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“Am I my brother’s keeper? An African reflection on humanisation

ABSTRACT

In this article, a short typology of Dirk Smit’s theology is set out in terms of the words “contextual”, “Reformed”, “ecumenical” and “public”. This is followed by a homily on the narrative of Cain and Abel as recorded in Gen. 4 in an attempt to illustrate the features of Smit’s theology. The Genesis narrative is analysed under the theme of (de)-humanisation in Africa. At first the strategies of de-humanisation are outlined, followed by the devastating consequences of these strategies. A Trinitarian approach is then used to argue for the restoration of humanity on the African continent.

DIRKIE SMIT: PROFILE OF A GIFTED THEOLOGIAN

“Justice, compassion and worship – these three together. The one cannot do without the other.”²

It is a great honour to participate in this *Festschrift* for a long-time friend and inspirational theological teacher and writer Dirkie Smit. If one would dare to profile Smit’s extensive writings and work over many years, four words come to mind: “contextual”, “Reformed”, “ecumenical”, and “public”.

Smit understands his theology as deeply contextual, and that context is primarily linked to the “geography” of (South) Africa. One could also say that his work, probably in no minor way shaped by one of his teachers, Jaap Durand, witnesses to a keen sense of historical consciousness.³ Not only did he write the dictionary entries on “South Africa” and “apartheid” in influential international reference works,⁴ but he has also become one of the foremost theological voices to assist us and others outside South Africa to interpret from a theological perspective the social, spiritual, historical, political and ecclesial developments in this country over the last thirty years. This is why “in South Africa” or “from a South African perspective” so often appears in titles of his essays.⁵

Smit, however, also acts as translator of classical theologians, philosophers, and social scientists into the realities of South Africa. In other words, he makes Luther, Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, Habermas, Marty, Wolterstorff and many other voices “speak” in the South African

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2 A quotation from Smit 2009a:378.

3 Cf. Smit’s incisive (and agreeable) analysis of Jaap Durand’s theology from the perspective of historicity or the struggle between historicism and a-historicism (Smit 2009b).

4 On South Africa, cf. Smit 2007:11-25 and on apartheid, cf. Smit 2006 and 2008a.

5 Cf., for example, the recurring South African references in his collected essays, published as *Essays on Being Reformed*, especially Part 2, on the historical contexts (Smit 2009a:185-294).

context. Thus, he both achieves an enlightening reading of the original texts and contributes to a fresh (re)interpretation of these tradition-making authors via an incredibly wide engagement with primary and secondary literature.⁶

Dirkie Smit is an unashamedly *Reformed* theologian. The massive third volume of collected essays (Smit 2009a) witnesses to his tireless interpretation of this specific theological tradition. He stands in the tradition of the Scriptures, the creeds of the early church⁷ and the trajectory of Anselm,⁸ Calvin, Barth⁹ and the confessing church tradition, and follows in the footsteps of his predecessor and teacher at Stellenbosch, Willie Jonker. His theology is fundamentally shaped by this tradition: a keen exegesis of Scripture;¹⁰ the importance of confessions as unique mark of this tradition;¹¹ the church and liturgy or worship (Smit 2009a:461-472) – especially in its local form – as central to the embodiment of faith (Smit 2007:425-454); and ethics with a focus on justice in all spheres of life.¹² No wonder he has become a leading theological figure in regional and world bodies of the Reformed tradition, and a committed and involved member of the local Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).

This overt confessional stance in no way implies a “closed” view of theology or a keeping of the Reformed faith as sectarian truth. In fact, in his most recent contribution on trends in Reformed theologies, Smit (2010) again emphasises the plurality of views and the divergent opinions that all go under the term “Reformed”. As he wrote in 1992 already, the Reformed story is a story of many stories.¹³ This deep sensitivity for plurality led him to become an ecumenical theologian in the broad sense of the word.¹⁴

Smit understands that one’s participating in the global church is best appreciated from a deep foundation in at least one tradition. He knows the other traditions well, and often engages with them precisely to point out the strengths and weaknesses of his own tradition – he wrote

6 I have many times (in a good spirit) remarked that Dirkie Smit’s bibliographies are probably as useful as his articles. One should not underestimate his contribution towards giving many of us a broad orientation in diverse fields of theological reflection.

