslim radical, in 2004, the last possibility became evident to many people, and the nation appeared to be in a crisis (see Buruma 2006).⁹

The growing polarisation showed that certain leaders of Dutch public opinion were likely to look for identity markers in a shared pattern of values, in the debate often summarised as that on “culture”. The inarticulate nature of Dutch identity was gradually perceived as negative and indeed weak. Cultural boundaries were too vague, porous, and not taken seriously by the Dutch themselves. In the end, any sign of Dutch identity would dissolve and stronger identities would take over. If one listens closely, one will understand that these ideas of the “other” is foremost the fear of the “other” becoming numerically dominant. Of course, this is a problem only because the definition of who is the “other” is a problem. In open and inclusive societies such as the Netherlands, “otherness” principally points to the freedom and the possibility of expressing different identities in public. The fact that some forms of “otherness” are currently seen by some as problematic shows that there has indeed been a real change in the debate and that it has brought certain conservative voices and populist sentiments to the surface.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, there the debate continues. Whilst populist movements have become visible as a political force, there is also another movement that is very critical of the new populism.¹¹ An opinion leader from the latter group is the sociologist Dick Pels, who has turned the argument of weak identity around by showing that the “weakness” of Dutch cultural identity in fact means versatility, creativity and inclusion (Pels 2005). According to Pels, “weak” identity boundaries are strengths if they communicate that freedom of the expression of identity goes hand in hand with the realisation that my freedom is only guaranteed by the freedom of somebody else. Clearly, there is nothing weak about this view because it in fact displays a strong faith in liberal (and secular) democratic values, inviting others to become liberal democrats. It is also a view that can only succeed through upholding an agreement of tolerance between citizens and a healthy constitutional state to back this up.¹² With the emphasis on tolerance, one of the few values that Dutch people identify with re-enters the debate. The image of a tolerant society was the strongest self-representation of Dutch society since the 1960s – a mostly positive image that Dutch people

⁹ The public outcry at to both the killing of Fortuyn and of Van Gogh was intense, very emotional and sometimes violent. After Fortuyn’s assassination, death threats against (“leftist”) politicians became very common. After November 2004, the number of attacks on mosques increased and there were also some attacks on churches.

¹⁰ Although the populist revolt used to depend foremost on middle- and lower-class voters, neo-conservative intellectuals certainly exerted an influence also.

¹¹ The most important right-wing populist voice is that of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), led by Geert Wilders, a renegade from the (mainstream) Liberal Party and known for his critical film *Fitna* (see Moore 2008). Wilders is winning in every political poll and seems to be gaining popularity among higher educated people.

¹² Interestingly, both the populist view and the liberal view share the fact that they look for identity markers in defence of liberal democracy. It is noteworthy that they both are totally secularist and, for obvious reasons, anxious about religious influences in the public domain.

saw constantly corroborated by outsiders, e.g., tourists, European media, and migrants. When people believe that their national character can be summed up in the word “tolerance”, it should not come as a surprise that they should feel disappointed or even betrayed once they feel that this value is threatened. However, this is exactly what happened in the course of events after 2001. The Muslim “other” was suddenly an uncertain element; Muslims were possibly abusing the tolerance of their host country. What happened in the populist revolt was that it exposed the “other” as a potential threat, thereby subverting dominant forms of social conduct – such as political correctness in relation to religious and cultural differences, and the taboo of creating antagonism between groups. Populists and liberals alike are now trying to redefine the value of tolerance; liberals by re-embedding tolerance in an attitude of inclusion of differences, and the populists through the exclusion of people that are seen to fall short of being tolerant themselves. In practice this means that populists want to silence radical Muslims, while at the same time claiming free speech for their own radical agenda.

Religion, however, is not the only way in which inhabitants of the Netherlands are differentiated. Recently Hafid Bouazza, a Dutch writer of Moroccan descent, appeared as a guest on a Dutch late night show to talk about his latest book. While concluding the conversation one of the talk show hosts said: “You write more beautiful Dutch than a lot of Dutch people”. To this Bouazza replied: “I don’t see that as a compliment. It’s my Dutch, too!” Similarly, Maryam Hassouni, Dutch actress of Moroccan descent, gave an irritated answer to a journalist who asked her whether she felt more Dutch or Moroccan. According to Hassouni, she no longer wanted to call herself Dutch, because nobody would allow her to be Dutch.¹³ These are examples of how in Dutch society, identities are increasingly seen as exclusive and how, on the basis of (assumed) cultural differences, people can never be completely included, even when they are fully “assimilated” (Davis & Nencel 2009).¹⁴ Although I believe that Dutch people have always been very sensitive towards cultural differences, the populist revolt has made differences more problematic. As a consequence, Dutch identity is now far more and self-evidently ethnicised: to be Dutch is to be “Dutch-Dutch” – whatever that means. Everything that is “other” becomes ethnicised as not (completely) Dutch. The difficulty faced by the “other” is that the conditions for becoming “truly Dutch” can never be fully met – or so it seems. What these examples show is that it is not only religion that becomes an identity marker of the insider, but everything that is perceived (by many) as “different” from the “real” Dutch. A hyphenated Dutch identity seems to be virtually non-existent. The creation of “otherness” is subtle and hardly recognised by the people who create it.

13 “I was born in the Netherlands, studied Dutch law at a Dutch university, and speak the language better than Moroccan and yet I’m still a foreigner ... a newcomer ... Until I was 16, I tried my best to be accepted as a Dutch person, but that meant I was always having to defend myself. I’m just tired of having that discussion. I’ve decided that I’m a Moroccan and that’s that” (interview with Maryam Hassouni in *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 November 2006; translation by Davis and Nencel).

14 Davis and Nencel (2009:286) comment on the example of Hassouni that when even the most assimilated people are not credited for their efforts to integrate, something is “clearly wrong in the Netherlands”.

MAKING IDENTITIES EXCLUSIVE

Clearly, the Netherlands is facing the question of what it means to identify oneself with someone or something. However, it is fair to say that not every aspect of contemporary Dutch identity formation carries the heavy political weight that I have described above. The discussion about a Dutch canon of history to be taught in schools, the election of the greatest Dutchman of all time and the decision to build a National Historical Museum, all happened after 2001.¹⁵ There is a historicising way of dealing with a self-image that is fed by insecurity on the one hand, and a feeling of belonging on the other. The latter is not negative, of course, and we can see how it is expressed in, for example, the popularity of genealogy and the growing interest in local history and dialects in the Netherlands. These things do not necessarily imply the exclusion of “difference”, as opposed to feelings of insecurity, which do see the “other” as a constant threat. As is clear from the examples I gave earlier in this section, the tendency to see identities as exclusive rather than inclusive is strong: one is either this or that and cultural boundaries determine what one can be. We have seen that simply having a “different” background can be understood in everyday interaction as a cultural boundary. Similarly, accents can become boundaries because they point to that same “difference”. A persistent view on identity in the Netherlands is to see difference in a problematic way, in relation to an illusory Dutchness that is construed as “national”, “cultural” or “ethnic”. Eventually, the problem of difference leads to a simplification of identity, in which overlapping roles and styles are denied. From this point of view, multiplicity and plurality in society are confusing or even impure elements that are in need of cleansing (see Douglas 1966).

At least since the time of decolonisation, anthropologists have been among the first to point at identities being emphasised for political and economic purposes, repressing other identities (see Van Binsbergen 1999). This implies repressing groups of people, but more often repressing difference *within* certain cultural groups. In the social sciences this view of identity being a contextual and situational process and an object of political interest has become almost common sense. The people we study, however, continue to defend and construct, for all sorts of reasons, “timeless” realities and fixed identities. The “discovery” of Dutch identity makes this point clear. At stake here is a form of popular essentialism that needs to be addressed just as critically as any other form of essentialism. A culture or an identity does not exist as a single marker of a person or group, because that would obscure the fact that people have many different roles in social life. But, of course, essentialism is not just a grass roots phenomenon; it has been and still is to a certain extent a scientific perspective in the humanities and social sciences. However, in the light of what I have argued, I think that for students of identity formation processes, essentialism or constructivism can never be a real choice. After all, a choice for essentialism means a choice for consciously ignoring the *practice* of identity as a way of *making* social persons, thereby supporting the suppression of other roles and cultural dimensions that people can claim. A contribution that scholars

¹⁵ The election of the greatest Dutchman was won by Pim Fortuyn, although this turned out to be a counting error. The real winner was William of Orange. On the basis of votes, Fortuyn came second, and thus ahead of Johan Cruyff, Erasmus, and Rembrandt.

therefore can make is to direct attention to this contextual practice of identity that will make questions of identity not unimportant but, on the contrary, relative. Seeing identity as a process also means inviting people to become more reflexive of their own layered identities.

CONCLUSION

Much has changed since the Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned earlier confessed his primary identification with Europe rather than with the Netherlands. When in 2007 Princess Maxima stated that she had not found a particular Dutch identity since she had arrived in the Netherlands, she was heavily criticised by many people in parliament.¹⁶ The spirit of the age suddenly dictated a different political correctness in which national identity had to be affirmed. But not only did Dutchness become identified as national identity. As I illustrated with reference to the belonging of people with a “different” background, Dutchness has become ethnicised as well. At the same time, these more excluding forms of identity formation are balanced with the idea that a narrowing and simplification of identities is undesirable. An inclusive way of thinking that leaves room for overlapping identities is still present in the Dutch public debate.

Besides an attitude of empathy towards the right of people to belong, a critical anthropology of identity needs to be confrontational and to question fixed identities, showing how identities are always constructs that serve particular interests – personal or political. The case of the Netherlands clearly shows how in a very short time invented notions of Dutchness started to dominate the public debate, at the cost of an increasing alienation of fellow citizens. The societal consequence of discovering “Dutchness” meant at the same time imposing a “different” identity on “others”, most notably Muslims, whose inclusion in the Dutch nation was somehow compromised. We can also say that this exclusivist form of identification hinders the space for people to project their own identities. Ironically, this space becomes just as narrow for the excluders as it does for those who are excluded.

It is obviously easier for us to critically enquire into the essentialism of identities that we find repulsive, such as overtly xenophobic and racist-motivated identities. Yet we should have the courage to question the fixity of any kind of identity claim, even if it goes against the political correctness of the academic or political communities that we are part of. If we fail to do this we run the risk of reifying the fixed reality people communicate to us, with the possible consequence of leaving unquestioned issues of unequal relations that are legitimised by a fixed group identity. The more exclusive an identity is, the less reflexive it is and the less self-critical it will be able to be. Exclusiveness is expressed in upholding group boundaries, which relate to moral categories, roles and power, and beliefs and practices. An anthropology of identity, together with other hermeneutic approaches, will have to reveal the potential

¹⁶ It was, in fact, criticism on a report by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR 2007). However, the symbolic value of having this study presented by the most popular but foreign-born member of the royal family, and married to the heir to the throne, could not be taken lightly. For the mainstream parties, too, questioning Dutch identity was not called for, let alone when this questioning was scientifically legitimised by a government institution. Interestingly, Princess Maxima has been part of the (governmental) advisory committee Participation of Women from Ethnic Minorities.

reflexivity of identification, because it is in this perspective that we show to ourselves that we make our reality. What has been created can be undone again.

I have discussed the difficulty for Dutch people to articulate their cultural or national identity. Seen from the perspective of constructed identities, however, this should not surprise us. The struggle to define and to articulate is after all at the heart of identity formation. The fact that some groups and nations can instantly demonstrate symbols and narratives that express identity does not change this observation. On the contrary, it shows that under certain conditions people are urged to position themselves as a distinct group by choosing the appropriate cultural frills. Most of the time, an element of exclusion is involved in this selection process, but sometimes people may strive to make identity inclusive. Since we, as human beings, have a choice to identify with a huge variety of roles, styles, symbols and stories – albeit restricted by situations of inequality and trauma – we should choose wisely.

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THE CONTEXTUAL JESUS AND THE COVENANT AS CONTINUOUS CHALLENGES TO ETHNICITY²

ABSTRACT

This contribution deals with the themes of the contextual Jesus and the covenant under the heading of the inclusiveness-exclusiveness dilemma.

The intention of the emphasis on the contextual Jesus can never be to restrict him to a specific culture. Jesus can only be “at home” in a specific culture if he also, simultaneously, transcends that culture. This transcendence has everything to do with the recognition that there are important features in the contextual Jesus that transcend that specific context as well.

In Reformed theology, covenant, prophetism, and kingdom belong together. The covenant does not lead to the striking of a bargain with God in favour of nationalist or ethnical self-interest, but it is “a strategic covenant” aimed at the application of the norms of the kingdom of God.

The exclusiveness of the covenant, agreed upon in a specific situation with a selected group, does not exclude but includes so-called “outsiders”. This element of inclusiveness belongs to the very essence of the biblical concept of covenant.

THE CONTEXTUAL JESUS AND ETHNICITY

Culture and religion

The current emphasis on inculturation strengthens the awareness of the cultural roots of our ideas and concepts. It places the gospel in our own context. It facilitates our “owning” of the gospel, but it does not intend to make us its “possessors”.

It is especially the contemporary debate on the contextual Jesus – for example, *The Chinese face of Jesus Christ* (Malek 2002/2003) and *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Schreier 2000) – that confronts us with the question whether or not this tendency runs the risk of a “domestication” of Jesus. Does the talk of Jesus as “ancestor” imply that he becomes just a

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² Paper delivered at the concluding conference of the sub-Saharan project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies at Stellenbosch, March 2010.

tribal saviour? (Cf. the Stellenbosch dissertation (2007) of the Zimbabwean Victor Nakah on *Evangelical Christianity and African culture* with an extended part on the veneration of Jesus as ancestor in his (Nakah's) Shona culture.)

By appealing to that which transcends tangible human existence but influences thinking and acting, religion acquires the character of something intangible. Neither those in power nor its adherents can control it. Religion always represents something transcendent, something that hints at that which is "greater than". This explains why religion and culture are never completely identical, and it is for that reason that critical questions can always be asked about the nature of the relationship between them. These questions do not concern the cultural embedding of religion as such – religion never arises in isolation and there is no single religion without any cultural attire. Rather, these questions explore the latitude between religion and culture. This also expresses the ever-present paradox in the culture-religion relationship: on the one hand, religion is part of an existing culture and more-or-less forms its trusses; but, on the other hand, it also always claims to be in a position to criticise existing culture. The relationship is therefore always characterised by both integration and segregation (separation).

This specific cultural attire does not constitute a straitjacket; religion and culture are not riveted to each other for good. Every religion – as indeed every culture – has a certain dynamic (vitality) that allows change as a result of internal development or the influence of outside events. And, (cultural) clothing can be changed. That is why the question arises, "Must God (or Jesus) remain Greek?" In 1990 the Afro-American Protestant theologian Robert Hood published a book by that title in which he asked whether the Greco-Roman concepts in which the early church articulated the meaning of God and Jesus should also be normative for other cultures in other times. For believers in the non-Western world, Hood argues, those concepts hinder faith more than they help it. These concepts make it harder rather than easier to pass on the faith. Thus, the intentional *rooting* of the faith in a non-Greco-Roman culture also always requires a certain *uprooting* from that Greco-Roman culture. *Traduire c'est trahir* ("to translate is to betray") was true then as well. No single culture can be declared the bearer of the gospel, and it should also be remembered that any culture can also stand in the way of the spreading of the gospel.

In contemporary non-Western theology, the transmission of faith and thus also the relevance of faith is one of the most important arguments for a different conceptual apparatus for the proclamation of the gospel. Non-Western theologians see a form of Western imperialism in the Western stress on the continuing validity of the terminology used by the early church. One specific inculturation – that of the Greco-Roman culture that the West has appropriated – is absolutised. Other inculturations, such as those in contemporary Africa and Asia, are considered second-class right from the start.

A contextual Jesus?

Christianity was never viewed as a faith that was bound to a certain territory. It was never viewed as the faith of a specific people that lived in a specific area. From the beginning it

has always moved across borders and was universally inclined. This is even one of the most prominent features of the transmission of Jesus' message and it enabled Paul to say that "[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The most essential problem with respect to the inculturation of the meaning of Jesus in cultures other than the Greco-Roman one pertains to the fact that, in the case of Jesus, decisive religious experiences are always bound to both time and place and also always transcend it. In the Greco-Roman world, Jesus was never presented purely as a local hero (of faith) who was associated exclusively with his immediate environment. If that were so, one could never introduce him into other cultures. Jesus made an impression on the people around him in a historical situation that can be described with reasonable accuracy. On the basis of that impression, a number of terms and titles were ascribed to him that had certain meanings. These meanings, in turn, had to do with the role that people ascribed to other people or things in their lives. In Jesus' case, it always concerned a role that transcended any one person's specific experience; the particular is always connected with the universal.

For example, Jesus' disciples had the experience that he revealed the nearness of the divine in a unique way. On the basis of this experience, they subsequently ascribed to him a meaning that he in principle should have for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Could this have been done as easily as that? Here we encounter the classic problem that confronts any religion with universal claims. At the founding of such religions one finds very specific experiences, often more or less historically placeable. These experiences also proved to be of great value for later generations, but in circumstances different from the original context in which they occurred. Later generations can realise the value of these experiences of the first witnesses of a religion only if they can make them their own; these particular experiences can apparently be broadened into universal experiences. True universality does not arise through abstraction but through the apparently unlimited possibility of connecting particular experiences with other more or less similar experiences, and experiencing their authenticity in that way. Authentic universality always concerns a particularity that, in the words of African Roman Catholic theologian, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, (1984:115), "transcends its own limits".

Particularity and universalism

The well-known story of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at the end of the march on Washington in 1963 illustrates this well. At a specific place and at a specific time, King articulated his dream of the end of racial segregation between black and white. This particular, historically placeable experience of King's has since then been recognised by millions of people all over the world because they have had similar experiences of racial segregation and longed passionately for it to end. In this way, a bridge was built between King's dream and the dreams of millions of others and it therefore could acquire universal significance.

When something is accorded universal significance, two specific experiences are involved: the *original* experience and the experience of *recognition*. Even though the latter can be experienced by millions of other people, it nevertheless remains very specific for the one involved and thus also unique. One could think here of the many millions of people who, down the centuries and everywhere in the world, could identify with the original experience of the disciples concerning Jesus. Those (conversion) experiences are often unique markers in the lives of these people.

The transmission of the meaning of Jesus concerns three such experiences. First are *the experiences of the disciples* close to him (1) that we find the expression of primarily in the four gospels in the New Testament. Then there is *the discovery* of people in the Greco-Roman world around the Mediterranean Sea that they could recognise and articulate these experiences in their own intellectual categories (2). Next are the experiences of *recognition* by contemporary believers who can see the same divine nearness in Jesus through the Greco-Roman conceptual apparatus (3).

Double transformation

So, the intention of the current emphasis on the contextual Jesus can never be to restrict him to a specific culture. He can never become a local hero. Jesus can only be “at home” in a specific culture if he simultaneously transcends that culture as well. This transcendence has nothing to do with abstraction or taking distance from, but has everything to do with the recognition that there are inherent, important features in the contextual Jesus that can be recognised beyond that specific context as well.

This dual character of “being at home” and transcendence is a consequence of the way the divine meets the human. Theologically speaking, inculturation always occurs between two poles: the incarnation at the one pole, and the cross and resurrection at the other. The incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) implies that God wants to dwell among people. That means that the divine wants to take on human cultural garb. While the incarnation represents the *fact* of the assumption, the cross and resurrection represent the *nature* of the assumption and, in fact, its *critical* character. The cross and resurrection is a model of dying and rising with Christ, an event that is symbolised in baptism. The latter is a critical event of dying and rising. We die to our old Adam and rise up as people reborn with Christ, our second Adam. It is not for nothing that Jesus says that only those who are prepared to lose themselves will find themselves (Mark. 8:35; John 12:24). Believers are expected to make this experience their own, not only at the moment of their baptism but throughout their lives. Baptism thus always refers to a critical *process of purification*, a catharsis. Whereas incarnation stands for confirmation, affirmation, the cross and resurrection stand for denial, negation and finding oneself through losing oneself.

If we then consider the incarnation and cross to be characteristic of a theologically adequate approach to the inculturation process, we refer to a *double transformation process*. That is why the incarnation can never be described without the experience of cross and

resurrection. *Indwelling* never occurs without change on the entering and receiving sides, and *change* never occurs without solidarity (identification). No single culture can reveal anything (new) about Jesus apart from this interaction.

THE COVENANT AND ETHNICITY

The history of the concept of covenant

In twentieth-century literature the theme of the covenant, which is closely related to the theme of the chosen people, was a popular feature. James Michener dedicated his 1980 bestseller to it in *The Covenant*, on the history of Southern Africa (1980:1), as did the Jewish author Chaim Potok with the related theme of *The Chosen* (1967) and Jan de Hartog in 1974 in *Het Uitverkoren Volk*, part three of his trilogy, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, on the history of the Quakers in the United States (published in English in 1975 as *The Peculiar People*). It is a well-known motif in European thought, elaborated in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed Covenant or Federal theology but, of course, with strong biblical roots as well. In Reformed circles, the concept of the covenant was made the generative and organising principle of a theological system; the puritan Pilgrim Fathers, travelling in 1620 on the *Mayflower* to New England, in particular contributed to the popularity of the concept.

Covenant theology sought to understand the whole history of salvation and divine-human relationships in terms of a bond or agreement between God and humankind, first in a covenant of works and then, after that had failed, in a covenant of grace. William Klempa (1992:94) succinctly summarises its meaning and impact as follows:

In its developed form covenant theology represented a significant reaction against a mechanical version of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. Instead of locating the work of salvation solely in the divine decree, covenant theology sought to provide a distinctly biblical and dynamic understanding of God's dealings with humanity in successive stages of human history, thus furnishing a formula for the Christian interpretation of history.

Particularity and universalism

Covenant theology became the ruling orthodoxy of the Reformed churches in the seventeenth century, as can be seen in chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of 1647. This chapter distinguishes between two covenants: (1) a covenant of works made with Adam and his descendants on condition of perfect obedience; and (2) a covenant of grace made with believers in Christ that offers them the gift of salvation on the condition of faith in him. Sometimes the distinction is more detailed and encompasses first the covenant of God with Adam, then with Noah and further with Abraham, and finally with Moses.

The reference to the covenant with Adam is particularly important for our theme of the covenant and ethnicity because it questions the often exclusivist connotations associated with the concept of the covenant. It makes clear the universal character of the covenant.

From the very beginning it was open to the whole of humanity, not in the sense that all were automatically included in it, but in the sense that it was made for all and that it is the destiny of all to be included in it. Later, not only in Judaism but also in Christianity, this universalism was quickly obscured, if not obliterated. Even in the covenant with Abraham can this universalism be heard. Similarly with the contextual Jesus, particularity does not exclude universalism but is often the only way to achieve it.

The political role of the covenant

In many countries of the Reformation, the concept of the covenant functioned as the moral basis of a nation. Not only our individual existence as believers, but also our collective existence as a nation was and is based on a covenant, a contract with mutual obligations, although this idea of a double, two-sided contract lacks a solid biblical basis. In the Bible it is God that always takes the initiative. This means that the covenant is always mono-pleural, founded on the initiative and on the credibility of *one* of the partners. God's grace is not conditional upon human obedience. The original meaning of the covenant refers to God that unconditionally binds himself to the human partner, and this is not connected to any idea of legalism.

As such, as a sign of God's reliability, the Reformed fathers were able to interpret human history in a dynamic way. It holds together God's sovereignty and human responsibility, God's intentions and our freedom. Provided that it is interpreted in its given biblical context, covenant theology represents a move in the direction of a more inclusive and universal understanding of God's work of salvation (Klempa 1992:106). In the Bible, the term "covenant" never functions within an exclusive ethnical, racial or national context, but always in a context of being moral and faithful. It has to be interpreted in its *pars pro toto* character, one for all. Hence its Christological interpretation is an adequate one.

The story of the covenant concluded in 1838 by the *Voortrekkers* on the banks of the Blood River is well known. More than a hundred-and-fifty years later John de Gruchy, imagining what Calvin's comments on this would have been, wrote in his *Liberating Reformed Theology*:

Not only would he have disapproved of the contractual nature of the covenant, which meant that a bargain was struck with God, he would also have disapproved of the identification of the Trekkers with Israel or the church (1991:266).

This identification could already be observed among many Reformed people in the Netherlands, Scotland and in the United States in earlier centuries. The one-sided biblical concept of the covenant developed into a two-sided equivalent in the field of politics. This "doctrine" created a new political situation that could be interpreted as the foundational idea behind modern Western democracies. To quote De Gruchy again:

Now not only were rulers accountable to the people, but the people could even decide that particular rulers were tyrants and that therefore their rule was illegitimate, in terms of the covenant. God's blessing was thus dependent upon the rulers fulfilling their contractual obligations to both God and the people (1991:268).

Covenant and prophetism

The idea of the covenant as a political contract creates room for political prophetism. De Gruchy concludes that, in order for the prophetic voice to exercise its critical function, it must be able to appeal to some norm or set of values regarded as binding upon society (1991:269). This set of values can be derived from the biblical message of the kingdom of God. Therefore, in Reformed theology, covenant, prophetism, and kingdom belong together. This covenant is not a covenant that leads to the striking of a bargain with God in favour of self-preservation and nationalist or ethnical self-interest, but it is, in De Gruchy's words, "a strategic covenant" aimed at the application of the norms of the kingdom of God (1991:271).

The exclusiveness of the covenant, agreed upon in a specific situation with a selected group, because of its critical content, does therefore not exclude but include so-called "outsiders". This element of inclusiveness belongs to the very essence of the biblical concept of covenant. The implication is that all people on earth are allowed, even expected, to consider themselves as chosen people: the Tiv, the Shona, the Dutch, the coloured, the Xhosa, etc., provided that they understand their election as a calling, a vocation, to be a blessing to all according to the values of the kingdom of God.

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BELHAR REVISITED

The unity of the church and socio-cultural identities within the Reformed tradition²

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question whether the Belhar Confession provides the theological resources to deal with the issue of the unity of the church in relation to socio-cultural identities within the Reformed tradition. After providing an analysis of Belhar, a historical account is given of its reception within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches during the 1990s, after the demise of state-sanctioned apartheid in South Africa and the global rise of nationalistic identity politics. The very limited impact leads one to a new reading of Belhar in order to discover its potential, as well as its limitations.

INTRODUCTION

This contribution was triggered by Nico Koopmans's reaction to my inaugural lecture upon accepting the Desmond Tutu Chair at the VU University Amsterdam. In the lecture I argued that 15 years after the end of apartheid, race is still a very important factor in South African society. In its findings, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) described the extent of the influence that apartheid had on religions, not only with reference to their passive and active support of the then official state policy, but also in the way that racism had been internalised by religions. Unification processes of denominations formally divided along racial lines have proved to be extremely difficult and to move forward very slowly. Sunday morning is still the most segregated time of the week. From a theological point of view, this influence of race as a major identity marker is remarkable since it contradicts biblical and confessional attestation that the church is one. The faith community hearings at the TRC disclosed how, besides the Afrikaner churches, many other churches in some way internalised apartheid ideology. This can be explained in part by the strong pressure exerted by the state. However, at the same time it might also signal a potential vulnerability

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² Contribution to the closing consultation of the four-year Joint Project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies at Stellenbosch University, 10-12 March 2010.

within Christian ecclesiology itself. I am convinced this is the case. Not only South African churches, but churches worldwide struggle with the question of how to recognise socio-cultural identities – such as national, ethnic, and tribal identity – while at the same time confirming the unity of the church. To illustrate this, let me give some examples provided in my inaugural lecture (Van der Borght 2009a:23):

It is an issue in Amsterdam as it is in all European cities where new migrant congregations are established daily. Most Ghanaian Presbyterians in Amsterdam, for example, do not join Dutch Reformed congregations but start their own Ghanaian Presbyterian church. In my own denomination, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, an issue is how to help the French-speaking members and the Dutch-speaking members relate to one another in one united church. In Central and Eastern Europe, where mostly Orthodox churches consider themselves guardians of the national identity of their nations, it is also an issue. It is an issue in American churches where the national American identity – symbolized by the American flag next to the cross in the front of the church – has become as important as their Christian identity. It is an issue all over Africa where churches tend to be ethnically or tribally structured.

Nico Koopman regretted that I did not refer more extensively to the Belhar Confession, because he is convinced that what I was claiming was in essence already contained in it.

As part of this closing conference of the four-year project on religions searching for the common good in pluralistic societies, I will address the question whether the Belhar Confession provides the theological resources to deal with the issue of the unity of the church and socio-cultural identities in a satisfying way. I will develop my argument in the following way. First, I will reread Belhar as a theological resource. I will then focus on the reception of Belhar. In a next step I will analyse the way the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) dealt with socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church in the 1990s. Finally, I will then return to Belhar and consider its limitations.

THE BELHAR CONFESSION AS A CONTRIBUTING ECCLESIOLOGICAL SOURCE

Koopman does have a point. There are valuable elements in the Belhar Confession that are helpful with regard to the way churches deal with socio-cultural identities as an ecclesiological issue. I have identified three.

The first element is the centrality of the unity of the church. The first reason why the Belhar Confession condemns apartheid theology is that it contradicts the fundamental “one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints”. Every heresy threatens the unity of the church, but this heresy – that absolutises natural diversity – has had such obvious consequences for the nature of the church, that the first argument is an ecclesiological one. The absolutisation of natural diversity leads to sinful separation that ruptures the visible unity of the church and leads to the establishment of separate church formations. This contradicts the fundamental unity of the church. How can one confess the unity of the church while, at the same time, establish separate synods on the basis of colour? This question was first and foremost directed towards the members of the synod of the “white” Dutch Reformed Church,

which had been responsible for implementing this ecclesial practice and for providing it with theological justification. The apartheid system and apartheid theology contradicted the unity of the church. This is the first and most elaborate argument contained in the Belhar Confession. While Reformed theology tends to be less sensitive to ecclesiological rationale, this Reformed confession places it at the centre, in a truly catholic way.

The second element is that the Belhar Confession adds to this ecclesiological argument a reconciliation and justice rationale. The racist apartheid ideology hindered racial reconciliation, and it was fundamentally unjust. The reconciliation and justice motives built further on the central confession of the unity of the church. When the church confirms the unity of its diverse members, it can truly advocate the message of reconciliation over against forced separation and it can then convincingly address the injustice created by the oppression of those being segregated in society.

The third reason is related to Belhar's confessional status. The document has not been formulated as an ecclesial statement but as a confession. The internalisation of apartheid in the church was not just an option that you might like or dislike; it contradicted the central claims of the gospel, namely that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, that the church is the place where the walls of separation have been torn down, and where reconciliation between socio-cultural identities in Christ Jesus is to be celebrated. In short, apartheid in the church, in its ecclesial structures and its ecclesiology, is a heresy. In fact, the Belhar Confession was written as an ecclesial answer to the official position taken by the General Council of WARC in Ottawa in 1982 that declared that apartheid in the church constituted a *status confessionis*. Formally, it indicated that it was an issue "on which it is impossible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of our common confession as Reformed Churches". It stated:

We declare with the black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (separate development) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy (WARC 1982).

Clearly, this confession has the potential to contribute to theological solutions when churches are challenged on an ecclesial level by issues of socio-cultural identity.

THE RECEPTION OF *BELHAR* IN REFORMED DENOMINATIONS

But has Belhar in reality functioned that way? Has it helped Reformed denominations in practice in dealing with socio-cultural identities? To answer this question one should first look at the international reception of Belhar in various Reformed denominations. In recent years, several churches in the Reformed tradition adopted the Belhar Confession as a standard of faith, a very exceptional event. My own church, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, was the first to adopt it at its synod in 1998. The *Eglesia Reformanda Dominica* also adopted Belhar. The *Reformierte Bund* and the *Lippische Landeskirche* of Germany are considering adopting it. In June 2010, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) accepted it and the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) are considering doing the same. For the purposes of this essay

the question is whether in the process of adopting the Belhar Confession, issues relating to socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church have been major factors.

My intuition tells me that it is not the primary reason for the acceptance of Belhar. As an example, I refer to the synods of my own church, the United Protestant Church in Belgium. As already mentioned, it was the first church outside South Africa to include the Belhar Confession in its list of confessional reference texts. My observation is that the members who really pressed for the acceptance of the document were those who stressed the justice issue. They wanted this document to become part of the confessional references because for them, the struggle of churches in relation to justice in society is central to their ecclesial identity. Many (more traditional) church members consented, because they were charmed by the reconciliation aspect against the background of the recent post-apartheid history of South Africa and the role played by the TRC. And the unity aspect? Well, for some members it may have been an extra element in the positive consideration of the confession seen against the background of the Belgian Kingdom, with its permanent struggle to keep its Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south together in one nation-state. In my church, theological and ethical points of view sometimes clash, but it really becomes serious when the theological and moral differences reinforce the north-south divide in my church, between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking congregations and between their ministers. Therefore, it will be interesting to see whether the acceptance of the document is related to the race issue, for example, in PCUSA, RCA, or CRCNA. To conclude this section, I doubt whether challenges in denominations regarding socio-cultural identities have been decisive in discussions regarding the adoption of the Belhar Confession. More research on the reception process of Belhar within churches of the Reformed tradition needs to be done to determine whether this had been the case. One of my post-graduate students is currently doing research on the debates within the RCA that led to the acceptance of the confession.

THE WAY WARC DEALT WITH SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN THE 1990S

There is, however, another indication that an ecclesiological response to racial identities – similar to that during the apartheid era – had not been followed when faced with a challenge by other socio-cultural identities.

I will use this occasion to present an analysis of the way the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) dealt with the issue of national and ethnic identities, in the 1990s, that culminated in statements on the issue at the meeting of its 23rd General Council in Debrecen in 1997.

Identity issues were very high on the international agenda at two occasions during the twentieth century. They first emerged before World War II under the threatening cloud of an imminent war due to nationalistic profiling, especially by the German Nazi state. After World War II, a new ideological confrontation appeared that pushed national and other identities into the background. However, for many in the West, the end of the Cold War brought a re-awakening of the violence that can accompany identity politics. Many were surprised by the resurgence of nationalistic violence and practices of ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe.

Highly unexpected was the use of religions as identity markers in these post-communist societies that had been thoroughly secularised under state control for over 40 years. Serbs, for example, presented themselves as Orthodox; Croats as Roman Catholics; and Bosnians as Muslims.

Of course, religions were abused for political purposes, but at the same time religions also used the opportunity to present themselves in the public sphere. In this heated atmosphere, they knew and used the Christian vocabulary of peace and reconciliation, but more importantly, many religious leaders, theologians and lay believers, without reservation defined themselves in terms of national or ethnic identity.

A FIRST REACTION: A REMINDER OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STATE

In response to the historical changes that took place in Europe in 1989, the Department of Theology of WARC arranged two consultations. The first one with some thirty participants was held in November 1990, one year after the implosion of communist states in most of Central and Eastern Europe. The broad theme and mandate for this consultation was “Christian Community in a Changing Society”. It was to discern how Christians in a living community of men and women could exercise responsibility in a changing society.

The rise of ethnical identity and nationalism was mentioned a few times, but just as one of the elements since 1989 in a rapidly changing society. In the introduction to the working paper, an explicitly negative reference to the issue of nationalism is found: “... we are concerned about the rise of nationalism, racism, and other disquieting features of the present day” (Wilson 1991:80). According to the then Executive Secretary of WARC Department of Theology – Henry Wilson’s introduction to the volume containing the texts of the consultation (Wilson 1991:II) – the negative connotation attached to nationalism in this context was not shared by all at the consultation. This volume is revealing in another way as well. It contains the presentations at the conference: six case studies,³ and two papers. Both papers concerned the same issue, the relationship between church and state, but from two perspectives – the biblical witness (Gottwald 1991:1-18), and the Reformed tradition (Busch 1991:19-28). In his report on the consultation in *Reformed World*, Wilson describes which insights the Reformed tradition can contribute in such a situation:

The Reformed tradition affirms that God has installed governments with the clear function of looking after the well-being of all, and to create a just social body responsible for protecting the weak from the strong and freeing all the oppressed. The Christian community is then called to support the functions of the government in striving towards this goal (Wilson 1990:108).

But would this specific Reformed contribution be enough when more violence, fuelled by ethnic and nationalistic claims, erupted in Europe and other parts of the world in the first half of the 1990s?

³ On the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, South Africa, and South Korea respectively.

A SECOND REACTION: CHURCHES CALLED TO PROTECT DIVERSITY AS AGENTS OF RECONCILIATION

The second consultation, with 36 participants – also held under the impact of the ethnic crisis in Bosnia and Rwanda – took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1994. This consultation took place in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, and focused on one of the main characteristics of the post-Cold War era – the resurgence of the issue of ethnicity and nationalism. Four short presentations and a statement issued at this consultation were published in *The Ecumenical Review* in 1995.⁴ The first paper, presented by Jayadeva Uyangoda, Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Colombo, tried to entangle ethnicity and nationalism and ended with a call to de-ethnicise politics. Uyangoda explains that the issue of conflicting identities also affects the churches.

In other words, the church is a part of the problem because at one level church has this universalising, universalist, homogenising identity, while at the same time church members have micro-identities (Uyangoda 1995:193).

The second paper, from the still fairly unknown Croat scholar at the time, Miroslav Volf, offers theological perspectives on cultural identity and conflict.⁵ According to Volf, Christians should not be *of* the culture in the balance between distance and belonging, but be *in* and *for* the culture. This requires a catholic personality that belongs to a catholic community; catholicity referring to openness to other personalities and other communities. The catholicity of the local church is attributed to its being part of the universal church, but in reality every local church is a catholic community because all other churches shape its identity.⁶ But, next to this movement towards the embracing of culture, especially other cultures, a movement in the direction of exclusion has to be distinguished. It requires an evangelical personality, transformed by the Spirit and engaged in transformation of the world as part of an ecumenical community that says “no” to evil in every culture. Volf refers to the Barmen Declaration, which called upon the churches to reject all “other lords” in its fight against the Nazi regime. Its abstract formulation, however, is in need of specific added formulation in order to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of the Christian church (Volf 1995:198-200).

The meeting in Colombo closed with an adopted statement titled “A challenge to the churches”.⁷ The introduction contains a revealing confession:

The role of the Christian community in any situation of ethnic strife is always difficult and often ambiguous. In many of these conflicts, no solution is apparent; and we recognise that Christian faith offers no ready answers to them (WARC 1995:225).

⁴ *The Ecumenical Review* 47(2)(1995):189-231.

⁵ In this contribution, published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Volf offered some ideas that he later fully developed in a publication in 1996, *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*.

⁶ Volf has developed his congregational understanding of catholicity in his 1998 work, *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity*.

⁷ This statement, “Ethnicity and Nationalism: a Challenge to the Churches”, was published in *The Ecumenical Review*, as well as in *Reformed World* with an introduction by Henry S. Wilson and on pages 150-156 of Theo Tschuy’s *Ethnic Conflict and Religion: Challenge to the Churches*.

For WARC, the Colombo conference of 1994 had to be understood as a sequel to the 1990 conference in Switzerland on *Christian Community in a Changing Society* (Wilson 1995:113). But since it was jointly organised with the LWF and the WCC, specific Reformed approaches are absent. In his introduction to the statement published in *Reformed World*, Wilson suggests certain key doctrines that might require reinterpretation and application – namely the sovereignty of God, covenantal relationship, exercise of Christian freedom with responsibility, and the pilgrim nature of the Christian (Wilson 1995:115). What this might mean, specifically in the context of rising ethnic and nationalistic tension, Wilson does not develop; but these doctrines seem to be theological elements that might help in critically looking at the issue of ethnic and national identification. This in turn might help churches steer clear from a too-close alliance with national and/or ethnic groups. For further guidance, Wilson refers to the 23rd General Council of WARC that would be held in 1997.

ON THE WAY TO DEBRECHEN 1997: THE PRESBYTERIAL-SYNODAL MODEL

In preparation for the 23rd General Council, the staff prepared a study book and a volume with study texts. The latter supplied to participants the basic documents for the discussions during the Council meeting. National and ethnic identity would be addressed, not during the first section on “Reformed faith and the search for unity”, but during the second one dealing with “Justice for all creation”. Next to justice in the economic sphere and in creation, justice with regard to issues of national and ethnic identity would feature during the third subsection. The focus was on protecting ethnic and national diversity, and on protecting ethnic and national minorities. It continued to build on the results of the Colombo meeting. After describing the ambiguity of belonging and the types of ethnic conflicts, the document called “National and ethnic identity” observed that often in ethnic conflicts, churches are not able to act as agents of peace (Réamon 1997:64-72).

In the fourth paragraph of the document, biblical and theological perspectives are provided for: dignity and equality in creation; God’s option for diversity in the story of the Tower of Babel; ethnic discrimination as sin; the calling of Israel to be different for the sake of others; the cross of the ‘stranger’ Jesus reconciling humankind with God and with one another; the eschatological promise of all tribes and nations gathered around God’s throne; Pentecost as the confirmation of God’s option for diversity at the Tower of Babel; the Christian attitude of distance from and belonging to culture; forgiveness as the Christian message in contexts of ethnic violence; and justice and truth as both being indispensable on the way to ethnic harmony.

Two of the theological themes did reveal a specific aspect from the Reformed theological tradition. One is the Reformed understanding of the state: the state as an institution is a gift of God, to promote peace and justice and to provide for the protection of the weak. We find here the central theme of the first consultation in 1990. The second Reformed accent was new and referred to Calvin’s organisation of the church (Réamon 1997:69-70):

This Pentecost vision of unity in diversity is reflected in Calvin’s view of the church. According to Calvin, the visible church is first of all local: the church in a

definite region of the world where it can act responsibly, because it is small enough to be manageable. The church in its region is not, however, separate: it is in this region the one Christian church. It is immediately in contact with other churches in their regions, tied with them in federal communication. Without imposing its confession or order on the churches in the other regions, it is connected with them in the same faith. The church is in this way an ecumenical church.

The autonomy of the local church and the interdependence within the presbyterial-synodal system were presented as a kind of model for the way ethnic groups and national states should interact with one another.

Biblical and theological perspectives were followed by challenges to and tasks of the churches. These were identified as being a welcoming and open community to all; the development of liturgies that reflect ethnic diversity; a reassessment of the involvement of churches in ethnic conflicts; to explore the political meaning of forgiveness; to engage in the struggle for the rights of vulnerable people; to call for the accountability of governments; and to promote encounters with peoples of other faiths.

The study text on national and ethnic identity ended with a confession in the tradition of the Barmen Declaration (Réamon 1997:72):

“You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

All the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the Lamb to form one multi-cultural community of faith. The “blood” that binds Christians together as brothers and sisters is more precious than the “blood” (the language, the customs, the political allegiances or economic interests) that may distinguish them or separate them from each other.

We reject the false doctrine, as though a church should place allegiance to the culture it inhabits or the nation to which it belongs above its commitment to brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, their common Lord, and members of God’s new community.

This study text on subsection 2.3, on national and ethnic identity, was the most elaborate document produced on this issue within WARC. It had no official status, but it provides one with good insight the thoughts on this theme within WARC. It is obvious that the approach of the Colombo statement of 1995 provided the main inspiration. On further analysis, it became clear that the approach was ecclesiastical and not ecclesiological. It dealt with ethnicity and nationalism on the level of the churches, not on the level of the theology of the church. If the latter was the case, the subsection would not have been part of section 2 on justice, but of section 1, the section on the unity of the church. At the conference in Colombo, political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda challenged the church to rethink how its universalising identity corresponds with the micro identities of its members. The presentation by the theologian Miroslav Volf also contained various creative ideas which linked ethnicity and nationalism to the identity of the church as one and catholic. But the study text following the Colombo

statement abstained from looking into the ethnicity issue as a unity theme, as a fundamental ecclesiological issue. One element of Volf's lecture was copied though. The Barmen commitment to the lordship of Christ was complemented with the commitment to the multi-cultural church of Christ.

Of the two specific Reformed theological inputs, one has been repeated over and over again. The church should be a sentinel in relation to the state, permanently assessing whether the state is performing according to the way God calls it to act. The other input was new. The Reformed presbyterial-synodal church order was presented as a model for the way the multiple ethnic and national groups can relate to one another. The quite small and manageable local church in one region is linked with other churches in other regions, together to form the one church of God and allowing in this way for unity in diversity. Still, it had to be seen whether this church model was really so attractive. Calvin understood this as a regional model, having one church for each region, but in the Calvinist tradition this connection of one church for one locality was lost. Due to the strong emphasis on truth, discussions often led to schisms in which the unity of the local church was abandoned to safeguard the purity of the church. The presbyterial-synodal structure has survived in a variety of denominations within the same region. The diversity was saved at the cost of unity. The question now was whether this latter theological input and all the other elements in this study text on national and ethnic identity would form part of the official statement accepted by the 23rd General Council of WARC that met in Debrecen in August 1997?

23RD GENERAL COUNCIL IN DEBRECEN: NO LONGER AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL ISSUE

National and ethnic identity did indeed become part of the second section of the official report of the General Council in Debrecen (Opočenský 1997: 192-201), and was entitled "Justice for All Creation". The texts of the subsections in the study texts were integrated into one document. Economy, ecology and national/ethnic identity were all themes of the "living together in the household of God". The third issue dealt with "respect for diversity of the household" (Opočenský 1997:192). National and ethnic identity formed a subheading under "biblical perspectives and analysis of issues" (Opočenský 1997:195-197).

In the final part of the report, separate conclusions were drawn regarding economic and ecological issues, and regarding national and ethnic identity. With regard to economic injustice and ecological destruction a *processus confessionis*, a progressive recognition, education and confession was called for. Regarding national and ethnic identity, the General Council called upon member churches of WARC to affirm the multi-cultural character of the church in the same way Barmen did. The text proposed by Volf was then quoted. It also called on the churches to engage in religious dialogue, and to evaluate their own historical track record on this theme and to repent and repair. The General Council furthermore called upon WARC to establish a permanent commission on ethnic and cultural conflict, and to disseminate these statements and concerns to religious and political authorities (Opočenský 1997:200-201). Just as the climax in relation to the economic and ecological justice could be

found in the call for a *processus confessionis*, so the climax in relation to national and ethnic identity was to be found in the “affirmation”, modelled on the Barmen Declaration.

This Barmen-like declaration was copied from Volf’s lecture at the meeting in Colombo. It did not form part of the statement adopted and issued in Colombo. Because it was central to the declaration issued in Debrecen, it is worthwhile to look closer into the “affirmation”. Churches were asked to confirm that they put loyalty to Christ above loyalty to ethnic group or nation. Just as ethnic and national allegiance finds expression in group identities, belonging to Christ was expressed in terms of group identity. In the accepted recommendation in the style of Barmen, this group identity was described as “one multi-cultural community of faith”. The context suggested that this had to be understood eschatologically, in the sense of referring more to the future than to realised eschatology. The reality was “all the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures”, but God’s redemption by the blood of the Lamb transformed this into one multi-cultural identity. The biblical introduction supported this eschatological reading. The first of the two texts was taken from the Book of Revelation (5:9). The anathema also confirmed this interpretation. Allegiance to nation and culture was rejected when placed above allegiance to God and “to the vision of God’s new redeemed community”. Important was the word “vision”. It suggested not what the churches were at the moment, but where they wished to head.

The anathema was clearly not aimed at “all the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures”, but only at Christians and Christian churches who identify the Christian community with ethnic or national communities and who have lost the eschatological vision of one multi-cultural community of faith. Thus churches organised along ethnic or national lines were not to feel that the anathema was aimed at them if they keep alive the hope of a multi-cultural future in one community. Reformed churches should confirm their loyalty to Christ as this is more important than their loyalty to their people – also because the multi-cultural community of faith has an eschatological overtone. At the same time, Reformed churches should be happy with the approach taken by the WARC conference in Debrecen. Its reasoning was along a strong creation-theological line, while Christology and ecclesiology were set in an eschatological key. The main accent was not on unity, but on diversity and the call for protection of minorities. It might have been that for Volf, the original author of this text, the declaration sounded less eschatological. In his ecclesiology that was later published, *After our Likeness* (1998), Volf further developed the notion of congregational catholicity. The local multicultural congregation became the expression of this congregational catholicity. In such a context of multicultural local congregations this sounds less remote.⁸

It is obvious that the Barmen-like declaration got a place first in the study-text and later in the official report of the Debrecen General Council, because the original Barmen Declaration of 1934 has reached an almost confessional status in many Reformed churches. A statement that is built on the central idea in Barmen (a recommitment to the Lordship of Christ within the Church) and on the structure of Barmen (biblical references, followed by

⁸ For a critical discussion of Volf’s concept of congregational catholicity in relation to socio-cultural identities, see Van der Borght (2009b).

a confessional statement and an anathema) would profoundly appeal to the Reformed, and would confirm and strengthen a collective Reformed identity. This Barmen-like statement became so central that other specific references to the Reformed tradition in the study text have not been retained in the final text. Both the traditional call on churches to act as a sentinel for government and the reference to the presbyterial-synodal system disappeared.

Volf's Barmen-like statement was imbedded in an original ecclesiological discourse on catholicity and unity. The first section of the program of the Debrecen General Council addressed the issue of the Reformed faith and the search for unity. This section dealt with Reformed self-understanding, gospel and cultures, and common witness, but not with churches and their cultural and national identities. Such a complete silence on the latter issue in the context of the 1990s was more than remarkable.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE REACTIONS OF WARC IN 1982 AND 1997

I now continue by comparing the statements issued by the General Council of WARC in 1982 in response to apartheid, and its statements in 1997 in response to identity politics. Such a comparison makes sense because in both cases, socio-cultural identities were involved, and because in both cases the unity of church was threatened. Still, the results differed. In 1982 it was decided that apartheid constituted a *status confessionis*, while in 1997 identity politics were excluded when a *processus confessionis* was declared. Secondly, for Belhar it fundamentally concerned the issue of the unity of the church, while Debrecen deliberately steered it away from this theme. And last but not least, while Belhar's strength lay in its combination of unity of the church, reconciliation and justice, Debrecen reduced identity politics to a justice issue. There is a remarkable and fundamental difference. The three elements that had made the Belhar Confession particularly relevant regarding issues of socio-cultural identity were excluded. Belhar played no role in relation to WARC's reaction to identity politics a decade later. I wish it had.

CONCLUSION

Rereading the Belhar Confession, I was struck by the elements that have the potential for being helpful with regard to socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church. However, the reception of Belhar in denominations and especially its absence in WARC's response to identity politics in the 1990s make me doubt whether Belhar is indeed the document that "covers it all", as has been suggested.

Different possible reasons can be offered to explain the difference between the Reformed reaction to apartheid in South Africa and the reaction to nationalism a decade later. One might be the central position that the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa occupied under apartheid over against the minority status of many Reformed churches in many countries where identity politics were key in the 1990s. Another possibility might be the shift in emphasis from unity to diversity in ecumenical theology that coincided with the end of the Cold War. In general, one may say that the statement at Debrecen was more in

line with the common Reformed tradition with its traditional lack of *sensus unitatis*, to which Belhar formed the happy exception.

However, can elements be identified within the Belhar Confession itself that make it less suitable as a response to issues of socio-cultural identities? Rereading Belhar, I found two such major elements. The first is the lack of room it allowed for socio-cultural diversity within the unity. Belhar condemned the “absolutisation of diversity”, and stressed the unity of the church. Not that the diversity of members was left unmentioned. It was first referred to in a general way (“the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions”) and then more specifically in relation to socio-cultural identities – it referred to “the various languages and cultures” and to “descent or any other human or social factor”. However, the message is univocal. The diversity is part of the unity of the church and the aspects of the diversity cannot be claimed as elements determining membership of a church. It is understandable that in the context of apartheid that absolutised so-called racial differences, a confession that emphasised the unity of the church showed no interest in expanding on the meaning of socio-cultural identities. Because of its contextual nature, the confession cannot simply be shifted into other contexts. The answer does not lie in the changing of the words of the Belhar Confession, but in an ecclesiology that focuses on the unity of the church and, within that unity, provides for the diversity of socio-cultural identities.

The second reason why Belhar may be a less suitable response to the issues of socio-cultural identity has to do with the concept of “the unity of the church”. It is one thing to confess the visible unity of the church, but what does it refer to? To the Dutch Reformed family of churches, to all Christian churches in South or Southern Africa, to the communion of Reformed churches, to the member churches of the WCC, or perhaps to the participants of the new Global Forum? From this perspective, the visible unity of the church confessed by Belhar hangs in the air and remains just an abstract principle.

EPILOGUE

What is at stake is the question of how creational diversity finds its way into an ecclesiology that confesses the unity of the church. The theology of the *Deutsch Christen* and apartheid theology have been rejected as heretical for the way in which they absolutised socio-cultural identities. Thus we need another understanding and formulation. However, this still is lacking. To illustrate the problem, one may refer to paragraph 59 of the 2005 Faith and Order Paper entitled *The Nature and the Mission of the Church* which reads:

There remains by virtue of creation a natural bond between human beings and between humanity and creation. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The new life of communion builds upon and transforms, but never wholly replaces, what was first given in creation; within history, it never completely overcomes the distortions of the relationship between human beings caused by sin ...

In his paragraph it remains unclear in what way the new life of the Christian community replaces what was first given in creation. Should it completely replace it or not? Is the creational part taken over fully contaminated by sin?

More than ever in a globalised world, we are in need of a Christian church that fully understands its nature as one and that sees the consequences of this for its mission. Because we have no final clarity on this, we are in danger of being made captives of those who use the concept of the unity of the church, or the diversity of socio-cultural identities for ulterior motives. Being part of the conversation on religions and the search for the common good in pluralistic societies, Christian theologians should assist also in the search for a better theological understanding of how the common is related to the plural within the Christian church itself. The Belhar Confession is a helpful resource but, because of its limitations, it is not enough. Therefore, I challenge my South African colleagues in particular not to be content with the attention afforded the justice issue, but also to reconsider the question of the unity of the church and to find alternatives for apartheid theology with regard to this question.

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KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

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“PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S MISSION OF RECONCILIATION”

Nigerian churches’ response to ethnic conflicts²

ABSTRACT

The paper appeals to the Faith and Order paper on “Ethnicity, National Identity, and the Search for the Unity of the Church” (ETHNAT) to evaluate whether or not and in what way, Nigerian churches are responding to ethnic challenges. After a brief statement of the Faith and Order paper’s invitation to participate in the ministry of reconciliation (1), the paper describes categories of churches in the Nigerian context (2). The Nigerian churches’ responses to ethnic identities and their impact on the unity of the church is then evaluated (3). It is argued that not all Nigerian churches are responding to the call to reconcile societies divided along ethnic lines and, therefore, issues a call to participate in a ministry of reconciliation in their country (4).

THE INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

In 1997, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) initiated a study project entitled “Ethnicity, National Identity, and the Search for the Unity of the Church” (ETHNAT). According to Faith and Order Paper 201, entitled *Participating in God’s mission of reconciliation. A resource for churches in situations of conflict*, the express goals of the study were fourfold. First, to equip churches to understand and discern the role that ethnicity and national identity play in their (the churches’) own lives – both in their inter-church relationships and between the societies within which they propagate the gospel. Put in another way, the study was to help the churches to explore how and in what ways ethnic and national identities affect inter-church relationships and the relationships between churches and the societies in which they exist. Secondly, the study was to assist churches in challenging any loyalties toward ethnic and national identity that impede church unity and reconciliation

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² Paper delivered at a conference that focused on ethnicity, hosted by the joint project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies, which was held on 23-25 February 2009, at the University of Mkar, Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria. This revised version was written in the period January to March 2010 during which the author was a visiting scholar at the VU University Amsterdam. The financial assistance from the latter institution is hereby acknowledged. The views expressed here are those of the author.

between communities or churches in conflicts – the ultimate objective being to “transcend” divisions within churches and communities. Thirdly, the study aimed at preparing churches for an “effective prophetic” ministry of unity and reconciliation capable of creating a renewed and healthy human community. Finally, the study hoped to guide churches toward hopefully becoming agents of reconciliation in their immediate (local) communities where tensions and conflicts exist (WCC 2006:Par. 4). On the whole, the study invited churches to “examine and explore” *together*, not individually, “the part they are playing in situations of tension or conflict in which ethnic and national identity is an important factor” (WCC 2006:Par. 4).

As will become clear in this paper, Nigeria is full of such situations of tension, so much so that, for us who live in this country, it is not a matter of either/or, but a situation of both tensions *and* conflicts, where ethnicity (not national identity) plays a leading role.³ Therefore, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN),⁴ the largest and highest ecumenical body in Nigeria, states as one of its objectives: “To promote understanding, peace and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria, through propagation of the gospel”. In line with the goals of Faith and Order Paper 201, CAN member churches agreed to promote *understanding, peace and unity*, not only among member churches, but among all the *various* peoples and strata in Nigeria itself.

The churches are aware that Nigeria is a nation of many nationalities, a country with people of various ethnic backgrounds and origins; a country with over 500 languages; a country with numerous religious beliefs and cultures. The churches, therefore, do not seek to work among Nigerians as a homogenous group, but as a people with different ethnic backgrounds and affiliations. CAN is also aware of the existence of conflicts of interest among the socio-cultural, religious and ethnic groups that make up the entity we call “Nigeria”. Therefore, *understanding* among these groups is a key factor on the path toward *peace, unity and reconciliation*. CAN also acknowledges that the gospel of Christ is at stake in any situation where misunderstanding exists among the various people of Nigeria. Hence, it undertakes to use the gospel as a means of promoting understanding that may lead to peaceful coexistence and therefore unity among the ethnic nationalities in the country. The earlier stated objectives

³ The geographical entity called “Nigeria” cannot be described as a “nation” in the same way as, for example, Israel (where the nation is more or less formed by the Jews), or Holland or India (where the native Dutch or the Indians constitute the nation). We are indeed at best a “nation” of nationalities as Obafemi Awolowo, the pre-independence nationalist and First Republic (1960-1966) Premier of the Western Region, described it. Compare his description of Nigeria in Cletus T. Gotan (1995:1).

⁴ CAN was formed in 1976. The history behind the formation of CAN is quite revealing. It was General Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo, the then Head of State, that called a meeting of all church leaders in Nigeria to discuss his proposal of introducing in all schools the singing of the National Anthem and the recitation of the National Pledge every morning during school assemblies. Since this was to interfere with the daily morning devotion in Christian schools, the Head of State felt that the consent of the churches that own Christian schools was important before the implementation of the policy. Since no umbrella organisation existed that represented all churches, those with schools were invited to attend the meeting. During the meeting, Obasanjo’s second-in-command, the late General Musa Yar’Adua, a brother of the President [the author is referring here to the late President Umaru Yar’Adua who died on 5 May 2010 – eds], told the Christian group that he did not know from which denomination to choose a leader who would pray at the start of the meeting, since there were so many denominations present. Since church leaders attending the meeting were embarrassed by this comment from a Muslim, they immediately agreed to form CAN on that same day – a single ecumenical body similar to the WCC. For more detailed information on its formation, as well as an analysis of CAN, see Peter B. Tanko (1995).

of CAN expresses the conviction of member churches that the church of Jesus Christ in Nigeria exists among diverse ethnic groups with different interests, in such a way that whatever happens among the ethnic groups has consequences for the unity of its member churches. For this reason there was the desire of the churches “to promote understanding, peace and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria ...”.

From both the above conviction of members of CAN and their desire to promote understanding and unity in Nigeria, it seems as if CAN is taking the invitation of Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to its members to “participate in God’s mission of reconciliation” seriously, as they should. But is this really the case? In order to establish whether or not and how churches in Nigeria are doing so, I find it helpful to draw on Faith and Order Paper 201, which was given to the churches as a guide for accessing, on ecumenical and local levels, their participation in the mission of reconciliation. Structurally, I shall present a sample description of churches in Nigeria. I shall then adapt some provisions in Faith and Order Paper 201 to assess Nigerian churches’ response to the call for reconciliation. In the concluding part of this paper I shall argue for an ecclesiology capable of addressing ethnic conflicts in the Nigerian context.

A SAMPLE DESCRIPTION OF CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

South African theologian, Dirkie Smit, describes the story of Reformed faith and tradition in South Africa as a “story of many stories” (2008a:263; see also Smit 2008b). I have a similar view of the context within which the Nigerian churches participate in the mission of reconciliation. The Nigerian churches’ experiences of ethnic tensions and conflicts varies from one church group to another. This is largely due to the history of the missionary activities in these churches. To appreciate the situation of the churches in Nigeria with regard to the issue of reconciliation, it will be best to afford the outsider the opportunity to gain some insights into the nature and formation of some of the major churches in Nigeria. In doing so, it is not helpful to apply to Nigeria the method used by the Cameroonian theologian Precille Djomhoue (2008:355) in her own context.⁵ Although her grouping of churches in Cameroon as “mainline and others” is legitimate within the context she did it, the context discussed in this essay is vastly different, and therefore a further grouping of churches will reflect the different experiences of the Nigerian churches with ethnic realities.

Therefore, I identify four church groups: The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches; the Evangelical churches; the Reformed churches; and the Pentecostal-like churches (Gifford

⁵ Djomhoue refers to “mainline churches” as those planted by missionaries but are now self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. By “other churches” she refers to all the Pentecostal churches that came into being on the initiative taken by the indigenous people. Djomhoue’s goal was to compare the “manifestations of ecumenism” between mainline and Pentecostal churches in Cameroon. However, the goal in this essay differs. I want to look at the churches’ engagement in ethnic tensions and conflicts in Nigeria, specifically looking at how and to what extent they are responding to WCC’s call to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation in their own context. As it will soon become clear, the churches in Nigeria have had different experiences with ethnic tensions and conflicts, demanding a kind of classification that best captures those different experiences. An attempt is made to do precisely this in the essay.

2008:280).⁶ The first group is self-explanatory. The second group (Evangelical churches) refers to a broad category of churches such as the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA), the Methodist Church, African Church, Apostolic Church, Church of Assumption, Jehovah's Witnesses, Deeper Life Bible Ministry, Reformed Evangelical Mission (REM), and numerous others. The Pentecostal-like churches include, but are not limited to, the Living Faith Worldwide (Winners' Chapel), the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church (MFMC), the Kings International Christian Centre, the Full Gospel Business Men Fellowship International Inc. and similar churches. The Reformed churches, as described by the Nigerian theologian Benebo Fubara-Manuel (2008:228-251), include the *Nongo U Kristu u ken Sudan hen Tiv* (NKST – formerly called Dutch Reformed Church Mission), the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN), the Nigerian Reformed Church (NRC), the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN), the Reformed Church in Central Nigeria (RCCN), the Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ (ERCC), and the Qua Iboe Church. I admit, as Gifford (2008:276) does, that this does not cover all the churches. Certainly, this categorisation does not necessarily capture the diversity of church traditions present in Nigeria. However, it does serve the purpose of the discussion in this essay.

The Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches listed in the first category were the first to appear on the Nigerian scene. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, there were already Augustinian missionaries from Portugal, Italy and Spain, making converts around the south-western part of Nigeria. They moved further north at the beginning of the nineteenth century to cover the whole country by the twentieth century. The Roman Catholic missionary policy entailed first converting the kings, in order to have easy access to their subjects. This missionary policy enabled them to work across various kingdoms associated with various ethnic groups, even though they did not identify specific ethnic groups for missionary explorations. Therefore, wherever they went they preached the gospel and established Roman Catholic churches. Hence there are no Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv, Hausa, Idoma or any other tribal Roman Catholic churches in Nigeria (cf. Catholic Secretariat s.a.). The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) took a similar approach to evangelism as the Roman Catholic Church did. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was responsible for the establishment of the Anglican Church in Nigeria. They also worked in specific locations rather than among specific ethnic groups. Thus, this Church's membership cut across many ethnic groups. Perhaps, the cordial and bilateral relationship between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church contributed considerably to the duo's success in the country (cf. IARCCUM 2007). Catholic Augustinians and Our Lady of Apostles' missionaries used CMS buildings and facilities for worship in the formative years of Catholic missionary work in northern Nigeria.

It was indeed here, in northern Nigeria, that both Roman Catholic and CMS personnel encountered the forced exclusion of certain ethnic groups from being evangelised. This state

⁶ I use the category "Pentecostal-like" instead of Pentecostal for similar reasons that Gifford uses it in his work. It is somewhat difficult to place the numerous Pentecostal groups in Nigeria in similar categories as those that can be used to categorise Pentecostal churches in the USA. To use the designation "independent churches" will be misleading as well since there are independent churches in Nigeria, for example, Ekankar, but also many others that have no trace of Pentecostal elements in them.

of affairs was the result of an agreement between Lord Lugard, the then British Governor-General of Nigeria, and the Hausa/Fulani so-called “ruling class” in the north.⁷ The agreement was that CMS was allowed to carry out their evangelical activities only if they were willing to avoid reaching out to Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups. The reason for this was that Islam was used to sustain the political interests of Hausa/Fulani ruling class to dominate other tribes. In return for the numerous (more than 200) other ethnic groups in the area being allowed to convert to any alternative religion, the British Administration agreed not to interfere with the Hausa/Fulani political aspirations towards domination of minority groups. It will thus not be incorrect to argue that the political arrangement between the British colonial masters and the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group accounts for the beginnings of missionary work among particular ethnic groups, particularly in northern Nigeria. The policy of the non-Christianisation of the Muslim ethnic groups (i.e. the Hausa/Fulani group) was also strictly adhered to by missionary societies responsible for planting of churches in the third and fourth categories mentioned above. What this meant was that tribes/ethnic groups were divided among specific missionary groups, and that the churches planted by specific missionary groups among the specific tribes they evangelised ended up being the churches of those tribes – this will also become evident in the discussions in the following paragraphs.

The broad category of Evangelical churches had the goal of preaching to anyone they met in the southern part of Nigeria. However in the north, the policy of non-Christianisation of the Muslim groups was in place. Therefore, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), the missionary group that planted ECWA, had to work among southern Kaduna ethnic groups (who are mostly Christians) and down to the Plateau tribes in the present Plateau State.

The migration of some Muslim groups to areas previously occupied by the non-Muslims in the second half of the twentieth century created tension between the two groups. The recent crisis in Jos, Plateau State, is one example of such tensions. The Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) that started its missionary activities – as the Catholic and CMS missionaries did – among freed slaves in the coastal areas without much hindrance, also had to contend with the policy of non-Christianisation of the Muslim ethnic groups in the northern part of the country. Already in 1926, at a missionary conference in Lokoja, a decision was taken to divide the ethnic groups/tribes among the different missionary groups.⁸ Following the 1926 decision, ethnic groups/tribes began to lay claim to specific church groups planted by particular mission boards. The WMS, for example, worked among the Idomas in southern Benue. This explains why their first indigenous church leader, late Bishop Achigili, was an Idoma. Although they also made converts among other tribes in the Benue Valley, most of their members in that region are of Idoma origin.

⁷ Detailed documentation exists on this arrangement, its objectives, and how it was implemented. See especially the work of Catholic theologian and civil activist, Mathew Hassan Kukah (1993). Tanko (1995), a Catholic ecumenical theologian from Kaduna State in northern Nigeria, has also done a comprehensive analysis of how the Hausa/Fulani hegemony affected the ecumenical unity of the churches in that part of the country.

⁸ See Eugene Rubingh (1969) for an analysis of the circumstances that led to the call of the missionary conference in Lokoja, Nigeria.

Nigerian Pentecostal-like churches are mostly the inventions of the indigenous people. In fact, a number of them, such as the Winners' Chapel, RCCG and MFMC, among others, were Nigerian exports to other countries (Gifford 2008). All three of these major Pentecostal-like churches have their headquarters in the Lagos area. As Gifford rightly observes, they all emphasise prosperity (a true believer should be successful in all s/he does), as well as baptism by the Holy Spirit for the bestowal of spiritual gifts. However, the promise of (economic) prosperity is particularly attractive to their members. For this reason, no discussion on ethnic conflicts and other public issues occurs within these churches. In a word, the ministry of these churches is person-oriented and not group-oriented.

Among the four groups of churches described above, it is the fourth group that has to contend with ethnic divisions. The various Reformed churches are missionary churches. Therefore, the missionary policy of their founding fathers is largely responsible for the churches' subsequent experience with ethnicity. Of all the Reformed churches in Nigeria, PCN was the first to be established. By 1846, missionaries from the Church of Scotland had already commenced missionary work among the Ibos and Ibibios in the old Eastern Region (now South-East). Their work did not extend to other minority tribes but was restricted to the south-eastern zone. The other minority groups would later constitute the "other" (ethnic groups) within the PCN. Accusations are made of the marginalisation of the minority ethnic groups within the PNC and according to Uma Onwunta, a former Moderator of the PCN, this situation affects the "missional" activities of PCN (Onwunta 2006:4).

More prominent among the Nigerian Reformed churches that worked among specific ethnic groups are the churches planted through the missionary work of Sudan United Mission (SUM) founded by Karl Kunm in 1904 (Akper 2009:4-7). SUM had two branches: the South African branch comprising of Afrikaans- and English-speaking missionaries, and the Christian Reformed Church of North American branch. The missionaries from the South African branch split after a decision to separate the English-speaking group from the Afrikaans-speaking group in 1937 (Rubingh 1969:90). This in turn led to the establishment of two churches: ERCC (1957) among the Madas and the Alagos south of Jos by the English-speaking group, and NKST (1959) among the Tiv in the Benue Valley by the Afrikaans-speaking group (the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa). The North American branch had only an English-speaking group that worked among the Kutevs and Jukuns. Although they planted only one church, the *Eklesiyar Kristi A Sundan, Ladin Benue* (EKAS), this church later split due to tribal differences between the two ethnic groups within EKAS. For this reason CRCN now exists among the Jukuns, and RCCN among the Kutevs.

The other Reformed church of a specific tribe is NRC. Missionaries from Protestant churches in the Netherlands came to Nigeria in the second half of the twentieth century. They specifically worked among the Izi in south-eastern Nigeria.⁹ In 1974, the NRC was formed among the Izi. Despite this tradition of Reformed churches for specific tribes, the Qua Iboe Church was planted by Samuel Bill, who did not work among a particular ethnic group. Bill was, however, only able to cover a small geographic area where the impact of his work can be

⁹ Note that Izi were not converted by the Scottish missionaries that worked among the Ibos in the same region.

noticed. After his death, the gospel spread beyond the Ekwere in the Niger Delta area to other parts of the country. Today, there exist Qua Iboe churches in central Nigeria and beyond.

From the sketchy overview of the history of the formation of the given sample of Nigerian churches, two major realities become apparent: firstly, it shows that Nigerian churches did and do not have the same experience with regard to ethnic Christianity (ethnic churches). For this reason, one expects that the churches will also have different attitudes to ethnic tensions and within their ministry of reconciliation. Secondly, the overview indicates that the emergence of ethnic churches was the making of the missionaries that planted them.

Before moving on to a discussion of how the churches (in the four categories mentioned above) are currently responding to the call by the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission to “participate in God’s mission of reconciliation” in their respective communities, it will be helpful to first look at the relationship between the churches themselves and their relationship with the parties in conflict.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCHES AND CHURCHES AND CONFLICTING PARTIES

The two churches in the first category have strong ties with each other. They agree to collaborate in matters of church life and ministry. There is also a growing “consensus in faith” between them. This is clearly expressed in the statement on their “fresh commitment to share together in common life and witness”, as contained in the *International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission* statement of agreement.¹⁰ Based on this common goal of visible and living unity, the two communions, as they call themselves, appointed various commissions to address various societal issues such as ethnic tensions and conflicts (the Peace, Justice and Development Commission), health, ecumenism, etc. Nationally, the churches of the two communions are members of CAN and Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN).

Members of churches of the communions have been affected in various crises in Nigeria, such as the sectarian violence between Muslim groups and other minority ethnic groups¹¹ (the majority among these being Christian)¹² in Kaduna State in north-western Nigeria in 1991, 1992, 2000 and 2001, and the sectarian violence in Jos in north-central Nigeria in 2003, 2008, and 2010. Through CAN, these communions and the churches have reached out to various

¹⁰ IARCCUM (2007). Paragraph 6 of this statement reads as follows: “We believe that now is the appropriate time for the authorities of our two Communions to recognize and endorse this new stage through the signing of a Joint Declaration of Agreement. This Agreement would set: our shared goal of visible unity; an acknowledgement of the consensus in faith that we have reached, and a fresh commitment to share together in common life and witness.”

¹¹ I refer to these crises as sectarian and not religious because of the conviction of many, Christians and Muslims alike, that the violence was ethnic in nature and politically motivated. It was a power-play between the Fulani migrants in Jos, who happen to be mostly Muslim, and the indigenous Birom people, who happen to be mostly Christians. In the recent Jos crisis, the Sultan of Sokoto, the Chairman of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Nigeria, Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar III, as well as the President of CAN, Archbishop John Onayikan, the Catholic bishop of Abuja, stated in the media (*ThisDay*, 7 February 2010) that the violence is ethnic in nature and politically motivated.

¹² Many of the victims of the numerous violent crises in Kaduna and Jos were not Christians. They were simply members of the contending ethnic groups.

conflicting groups at different times, calling for peaceful co-existence. The churches in the second category have a more complex relationship among themselves than churches in the third and fourth categories. Some among them like ECWA accept only adult baptism, but by immersion. Other churches in that category, such as the African Church, accept polygamy, while the others do not.

The Pentecostal-like churches, as Gifford (2008), Djomhoue (2008), and Ukwuegbu (2008) assert, emphasise the visible manifestation of spiritual gifts, which is measured in terms of the successes achieved by the believer. Therefore, most of them see traditional churches as spiritually dead, possessing no power to exorcise demons and bad luck. The churches in the first, second and fourth categories “condemn” Pentecostal-like churches for their lack of sound theological training and biblical exegesis. They argue that Pentecostal-like churches lay more emphasis on the spontaneous effects of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer and preacher. This, according to them, disregards the original meaning of the biblical texts Pentecostal-like preachers allude to in their healing ministries.

Pentecostal-like churches have their own fellowship. This is called Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). A good number of these churches are also members of CAN. However, their involvement in the ministry of reconciliation in the public domain is not easy to discern.

The Reformed churches in the fourth category, as was seen in the last section above, are most often implicated in ethnic tensions and conflicts since most of them function as ethnic churches. This, more often than not, translates into crises between their respective members that inevitably also involve conflict, not only between the Muslims groups and these churches, but also between the different Christian churches in this category themselves (Akper 2009:6-18). Notable examples are the conflicts between the Jukuns and the Tiv, the Jukuns and the Kutev, the Kutev and the Tiv, where CRCN, RCCN and NKST churches and properties are destroyed during ethnic conflicts (Akper 2009:16-17). The PCN, too, has to contend with internal ethnic tensions between the dominant Ibo group and other minority groups within the structures of the PCN (Onwunta 2007:4). In 2006, the ERCC was caught up in the political conflict between minority Muslim settler groups and the indigenous non-Muslim majorities in Nasarawa State.

All the Reformed churches are part of the Reformed Ecumenical Council of Nigeria (RECON), the national body organised under the auspices of the former Reformed Ecumenical Council. Apart from the PCN and the Qua Iboe Church, all the other members of RECON are also members of another evangelical ecumenical body of about 11 churches, *Tarayar Ekklesioyin Kristu a Nigeria* (TEKAN) (roughly translated as the “Fellowship of churches of Christ in Nigeria”). They relate to each other at this ecumenical level – and as members of CAN as well – but otherwise still function as churches in isolation from each other on an individual, ethnic level.

OVERVIEW OF CHURCHES’ RESPONSE TO ETHNIC AND SECTARIAN CONFLICTS

Paragraph 24 of Faith and Order Paper 201 reads in part:

The churches’ reconciliatory role can be seen in two interrelated contexts: first, the need to manifest unity within and between the churches themselves; and secondly, the churches’ wider role in working towards national reconciliation.

Regarding the first “context”, there is a lesson to be learnt from the South African experience. Smit (2002:128) argues that in apartheid (separate development) South Africa, South Africans “did not see in the same way”. For churches to undertake meaningful reconciliatory efforts in any context of crisis, but ethnic crisis specifically, they must “see in the same way”. Unfortunately, the Nigerian situation presents a contrary reality: the churches have different understandings of what constitutes church unity. Tanko (1995) devoted the second half of his book to arguing that the unity of believers that Christ prayed for in John 17:21 “that they may be one” goes beyond a mere fellowship of churches within an ecumenical body like CAN. According to Tanko, what is needed is a visible unity that could bring believers in “one” fellowship. His colleague from the same Nigerian Catholic tradition, Bernard Ukwuegbu (2008:309-316), argues for autonomy of the African church (i.e. churches in Africa, both mainline and indigenous). Stating his case for the urgent need for an ecclesiology for the churches in Africa, Ukwuegbu states, within the context of Pauline conviction, that there is “neither Jew nor Greek in Christ”,

[I]n the eyes of his opponents, what Paul proposes invariably jeopardizes the boundaries that maintained the ethnic integrity of the Jewish communities and protected them from foreign invasion (2008:215).

Applying the same to the African ecclesiological debate, Ukwuegbu contends that:

The same also goes today for attempts within the wider Church to view with suspicion any move by a group to find ecclesiological models and ecclesiastical structures that are attuned to their way of life (2008:315).

When reading Ukwuegbu’s proposal in the context of the discussion in this essay, it is possible to expect different faces of ecclesiology on the African continent in every country. Take Nigeria, for instance, with its more than 240 ethnic groups with different “ways of life”. How many ecclesiologies might be developed in Nigeria reflecting all those ways of life? It is also clear that Ukwuegbu and Tanko have different views on ecclesiology and concept of the unity of the church.

Despite the achievements recorded by the International Anglican-Catholic Commission for Mission and Unity, the two communions are not close to achieving the kind of unity hoped for by Tanko. Baptism has been suggested by many as the element that binds different believers together. However, it is also a point of divergence between many churches in Nigeria, as noted above. “Seeing” differently affects the churches’ ministries, and this includes their ministries of reconciliation as their divergent views of the nature, purpose, meaning of, and the reasons for reconciliation affect the efficacy of their involvement in

reconciliatory processes. If the churches themselves are not united, it is difficult to expect them to unite in their efforts to reconcile others.

Regarding the second “context” – the churches’ wider role in national reconciliation – it is important to establish whether Nigerian churches are in fact participating in national reconciliation, if such an ongoing national process indeed exists. If it does, what are the levels of involvement of the churches in Nigeria? In order to respond to these issues, one must first gain some insight into what constitutes the ongoing ethnic or sectional crises in Nigeria. It will then be easier to assess the level of involvement of the churches in any existing reconciliatory processes.

The most persistent conflicts in Nigeria are sectarian crises in the northern parts of the country between the so-called Hausa/Fulani Muslim ethnic groups and non-Muslim groups, designated “settlers”. The second most persistent conflict is the restiveness in the Niger Delta centred on resource control, environmental degradation, and poor infrastructure. The major ethnic groups in this area include the Ijaw, Ibibios, Itsikiri, and Orhubo, but many others as well. There are also frequent ethnic conflicts in other parts of the country, for example, the crisis that erupted between the so-called “Fulani settlers” and others who are not Muslims in Jos-Plateau State from 17-20 January 2010. There are also other recent crises that still necessitate reconciliation, such as that between the Tiv, Jukun and Kutev in north-central Nigeria, the *Boko Haram* (“school is forbidden”) sectarian crisis in many parts of the far north of the country, and the recent conflicts between rival tribes within the Yoruba ethnic group in Osun and Ogun States in south-western Nigeria.

Regarding the means and the extent of the level of involvement of the churches in Nigeria, the activities of the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences come to mind. From 7-12 September 2009, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) met at Kafanchan – an area notorious for ethno-religious conflicts in northern Nigeria. During their meeting, the bishops deliberated and issued statements on three of the crises mentioned above. Regarding the *Boko Haram* violence in some states in northern Nigeria, the CBCN declared:

[W]e deeply regret and strongly condemn the loss of life and property caused by the religious sect, *Boko Haram*. We offer our deepest condolences to all the bereaved, and our sympathy to all those who have suffered grave material losses, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. We pray for God’s mercy on all the dead (CBCN 2009:Par. 9).

Convinced that this crisis had nothing to do with religion per se, the bishops pronounced as blasphemous any religious justification for what had been rather ill-motivated violence inflicted on fellow human beings, since

God has not given anyone the right to kill in his name. Neither has he authorized anyone to violate the dignity of other human beings (CBCN 2009:Par. 10).

The bishops further expressed their sadness and their disappointment with government authorities for allowing this to happen, in spite of credible security warnings that this was impending (CBCN 2009:Par. 11). On the Niger Delta crisis, the CBCN applauded the government for granting amnesty to the militants and urged them to accept the amnesty.

However, they decried the injustice done to the people of the area by previous administrations in ignoring their area in their development agendas, and urged government to fulfill its promises to the people of the area (CBCN 2009:Par. 8). They made a passionate appeal for “Nigerians [to] be granted the grace to cooperate with God in solidarity with one another to transform our nation” (CBCN 2009:Par. 24). The CBCN, however, issued no statement on reconciling the parties in conflict so that lasting peace could be established between the groups. CAN leadership only issued statements in the media condemning the sectarian acts, without providing any plans of action to reconcile the factions involved in the conflicts.¹³ RECON, the Reformed body, issued no statement and did absolutely nothing to address the sectarian crises. If anything, they merely preached during Sunday services against violence in society – services that those directly involved were not in a position to attend. Almost all the mega Pentecostal-like churches in Nigeria held their annual meetings in the outskirts of Lagos between December 2009 and January 2010.¹⁴ However, none of the churches addressed the issue of sectarian violence in Nigeria.¹⁵ The CBCN Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province met when security forces were still battling to stop the ethnic violence in Jos, and in the aftermath of tribal violence over chieftaincy close to Ibadan, the venue of their meeting. The bishops condemned and issued a statement against the Jos violence (CBCN 2010:Par. 4). However, they were silent over the Yoruba tribal conflicts at their doorstep. No discussions were held on how to reconcile the parties in conflict. On the Kutev, Jukun, and Tiv ethnic crises, three Reformed churches, NKST, RCCN and CRCN, organised a peace walk in 2008, six years after the last major incidence of armed conflict that saw members of these same churches losing their lives and properties.¹⁶ No other reconciliatory efforts have been made to ensure that the parties agree to bury the hatchet in order to live in peace with one another. In fact, in all the crises mention in this essay, it is in the Jukun, Kutev, and the Tiv crises that churches were directly confronted with ethnic conflicts. One would expect that, since all the churches (NKST, RCCN, and CRCN) are members of RECON, a deliberate attempt would have been made by RECON to bring the parties in conflict together for dialogue. The fact that this never took place is a clear indication that the churches are indeed not interested in genuine reconciliation in the society.

13 The direct involvement of churches and church bodies in most of these crises usually begins and ends with handing out relief material to victims and condemning the actions of the perpetrators and the inaction of government agencies. They also stop at exposing the bias of security operatives during the crises. The Commission for Peace and Justice of the Anglican Communion did meet with various Judicial Commissions of enquiry constituted by various government bodies, but the commissions’ reports never saw the light of day anyway. The point is that there were and are no deliberate direct efforts to engage the perpetrators and victims of these crises in dialogue in order to reconcile them with each other and, therefore, with God.

14 In fact, the tribal violence in Osun and Ogun States delayed some members of these churches on their way to what Gifford (2008:283) refers to as a “pilgrimage” to their headquarters in the suburbs of Lagos.

15 Perhaps where they considered the spiritual growth of their followers to be more important, believing that once ‘born again’ the believer will shun violence and avoid conflict. Hence, RCCG’s theme for its meeting on 14-19 December was “Our God Reigns” over all things – perhaps over violence and ethnicity as well. It is believed that members of RCCG reign with God and have therefore surpassed all social ills, including ethnic identity loyalties that threaten peace in the country.

16 The complacency of members of the three ethnically-based Reformed churches associated with these tribes in the conflicts is documented elsewhere. See Akper (2009:4-21).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nigerian churches are aware of the call by the WCC and other ecumenical bodies to participate in God's mission of reconciliation. However, the history of their formation – especially the missional strategy of founding fathers/mothers in the Nigerian mission field – has affected the way these different churches respond to and participate in God's mission of reconciliation today. The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches approach the issue of reconciliation on the basis of biblical and theological decisions taken at ecumenical levels. The same decisions are then faithfully implemented by their local communions. The Evangelical and the Reformed churches have had a less significant impact on the issue of reconciliation, perhaps due to the absence of a sound ecclesiology that prescribes how such a mission could be carried out. The Pentecostal-like churches do not consider reconciliation in the public sphere or outside church structures as a mission to which they are called. The churches in the latter category, apart from their complacency in ethnic conflicts, also lack a well-constructed and documented ecclesiology for public engagement. The churches in the first category thus have a more appreciable approach to ethnic conflicts. However, their approach to these conflicts appears to be reactionary. They respond with condemnations of the act only, and by offering relief packages weeks or months after the conflicts have already escalated into violence. For real reconciliation, perpetrators and the victims must meet, and the offender must be willing to confess the wrong that was committed and must ask for forgiveness with remorse and conversion of heart – i.e. with the desire never to “sin” again. Nigerian churches are as yet to jointly or individually facilitate such a process. The same is true for inter-church dialogue and reconciliation. The affiliation of Reformed and Evangelical churches with specific ethnic groups is a dangerous phenomenon. Their continued existence, separately and among specific ethnic groups when they subscribe to the same doctrinal standards (Three Forms of Unity), puts to the test their “gospel of reconciliation”. How could any invitation from them to people to reconcile with each other as a sign of their reconciliation with God have any credibility when they, as churches themselves, are not visibly worshipping together?

In light of the foregoing discussion, it would seem as if a biblically-based ecclesiology is needed to expose the nature and mission of the church in the Nigerian society. Such an ecclesiology will also show the danger of the continued divisions among churches and the fact that the current situation calls into question the churches' ministry of reconciliation. A common understanding of the nature and mission of the churches in the Nigerian context, by all the churches, is a good place to start. Inter-church dialogue is as important as dialogue between ethnic groups and between aggrieved parties. The churches must first reconcile their ecclesiologies in order to reconcile the Nigeria's population groups.¹⁷

¹⁷ The attitude of the Reformed churches that continue to operate on ethnic bases calls for urgent attention. Benebo Fubara-Manuel (2008:233), former General Secretary of RECON and Clerk of Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, reports that in 2004, during the 16th General Assembly of the PCN at Enugu-Nigeria, it was resolved that the continued existence of several Reformed churches in Nigeria is a poor witness to the gospel of Christ which they are called to preach. Therefore, the PCN called on RECON for the formation of one, united Reformed church in Nigeria. Today, several years on, the churches still have not seen the need to come together in one communion.

This does not mean that any ecclesiology acceptable to the churches will automatically translate into a successful ministry of reconciliation. The South African experience has given us reason to believe some ecclesiologies in fact promote and sustain ethnicity, race and oppression,¹⁸ thereby exacerbating conflicts. The South African theologian Clint Le Bruyns has suggested ways of evaluating theologies that are constructed for the churches as they deal with differences. First, he suggests we should ask to what extent such theological "resources assist us in recognizing and respecting differences, but especially facilitating a forum of cooperation and communication"? Secondly, we must seek to know if such "theological resources manifest cooperative tendencies on how we live with differences" (2006:129). I believe these criteria are capable of helping the churches in constructing an ecclesiology that could not only be effective, but may stand the test of time.

¹⁸ Allan Boesak, the South African black theologian who had been deeply involved in the struggles to dismantle apartheid structures in his own country, has documented some of the obvious ways in which theology sought to intensify segregation in the then South African context (1976, 1984). Renowned South African theologian John de Gruchy deliberately sought to "liberate" Reformed theology, seeing it as being trapped in the theological battle for supremacy among South African population groups during the apartheid era, especially the negative image it merited for itself in South Africa. For this reason, De Gruchy was convinced that the "liberating" nature of Reformed theology itself needed to be stressed (1991). Cf. also the comments of Smit (2008a:264) in this regard.

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ETHNICITY AND THE EXPULSION OF WOMEN IN EZRA 9-10

A covenant perspective for Africa²

ABSTRACT

The expulsion of women in Ezra 9-10 has been viewed in a variety of ways by different biblical scholars. This author discusses ethnicity as one of the motivating factors for the expulsion of these women on the part of Ezra and his associates. Apparently, the text appeals to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as the basis for this outrageous expulsion. But a close reading of the covenants reveals that the decision to expel the women was informed by an ethnic consciousness. This produced an exclusive understanding of the two covenants. The paper therefore suggests an inclusive interpretation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants for ethnic harmony in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The expulsion of women in Ezra 9-10 has been viewed in a variety of ways by different biblical scholars. Some have viewed it as attempts to preserve the identity and culture of the returned Jewish exiles (Smith-Christopher 1994:123; Dyck 1996:100; Williamson 1985:160). Others have argued that intermarriage in Ezra's perspective was directly associated with the subject of disobedience to Yahweh's ordinance (Hoglund 1992:35). In other words, Ezra wanted the *golah* community to retain its religious purity (Anderson 1966:165). Yet, some other scholars were with the opinion that intermarriage in Ezra 9 and 10 threatened the economic stability of the Province of Yehud by threatening its land base and, therefore, it necessitated the reform of rules regarding intermarriage (cf. Dyck 1996:102; Farisani 2004:40).

In view of these varied perspectives, I will endeavour to show that Ezra and his associates were influenced partly by their ethnic³ consciousness in expelling the supposed foreign women. In other words, Ezra and his associates used an exclusivist understanding of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants to expel them. I will also argue that an inclusive

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3 Ethnicity is used here as defined by Hunter (1990:253) as "a primary bonding, an identification and context of belonging, shared by groups with common language, behaviours, histories, lifestyles, values and norms".

understanding and interpretation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants ought to have informed Ezra's intermarriage reforms and, derivatively, that if Africans adopt this inclusive covenant perspective suggested in this article, it will be one step towards promoting ethnic harmony/integration on this continent.

AN EVALUATION OF EZRA'S INTERMARRIAGE REFORMS (EZR. 9-10)

When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he was met by ethnic integration between the returned exiles and the people of the land. Ezra and his associates saw this as a serious religious breach of the covenant committed by the alleged "holy race" (cf. Ezr. 9:1-2).⁴ Ezra spent a lot of time on handling the problem (cf. Ezr. 9:3-10:44), which is described as follows:

- The people of Israel (*golah* community) have joined the "peoples of the land" in their abominations; and
- That they have also mingled their "holy seed" with that of the "peoples of the land" by intermarrying with them (cf. Ezr. 9:1-2)

Ezra 9:1-2 refers to three groups of people in relation to the alleged intermarriage problem:

- The first is the *golah* community (Israel);
- The second group is the "peoples of the land" (supposedly non-Israelites); and
- The third group is the Canaanites, Hitittes, Perezites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.