7 Cf. Smit’s discussion of the Trinity in the Reformed tradition where he states that “... the early Reformed theologians did not invent the doctrine, but received it from the tradition since the early church ...” (Smit 2009a:35).

8 Cf. Smit’s programmatic essay on the nature of theology (Smit 2008c:387-428, his 2002 inaugural lecture at Stellenbosch) as second-order reflection on the faith, following Anselm’s understanding of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

9 Smit wrote many essays on and in dialogue with Barth. For an interesting article on the core trends in Barth’s thinking, cf. Smit 2008d.

10 We must not look only at Smit’s purely academic work here. The extensive series *Woord teen die Lig* (Word against the Light) is an example of a Reformed systematic theologian.

11 Cf. the many essays on confessions, Barmen, Belhar and Accra, some of which are grouped together as Part 3 of Smit 2009a:295-394.

12 Cf. the four essays on justice – with a specific focus on economic justice – in the collection Smit 2007:343-422. These essays function at various levels of the debate: on the role of theory or paradigms in economics, Barth’s views on justice, the link between Reformed ethics and justice, and an exposition and critique of the *processus confessionis* of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Cf. also Smit 2009c

13 Smit goes so far as to write: “It is therefore impossible to find consensus on any description of Reformed theology. Any picture will be subjective and open to contrary claims. The Reformed story is by its very nature a story of many stories” (2010: 2). He, nevertheless, attempts to sketch in the subsequent pages what he terms “the Reformed ethos” as “... a way of being the Christian community in the world,

14 His contribution to Jonker’s *Festschrift* already demonstrated that this openness and fairness to learn the truth with others is what he found attractive in his former teacher of dogmatics – cf. Smit 1989.

his doctoral dissertation on the influential Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (Smit 1979). Smit engages with Luther himself and with leading Luther scholars and ethicists like Wolfgang Huber and, more recently, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm (Smit 2008:35-66). He has great respect for ecumenical theologians like Edmund Schlink (see Smit 2008b), Geoffrey Wainwright, Konrad Raiser, Dietrich Ritschl, Lukas Vischer and many others. He himself made several contributions to the authoritative *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (1991), and has written numerous articles on developments in the modern ecumenical movement as represented by the World Council of Churches, WARC and Lutheran World Federation.

Although the technical term “public theology” was not in vogue when Smit began his theological work, he has seamlessly become one of the leading interpreters and proponents of what is now known as “public theology”. On the face of it, there are at least two reasons for this:

First, Smit is a keen student of Western philosophy and wrote his master’s treatise in philosophy on Jürgen Habermas – probably the most influential proponent of modernity in the twentieth century.¹⁵ Smit interprets the rise of modernity since René Descartes as a redefinition of “public” and “private” with the danger that religion be relegated to the private realm only. Second, he has always understood Reformed theology to be a public theology in the many senses of the word, including transforming public institutions and public life. He could, therefore, never relinquish his own calling to shape public debate¹⁶ and to work on an interdisciplinary level with political scientists, legal scholars, historians and economists.

The gospel is by nature not a private gospel. With this concise (and inadequate) summary of Dirkie Smit’s theology, it seems apt to honour him and his work with a short piece that shares some of these emphases, and links with core themes (such as justice, human dignity, and human rights) that are widely discussed in his dogmatic and ethical writings.¹⁷ What follows is a substantial reworking of an address given on invitation at the annual Ugandan parliamentary breakfast on 8 October 2010 in Kampala. It is, therefore, a deeply contextual address – given by an African in Africa and for Africans. Although not a treatise on Reformed theology in any overt way, it draws its content from an exegesis of a specific scriptural passage with a firm conviction that humanity is embodied in civic and political life. There is a close connection with the insights of the ecumenical church on issues of justice and humanity. By its very nature, it can be seen as public theology in action, as the address was given “in the open” with President Museveni, the speaker of parliament, cabinet ministers, judges, generals and MPs all in attendance, including dignitaries from several other nations from Africa and around the world.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” was chosen as theme for the 2010 event and it was left to the speakers themselves to interpret the topic and give content to it.