Those who are labelled "the peoples of the land" (i.e. the second group, cf. Ezra 9:1-2) differ from the third group, the Canaanite tribes (Breneman 1993:148). However, the problem here is that the practices of the peoples of the land are alleged to have been similar to that of the third group, namely the Canaanites, Hitittes, Perezites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites (cf. Breneman 1993:148). Therefore, the *golah* community that intermarried with the peoples of the land were assumed to have adopted the lifestyle of the Canaanite ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the returned exiles were considered a separate ethnic entity. Now, instead of marrying those in their own ethnic circle, they intermarried with those who were considered to belong to a different ethnic group, and this is what Ezra and his associates deemed sinful.

However, a close reading and examination of Ezra 9 and 10 reveals that the peoples of the land were those Jews who did not go into exile and, as a consequence, were excluded from the *golah* community (Klein 1999:733). It may also be that the "peoples of the land" were those who were partly of Jewish descent, the Moabites and Edomites. The Canaanite tribes mentioned in Ezra 9 had ceased to exist during the reforms of Ezra (Clines 1984:119; Blenkinsopp 1989:175). If this view is to be followed, the basis for the accusation made against the *golah* community concerning intermarriage with the peoples of the land turns out to be self-defeating.

⁴ Ezr. 9:2 reads: "They have mortgaged the holy seed with the people of the land."

It must be admitted that the prohibition of intermarriage with heathen nations is alluded to in Deuteronomy 7:1-6. However, the reason given for the prohibition of intermarriage in this post-exilic situation may be questioned, since the Law did not prohibit intermarriage between Israelites and Edomites or Egyptians (Clines 1984:119; cf. Dt. 23:7). My argument in this article is that it was on the grounds of an ethnic consciousness on the part of Ezra and his associates, that the Deuteronomic law (cf. Dt. 7:3-4) was reinterpreted and reapplied to this new situation to support their exclusivist religious and social reforms (Clines 1984:119).

The view that the peoples of the land were Jews who had remained in the land during the exile finds support from the research conducted by Eskenazi and Judd (1994:266-285), on the sociological and theological classification of the strange women in Ezra 9-10. They suggest that these women, classified as strangers, were not really strangers as the editor(s) author(s) might have presupposed. The women might have been Judahites or Israelites, who had gone into neither the Assyrian or the Babylonian exiles (cf. Grabbe 2000:15). Thus, it might have happened that the early Jewish returnees saw these women as legitimate marriage partners. This position is also supported by the fact that Ezra 9:1-2 does not recognise these women as Ammonites or Canaanites, because they were not. Rather, Ezra and his associates – supposedly having been influenced by their ethnic consciousness – redefined the identity of true Israelites during the early post-exilic period. As a consequence of this redefinition, these women were considered or labelled as foreigners by Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Grabbe 1998:138).

When Ezra heard about the charge against the returning exiles (Ezr. 9:1-2), he burst into tears, torn his clothes, pulled out his hair, and sat down for the whole day (Ezr. 9:3). In Ezra's view, intermarriage between the returned exiles and other peoples of the land constituted a serious breach of Yahweh's covenant with his prophets. The tone of Ezra's speech suggests that the commands referred to here were thought to have come from the Mosaic covenant (i.e. the product of the Abrahamic covenant).

One solution to the intermarriage problem, therefore, was to renew the covenant between Yahweh and the *golah* community. During such a ceremony, every person who was married a foreign woman would have been compelled to divorce and leave her as well as her children. This would constitute a permanent separation from those whom Ezra deemed as belonging to a different ethnic circle. Most people accepted the proposal and divorced their so-called "foreign women" (Ezr. 10:10-15). However, a handful were not satisfied with the proposal (cf. Keil & Deltzsch 1975:131). It is argued that the four people mentioned in Ezra 10:15 took an even more rigid and exclusivist approach than the divorce proposal (Klein 1999:742-743; Williamson 1985:156-157). A contrary view (Keil & Delitzsch 1975:131) is that these four people actually opposed the divorce proposal because they were more sympathetic towards the women than the majority of the returnees who had accepted the divorce proposal.

The fact that the stance of the four men is not explained in this passage may suggest that they were opposed to the decision to divorce the alleged foreign women (cf. Allen 2003:80). It is most likely that the decision of the whole community prevailed over the view of the

four men. Thus, the divorce process was carried out at the insistence of the majority. Those who were opposed to the intermarriage reforms were ignored or silenced (cf. Ezr. 10:15; see Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256) and the process of divorce took its toll upon the foreign women and their children (cf. Ezr. 10:18-44).

If Deuteronomy 7:3 formed the basis for Ezra's intermarriage reforms, it seems to me as if the author(s) editor(s) of the Book of Ezra reinterpreted this passage in a peculiar way, in order to support Ezra's exclusivist social reforms (cf. Blenkinsopp 1989:200-201). It is evident from the context of Deuteronomy 7:3 that the eradication of idolatry was the real focus of the prohibition. Nowhere in the Pentateuch do we find an explicit rejection of intermarriage without the worship of foreign gods as the main reason for it (cf. also Breneman 1993:149; Williamson 1985:130-131).

A further question remains – namely, how Ezra would interpret other biblical passages that clearly refer to cases of intermarriage between the Israelites and other people or foreigners? Ezra referred to the law of Moses as the basis on which the divorce proceedings were conducted. But Moses himself had married an African woman from Ethiopia (cf. 12:1-3). It can therefore be argued that Ezra, being influenced by his ethnic consciousness, reinterpreted the passage from Deuteronomy or a related law to support his intermarriage reforms.

It is obvious that Ezra's decision concerning intermarriage was unacceptable to some other people as well (cf. Ezr. 10:155). This passage hints at opposition, but fails to tell what really happened to those who opposed Ezra's divorce programme. Were they expelled from Israel together with their families, or were they allowed to remain among the supposed "holy race" (seed)? It is not known, but in all probability appears that they were sidelined and did not remain in the mainstream of affairs in that new community.

AN INCLUSIVE UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC AND MOSAIC COVENANTS

Before this inclusive viewpoint is discussed, the studies undertaken by Eskenazi and Judd (1994:285) have a bearing on the issue once more. These latter scholars (1994:285) had already indicated from their sociological studies that these women were unjustly excluded from the *golah* community by the reforms of Ezra. There are three important points that should be noted in Eskenazi and Judd's research findings:

- First, it can hardly be proven from the text of Ezra 9-10 that these women who were expelled from the *golah* community were foreigners like Ammonites or Canaanites, as Ezra's reforms appeared to have presupposed.
- Second, these women were not members of the returned exiles; rather, they were in the land during and after the exile. Thus, part of the reason they were identified as 'peoples of the land' was that they had remained in the land during the exile.
- Third, the fact that Ezra and his associates attempted to redefine the concept of 'Yahweh's people' exclusively as the *golah* community, inevitably rendered these women as 'non-Yahweh's people'; therefore, they were foreigners in their own land and unfit to intermarry with the *golah* community.

I suspect that Ezra's concept of holiness (cf. Ezra 9:2) concerning the *golah* community, is irreconcilable with other passages such as Deuteronomy 9:4-6. Neither pre-exilic Israel, nor the *golah* community possessed the land, because of their righteousness or holiness. According to the above-mentioned Deuteronomic passage, it was as a result of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD was going to drive the Canaanites out of the land. But, in the Ezra 9:2 incident, the women who were divorced from their partners were not reported to have been wicked as described by the Deuteronomic law. Nothing specific is said about these women, except that they were not members of the redefined Israelite (*golah*) community. The narrative leaves the reader(s) guessing even as to the situation concerning the families that had been separated. What was the fate of the babies and women that were left without a male supporter and vice versa? How will such children deal with the reality of being separated from their families (cf. Klein 1999:746)? No answers are given to these questions, and the Book of Ezra ends on this sad note.

In view of the above, I propose that an inclusive understanding and interpretation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants should have been the wisdom that ought to have informed Ezra's intermarriage reforms. It is obvious from the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants that all other nations, races and people could associate and intermarry with Yahweh's people (Israel) through appropriate covenant means. These covenant processes can be summarised as follows:

- Yahweh promised to be the God of the Patriarchs, as well as the God of Israel (cf. Gn. 17:7-8).
- Yahweh tells Abraham that he will become the father of a multitude of nations, pointing to a fact that other nations are inseparably linked with Abraham as their father (cf. Gn. 17:5).
- The circumcision of Ishmael and all male servants in the house of Abraham points to the inclusion of outsiders in the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gn. 17:10-14).
- The blessing of other nations via Abraham and his descendants also suggest that foreigners are inevitably linked with Abrahamic descendants (cf. Gn. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).
- The provision of food for foreigners and aliens living among Israelites drives home the message the Israel and other ethnic groups are cared for by the same Yahweh since all are Yahweh's people (cf. Ex. 23:10-11; Lv. 19:9-10; 23:22; 25:1-7; Dt. 14:28-29; 24:19-21; 26:12-15).
- Participation of other ethnic groups in the keeping of the Sabbath shows the importance of the Sabbath rest day both for Israel and other nations (cf. Ex. 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt. 5:12-15).
- The inclusion of aliens and other nations in the celebration of the Passover, feasts of Weeks and Tabernacles, indicates the inclusion of other ethnic groups in the religious life of Israel (cf. Ex. 12:17-20, 48-49; Nm. 9:14; Dt. 16:10-14).
- Equality of both the Israelites and the aliens before the law of Yahweh fly in the face of Ezra and his intermarriage reforms (cf. Ex. 12:49; Lv. 24:22; Nm. 9:14; 15:13-16, 29-30).

- Instances abound in the Bible where intermarriage between Israelites and other ethnic groups occur (cf. Tamar, Gn. 38:6-30; Ruth, Rt. 1:16-17; 4:13-22; Joseph and Asenath Gn. 41:45; Solomon and his many foreign wives, 1 Kgs. 11:1; Ahab and Jezebel, 1 Kgs. 16:31; Abraham and Keturah, Gn. 25:1; Moses and his Ethiopian woman, Nm. 12:1; and Bathsheba, 2 Sm. 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25).
- Other ethnic groups could also offer sacrifices to Yahweh, because these ethnic groups are also provided for by Yahweh (cf. Lv. 22:17-20, 25; Nm. 15:13-16).
- Cities of refuge were opened for non-Israelites who unintentionally commit murder (cf. Nm. 35:14-15).

The above series of biblical stories concerning the inclusive dimension of both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants should have been incorporated into Ezra's intermarriage reforms. It is unfortunate that the reforms ignored this and, instead, adopted an exclusivist perspective of the covenants as its basis. This was a one-sided understanding of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants concerning other ethnic groups. The wisdom that ought to have guided Ezra and his associates, is that all nations, races, people and ethnic groups could associate with Yahweh's people through appropriate covenant means. This suggests that the decision to divorce the supposed foreign women was informed partly by an ethnic consciousness on the part of Ezra and his associates. This also goes to show that biblical texts need to be handled with care in order to, sometimes, strike a much needed balance in a conflict situation.

AN INCLUSIVE COVENANT PERSPECTIVE FOR HARMONY IN AFRICA

Gottwald defines the term covenant (*berit*) as:

A formal, solemn, and binding agreement between parties in which there are obligations to do certain acts, or to refrain from doing them, and there are promises or threats of consequences that will follow on fulfilment or breach of the obligations (Gottwald 1987:202).

According to Gottwald, the above definition does not necessarily capture the full meaning of this Hebrew term *berit*. In view of this limitation, he immediately suggests certain terms that appeared to have captured some aspects of this word. These terms include descriptions such as agreement, arrangement, compact, contract, commitment, treaty, alliance, obligation, bond, and relationship (1987:202; cf. Human 1983:142).

The concept and practice of covenant transactions began as early as the art of writing itself (Mendenhall & Herion 1992:1180). Accordingly, many treaties from Ebla – dating from the Early Bronze Age (about 3500 BC) to the Iron Age (about 1000 BC) – were recorded and have been preserved till today (cf. Baltzer 1971:9-10)

During the second millennium BC, there were two broad types of treaties concluded in the Hittite Empire. These were the “international” and the “domestic” treaties (Barre 1992:654). The former were more common and were subdivided into two main categories. These included so-called “parity” and “suzerain-vassal” treaties (cf. Bruce 1980:328; Pfeiffer 1966:175).

Parity treaties sought to establish non-aggression between the parties (sometimes of equal strength) and to guarantee the stability of the respective ruling dynasties. Suzerain-vassal treaties served to consolidate the hegemony of the suzerain; the vassal's interests were clearly subordinate (Barre 1992:654).

The idea of covenant carried with it a fundamental concept of "relationship" between individuals, kings and their subjects, etc., within the Ancient Near Eastern Hittite treaty culture. A relationship could take different forms, such as parity or suzerain-vassal treaty forms, as observed from above.

I would therefore argue that, through the institution of a covenant, Yahweh had established a relationship between himself and Abraham and his descendants, but also with other nations (cf. Gn. 15:1-21; 17:1-27; Ex. 20:1-26; Dt. 5:1-6, 25; Bright 2000:149). This relationship was not a casual or an informal one, and concerned the ultimate issues of life and death (cf. Gn. 17:14; Dt. 5:33: 6:2, 15, 24, Robertson 1980:8). Therefore, the concept "relationship" becomes one of the foremost theological, religious and socio-cultural centerpieces on which Yahweh established his covenant with Abraham, his descendants, and other nations. This is where the value of both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants provides a platform for ethnic harmony in Africa.

There exist hundreds, if not thousands of different ethnic groups or nationalities on the African continent. Each ethnic language, group, or affiliation possesses certain unique cultural, social and religious characteristics or qualities. Despite these variations, by God's design, we all inhabit the same continent. We, therefore, cannot live on this continent and pretend as if no one or no other group is living beside our ethnic group. We have to develop a certain platform on which we as a people can co-exist on the continent in peace and harmony. The Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenant values may serve as such examples, which Africans can adopt in order to live in harmony with one another despite their different ethnic, cultural, religious, and social affiliations. The covenant values that we, as Africans, should embrace include:

The recognition that we have a common origin and hopefully a shared destiny by virtue of the fact that we all are God's creatures and therefore people who have been linked to him. Abraham and other nations were made to understand that Yahweh's covenant with them was a platform upon which all of them could live under one roof. Abraham became the father of nations and all nations were to find shelter under his fatherhood. No one was to be discriminated against due to certain perceived differences. African people therefore are part and parcel of these nations, where Abraham is figuratively their father by virtue of the above covenant promise.

God provides and cares for all, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations. In the biblical covenants, God promised to provide blessings to all nations (Gn. 12:3). This indicates that Yahweh was and still wishes to do, if we so understand ourselves as being part of and living under one covenant in Africa today.

Ethnic differentiation is not a sin or a crime, but rather an unavoidable given to all of us at birth. In a covenant relationship, Africans should not use this to punish, kill, or destroy

one another. Our ethnic diversity is a gift from God that therefore must be respected by all. Africans must adopt mutual respect for one another as people who share the same origin.

Intermarriage is possible between people of different ethnic groups living under one covenant. Intermarriage between people of different nationalities is already happening on this continent. It will be a very sad day indeed if we Africans should turn around and start killing one another when we know that we have intermarried with one another's ethnic groups.

Dialogue is a necessary approach to dealing with differences, especially where ethnicity is part of the social variable. People living in a covenant relationship cannot avoid peaceful dialogue in handling issues that create tension between them. As a people who have a shared origin, it is imperative to adopt a principle of dialogue on contentious matters for the sake of peace and harmony in Africa.

CONCLUSION

In the face of different interpretations of and of motives suggested for the account of the expulsion of the so-called "foreign women" in Ezra 9-10, it was argued that an ethnic consciousness might have been one of the foremost motives. A close reading of the text showed that its apparent appeals to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as the bases for the expulsion, reveals rather the existence of an exclusivist understanding of the covenants. However, elsewhere in the biblical text, these covenants are of an inclusivist nature and as such open up possibilities for ethnic harmony in Africa.

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ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND THE STATE

Towards overcoming the challenge of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria²

ABSTRACT

Ethno-religious clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of intergroup crises in Nigeria. This article reflects on the challenge posed by ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria and the many ways in which it manifests itself. Two dangerous catalysts of ethno-religious conflicts are identified, namely a capitalist mindset aimed at participating in or controlling the distribution of material wealth or the nation's natural resources, as well as the desire for political control or the desire to use political power for selfish or sectarian interests. Finally, suggestions are made as to possible steps that may be taken by the Nigerian government, at all levels, in order to curb and ultimately to prevent the recurrence of ethno-religious conflict.

INTRODUCTION

A short summary of the circumstances that brought into being the entity we call "Nigeria" will provide a clear introductory path to the perplexing issue of ethnicity, religion and the Nigerian state. The Nigeria we know today did not exist prior to 1914. What did exist were two protectorates. The north used to be a protectorate where the predominant religion was Islam. This same Islam was used to unite – either by force or voluntarily – the various ethnic groups in that region. The southern replica of the northern protectorate included within its borders even more ethnic groups, with a variety of religious orientations. The eastern axis of this (southern) protectorate was predominantly Christian, while the western axis included Christians as well as Moslems, with no clear distinctions along family lines. On the latter axis, the juxtaposition of both Christianity and Islam tended to result, albeit unintentionally, in a greater sense of compromise between adherents of both these religions.

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The administration of Lord Lugard joined together these protectorates to form Nigeria. However, this was done without any definite programme to neutralise the possible dangerous consequences that forcing the various ethnic groups and religions into one nation might have. The effect of this hasty arrangement resulted in ethnic and religious conflicts that have claimed many lives in Nigeria. Consequently, any meaningful discourse aimed at overcoming the challenges of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria must first synthesise the fundamental principles that govern the attachment of Nigerians to religion and ethnicity as a means to gain material wealth or access to power. Such a functional approach will first require clear a conceptualisation of the terms “ethnicity”, “religion” and “state”.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity concerns the identification of any group of people with a particular cultural or traditional affiliation. Such people share a common identity or origin that often manifests in the ability to speak the same language, the tendency to dress alike, or partake in similar social activities and in a similar manner. More than 300 different ethnic identities are found in Nigeria. However, the Hausas, Ibos and Fulani constitute about 70% of the country’s population; the Kanuri, Tiv and Ibibio (each with more than one million members) 10% percent, and the remaining 20% of Nigeria’s population is from about 300 different ethnic groups.

These ethnic groups are spread across the country, but tend more to be concentrated on the south-south axis of the country and, to a lesser extent, in the north-central zone. The south-east, south-west, north-west, and north-east are comparatively homogeneous with regard to language. Ethnic communities tend to realign, in line with the evolving political trends, within the above-mentioned six geo-political zones. Such realignment focuses more on ethnic groupings as a function of geographical location rather than linguistic affiliation. Hence, this paper will reflect on ethnicity as it affects the relationship between and within these zones.

Religion

Religion refers to an individual’s or an aggregation of people’s strongly held beliefs, values, and attitudes that serve as a guide to behaviour and a way of life. Religion also refers to a practice, an activity, or an object that an individual, or group of individuals, tenaciously holds on to. Some individuals may be prepared to die in support of any such religious activity or cause. Religion also serves as a source of identity. Adherents of a religion are expected to believe, accept, and defend certain fundamental principles that constitute the religion’s core values or tenets. It is a sacred engagement that attempts to link the abstract with the real.

The predominant religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion. Within the Christian fold, variations ranging from Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Celestial churches are found. Amongst Muslims, variations also exist, including radical sects as found among the adherents of the traditional religions who worship different deities. The desire to spread a particular religion or to convert other believers often underlies the violence that characterises religious conflicts in Nigeria.

The state

A state consists, among other things, of a group of people who inhabit a specific geographic area and guided by a common legal authority. The entity that serves to bind the group together in this case is the regulating or governing body, and it presupposes that the group members have accepted to live together under agreed terms and conditions of coexistence.

In this essay, “the state” refers to Nigeria. Prior to the existence of Nigeria, the religious beliefs of the different ethnic groups were mainly rooted in their respective cultures. External forces introduced Christianity and Islam, with the eventual amalgamation of these religions into one state called Nigeria.

THE CHALLENGE OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

The presence of traditional religion and *either* Christianity *or* Islam in any particular region in Nigeria seldom results in the kind of terrible destruction witnessed in regions where both Islam *and* Christianity coexist. Most often, conflicts that start out as religious disturbances result in ethnic cleansing and vice versa. These conflicts pose a challenge to the government of Nigeria on all three of its levels: local, regional (i.e. challenges faced by the respective federal states that make up Nigeria), and national (i.e. conflicts that cut across different geopolitical zones). While challenges with regard to ethnicity permeate all three levels in all parts of the country, those connected to religion are more pronounced at the level of state and national level. This may be largely due to the fact that the more than 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria and religious affiliation tend to follow a north-south ethnic divide.

Religious clashes have proved to be the most violent instances of intergroup crises in Nigeria because of their tendency to spread – even across state or regional borders in the Nigerian federation. A religious conflict in Lagos, in the extreme south-western end of Nigeria, may reverberate in Sokoto, on the extreme north-western axis of the country. Thus far, most religious conflicts have occurred in the so-called “Middle-Belt” of Nigeria and in borderline states of the Muslim north, where Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups have been pitted against non-Muslim ethnic groups in

... [a] dangerous convergence of religious and ethnic fears and animosities ... [in which it] is often difficult to differentiate between religious and ethnic conflicts as the dividing line between the two is very thin (International IDEA 2000:296).

Among the primary examples of violent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are the Kafanchan-Kaduna crises of 1987 and 1999; the Zangon-Kataf riots of 1992; the Tafawa Balewa clashes in 1991, 1995 and 2001; the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000; and the Jos riots of 2001 and 2008. Although the exact number of casualties are not available, these riots claimed several hundreds of lives and had violent ripple effects far beyond the areas where they originated. The most ridiculous yet destructive riot was the *religiously*-induced Miss World riot of 2002.

Ethnic clashes have also taken their toll on human lives and property in Nigeria. Major cases of Nigerian inter-ethnic violence since the late 1980s include the Tiv-Jukun conflicts in

Taraba and Benue State; the three-sided Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri clashes in Warri, Delta State; the recurrent clashes between Hausa-Fulani and Igbo groups in Kano State; the Ife-Modakeke settler conflict; and conflicts that acquired an ethno-religious colour since they were between the Hausa-Fulani, who are Muslims, and the Igbos who are mainly Christians. While the Tiv-Jukun, Urhobo-Ijaw-Itsekiri, and Hausa/Fulani-Igbo clashes are long-running conflicts that have erupted occasionally in the early 1980s, others, such as the Hausa/Fulani-Yoruba clashes, took place mainly in 1999/2000 in the wake of the transition from military to civilian administration.

As the above examples show, both religion and ethnicity pose challenges to Nigeria. These challenges manifest themselves in the struggle for appointments, threats to the unity of Nigeria (suspicion, disaffection), impediments to the entrenchment of democracy (the struggle for votes during elections via rigging), and the destruction of lives and property. Others manifestations of these challenges are constitutional flaws, and corruption through weak social structures.

The struggle for political appointments

Ethno-religious conflicts jeopardise the appointment of credible and qualified persons to head key positions in government. This occurs at all three levels of Nigerian government. On the level of local government, family heads, community leaders, and opinion leaders promote the appointment of their children or wards in lucrative positions. Whenever they do not succeed, they will try to incite their followers by citing ethnic or religious marginalisation as reasons for this. The Jos religious crisis in 2008 was a product of such a local ethno-religious crisis.

This struggle also extends to the level of federal states, especially in the appointment of commissioners, chairpersons of boards, etc. – where communities and individuals often play the ethnic or religious card. An unsuccessful applicant will suddenly remember that the governor is a member of tribe A, as is the successful candidate, even though the candidate was better qualified for the position. As a result, tribal and religious sentiments may restrict the objective appointment of qualified personnel to public offices.

Similarly, people compete for appointments on national level, and use ethnic and religious sentiments in the process. A football coach, for example, who decides to select a team based on the players' football skills, may soon be accused of marginalising some potential players due to ethnic or religious bias. However, when such a coach decides to select his team to include players from across the board (which most often is the case), his team may end up performing poorly and thus the whole nation loses due to ethno-religious considerations.

The threat to unity in Nigeria

Ethno-religious conflicts threaten the unity of Nigeria at local, state and national levels as well. Ethnic conflicts have led to the struggle for small portions of land among otherwise

peaceful communities at local level. The Ife-Modakeke conflict had its origin in such a struggle for land. Similarly, minor land squabbles have escalated into national calamities. All these (avoidable) skirmishes, occurring along ethnic lines, promote disunity among the people. Furthermore, this leads to suspicion and disaffection among them.

At federal state level, ethnic conflicts manifest in the struggle for the control of state power. Communities and local governments within the same state are suspicious of each other and some people may try to discredit the government or to distract its attention by engaging in subversive behaviour because of ethno- religious affiliations.

The same tendencies are found when geo-political regions within the country as a whole cast suspicion upon each other. A citizen who, for example, loses property or children in a conflict in one region and moves away, will not be willing to return to that region. He or she might expect that another upheaval could occur without notice which will then again be to the detriment of his life investment. Groups also go to extremes, including the destruction of the belongings of those from other regions as a result of distrust or of feelings of being oppressed during ethno-religious crises.

Entrenchment of democracy

Ethno-religious tendencies sometimes lead to ballot rigging and other election malpractices. Such behaviour negatively affects the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria. People condone electoral malpractices when they are to the benefit of candidates from their own ethnic or religious group, and tend to react violently when the opposite happens. The reasons behind the first and second Nigerian coups and their subsequent civil wars can be traced back to ethnic struggles for power.

Only during the aborted Abiola-Kingibe presidential campaign did both presidential and vice-presidential candidates come from the same religion. Thereafter – and never again in the history of Nigeria – has religious one-sided candidacy for president and vice-president been allowed. All of the above tendencies challenge the entrenchment of a true democratic culture in Nigeria and all can be traced back to ethnic and religious chauvinism.

The destruction of lives and property

Many Nigerians have lost property, children and relatives in ethno-religious crises. Most were not compensated but were rather left to cope with their misfortunes by themselves. At the local level, towns have been sacked, peoples' houses burnt and their belongings looted. A case in point is the Ebom-Abijakara land crisis in the Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State. At the state level, too, communities have lost their wards in avoidable clashes due to ethnic tendencies. One example is the Warri crisis that erupted due to the establishment of a local government area and the situating of its headquarters amidst a minority group which the majority Ijaw disapproved of. As a result, several lives were lost and property worth millions of naira was destroyed.

Constitutional flaws

Attempts to review Nigeria's Constitution have always been greeted with hostility due to the ethno-religious inclinations of its citizens. Representatives from some communities have walked out of Constitution review sessions out of protest because their ethnic or religious views were not upheld.

Furthermore, despite the provision of so-called indigeneship for Nigerians who have lived in any part of the country for ten years, people are not allowed to apply for jobs or compete for elective positions unless they return to their places of birth. And added to this, the Constitution appears to be silent on the punishment to be meted out to defaulters of this provision.

Corruption through weak social structures

Ethno-religious undercurrents also promote corrupt practices. People cut corners, refuse to implement rules, or punish offenders because of religious or ethnic affiliations. They also cheat and get away with it by playing on peoples' ethnic and religious sentiments. Worse still, people take advantage of their positions to recruit or employ others based on religious or ethnic considerations. Such practices are, once again, found at the level of local government, at state, and at national levels.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Since the end of the Nigerian civil war, a series of conflict management strategies have been introduced in Nigeria to control the divisive tendencies of ethno-religious affiliation. These strategies have helped to some extent in preventing the country from disintegrating completely. However, these measures have not been able to prevent the sporadic outbursts of negative emotions whenever ethnic or religious friction occurs.

In attempting to overcome the challenges of ethnicity and religion, one must look at the two dangerous catalysts for ethno-religious conflicts whenever they occur. The first is the mindset aimed at controlling or participating in the distribution of material wealth or the nation's natural resources. The second is political control or the desire to use political power for selfish or sectarian interests.

Capitalist tendency

The need exists for fine-tuning approaches to the distribution of wealth among the entities that make up Nigeria. The promotion of some form of distributive justice through the redistribution of resources to multiple sub-federal jurisdictions, as well the representation of diverse sub-federal elites in national government institutions, will enhance Nigeria's revenue-sharing and "federal character" policies.

Government should make a conscious effort to compensate unfortunate victims of conflict, while at the same time ensuring that culpable individuals are brought to book. Strong and enduring financial structures and procedures should be devised, and these should be

entrenched in the Constitution so as to discourage greedy politicians whose only goal is to use ethno-religious sentiments to amass personal wealth. Furthermore, the negative use of the indigenisation policy should be reviewed. Nigerians should be recognised as citizens on the basis of where they reside rather than where their parents come from. This will reduce the tendency to see some Nigerians as settlers and others as bona fide indigenes. Regarding this issue, Government should formulate a policy where Nigerians can obtain local government certificates of origin from places they have resided in for ten years or more, as provided for in the Constitution. These certificates can then be used in seeking employment opportunities within the community where applicants reside with all the rights and privileges afforded to the majority of other members of that community. In other words, Nigerians should not be given the impression that their economic survival or existence depends upon the respective ethnic groups they belong to.

All religious groups that have engineered or promoted conflict should be penalised accordingly – for example, by withdrawing their certificates of business incorporation in commercial activities in Nigeria. Government should also go beyond the establishment of non-functional inter-religious bodies, and should expressly encourage inter-religious seminars and conferences at the local level. Such collaborative inter-religious interactions can be developed at both state and national levels as well. The obligatory cultural interchange of secondary school children from different states should be extended even to nursery school level.

Political control

The partial decentralisation of conflicts in separate, multiple, sub-federal arenas can reduce the capacity of ethno-religious conflicts to polarise or destabilise the Nigerian federation as a whole. Early warning measures should be concentrated at the local level rather than in a few large regional centres. This should also be followed by the fragmentation and relegation of each of the three major ethnic groups into several states, none of which will individually threaten the stability or continuity of the federation as a whole. Renewed calls for the establishment of additional states in Nigeria are an expression of this proposal. Heterogeneous ethnic minority-dominated states that will be created in this way will promote the political accommodation and empowerment of communities that were previously disenfranchised under the growing Nigerian geo-political structure.

Intergovernmental political alignments, especially via appointments, may not be helpful and should be discouraged. Political control should start by reviewing political processes with particular attention to the role of the electoral umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), at both federal and state levels to assert its independence. The will of the people should not only be reflected in the outcome of elections, but should also be reflected by the allocation of appointments across ethnic fault-lines. Constituent states that are not exactly isomorphic with ethnic boundaries need not fight or compete along functional lines of interest – including issues of states' rights and constitutionalism. National interests should be promoted above individual or group interests.

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the concepts of ethnicity, religion and the state. In doing so, it considered the development, diversity, and trajectories of identities and its associated conflicts in Nigeria. These identities are mainly ethnic and religious and have been shaped to an immense degree by colonial experiences, which created a culturally artificial and divided Nigerian state and did very little to nurture a unified Nigerian nation. The hasty unification of the northern and southern protectorates by the colonial regionalist federal legacy fuelled big-tribe hegemonic ethnocentrism, ethnic minority insecurity, democratic instability, ethno-military infighting and secessionist warfare. All of these tendencies manifest at the local, state, and national levels.

Among the resultant challenges of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are the struggle for appointments; threats to the unity of the country; obstacles to the entrenchment of democracy; the destruction of lives and property; constitutional flaws; and corruption. One of the most remarkable features of Nigeria's post-colonial political development has been the transformation of the dysfunctional colonial federal legacy into relatively more accommodative multi-state federalism. The relative success of this multi-state structure in sustaining Nigeria's unity amid diversity is underscored by recent surveys suggesting that an overwhelming majority (75% or more) of Nigerians (which includes a clear majority of the population in the former secessionist Igbo states) profess firm commitments to both national and sub-national ethnic identity, and will not contemplate any dismemberment of the country (Lewis & Bratton 2000; 2001). As earlier stated, this tilts the scales more favourably towards renewed calls for the creation of more states. Despite the many structural pathologies and violent conflicts that plague Nigeria as a multi-ethnic polity, the federation's achievement in accommodating multiple identities should not be trivialised. Finally, one of the two key approaches advanced to overcome ethno-religious conflicts proposed in this paper has been the reduction of capitalist tendencies to control or participate in the distribution of material wealth or the nation's natural resources. The second has been mediated political control or the elimination of the desire to use political power for selfish or sectional interest.

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KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

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CHURCH AND STATE

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RELIGIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION²

ABSTRACT

Because of the importance of the increasing integration of European nation states into the European Union, this article describes the influence of this body on the variety of traditional relationships between religions and states within the countries that now form part of it. The contribution focuses on European laws and the Europeanisation of religious organisations within the context of the shift of state to civil society.

INTRODUCTION

For many Africans, Europe is the place where the colonisers came from. This is, however, also the home of many missionaries who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ and their Christian denominations to Africa. In recent decades, many African Christians have come to Europe, often in the hope to stay there permanently. Visiting European churches, they are surprised that these churches are often more than half empty during worship services. A visitor to mass celebrated in the impressive cathedral, built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in my Belgian home town, Malines, will on any Sunday morning find fewer than two hundred participants, mostly elderly people and a few families with young children, no teenagers, and some African Catholic families. In September 2006, only three men began their training for the priesthood in the Dutch-speaking part of the Belgian Roman Catholic Church, which has some five million members in Flanders. A similar situation of growing secularisation can be found in most of Europe.

A second trend has characterised Europe after World War II, namely the growing integration of the European nation states in the European Union. Over fifty years ago in 1957, France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries – Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg – signed The Treaty establishing the European Economic Community in

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² This paper was presented at the consultation on Religions and the State in Search for the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies, which took place on 27-29 August 2007 in Mkar (Benue State), Nigeria.

Rome, also called the Treaty of Rome, joining these countries into a community with the aim of achieving integration via trade, with a view to economic expansion.³ In 1992, twelve countries⁴ signed The Treaty establishing the European Union in Maastricht, the Netherlands (also called the Maastricht Treaty), expanding the original economic aim to broader political objectives. Traditional economic, social, and trade relations were strengthened by new rules envisioning a future single currency, the euro; and a shared foreign and security policy and a policy on justice and home affairs were added. The Treaty of Nice, in 2001, reformed these institutions and changed the voting system in order to prepare for a rapid expansion of the Union. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU. This brought the total number of member states to 27.⁵

It is uncertain whether the Union will basically stay what it has become – a success story of European states closely working together – or whether it will develop further in the twenty-first century to become a United States of Europe. The European Union is not a nation state, but a *sui generis* supranational union, a hybrid form in which decisions are taken partly through member states' consensus (intergovernmentalism), and partly through majorities (supranationalism). The uncertainty of the EU's future is illustrated by the ratification challenges that The Treaty establishing a European Constitution (2004) ran into. Although 18 member states have already signed it, France and the Netherlands could not sign it after the majority of their citizens rejected it in referendums in 2005. In June 2007, the European Council agreed on a Reform Treaty, in which state-like terminology, such as “constitution” and “law”, was employed; and where the abolition of national symbols, such as flags, national anthems and mottos, was foreseen for the text of the new treaty.

In this contribution to this conference on religions and the nation state, I describe the European Union in its relation to the religions.

EUROPEAN LAW ON RELIGION

From a legal point of view, the relations between church and state have traditionally been an exclusively national affair. The EU can only act with regard to it if explicitly granted the authority to do so. Religion does not form part of its mandate. This was confirmed by the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), and re-affirmed by The Treaty establishing a European Constitution (2004).⁶ However, at the same time, it became clear that the relations between church and individual nations have an international dimension as well (Van Bijsterveld 2000:163-180; 2006:227-257). The EU has to respect basic rights, among them the right to

³ Further information on the EU, its history and its treaties, can be found online at <http://europa.eu>

⁴ Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined in 1973, Greece in 1981, and Portugal and Spain in 1986.

⁵ Austria, Finland and Sweden joined in 1995, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia in 2004. Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Turkey, are candidate members.

⁶ Cf. Article 11 of the Common Declaration of the Treaty of Amsterdam: “1. The European Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States. 2. The European Union equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.” The same text is found in Article I-52, first and second sections of The Treaty establishing a European Constitution.

freedom of religion.⁷ As a consequence of this basic right, a church-state relationship on the level of the EU is established in some way. This is confirmed in Article I-52, third section, which states:

Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.

Article I-52 forms part of the chapter on “The democratic life of the Union” and has to be read together with Article I-47, second section about “... an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society”.

Next to the above constitutional provision in European law, there exists a second source of European law on religion. All member of the EU are also members of the Council of Europe. The Council was founded in 1949 during the Cold War as an instrument for developing common and democratic principles throughout Europe, based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other relevant texts on the protection of individuals.⁸ Article 9 of the European Convention guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion.⁹ The interpretation given to the Convention by the European Court of Human Rights is, of course, of direct importance for freedom of religion on a national level in the states that are members of the Council of Europe, since it can influence the state church relations in those states.

MODELS OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Traditionally, a distinction is made between three legal models of church-state relations focusing on the constitutional position of religions in Europe, especially within the European Union: a state church system, a separation system and a hybrid system (Robbers 2005:577-589). I will discuss each system, its characteristics, as well the inability of these models to really cover what are important distinctions.

The state church system

This system is characterised by the close relationship between the state and a particular religious community. This relationship is often defined by constitutional law and, therefore, has consequences for the legal position of that community. Such a religious community might be labelled a “state”, “national”, “established, or “folk” church. Generally, in such a system, constitutional links exists between the church and the state executive, the church and the

⁷ Article II-70, section 1, on the Freedom of thought, conscience and religion in The Treaty establishing a European Constitution (2004) reads: “*Freedom of thought, conscience and religion* 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

⁸ Cf. online at <http://www.coe.int>

⁹ Article 9 of The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (online at <http://conventions.coe.int>) states: “1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance. 2. Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

state legislature, and the church and the people. Examples of a state church system include that of England, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Malta and Bulgaria. European state church systems are by no means homogenous. Thus, for example, the Danish state church – the “folk church” of Denmark according to Article 4 of The Constitutional Act of Denmark – is firmly under the control of the state. The State Ministry of Ecclesial Affairs determines the rules that govern the Danish National Church. The latter lacks a synod, a constitution and legal personality: rules regarding membership, the establishment of new parishes, and the ordaining and dismissing of clergy. The clergy have the status of civil servants and are paid by the state (Dübeck 2005:55-76). In contrast to Denmark, intervention by the Greek state in the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church (the “prevailing religion” according to Article 3 of that country’s constitution) is highly exceptional. This church has legal personality, and the same article guarantees its self-government by a synod with administrative, legislative, and judicial competence (Papastatis 2005:15-38).

Not only do state church systems in various countries of the European Union include very weak church-state relationships, these countries often also lack clarity regarding the legal regulations pertaining to religions, for example regulations concerning freedom of religion or laws prohibiting discrimination on religious grounds in the countries where such a system exists. Religious freedom and non-discrimination can co-exist in a country with a state church system, provided that legal preference is not accompanied by distinct civil and legal disadvantages for non-adherents to the official religion. The categorisation “state church system” also does not provide information regarding the position of religious minorities within a country following such a system. Under the state church system, the degree of accommodation of minority religions, such as Islam, can vary considerably. Minority religions are generally treated as private organisations, but the degree of state involvement differs greatly – for example between Denmark where no special legal status is granted to religious minorities, and Finland with its very complex registration requirements for minority religions.

To illustrate the complexity of the different models of the state church system, one may compare non-discrimination and the position of religious minorities in the two countries already mentioned, namely Denmark and Greece. Although Denmark is characterised by a strong state intervention in the affairs of the church, the country combines this with strong laws against discrimination against religious minorities. Greece, with its limited intervention by the state in church affairs, does not give minority religions the same guarantee of non-discrimination (Van Bijsterveld 2006:247). Thus, a strong relationship between state and one specific religious group does not automatically contradict openness towards other religious communities. However, it does seem that given the wide variety of forms it can take, categorising a system as a “state church system” leaves many aspects regarding the place of other religions within such a country unspecified, and often tells one more about the history of the state than about the sociological reality.

The separation system

This system of state church relations is based upon constitutional barriers which forbid intervention by the state in the affairs of the church by preventing financial support for and the establishment of any one religion. France, the Netherlands and Ireland are examples of this in the European Union. Contrary to the term “separation system”, the aim of such systems is not separation itself, but the use of separation as an instrument towards protecting religious freedom. In order to achieve this, it is not indifference by the state but positive action towards facilitating religious freedom that is required. France is the example par excellence of the separation system. Article 2 of the French law of 1905 – “The Republic does not recognise, remunerate, or subsidise any religious denomination” – and Article 1 of the 1958 Constitution – “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic” – established the neutrality of the state and its secular position, better known as the *laïcité* of the state. Gradually, France came to realise that, in order to safeguard its neutrality and to protect freedom of religion and equality, an active *laïcité positive* is required. As a consequence, the *Bureau des Cultes* of the Ministry of the Interior plays an active role in creating the practical conditions for public worship in respect of each religion. Various legal provisions have been provided to make it possible for various religions to worship legally. Because the Roman Catholic Church refused to comply with the system of “religious associations” provided for by the law of 1905, a system of “diocesan associations” was recognised as well. And Muslims, for example, use a system of “charitable and educational associations” for the establishment of Islamic schools. Although religious groups are mostly funded by private donors, they might still enjoy some indirect financial support from the state for activities of a general nature, or for major repair works to older churches (Basdevant-Gaudemet 2005:157-186).

The way in which the Irish separation system developed illustrates one such example of an active and positive relationship with religions. Article 44.2 of the Irish Constitution states that

[t]he State guarantees not to endow any religion ... [and] shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious profession, belief or status.

This is preceded by Article 44.1, which declares that:

The state acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to Almighty God. It shall hold His Name in reverence, and shall respect and honour religion.

Here, too, indirect financial support is provided for religious groups, for example, by way of exemption from taxation of the income of religious groups. Education organised predominantly on denominational lines is also extensively funded by the state (Casey 2005:187-208).

The hybrid or cooperationist system

Such a system is characterised by a separation between state and church, coupled with the recognition of a multitude of common tasks that link state and church. This recognition takes place within a legal framework as an agreement, treaty, or concordat. Spain and Italy

are classic examples of this. Article 16(3) of the Spanish Constitution (1978) proclaims the non-established character of all religions in combination with the duty of civil authorities to cooperate with religious communities, through agreements and concordats (Iban 2005:139-155). The Italian Constitution tries to balance liberty and equality of the individual in religious matters with a system of cooperation between the state and religions on the basis of agreements (Ferrari 2005:209-230). As can be imagined, this system can accommodate a large variety of models, but it is at the same time, a legal model without a strong profile.

EUROPEAN LAWS ON RELIGION IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Russell Sandberg, researcher at the Centre for Law and Religion at Cardiff University, proposes a departure from the above tripartite distinction favoured by ecclesiastical lawyers (Sandberg 2008:329-352). Instead of focusing on the formal aspects of the relationship between church and state, Sandberg wants to look at what these formal relations are really about. In order to do so, he advocates a sociological approach. This will help to get to grips with the relationship between religion, law and society. He wants to use sociology to contextualise contemporary legal debates concerning religion. Sociology of law and religion then is an instrument to evaluate the way in which laws facilitate the social effects of religion.

Sandberg bases his sociological analysis of religion in Europe on the work of Grace Davie – *Europe: the exceptional case*. Davie observes that throughout Europe the same pattern of an unchurched and residually Christian religion emerges. This development makes Europe an exception to the trend in other regions of the modern world where religion continues to be a potent force. Although the sociological decline of the Church's public role is faster in Protestant northern Europe than in the Roman Catholic southern Europe (which is perhaps a generation behind), this does not change the common observable, specifically European, trend of unchurching against a background of a powerful Christian church past. Davie contends that this sociological pattern can be observed in the European constitutional connections between state and church. In the Protestant north this has often resulted in state churches, embodying a combination of national and religious identity. Under such a legal construction, a relatively low religious activity is combined with little tension between church and populace. In Catholic Europe, ecclesiastical arrangements tend towards separation between church and state, which can be explained from by traumatic experiences of power abuse by the church in the past. But both regions have developed systems of regulation of religion, often in the form of constitutionally established relations between state and church. The European approach is characterised by the recognition of religious freedom and the autonomy of religious organisations. A basic level of neutrality, tolerance, and parity is common to the whole continent. No European country has a strong state church system to the extent that other religious groups are not tolerated, and no country has a strong separation system whereby the state is indifferent to religion and religious liberty. European countries place ever-increasing emphasis on being neutral and facilitative in relation to the regulation of religion.

TOWARDS A COMMON LAW ON RELIGION IN EUROPE

Norman Doe, director of the Centre for Law and Religion at Cardiff University, goes one step further. He tries to describe the principles of common law in relation to religion in the European Union (Doe 2010).¹⁰ Doe observed an increase in the treatment of religion in the laws and other regulatory instruments of the European Union since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. A corpus of norms related to religion, a corpus proper to the European Union, has developed silently and gradually as the need has arisen. This corpus can be called the “European law on religion”. Doe finds common principles of the European law in relation to religion in four sources: the laws and other regulatory instruments of the Union; the general principles of the laws on religion of the member states; the European Convention on Human Rights; and the laws of the religious traditions themselves. He identifies eight common principles:

- the principle of the value of religion;
- the principle of the subsidiarity in matters of religion;
- the principle of cooperation: dialogue with religion;
- the principle of religious freedom;
- the principle of the autonomy of religious associations;
- the principle of religious equality (non-discrimination);
- the principle of special protection of religion (conscientious objection); and
- the principle of religious privilege (for example, tax exemptions).

Doe comes to the conclusion that the law of the European Union leans toward the classic cooperation model. The draft European Constitution explicitly lists the principles of the value of religion: subsidiarity, cooperation, freedom, and equality. The principles of religious autonomy, special protection, and religious privilege are not expressly stated, but are natural consequences of the formentioned principles.

SECULARISM AS THE WAY TO INTEGRATE RELIGION INTO EUROPE

The French sociologist of religion, Jean-Paul Willaime,¹¹ claims that secularism is a European value (Willaime 2010). He identifies three key historical constituents of Europe’s identity as a civilisation: (1) the wealth of religious heritage and of philosophical traditions questioning faiths, and their claims and pretensions; (2) the respective autonomy of the spiritual and temporal powers after a long debate on the boundaries between them during the whole of Europe’s history; and (3) respect for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion is the consequence of a European history marked by confessional conflicts, religious wars, and anti-Semitism.

¹⁰ He is also involved with the European Consortium for Church and State (<http://www.church-state-europe.eu/>), which publishes the *European Journal for State and Church Research*.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Willaime is Director of Studies at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* and Director of the *Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités* in Paris.

Willaime describes European secularism as, firstly, characterised by three elements: Freedom of conscience, thought, and religion. These include the freedom to have or not to have a religion, to change one's religion and to practise one's religion – subject only to respect for the law, democracy, and human rights. Secondly, as equal rights and duties for all citizens – irrespective of their religious or philosophical beliefs – which mean that government and state must not discriminate against persons because of their religious or philosophical positions. And thirdly, as the respective autonomy of the state and religions, which signifies that they each enjoy freedom and independence with regard to the other – subject to respect for the law and democracy. According to Willaime, this triple understanding of secularism leads to a system of recognised religions as the dominant church-state relation. Where the state recognises religions, it acknowledges the participation of religious groups in the education of citizens and the practical exercise of citizenship in public life. This threefold secularisation is not only a legal concept expressed in the texts of the European Convention for Human Rights and of the draft Constitution of the European Union, it is also an expression of the general mentality throughout the continent.¹² A growing number of young adults indicate that they follow no religion. And, even those who identify strongly with one religion favour a separation between political and religious systems.

THE EUROPEANISATION OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

Friederike Böllmann, sociological researcher in Marburg, has studied the europeanisation of religious organisations. The European integration process creates a specific institutional environment that challenges religious organisations to position themselves and gain legitimacy in this newly developing public sphere. Important in this process is the perception that religions have of the political situation. In relation to the general development of the EU, the critique of the broader globalisation process that it is too one-sidedly focused on economy and loses track of the social consequences, is also applied to Europeanisation. Religions are also critical of the religious policies of the EU. In the first place, they lack legal status since Article 52 of the draft European Constitution, which refers to open, regular, and transparent dialogue, is still to be ratified. Till now they have depended on the goodwill of politicians. Second, the talk about dialogue with civil society stands in contrast to the practice of one-way communication of the European Commission, which is perceived as being top-down reporting of political decisions. Third, religions often do not feel as if they are taken seriously by the European Commission, which they perceive as thoroughly laicist. Religions have the impressions that the EU considers them more as part of the cultural and national heritage than as relevant partners. And, in recent years, religions feel that they have come to be perceived as a security issue, a threat to democracy. Fourth, the traditional churches have to operate in a much more pluralist setting. Not only does the non-religious world view, *laïcité*, hold the stronger position, placing them in the same category as “communities of conviction” with other non-traditional groups has left them feeling uncomfortable as well.

¹² Compare the results of the regularly conducted *European Values Survey*.

What do European politicians expect of religions? First of all, they see them as INGOs (international non-governmental organisations) that should be transparently, representatively, and democratically organised. Second, they judge them not so much on presenting themselves as religions, but as positive contributors to the work of the political actors. Third, religions are considered to be instruments of further integration.

In general, learning processes and adaptation strategies of religious interest groups can be observed. The aim of these groups is a better integration into the European political sphere in order to gain legitimacy. They emphasise their long tradition of democratic thought, their political expertise in EU affairs, their support for EU integration, and their capacity to fulfil an integrative role at EU level. They refer to both their core beliefs and practices (doctrinal, organisational, and individual; and their fundamental beliefs and religious community) as supportive of the European potential for integration, and to non-theological factors (communal, organisational, and individual) as obstacles to Europeanisation (Böllmann 2010).

A THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A SHIFT FROM STATE TO CIVIL SOCIETY

After the establishment of Christianity as the majority religion in the world of late antiquity, the theory of church and state developed in Medieval Europe in the context of the relation between two dominant institutions. The theological vision of the early church concerning the divine rule in history and its eschatological outcome resulted in a subordinated perception of both church and state, and a critical assessment of the existing socio-political realities.

In the second half of the Middle Ages, the development of the concept of the common good expresses the conviction that the rule of God and the hope of the world cannot be found merely in ecclesial forms. That era witnessed the emergence of a stronger sense of community and civil society. *Communitas* describes a variety of forms at a level between national or imperial powers and those individuals whom they govern: the whole population of a town, associations based on taking an oath, corporations, colleges, confraternities, and professional associations. Such developments created widespread group awareness and a desire on the part of individuals to govern themselves in these communal forms. As a consequence, the relationship between church and society could no longer be reduced to a relationship between them and a monarch, but also between them and other social groups, organisations, and institutions that shape the lives of individuals in their search for the common good.

In that same period Aristotle was rediscovered. His description of the human person as a political animal naturally fitted into the idea of a network of social relations with other persons. Aristotle's use of the concept *bonum commune* as the expression of human fulfilment through exchange of knowledge, practices, and goods, also inspired Thomas Aquinas to write his theological anthropology. According to Aquinas, the purpose of governments is to lead human persons to those social goods that are essential to their social nature. The key concept of common good is linked to related notions such as order and justice. In promoting this common good, political society may exercise a role in fulfilling the divine law as expressing God's providence in a way that exceeds Augustine's limited restraining function of secular

forces. The emergence of new communities was accompanied by a new emphasis on popular sovereignty in the writings of theologians such as John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. The political community was to serve its members by seeking the advancement of the common good; power was perceived as residing within the political community as a whole under the rule of God; it was believed that the needs of civil orders are best met by strong secular rule, free of ecclesiastical interference; and ecclesial rule was to be exercised on the basis of the whole community of believers.

The Lutheran Reformation affirmed a secular vocation outside the domain of the church as a sphere in which the divine will was to be fulfilled and the state had to play its role. The Reformed Reformation went one step further with its ambition not only to serve God in the secular realm, but also to actually transform that realm and to create a Godly society. The Protestant Reformation was inspired by the biblical theme of God's dominion over all aspects of life. In order to achieve this, Calvin opted for a close partnership between church and state. He believed that God ordained the office of the magistrate for the maintenance of peace and justice within the boundaries of the state, if necessary with the use of force. The church was to have its own divinely ordained offices that rule the church spiritually, rejecting state control. The magistrates had a duty to uphold not only the second, but also the first table of the law, which outlines our duties to God. This entailed the civil protection of Reformed churches, the suppression of serious heresy, and the prohibition of the mass. In answer to its responsibility towards the secular realm, the church took up the organisation of comprehensive education, poor relief, and moral discipline of all citizens. The magisterial Reformation strengthened the awareness of the secular vocation, while retaining the medieval vision of an organic unity of church and state.

The political and religious fragmentation on the European continent during and after the Reformation led to the appearance of national churches, which was a characteristic of Protestant nations. Since then, churches have lost their dominant position and their national status in West European society. The terrible experiences on the continent with totalitarian states gave rise to the awareness that an active civil society is the best guarantee against both the monopolisation of the search for the common good by the forces of the state, as well as against potential power abuse. David Fergusson (Fergusson 2004:148) adds solidarity and subsidiarity as two theological arguments to support the significance of civil society. In pluralistic societies, he states, local congregations and churches as religious institutions have become part of civil society contributing to the *bonum commune*.

CONCLUSION

European state church relations have become more and more alike, even if various models still exist at the constitutional level in different European nation states. In reality, they all tend toward a cooperation model, which recognises the contributions of religions to society. The state takes a neutral position on the basis of the autonomy of religions and the freedom of religion, and sees itself in the role of a facilitator in relation to religions.

European churches can live with this evolution in state church relations. In fact, they have become conscious of the fact that they should not only relate to the state, but even more so to civil society and that, as part of civil society, they can engage in dialogue with the state.

The main challenge for the European churches does not concern their relationship with the state but with civil society. European law of religion is an expression of a common European secularist mentality. God-talk has become a foreign language in the market place. It is in this context that the churches are challenged to find a role for themselves in this secularised society.

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THE ACCRA CONFESSION

An example of the ecclesiological implications of public theology²

ABSTRACT

The report of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ghana in 2004 with the title *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice*, has resonated within the Reformed churches worldwide. In this document, WARC, as an alliance of faith communities, reacts to the devastating effects of economic globalisation. It offers a faith perspective on a phenomenon, the negative consequences of which all people, but especially those in the global South, are experiencing. Following an extensive summary of the document, this article will reflect upon some ecclesiological implications and problems related to being a church that intends to speak out on social and public issues. In order to better understand the way Reformed churches tend to go public, a comparison will be made between the Accra document and a recent document issued by the Roman Catholic Church that also deals with public issues.

INTRODUCTION

The recent 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ghana in 2004 – where the Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv was represented by, among others, its General Secretary, Dr Antiev, as observer (Asling 2005:309) – produced three reports: one on covenanting, one on mission, and one on spirituality. The first one particularly, *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice*, has attracted the attention of and is resonating within Reformed churches worldwide (Asling 2005:153-160). In this document, WARC, as an alliance of faith communities, reacts to the devastating effects of economic globalisation. It offers a faith perspective on a phenomenon, the negative consequences

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2 This contribution was presented at the first conference of the Institute for Public Theology and Development Studies on the theme of Theological Education for Nation Building. It was held at the Reformed Theological Seminary, Mkar – Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria, from 28 February to 2 March 2006. This conference was instrumental in the preparation for the Joint Project on Religion and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies.

of which all people, but especially those in the global South, are experiencing. Following an extensive summary of the document, this article will reflect upon some ecclesiological implications and problems related to being a church that intends to speak out on social and public issues. In order to better understand the way Reformed churches tend to go public, a comparison will be made between the Accra document and a recent document issued by the Roman Catholic Church that also deals with public issues. It is hoped that this will contribute to an awareness of the ecclesiological issues at stake when churches decide to go public.

THE ACCRA CONFESSION AS A FAITH STANCE

The document *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice* consists of three parts, preceded by an introduction. This introduction (paragraphs 1-4) describes the background of the document. The 23rd General Council of WARC, in Debrecen in 1997, invited member churches to enter into a process of “recognition, education, and confession (*processus confessionis*)” (1). After observing that nine member churches had in the meantime committed themselves to “a faith stance” (2) and, after being confronted during the conference with the former slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast (3), the churches decided to take “a decision of faith commitment” (4).

The first section, *Reading the signs of the times*, refers to Romans 8:22 – creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for liberation. It also refers to the challenges issued by the cries of the people who suffer, and by the woundedness of creation itself (5). Scandals such as the growing income gap between rich and poor, the growing number of people living in absolute poverty, the increase in the debt of poor countries, the millions dying of preventable diseases, the poor who die from the global HIV/Aids pandemic, and women and children being the majority of those living in poverty, are all a denial of God’s call to life for all (7). The consequences of the plundering of the earth as a result of policies promoting unlimited growth among industrialised countries and the drive for profit by transnational corporations have become clear, namely the rapid extinction of species, climate change, depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, soil erosion, threats to fresh water, a global increase in storms and flooding, and the loss of livelihoods. Furthermore, increased radioactivity continues to threaten people’s health globally, and life forms and cultural knowledge are patented for financial gains (8). These signs of the times have become so alarmingly obvious that they need to be interpreted. The root cause of this massive threat to life, the document says, is the unjust economic system, a system that is defended and protected even by military might (6). This system of neoliberal economic globalisation is based on certain specific beliefs (9), namely:

- i. That ownership of private property brings no social obligation.
- ii. That wealth for all is best achieved by capital speculation, liberalisation and deregulation of the market, privatisation of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investment and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital.
- iii. That social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, and relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation.

The document unmaskes these beliefs as constituting an ideology, one that demands endless sacrifices from the poor and creation, and one that makes false promises and demands total allegiance, all of which amounts to idolatry (10). This immoral economic system is defended by “empire”, meaning

the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests (11).

Since the 1980s, through the transnationalisation of capital, neoliberalism set out to dismantle the welfare functions of the state (12). The government of the United States of America and its allies, together with international finance and trade institutions (IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization) use political, economic, or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of the owners of capital (13). In concluding this part of the document, it is stated that economic globalisation and geopolitics, backed by neoliberal ideology, protect the interests of the powerful and holds all people captive. This system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is condemned, with a reference to Jesus’ call to choose between God and Mammon (Luke 16:13), as unfaithfulness to God (15).

This analysis of the current global economic order is followed by a *Confession of faith in the face of the economic injustice and ecological destruction*, affirming that “global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians”. As a consequence, the participants in the Accra meeting felt obliged to confess before God and one another (16), and what follows is a confession of faith in the Triune God (17), Father (18-27), Son (28-31) and Holy Spirit (32-36), with corresponding anathemas. Based on faith in God’s sovereignty over all of creation and because of the promise in Christ of a life in fullness (18), economic systems that defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable, and all of creation from such fullness of life, are rejected together with any claim of economic, political, and military empire that acts contrary to God’s just rule (19). Because of God’s inclusive covenant of grace with all creation (20), the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market are rejected (21). Because of the accountability to God in terms of the dignity and well-being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation (22), the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth at the cost of millions and of God’s creation is rejected (23). Because of the justice of God, caring in a special way for the poor and calling for a just relationship with all creation (24), the ideology that puts profit before people, and all teaching that supports such an ideology in the name of the gospel are rejected (25). Because of God’s call to stand with those who are victims of injustice (26), any theology that claims that God is only with the rich, or that claims that human interests dominate nature, are rejected together with forms of injustice that destroy right relations (27).

Because Jesus brought justice to the oppressed (28), any church practice or teaching that excludes the poor or the care for creation in its mission is rejected (29). Because of God’s call for the unity of the church in order to make the reconciliation in Christ visible (30), all attempts in the church to separate justice and unity are condemned (31).

Because of the call to hope in the Spirit (32), participants committed themselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth (33), while being aware that they stand under the judgement of God's justice themselves. Complicity with the current neoliberal economic global system, acknowledgement of being captive to the culture of consumerism and competitive greed, failing to play a role as stewards and companions of nature, and the disunity of the Reformed family are all confessed as sins (34). The conviction of being called to confess, witness, and act, are reiterated (35), and this confessing part ends in Trinitarian praise of God (36).

In the final part, *Covenanting for justice*, the confession leads to a commitment to work together for justice in the economy and on earth (37-38, 42), to translate the confession in a prophetic manner to local congregations (39), to follow up the recommendations on economic justice and ecological issues (40), and to work together with others towards a just economy and the integrity of creation (41).

THE CONFSSIONAL STATUS OF THE ACCRA CONFSSION

The above summary of the content of the Accra Confession omitted a reference to one paragraph that is crucial in understanding its ecclesiological framework. Paragraph 15 reads:

Faith commitment may be expressed in various ways according to regional and theological traditions: as confession, as confessing together, as faith stance, as being faithful to the covenant of God. We choose confession, not meaning a classical doctrinal confession, because the World Alliance of Reformed Churches cannot make such a confession, but to show the necessity and urgency of an active response to the challenges of our time and the call of Debrecen. We invite member churches to receive and respond to our common witness.

The plenary debate agreed to include this explanatory paragraph in the understanding of "confession" in the draft text (Möller 2005:202-213, esp. 205).³ Seong Won Park, the Executive Secretary of WARC's Department of Cooperation and Witness, indicates that, despite the consensus about the problematic nature of today's global economy and about the need to respond in a confessional manner, some delegates were in favour of a declaration or a statement instead of a confession. In order to avoid division on the question of whether or not this issue constituted a *status confessionis*, the General Council distinguished its faith stance against economic injustice only in the form of a confession in the traditional sense (Park 2005:199). Paragraph 15 justifies this decision with a formal argument. As an alliance, not being a church itself, WARC cannot make this statement into a classical doctrinal confession, but it leaves this possibility open to individual member churches.

In fact, the confessional status of a declaration on economic injustice and ecological destruction has been part of the discussions within WARC since the suggestion to declare a *status confessionis* made by the Southern African constituency when the latter met in Kitwe, Zambia, in 1995. The Debrecen General Council of 1997 decided to allow time for careful

³ The proceedings of the meeting are vague regarding this inclusion as can be seen in Asling (2005:32-33, 42, 46).

reflection, “a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession” – a so-called *processus confessionis* – instead of a quick move to *status confessionis* (Opočenský 1997:198). The decision to continue with a confessional approach without declaring a *status confessionis* was matched by the Executive Committee in its meeting in Bangalore in 2000, which gave the process a more comprehensive name, namely “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth” (Park 2005:192). Due to uncertainty on the right way to address economic issues as confessional issues, the assembly broadened the scope with an action aspect: confession leads to covenanting – another typical Reformed focus (Smit 2004:172-174).

The call for *status confessionis* at the regional meeting in Kitwe in 1995 echoed the earlier statement by the 22nd General Council in Seoul in 1989 on the issue of a *status confessionis*, namely that

[a]ny declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error to truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical. The declaration of a *status confessionis* refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teaching. The church’s practice in the relevant case must conform to the confession of the gospel demanded by the declaration of *status confessionis*. The declaration of a *status confessionis* addresses a particular situation. It brings to light an error which threatens a specific church. Nevertheless the danger inherent in that error also calls in question the integrity of proclamation of all churches. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing (Opočenský 1990:173-175).

Milan Opočenský described the change of “status” in Kitwe to “process” in Debrecen as a shift in focus from credibility and faithfulness to effectiveness (Opočenský 2003:392). Explaining the term *status confessionis*, he stresses the need for a radically challenging situation, a *Grenzsituation*, a matter of life and death, as a necessary condition before we can call it a *status confessionis* (Opočenský 2003:394; Smit 2004:170). Opočenský understands the confessional terminology as part of the Reformed tradition, always struggling for an adequate expression of Reformed faith in every new circumstance and place, and at every new time (Opočenský 2003:393). He refers to the examples of the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany in 1934 and the Belhar Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986 (Opočenský 2003:393-394).

The Debrecen General Assembly stated that the current economic injustice and ecological destruction has reached a crisis level to the extent that it has become a matter of life and death: the survival of planet Earth is at stake.⁴ The Accra General Assembly confirmed

⁴ “In many parts of the world, Reformed churches and communities are challenged by the appalling circumstances in which many people live and by the threat of the ongoing destruction of the environment. Many believe that the time has come to make a confession of faith which rejects and struggles against these injustices, while affirming our faith in the triune God who in Christ offers a new creation” (*Debrecen 1997*, in Asling 2005:197-198).

this conviction by affirming that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and discipleship as Christians, and that by remaining silent or refusing to act, the integrity of the faith is at stake (§16).

ECCLESIOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS BEHIND THE ACCRA CONFESSION

As became clear in the overview of the development of the Accra Confession, the urgency of the current disastrous economic and ecological situation was put on the agenda of WARC by the Southern African churches. And, as an article by René Krüger, President of the *Institutio Universitaria* ISEDET in Buenos Aires shows, some Latin American churches have been supporting this plea wholeheartedly. He describes the Accra Confession with perspectives from the South as very challenging, especially for the churches and individual Christians from the North (Krüger 2005:226-233). Krüger's point of departure is the injustice and human despair caused by the devastating collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001, resulting in a social explosion. He challenges the North's hermeneutical approach to neoliberal globalisation with its logic of "keep the good and correct the bad". Krüger urges churches, especially those of the North, to choose what he calls a "hermeneutics of life".

What are you doing about the religion of Mammon? Which themes are defining the agendas of congregational councils, the meetings of church leaders, synods? What motivates professors and students in theological faculties where the next generation of ministers and teachers of religious education are trained? Which are the overarching concerns, themes and tasks of theology and church policy? What part is played in your reflection by the connection between money, property, poverty and eternal life? In this regard the South today is also asking the North: Are you willing to share with us the Bible's critical presentation of social, economic and political developments? Are you willing to share with us the fundamental biblical concerns for a life in love, dignity and abundance? (Krüger 2005:233).

These powerful and challenging questions make it very clear that, for the churches to speak out on social issues, they need a hermeneutical reorientation. Speaking out on social issues – thus, practising public theology – is not just an occasional business, but also an expression of a church that has gone through a conversion process. Krüger is addressing in the first place the churches of the North, but in the context of this conference he also puts the issue on the table of the Reformed Theological Seminary of Mkar-Gboko – at the moment its staff is considering the development of the theological curriculum for the coming year – and challenges the NKST synod to make social issues a substantial element of its agenda as well.

However, besides that, the logic of Krüger's argument also reveals another aspect of the ecclesiological presuppositions behind the Accra Confession. The acceptance or refusal of neo-liberal globalisation is linked to the choice between Mammon and God. As a consequence, the rejection of this economic model must take the form of a confessional statement. From what has been described in the previous paragraph, it becomes clear that not all partner churches within WARC will follow the same logic. And the Nigerian churches' theological seminaries, too, are invited by WARC to consider the way they think critical

social issues are best addressed publicly – by statements or by confessions? Can a faith stance on pressing social issues be expressed only in a confession, or is the option of a statement a better sign that the church is not making the radical choice between God and Mammon?

A PLEA FOR A RESTRAINT IN THE USE OF CONFESSIONAL LANGUAGE

In order to stimulate the discussion on the ecclesiological consequences of public theology, one not only can put forward some ecclesiological presuppositions underlying the Accra Confession, but some arguments for a restraint in the use of confessional language, should churches take a faith stance as advocated above. Already before the start of the Accra General Assembly, Ulrich Möller published some critical questions on a *status confessionis* (Möller 2004:176-189). This Ulrich Duchrow tried to refute (Duchrow 2004:200-204). In my opinion they are still on the table after the final draft of the General Assembly has been accepted.

Regarding the difference between Barmen, Belhar and Accra

Although the Accra text itself does not refer to the Barmen Declaration or the Belhar Confession, it is evident to everybody that these documents were inspiring examples, most of all for Southern African churches that initiated the process that led to the acceptance of the Accra Confession. Still, an important difference remains between the former two documents and the Accra Confession. Through their heretical identification of church and “Volk”, the *Deutsche Christen* jeopardised the unity of the church, as did the Dutch Reformed Church with its theological justification of apartheid. However, in the case of an unjust economy and ecological destruction, no member church of WARC is justifying neoliberal globalisation in its teachings. It is a moral issue that demands a strongly worded condemnation by the church. We most definitely find ourselves in a situation that demands urgent theological reflection (and action) by the churches; however, I do not think this should be done in the form of a *processus confessionis*. Duchrow’s reference to the “prosperity gospel” is not convincing (it is not the official church teaching of the member churches of WARC), nor is his reference to the hidden agenda of the neoliberal market economy (2004:202-203) (in contrast to the open intentions of the Nazi and apartheid ideologies) a sufficient ground for a *status confessionis*. Therefore, I prefer to restrict the use of confessions to situations where, due to heretical teaching, the unity of the church is a stake.

Regarding the risk of the strategy

It remains questionable whether the theological reflection in the long term is really helped by the declaration of a *processus confessionis* when many churches in reality are still only beginning to theologially reflect on the global economy (Möller 2004:184-185). In the short term, a strongly worded condemnation of the ideology of neoliberal economic globalisation, defended by empire, might seem a victory in the struggle to fight its terrible consequences. However, when it becomes clear that the situation is more complex than the analysis offered in the Accra Confession, the individual faithful and synods may come to distrust the analysis of WARC – they may lose sight of the fact that this document admits to the enormity and

complexity of the situation, and intends to refrain from simple answers. Not all synods may react in a way similar to that of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, which endorsed the conclusions of the document without fully accepting what it considered an incomplete analysis, and because they had reservations about the form of the Accra Confession.⁵ Other churches may not be inclined to consider economic globalisation as a faith issue under the pretext that they cannot agree with an incomplete analysis combined with a confessional statement, or because they are of the opinion that the identity of the church is not at stake. So it is questionable whether addressing this very pressing economic issue in confessional language (declaring a *status confessionis* or a *processus confessionis*) is the best way to put pressure on the churches, especially those of the North.

Regarding the danger of ideology

Putting theological emphasis on the issue by way of the declaration of a *processus confessionis* increases the risk of the ideological abuse of theology. It is one thing to translate the ethical challenges of neoliberal globalisation in terms of faith affirmations (Botman 2003:381), but it is another to suggest that the declaration of a *processus confessionis* on this issue will eventually result in the declaration of a *status confessionis* that will decide who is inside and who is outside the communion of the church.⁶ Under pressure of Nazi and apartheid ideology, some Christians in Germany and later in South Africa were tempted to supply a theological justification of the identification of *Volk* and race. It remains a warning for us today not to go the same way by radicalising theological justifications or condemnations on ethical issues that open the door for theologically justified ideological stances. Instead of declaring a *processus confessionis* that may lead to a *status confessionis*, or of demonising economic structures and mechanisms, there is a need for “recognition, education, and confession”, as the Accra document says. However, this process of recognition, education, and confession should be separated from a connotation of heresy in which the unity of the church is at stake.

Regarding the Reformed character of this statement

Dirkie Smit refers to the specific Reformed character of the confessional approach in the Accra Confession in its reference to specific situations, in its appeal to action, and in the use of Reformed theological themes – such as the sovereignty of God, the rejection of idolatry,

⁵ The General Synod 24/25 November 2005 of the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* accepted the Accra Confession, although it preferred the expression “Accra Declaration”. In preparation, the members of the synod were offered a paper on faith and the economy with the title *Accra’s appel* (“Accra’s appeal”). It refers, among other things, to the identification of the actors in economic globalisation as international financial institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, “Washington”, and Transnational Cooperations. This was considered a simplification, because first, in many cases, the intention is not the impoverishment of people and, second, because more actors are involved, including the consumers, even from the South. The report explains the problem of the neoliberal globalisation in terms of the dominance of the (current) financial system (p. 12). The Accra document is described as a document in which the church speaks in a prophetic and confessional manner. The prophetic element refers to the experience of and the option for the poor and suffering, while the confessional aspect refers to the hopeful perspective of the kingdom of God.

⁶ Cf. the title Möller’s 2004 article, “Folgt im ökumenischen Prozess des Bekenkens jetzt die Feststellung des *status confessionis*? Standortbestimmung vor der Generalversammlung des Reformierten Weltbundes 2004 in Accra.”

the confession of responsibility for economic injustice, and the confessional and covenantal approach (Smit 2004:164-174). However, such a reference to the “Reformed character” is not without danger. Other Reformed Christians who see themselves as proud heirs of the Reformed confessions and traditions in the Netherlands reject the Accra Confession, not because it deals with an economic issue, but because they are of the opinion that the document takes as its point of departure non-Reformed presuppositions on the understanding of God, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. Many Reformed churches proudly claim to be heirs to a tradition that produced such brave documents as the Barmen Declaration and the Belhar Confession. However, especially since being Reformed, a self-critical reflex forces us to admit that we are the Christian tradition with the worst record of church schisms in history. More than once, a dogmatic, ecclesiological, or ethical difference of opinion proved so divisive that a *status confessionis* was declared, which led to a permanent break in communion. At the same time, it is important to be aware that all major Christian traditions have become aware of the need to address the terrible consequences of economic globalisation. Recently, the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, also dealt with economic and ecological issues, and spoke out on them by accepting the so-called AGAPE Document, without feeling the need to make a new confessional statement on these issues in the way the Accra Confession did.

DEUS CARITAS EST

After the identification of some ecclesiological presuppositions in the Accra Confession and the discussion of the nature of its confessional language as examples of ecclesiological issues related to public theology, this section focuses on another contemporary example of public theology, but from another Christian tradition. In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI published his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, on Christian love.⁷ It is a totally different genre of church document, but what the Pope writes in it helps us to see more clearly the ecclesiological element at stake. Encyclicals are open pastoral letters written by popes. Its addressees are the clergy, those who have taken religious vows, as well as all the lay faithful. With his letter on *caritas*, the pope focuses the attention of believers on the core of Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny (§1). He frames his encyclical in the context of “a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance and even a duty of hatred and violence” (1). The Pope unfolds the theme of Christian love in two connected parts: the first, under the title of “The Unity of Love in Creation and in Salvation History”, is on the love God lavishes upon us. The second part, entitled “Caritas: the Practice of Love by the Church as a ‘Community of Love’”, is on the love that we, in turn, must share with others. In the context of the theme of this conference on public theology, the focus here will be on the second part.

⁷ Originally planned to be published on 25 December 2005, but actually released on 25 January 2006, the day of the commemoration of the conversion of Saint Paul.

This second part offers a description of “the Church’s charitable activity as a manifestation of Trinitarian love” (19) and continues with the description of charity as a responsibility of the Church, both on the level of each individual member, as well as on the level of the entire ecclesial community. This responsibility has had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the beginning, as is attested by Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-37. Believers held all things in common and there was no longer any distinction between rich and poor. As the Church grew, this radical communion could not be preserved, but its essential core remained: within the community of believers there can never be room for poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified existence (20). The communal ministry of charity became part of the fundamental structure of the Church in the formation of the group of seven deacons (Acts 6) (21) and proved to be one of her essential activities (22-24). Thus, the first conclusion of this section of the encyclical can only be that, next to the proclamation of the Word of God (*kerygma-marturia*) and celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*) is part of the Church’s threefold responsibility, which expresses her deepest nature. And second, in the Church as God’s family in the world, no one ought to go without the necessities of life and, at the same time, its charity also extends beyond the boundaries of the church (25).

The Pope then continues his reflection with a section on justice and charity, which is particularly interesting for our conference. Since the nineteenth century, the objection has been raised – especially by Marxism – that the poor do not need charity but justice, and that, instead of contributing through individual works of charity to maintaining the status quo, we need to build a just social order in which all receive their share of the world’s goods and will no longer depend on charity. The Pope admits that there is truth to this argument. The pursuit of justice must be a fundamental norm of the State, and the aim of a just social order must be to guarantee each person a share of the community’s goods (26). After the industrialisation of society in the nineteenth century, the Church’s leadership was initially slow to react. However, since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, the Church has permanently developed its social teaching into a social doctrine offering fundamental guidelines (27). The Pope points out two elements that must be taken into consideration if one wants to define the relationship between justice and charity. First of all, the Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet, at the same time, she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. Second, *caritas* will always prove necessary, even in the most just society (28). Promoting justice being an indirect duty of the Church, one element of her core business is doing charity, doing what corresponds to her nature (29). Globalisation has created more channels for communication and humanitarian assistance, and cooperation between State, Church agencies, and Roman Catholic and other churches’ charitable agencies (30). Still, the Church’s charitable activities have their own distinctiveness. The Pope distinguishes between three essential elements of Christian and ecclesial charity:

- i. Christian *caritas* is not only executed with professional competence but also with a heartfelt concern.
- ii. Christian *caritas* must be independent of parties and ideologies, because it is not a means of changing the world ideologically and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which humankind always needs.
- iii. Charity cannot be used as a means of engaging in proselytism (31).

Finally, the Pope turns his attention to those responsible for the Church's charitable activity. The true subject of various Catholic organisations that undertake a ministry of charity is the Church herself, at all levels, from all parishes, through the particular churches, to the universal Church. The fundamental ecclesial nature of the ministry of *caritas* becomes clear in the promise made by the ordained bishop in the ordination rite to be welcoming and merciful to the poor and all those in need of consolidation and assistance (32). Thus, the personnel who carry out the Church's charitable activity must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love. As a consequence, the personnel of Catholic charitable organisations want to work with the Church and therefore with the Bishop (33). Interior openness to the Catholic dimension of the Church stands not in contradiction with working harmoniously with other organisations, and respects what is distinctive about the service, which Christ requested of his disciples. The activities should be driven by love, humility, and prayer (34-36). In *caritas*, faith, hope, and prayer go together (39). In conclusion, the Pope refers to the examples of the saints and especially to Mary (40-42).

This document is only indirectly linked to our theme. If we have identified the agenda behind the Accra Confession as the intention to put pressure on the churches of the North to be more outspoken in their condemnation of the neoliberal globalisation, then we can refer to the appeal made on Catholic charitable organisations to confirm and strengthen their Christian, Roman Catholic identity as the core of the encyclical. In relation to our topic, a few elements may be mentioned that may help to identify issues that have to be taken into consideration when developing a public theology.

- Reading *Deus Caritas Est*, one is struck by the development of the argument from the heart of the Christian message in strong biblical and theological language, with the exception of a few passages, to which Reformed Christians can easily relate. It will be a challenge for churches going public on ethical issues, to relate their convictions well to what is at stake in Scripture, to the confessions and theological traditions of the church through the ages. The more the actual ethical stances of churches have deep roots in the Bible and the tradition of the church, the more convincing their arguments will be. By starting with an economic analysis and the conciseness of the references to Christian principles in the confessional part, the Accra Confession lacks being embedded in strong theological discourse.
- *Deus Caritas Est* reminds us of the role Christian tradition has traditionally reserved for the State. The Accra Confession does not only lament the eclipse of the nation state under the economic pressure and ideology of neoliberal globalisation, it also seems to

presuppose that the church itself will be the instrument to realise the dream of a just society. After the rise of the nation states, expectations soared, even expectations that they might turn out to be the instruments par excellence to establish the kingdom of God. After bad experiences with state power and the pressure it feels from economic globalisation, a tendency is growing of not expecting any positive influence of state power in relation to justice. When churches go public, they have to consider the role they expect the State to play.

- *Deus Caritas Est* links its theological discourse on *caritas* to the ministerial structures of the church. The *caritas* promise in the ordination rite of the bishop signifies the centrality of *caritas* in the life of the church. It presents a very strong argument why the church feels obliged to speak out on issues such as *caritas* and justice. It is part of its central mission. Reformed churches have a somewhat different ecclesiology that identifies the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as the central marks of the church. Public theology within the Reformed tradition will be strengthened if it can be related to the way it understands preaching and the sacraments. It will be a challenge to find ways to relate the preaching ministry of the church to social issues people are faced with. As long as the interpretation of Scripture and proclamation is understood solely in terms of individual salvation, it will be difficult to explain why it should be a task of the church to also consider social issues. When the minister understands his/her calling to minister the Word not only in terms of relating to his own congregants but also in terms of reaching out to those outside of it as well, then public theology becomes part of reaching out to society and its issues. Once baptism is explained as burying the old life with its old communal belongings and as beginning a new life in Christ in which there is neither Jew nor gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free person, then one realises the social implications of baptism. When the Lord's Supper is joyfully experienced as a time of brother and sisterhood at the table where the Lord Jesus is the host, then the public theology of the church will become embedded much more strongly in its sacramental interpretation of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

If churches, ecclesial bodies, or theological institutes want to go public and engage in public theology, they are forced to consider important ecclesiological issues such as the style (confessional or in the form of a declaration), the role of the State, and the relationship between public issues and their (the churches') central ecclesiological structures. I hope the new Institute for Public Theology and Development Studies in Mkar-Gboko, Nigeria, will contribute to the global ecclesiological discussions on these topics.

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A ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIONS AND THE STATE IN SEARCH OF THE COMMON GOOD IN NIGERIA²

ABSTRACT

This paper uses “Religion” and “state” interchangeably for church and politics, church and government, and church and civil society. The two are undeniably autonomous and function in different domains, and yet they live in sybiosis, sharing common concerns and interests. The Church’s mission is apolitical, but she cannot remain on the sidelines in her prophetic office of relating the Gospel to the practical world of today for the sake of the promotion and salvation of humanity. To arrive at a “Roman Catholic perspective” on the need for cooperation towards the common good, the paper reflects upon specific papal documents, pastoral letters, and episcopal communiqués. Finally, within the current Nigerian context, the fight against increasing poverty and misery, injustice, and the apparent flourishing of the greedy and corrupt, are identified as examples of possible areas for collaboration between church and state.

One of the most important social teachings of the Church [from here on “Church” will refer to the Roman Catholic Church] is the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII entitled *Rerum Novarum*, which was published in 1891. The document emphasises the need for just wages and decent working conditions for workers. In 1961, Pope John XXIII expanded on this in another encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*. In it he deplored the widening gap between rich and poor nations to which he proffered a solution by advocating aid to less developed countries. The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (the so-called “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”), issued in 1966, contains elements that express the solidarity of the Church with the whole human family and gives great insight into the Church’s commitment to political progress for the sake of the common good. The search for a fair society inspired His Holiness Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (“On the Development of Peoples”) in 1967.

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Lending his voice to this social tradition of the Church, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical entitled *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), affirmed the existence of great inadequacy in today's economic and political structures. Marking the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio* in 1987, the Pope emphasised, in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the need for the development of humankind and a society that would respect and promote all dimensions of the human person. In his recent encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, the current Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, provides a point of departure for this discussion when, in distinguishing between the roles of the Church and state, he asserted that, while the Church does not have a political mission, she nevertheless has a political responsibility. According to the Pontiff,

[t]he Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of common good is something which concerns the Church deeply (Benedict XVI 2006:6).

In fact, as one African leader, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, once noted, the church represents the “moral conscience of a nation, and she is expected to spell out what is good or bad, right or wrong, in the public life of a given community” (quoted by Byrne 1988:85). In 1973, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, when speaking to Church leaders, also stated that

[u]nless we participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organisations which condemn people to poverty, humiliation and degradation, the church will become irrelevant to people, and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. Unless the church, its members and its organisations, express God's love for people by involvement and leadership in constructive protest against the present conditions of humankind, then it will become identified with injustice and persecution. If this happens, it will die, and humanly speaking deserve to die (Nyerere 1972:1).

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has not been lacking in its contribution towards the spiritual and material progress of Nigeria. Conscious of the fact that the Church “has the right always and everywhere to proclaim moral principles even in respect of the social order, and to make judgements about any human matter in so far as this is required by fundamental human rights or the salvation of souls” (Canon 747, par. 2), the Conference has never minced its words on matters pertaining to the temporal common good or welfare of the people.

In view of its specific role – arising from the commission given to the Church by her founder, Jesus Christ, to be “the light of the world”, “the salt of the earth”, and “the leaven” of society – the Conference in the past strove to guide, warn, inspire, and nurture the development

of Nigeria through various pastoral letters and communiqués to enable people to seek human ends and find human fulfilment (cf. Schineller 2002).

THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT TODAY

Nigeria, the tenth largest country in Africa and inhabited by about 140 million people, became a sovereign state in 1960, having gained independence from Britain. Since then the country has transformed in all facets of development, from three regional governments to a 12-state entity, and later to 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. There are now 774 Local Government Councils in Nigeria, and here, too, different phases of transformation have occurred at different paces.

The religious context

Judging by external manifestations of religiosity, Nigeria clearly projects the image of a very religious nation. This fact in itself has a positive value which should neither be denied nor underrated. In fact, a countrywide survey, conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2003, described Nigerians as the most religious people in the world. Religion has been one of a few factors that have succeeded in bringing together under one umbrella sizeable numbers of Nigerians, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations. This positive role notwithstanding, it is our national experience that, in the name of religion, a lot of evil has been perpetrated in our society and many crises have arisen, which have devastated the nation and caused untold hardship to many people. Religion has been so politicised, militarised and manipulated by unscrupulous politicians that fraud, rivalry, political antagonism and ethnic discrimination committed behind the mask of “religion” now pose about the greatest threat to national understanding and peaceful co-existence.

In light of the above, it is no wonder religion appears to be one of the problems of our nation rather than a solution to them. The question is, therefore, how can religion have an effective, positive impact on our nation? The problem does not lie with religion in itself, but with the misuse and abuse of religion due to sectional, social, or economic interests, or political ambitions and ethnic considerations.

The social context

Despite the obvious effects of the earlier “oil boom” in certain places and the fact that there are clear signs of material prosperity in Nigeria, misery seems to be written on the faces of most people as they go about their struggle for survival. Poverty seems to be on the increase, unemployment has reached crisis proportions, and hunger and starvation are now causing havoc among more and more people. In fact, Nigeria must have a very, very high score on any “suffering index” at the moment. According to a World Bank report, “Nigeria presents a paradox: the country is rich, but her people are poor” (cf. Awe 1999). And according to Ali-Akpajiak (2003:2), “Nigeria’s performance in terms of social indicators is increasingly

and steadily among the worst in sub-Saharan Africa and throughout the developing world". In none of the development indices, whether with regard to education, health, water, environment, infrastructure, access to justice, maternal/child mortality, etc., does Nigeria achieve a pass mark. The country is among the poorest in the world according to statistics released by the United Nations Development Index. She produces an average of 2.2 million barrels of oil daily and has been able to raise \$320 billion since 1970, yet evidence shows that these oil dollars have been squandered, mismanaged, or stolen from the country by a corrupt few who have "infected the moral fabric of the society contributing to group rivalries and loss of national direction" (Ali-Akpajiak & Toni 2003:2, quoting the 1998/1999 report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for Nigeria). Owing to the deliberate, reckless and persistent manner in which public officials pilfer away the nation's resources, Nigeria has been ranked one of the four most corrupt nations by Transparency International (Ali-Akpajiak & Toni 2003:12). Finally, according to the World Bank Report, the poor in Nigeria have a cash income that is insufficient to cover minimum standards of food, water, fuel, shelter, medical care and schooling. But what is even more distressing is the fact that Nigerians get poorer with the passage of time and in the same proportion as the national income increases. This is defended by the UNDP in its recent report on Nigeria, which states that "the inescapable picture of Nigeria as one of the poorest countries in the world is not in doubt ... she is worse off today than in the 1980s" (*Nigeria 2000/2001 Human Development Report* in Ali-Akpajiak & Toni 2003:6).

Infrastructure

In terms of infrastructure, Nigeria has been rated among the worst in the world. There are few functional roads, and up to 75% of Nigerian communities have no access roads. The health system is degenerate, with obsolete equipment and dilapidated hospital buildings. There are enough resources to provide for adequate medical care for Nigerians, but millions die daily of simple preventable diseases. Today, Nigeria has one of the highest maternal and child mortality rates in the whole world. It also has the resources to give all its citizens a free education, but at present, illiteracy is a major challenge; educational facilities have broken down, and the few educated persons are increasingly being lost to the "brain drain". Furthermore, Nigeria has the resources to give its people employment, but millions of school leavers are roaming the streets in search of jobs that do not exist.

It is said that in no country have politicians shown as much contempt for its electorate as in Nigeria. The government lacks the vision and the political will to bring positive change to the lives of the people, who for so long have been wallowing in a pit of poverty, suffering, and want. Citizens also further these anomalies by their permissiveness and their positive disposition to abuse. Their mindset has come to accept suffering and poverty as a way of life. In summary, Nigeria has been described as a society in transition, situated halfway between the traditional world of the pre-capitalist, pre-colonial past, and the modern world of urban life, industry and global communications.

In a situation such as this, where poverty and misery are on the increase, where injustice is the order of the day, and the corrupt and the greedy seem to be the only successful ones, one wonders if the Church should just keep quiet, watch, pray, and continue to console the victims of the system to humbly accept their suffering with Christian fortitude as they wait for the eternal kingdom of everlasting happiness? The land is no doubt rich and the people intelligent, but it has been stripped bare by a corrupt, selfish, greedy and callous elite (Ehusani 1966:26). There are many without any visible means of earning a livelihood: the orphans, the unprotected, the uncared for, the sick, and the disabled. This situation issues some quite daunting challenges to religious groups in Nigeria.

THE CHURCH AND THE STATE

The American theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, who produced a classic work on Christianity and human society, is of the opinion that the question regarding the relationship between the Church and the State is by no means a new one, and that “the problem has been an enduring one through all the Christian centuries” (Niebuhr 1957:2). Difficult as the task may seem, it is absolutely necessary that we recognise the common ground or values shared by the two. State and church undeniably function in different domains, but they also share some concern and common interest.

Without a doubt, the Church is in the world, “[s]he exists in the world, living and acting with it” (Okolo 1991:285). She forms a society in this world composed of men and women, that is, of members of the earthly city who have a call to form the family of God’s children during the present history of the human race (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 48). She is at once a visible association and a spiritual community, constituted and structured as a society in this world, but primarily on behalf of heavenly values. Her task, in brief, is: “to serve as leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40). The documents of the Church are clear that its Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, gave this Church no specific mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which he set before her is a *religious* one. However,

[o]ut of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light, and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law ... [the Church] can and indeed should initiate activities on behalf of all men [*sic*] especially those designed for the needy, such as the work of mercy and similar undertakings (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 2).

A state is a definite entity where law and order are maintained within a defined boundary by a supreme or coercive authority. The basic concern of state is to promote the common good and welfare of its citizens. Its task is to spell out the fundamental values of each community in the temporal sphere, and to provide the community with ways and means to live an honest, just, and peaceful life, combatting all elements of backwardness – lawlessness, poverty, hunger, ignorance, disease, and corruption (Agostino 2001:12). This is achieved through governance, expressed in the institution of the polity.

It is generally agreed that both Church and state are autonomous and independent societies in their own right, but that they are also complementary to each other in more ways than one. The two are different, but nevertheless linked within the design of God in Christ. They live in a symbiosis (Okolo 1991:285). The point, therefore, is that the mission of the Church is not just spiritual. It is temporal as well and, on this count, the Christian is a citizen of both these worlds.

Both church and state are concerned with the same persons and their actions and relationships – the same persons who are expected to be loyal to both church and state. Many issues touch them both and bind them together – areas of mutual interest that may potentially cause conflict. Issues such as family planning, the sale and use of contraceptives, abortion, euthanasia, bribery and corruption, wages, strikes, housing, unemployment, detention without trial, freedom of speech, the place of religion in education, are of interest to both religion and politics – even if they often disagree on the issues themselves. During his visit to Nigeria, Pope John Paul II (1980:212), speaking to the leaders of government on “our common concern for humanity”, declared that, in their own fields, the political community and the Church are autonomous and independent; however, their common concern for humankind brings them together and invites them to collaborate for the welfare of all. The difficulty in the relationship between church and state did not appear when the medieval unity of religion and culture broke down, rendering the spiritual distinct from the temporal, but it has existed since the time of the disciples of Jesus who found it hard to purge their faith in the Son of God from all ideas of a political Messiah. In fact, the prophets again and again bear witness to the failure of the covenant people of God to draw the proper conclusions, with regard to social relations within a nation and between nations, from their belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This already suggests the blind alleys into which Christians can stray, and have often strayed, when defining that relationship.

One sometimes hears accusations against the Church of it interfering in politics. By this it is often meant that official church spokespersons and personnel, the ordained ministers, are taking political positions or making political statements. Such accusations are more often than not unfounded, and are usually the ranting of those who are uncomfortable with statements made regarding one area of common concern to the Church and politics. While as mother-to-all, it is indeed not the mission of the Church to engage in party politics, to sponsor a political party, or to make political choices on behalf of the laity; it remains her duty to identify the objectionable moral elements in the ways governments formulate solutions to problems, and to relate the gospel to the practical world of today.

The Church is a universal moral authority, which exercises her prophetic office in the interest of human promotion and salvation. There is today no quarrel among Christians about the need to order social relations so that justice, freedom, and peace are promoted, and so that human rights are respected. Nyerere, in a categorical statement on the inescapable duty of the church, expressed the view that

[t]he church has to help men rebel against their slums; it has to help them do this in the most effective way it can be done. But most of all the church

must be obviously and openly fighting all those institutions and power groups, which contribute to the existence and maintenance of the physical and spiritual slums, regardless of the consequence to it or its members ... the church must work with the people in the positive tasks of building a future based on social justice (1972:1).

The basis for the church's involvement in social services

During His earthly life, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, went about healing the sick, feeding the hungry, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead to life. The Church must continue to give witness to Christ by her involvement in humankind's social welfare. This involvement can take different forms depending on those involved, the place and the time, and according to different possibilities available in different situations.

As was seen earlier, since the establishment of the Church in Nigeria, the social well-being of its people has never been forgotten by those who direct her affairs. The first institutions that come to mind are schools and hospitals of various kinds and grades. However, the contribution to the social welfare contribution of Nigerians by the Church also went beyond such visible examples. The preaching of the gospel, with its emphasis on the love of one's neighbour, on justice, on universal brother and sisterhood and on fundamental human rights, could not fail to have an immediate influence on the social sphere in the country. Moreover, the promotion of modern childcare, adult literacy campaigns, premarital training centres, vocational trade schools, and domestic science centres have also been a feature of the Church's efforts.

In the recent past, a greater desire has become visible for control over certain institutions of the Church by government at various levels. In some federal states, this has culminated in "take-overs" – a very emotive word. However, even in the midst of these take-overs, people realise that the Church has a role to play in the social and economic development of the country. No matter, therefore, what institutions or services are taken over by government, the Church retains her duty to show concern for people's social welfare. The Church would not be true to her nature if she retired into the sacristy, and engaged in closed-circuit television of self-entertainment in sacred liturgy, splendidly isolated from the world outside. The Church must refuse to be made to look like an interesting relic from the Middle Ages. All of this means that various members of the Church need to be involved.

Our religions should continue to emphasise and promote the positive involvement of their followers in the betterment of the earthly city. They should share the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people of this age – especially of the poor or of those who are in any way afflicted, and also in Nigeria: a Nigeria of breath-taking economic potential, of salary increases and high prices, extensive oil reserves and other kinds of mineral wealth, a Nigeria of about 140 million people with rich cultural values, but also a Nigeria not immune to materialism, guilty of exploitation of the weak, of mismanagement, challenged by unemployment, the inadequate development of agriculture, the constant failure of water and electricity supply to urban centres, and a Nigeria with an ever-increasing widening of the gap between rich and poor. It is in this Nigeria that the different religious groups are called upon to cooperate with the state in coordinating its social services.

In his *The Gospel to every creature*, (Cardinal) Suenens (1963) argued that it is useless to speak to the outcasts of the world about prayer, about heaven and the rest, because they will not listen. According to him one should rather

... speak to them of justice, labour and work with them to obtain indispensable reforms and then Christianity will have some meaning for them. What the poor, humiliated, oppressed and marginalized people are yearning for is a religion that is consoling, reassuring, empowering and promising (Suenens 1963:123).

Some Christian churches are known to have declared the active involvement in politics as a no-go area for their clergy and officials, and rightly so. However, people misunderstand these churches when they want to extend such prohibition to the laity. The lay Christian must not be viewed merely as a non-cleric with a “share” in a church’s mission resulting from his or her baptism and confirmation. A fully-fledged Christian lives in the world and obeys the Lord’s command to make the world subordinate to Him through their work and their full participation in all the activities of the wider society. This also gives them ample opportunity to demonstrate their Christian values. They, therefore, obey the command to follow Christ – i.e. to sanctify the world – be it as a labourer, housewife, businessman, civil servant, politician, scientist, or whatever. Hence, Christians wishing to follow Christ must not withdraw from the world, merely lamenting its ills, and take refuge in Sunday observance. They must rather commit themselves in the world through their education, skills, and vocational responsibilities to become God’s companions in creation. Seclusion from and contempt of the world does not amount to the imitation of Christ; instead, these lead lay Christians away from the path of their duty, even if this has not always been accepted in the history of Christian lay piety.

It is, therefore, not only a sociological but also a theological preposition to say that the lay Christian can sanctify his or her life in the world and not in seclusion from it, and that in so doing he or she can follow Christ. As a Christian, it is one’s duty to give substance to one’s faith in Christ through one’s work – in the world – and to accept the world as one’s field of commitment and sanctification. One’s occupation, therefore, is not merely a burdensome labour to earn a living; it has to do with creation and salvation.

Religious groups in Nigeria are challenged to be aware of the problems the country faces. They should be aware of bribery and corruption, embezzlement of government and company funds, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the parade of wealth by many who have it, and many other problems of our contemporary society. Authentic religion cannot be a passive spectator in the unfolding of such events. Its followers should not only ensure that they do not partake in these practices or worsen the situation, but should also find ways, alone and with others, to solve these problems. If a Christian, for example, holds a local, state, or national office; if a Christian is a local councillor, a minister or whatever, he or she must remember it is the duty of every member of the political elite to “wash the feet of one’s fellow human beings”. The task of such officials is to serve, and they must view their time in office as a time of special responsibility – not towards him or herself, but rather towards the common good.

SUGGESTIONS TOWARDS LIBERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The picture of Nigeria painted above is not a flattering one. What cannot be emphasised strongly enough is that poverty and social ills in Nigeria are humanly-made, by-products of human greed, over-reaching ambition, injustice, classism and structural exploitation. Many Nigerians are simply victims of power struggles and socio-political structures created by the rich and powerful. From this perspective the problem is not poverty as such, but the widening gap between the super-rich and super-poor, the super-powerful and super-powerless; those with and those without property; the job-holders and the jobless, as Nyerere (1972:1), once put it.

The task before the Nigerian state and religions as dictated by life situations of our people should be clear: it is a situation that cries for liberation and for development. And, since development is enhanced by peace, it means that the Nigerian state and the Church have to be committed to peace. Furthermore, since peace is inseparable from justice, it means that the Church and the state must be totally committed to justice.

“I have seen the affliction of my people. I have heard their cry. Indeed, I know their sufferings. I have come to deliver them” (Ex. 3:7). Here we find the reason for Yahweh’s leading his people onto the path to liberation. The cries of Nigerians against injustice, exploitation, poverty, artificial inflation, etc., have become impossible not to hear. What is to be struggled against are not just personal, individual sins but social sins, institutionalised sin, sin located in socio-political structures. As Pope Paul VI (1967: n. 47) put it:

It is not just a matter of eliminating hunger, nor even of reducing poverty ... It is a question rather of building a world where every man [*sic*], no matter what his [*sic*] race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control.

In response to the cry of the people and the call of the Lord, the Church must find the ways and means of guiding the state in such a way as “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour” (Lk. 4:18-19). The building of the kingdom of justice and peace is the commission and mandate given by Jesus to his church and followers. This mission calls for conversion on the personal level, a spiritual revolution regarding our behaviour and attitude to life. It also calls for a response at the social level, challenging us to play our part to ensure that truth and justice prevail so that our society can live in peace and tranquillity.

It is also the task of the Church to challenge her members to make faith relevant in action, and to translate the good news within their own milieu. Matthew 25 will then become not simply a bible passage, but a “magna carta” for life: seeing Christ hungry and feeding them, naked and clothing them, thirsty and providing them with a clean water supply, sick and fighting the prevalence of disease with preventive healthcare and good medical service; without shelter and working to provide decent housing for all; seeing them imprisoned and working to make such institutions unnecessary or at least more humane.

In the extreme circumstances one finds in Nigeria today, pledges, pious admonitions and enunciations of principles for a more egalitarian society are not enough. What is needed is a more prophetic Church endowed with the wisdom that comes from God the Father, equipped with the vision that comes from Jesus Christ the Son, and moved by the passion that comes from the Holy Spirit to intervene in God's name on behalf of our distressed people.

In a country where many professors of political science (for whom democracy is an article of faith), where legal luminaries (who have sworn to defend the rule of law), and even where some respected religious prelates (who are expected to hold truth as sacred), have failed our people, the Church must be the conscience of the nation. It must do so by courageously highlighting the evils in society that constitute the obstacles to peace and prosperity. Many of those whom Nigerians look up to for direction, have become sycophants, praise singers and propagandists for the oppressors of their brothers and sisters. In the face of our nation's distress, religious groups must embark on literacy programmes to cultivate a more discerning citizenry that can discriminate between good and bad leadership and who then can reject bad leadership in the socio-political and economic arena.

When the Church does this, she is not only putting herself at the service of her Lord who is the Light of world and the Salt of the earth, but she is also promoting the kingdom of God here in Nigeria. This is the kind of kingdom which will substitute righteousness for iniquity, truth for falsehood, humility for arrogance, love for hatred, unity for division and holiness for vice. Nigeria needs that kind of a church if our crises of governance are not to become a disaster. Such a church will be an agent which will bring our human community to stand under the judgment of the enduring values of the gospel of Jesus Christ to criticise what is fundamentally inhuman and anti-human in our system of governance. Without such criticism, freedom will continue to yield to totalitarianism, justice will give way to exploitation, charity will recede into ruthlessness, and peace will dissolve into hostility. The church must be a place where all personal and political forces that challenge and undermine the values that constitute the common good are effectively exposed, prophetically denounced, and courageously dismantled.

CONCLUSION

God has no doubt been kind to the Nigerian nation. He has blessed it with a country of abundant natural resources and a wonderful climate. The Nigerian people are mostly deeply religious and God-fearing, and their ethnic and cultural diversity is a blessing yet to be fully realised. However, all is not well as is shown by the painful difference between the ideals and the realities of our existence. In his message to the CBCN, former President Olusegun Obasanjo said with reference to the problems of corruption, violence, and disunity in Nigeria, that "[t]he Nation is knocking at the door of the Church for peace and harmony at this midnight hour." And he called upon the Church to "[r]ise up and meet our need!" This is an acknowledgment and invitation to religions to collaborate with government in the search for the common good. It is a call for a self-critical examination of their different roles in and

duties toward the nation. The “Prayer for Nigeria in distress” composed by the CBCN and recited daily in the Roman Catholic Churches all over the country, seems a fitting prayer with which to end this paper:

All-powerful and merciful Father, you are the God of justice, love and peace. You rule over all the nations of the earth. Power and might are in your hands and no one can withstand you. We praise and thank you, for you are the source of all we have and are. We are sorry for all the sins we have committed and for the good deeds we have failed to do. In your loving forgiveness keep us safe from the punishments we deserve. Lord, we are weighed down not only by uncertainties but also by moral, economic and political problems. Listen to the cries of your people who confidently turn to you. God of infinite goodness, our strength in adversity, our health in weakness, our comfort in sorrow, be merciful to us, your people. Spare this nation, Nigeria, from chaos, anarchy and doom. Bless us with your Kingdom of Justice, Love and Peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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CAPE DUTCH CHRISTENDOM AND ITS LEGACY²

ABSTRACT

As a general concept, Christendom (*corpus Christianum*) – and particularly the phenomenon of patronage – are useful tools to understand the relationship between churches and cultures, and between political and civil society. This is particularly true of Western churches, but also of former Western colonial possessions and churches within them. In Christendom, patronage is usually associated with privileges bestowed upon a church by the state (political society) – state control over church/es in its realm. However, civil society and a culture, too, can assume patronage over a church, threatening the latter's integrity and prophetic witness. The colonial Cape (Dutch Reformed) Church's character was formed by powerful political patronage to the extent that it found it difficult to live and witness under the sole patronage of its crucified Lord. Ever since, it also continually sought to align itself with one or more of the above mentioned powers in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In October 1991, on the eve of a new, non-racial, democratic South Africa, the late influential South African theologian Willie Jonker addressed the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. He sketched a political and cultural situation in which the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) would experience the diminishing of its traditional influence on both its membership and in public life in South Africa. This came about as a result of a break in the DRC's historical alliance with both political and cultural powers. The long-established position of dignity and honour, even dominion, which the DRC had inherited from the church in Europe, was also drawing to an end. The alliance of the DRC with the old political order was about to be terminated, as the end of the colonial era finally dawned upon South Africa.

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That political and ideological change coincided with broader paradigmatic cultural changes in the West that were also felt in South Africa. Hence Christianity and the church lost their dominant positions in society. This loss was reflected in an enormous shift in values and norms. Thus, the DRC faced a future in which it would have to exert its influence from a new position of which it had little experience, namely that of political and cultural powerlessness. This, however, was an opportune moment for the DRC to be freed from the bondage of political and ideological servitude and to reform to the form of Jesus Christ as servant (Jonker 1991:160).

Christendom – the *corpus Christianum* – as a Christian society in which the church could count on the patronage of the hegemonic political and cultural order to bolster its influence, was facing a major crisis in South Africa – at least from the perspective of the DRC. Nearly two decades after that prophetic speech of Jonker, the age-old ideal of establishing a theocracy in South Africa with the DRC as its main ecclesiastical agent, remains in crisis.

Behind this crisis lies a history of the colonial transplantation of Dutch Reformed Christendom to the Cape of Good Hope. The Dutch Reformed Church was invested with the position and role of established church. This article attempts to follow the trajectory of one specific aspect of this Christendom: patronage. The development of patronage within what I call Cape Dutch Christendom will be traced after general introductory remarks on the notion of Christendom and its relevance for South Africa and the rest of the continent. Dealing with patronage and the DRC will hopefully not only contribute to an understanding of the current context of the DRC in South Africa and where God's missionary calling is leading this denomination, but will also be edifying to other churches in this and other contexts as they search the Scriptures anew to discern God's calling. The lessons of Christendom and particularly the yielding of the Dutch Reformed Church to the temptation of servitude to political, cultural, social and economic patrons, should sound a warning to young non-Western churches. It should also contribute to the ecumenical quest for ways to be faithful participants in the mission of God.

THE NOTION OF CHRISTENDOM AS THEOLOGICAL TOOL TO DEAL WITH CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN THE POST-CHRISTIAN WEST

The concept "Christendom" has been in use since Ernst Troeltsch used it at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although a relatively recent term, it refers to a reality that originated in the Roman Empire in the early fourth century when Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity, and when Emperor Theodosius declared it the official cult of the Empire later that century. It has even deeper roots in the theocratic polity of Israel of the Old Testament. While Troeltsch still harboured dreams of Christendom for Europe, theologians in different parts of the West, including some former colonies that regarded themselves as Christian, used the concept to deal with a new, post-Christian situation.

There is a common denominator for the use of the concept "Christendom" by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in Nazi Germany), Lesslie Newbigin (in secularised Britain), Douglass John Hall, and authors of the Gospel and Our Culture Series (in North America),

as well as Pablo Richard and Enrique Dussel (in post-Vatican II Latin America), namely that Christendom is constituted by a network of reciprocal relationships among the gospel, church, state, civil society and culture. Within these relationships, the church invariably relies upon the power exerted by any one or more of state, civil society and/or culture – to implement its vision for the public relevance of the gospel, namely, to establish a Christian state, society and culture (Nieder-Heitmann 2007:212-214).

Despite this common denominator in different Christendom settings, it needs to be stressed that Christendom has taken on various shapes in different periods and localities. Even within a particular country, its legacy manifests itself in various ways within different churches and sections of the population. It also continually changes its profile in any given setting (cf. Hall 1999). Therefore, a theological study of Christendom in a particular setting has to be cognisant of historical and sociological factors.

Christendom and non-Western churches in African states

Let us return to the question of how a treatise of Christendom, and more specifically a case study of Cape Dutch Christendom and the DRC, can benefit other churches and nations in Africa.

From the perspective of indigenous African churches, one may justifiably question the relevance of such an undertaking, considering the fact that these churches have neither experienced positions of privilege and power in their nations nor cultural congruence with their host societies in ways comparable to the once-established churches of Western Christendom. The churches of Christendom tended to accommodate and reflect the cultures of their societies to the point of being contently domesticated (being in a state of ideological servitude, as Jonker would portray it), while the young indigenous churches of Africa have experienced the opposite. Their problem is one of estrangement from the cultures of their host societies as a result of Western missions that aimed at shaping them into Western cultural moulds. This was done under Christendom's assumption that Western culture was not only permeated by the gospel, but that that culture was indeed part and parcel of the gospel.

This, however, illustrates one of the ways in which Christendom has affected colonised peoples. Subsequently, the quest of African theology has been one of contextually applying the gospel and the shape of the church within the cultures and religions of Africa. Accommodating the traditional cultures of Africa in church and theology became a matter of liberation for African theologians (cf. Richard 1986:153). John Mbiti, a leading voice in this respect, advocated more than the accommodation of those aspects of African culture that are not in conflict with the gospel, by defining African religions as preparations for the gospel.

Colonial Christendom affected indigenous people not only culturally but also politically. Colonial racism, reinforced by a theology that accommodated colonial ideology, affected Africans in all aspects of their lives. Hence, black theology joined the cause of liberation theology in Latin America in a quest for political emancipation from colonial exploitation and repression, by unmasking the culture and theology of colonial Christendom. This culture, they contend, is colonial and racist and marked by capitalist abuse (cf. Kritzing 1990:3-6).

In line with such critique, a growing number of dissident voices amid white South African Dutch Reformed theologians have advocated a recovery of the “strangeness” of the gospel and the church, which does not emulate the scheme of the (Western, colonial) world (cf. Kritzinger 1990).

There is indeed much that can be learnt from Christendom’s experience in the West, both positively and negatively. On the positive side, Christendom represents a willingness by the church to take responsibility for public life (Newbigin 1986:100f.). Furthermore, the way in which European culture came about as a synthesis between the gospel and ancient Roman culture constitutes a classic study of indigenisation. This synthesis was a work of theology – particularly that of Augustine (Newbigin 1995:7-14; cf. Goheen 2000:379; cf. Bonhoeffer 2005:106-109). Nevertheless, the ways in which it aligned itself with secular powers in the process of fulfilling this task is justifiably critiqued.

On the other hand, the post-Enlightenment culture of the West – the so-called culture of modernity – with its insistence on the banning of religion from the public sphere to the private domain, spread throughout the world and has probably become dominant even in many non-Western countries. South Africa is a prime example of this (cf. Nieder-Heitmann 2003). This culture, which fosters secularism and new paganisms in the West, came about as a reaction to European religious wars that followed the Reformation. These conflicts fostered the conviction that religion no longer had a constructive public role to play. Instead, rationalism became the new guiding light (Newbigin 1986:101ff.; 1994:172; 1995:30-40; Bonhoeffer 2005:113ff.). Secularism and new paganisms, coupled with two devastating world wars that were fuelled by “Christian Europe”, have contributed to a realisation among Western theologians that Christendom has indeed failed in the West. This realisation has called for a reassessment of the notions of mission and church. Ecumenical exposure to non-Western churches that bear witness to Christ and exist in a non-Christian world, encouraged Western theologians to revisit many biblical notions, notably that of mission and church.

As a result, Christendom’s understanding of mission – as the “extension of the kingdom of God” by the church from the Christian West to the non-Christian world – was replaced by a new ecumenical consensus. Mission could no longer be regarded as a church venture. In following the lead of pioneer post-Christendom theologian, Karl Barth, mission came to be understood as a function of the trinitarian economy of salvation – the Father’s sending of the Son and their sending of the Holy Spirit (Guder 2002:10, 16). This new understanding of mission has had a profound effect on ecclesiology. God’s mission (the *missio Dei*) that aims at the restoration of all creation, incorporates the church as divinely elected instrument, sign, and foretaste of the coming reign of God (cf. Newbigin 1953:9).

CAPE DUTCH CHRISTENDOM AND PATRONAGE

Cape Dutch Christendom and particularly its dependence on the patronage of its established church, the DRC, developed the Cape of Good Hope during the almost 150 years of colonial rule of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) (1652-1795). During this period, patronage was mainly political and judicial in nature. Patronage has its roots in the Constantine practice

of political society, offering protection and bestowing privilege upon the church. More often than not this came at a price for the church, the political patron demanding some degree of control over it. This pattern persisted during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when Protestant princes would offer patronage to a Protestant church. In the United Netherlands, the Reformed Church became the privileged church. Much was sacrificed for this status in terms of the freedom that the Reformed movement viewed fitting for the church.

At the Cape, this situation was even more pronounced. Here the Dutch Reformed Church emerged as the chaplain service of the VOC – the latter being a corporate mercantile venture of capitalist, upper-middle-class Dutch Reformed merchants of the free cities of the Republic of the United Netherlands. The VOC monopolised trade in the East Indies as such, as well as between the latter and Europe. Ordained Dutch Reformed ministers of religion and non-ordained spiritual workers (the so-called sick-comforters) were employed as chaplains on its ships and at its refreshment posts. The Cape of Good Hope was such a post established to supply fresh produce to the VOC's passing merchant fleets. Soon thereafter the VOC began encouraging the settlement of colonists at the Cape. Congregations that were founded at the Cape virtually became extensions of the VOC's "chaplain service".

This particular way in which the church at the Cape was established, namely as "department of religion" of the VOC, constituted a novel kind of patronage. No longer was patronage merely a function of political society, whether of imperial or feudal kind, nor even the republican kind of the United Netherlands. Political society at the Cape consisted of the colonial governing body (called the Council of Policy) of the managing board of the VOC as mercantile corporation (the Council of Seventeen). While the United Netherlands, with its republican form of governance, already heralded the dawn of modern *Europe*, the Cape served as a precursor of a modern *world*. It was part of the modern colonial project – not as regal expansionism (as in the case of Latin America), but rather as global, corporate and monopolising capitalism (cf. Moltmann 1998:3-4). Mercantile capitalism was the undisputed reason for the establishment of Cape Dutch Christendom and it remained the reigning ideology. The VOC, as institutional embodiment of this ideology, gained full control of the DRC at the Cape by assuming patronage over it.

Why would the VOC establish a chaplain service and by so doing become patron of the established church in its domains? This question can be answered in a functionalist manner. It was probably expedient for the Company to co-opt the church into its organisation. The church expounded a gospel that was favourably disposed towards capitalism, recognised rulers and the rule of law, and promoted "tranquillity and peace" in church and society. In its conflict with the Anabaptists, the Dutch Reformed Church had pronounced an anathema against those who rejected governmental authority and governors, disobeyed the rule of law and imported communal ownership (*Confessio Belgica*, Article 36). By contrast, the church at the Cape was itself loyal and preached civil loyalty to the VOC patron's colonial government, administration of justice and capitalistic ideology.

This raises a further question: how could political society and the church in the Netherlands allow a company like the VOC to assume political patronage of the church? Part

of the answer is that the VOC pre-empted this formal arrangement by taking the initiative and employing chaplains. Another side of the story is that mercantile capitalism was held in high esteem as it had come to the rescue of the Reformation in the Netherlands and of the Dutch people per se. This ideology and the body of functionaries (VOC) that put it into economic and political practice at the Cape therefore enjoyed the status of patron not only of the Dutch Reformed faith, but indeed of the Republic of the United Netherlands. Criticism of the VOC and its economic principles and practices would be unpatriotic and in conflict with popular sentiments in a tiny, beleaguered Protestant republic that braved the wrath of the Spanish crown and Inquisition. Moreover, it would border on being unfaithful to the theocratic ideal of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Yet another side to the story is that chaplains – and the church at the Cape as “chaplain” – benefited in many respects from the patronage of the VOC. Chaplains were high-ranking, paid officials of the Company. Church amenities were provided by the patron. Public education, which the church claimed as part of its cultural mandate, was also sponsored by the Company.

As was referred to above, these privileges, however, came at a price. The Company assumed stricter control over its chaplain church than the government of the Netherlands did, with regard to the mother church. In their instructions, VOC chaplains were restricted to their “profession and vocation” – religion (1696 Instructions for Predicants and Sick-comforters, Article 5, in Spoelstra 1907:544-557). Even though they were not forbidden to reproach “vain or sacrilegious utterances” or “immoral and improper actions” (1696 Instructions, Article 11), they were prohibited from becoming involved in any matters of Company governance (1696 Instructions, Article 5) and from admonishing government and government officials in public (1617 Instructions, Article 2; 1695 Instructions, Article 10). Members of consistories needed Company approbation. Church councils were monitored and advised by political commissioners. This contradiction caused chaplains to be very cautious in taking any action that could be conceived as criticism of its patron. Chaplains and councils made pronouncements of an economic nature only once the patron had paved the way. Hence criticism against the excesses of a capitalist lifestyle at the Cape reflected in the official documents of the church was expressed, only once Governor Rijk Tulbagh had promulgated laws against “pomp and circumstance”. By doing so the church merely echoed its master’s voice.

The church at the Cape placed such a high premium on “tranquillity and peace” (*rust en vrede*) that it virtually became a hallmark of the true church. The value ascribed to “tranquillity and peace” also applied to society at large. Law and order were important. Such a church, firmly under Company control, was an asset to a refreshment and military post and young colony populated by diverse and displaced people, where mutiny and revolt could readily find fertile breeding ground.

Thus, when civil resistance to public maladministration surfaced, the church loyally supported its patron, albeit by quiescence. No sign can be found in church documents of any official support from the side of the church during the civil opposition to the rule of Governor W.A. van der Stel. When Rev. Le Boucq criticised Governor Van der Stel’s acting successor,

the church joined the Company government in condemning Le Boucq's actions (Nieder-Heitmann 2007:181-182).

When civil resistance resurfaced during the last sixteen years of VOC rule, nothing was again reflected in the official documents of the church. However, it can be assumed that most – if not all – Cape Patriots were members of the church. The church stayed loyal to the VOC as patron, however much the latter was guilty of corruption (Hofmeyr 2002:71).

Cape Dutch Christendom and patronage in crisis

When the British took over the Cape Colony in 1795, Cape Dutch Christendom and its established church faced a crisis. In the first place, the VOC patron was replaced by British colonial masters. This also meant the loss of its privilege of being the only established church in the colony. However, it did still receive government funding.

The short-lived return of Dutch colonial rule did not resolve this crisis, but rather added another layer of political control to it. The administration of the Batavian Republic, as the Netherlands was then called, was deeply influenced by the French Revolution and the resulting new views regarding state, nation and church.

The Cape Church³ knew no other way of relating to political society than being dependent and subservient. Hence it obligingly conformed to these regime changes. Loyalty to the British crown, for instance, was reflected in its disapproval of the so-called “Great Trek” – the emigration of some of its members from the Cape Colony to the hinterland with a view to escaping British rule. By withholding ministry to the Trekkers, the Cape Church in effect censured its own members who took part in the Trek.

The crisis of Cape Dutch Christendom and its church deepened with the promulgation of the “voluntary principle” by the Cape Parliament in 1875. The passing of this act was the result of a rigorous campaign by an influential Reformed minister of British nonconformist persuasion. He could rightfully appeal to Calvin's tradition for disestablishment. This act meant the end of material provision by the state. The Cape Church, however, had no lived experience of being disestablished – of being “a church under the cross”, as churches that did not enjoy political patronage were called.

So deeply ingrained was political patronage in the identity of the Cape Church and its theocratic ideal for society, that it was argued that the retraction of material provision by the state was tantamount to disavowal of the Christian character of the state. The theocratic ideal of the church, namely that of a *corpus Christianum* – Christian state and society – was therefore at stake (Hanekom 1951:326).

Furthermore, it was argued, “the voluntary principle” would render preachers dependent upon the voluntary support of members and, therefore, jeopardise the freedom of the former to preach the gospel in an uncompromising manner, as church members would then be in a position to pressurise preachers to say what they wanted to hear (Hanekom 1951:329). In this manner, a new centre of privilege and control – a new patron – would be established.

³ The term “church at the Cape” is now exchanged for “Cape Church”, since the Dutch Reformed congregations in the Cape Colony had meanwhile formed a synod in 1824.

This fear was not completely unfounded. At the Cape Church Synod of 1857 (where “the voluntary principle” was vehemently opposed), “weaker brothers” among the flock had already managed to pressure the Cape Church into compromising its official non-racial stance by condoning the segregation of converts from “heathendom” and those who claimed biological descent from (Western) Christendom. Therefore, the “voluntary principle” had the potential to allow wealthy church members to impose their will on the church.

The crisis of legal disestablishment led to a new development. The vacuum left by the retraction of the privileges associated with state patronage was filled by the middle-class members of this church. These members constituted the bulk of “white” Cape Dutch colonists. White, Dutch-speaking landowners were set to become the new patrons of the Cape Church as they thenceforth provided for the sustenance of the institutional church. As reflected in the above-mentioned synodal decision, they had also already staked their claim regarding control of the Cape Church. This bolstered their influence significantly.

Not too long after legal disestablishment, the First Boer War of independence against British imperialism sparked the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. The Cape Church found itself in a situation of having to side either with its former patron, the state, or with its flock – “*die volk*”. This was a choice that had never been necessary in either Dutch or Cape Dutch “Christendom”. Political society in both these forms of “Christendom” was in alliance with the Dutch national sentiments that followed in the wake of the Reformation and the Eighty Years’ War. At the Cape there were also indications of the fostering of sentiments of Dutch supremacy (Nieder-Heitmann 2007:183-186). The educational policy of Governor De Mist of the second Dutch (Batavian) colonial rule was also geared towards the promotion of Dutch civility (De Mist 1920:201). Protestant England, however, had up to that point been regarded as a kindred kingdom, which initially resulted in a smooth change of political patronage (cf. Nieder-Heitmann 2007:177). This war brought about a clear break, as it led to the emergence of an Afrikaner nationalism poised against England and all things English.

Once the Cape Church had lost state privilege and had subsequently become dependent upon the voluntary offerings of its flock, its members and their nascent ideology of Afrikaner nationalism commanded the loyalty of the Church. Here we witness the dramatic shift away from Thomas Hobbes’s seventeenth-century work *Leviathan*, which portrays an era when the power of modern states was still absolute, when rulers could impose their will on the people, and order society according to their likes and dislikes. Now “Leviathan” had to make way for “Lilliput”, which exemplifies the manifold threads of popular opinion that had come to dominate post-French-Revolution society.

A new type of quasi-church establishment had come into being: patronage was now located in the *volk*. This shift became evident in the response of the Council of the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa to the foiled 1914 rebellion by Afrikaners against the British take-over of German South West Africa. The Council virtually sided with the new patron (the *volk*) by justifying the rebellion against its former (British) state patron.

This development culminated in the establishment of a new Christendom in the form of the apartheid state in 1948, with the DRC as the main theological apologist. For Afrikaners

it resolved the crisis of estrangement between political society and the *volk* that had been their experience after the formal termination of Cape Dutch Christendom in 1795. The DRC espoused an interpretation of the gospel that legitimated an Afrikaner Christian-national regime. As Willem Nicol argued convincingly, church leadership had learnt to “accompany the flock” (2004:115-121).

Within the new Christendom of the apartheid state, where Afrikaner nationalism reigned supreme, the DRC could once again revert to the old quietist position of Cape Dutch Christendom: championing “tranquillity and peace” in church and society.

Loyalty to the new ideological patron offered many benefits for the DRC. Its members benefited economically from the apartheid state, which resulted in booming voluntary offerings that were reflected in the many new grandiose church buildings that shot up during that period.

However, the advent of the new South Africa in 1994 signalled the defeat and shaming of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism. The DRC currently finds itself amid a renewed crisis due to its Christendom heritage. The critical question is whether this heritage will undergo a new metamorphosis whereby a new worldly patron will be acknowledged. New ideological patrons indeed present themselves. The current hegemonic ideology among many Dutch Reformed is that of the new-liberal market (cf. Van der Westhuizen 2007). Hence congregations that befriend this patron by buying into its consumerism and individualism seem to flourish financially while others suffer or even have to close their doors. Churches of the former kind tend to find their identity in being vendors of religious goods and services (cf. Hunsberger 1993/4:17-18) in order to win and retain the patronage of their clients.

Meanwhile, there are also signs of a new surge of Afrikaner nationalism. Nationalism and capitalism, however, have a history as aligning forces in Dutch Reformed Christendom. National-capitalism was a formula that formed a cornerstone both in Cape Dutch Christendom and in the new Christendom of the apartheid era. It might just be that new liberalism and nationalism join forces once more.

The critical question the DRC now has to answer is whether it will seize this *kairos* – this opportune moment of truth – and finally break with its Christendom habit of paying homage to the crown of political and/or ideological patrons, and rather live under the cross of its only true patron – Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

“Christendom” as a general concept, and particularly the aspect of patronage, are indeed helpful tools to understand Cape Dutch society and the Cape Church. Cape Dutch Christendom, with all its resemblances to other colonial Christendoms, distinguished itself. VOC patronage was essentially not political but economic in nature. Its capitalist ideology served as “patron” not only of the Cape Church, but also of the Cape Colony as well as the United Netherlands and its privileged Dutch Reformed Church. This trajectory helps one understand the later developments in the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape, first as privileged church controlled

by the British colonial administration, then as church of Afrikaner nationalism, and now as a church seeking refuge under the patronage of new liberal capitalism. The perennial challenge to this church remains to reform and (re)gain its integrity as church under (the patronage of) the cross.

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RELIGION AND THE COMMON GOOD IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Reformed theological perspectives²

ABSTRACT

This Article is about religion and the common good in a pluralistic society. It is argued with the pluralistic society of South Africa in mind. The theme is further argued against the background of reformed theology, and asks about the contribution that reformed theology can make towards the common good in a pluralistic society.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCENE

South Africa is indeed a country of many pluralities – there is a plurality of peoples, a plurality of languages, and a plurality of religions, as can be seen from the following figures.

Plurality of peoples

Total population: 47.9 million

- Black: 38 million (80%)
- White: 4.35 million (9.1%)
- Brown: 4.2 million (8.9%)
- Indian: 1.2 million (2.5%)

Plurality of languages

Eleven official languages

Languages spoken in households:

- IsiZulu: 23.8%
- IsiXhosa: 17.6%
- Afrikaans: 13.3%

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2 Contribution to the closing consultation of the four-year Joint Project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies at Stellenbosch University, 10-12 March 2010. It has been published earlier in *NGTT* 51(3&4), December 2010.

- Sepedi: 9.4%
- Setswana: 8.2%
- English: 8.2%
- Sesotho: 7.9%
- Xitsonga: 4.4%
- Siswati: 2.7%
- Tshivenda: 2.3%
- IsiNdebele: 1.6%
- Other: 0.5%

English

Language of:

- Trade and Commerce
- Science (?)
- Anchor language of the government?
- Mother tongue speakers: 8.2%

Plurality of religions

Christianity is the majority religion in South Africa.

- Christians: 79.8% (2001 census)
- Jewish: 0.2%
- Islam: 1.1%
- Hinduism: 1.3%
- Buddhism: 0.1%
- African indigenous: 12% of Africa's total population (70 million members)
- No religion: 1.2%

The position of Christianity

Within Christianity there is no majority denomination.

Mainstream churches: 39%

- Reformed: 7.2%
- Anglican: 3.8%
- Methodist: 7.4%
- Lutheran: 2.5%
- Presbyterian: 1.9%
- Congregational: 1.4%
- Roman Catholic: 8.9%

Pentecostal churches: 7.3%

Other Churches: 12%

African Independent Churches: 40.8%

CLASH OR DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION?

The term “the clash of civilizations” was first used 1990 by Bernard Lewis in an Article titled *The Roots of Muslim Rage* (*The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990). In 1992, Samuel P. Huntington, in a lecture at the American Enterprise Institute, formulated his theory of a *clash of civilizations* that he then developed further in an Article, *The Clash of Civilizations?* (*Foreign Affairs* 72(3)(Summer 1993):22-49). In his lecture and Article, Huntington responded to Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). In his Article Huntington writes, “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world (the world after the Cold War) will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating of source conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principle conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilisations. The clash of civilisations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future” (Huntington 1993:22). About civilisation Huntington writes, “A civilization is a cultural entity. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity”. A civilisation is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity that people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people (Huntington 1993:24).

Given these characteristics of civilisations and cultures, South Africa can clearly be in line for a clash between civilisations. There is for instance the Zulu festival of Ukubuthwa as a typical Zulu cultural festival (Le Roux 2009:13); when president Zuma married his third wife and there were outrages against it, he claimed that polygamy was part of the Zulu culture and that he saw nothing wrong with it, and he claimed that he had a right to be a polygamist; nowadays when one goes into Absa banks, there are pamphlets available for Muslim customers indicating special bank services in accordance with Shari’a laws (ABSA s.a., Islamic Banking: Banking the Shari’a way). Many more examples can be cited from the different cultures in South Africa. Diverse elements of religious and customary pluralism are indeed present in South African society. The question is, how must Christianity – and in fact all religions in South Africa – react to this diversity? In response to the theory of the clash of civilisations, the former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami introduced the idea of *Dialogue Among Civilizations*. The term *Dialogue among Civilizations* became more well known after the United Nations adopted a resolution to name the year 2001 as the year of *Dialogue among Civilizations*. This Article is an attempt to contribute to this dialogue and the eventual cooperation between religions in South Africa, and at the same time make a contribution from the perspective of Reformed theology.

REFORMED PERSPECTIVES ON PLURALITY

The kingdom of God

From a Reformed perspective, the kingdom of God forms the primary context for the whole of creation, individual and society, religion and state. The Dutch theologian, Herman Ridderbos (1978:1), calls the kingdom of God the most theocentric concept that Scripture offers for our understanding of the creation, humanity, the world and current and future times. God's kingdom and the Lord Jesus Christ's royal sovereignty comprise the whole of creation. Where Christ's kingship is recognised, something of the kingdom becomes visible; individuals are liberated, and the entire patterns of their lives are transformed (Ridderbos 1960:303). Every part of creation forms part of God's kingdom and, although a specific individual, society or state often does not acknowledge God's sovereignty, it nevertheless, according to a reformed perspective, is and remains a part of the kingdom of God.

Plurality

Plurality is a fact of life in our modern world as can be seen, *inter alia*, from the statistical facts about South Africa. This also applies to many, in fact most, societies across the globe.

The Canadian political scientist J.L. Hiemstra distinguishes a plurality of institutions and associations, a plurality of directions and a plurality of cultural contexts in society (Hiemstra 2005:21-25). In every society there are pluralities of institutional associations, which are complementary, overlapping and mutually interdependent. This means, *inter alia*, that no institution or association is autonomous – a law unto itself – they all exist, or should exist to enable humanity to achieve its true unifying purpose – which for Christians will mean to love God and neighbour. About the plurality of directions, Hiemstra writes, “The full reality of institutional plurality in society can be unfolded in many religious and ideological directions” (Hiemstra 2005:46). The pluralism of directions that unfolds in many religious and ideological directions (Hiemstra 2005:46) is also something very real in many societies. It entails both a confessional and a social element. Confessional pluralism is aimed at entertaining and accommodating a diversity of religious expressions and organisations in a community. The social aspect of religious pluralism is aimed at entertaining and accommodating a diversity of social institutions such as churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious associations, families, schools, welfare institutions, academic and civil associations – they all play a very important role in the keeping and expansion of religion. All these religious institutions also play a very important role against the interference of the state in religious affairs; the establishment of religious rights, as well as supplying vital sources for theology, morality, charity, and discipline in society (Witte 2000:44-45).

The fact that Christians cannot accept many of the ideological and religious directions of institutions and associations in society does not mean that they should not be respected and tolerated. Disagreement does not make them less real, nor diminishes the calling of both religion and the state to deal with the plurality of directions in society – each of course in its own way. “The state must respect and tolerate the convictions and conscience of its neighbours

in a plurality of institutions within society, while vigilantly executing its limited task of public justice” (Hiemstra 2005:47). The religions including the church must also respect the convictions of its neighbours in a society with a plurality of other directional individuals, institutions and associations. This does not mean that the church and Christians must approve of all the different directions in society, but it does mean that the church and Christians cannot deny their existence or belittle them.

The church must also never forget that it undeniably has the task of proclaiming, through word and deed, the Gospel of the kingdom of God – calling all people, institutions and associations of whatever direction they may be, to obedience to the Triune God.

Hiemstra also identifies a third kind of diversity, namely that which he calls contextual plurality. This refers to the fact that diverse cultures around the world and throughout different historical eras have developed the cultural and social potential of creation in different ways. Hiemstra concedes that some of these developments may be due to the sinful nature of mankind, but more often these unique geographical and historical contextual developments are simply different legitimate responses to God’s creation (Hiemstra 2005:23-24).

Freedom of religion in a pluralistic society

K. Blei defines freedom of religion in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). From this he points out that religious freedom has both an individual and a social side. Religious freedom also means more than just having a religion and upholding inner convictions and feelings. Freedom of religion includes the right that everybody can express their religion and faith in worship, teaching, practice, and maintenance. This view of religious freedom means that individuals and religious groups want to live their religion, act according to it, and be witnesses to the truth of their faith, also in public. According to Blei, freedom of religion also relates to the fact that the religious convictions of people usually contain views on how they think society should be organised. He also points out the important fact that freedom of religion implies that the authorities must accept the responsibility and duty to respect and guarantee the right to freedom of religion. This responsibility is not accomplished if the authorities just steer away from an active involvement in religious matters.

It is not just a matter of keeping “hands off” from religious communities in their territory and leaving them alone. On the contrary, active engagement by the state is required in order to make religious freedom a reality to all religious people. The state should create the possibilities and facilities so that freedom can really be enjoyed and implemented. Otherwise, the principle of religious freedom is in danger of being doomed to remain just a nice principle without significance in practice (K. Blei, *Freedom of Religion: Principle and Practice*; see also L.C. van Drimmelen s.a.:199).

At the same time, it can also be said that just as the state has an active responsibility to guarantee and promote freedom of religion, churches and religious communities have a similar responsibility – they must see to it that their order and structures are adequate for the practice of freedom of religion.

In his attempt to define freedom of religion, Witte claims that “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Religion are (i) freedom of conscience, (ii) the free exercise of religion, (iii) religious pluralism, (iv) religious equality, (v) the separation of church and state, and (vi) the disestablishment of religion by the state” (Witte 2000:37). These six essential rights and liberties of religion are indeed very handy distinctions to understand what is freedom of religion exactly. As a matter of fact, for a country like South Africa with its plurality of religions within the boundaries of one state, they are much needed distinctions on the one hand for the state to know what the essential rights and liberties of religions are vis-à-vis the state, but also to empower religions to contribute to the common good of the country.

The state and a pluralist society

Religion, apart from its involvement with individuals in society, is also involved with many other social entities, for example, marital unions, families, corporations, social institutions, etc., etc. – that which can be called the plurality of associations. However it can be said the state is the most encompassing entity in its own right (Van der Vyver 2004:35ff.), which a religion/church can encounter in its earthly existence. The state encompasses and co-ordinates, *inter alia* by its legislation and policies, all individuals, corporations, and institutions, which include religions, within its sphere of authority.

Christians believe that the state is divinely instituted; in other words, it is an instrument of the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ; or to say it in still other words, the state is the great human representative of Christ’s sovereignty over the whole of creation – even if a state itself does not always recognise itself as such. This is also why, with reference to Romans 13:6, many Christians confess that state authorities are God’s servants who are executing their God-given command. This conviction brings to the fore a remarkable parallel between church and state in that the centre of the church’s existence is simultaneously also the final centre and authority of and over the state – Jesus Christ the Lord!

Apart from being divinely instituted, the state is also a historical institution, a human, cultural response to God’s call to do justice in the public relations that exist in our lives. Through the course of history the state has taken on many different forms such as kingdoms, principalities, empires, commonwealths, tribal arrangements, etc. Sometimes these arrangements were more just and at other times less just. Sometimes they were even straightforwardly unjust, but were always ways of structuring the political life in their times and contexts. In the same way, contemporary states are our societies’ better or worse answers to God’s call to concretely structure political life. This implies that states may be reformed so that they can deal in a more just manner with society (Hiemstra 2005:39-40).

The state, as embodying a political community, can be characterised by its specific concern, to ensure that people and institutions, directions and contexts are publicly integrated in just ways. The state that has this as its main task is always territorially bound and should function by way of legal rule with the intent to bring about public justice (Hiemstra 2005:40-46). In other words, such a state will then be obliged to recognise, integrate and protect the plurality of individuals, associations, directions and contexts which fall under its authority. For the

church this will mean – as for all other institutions and associations – that the state must allow them the space and the freedom they need to fully respond to their God-given calling. However, should the actions of institutions and associations fail to achieve their essential tasks, or distort the lives of others or harm their members, the state must act to ensure that just public relations exist between all, and that the common good shared by all societal actors is achieved.

One very important document that deals with the relationship between the state and religions is the constitution of a country. About a constitution, Rautenbach and Malherbe (2004:22-23) writes as follows:

A constitution is a law that contains the most important rules of law in connection with the constitutional system of a country. These include the rules of law dealing with the state, the government bodies of the country, their powers and how they must exercise those powers. In other words, a constitution defines government authority, confers it on particular government institutions, and regulates and limits its exercise. (The exercise of government authority includes the creation of legal rules on virtually every aspect of society.) A constitution guarantees and regulates the rights and freedoms of the individual and determines the relationships that exist between inhabitants of a state and their government bodies. A constitution thus provides a norm against which everybody's actions can be measured and which ensures public stability and security. A constitution is thus a key component of the legal system of a state. In addition, a constitution is regarded in democratic societies as an expression of the will of the people and reflection of prevailing values, requiring the support of the citizens.

A constitution can also be described as the *lex fundamentalis* of a country, the basis of its whole legal order. As such it is also regarded as a special law with a higher status than other laws – in fact, all other laws of a country are subject to the constitution and are invalid if they contradict the constitution. A constitution is also accorded supremacy in that it is an entrenched document, i.e. it cannot be amended at will by the government and the government itself is subject to it. To change the constitution, certain definite procedures must be followed. Furthermore, the courts of the country are assigned the function of enforcing the observance of the provisions of the constitution. In the case of South Africa, Section 2 of the Constitution itself stipulates that it is the supreme law of the land, that any law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid and obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled. Apart from this, the South African Constitution is also entrenched and the courts are formally vested with the power to test the constitutional validity of any action by government and to declare it invalid if it is in conflict with the Constitution:

All executive authority is also subject to the Constitution. The supremacy of the Constitution therefore obliges government bodies to act consistently with the Constitution, lest their actions be declared invalid by the courts (Rautenbach & Malherbe 2004:25).

Article 36 of the Constitution of South Africa, the so-called “Limitation of rights” clause, enables both the state and any institution of civil society to limit certain rights included in

the Bill of Rights on condition that this takes place in accordance with the stipulations of the Constitution and prescribes certain procedures according to which rights can be limited in both the state and civil society.

The Constitution itself can limit rights internally by means of the constitutional Article that entrenches it. It qualifies it (for example, Article 17-rights may only be exercised peacefully and unarmed) or makes it subject to a further limiting stipulation (for example, in the light of Article 126[2], the right to freedom of expression guaranteed in Article 16 does not allow for the use of so-called “hate-speech”). The Constitution also allows for the external limitation of rights by generally applicable legal rules besides specific stipulations contained in the Constitution when it:

- i. Is reasonable and justifiable in an open democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom, and
- ii. satisfies certain proportionality requirements (Article 36[1]).

Institutions of the civil society (such as, for example, religious institutions) can thus, by means of the formulation of internal constitutional laws, statutes, church orders, stipulations and regulations, make use of the limitation possibilities that the Constitution offers, to interpret or reinterpret each of the stipulations of the Bill of Rights within the context of their own internal constitutions. In the case of churches, this will entail an interpretation or reinterpretation in accordance with the faith identity in the church as it is found, *inter alia*, in the confession(s) of faith and church order of a church. Such a reinterpretation, especially where it pertains to a church’s limitation of the rights contained in the Bill of Rights in the light of Article 36, must always be very well motivated in the light of the church’s faith identity and its resultant church order. Such limitation must furthermore be in compliance with the requirements of Article 36 (cf. Du Plessis 1999:204-206).

The church and Christians in a pluralistic society

Within the kingdom of God there are those who are gathered into a unity through the proclamation and acceptance of the gospel. They are gathered into a confessional, cultic, orderly and confessing community – the church (cf. Ridderbos 1972:296-308). One could say that the church is a community of people who are, and must be, organised in respect of their confession, their worship, their teaching, discipline, pastorate, diaconate, mission, social calling, etc., etc.

In all these respects the church is an image of God’s kingdom that simultaneously points to the kingdom, and it also becomes a place where the kingdom is revealed and displayed in this world (Heyns 1977:23-26; Van Ruler 1978:64).

For the church it is very important that Jesus Christ is its only Lord and Head. He is the primary subject in his relation to the church, the latter then being the secondary subject. The church must always be about a Christological-ecclesiological relationship (Barth s.a.:678-679). The church is the body of Christ and, as His “fullness.”(Ephesians 1:23; Berkhof 1962:154), this means that it is the area where there should be in perfect obedience to Him, the Lord and head (Du Plessis 1962:76). Christ rules His church by means of the

Word, the Holy Spirit and the ministries/offices that He has given it. This is also a unique characteristic of the church. The proclamation of the Word in a variety of forms, such as preaching, training, charitable deeds, prophetic witness, caring and comforting can also be viewed as the church's unique task, as well as that of the members and the offices in the church. In the Word, the church hears the Lord's voice through the Holy Spirit's Curiological work (Versteeg 1971:211-213). The church hears the Lord's voice for the time in which it lives, and through the calling and work of the offices and the members of His body, Christ cares for His body. The offices must equip, feed, discipline, stimulate and co-ordinate the members of the body for their task within the church, but also within God's greater kingdom.

The offices must also join and lead the body to be able to function as the body of Christ in the world (Roberts 1963:140). All of this will mean, *inter alia*, that the church must continuously assist its members to walk with God in righteousness – also with regard to the political challenges that they face. The church must help its members to distinguish between the plurality of religious and ideological directions that confront them every day and what they have to do to remain loyal to Christ. It is also the task of the church to help its members to understand the societal context in which they live, be it that they are a majority or a minority religion; what the consequences are when a state that does not allow any religion in the public sphere, or when a state guarantees freedom of religion to all religions within its borders and what the impact of that is on churches.

It is also the task of the church as an institution but also through its individual members, which it has to equip for this task, to give witness to the kingdom of God and the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ before the political powers of the day. This can be done through prayer, dialogue, or the prophetic witness of the church, as well as through the examples of righteous living by the members of the church (Hiemstra 2005:11-12).

The faith identity of a specific church denomination usually finds its expression in the confession(s) of faith and the resulting church order of that church. A confession (confessions) of faith (faiths) is a very fundamental document for any church. It is a systemised expression of what the specific faith community understands as the main truths of the Bible. As such, the confession(s) of faith is always subject to the teaching of the Bible. Until it is changed, the confession of faith determines the faith identity of a church. The church order or constitution of a church contains the rules that govern a church's life and actions at a given point in time. The primary sources for a church order are the Bible and the confession(s) of faith of the church. Secondary sources are the history of the church and the tradition in which it stands. Although the historical traditional or contemporary context of a church can never be a normative source for its faith identity or the church order; it is something which a church must always take into account. In the end, a church must always weigh up its faith identity against the Word of God and the needs of the time. It is usually in this area where church, state and society must have clarity on their different identities and functions. The church order of a church usually states what the confession(s) of faith is to which the church adheres; what the offices are allowed for in the church, what their authority each office holds, how the office bearers are elected; and how the church assemblies are called and what authority they have. The

church order also lays down the rules for the training of its office bearers; the requirements for eligibility for offices; the conditions of employment for ministers and other employees of the church. Furthermore the church order contains the definitions of the functions of the church; the rules of discipline and conflict resolution in the church, as well as the rules that govern the church's relationships with respect to the state and society and their institutions, as well as relationships with other churches and religions. Very important is the fact that a church order contains the rules that have to be adhered to during the assemblies of the church; this means that the church order will also contain rules regarding the entrenchment of the confession of faith of the church. The church order has authority within the church and the courts of the country also recognise this authority and, although the authority of a church order can be amended, it can only be done according to prescribed means. It can be said that a church order is a contemporary expression of the identity of a church within the context in which it is called to function. As such it is a very important document in the relationship between church and state (see Coertzen 2004:150, 187-209).

All of the above does not necessarily mean that the state, in its relation to the church, views the church as the church sees itself (Barth s.a.:686). It often happens that the state does not take the existence of the church seriously; or it propagates an absolute separation between the state and the church, and the church is relegated to the so-called inner or private sphere of life. It can also happen that the state sees the church as a mere subject of itself that has to abide by its rules, denying the church its unique existence as part of the kingdom of God. For the church, the danger always exists that it can begin to view itself in the same way as the state often does, namely as a mere voluntary association of people, albeit then a voluntary association with a special relationship to the Person whom they call Christ. It can happen that while the state sees the church as a mere voluntary association of people that performs certain actions in the Name of Christ, the church can also begin to see itself as such, and lose view of its very special religious identity and calling. The church may never accept or be reconciled to such view of itself. The law of the state – the *ius circa sacra* – may never, without responsible theological reflection by the church, become the law in the church – the *ius in sacra*. Given the freedom of religion in a democratic society, the church is obliged to do everything possible to convince the state to view and judge it as it expresses itself in its obedience to the Word of God, and as this is expressed in its confession of faith and in its church order. This also places the church under the obligation to express itself in its church order in a way that is consistent with its confession(s) of faith and faith convictions. In other words, the church must use the space that constitutional freedom of religion allows it to define itself in a way consistent with its faith identity as a faith community, and not wait for or allow the courts of the country or the laws of the country to define it.

On the relationship between the state and religion

In the history of the relationship between church and state two big trends can be distinguished, a distinction which proves to be very valuable. On the one hand the so-called *Constantinian*

model, and on the other hand the so-called *Theocratic model* which was advocated in stronger or weaker terms by the medieval church (Hiemstra 2005:29). Constantinian and Theocratic models of the relationship between church and state are not unique to Christianity. Both these models can also be found in other religions and the way in which they see their relationship with the state and the rest of society.

Both the Constantinian and Theocratic models are positive about the role that religion should play in society – according to many Christian thinkers that support of these models, society should serve the Triune God and Christianity should provide direction to society. The models differ on who should be the guide or the leader of the role that religion plays in society. According to the Constantinian model political authorities are dominant and above church authorities. This means that they often assist, influence and sometimes fully control and use the church/religion.

It also means that the state has a role to play in the advancement and protection of the “true religion” even to the extent that it may use its coercive power. Right in our own day we detect signs of Constantinianism in the relationship between religion and state when we hear that a political party wants to guide the debate on morality in the South African society, using religions in the process. According to the Theocratic model church and religious authorities determine the role of religion in society – the church (or religion) should dominate political authorities as well as the rest of society (Hiemstra 2005:28-29).

In the history of South Africa, the Constantinian model has played a significant role right from 1652 up until 1994. After 1994, South Africa became a Constitutional state in which the Constitution of the country with guaranteed freedom of religion became the guiding rule for the relationship between religions and the state. The condition for this relationship is that the state must really take up its role to guarantee, promote and protect freedom of religion, while religions must take up the challenge to use freedom of religion to fulfil their religious role and to serve the common good of the country.

The nature of a Christian contribution to the dialogue and cooperation

Because Christians are called to seek justice (Amos 5:15, 24) one can argue that they are also called to political involvement, as well as involvement in society. The belief that God’s redemption is at work in this present world is one of the reasons why Christians ought to engage in political activity. According to reformed theology, Christians must bring Christ’s renewing influence to bear on public life, furthering the cause of God’s kingdom in this world in obedience to Scripture.

In a country like South Africa, this will of necessity entail both dialogue and co-operation with other religions and cultures. As a matter of fact, the makeup of the pluralistic South African society offers a unique opportunity for dialogue and cooperation between the religions in our country for the sake of the good of all the citizens of the land, and as a witness to the common grace of God. As to the nature of Christian involvement, the characteristics that follow can be mentioned.

Modesty

Christians must always be cautious to claim that they speak for the Lord. Smidt quotes Skillen:

We must constantly act with an attitude of true humility. We should undertake every civic duty, every political action – we can add every dialogue and cooperation – with the avowed understanding that they are not God’s will but only our response to God’s will. The attitude of humility will lead us to be modest and self critical in our claims and stated intentions (Smidt 2007:147).

A true understanding of freedom of religion ought to keep Christians from an uncompromising claim that they alone have the answers to the problems of the land and that nobody else can make any meaningful contribution. At the same time, Christians must bear witness to the fact that they have a very important contribution to make.

Tolerance

Tolerance is a second important characteristic of a Christian contribution to dialogue and cooperation. Tolerance does not mean indifference or relativism. Genuine toleration calls for peaceful co-existence despite the fact that there are areas where real disagreement exists. Forbearance/tolerance means permitting the other with whom we disagree to exist and, when appropriate to persuade and engage others by word. In the present age, prior to the full establishment of the kingdom of God that will be fully inaugurated with the second coming of Christ, we must exercise genuine tolerance – an action that defends both truth and co-existence.

Dialogue and cooperation

In a pluralistic country like South Africa, people that share the same kind of values due to their religious convictions need to engage in dialogue and cooperation in the matters that concern all of us; they also need to cooperate with each other in order to articulate and find that which is the best for the country and all its citizens – the elderly as well as the children; blue collar as well as white collar; single persons as well as married couples and families; and government as well as subjects (Smidt 2007:147-149).

Charter of religious rights and freedoms as part of the dialogue and cooperation

1. Clear distinction must be made between the freedom of religion that every human being possesses as a quality of life, and freedom of religion as something guaranteed by the constitution of a country. Although there are examples in history of efforts by governments to give citizens a certain amount of freedom to practise their religion, like the Edict of Milan (315), the Magna Charta (1214), the Edict of Turda (1568) and the Edict of Nantes (1598), it was really only after the Second World War that international charters of rights were accepted to protect freedom of religion. In this regard, there is Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948); Article 18 of the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights (16 December 1966) (Malherbe 2007, Motivation Article 6; Lerner 1996:86, 91); and Article 9 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights

and Fundamental Freedoms (Rome 1950/1953) (Malherbe 2007, Motivation, Article 6; Gunn 1996:305). Furthermore, there is also the African Charter for Human and Peoples' Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) (Malherbe 2007, Motivation Article 6).

2. For Christians, the deepest foundation for freedom is that God created man in His image with the capability to choose and to serve God. Man lost this freedom when he chose to follow the way of evil instead of the way of God. In Jesus Christ, the freedom of those who believe in Him was restored. This is a freedom that is not dependent on any constitutional guarantee. This is one reason why Christianity could endure through many centuries and many regimes, without having a constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of religion. Where there is a constitutional guarantee for freedom of religion, it enhances the freedom that Christians have in Christ and offers Christians the opportunity to publicly proclaim their faith identity in Christ – without any fear of prosecution or discrimination.

3. Freedom of religion as a constitutional right is difficult to put into a mere definition. It is much more a concept that needs to be circumscribed. It is also a concept that can continue to develop in the future. The South African Constitution describes freedom of religion in rather vague terms, merely as "... the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion" (Constitution Article 15(1)). It further states that "... religious observances may be conducted at state or state aided institutions" given that it complies with certain conditions (Const Article 15(2)) Article 15(3) provides for "... marriages conducted under any tradition, or a system of religious, personal or family law." Primarily, it is and remains the task of the religions and religious people of South Africa to identify their religious rights in a way consistent with their own religious identity, and within the ambit that the Constitution and the laws of the country allow. If the religions and religious people of South Africa do not accept this task, it will be taken over by government, the courts of the country and society, and it will be fulfilled in a way which will not necessarily further freedom of religion – a way that can again work with Constantinianism in hand. In fulfilling their task, churches and religions must make very sure of their deepest roots and identity, and also make sure of the rights and obligations that spring from those roots and identity. They must also take note of the Charter of Human Rights contained in the second chapter of the Constitution as well as of the acts of Parliament, which further describe the content, and application of the rights concerned. "The following examples of such acts may be mentioned:

- Section 9 (the right to equality): the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, Act 4 of 2000
- Section 23 (labour rights): the Labour Relations Act, Act 66 of 1995
- Section 32 (the right to access to information): the Promotion of Access to Information Act, Act 2 of 2000
- Section 33 (the right to administrative justice): the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, Act 3 of 2000

Directly or indirectly, numerous other acts give effect to the rights in the Constitution as well, as in the case of health, housing, education, the environment, the rights of children, the right to vote, and the rights of accused persons and prisoners” (Malherbe 2007, Motivation Article 6). Religions need to position themselves with regard to the rights in the Constitution and acts that describe the content and application of those rights in a responsible manner in order to determine whether they can subscribe to them as a religion or to avail themselves of the grounds on which they may want to limit those rights in their organisation.

4. A Charter of Religious Rights for South Africa is currently being developed, as put as put as a proposal to a public conference held on 21 October 2010. In the proposed Charter, the following religious rights and freedoms were identified – the rights and freedoms are merely mentioned without going into all the subdivisions. The references are to the Articles in the proposed *Charter of Religious Rights for South Africa*:

- the right to believe or not to believe (Article 1–2.3)
- the obligations of the state with regard to religious rights (Article 3–3.2, Article 9.3)
- the right to observe and exercise one’s religion (Article 4–4.4)
- the right to education consistent with one’s religious convictions (Article 7 and Article 8)
- the right to maintain particular matrimonial, family and personal legal traditions (Article 5)
- the right to institutional freedom (Article 9)
- the rights and obligations of religion with regard to the laws of the land (Article 9.4, 10)
- the right of religion to freedom of expression (Article 6–6.3)
- the right of religion to freedom of association (Article 1–2.2)
- the right of religion to freedom of propagation (Article 6.2)
- the right to religious dignity (Article 6.3)
- the right of religion to solicit, receive, manage and spend voluntary financial and other forms of support and contributions
- the right of religion to conduct upliftment and charity work in the community and to establish, maintain and contribute to charity and welfare associations, and to solicit, manage, distribute and spend funds for this purpose.

All of the above in fact describes what the freedom of religion entails and to which churches and religions in South Africa can lay claim as religious rights and freedoms.

CONCLUSION

South Africa is indeed a country of many pluralities – cultural and religious. This in itself contains the possibility of a clash of cultures. This Article argued that we must not try and deny these pluralities or force them to become one. To the contrary, the pluralities must be accepted and granted their lawful space under the Constitution to live and work – as long as they exist within the laws of the land.

A second argument of this paper was that the plurality of religions in South Africa needs not clash with but can serve the common good of the land through the dialogue and co-operation in drafting a Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms for South Africa, as well as through the endorsement of such a Charter and then taking it to Parliament for enactment – something which the Constitution allows for (Constitution Article 234). Already in 1990, Judge Albie Sachs wrote, “Ideally in South Africa, all religious organisations and persons concerned with the study of religion would get together and draft a charter of religious rights and responsibilities ... it would be up to the participants themselves to define what they consider to be their fundamental rights” (Sachs 1990:46, 47). A Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms for South Africa as a document that recognises the fact of religious pluralism in SA is a starting point, which will help both religions and their adherents to understand what their rights and freedoms are. At the same time, it will help the state to know the nature of religious rights in SA and its own limits. Through the dialogue and cooperation of religions in this regard, the common good of the country and its citizens will be served.

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THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY

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RELIGION, PLURALISM, THE COMMON GOOD AND POVERTY²

ABSTRACT

Poverty is a scourge that threatens the common good. This contribution analyses situations of poverty in South Africa as well as globally and seeks to explore the ways in which the shared values of the three Abrahamic religions which feature strongly in South Africa, can address this situation. The author does not plead for a blend of these religions, but instead for a search of those values at once shared by and unique to each that can make a contribution to the common search for justice in a pluralistic society such as ours and thereby serve the common good.

GOD IS A GOD OF JUSTICE

Let me be up front and declare where I will be coming from in this paper. There is a standard view about the role of religion in public life that sees religion as an add-on which, when peeled off, leaves us with a body of principles thick enough for living our lives together. In these matters I feel as strongly as my friend and teacher, theologian/philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, who says in this regard:

My own religion has not been an add-on that could be peeled off and consigned to the private, leaving intact secular morality that I share with everybody else (Wolterstorff 2008:475).

It has always been my belief that Christian theology, if it is to be anything, is a *public* theology. It is public, because it is the theology of the kingdom of God which is God's public claim on the world and the lives of God's people in the world. It is public because of Jesus of Nazareth, who took on public form when he became a human person, and because his life was lived in public servanthood and public vulnerability in obedience to God. It is public because Christ was tried and crucified in public, for all to see. And it is public because he rose from the grave in the light of day and defied the power of death for all to see. Hence Christian

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theology is public, critical and prophetic in our cry to God; public, critical and prophetic in our struggle with God and in our stand against the godless powers of this world; and public, critical and prophetic in our hope in God and in our work for the well-being of the world (cf. Boesak 2005:3).

The public square in which we work is more and more a pluralistic, globalised one. We can no longer act as if the “public” is an exclusively Christian public or that the public square is adequately addressed if we act out of exclusively Christian concerns. We make a Christian contribution on the common good from within our Christian traditions and convictions, but with full cognisance of the growing pluralistic nature of South African society. In my view, pluralism in this sense is in the first place accepting diversity and embracing engagement with the other. It is more than mere tolerance; it is an active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. As such pluralism is not relativism. It requires accepting the dignity of others in their difference, the rights that come with their being human and hence a neighbour, a human being in whose humanity my own humanity is reflected and affirmed. It means not just respecting the space others claim, it means actively working for that space for them to claim. It means opening spaces for human dignity, difference and equality. It is to this public square that we bring our Christian convictions, in the hope that we might make a contribution to that plurality and to the well-being of society, alongside those from other religions.

There are those Christians who believe that Christians have no responsibility for the well-being of either our society in general, or that of its government. I am not one of them. I do not subscribe to Augustine’s idea that humanity is divided into those who are members of the *civitas dei* and those who are members of the *civitas mundi*. This Augustinian way of thinking, Wolterstorff claims, I believe correctly, “is one of the most fateful errors ever made in the history of the West”. The state is not the polity of the *civitas mundi* and the church of the *civitas dei*. The state is the polity of all of us together. Again Wolterstorff:

And since it [the state] is the polity of all of us together, surely the care, the agape, for our fellow human beings that Jesus and the Torah [and, I add, the Qur’an – AAB] enjoin on us, extend to each of us doing what we can to see to it that our government secure justice for all and promote the common good (2008:677).

For myself, as a Christian, I hold on to the belief of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, I am driven by the conviction that there is not a single inch of life where that Lordship should not be established. So, privatisation or compartmentalisation of my faith is not possible. In terms of government, I follow John Calvin, who believed that true measurement of good government is justice to the poor: “A just and well-regulated government”, Calvin said in a sermon on Psalm 82:3, “will be distinguished for maintaining the rights of the poor and afflicted” (cf. Boesak 2005:204).

In other words, for me, the quality of our common good is measured by the response to the plight of the poor and the vulnerable. If the rights of the poor are ignored, denied or in any way trampled upon, government does not serve the common good, and becomes questionable.

A COMMON COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE

There is, I should think, no longer a debate on what has crystallised as the core of the three major religions represented in South Africa. However else we define God, be it as Creator, merciful, beneficent, Saviour ..., the one central element that is constantly emphasised is that our God is a God of *shalom* and *mishpat*, of *adal* and *insaf*, of justice, peace and righteousness.

The justice we speak of here is the justice that the Lord “loves” (Isa. 61:80) and “requires” (Micah 6:8) – a primary and rectifying justice, done especially to those who are considered the most vulnerable: the widows, orphans, strangers and the poor. It is not justice we may contemplate to give when we feel like doing so. It is the demand from Yahweh to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17). Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggeman calls this justice “redistributive justice” because the intention is to “redistribute social goods and social power” which are

unequally and destructively distributed in Israel’s world (and derivatively in any social context) and that the well-being of the community requires that social goods and power to some extent be given up by those who have too much, for the sake of those who have not enough (Brueggemann 1997:736-737).

It is not a philosophical theory of justice, Wolterstorff argues elsewhere, but the justice Israel is to practise because it is “Yahweh’s own abiding cause ... the undoing of injustice and the brining of justice” (Wolterstorff 2008:81).

It is the establishment or restoration of fair, equitable and harmonious relationships *in society*, argues Obery M. Hendricks:

The major implication is that any member of the community has the same rights as any other, that everyone has the same inalienable right to abundance and wholeness and freedom from oppression (Hendricks 2006:43).

It is a justice based on social relationships, not on individual personal piety, or individual conformity with liturgy and ritual, but on social interactions. For this reason, states Obery,

for any social or political endeavour to rightly claim to be consistent with the biblical tradition, it must have at its centre justice for all people regardless of class, gender, colour or national origin (Hendricks 2006:44).

The same is true of the writings of the New Testament, especially the Gospels (see Wolterstorff 2008:109-131). Jesus testifies to himself as the Servant of the Lord, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests of whom Isaiah 42 and 62 speak, the One who “will bring justice to the nations ... He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (Isa. 42:1-4).

There is yet another aspect to this. In the Hebrew Bible, God is first and foremost known as the God of slaves, and of the liberation of those slaves. Israel first came to know Yahweh as a God of justice and freedom and as such God is proclaimed in Israel’s first celebrations of God’s greatness. The “Song of the Sea” is the first song to the new God that broke the silence of the desert (Kaufmann 1968; cf. Boesak 1977:17ff. and references in notes on

pages 154-155). Furthermore, that act of liberation was deliberately disconnected from any suggestion of earthly power and benevolence from the power structures of Egypt. Charles Amjad-Ali makes the point: Moses was chosen for the task of leading the people out of Egypt not while he was in a position of power in Pharaoh's household, but when he was

on the run, deprived of his status as the son of the daughter of Pharaoh, and no longer able to exercise any of the power and privilege that came with that status (Amjad-Ali 2006:146).

Jesus came from Nazareth, from "Galilee of the Gentiles". He was born to a single mother, grew up, in the wonderful phrase of Andries van Aarde, "fatherless in Galilee", the son of a nobody. He lay in a manger amongst the animals, the dung and the dirt; was first worshipped by shepherds, representatives of the lowest classes in society. Throughout his life and ministry he associated with "sinners", prostitutes and those on the margins of society. He lived for and among the poor and it is to them that he brought the good news of God's commitment that they should have life in abundance.

At the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an, Islamic scholar Reza Aslan tells us, theology and doctrine were not the first things on the mind of the Prophet. His message dealt almost exclusively with the demise of the tribal ethic in Mecca.

In the strongest terms, Muhammed decried the mistreatment and exploitation of the weak and unprotected. He called for an end to false contracts and the practice of usury that had made slaves of the poor. He spoke of the rights of the underprivileged and the oppressed, and made the astonishing claim that it was the duty of the rich and powerful to take care of them ... Muhammed was not yet establishing a new religion; he was calling for sweeping social reform. He was not yet preaching monotheism; he was demanding social justice (cf. Wallis 2008:89-90).

Thus, the monotheistic religions worship a God whose central characteristic is justice, whose compassion enfolds, protects and defends the widow, the orphan, the stranger and those who have no helper.

From this foundational truth flows the commitment of all three of these religions to the establishment of a just, compassionate society, in which the poor are not mere objects of pity or charity; they are our own flesh and blood. Therefore, in his sermon on Deuteronomy 15:4, the reformer John Calvin argues that there is no such thing as *the* poor:

There is a reason for the Lord to say; (open your hand) to *your* poor, and to *your* needy, in *your* land. It is the Lord who presents them to us.

POVERTY: GLOBAL AND LOCAL REALITIES

In speaking of religion and poverty, I propose that we first briefly look at the global situation, before focusing as briefly on South Africa and then discussing the implications for us as they arise from these contexts. The overarching reality of our life today is caught up in the word

“globalisation”. In our own work in the Globalisation Project,³ we have come to distinguish between the historical process of globalisation – the world becoming increasingly accessible through the revolutionary technological wonders of our day; one just as easily accessible market of ideas and goods – and globalism, by which we understand the ideologically questionable process driven by the self-interest of powerful nations, corporations, individuals, and power constellations from which the rich nations and the powerful elites in poorer nations benefit hugely while the poor within rich nations and poor nations generally are detrimentally impacted upon (cf. Boesak *et al.* 2010:4).

This process is driven by global, what has become known as “neo-liberal” capitalism, a system of immense power from which it has become increasingly difficult for nations to dissociate themselves. Globalism is the uncritical and deliberate acceptance of the neo-liberal ideology of profit at all costs, limitless growth and development, and powerful manipulation of finance and trade within a so-called “free market”, without any regard for the consequences it will have for people and the planet. More effectively than armies, globalism has won the ideological battle and has emerged as the dominant ideology with its concomitant systems in the 21st century. Without doubt its biggest impact upon the world and its peoples is socio-economic, and on the poor and vulnerable that impact has been no less than catastrophic. That impact has been no less catastrophic on the Earth.

Globally, inequalities have risen alarmingly. The average North American consumes five times more than a Mexican, ten times more than a Chinese, 30 times more than an Indian. There are 1.3 billion people – 22% of the world’s population – living below the poverty line; 841 million are malnourished; 880 million are without access to medical care. One billion lack adequate shelter; 1.3 billion have no access to safe drinking water; 2.6 billion go without sanitation. Among the children of the world, 113 million – two-thirds of them girls – do not attend school; 150 million are malnourished; 30 000 die each day from preventable diseases (cf. Sacks 2006:29).

In 18 countries, all of them in Africa, life expectancy is less than 50 years. In Sierra Leone it is a mere 37 years. Infant mortality rates are higher than one in ten in 35 countries, mostly in Africa but including Bangladesh, Bolivia, Haiti, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan and Yemen (Sacks 2006:29).

It gets worse: By the end of the millennium, the top fifth of the world’s population had 86% of the world’s GDP while the bottom fifth had just 1%. The inequalities almost become an absurdity. The assets of the world’s three richest billionaires were more than the combined wealth of the 600 million inhabitants of the least-developed countries (Sacks 2006:29).⁴ And we now know that at least a billion persons across the globe go to bed hungry at night.

³ I refer here to Joint Globalisation Project of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (BNC), the German Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW), the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and the Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche (ERK), 2008-2010.

⁴ Sacks is here quoting David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds) (2000). *The Global Transformations Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

South Africa, having so fervently and uncritically embraced the ideology of neo-liberal capitalism, presents us with a picture that is equally disturbing.

In 2008, economist Sampie Terreblanche tells us, the richest 20% – that is, the new nonracial elite – received 74% of the total income in the country, while the poorest (53%) among the population had access to only 8%. The new wealthy black elite make up 11% of the total black population but receive 26% of the total income; or put differently, 54% of the income the rest of the African population (89%) have access to (Terreblanche 2009a; cf. Terreblanche 2002).

According to other major studies, control of the economy and economic resources are in the hands of 10% of the population; the poorest of the poor receive only 40% of educational resources (HRSC 1995; May 1998; African Monitor 2009). The economic and human development status of South Africa has seriously declined over the last years, from 85th place in 1990 to 129th out of 182 countries in 2007 (Terreblanche 2009a). This means it is now at the same level as in the 1960s.

Over 9 million people are still living in informal settlements, and the Ministry of Human settlements is now having to spend hundreds of millions of rands in order to repair RDP houses built since 1994 but now falling apart because of the poor quality of material and workmanship. An estimated 563 501 children are not attending school and 38% of our children suffer from stunted growth, at least 23% from malnutrition (cf. Boesak 2005:53-54). Here I cannot even begin to speak of the undeniable link between HIV/Aids and poverty (with the vast majority of those infected living in sub-Saharan Africa), access to treatment (with scientists estimating that despite the evident success of ARVs preventing the virus from causing Aids, only 12% of those living with the disease receive the drugs, as was reported in *The Mail and Guardian* on 5 March 2010); susceptibility to tuberculosis – which has overwhelmed health care in South Africa with an expected 5 million new cases expected by 2012; the plight of Aids orphans, and the phenomenon of child-headed households. I also do not have the time to speak of human trafficking, including that of children, or of prostitution and sexual exploitation, especially of poor women and girl children, but also boys, all of whom are easy targets precisely because they are poor.

AN INVERSION OF PRIORITIES

The statistics go on and they are utterly grim. But as we all know, poverty is more than statistics. It means unemployment, or the vulnerability of gratuitous employment; lack of access, education and skills, poor health, deprivation of knowledge and communication, and an inability to exercise one's basic political and human rights despite the rightfully hailed South African Constitution. In all sorts of ways, the poor become the victims of slavery of all kinds.

Poverty means the absence of dignity, confidence, and self-respect. It means the absence of security and the safety of parenthood and family life. The poor remain excluded, and their exclusion ranges from basic needs to justice in the courts. For them, there is no difference between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

Behind these realities, the 1997 UNDP Report on Human Development reminds us, “[l]ies the grim reality of desperate lives without choices” (quoted in Boesak 2005:54). This is, I think, the final humiliation of the poor: to be without choices, options or opinions, which in effect make of poverty a state of effective slavery in a democracy that came into being by the blood, sweat and tears of the poor.

Criminal, too, is the wastage of resources and the overturning of priorities. This is seen not only in the constant cover-up of corruption and the rising costs of official incompetence, but also in the continuing scandal of our weapons industry and the unnamable shame of our arms deal that will not, and should not be allowed to go away. To take but one example, Armscor’s Rooivalk attack helicopter project has soaked up some R1.17 billion in research and development money and has failed to create more than a few hundred jobs – the industry promised “thousands” of new jobs. Arms production is inefficient and expensive. It distorts the structure of the national economy in the long run and has only limited export potential, the experts tell us (Boesak 2005:61). Over the last fifteen years, our armament industry, represented by Armscor and Denel, has reported loss after disastrous loss; every audit reveals bad decision-making, poor management, and corruption. Subsidising this perversely cherished child of apartheid is costing us millions, at the expense mostly of the poor.

The hideously expensive Gripen fighter jets, the frigates and submarines for which South Africans had to pay billions of rands will, for the next three years at least, stay on the ground or in the docks because there is no money to put them to use (Du Toit 2010). When church groups and peace activists called the arms deal “economic nonsense”, holding that a straightforward investment of the R60 billion would have made much more sense (cf. Boesak 2005:61), government’s reaction was apoplectic. However, since then, year by year, it has become clearer: the economics are not working.

Economics aside, for people of faith there is another issue at stake here. South Africa, with our new democratic government supposedly representing the interests of the poor masses who had voted, and keep on voting it into power, fighting the frightening legacy of apartheid and having upon itself the development of our nation, cannot afford an arms industry, heavily subsidised at that, or squander money on so-called defence when there is no discernable military threat to the country. The greatest threat to South Africa’s security is not a military one but poverty. The acquisition of arms that diverts public resources away from socio-economic investment is nothing less than a betrayal of the struggle against apartheid and a betrayal of the poor.

Related to this, although a point that will take us too far from our designated topic today, a person of faith should raise the question: How can South Africa set an example of, and take credit for, a “transitional miracle”, speak of “reconciliation” as a model for others, boast of our “rainbow nation” while our weapons (which we have sold to dismally undemocratic countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Indonesia under Suharto, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and China), fuel wars in other poor countries, bolster ruthless dictatorships, and blow other peoples’ chances of reconciliation to smithereens? How can a country with no less than four Nobel Peace laureates make peace impossible in the same continent we hope to lead?

As for the argument that arms sales bring in foreign exchange – how can we help to kill the poor elsewhere with the intention of feeding our poor, and then we feed only the already well-fed? Can we see the hopeless contradiction, the total impossibility of being both the apostle of peace and a merchant of death?

DISDAIN FOR THE POOR

However, the inversion of priorities to the detriment of the poor reveals something else as well. In the early days following the Zuma administration coming to power, much attention was drawn to conspicuous spending by government officials on lavish trips and parties and all sorts of entertainment. I mention this, not because the opposition has made such huge political capital out of it, or because of the public outcry only, but because – and this is the point I wish to make – it displays such an open disdain for the plight of the poor whom our politicians claim to represent and fight for. It couples with the unashamed display of wealth by the privileged elite in this country, the crass materialism of the so-called “bling generation”, and the casual carelessness with which promises to the poor are given and treated. This is only the public symptom of the deep-seated scorn our political elites feel for the poor. This is the real embodiment of the inexcusable inequalities the statistics reflect. It is the politicised, concretised opposite of the compassion God has for the poor and the vulnerable which is a theme that runs through the whole of the Qur’an and the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. According to the Holy Qur’an (6:115)

The Word of thy Lord doth find its fulfillment in truth and in justice, none can change his words (6:115). ... Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and he forbids all shameful deeds and injustice ... (16:90).

The prophet Micah says,

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8).

When Jesus speaks of the hungry and whether we have fed them; of the thirsty and whether we have given them something to drink; of the naked and whether we have clothed them; of the stranger and whether we have welcomed them; of the sick and whether we have taken care of them; of those in prison and whether we have visited them, he says,

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me ... (Matt. 25:40).

For us, as people of faith, it begins not with the allocations in the Finance Minister’s budget speech, with the debate on whether the decisions taken at Polokwane are translated into policy or not, or even with who wins the current battle for the hearts and minds of the poor. It begins with the disdain for the poor, the contempt for the humanbeingness of the poor, the denial of the rights of the poor not to be hungry, excluded, cast aside; it begins with the right not to be poor.

People of faith rise up in indignation because the disdain of the poor denies creatureliness, and hence the fact that the poor are created in the image of God. We are human in the likeness of God, which means not a physical likeness, but our unique, dynamic relation to God and hence to one another and the whole of creation. The uniqueness of the other confirms the communality of both us and them, and turns both of us and them toward the divine. The denigration of human worth and value is an assault upon the image and worthiness of God.

As Christians, we also affirm that the poor are people whose humanity is confirmed and made sacred by the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ. Disdain for the poor denies the liberating, humanising, reconciling work of Christ who has taken on human form, thereby affirming human worth in the sight of God. This Jesus, the church believes and confesses, has through his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, reconciled people to God, to one another and to the world. He has, the Bible says, “broken down the walls of partition and enmity [amongst human beings] and so become our peace” (Ephes. 2:14).

People of faith protest against the disdain of the poor because it is in fact a denial of the rights of the poor. In our quotation from Calvin’s sermon on Deuteronomy 15 we noticed how he emphasised that a good government will be distinguished by its response to the *rights* of the poor and the afflicted. What is at stake here is the rights of the poor. Calvin’s call is not for charity that would leave systemic injustices untouched. The concern is for conduct towards the poor that is measured by political and economic policies that guarantee justice and are driven by compassion.

The justice we are speaking of is inextricably linked to the rights of the poor. Justice has to do with rights. And here I would plead that we do not become confused or distracted by debates contrasting rights and obligations. We cannot lay obligations upon people whose rights we have systematically denied, whose humanity we have despoiled, who we have systemically disempowered and wounded. A social situation is *just* when the *rights* of people in that situation are honoured, says Nicholas Wolterstorff:

When we fail in our obligations, we are guilty. When we fail to enjoy our rights we are morally wounded. So obligations have to do with guilt, and rights have to do with woundedness. I have come to think that these are two irreducible sides of moral life (1999:107ff.).

These rights, Wolterstorff concludes, not only tell us that they are grounded in the justice and love of God, they also mean that we are not beggars in life.

For people of faith, it begins with the recognition of the disdain for the poor and vulnerable, and what it truly means. It is the recognition of the real crisis we are facing. The crisis is not a Zuma-crisis, an Alliance-crisis, or an identity crisis. It is, to what Jürgen Moltmann refers as a “God crisis”:

Our social and political frigidity towards the disadvantaged, the poor and the humiliated is an expression of our frigidity towards God. The cynicism of modern political and economic manipulators is an expression of our contempt for God. We have lost God, and God has left us, so we are bothered neither by the suffering of others which we have caused, not by the debts we are leaving behind for coming generations (1999:16).

THE LESSONS THAT SHAME AND TEACH US

More and more, South Africans are beginning to realise that poverty is not just a problem, it is a time bomb. Over the last five years, we have repeatedly seen what are called “protests against poor service delivery”. Increasingly, too, these have become more and more violent because the belief is growing that this is the only language government can understand and will respond to. The anger of people on the ground can no longer be denied or ignored, and the leadership articulating and directing this anger is increasingly being estranged from politically elected leadership.

This is not too difficult to understand. In reality, people are not “protesting against poor service delivery”. They are protesting against inequality, poverty, and powerlessness. Increasingly their anger will become political. The violence will increasingly become less an expression of social frustration than an expression of political intent. Our levels of inequality are not sustainable, our shallow understanding of reconciliation is catching up with us, our failure to address the legacy of apartheid in terms of justice and human dignity can no longer be hidden, our wrong choices in economic decision-making to please the wealthy and powerful are turning against us, and, above all, our disdain for the poor is setting fire to our future.

“Just as (English liberal) segregation has been replaced by (Afrikaner) apartheid, apartheid has been replaced by nonracial elitism”, says economist Sampie Terreblanche (2009a). He fears an “atmosphere conducive to a second struggle”. I think we might be facing much more. I fear the coming of a postponed revolution. How far must one travel along this road to get from the privileged and entitled “us” to the non-deserving “them”? Not far at all.

Religious communities are not innocent in this. We have not nearly been as clear, as articulate, as united in our prophetic stance during the past fifteen years as we used to be during the struggle. In the most difficult and fundamental debates that the nation struggled with – the truth and reconciliation process, the question of wealth and poverty and economic choices, the continuing struggle for a non-racial, non-sexist, inclusive democracy – we have been either conspicuously silent or hardly audible or understandable. We have seen the spiritual unravelling of our society and the disintegration of our communities before our very eyes and we have said very little, and done even less. This has to change.

Our responsibility as people of faith remains great in all these matters. After the unbridled optimism of the Enlightenment and modernity about the autonomy of humankind, we are now sadder, older, wiser. Religion has, contrary to all sorts of learned predictions and wishful thinking, not disappeared from the scene. Secularism has after all not won the battle. Religion has remained, and sometimes in horrific forms established itself once again quite centrally in the life of humankind.

However, in the lessons that shame and teach us, we continue to learn that there are things we, in rediscovering the great Source of our being and future, continue to have to offer the world. But we must begin to rediscover them for ourselves first, in teaching and practising them in our own lives and our communities, and live by example so that we can share them with the world.

There are deep-seated values in the great religious traditions that have always been the bedrock of what makes a society humane and a people compassionate. The belief in the ultimate value, worth and dignity of human beings, because they are created in the image of God; the belief that people and civilisations survive and prosper not by strength, might, or power, but how they respond to the weak and the vulnerable; not by wealth, but by compassionate justice for the poor; that the fight against poverty is a call of the God who stands by their side in their struggle for justice and equity. So in faith and obedience, that is where we stand.

That the diversity of peoples and cultures, in faith and in creation reflects the glory of God and that we are called to honour, cherish, uphold and defend the dignity that is in that diversity. That it is better to share than to hoard; that our equality comes from our being equal before God in our sinfulness and in our immense capacity for doing what is right. That hope is redemptive: it inspires us to look for the sources of action that lie within ourselves and beyond ourselves, in so doing saving us from the paralysis of helpless powerlessness. Hope is the knowledge that we can choose, that we can learn from our mistakes and act differently next time. The belief that history is not a “trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind, but a long, slow journey to redemption” (Joseph Heller), leaning upon God and on the shoulder of the other in whose suffering, restoration, and dignified life my own humanity is reflected and without whom, as with the rest of creation, my life is not humane nor fulfilled. These are some of the things we should once again make our own.

Faith tells us that God is not unmindful of our aspirations, that dreams of humanity, justice, a fulfilled and dignified life, and a shared and sharing community are dreams in the very heart of God; that God, as Jonathan Sacks (2006:207) reminded us, gives us the wisdom and power and the means to save us from ourselves, and that we are not wrong to dream, wish, and work for a better world. The LORD of the Hebrew Bible commands and warns us:

Execute justice in the morning and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath shall go forth like fire and burn, with no one to quench it ... did not your father ... do justice and righteousness ...; he judged the cause of the poor and needy ... is this not to know me? (Jer. 22).

And, is the testimony of the Holy Qur'an:

Oh ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor; for Allah can best protect you both. Follow not the lusts (of your heart), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well acquainted with what ye do (4:135).

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, were the words of the first public sermon of Jesus of Nazareth,

... because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-19; 21).

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REMEMBRANCE AND RENEWAL

Exploring the role of the church as an agent of welfare after 15 years of democracy

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contributions made by the church in the past towards welfare provision in South Africa, and current challenges faced by the church in acting as a welfare provider after 15 years of democracy. The church is well-placed to affect societal transformation and has played a significant historical role as a welfare agent in South Africa, as evidenced by the establishment of soft infrastructure during colonialism and in the advocacy and the formation of social capital that took place during the apartheid era. In a post-apartheid era, many churches continue to wrestle with issues such as: reconciliation and redistribution in an unequal society; bringing holism to social welfare; redefining their prophetic role; lack of capacity in delivery; and relief mode delivery. This paper, therefore, also proposes paths of renewal for the future, and draws from the WGRIP case study of the town of Paarl, Western Cape, in particular.

INTRODUCTION

It would not be out of place to state that the church has had an intrinsic relationship with welfare delivery in South Africa since colonialism, and continues to play a significant role in our relatively new democracy. Not only did the church (as is the case with many nations) put the first soft infrastructure such as schools and hospitals in place, she also played a significant role in the opposition against apartheid, and is still regarded by state and civil society as a key player in welfare delivery. However, it would also not be out of place to note that the church has not always been a positive agent of change with regard to social transformation. In fact, many churches lent tacit support to the regime and provided the theological justification for apartheid. Today, the church is at times viewed with ambivalence, despite being widely acknowledged as a key contributor to and agent for welfare. It is this tension that this paper will endeavour to navigate by exploring, through remembrance of the role that the church has played and continues to play as a provider of welfare; and by proposing that through renewal

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of both theology and praxis, she may continue to act as an agent of social transformation. The WGRIP study, undertaken in Paarl (a peri-urban town outside of Cape Town in the Western Cape), will serve as a case study and lens through which this tension and the possible creativity that may arise can be viewed.² The findings of this study are based on interviews and focus groups undertaken with church leaders of four mainline denominations, community members, and local government/public authorities.

LOOKING BACK: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN PRE-DEMOCRACY

Ecclesiastical involvement in social justice and upliftment is not a new phenomenon; social welfare/community development has always accompanied Christian mission as either as an explicit part thereof or an intended by-product of mission (Pierson 1993:8). However, the pre-democracy role of the South African Church with regard to welfare provision and social justice is a complex one – owing to the dividedness of South African society and the complex state-church interactions throughout this period.

The church has been at the forefront of mobilising its resources to support and care for the poor and marginalised in South African society since 1652. Societal reformation for the oppressed and marginalised was also promoted by the church. Several missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) encouraged the Khoikhoi to institute court cases against white farmers and employers at whose hands they'd suffered. Ordinance 50 at the Cape, which gave legal equality to "Hottentots and other free persons of colour", is also credited to the influence of a member of the LMS (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:52-56). The development of soft infrastructure and welfare work in the form of hospitals, orphanages, and schools (as elsewhere in the world), were largely facilitated in the early years by missionaries. However, as the church grew, congregations and denominations began to establish institutions and to care for their neighbours. Kritzinger (1996:4-12) identifies three historical models of social welfare in the South African church: the *versorgingsbenadering* (the care approach directed at relief measures), the *institutionele benadering* (the institutional approach directed at the establishment of social welfare institutions)³ and the *opheffingsbenadering* (the upliftment approach).

One of the most prominent roles played by any denomination in terms of social welfare – a role which eventually led to the development of the government's Department of Welfare – was unfortunately limited to its own racial grouping. This involvement arose in the early

² The WGRIP study was an interdisciplinary study spearheaded by The Unit for Religion and Development Research (URDR) who, together with a Swedish partner, the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society (CSRS) at the University of Uppsala, received a three-year grant (2006-2008) for a research project called "Welfare and Religion in a Global Perspective: theoretical and methodological exchange across the North-South divide" (WRIGP). This project was administered and funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa, the Swedish Research Council (VR) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

³ A prominent model of this in South Africa is Lovedale, established by the Glasgow Missionary Society in 1841. It became a multiracial, interdenominational centre of learning in the Eastern Cape and later generated the development of Fort Hare University (an institution which was "to provide education, expertise and confidence to many of those who became leaders in the African National Congress"). See Hofmeyr and Pillay (1994:74).

decades of the twentieth century from what was termed “the poor white problem” – a growing poor white population, the majority of whom spoke Afrikaans, who dwelt or originated in rural areas and had made their living from farming. Therefore, the first Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem was launched in 1930, largely based on the involvement of the Dutch Reformed Church. Although the “first commission did note the problems of black poverty as not being any less acute than those of poor whites and would require study on their own”, blacks were excluded from the inquiry (Albertyn & Rothman 1932:xix; see also Wilson & Ramphela 1989:x). Blacks and coloureds were viewed as an economic hindrance to the economic progress of the white population, and population growth in the black and coloured sectors of society was viewed as alarmingly high. Population growth, combined with the acquisition by blacks of skills that were on par with those of many poor whites, was seen as both economically threatening and psychologically demoralising for poor whites. Job reservation, which the inquiry proposed for a set, temporary period, was therefore proposed as the answer to this quandary (Albertyn & Rothman 1932:xx; cf. Maquarrie 1933:28). The success of this first inquiry is evident today.⁴ The poor white problem receded as many of these findings were incorporated into National Party policies, which formed in part the sociological and ideological motivation for apartheid and its subsequent policies which included recommendations such as job reservation (Albertyn & Rothman 1932:xx; cf. Wilson & Ramphela 1989:x).

Poverty in South Africa therefore became not only a socio-economic issue, but a profoundly political issue. Gross inequality was the direct result of the racial policies that flowed from recommendations such as job reservation, resulting in the racially correlated distribution of income that remains our legacy. Sadly, some sectors of the church gave theological justification to the heresy of apartheid. Others, however, in response to the institutionalised discrimination of the apartheid system, were often the voice of the voiceless black masses in the vacuum created by the banning of black political organisations such as the ANC and PAC. While many churches, “given their membership and multiracial nature”, did not welcome this new role, the developments following events such as the Sharpeville massacre left them little choice (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:275-76).⁵ De Gruchy (1996:49), for example, describes Desmond Tutu as a “political leader by default” because of the exile, imprisonment and killing of political leaders. Against the background of a growing African Theology, the Black Consciousness Movement and the Liberation Theology of Latin America, the strongest voice came from a South African theology of resistance that declared that “Liberation involves joining the struggle” – neutrality was not an option (Thomas 1995:195-96).⁶ Llewellyn MacMaster (2008:6), himself a theologian arrested under

4 It is important to note that the expansion of gold mining in the 1930s and industrial developments of the Second World War also contributed to the proposal of job reservation. See Wilson and Ramphela (1989:x).

5 Organisations such as the SACC (known at first as the Christian Council of South Africa) and the Christian Institute “committed themselves to a conscientious struggle for the liberation of blacks” during the apartheid struggle.

6 Sadly, some sectors of the church “either supported apartheid or preached a piety divorced from social injustice”. See Thomas (1995:149).

apartheid, cites Allan Boesak in arguing that for millions of South Africans “the struggle for a free, democratic South Africa ... was based on their religious convictions”.

Patel (quoted by Van der Merwe 2007:3) identifies apartheid as giving rise to the “development of the social welfare sector (which) took place largely along racial lines and was focused on the white population group”. However, this situation also gave rise to the formation of faith-based NGOs that recognised that the government was not caring for the oppressed black masses. In fact, during the early 1980s the church was identified by the Second Carnegie Inquiry as one of the key organisations (together with trade unions and other civil society role players) that could bring about social change. It is interesting that the concept of community development (which was not popular in South Africa because of its “potential for political change”) is seen as only really having “made headway in evangelical missionary circles and the Black Consciousness Movement” (De Beer & Swanepoel 1998:10). In fact, Swart and Venter (2001:486) argue that, particularly in the light of the church’s role as an ally “in the liberation struggles and grassroots socio-economic activities of NGOs”, most South African development-/welfare-orientated NGOs cannot be viewed apart from their religious roots.

MOVING FORWARD: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE CHURCH TODAY

Fostering civic life

In a post-apartheid state, the importance of the church’s partnership in welfare provision appears to be recognised and sought by a state that, according to Swart (2009:75), appears to be struggling to meet the awaited “social and infrastructural needs of its citizens”. One of the most telling early statements made with regard to the role of faith in fostering civic life is that of former President Nelson Mandela in his statement on ethical transformation:

[I]n our striving for political and economic development, the ANC recognises that social transformation cannot be separated from spiritual transformation (ANC 1998:2).

This positive view of the role of religion in affecting social change appears to have been shared by his successor. Both Thabo Mbeki and the former Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, recognised the role that the church has played historically in the development of soft infrastructure, and encouraged partnership between the public and private sector largely through national religious bodies, such as the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) and the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD).

This is certainly also evident at grassroots level in Paarl. Views held by the public/government authorities in the Paarl area were unanimous in their conviction that the church had a positive role to play in social welfare. The church was seen to be “in contact with people on the ground and knows best what the needs of the communities are and it also knows before anybody else” (Erasmus 2008:18). Those interviewed as part of the WGRIP study felt that the church could play a significant role in moral formation, in counselling and

relief work, and saw the possibility of the church's involvement in welfare as being able to bridge societal gaps. This is confirmed by several recent studies regarding the importance of the role of the church in social welfare and development in South Africa, which note that the church is able to mobilise far more people than any other social movement, and to reach all sectors of society. It is also better positioned than the state to address issues of moral decay, has the greatest level of trust than any other institution in society, and contributes more than the state to social welfare (Krige 2008:17). However, when asked to comment on the church's post-1994 role, many felt that the churches' role had diminished in comparison to "the activist role of the churches before 1994 and how this helped to oppose and in the end, topple the Apartheid government". These respondents felt that the church could be playing the same role of mobilising people as they did in the past, but now to address the welfare problems communities face currently (see Erasmus 2008:53). Some respondents felt that the church was becoming almost invisible, "afraid to voice their opinions on certain issues and this makes them seem weak to the public" (Erasmus 2008:53). Academics have echoed the same concern and have even gone so far as to state that the church has "moved to the margins" (MacMaster 2008:3). This presents a definite challenge to the church, which is perceived as being able to play a vital role and yet appears to be failing to do so. During the apartheid era, mobilisation was used to great effect and so a remobilisation of the laity in a post-apartheid context is, in my opinion, perhaps one of the ways in which the church can again revitalise its involvement in civic life. For a while now, congregations have also been identified as effective generators of "social capital" – "those connections of communication and trust that make the organisation of the complex society possible" (Ammerman 1997:362). One study undertaken in the USA, for example, has noted that African American churchgoers were more likely to be actively involved in civic life "due to the development and fostering of social trust and a sense of mutual obligation that exists within these [*sic*] churches" (Brown & Brown 2003:618). Furthermore, although Putnum states that, in his opinion, "altruism (doing good for other people) is not part of the definition of social capital", he does acknowledge that "it turns out empirically, at least in the United States and probably elsewhere, that a very strong predictor of altruism is social connectedness" (Putnum 2001:7). Besides giving financially towards social welfare, altruism, through the volunteering of time and services, is one of the things the church is good at. The culture of volunteerism is inherent to the church's inner organisation and mission mandate and so it is unsurprising that recent South African studies affirm the Christian faith as an important factor in shaping and motivating volunteerism in our country. In fact, several community volunteers express the roots of their involvement as stemming from "their calling as Christians" (Green 2009:35). There appear to be many opportunities for greater volunteerism. Women, children and the disabled were just some of the vulnerable groups, mentioned by the WGRIP report, which require the mobilisation of volunteers. Crime prevention was also an issue in which congregants as concerned community members could play a role, and home-based HIV/Aids care is also an important avenue for volunteerism. Perhaps the most interesting response to the perceived silence and lack of mobilisation of the church came from the public authorities, who stated that, due to the strong moral- or value-

orientated basis of the church, the church should be more involved in the moral debate on welfare issues such as women and child abuse, substance abuse and crime (Erasmus 2008:52). This of course highlights again the need for the church to take its place in the public arena both through the mobilisation of its congregants and through public theology.

The reconciliation and restitution agenda

In a post-apartheid context, South Africa's inequality ratio remains one of the highest in the world, with income distribution still largely skewed along racial lines. Widespread inequality continues to exist today and, while the radical political power shift has already taken place peacefully, empowerment of the poor who are powerless against the ravages of economic, social, and even political poverty remains a challenge (Roberts 2006:116). Apartheid also served to fragment society, so that according to Villa-Vicencio and Doxtader (2004:77): "viable communal reparations, which focus on economic growth and the restoration of human dignity, are not easy to realise". It is within this context that the church has an opportunity to embody an ethic of sharing and redistribution. Furthermore, the provision of social welfare by the church cannot be looked at without acknowledging that the ethic of sharing and redistribution has not only socio-economic significance, but also a deep theological significance. As the authors of the book, *Facing the Truth*, that deals with the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), note: "religious notions of reconciliation expect from perpetrators an ethical commitment to making redress, restitution and reparation" (De Gruchy *et al.* 1999:130). While in Christian theology there are no simplistic inferences to be drawn from biblical examples of equality, the "implication within the biblical text is sharing and possibly restitution for those oppressed, is one that addresses unjust structural relationships and power dynamics" (Bragg 1987:42).

It is not insignificant, therefore, that in WGRIP interviews with several church leaders from different denominations, the importance of economic "sharing" is mentioned (Bowers-Du Toit 2009:103-104). However, due to the divisive nature of apartheid town planning, "white, black and coloured neighbours in areas such as Paarl remain fairly isolated both geographically and socio-economically" (Bowers-Du Toit 2009:107). Furthermore, the legacy of denominational divides along racial lines (i.e. Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church) continues to raise issues of trust between local congregations. A regional partnership initiative between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church has resulted in the formation of a joint NGO, Badisa. However, this partnership does not appear to be happening at congregational level. One of the ways in which this division may be addressed is through an inter-congregational model, which "twins" wealthier (usually white) congregations with poorer congregations in areas such as Paarl (cf. Hammet 2000:204-205). Such "twinning" will possibly create the space for the creation of a pool of voluntary professional expertise from which poorer congregations can draw for technical services. Such a model could in essence thus promote redistribution through sharing of resources – whether they be financial, technical or material. In fact, some church leaders interviewed mentioned this as a possible model, and greater cooperation between churches

regarding welfare issues was also noted as being needed in what is regarded by most church leaders as a divided community (Erasmus 2008:40).

How such relationships will be defined and created by the church in an area such as Paarl will be interesting to observe should they seek to implement such an initiative, because such models also raise issues of power and paternalism. The latter issues are of course fresh in the minds of many black and coloured South Africans. The latter could, however, go a long way towards bridging social divides. A study undertaken in the USA in 2005 documented the success of one such program which “twinning” poorer African American congregations and wealthy white suburban congregations, and claims that whites reported that they “gain as much if not more than they give in these programs” (Lockhart 2005:55).

Following our team’s feedback of the data and papers to leaders of the community, it was found that churches were beginning to take steps towards healing wounds of the past. Some white ministers in the area were, for example, playing a role in facilitating socio-economic justice through economic advocacy for farm workers employed by their white congregants. Should such opportunities not be grasped now and taken to the next level, it may lead to a loss of community witness and may continue to feed the divisions which exist in many such communities. It is hoped that such initiatives will spread into fully fledged creative partnerships that may address some of the welfare challenges faced by Paarl.

More effective delivery

Church, state and “more comprehensive delivery”

It is clear from the WGRIP study that a greater need for partnership is not only confined to “intra-church” partnerships. There is a definite need for local congregations and Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) to cooperate to a greater extent with government welfare services. Partnership between the public and voluntary sectors through a community-based approach is one of the cornerstones of our current welfare system. However, it appears as if some of the church representatives interviewed felt that there needed to be greater co-ordination between government and the church, and that the former should liaise with churches at grassroots level because “they are more sensitive to the problems of the community” (Green 2009:31). Patel further adds that

... given the limited institutional capacity of the new democratic government to deliver the services itself, collaboration with the voluntary sector is imperative if the government is to achieve its ambitious social development outcomes (Patel 2003:1).

However, she also adds that this might come at the cost of the “autonomy and independence of such voluntary organizations as they struggle for survival in a public management milieu” (2003:1). This is confirmed by Davids, who also notes that within the South African context NGOs “do not operate in a political vacuum. Government policy can limit or advance NGO activities” (Davids 2002:71).

This challenge will certainly apply to local congregations that wish to actively respond to the felt needs in their grassroots communities. It is interesting to note that while most

respondents felt that such cooperation would be advantageous as the common vision is the good of the community, others felt that there would be a tension between the church's identity and calling and the state's approach:

There are also disadvantages. Church and government operate differently; the church is a place of service and involvement, while the government is seen as only serving self-interest. Risks for such cooperation are: if "politics" creeps into the cooperation, if government is too prescriptive, wrong priorities are tackled and one group's interest is put before those of others (Erasmus 2008:45).

Still others went on to comment that the church nevertheless needed to be sensitive to the process and structures of the state welfare system and to work through these channels. Findings indicate that there are not many existing examples of cooperation between churches and NGOs, government and business.

FBOs (there are several in the Paarl community), however, are viewed by public/government officials as doing good work, particularly in assisting "the cases that were not catered for by the state" (Erasmus 2008:51-52). All but one of the denominations that were included in the WGRIP study (Anglican, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholic) had professionalised their welfare services through the development of institutions such as old age homes, community centres and orphanages, rather than to focus on congregational action (Erasmus 2008:38). It is interesting that two FBOs were identified by members of the population as being the most involved with welfare in the Paarl area, and this perhaps highlights a need for FBOs to assist local congregations in capacity building with regard to government structures and policies – so that they can better engage with government structures (Erasmus 2008:46).

However, one public official noted that congregations appeared reluctant to join government-funded projects, because they were not faith-based projects. The case study also suggests that currently the majority of welfare work done by congregations in Paarl is largely relief work in the form of soup kitchens and the distribution of food parcels and clothing – all forms of welfare that do not require the church to necessarily engage directly with the welfare system (Erasmus 2008:36). This certainly poses a challenge to local congregations who have the potential to be more responsive in terms of addressing felt needs more rapidly and contextually than government structures.⁷ Large numbers of the population interviewed felt that government welfare offices were inaccessible to those who were most vulnerable (children, pensioners, HIV orphans) and that social grants were not sufficient to "uplift people" (Erasmus 2008:46). It also poses a challenge to congregations and FBOs to continue to engage government and possibly partner with other stakeholders in order to ensure what Green identifies as "more comprehensive delivery" to the needy and vulnerable (Green 2009:31).

⁷ Korten (1991:98) suggests, for example, that the "small size, independence and focused value commitments" of voluntary organisations such as the church "give them the capacity for social and institutional innovation seldom found in either government or business".

Moving beyond charity and relief

Relief work, while well-meaning and legitimate in many contexts, focuses more on the symptoms than causes of poverty and implies a “charity” approach to welfare and development, rather than the community development approach (based on tenets such as empowerment, self-reliance and participation) advocated by the South African government (Lombaard 2009). This approach, most famously identified by David Korten as a “Generation One” approach

... involves the direct delivery of services to meet an immediate deficiency or shortage experienced by the beneficiary population, such as needs for food, health care or shelter (Korten 1991:115).

Religious organisations have long been at the forefront of such efforts and therefore it is not surprising that most congregations and FBOs in Paarl are operating within this paradigm.

However, this approach has been criticised by those wanting to promote holistic development – not as with this paradigm where the NGO/agency/church is the doer of development and the people the passive recipients.⁸ The church as “doer” of development, according to sociological analysis, results in dependency, not holistic development. Kritzinger and Swart appear to agree that this is tantamount to paternalism, where things are done for the people and not with them, and which thus presupposes inequality. This then results – in the case of the church – in acting as a dividing agent between the poor on the one hand and the church on the other, or perhaps in terms of a handout from above (the church) to the poor below (Kritzinger 1996:6; Swart & Venter 2000:27). Dennis (in Jacosen 2001:42) makes the point that richer suburban congregations often prefer to donate money and emergency food rather than become involved in holistic development that empowers the poor as they “draw their sense of self-worth from the dependency of the needy upon them”. This is a danger which white churches in South Africa need to be particularly aware of in light of South Africa’s divided past.

The church, nevertheless, has definite potential to enable those in need to help themselves – both through local congregations and FBOs. As far back as the late 1980s, Wilson and Ramphela regarded “empowerment” as one of the South African church’s most powerful tools, a tool that helps people to “become critically aware of the reasons for their poverty ... with a view to controlling their own destinies” (Wilson & Ramphela 1989:302).

Theology as “friend” or “foe” of praxis?⁹

Yet, one of the hindrances identified with regard to churches engaging in a more holistic approach to welfare and moving beyond a charity paradigm, has been that of their theology.

⁸ A study undertaken by Swart and Venter – making use of Korten’s generations – found that despite national attempts at deliberate institutional transformation in the Methodist Church of South Africa (MCSA), their findings indicate that of the 22 programmes investigated only one was not a first generation project. See Swart and Venter (2001:287). In the case of the Dutch Reformed Church, Swart’s analysis reveals that its social welfare work remains firmly within a social welfare (first generation) approach. See Swart (1997:85).

⁹ It should be noted that this section makes reference to and is drawn from an article which appeared in the *JTSA* March 2009 special edition.

In analysing the theological themes which emerge from interviews with clergy and other church leaders in the Paarl WRIGP project, it becomes evident that theology:

... has a significant impact on the way the church engages with poverty and vulnerable groups both for “better” and for “worse”. As “friends”, praxis has the potentiality to be more effective as it engages with theologies that challenge the church to be more incarnational and address issues of self-worth and vocation. As “foes” biblical motivation that is valid, yet remains unexamined, may hinder the church in exercising the kind of praxis that moves beyond charity or the boundaries of their own community or congregation (Bowers-Du Toit 2009:110).

It is also interesting to note, for instance, that the Report highlights the fact that within the context of the various denominations, welfare (or in the SA paradigm, “social development”) is often referred to as “caring or charity”. Such designations may in fact be further pointing to a lack of theological engagement with the welfare/social development discourse, and may be contributing to the current relief mode of welfare dominantly employed by congregations.

There currently exists a vacuum with regard to a theological mode of discourse which moves beyond the liberation paradigm or the current pragmatic debates in South Africa. This may be ascribed as largely due to the late onset in South Africa of formal training on “theology and development”. Possible recommendations for the cultivation of more engaged congregations is that all theological training institutions introduce such studies for prospective clergy. For grassroots-level work, training workshops or conferences that explore a biblical basis for development could be run for clergy and laity. Possible texts pertaining to God’s justice and concern for the poor, oppressed, and marginalised could be consulted, with the view to promoting their usage in church liturgy, sermons, and bible studies. Such training could help clergy and laity to think theologically regarding the socio-economic challenges they face, thereby imbuing hope and possibly revitalising praxis. Informal training workshops conducted for clergy and laity in an area such as Paarl could also form a rallying point for greater partnership between various sectors of the local church.

CONCLUSION

In remembering the role the church has played within the development of social welfare in South Africa and in seeking ways toward the renewal of its praxis, it becomes evident that within a society in transition, religious organisations such as the church can create space for the voices of the poor to be heard and addressed. The respondents interviewed certainly felt that the church has a significant role to play in engaging poverty, and certainly the administration acknowledged its role. A re-examination of its internal dynamics of welfare delivery, theology and the reconciliation agenda, therefore beckon the church to more effective mobilisation against the scourge of poverty. The church’s response will be telling in the years to come and may go on to either “make or break” the effectivity of welfare delivery to the poor in the next fifteen years.

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TOWARDS A HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF ALMSGIVING IN “SOUTH AFRICAN ISLAM”²

ABSTRACT

In human history it is not uncommon for religious ideas to shape the behavioural attitude of actors within it. This paper finds its influences in Max Weber’s seminal essay *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. The quest of this paper is to investigate the formations of different forms of Islam in South Africa and how the ideas of early historical Islam at the Cape influences attitudes toward charity (*sadaqa*) and obligatory almsgiving (*zakah*). The Cape Islamic tradition is contrasted against the more doctrinal form of the religion in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. The methodology employed is historical-sociology which, in this case study, allows further comparison with the Dutch Reformed Church in the region and its attitude toward the “poor whites”. Conclusionary remarks are offered after three prominent Islamic organisations involved in Islamic forms of charity are investigated.

INTRODUCTION

This paper finds its inspiration in Max Weber’s grand project published at the beginning of the twentieth century: understanding the role of religion and its “*innere Zusammenhang*”³ with modern capitalism (Weber 1962). In the current paper, pressing questions – explicit and sometimes implied – are addressed, questions with regard to the relationship between religion and the attitude toward poverty alleviation in general, and more immediately, the case of “South African Islam”. Questions include: How are we to understand poverty in capitalist societies where life chances are seemingly equal for all citizens? Is it fair to expect the same level of commitment to the poor given the divergent religious backgrounds in our globalising

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3 The term *innere Zusammenhang* literally means an “inner hanging together”. For Weber it is the intrinsic or elective affinity between modern capitalism and the peculiar Protestant ethic that he sets out to prove that promotes a distinctive synergy between religion and capital.

world today? Then, more specifically, how does the religion of Islam in South Africa engage with issues like poverty, given the country's unique socio-historical background? And finally, how does "South African Islam" attend to its social responsibilities? This question is addressed through an investigation of three Muslim organisations – Mustadafin, a Cape-based social welfare organisation, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) and the South African National Zakah Fund (SANZAF) – and their use of doctrine in poverty alleviation. Drawing on the methodological approach of Joseph Bryant and John Hall (2005:I), this paper underscores the idea that

the manifold realities investigated by economists, sociologists, scholars of religious studies, theologians, and other students of the human social condition can find comprehension only through a full engagement with historical modes of analysis while progressively enfolding within its interpretive operations a corresponding sociological awareness.

Max Weber's essay, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, first published in 1904, continues to serve as the touchstone for ongoing discussion about the rise of "modern capitalism"⁴ and the role of Protestantism in the shaping of modernity.⁵ For Weber, it was Protestantism, most notably in its Calvinist variant, which was instrumental in providing the "ideal" legitimation to the incipient capitalism that was taking shape in Western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards. Weber's celebrated thesis, however, has not gone unchallenged. From its first publication to the present, for approximately 100 years, scholars have argued from both sides in either affirming or rejecting Weber's thesis.

The Protestant ethic thesis has generally been assessed in reference to Europe and the Americas. More recently, however, scholars have been extending the Weber question to non-Western countries. The expansion of economic development and modernisation in non-Western countries has stirred renewed interest in Weber's thesis (Eisenstadt 1968:3). Over the last decade, more scholars are returning to the Weber thesis as China emerges as an economic superpower, and then in particular considering Weber's work with reference to the religions of China. Many seek within the Protestant ethic, or some religious equivalent, as the key to an understanding of why some non-Western countries have achieved modernisation while others have not. Others are interested in how religious ideas affect economic outcomes, as well as other psycho-social behaviour such as, for example, racism, and in the case of this paper how it affects the poor and poverty alleviation.

Weber's essay seeks to offer a causal explanation for the spirit of modern capitalism. This, he says, is to be found in the Protestant ethic. This ethic differs from that adopted by other groups such as Roman Catholics and Jews in that rather than a ruthless pursuit of capital, the Protestants had a somber and more calculating approach to the accumulation of capital:

⁴ For Weber's distinction between premodern and modern capitalism, see his *General economic history* (1981), Part IV.

⁵ Modernity, like all epochs, includes distinctive forms of economic and political organisation, characteristic cultural institutions, and persistent tensions between antithetical civilisational trends.

Truly what is here preached is not simply a means of making one's way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty. That is the essence of the matter. It is not mere business astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an ethos. This is the quality which interests us (Weber 1962:51).

This psycho-social attitude, Weber argues, had its roots in the religious ideologies of the Reformation period of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Similarly, the Chinese with their Confucian-Taoist religious background or the radical world renunciation of Indian Buddhism engages capital in unique ways and finds ideas that set it on a "developmental course that permitted an enduringly functional social presence" for centuries (Bryant 2008:538). Islam finds its classical formulations within seventh century *jahiliyah-bedouin* society and sets its "accommodative transformation" process along unique paths very different from those of other world religions.

Taking my cue from Weber then: what ideological underpinnings within Islam send the actors in Islamic tradition along a path of a socio-psychologically constructed attitude toward poverty? In this case, the religious attitude is not necessarily primarily for Islam's engagement with modern capitalism, as Weber might have sought to argue, but rather an attitude that is born of a philosophy toward capital accumulation in general. One has to bear in mind that much of Islamdom is still rooted in patriarchal societies around the world, engaging traditional forms of capital accumulation and Islamic modes of addressing the needs of the poor – as, for example, in bedouin societies in North Africa, where Islamic societies are far removed from notions like bureaucracy and the rationalisation of economics along Euro-American lines. With this broader teleology of societies and their modes of production, a historical sociology of Islam in South Africa will be attempted.

However, an explanation of the ideological tenets of Islam that informs its orthodoxy and orthopraxy will be offered first. Islam insists on five "pillars". First, the belief in "the God", Allah, and the belief that the seventh century Arabian prophet, Muhammad, as Allah's prophet. Second, that it is mandatory to carry out the five daily prayers (*salat*). Third, that it is obligatory to give *zakat* (alms) to the poor. Fourth, it is a must for the adherents of the faith to abstain from food and drink for one lunar month (*Ramadan*) of the year. And, finally, that a Muslim must visit the Islamic holy city of Mecca on pilgrimage (*hajj*) at least once in his/her lifetime only if he/she has the financial means to do so. The ontology of these tenets is non-negotiable and is ranked in order of sacrality. It is therefore more important for one to give alms to the poor than to fast during the month of *Ramadan*. Or, it is not orthopraxy for a Muslim to go on holy pilgrimage if he or she has not given alms to the poor. Epistemologically, these tenets are rooted in the *Qur'ān* (Islam's sacred text) which believers agree are the literal words of Allah, sometimes even expressed in the first person. Muhammad, they believe, was only the medium through which the words were revealed. What is evident in these injunctions is the necessary social commitment to a collective: a social responsibility that is built upon a cast-iron ontological platform.

Besides these five injunctions placed on Muslims in the *Qur'ān*, the Islamic holy book also lays the groundwork for Islamic ethical economic transactions including prohibitions on investments and usury, the relationship between employee and employer, laws of inheritance, attitudes on frugality and thrift, the question of hoarding, many laws regarding the philosophy of money and laws, and attitudes regarding the giving of charity. The Islamic notion of giving alms to the poor takes two forms: (1) *Zakat*, which is the obligatory giving of alms assessed annually on all personal wealth above a set minimum; and (2) *Sadaqa*, which is the *Qur'ān's* motivation to believers to donate voluntary alms to the community. However, a theme that is ever-present is the responsibility of one human toward another, and in many instances “human” is the preferred noun used over “Muslim”. For example, the Arabic phrase “*Rahmatullilalamin*” (God as a mercy to humankind) is favoured over “*Rahmatulillmuslimin*” (God as a mercy to Muslims).

The value of these *Qur'ānic* injunctions is not to be taken lightly as we witness its power in South Africa in 2008. The notion that a seventh-century Islamic economic idea, formulated in a desert region far removed from competing civilisations, could have import more than fourteen-hundred years later on the southern tip of Africa is soon dispelled when you visit the local banking institutions – many with major share-holdings by British and Chinese investment companies. The terms “Islamic banking” or “Shari’a compliant banking” are catchwords used by the major banks in South Africa including ABSA, Standard, and First National Banks. What it explicitly says is that it values its Muslim customers and what it implies is that a seventh-century Arabian idea is real in South Africa today, albeit pushed along by the dynamics of interest. In summary, the psycho-social attitude that early Islam developed through ideas is still evident today and is felt ubiquitously in Muslim societies of South Africa, including ideas and related attitudes toward the poor.

Islam compared to other faiths and churches in South Africa today⁶

Religious group	Number of followers	%
African traditional belief	125 898	0.3
Anglican churches	1 722 076	3.8
Apostolic Faith Mission	246 193	0.5
Bandla Lama Nazaretha	248 825	0.5
Baptist churches	691 235	1.5
Congregational churches	508 826	1.1
Dutch Reformed churches	3 005 697	6.7
Ethiopian type churches	1 150 102	2.6
Hinduism	551 668	1.2
Islam	654 064	1.5
Judaism	75 549	0.2
Lutheran churches	1 130 983	2.5
Methodist churches	3 035 719	6.8

⁶ This table is from Statistics South Africa (2001) and presents data for revelatory analysis into religious affiliation post-1994.

Religious group	Number of followers	%
No religion	6 767 165	15.1
Orthodox churches	42 253	0.1
Other African independent churches	656 644	1.5
Other Apostolic churches	5 627 320	12.6
Other beliefs	283 815	0.6
Other Christian churches	2 890 151	6.4
Other Reformed churches	226 499	0.5
Other Zionist churches	1 887 147	4.2
Pentecostal/Charismatic churches	3 695 211	8.2
Presbyterian churches	832 497	1.9
Roman Catholic Church	3 181 332	7.1
Undetermined	610 974	1.4
Zion Christian Church	4 971 931	11.1
TOTAL	44 819 774	

Islam by region⁷

Region	Number of followers	%
Eastern Cape	19 671	3.0
Free State	4 036	0.6
Gauteng	150 081	22.9
KwaZulu-Natal	142 459	21.8
Limpopo	10 287	1.6
Mpumalanga	16 837	2.6
Northern Cape	4 651	0.7
North West Province	13 133	2.0
Western Cape	292 908	44.8

RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE TOWARD POVERTY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poverty today is different to the poverty of a pre-capitalist context where farmers might have been victims of drought or disease. In the pre-capitalist era, agrarian societies – mostly defined within a patriarchal society – were neither necessarily self-consciously “poor”, nor were they always socially stratified as such. In South African history over the last four centuries, people were socially stratified according to religion and colour with terms like Christian, heathen, Malay, bastard, white, mixed, black, Indian, and coloured being some of the primary markers used. The unique historical sociology of South Africa, especially since the arrival of the Dutch in 1652 and continuing today, produces social classes and stratifications that favour whites over people of colour on the hierarchical rungs of affluence. What is suggested here is that poverty in South Africa was and remains predominantly a problem for those of colour. This is not to dismiss the plight of the indigent whites in South African history over the last centuries.

⁷ These statistics are taken from the *South African Christian Handbook, 2005-2006* (Symington 2005:37-76).

The Reformed Church at the Cape between 1652 and 1795 showed a heightened commitment to the poor, offering support through both church and state institutions – the two intricately fused in this case. Examples abound in early Afrikaner history where poor and destitute immigrants were afforded land, money and facilities to alleviate states of poverty, and in many cases these poor would within a generation become upwardly mobile and join the *nouveau riche*. After the South African War of 1899-1902, many Afrikaners, almost exclusively from the Reformed tradition, were forced off their farms by the forces of modern capitalism. For many decades following the war, the plight of the “poor white” dominated both church and state agendas. These “poor whites”, mostly unskilled workers handicapped by language and lack of material means, posed the threat of developing a mixed-racial stratum and possible alienation from their church and mainstream white society. The threat of racial mixing among the “poor whites” served as the primary motivation to poverty eradication (Freund 1992:xviii). The kind hands of the Dutch Reformed Church through the formation of the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging* (ACVV), established in 1904, came together precisely to solve the “poor white” problem (De Gruchy 2005:89). The Dutch Reformed Church also established labour colonies like De Lagersdrift in 1907 which “became the focus of the ‘poor white solution’ in Middelburg for the next thirty years” (Morrell 1992:4).

All the focused attention that the Dutch Reformed Church afforded its poor was informed by ideas. The fact that poverty alleviation was almost exclusively focused on whites speaks of a peculiar attitude that finds its origins in notions like *uitverkore volk van God* (“chosen people of God”), “showing outward material signs of election” and the notion of a calling (Begg 2008:35). In the South African form of Calvinism, these ideas were combined with colonialism and, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, this was even supported and legitimated by racial Darwinism. These ideas were used to rationalise the necessity of alleviating poverty among “poor whites” while, at the same time, to appease the social conscience when it came to the neglect of the poor of colour.

A BRIEF SOCIAL HISTORY OF ISLAM: 1654 TO THE PRESENT

In South Africa, Islam is roughly as old as Calvinism. Historically – around the second half of the seventeenth century – Islam was imported to the Cape along with the institution of slavery. These slaves, many of Islamic origin, were initially brought by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from their colonies in East and West Africa, South India, Ceylon and the Malaysian Archipelago, to provide labour for the nascent Dutch colony at the Cape. Since the VOC would only allow Calvinism freedom of religion at the Cape whilst opposing other forms of Christianity, Islam as slave religion, offers interesting insights into master-slave relationships of that time. The fact that the slaves were able to continue in private with their Islamic practice and ritual, says much about how those in power viewed the Muslim slave and his religion.

Among the prominent Muslim captives to arrive at the Cape was Sheikh Yusuf, also known as Abadin Tadia Tjoessoep, who came from Ceylon for further incarceration at the Cape. Parts of his writings translated in the twentieth century reveal the strong influences of

mysticism in his religious thought and practice. Sheikh Yusuf was followed by Tuan Guru in the late eighteenth century. Both these prominent scholars were committed to political ideals that cost them their freedom in their countries of residence and they were subsequently banished to and incarcerated in the Cape Colony by the VOC. The history of Islam in South Africa, and especially at the Cape, including its philosophies and rituals, owes much to the charisma of these religious virtuosi.

However, historians generally agree that Islam's growth at the Cape came mostly from the relationship between white colonialism and slave ownership. The 1770 Statutes of India, imposed at the Cape, prohibited the sale of Christian slaves. The colonists interpreted this as interference in their rights to the ownership of slaves, and instead of leading their slaves towards Christianity, they encouraged them to become Muslims. Therefore, these regulations, which had been specifically designed to promote Christianity among the slave population, in reality led to the promotion of Islam. The result was that by 1800, the benches set aside for slaves in the Groote Kerk were empty (Da Costa & Davids 2005:59).

For the first two centuries (1652-1860), Islam in South Africa was largely confined to the Cape. The rituals and practices of these formative years cemented structure and agency, at least for the Cape Muslims in the South Africa of today, and find its impetus in *tasawwuf* (Sufi orientation). The Muslim slaves and prisoners brought to the Cape came from regions where Islamic practices generally followed one of the four schools of religious jurisprudence (*madh-hab*), and certain special orders of mysticism known as *tasawwuf* orders. Slaves from West Africa followed the *Malikiyyah madh-hab* and the *Qadiriyyah tasawwuf*. East African slaves followed and promoted *Qadiriyyah* and *Alawiyyah tasawwuf* while adhering to the jurisprudence of Sheikh Shafi. Some of the other *tasawwuf* orders that can be traced to the Cape are, the *Qadiriyyah*, *Alawiyyah*, *Sammaniyyah*, *Shattariyyah*, *Naqshabandiyyah*, *Suhrawardiyyah*, *Chistiyyah* and *Aydarussiyyah* (Da Costa & Davids 2005:129). What is important to note is that before the institutionalisation of Islam at the Cape around the beginning of the twentieth century, the rituals, beliefs, philosophies, and practices of the Muslims were strongly infused with *tasawwuf* philosophies.

A text compiled by Tuan Guru in 1781, *Ma'rifah al-Islam wa al-Iman*, while the teacher was still incarcerated on Robben Island, became the main textbook of the school he started at the Cape.

Through over 600 pages, the *Ash'arite*⁸ concepts of *taqdir* (predetermination), *iradah* (the Will of God), *taqwah* (piety, attained through fearing God, and being submissive to His commands) and *iktisab* (acquisition – in the sense that God created the acts of man, and man acquires them) – Tuan Guru manages to weave a system of social relations in which the slaves and their free-black slaves owners could coexist harmoniously (Da Costa & Davids 2005:48-49).

The *Ash'arite* philosophy that Tuan Guru employs speaks to the strong Sufi commitment to the first pillar of Islam: absolute philosophical monotheism. Given the slave condition, orthodoxy

⁸ *Ash'arite* followers adhere to the basic theological methodology and doctrine of Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (d. 935).

was favoured over orthopraxy. A slave could not pay *zakat*, the third pillar of Islam as he or she was said to be *onvolkoem* (“incomplete”). The notion of being *onvolkoem* excluded the slave from leading the congregational prayers on a Friday. What we see emerging is an “*ulamaless*” (without priests) class developing that feeds egalitarianism of a certain (“low”) form of the Islamic tradition during these early years.

The import of these early *Sufi* leaders abounds. A tour of the many *kramat(s)*⁹ around the Western Cape affirms the significance of the *tasawwuf* orders on Muslim ritual, practice and philosophy still present today.¹⁰ Those

very specific Sufi rituals and hymnology have survived and what these practices suggest is that folk or “low” Islam and folk mysticism were practised rather than “high” Islam of scripturalism and puritanism (Moosa 1995:137).

The nineteenth century brought British liberal ideals to the Cape, including the final emancipation of slavery in 1838. From the 1860s onwards, the British also brought their own waves of indentured Muslims, merchant-types, from their colonies in India to work on the sugar plantations in Natal. These Muslims would remain relatively distinct from those Muslims at the Cape up until today. In the Robert Redfield typology of “folk versus urban” religion or Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft* or “low” versus “high” religiosity, Islam at the Cape conformed to the more parochial, folk, *Gemeinschaft* and the “low” form of the religion. In contrast to the “low” form of Islam, the “*ulama* tradition is unmistakably the carrier of ‘high’ or universal Islam” (Moosa 1995:143). The Muslims of the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal (formerly Natal) and Gauteng (formerly Transvaal) today represent 21.8% and 22.9% of all South African Muslims respectively. These Muslims subscribe to the *Hanafi* School of jurisprudence

... as interpreted by ‘ulama of the Indian seminary of Deoband, founded in 1867 near Delhi, and its satellite colleges in India, Pakistan and South Africa (Moosa 1995:143).

The conflation of peculiar aspects of religion, history, politics, and economics in Natal and Transvaal produced a distinct “high” form of Islam in the northern provinces of South Africa.

Today, followers of Islam in South Africa number around 650 000 or 1.5% of the religious affiliation in the country (see earlier table). However, when taking a closer look at their distribution in South Africa, it becomes apparent that most are located in the Western Cape (44.2%) with almost all of the balance of the South African Muslim population found in KwaZulu-Natal (21.8%) and Gauteng (22.9%). It is argued that Islam remained relatively limited when compared to Christianity partly because it was historically denied any state support, and partly due to the modes of production that Cape Muslim slaves engaged: mostly semi-skilled artisans confined to and around the major cities where their skilled labour was needed. Thus, the Islamic religious tradition experienced very little growth in rural areas.

⁹ A *kramat* (holy site) is the name given to a *Wali* (friend) of Allah or a place where he lies buried.

¹⁰ Today, approximately 50% of all South African Muslims live in the Western Cape.

The post-1994 era witnessed the removal of the Group Areas Act. Ironically, this divisive Act that dumped people of similar racial classification together unified the Muslims, mostly coloured, in their townships and suburbs. The apartheid years fostered a sense of belonging that is now slowly being eroded as South Africa moves from a race-based society to a class-based one. In many ways post-1994 Islam is moving from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. The movement in social stratification, from middle class to upper class, is especially evident in the Cape with its large Muslim community, where individuals readily engage higher forms of Western education and capital.

THE CASE OF ISLAM AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION AT THE CAPE

Against the above historical backdrop, this study will look at three major Islamic organisations involved with welfare and poverty alleviation in the Western Cape: the Mustadafin Foundation founded in 1986, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) founded in 1945, and the South African National Zakah Fund (SANZAF) established in 1974. The primary question addressed is: what is the attitude of these organisations toward serving the poor and how do religious ideas and doctrine within Islam inform their respective attitudes. By investigating these three organisations, through a *verstehen* (Weberian interpretive) sociological methodology, an attempt will be made to offer an explanation as to the religious ideas in Islam that inform the attitude toward poverty alleviation in the Western Cape and in South Africa at large.

Mustadafin was officially founded in 1986 but had unofficially been in operation a couple of years before that. The organisation finds its roots in the Cape Town uprisings against apartheid, working mostly in the then tumultuous areas of Crossroads, Langa and Nyanga – then exclusively black residential areas. This group works at grassroots level with a full-time staff of 42 and a host of volunteers. Of the 42 employees, 23 are Muslim and 19 non-Muslim. The gender stratification shows a workforce of 35 women and 7 men. There is an absence of official clergy (*Imams* or *Sheikhs*).

Mustadafin's organisational philosophy and approach is holistic and, in an attempt to pursue its ideals, it has to date 21 daycare centres concentrated in Khayelitsha, Crossroads, Delft, Mannenberg and Philippi – the poorest areas of Cape Town. Mustadafin supports an adult literacy program, mainly geared towards home-based care and vocational skills. It also supports and is actively involved in HIV/Aids programs, providing around 3 000 HIV/Aids patients with food on a daily basis. Their feeding scheme also provided for around 15 000 men, women, and children daily, through shelters and their own centres. Mustadafin is also involved in disaster relief programs in partnership with the city of Cape Town, some of the Cape radio stations like Radio 786, Voice of the Cape, and Heart 104.9, and some of the local banks like Standard Bank South Africa. They host Christmas dinners and Eid¹¹ lunches for "their people". More recently, Mustadafin has embarked on transporting seventy-five children from their daycare centres in impoverished areas to a more-affluent primary school located in the city of Cape Town. The funding for Mustadafin's day-to-day activities comes mainly

¹¹ *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Adha* are the two sacred days of celebration in Islam.

from local Muslim businesses, the greater Muslim community in the Cape, and occasional grants from corporations and Christian churches¹² in the community.

My own research was done by way of interviews and personal observation at three of the Mustadafin centres. In response to a question relating to their target audience, the director of the organisation replied, “*Hudan lil-nas*”, which literally means “guidance to [hu] mankind”. When asked to explain “*Hudan lil-nas*”, in summary her response was that there are no distinctions made when it comes to religion, race or background. “Whoever needs help, gets help” was part of her response. In response to the question as to what percentage of the roughly 15 000 people that are fed belong to the Islamic religious tradition, she had no idea. When asked if the majority were Muslim or non-Muslim, she replied without hesitation, “Non-Muslim”. In response to questions regarding commitment to Islamic education at the daycare centres, she responded that only 3 of the 21 centres were *madrassa* (Muslim school) oriented. She was quick to respond that their philosophy does not insist on a *madrassa*-style preschool education but that it was only on the insistence of a predominantly Muslim group at a few centres that they had decided to accommodate parents (Johnstone-Adams 2008).

The second organisation, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), is an organisation of Imams formed in 1945. On their website they represent 136 affiliated mosques and *jamaat khana*'s¹³ in the Western Cape and outer regions, and their vision is: *To preserve and promote Islam as a practical, divine way of life, resulting in holistic approaches to all challenges and in all spheres of human activity*. Among the main departments of the MJC is its Social Welfare Department. The primary focus of this department is the provision of counselling in marital and other social matters of Muslim Personal Law. The overarching emphasis on matters legal in the welfare department has forced the MJC to “appropriately renaming it as: the Department of Muslim Personal Law Services”.¹⁴ The major projects listed on its website include a poverty alleviation project that consists primarily of a smallholding growing vegetables in the wetlands region of Philippi, Cape Town (Domingo 2008). In summary, given the size of the MJC and the political-economy of this group of *Ulama* (priestly class), welfare can be defined as giving religious *fatwas*¹⁵ and Islamic guidance to the laity.

The third group, SANZAF, came into existence in 1974. The organisation's primary function is the collection of *zakat*¹⁶ funds from the Muslim community. However, SANZAF also receives *sadaqa* from the general Muslim population. *Zakat* funds have to go to the impoverished belonging to the Muslim faith only while *sadaqa* is used for the needs of both Muslims and non-Muslims (Jacobs 2008). The organisation has offices across South Africa and maintains good working relations with all Islamic bodies, including the MJC and

12 The organisation is also sometimes approached by Christian churches in the Western Cape community to assist with aid.

13 A *jamaat khana* is a small Muslim prayer facility.

14 The information and direct quotation was taken from the MJC's official website, <http://www.mjc.org.za>

15 A *fatwa* is a formal opinion or decision treating a moral, legal or doctrinal question by someone recognised as knowledgeable in the juridical sciences of Islam.

16 *Zakat* is calculated at 2.5% of an adult's nett material worth at the end of a financial year. Those who have debt and remain in a deficit are not eligible or obliged to pay *zakat*.

Mustadafin. There are *imams* and *moulana* (Muslim clerics) involved in the organisation at various levels. SANZAF lists involvement in *da'wa* (Islamic propagation) work, programs for the aged, programs for orphans, skills development workshops, and in Operation Winter Warmth where clothing and blankets are collected for distribution to the needy during the winter months. According to SANZAF, it collected R41.4 million in the 2007-2008 financial year, with R29 million marked for *zakat* and R12.4 million for *sadaqa*. The administrative costs of running the organisation and its poverty-relief projects come from funds donated as *sadaqa*. As mentioned above, *Zakat* funds are used exclusively for helping the indigent that belong to the Islamic faith. Furthermore, after the deduction of administrative costs, the R12.4 million *sadaqa* funds are divided 60/40: 60% goes toward poverty relief and the remaining 40% toward skills development projects (Jacobs 2008).

CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

For most of its history in South Africa, from 1652 to the present, Islam mostly had to endure an oppressed and pariah status. The first century and a half saw Islam as a slave religion proper. It was only after 1795, when the British took over the administration for the first time, that Islam felt the loosening of restrictive laws. It is fair to argue that Islam during this period was a religion of the poor and that their attitude toward poverty was infused with that of a "low" form of Islamic religiosity. At the Cape, by the turn of the nineteenth century, very few people, of all races, were literate. However, many of the Islamic religious leaders that came to the region, either as political prisoners or as slaves, were very well educated.¹⁷ The practice of their religion in public spaces was, however, prohibited by the state. Religious rituals, like *salat*, were practised in stone quarries around the Cape (Shell 1994). And as mentioned above, the orientation of the Cape Muslims were toward Sufism (*tasawwuf*).

Zakat as the obligatory form of almsgiving must have been rare given the slave status of these early Muslims. However, in contrast, examples of the giving of *sadaqa* by the Muslim slaves abound in the writings of Robert Shell and others. It was not uncommon for free Muslims to pay for the manumission of other slaves, and it became customary for free Muslims not to own slaves. The very growth of Islam during this period is argued to be a direct consequence of Muslim slaves showing kindness (acts of *sadaqa*) to others in bondage. Robert Shell (1994:356-362) avers that many a slave would embrace Islam on the day of his execution as Islam offered all slaves that embraced the religion the minimum of freedom in the eschaton.

What is of particular significance to understanding the attitude of the adherents of the faith today, is that Islam in South Africa is a religion of the poor, but for a few; and that for most of the three hundred and fifty years in South Africa, poverty remained rampant among the Muslims – and more so in the Cape. Poor people are not, as a rule, able to give *zakat*.

¹⁷ Sheikh Yusuf of Macassar left at least thirteen texts in his name by the time he died in 1699. He wrote in three languages, Malaysian, Bughanese and Arabic. Tuan Guru, while a prisoner on Robben Island, compiled a text called *Ma'rifah al-Islam wa al-Iman* in 1781, in which he expounds the rational traditional philosophy of *Sunnism*.

Therefore *sadaqa*, so evidently displayed in the attitudes of the early Muslims, became the necessary form of charity and infused the attitude of the early Muslim slaves, and continues to infuse Muslims like those belonging to organisations like Mustadafin.

What is also evident is that the presence of an *'ulama* class or scripturalism-puritanism form of Islam – mostly in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng – insists on a Muslim/non-Muslim divide. *Qur'ānic* verses are readily invoked to rationalise charity for Muslims first. In the case of the *'ulama* group, the MJC, welfare is mostly defined as juridical advice to the nascent divorced and those social matters that need a sacerdotal eye, which goes partway in explaining why their help goes to Muslims almost exclusively.

In comparison to the MJC, SANZAF has few *'ulama*, but is unable to operate without them since it collects *zakat* in South Africa with the blessing of the MJC and the more than 100 mosques under MJC auspices. SANZAF uses the bulk of its annual *zakat* income exclusively in aid for the Muslim poor and some *sadaqa* funds for whoever is in need regardless of religion. The relationship between the MJC and SANZAF can be compared to that of state and capital in a capitalist society, where a mutually dependent relationship is necessary for stability. Since SANZAF is a national Muslim organisation, both the “high” and the “low” forms of the Islamic tradition have to be appeased. In other words, at some level of poverty alleviation, ethics toward the poor have to be compromised. In sum, “high” Islam favours *zakat* over *sadaqa*. Put differently, scripturalism gives impetus to religious social stratification and as a consequence thereof, Muslims have greater access to material for poverty alleviation from organisations like SANZAF.

A cursory glance at Mustadafin leads one to look for alternative ideologies that lie outside the scriptural tradition or, as Professor Moosa Ebrahim so lucidly describes, the “high” Islam led by an *'ulama* class. One example of this is Mustadafin, led by a female director with 35 out of its 42 fulltime employees being female and with a philosophy that reaches humankind rather than “Muslimkind”. Given roughly two hundred and fifty years of Sufi philosophy that infuses structure and agency at the Cape, the orthopraxy infused by the regional orthodoxy – as unfurled in the historical sociology – offers a theory as to the root of the ideas that lead to this particular attitude toward poverty: Given the slave condition and the struggles in carrying out timely rituals like *salat*, *hajj*, and, with limited means, to partake in *zakat*, emphasis shifted to the first pillar of Islam: the belief in the Oneness of Allah. In the words of South Africa’s most celebrated slave-prisoner-Sufi-mystic: “You have no right to judge others, not even yourself”. And, combined with the *Qur'ān*’s creation myth, so often heard in Sufi philosophical rationale, “I created you from dust, and then I blew my *ruh* (soul) into each of you humankind”, one moves towards the ideas that infuse actions such as that of Mustadafin. In the sociology of ideas, we are reminded in this instance of Max Weber’s famous metaphor of the switchmen. According to Weber, the “world images” that have been created by “ideas” very frequently have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interests (Weber 1958:280). The idea that all of humankind carries the *ruh* of Allah, so prominent in the *Qur'ān* and switched back on a course by *tasawwuf* reinterpretation of the Islamic creation myth, coupled with the philosophy that only Allah (“the God”) can judge, leads many in South Africa, and

especially those Muslims at the Cape, toward helping all poor rather than the Muslim poor only – something so instrumental in the ideologies of the Muslim slaves of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Cape Colony. In sum, the ideas of *tasawwuf*, so appealing to “low” Islam, erodes notions of religious stratification and fosters an attitude toward charity that is significantly less conscious of class than the “high” form of the tradition. To end with the response of Mustadafin’s director when asked what percentage of Muslims versus non-Muslims her organisation serves, “overwhelmingly non-Muslim, we even celebrate an annual Christmas dinner!” (Johnstone-Adams 2008).

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THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN GOVERNMENT POVERTY ERADICATION PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA²

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the role of the churches in the Nigerian government's programmes to eradicate poverty. It considers the issue of justice, especially as it relates to the responsibility of church and government toward the poor. Some guidelines are also provided by which churches may evaluate programmes designed to help the poor. It observes that the churches, by virtue of their moral, spiritual and constitutional mandate, have the responsibility to engage and have been successfully engaging in poverty issues even without government assistance. The paper concludes that should government work in partnership with the churches, this will increase the chances of success of its (government's) poverty eradication programmes because churches have the potential to become major catalysts for grassroots economic development in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Economists assess poverty in terms of the absence of basic goods such as food, clothing, shelter, and access to clean water. Those who cannot afford these are considered poor. The World Bank (2000) sees poverty as the inability to attain a minimal standard of living. Poverty is also considered as a pronounced deprivation in well-being, and comprises many dimensions. It includes low incomes and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity. Furthermore, poverty encompasses low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of a voice to address these issues, and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one's life. The meaning attached to an abstract noun like "poverty" reflects the way one looks at, thinks about, and makes sense of one's world. According to Myers (1997:578), the most common definition of poverty is that it is the condition of those groups of people we abstractly describe

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as “the poor”. One thing that has to be stressed at this point, however, is that *the poor* are not abstract. They are human beings with names, made in the image of God, those for whom Jesus Christ died. This realisation should remind us to view them in a different way than usual, i.e. not as a helpless, faceless, nameless group and mere objects of our compassion.

In Nigeria, the reality of poverty is both frightening and disturbing (cf. HDRN 2009:62-76). Since independence, several regimes – military or civil – have come and gone, all leaving behind one type of poverty alleviation programme or the other. These include the so-called “Better Life Programme” (BLP), which was introduced in 1987. In 1994, the BLP was transformed into the “Family Support Programme” (FSP), which had as its primary objective the empowerment of women. A related programme, the “Family Economic Advancement Programme” (FEAP), was introduced in 1997 as an economic project for the betterment of the fate of the poor. This programme set out to provide credit directly to the poor, and at ward level to enable beneficiaries to set up and run their own home enterprises. All these programmes relied on government grants in order to operate. The People’s Bank of Nigeria (PBN) came on board in 1987 to provide soft loans at reasonable interest rates for low income generating activities. The bank, however, faced a number of challenges itself, ranging from an unsustainable rate of branch expansion, dependence on government for funds, and weak and corrupt management. The bank finally merged with the then Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank (NACB) to form the Nigeria Agricultural and Rural Cooperative Development Bank (NACRDB). None of these programmes were self-financing and self-sustaining, but depended solely on government for provision of funds, administration, supervision and recovery of loans.

Some of the reasons that contribute to the failure of most of the above efforts include: poor policy formulation and coordination; policy discontinuity and lack of sustainability; the absence of policy frameworks, institutional frameworks and the machinery to deliver on the goals of the programmes; duplication of functions among institutions and agencies; embarking on projects that do not have direct relevance to the poor; and, in some cases, abandonment of these projects and the absence of effective collaboration and cooperation between the three tiers of government (federal, state and local).

CURRENT NATIONAL POVERTY ERADICATION PROGRAMMES

The implementation of poverty-related programmes is not new in Nigeria. It is a curious phenomenon that these programmes, over several decades, have never worked. It is also paradoxical that a country such as Nigeria, the acclaimed “giant of Africa”, endowed with both material and human resources, takes her place at the bottom rung of the list of poor nations. The citizenry has little or nothing to show for playing host to such rich mineral deposits. This is a typical case of, according to the Nigerian saying, one living on the riverbank and washing his/her face with spittle. One example of this is the fact that Nigeria has for the past three decades occupied an enviable position among the leading producers of crude oil, which has garnered billions of dollars into the coffers of the nation. One should expect that this would

have put Nigeria on the path of rapid development. However, the situation seems to get worse by the day with inadequate road infrastructure, little access to clean water and food, poor medical facilities, and an unstable and unreliable power supply.

Industries are steadily going under due to high cost of power, thereby dumping workers back onto the job market. A combination of mismanagement, poor leadership, corruption and the insatiable greed of public officials have, amongst other things, been the bane of development in Nigeria. At one point, “squander mania” was a common household word that defined the action of officials responsible for overseeing projects aimed at addressing issues such as poverty eradication.

One of these programmes is the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), which was established in 2001 with a supplementary programme, the National Economic Empowerment Development Scheme (NEEDS). At the state and local government levels one also finds the State Economic Empowerment Scheme (SEEDS) and the Local Economic Empowerment Development Scheme (LEEDS), respectively. NAPEP was set up with the overall target to completely eradicate poverty in Nigeria by the year 2010. The primary motivation behind this target was based on the commonly accepted socio-economic profile of Nigerians, according to which nearly 70% live below the poverty line (cf. Okolo 2011). According to Aliyu (2001), this agency was created to tackle poverty and the problem of mass unemployment amongst all categories of people. It was, furthermore, not only aimed at alleviating the incidence of poverty by boosting self-reliance among the Nigerian citizenry, but, amongst other things, at engaging and inculcating in Nigerian youth the desire for peace and the use of dialogue in decision-making and conflict management. Despite laudable projects – such as the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIDS), Social Welfare Services Scheme (SOWESS), Capacity Acquisition Programme (CAP) and Mandatory Attachment Programme (MAP) – and the colossal amounts of money allocated to them, the incidence of poverty has been on the increase. Two years to the end of the target date of 2010, there was no indication that the target would be achieved by any appreciable percentage. In fact, Kaiser (1983:212) argues that poverty is systemic and continuous amidst programmes to eradicate it.

The issue of poverty eradication in Nigeria raises a number of fundamental questions about what makes government programmes work. Is it a matter of mere allocation of cash to states and local governments, or are there some other more critical issues that must be addressed to make the programmes work? What impact does the procurement of very expensive vehicles and the establishment of well-furnished offices for the operators of these agencies have on the overall success of these programmes?

It is important to point out here that the stakeholders responsible for the implementation of NAPEP include federal ministries and agencies, state governments, local government area councils, political parties, traditional leaders, community groups, NGOs, and international donor agencies and their partners. Churches are not considered as important segments and stakeholders in the process. This may be because of a fear of inviting friction between religious groups.

In the Nigerian context, is there any role churches can play to increase the chances of success of programmes such as NAPEP? I believe that there is a lot that churches can do if there are collaborative efforts between them and government. I see the churches in Nigeria specifically as a vital instrument for reaching out to people at grassroots level. By the avowed commitment and allegiance of members to the leadership and authority of their churches, involving them in poverty eradication programmes has a greater chance of success if they are adequately mobilised to function as stakeholder in these programmes.

There is basic mistrust of government officials amongst Nigerians because they do not seem to make a success of government projects. People have lost respect for them. With huge sums of money disappearing into these projects, most of it mismanaged by the officials, only the little that trickles down to the grassroots is considered a share of the national cake, and it is felt that even this need not be accounted for. Because of their own fraudulent dealings, embezzlement and mistrust of others, officials lack the moral authority to address loan defaulters in the process of recovering funds.

The case would be different with churches since their leadership and authority are on the whole respected, because they are mostly transparent in their transactions. Therefore, I would suggest that the government involve church management as guarantors who will help in both the disbursement and recovery of loans. There is an even closer relationship between beneficiaries and the church, which makes it easier to recover loans. Furthermore, churches have both a moral and spiritual obligation to fight poverty, and spiritual and constitutional provisions also confer on them powers to address poverty among their members.

CHURCH AND POVERTY ERADICATION INITIATIVES IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, and I suppose elsewhere, too, issues of poverty cannot be effectively and successfully discussed and/or implemented without the involvement of the church. Churches in Nigeria have a very large following and any programme implementation that disregards this runs a real risk of failure. Knowing the Bible and its teaching on poverty, churches do not only feel motivated but *compelled* to get involved in efforts to tackle poverty. One example of an answer to this is found in Galatians 2:9-10 where Paul and Barnabas were given the right hand of fellowship with an admonition and charge not to forget the poor. Yet, when one says that the churches must be involved, this does mean that that they, as institutions, should take over issues of poverty alleviation from government completely. Nor does it mean that the clergy should leave their pulpits and be engaged in some poverty eradication mission and campaign – not unless they feel clearly called to act in this way. But there is something that individual church members can do if fully mobilised! Wherever we find ourselves – in our families, in our churches, in the community – it is time to exert an influence as widely as possible.

Permit me to draw on a few examples of the influence of the church via early Roman Catholic missionaries, *Nongo U Kristu u Sudan ken Tiv (NKST)*, The Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv, and the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) in the North Central Region of Nigeria. The Catholic Church in Benue State, Nigeria, established massive

orchards not just for the benefit of the early missionaries, but also taught basic agricultural practices to the people to improve their lives. Among other things, many people were taught how to graft different species of mango and orange trees. Today, many rural folks are proud owners of large orchards and they make a living from these. The Roman Catholic Church also set up a famous trade centre in Makurdi, St Joseph's Trade Centre, where students are taught a variety of trades. This school's graduates, who are usually drawn from different parts of the state, later make a living from their respective trades in their communities.

NKST, since its establishment in 1956, has helped to develop local crafts among her members. Even lepers who came for treatment at the popular hospital in Mkar were taught how to weave baskets, make sweaters, and other forms of crafts. A prominent market was established where crafts such as cane chairs, mats, hoes, etc. made by such patients are sold. These products also serve the needs of their hospitals and the immediate community.

ECWA set up many rural farms that are known nationwide for the production of eggs, chickens, and animal feed. These farming centres are generally pilot projects and model farms that use improved seeds and also create avenues for people to learn improved farming methods. Since these are projects that have worked well, government can set aside large portions of land, provide inputs and implements, and allocate plots to members of the church at controlled prices. With improved skills, production would definitely be higher and government can then buy from these farmers at subsidised prices. If government provides the market for these products, the farmers would be encouraged to plough their profits back into the farm and more church members will be encouraged to get involved in agriculture and make a living this way.

Apart from the examples above, all these churches are also fully involved with education. Educational institutions may look far removed from the question of the churches' involvement in poverty alleviation, but education is also generally aimed at addressing poverty and has had a tremendous influence, rate of success, and impact in Nigeria. Churches have brought about tremendous educational development in Nigeria and in the various settlements in Nigeria, the more educated the community, the less the incidence of poverty and vice versa. All three abovementioned denominations have primary, secondary, and even some technical and medical schools. On top of this, two of them, NKST and ECWA, have founded the University of Mkar in Benue State and Bingham University in Abuja, respectively. In their few years of existence, some of the Christian universities have already achieved success in their pursuit of entrepreneurship education. These two universities should also be encouraged to make curriculum changes that may provide for the acquisition of practical skills in order to address poverty, since Nigerians need a change in perception away from one that sees education as a ticket to a white collar job (that usually does not exist), to becoming creators of their own jobs upon graduation.

The Pentecostal group of churches may not have established many institutions because they are relatively new to the scene, but their teaching on prosperity has been aggressively proclaimed. Despite some criticism, members who have seriously taken to these teachings and work towards improving their lives have definitely changed their economic status. The

next thing they need to do is to pay attention to setting up educational institutions such as the one established by Living Faith, the Covenant University at Ota, Ogun State. The Word of Life Church in Warri, Nigeria, has set up a micro finance bank that has been rated one of the best in Nigeria. The Redeemed Christian Church of God also has one that is equally highly rated. These institutions advance soft loans at an interest rate of about 5% per year. These are two more success stories of modest attempts made by the churches to address poverty in Nigeria.

Many other churches and or groups within them have been engaging in one form of scheme or the other that advances loans to members with the intention to cushion the effect of poverty among members. These loans are usually repaid due to respect for the church or its leadership or due to some form of control or discipline in cases of payment default. Sometimes, such groups register as cooperative societies and attract soft loans which they then repay at some later time. That such ventures have worked successfully within a church setting is a clear indication that the church has machinery for loan recovery. It is, therefore, instructive that if government actively involves and engages the churches in the disbursement of loans to deserving beneficiaries, supervision of projects embarked upon and recovery of loans, there will be a great measure of success and impact.

HOW AND HOW NOT TO HELP THE POOR

The point has already been made that at the heart of this discussion lies the solemn truth and affirmation that poverty is not merely a statistical matter, but that it has a human face. The poor are human beings in human societies with human relations who have their own unique stories to tell, and these stories must not just be heard but the issues arising therefrom also addressed. It is very clear that poverty does not only divide humanity between those who have enough and those who do not. It also divides the members of churches themselves into rich and poor. For the churches in Nigeria to effectively address poverty, they must start from this reality. Having seen the clear scriptural mandate for the church to help the poor and support government initiatives, how does the church go about it? It is foolhardy for anyone to assume and think that every poverty eradication programme deserves the churches' unqualified support. Some programmes may be corrupt, or may be proposed by persons for selfish reasons. When it comes to programme proposals and implementation, there is every need to be both cautious and careful lest the churches are misguided into supporting programmes that dishonour God and have no relevance to the people these programmes are meant to benefit. Even in the time of Jesus Christ, one of the disciples made a proposal that was ill conceived and selfishly motivated. In John 12:3-8, Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ, criticised as wasteful the pouring of ointment on Jesus' feet by Mary. He suggested that it should rather have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. This, the Bible says, was not because he cared for the poor but that he was a thief, and bore the purse and would help himself out of what was put in there. Judas is not alive today but the same spirit still is. Some people committed with the oversight of government monies meant for the poor do not always faithfully use it as required.

Poverty eradication programmes may be outright wasteful, inefficient, or subject to abuse. In Nigeria hardly any government programmes in the past were not affected by fraud. In the end, it is the poor masses that get poorer. Chief among the causes of fraud and abuse seem to reside with officials who accept applications from intending beneficiaries without due and proper identification and screening procedures, coupled with the failure to periodically check on recipients to determine continued eligibility and the non-investigation and prosecution of fraud cases.

One of the more common techniques for abusing the poverty eradication programme is beneficiaries using money received to either marry more wives or buy some means to further social mobility; recipients then not reporting their income, and registering non-existent people or relatives of officials under various aliases as beneficiaries. I am in no way suggesting that this is true of all or most recipients, but it is widespread enough to merit serious concern.

Another problem with the poverty eradication programme in Nigeria is that it does not really help the recipients in the long run. Instead of providing short-term assistance to put the recipient on the road to self-sufficiency, it becomes a way of life. Most recipients rightly or wrongly consider these grants their piece of the national economic cake that is never accounted for, and they easily get caught up in a lifestyle of unemployment and not taking any initiative. As new administrations are appointed, they abandon past programmes, never attempt to recover loan advances, and agency officials are never held responsible or liable for any misdeeds.

Still another problem is that poverty alleviation programmes in the past became unduly burdensome. Colossal sums are used to set up the structures for these programmes, but since people default on payment of loans given in past schemes without any machinery to monitor this, the number of people queuing up for assistance has more than tripled. And this, in turn, is certainly burdensome for the diligent, hardworking and committed taxpayers whose tax naira it used to initiate and fund such programmes. A programme such as NAPEP has tremendous capacity to reduce mass poverty if it is properly administered. And, as agencies such as this enter into partnership with states, there should be some role for churches to also mobilise their members and work towards realising the objectives set.

Guidelines for evaluating poverty eradication programmes:

Eidsmoe (1984:91), in attempting to resolve the seemingly conflicting information about Christian responsibilities regarding wealth and poverty, stresses that a point of view is neither Christian nor moral unless it can be supported, directly or indirectly, by the Word of God properly interpreted and properly applied. To this end, the following guidelines may be useful to Christians and Christian institutions in evaluating government programmes designed to help the poor:

- *Voluntary charity is better than government action.* Proponents and promoters of government programmes can be extremely generous with other people's money. The Chief Executive who goes around selling such programmes to the public is often considered generous, a philanthropist and friend of the poor. In the process it is often

forgotten that the money spent is taxpayers' money – yours and mine! Even legislators are much more eager to spend other people's money than their own. For many, private organisations, particularly the church, seem to be more preferable initiators and administrators of poverty alleviation programmes. The reason for this may be because church programmes do not involve forced giving, and consequently the giver and recipient are both blessed. Government should, therefore, also encourage and support the churches in their efforts to mobilise their members to initiate programmes aimed at promoting self-sufficiency.

- *It is better to provide jobs and training than to provide monetary hand-outs.* Recently, the National Coordinator of NAPEP disclosed that the Federal Government awarded the agency one billion naira from its Debt Relief Gains (DRG). He further explained that the overall objective was to fight poverty. This is an emergency relief step and one hopes the funds will be used for the benefit of the real poor of the nation. That apart, the proverb remains true that if one gives someone a fish that person is fed for a day, but if one teaches another to fish, that person is fed for a lifetime. Thus, more attention should be paid to the teaching of entrepreneurial skills and management than merely to handing out cash in the form of loans to people who will never be able to repay them.
- *Poverty alleviation programmes should provide incentives to work.* A poverty alleviation policy should not merely provide the poor with the means to keep body and soul together. Those responsible for implementing these policies should also identify and address the nation's socio-economic problems. They should also educate beneficiaries on the reason why the funds are made available to them: to serve as a launching pad towards their economic emancipation.
- *Poverty alleviation programmes should be structured to minimise fraud.* Fraud will in all probability never be totally eliminated, but poverty alleviation programmes should be structured in such a way that loopholes that allow this are restricted. Stricter screening procedures for applicants should, for example, be put in place, as well as periodic rechecking of the eligibility of beneficiaries. More severe penalties could be allowed for and enforced against abusers. Officials should more actively encourage citizens to report suspected fraud. (Unlike in the story told of a lady who called to report fraud committed by a neighbor, and who was told by an agency worker to mind her own business!) Agencies should be held accountable and should operate with due fairness and transparency in the administration of funds.
- *Distinguish deserving poor from undeserving poor.* Coupled with the above is the need to distinguish between those who cannot work and those who will not work. There are even people with disabilities who are self-supporting and determined to stay that way. The Bible has very harsh words for those who are lazy, but commands compassion for those who are poor through no fault of their own. Paul's advice in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is quite in line with this principle: "if any would not work neither should he eat" – Paul says "would not" and not "could not". Paul, too, clearly distinguishes between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor.
- *Poverty alleviation programmes should encourage families to take care of their own.* Scripture has very harsh words for those who refuse to support their own families. Again

it is Paul that reminds us that “... if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8). In context, Paul refers to support for elderly widows – mothers, grandmothers, aunts. What would Paul say about our modern tendency to pass this responsibility off to the government with poverty eradication programmes? Christian responsibility teaches and demands this care. The churches in Nigeria are suitably spread across the country to address community-based care and support.

POVERTY, INJUSTICE AND THE CHURCH

Finally, the church preaches equity, fairness, and justice. True church members should imbibe and practise this in daily life situations. Boff (1994) discerns an interrelatedness between the ecological, human, social, and spiritual aspects of life. He claims that the plights of the oppressed, the poor and the earth are connected, and should not be isolated but rather addressed as collective responsibility of the church. In Nigeria, the rich directly, through commercial activities, and indirectly, through injustices related to inequitable practices, have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty. It is quite safe to argue that wherever there is poverty, it is directly linked to the perversion of justice. There is injustice against the poor also by way of the exploitation of the environment by the rich. According to Gnanakan (2004:106), whether it is inhumane living conditions, with accompanying disease and malnutrition, or a plundering of environmental resources, the roots can be traced down to unjust practices that have deprived people and the environment of basic rights and privileges. The struggle against the challenges these forms of injustices pose, is one that churches should join. On the other hand, the poor, when exploited, can become exploiters themselves. They look to their environment and its resources to escape from poverty. Many poor farmers in the rural areas, for example, have sold their large family farmlands to rich individuals, industrialists or urban estate developers, to be used in large-scale farming, or for industrial or housing developments. While this results in a quick fix, it usually ends with money only for a few and many simply made poorer in the process.

Closely connected with the above is the challenge posed by the fact that large numbers of poor members of churches are not organised in a way that attracts patronage or draws attention to their plight. Thus they do not have the power to influence programmes that affect their lives and communities. In this, too, churches may be of assistance. Involving people at grassroots, where poverty is most glaring, in identifying what causes poverty and what needs to change in order to address it, is of key importance. This participatory initiative recognises that people with personal experience are “experts” that have essential roles to play in developing proposals that will work for them.

CONCLUSION

Poverty issues in Nigeria cannot be effectively addressed at different levels (family, community, state and/or nation) in isolation from the churches. As Nigeria is in the process of a value re-orientation, poverty eradication programmes should be seen as an integral part of

development, with churches doing their part in helping to monitor and supervise the roles of their members in order to ensure accountability.

Despite all the social welfare programmes and the time and money spent on and by them, poverty is still with us in Nigeria, as in many other countries. This tempts one to ask whether this is what God means in Deuteronomy 15:11, and Jesus in Matthew 26:11? Will poverty never disappear? This paper does not answer this question. It rather reflects on how we treat people who have less, and pleads for the just disbursement of funds by poverty alleviation agency staff in a just manner without manipulation of funds, favouritism, or for personal gain. Not having enough is devastating, but enjoying plenty at the cost of others and mercilessly draining government resources meant for the poor rots the soul.

Perhaps churches should see poverty eradication as a part of their mission of evangelisation, since not only spiritual but also material salvation is needed to truly free someone. Some of the billions that some churches have locked away in banks should be made available to their members in form of loans and other poverty alleviation measures, and the churches should be able to build on their greatest strengths which are trust and commitment rather than dependency. Churches should also motivate their members to work or to help create employment, since the lack of it is probably the greatest bane of Africa today.

Blaming poverty on the rich does not help and is often simply not true; and carping about the rich is self-defeating. Let the needy not begrudge those that have plenty through hard work and skills. However, Christ exempts none of his disciples from the practice of generosity. If the church wants to be an instrument of the Spirit of God's transforming power in the world, it must start with an acknowledgement of our fundamental sinfulness and complete dependence on the reconciling work of God's grace and justice. It is only then that the church would take her rightful place to lead by example and to help tackle the issues of poverty justly.

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THE ROLE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY IN THE MISSION OF CHURCHES IN SECULARISED EUROPE²

ABSTRACT

In Europe, churches are no longer privileged partners of the state but contribute to public life in a way similar to that of other institutions of civil society. This article investigates the way in which ecclesial bodies present themselves in their statements in relation to the fight against poverty. More specifically it analyses two major ecclesial documents from the first decade of the twenty-first century that seek to answer to the question as to what is the calling of the church in secularised Europe. Special attention is given to the role for the fight against poverty. The two selected texts represent two of the major Christian traditions in Europe: the Roman Catholic Church in Europe and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).

A SHIFT IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCHES IN RELATION TO THE COMMON GOOD

In a recent monograph on *Church, state and civil society*, David Fergusson, Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, demands renewed attention for the rich tradition of Christian political theology (Fergusson 2004).³ His central argument is that the past relationship between church and state as a configuration of two dominant institutions that exist in a close and exclusive relationship might be over, but that a more differentiated approach positioning the church in positive relation to other institutions within civil society offers a new perspective for an effective public significance of the church (Fergusson 2004:1).

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² A contribution to the consultation on *Religions and the Eradication of Poverty in the Context of Economic Globalisation* at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, 19-20 May 2008. The consultation formed the second leg of a four year Research Project on *Religions in the Search of the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies* with research partners: the Beyers Naudé Center for Public Theology (Stellenbosch University, South Africa), Mkar University (Benue State, Nigeria) and the International Reformed Theological Institute (VU University, Amsterdam).

³ This work is based on Fergusson's 2001 Brampton Lectures at Oxford.

A historical overview reveals different understandings of the Christian view of the state. Within the early church, both church and state were subordinated to a theological vision of divine rule in history and its eschatological outcome. When persecutions and hostility diminished, a shift from the concept of “alien citizenship” to “subordinated citizenship” became apparent. In the second half of the Middle Ages, the emergent concept *bonum commune* revealed the awareness of the rule of God that surpasses ecclesial forms – our neighbours were no longer merely within the church. Furthermore, the idea of the common good was not limited to a narrow political understanding of the church’s relation to the state, as became apparent in the Reformed version of the concept of “the common good”. Every relationship within the household, the church, and the parish can be sanctified by obedience (individual and collective) to the Word of God. However, the gradual breakdown of the organic unity of church and society at the end of the Middle Ages and during the era of the Reformation, forced churches to reflect anew on their relation to the state and their political theology (Fergusson 2004:45-46).

Fergusson acknowledges the contribution of liberalism to arrangements that are ineluctable in our current situation, such as freedom of worship, association, political action, and more recently, a commitment to the equality of the sexes. However, he refrains from attributing the merits of this to a philosophy of political liberalism that attaches a primary significance to the autonomous individual. Not so much philosophies of the Enlightenment, but distinctive theological arguments for religious tolerance form the basis for the commitment to some of the features of liberal society (Fergusson 2004:69-71). Fergusson refers to the themes of peaceful coexistence, the irrationality of state coercion, the freedom of the act of faith, and the prospect of civil conversation with others unlike ourselves, from whom we have a good deal to learn. In his opinion, these motives better guarantee tolerance within pluralist societies than the approach to tolerance of political liberalism, which tends to result in indifference and scepticism (Fergusson 2004:92-3). Fergusson then analyses two important texts of twentieth-century Christianity, the Barmen Declaration and *Gaudium et Spes*, to prove that the church can make a public contribution to the common good of society on the basis of its own insights and standards (Fergusson 2004:139).

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed the demise of Christendom and the concept of the national church; however, according to Fergusson, the calling “to seek the welfare of the city” has remained. At the same time, terrible twentieth-century experiences of authoritarian states have revealed the need for the recognition of institutions that mediate between domestic households and the machinery of the state, such as trade unions, political parties, community groups, and religious and cultural organisations. Thus, Fergusson feels, it is as groups within civil society that churches, no longer assuming a triumphalistic “the-church-knows-best-attitude”, will continue to contribute to the common good in partnership with other institutions in society, recognising divine wisdom in other places.

THE MISSION OF THE EUROPEAN CHURCHES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

Although Fergusson offers one many issues for further discussion, for this contribution I shall limit myself to the question whether his central thesis – the continuation of the public role of the church no longer in privileged partnership with the state but as a contributing institution of civil society – is reflected in the way ecclesial bodies present themselves in their statements in relation to the fight against poverty. In order to do so, I shall analyse two major ecclesial documents of the first decade of the twenty-first century that seek to answer to the question of what is the calling of the church in secularised Europe. I will give special attention to the place of the fight against poverty. The two selected texts represent two of the major Christian traditions in Europe: the Roman Catholic Church in Europe and the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).

This article has to be read together with a contribution I made at the first conference of the *Institute for Public Theology and Development Studies* on the Theme of *Theological Education for Nation Building* in Mkar – Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria (28 February to 2 March 2006).⁴ That conference had been instrumental in preparation for the project on the role of religions in the search for the common good in pluralistic societies. In that article, I analysed the Accra Confession (2004) of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as an example of public theology by Reformed churches worldwide, contributing to the debate on the devastating effects of globalisation on the economic and ecological position of many people. I focused on the ecclesiological implications of this statement and I compared it to the way the current Pope, Benedict XVI, spoke out on Christian charity in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). The emphasis was on the way churches understood themselves in their public statements on economic justice and issues of poverty, in relation to the tasks of governments of nation states.

This current contribution deals with similar issues, namely churches and their role in the fight against poverty. However, the focus here is specifically on the way in which European churches understand their role in a highly secularised milieu, in which poverty remains a problem but does no longer constitute a the major issue. Thus, the main theme of both documents is not poverty as such, but being the church in secularised Europe – and the two research questions when reading these documents are: (1) How is secularisation evaluated? (2) What role do churches see for themselves in their mission in Europe?

Many European countries have laws to protect the poor. Still, poverty is not a thing of the past in Europe. Some groups, countries and regions on the continent are more isolated and more vulnerable to poverty. Churches are among the agencies that are involved in this struggle to eradicate poverty in Europe. At the same time, churches have their own specific struggle. They also fight for survival. During the previous century, especially in the past forty years, people have turned away from churches en masse, mainly because of secularisation. This has forced churches to reconsider their mission.

⁴ This article, entitled “The Accra Confession: An example of the ecclesiological implications of public theology”, is published elsewhere in this volume – editor.

ECCLESIA IN EUROPE

The first document to be analysed is *Ecclesia in Europe*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, published in 2003, four years after the Second Synod of the European Bishops in 1999. Its author, the late Pope John-Paul II, expressed a profound interest in Europe. Inspired by the Book of Revelations, he explores the theme of hope in the midst of despair. He talks about the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage that is accompanied by practical agnosticism and religious indifference (John Paul II 2003:Par. 7). The Pope observes a fear of the future, expressed in inner emptiness, loss of meaning in life, and points to its fruits: a diminishing number of births, the decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and the difficulty, if not outright refusal, to make lifelong commitments, including marriage. He then refers to the existential fragmentation revealing itself in, for example, family crises, the resurfacing of ethnic conflicts, the re-emergence of racism, and an obsessive concern for personal interest and privileges. This spread of individualism has led to an increased weakening of solidarity, "with the result that many people, while not lacking material necessities, feel increasingly alone, left to themselves without structures of affection and support" (8). According to the Pope "the root of the loss of hope is an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ." European culture creates the impression of "silent apostasy" (9). The pope is also very negative towards secularism, which he calls a poison (26, 38).

However, the Pope also observes signs of hope in Europe, such as the growing openness of peoples to one another, reconciliation between countries, the opening up to the countries of Eastern Europe, forms of cooperation and exchange, a growing European consciousness, democratic procedures, a spirit of freedom, respect for human rights and attention to these rights, and quality of life (12). In fact, the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition contributed strongly to specific elements of the European culture, such as: the recognition of the value of the human person and his/her inalienable dignity; the sacredness of human life and the centrality of the family; the importance of education and freedom of thought, speech, and religion; the legal protection of individuals and groups; the promotion of solidarity and the common good; and the recognition of the dignity of labour (19). The Pope also explicitly contributes some fundamental values to the influence of Christianity, including the affirmation of the transcendent dignity of the human person, the value of reason, freedom, democracy, the constitutional state, and the distinction between political life and religion (109).

This last element brings us to the recognition of the different places of state and church in civil society. The Catholic Church "consistently desires to respect the legitimate autonomy of the civil order" (19). The pope fully recognises the secular nature of state institutions (114) and is not calling for a return to the confessional state. However, he deplores every type of ideological secularism of hostile separation between civil institutions and religious confessions. He is convinced that in keeping with a healthy cooperation between the ecclesial community and political society, the Catholic Church can make a unique contribution to the whole of European culture (117).

How is this crisis of despair to be solved? It is in proclaiming the gospel of hope (the theme of Chapter 3 of the exhortation), in celebrating the gospel of hope (Chapter 4), but also in serving the gospel of hope (Chapter 5). Charity given and received is the primordial experience which gives rise to hope. The witness of charity possesses an intrinsic power of evangelisation. To live in charity becomes good news. Ecclesial communities are called to be true training grounds for communion, where a culture of solidarity is practised. The Pope calls for the rediscovery of Christian volunteerism (paragraphs 84-85). Next to communion and solidarity, serving men and women in society is a second dimension of serving the gospel of hope. The Church is called to give new hope to the poor through its preferential love for the poor. Particular importance must also be attached to confronting the challenges of unemployment, pastoral care of the sick, and a proper use of the goods of the earth (paragraphs 86-89). The Church can play a guiding role in building a city worthy of human beings, in which the Church's social teaching can play a role. The Church is also called to be instrumental in a culture of acceptance and hospitality towards immigrants and refugees. In the closing chapter of the document, Europe is called on directly to establish a culture of solidarity in the midst of globalisation (paragraphs 111-112).

One may, therefore, conclude that John-Paul II sees positive as well as negative aspects in the evolution of Europe. The positive aspects concern political and economic developments regarding a growing European union. The negative aspects are in relation to the socio-cultural changes, which are evaluated in very negative terms: secularism is poison. Social problems form part of the Pope's analysis and the calling to a ministry of charity is one of three specific missions for the Church in Europe, together with the callings proclamation and celebration. The roles of church and state are clearly distinguished.

EVANGELISING – PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES FOR THE CHURCHES IN EUROPE

In 2006, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) published a document entitled *Evangelising – Protestant perspectives for the churches in Europe* (CPCE 2006). The CPCE uses a broad concept of evangelism and mission; not only talk, but also action; not only witness, but also dialogue.

It manifests itself in preaching that awakens faith and in diaconal activity as well as in the work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation (paragraph 1.2).

The missionary challenges are described with the following questions:

How can we convincingly invite people to faith at a time of growing uncertainty about faith? How can we as Christians, amidst a plurality of lifestyles, witness to the one truth of the Gospel? How can we counter the breakdown of Christian traditions in church and society and open up for people new approaches to the great story of God? How can we live and witness to our faith credibly and attractively in the face of our own spiritual poverty and increasingly speechlessness? (1.3).

Doubt is expressed whether Europe, the most strongly secularised continent in the world, can or should be re-Christianised (1.5).

In contrast to Pope John-Paul II's highly negative evaluation of secularisation in *Ecclesia in Europe*, the CPCE shows some ambivalence regarding the topic:

We maintain that these contexts are not in principle resistant to the gospel and in consequence we do not meet them with any pessimism about the culture or the Zeitgeist (1.5).

The first of these contexts described is secularisation. The negative interpretation in terms of godliness, of denial of transcendence and of loss of the church's powers, is confirmed by the almost complete loss of access to religious questions or categorical rejection of religious coinages out of an ideologised secularism, both in the West and in post-socialist countries. But, to this is added another interpretation. Secularisation is also a process of emancipation from indoctrination and ideology, from escapism into another world. It challenges individuals to a more authentic rendering of faith, and challenges churches to rethink their calling in society and to find new language and expressions to communicate faith in a secular context (3.1). Other trends in Europe are approached in the same ambivalent way: new spirituality, breaking with tradition, useful truths, longing for community, no more grand narratives, performance-orientated society, change in the European world of work, leisure time and experience, the cult of health, resentment against institutions, religious pluralism, international youth culture, virtual community, and demographic change. Not only the negative aspects are mentioned, but also the challenges that they pose.

Among the challenges facing the churches, poverty and social issues in general are hardly mentioned. Under the negative aspects of the performance-orientated society, mention is made of the social drop-out and social isolation, breakdowns, and loss of employment (3.7). The widening gap between rich and poor is referred to under the changing world of work in Europe (3.8).

The theme of the church as part of civil society is not explicitly discussed. In line with the rest of the ambivalent evaluation of secularism, re-Christianisation in the sense of the so-called *Corpus Christianum* is not considered an option: "all churches have a duty to be humble and to abandon any 'missionary imperialism'" (3.15).

Since attention to poverty and social issues is weak in this document, one should not be surprised that the fight against poverty is an issue mentioned in passing only, and also indirectly. In fact, when the text discussed globalisation, this is not interpreted negatively only – markets and jobs are not only destroyed but also created in the process. Next to this, the document admits that the churches as employers have to shed jobs themselves, that the diaconal work of the church in particular is in a state of flux, that traditional parochial structures are not adequate to deal with such global issues, that unemployed people feel themselves unwelcome in many churches, and that churches are perceived as part of the economic and political system. The answer proposed is the Protestant message of justification and God's transforming message that gives back dignity to the impoverished and unemployed (3.8).

This second document has a more ambivalent attitude to secularisation and is more strongly nuanced in its evaluation. The fight against poverty is a marginal issue in the

document's description of the problems in Europe, and it remains marginal when it reflects on the task of the churches in Europe. The document started with a broad vision of proclamation "evangelism", of which diaconal activities form part; but in the rest of the document the social role of the church is insufficiently reflected upon. The text explicitly refuses to return to a re-Christianisation of Europe, but does not make clear what this means for the relation between church and state.

CONCLUSION

Fergusson indicated that the evolution of the differentiated roles of church and state have their origins in the late Middle Ages already, and that not only political but, more importantly, *theological* arguments contributed to this evolution. The documents analysed above both show an awareness of and an acceptance of this evolution. The Roman Catholic documents are more explicit in affirming this new relationship and describing the different roles of church and state – also in relation to the fight against poverty. However, the negative evaluation of secularism creates an inner tension because the differentiation between the roles of church and state, and secularism, are both part of the growing secularisation process. The Protestant text is less clear when it comes to differentiating between the roles of church and state and is more nuanced in its evaluation of the secularisation process. In general, the latter text reveals some of the confusion and uncertainty within these churches about which direction to take. Their bonds with the nation state are still ambivalent and, while affirming the liberating aspects of secularisation, they find it difficult to find an answer to its negative aspects.

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