STRATEGIES OF DEHUMANISATION

Africa confronts us with deep ambiguities. It is a continent of immense natural beauty and

15 The unpublished MA treatise is entitled *Demokrasie en Dialoog* (Democracy and Dialogue) (Smit 1975).

Cf. also Smit’s extensive use of Habermas in his exposition of the “publics”, Smit 2008c:3-34.

16 Cf. his weekly column in *Die Burger* (a prominent Afrikaans daily) published over many years, in which he succinctly addresses issues of public concern from a theological perspective

17 Cf. footnote 12 above. For a specific application to the economic sphere, cf. Smit 2008e.

bountiful resources. It is home to just under a billion people, with a rich diversity of cultures, languages and religions. According to paleontological research, this continent is the cradle of *homo sapiens*, the origin of all people on earth. Its benign weather conditions in most parts and fertile soil make this a wonderful continent on which to live and work.

Yet, the dominant perception of Africa – by itself as well as by others – is pessimistic. On many international indices, Africa – specifically sub-Saharan Africa – fares proportionally the worst.¹⁸ The continent has been subjected to dehumanisation over the last 450 years: slavery, colonialism, postcolonial misrule, immersion into the global financial system (Naudé 2010a; 2010b:170-174) and now also climate change. The WARC declaration at Kitwe, Zambia (October 1995, see Smit 2007:402-406) speaks of “the irony of this painful situation” and concludes that “instead of rivers of economic prosperity and justice flowing season after season in Africa, poverty, misery, hunger and chronic unemployment have become endemic in Africa” (Smit 2007:403).

Africa has become a continent suffering under dehumanisation. Some of the factors behind this are historical. Their impact and effect are still evident, but the fact of their existence cannot be denied or altered. Other factors contributing to dehumanisation are contemporary and fall into two categories: There are indeed global forces over which Africa has little or limited control; and then there are factors like regional and national policies and actions that are more within the reach of African leaders to determine.

One of the problems with us in Africa is that we have fallen into what can be called a “victim and blame mentality”, implicitly giving up on the possibilities to determine our own destiny. Recent church documents like the Kitwe Declaration and Accra Document are helpful in putting economic and ecological justice on the agenda, but unhelpful in two ways: They almost completely deny the complicity of Africans in their own misery.¹⁹ And, they analyse the situation from a supra-personal and global “systems”-perspective only, with the unintended result that ordinary Christians and local churches are disempowered to act, which reinforces a victim and even an entitlement attitude.²⁰ With this in mind let us look a little closer at the strategies of dehumanisation in Africa.

The misuse of language

It was the existentialist philosophers who helped us understand that language does not have a descriptive function only, that it is, assisting us to make sense of reality and communicate information about that reality to third parties. Martin Heidegger, to name but one example, saw language in its ontological function, that is, not only passively describing reality, but actually constituting and shaping reality. “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins”,²¹ became a famous adage and was one of the bases on which Heidegger and others distinguished between authentic and inauthentic existence. If one is able to use language creatively – opening up new realities

18 Cf. the annual United Nations Human Development Index, which combines a number of indicators such as life expectancy at birth, educational levels (including literacy), and GDP into one index, and how the bottom 30 countries are dominated by African states online at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>. [2011, January 19].

19 The confession in Kitwe of “our sins of omission” is not an acceptance of co-responsibility, as it refers to a confession that “we did not resist enough” (Smit 2007:405).

20 For Dirkie Smit’s wider critical analysis of the Accra Document specifically, cf. Smit 2009:177-184.

21 Literally: “Language is the house of reality.”

– one lives authentically, in contrast to the mere repetitive language of “das man”²²

People who start out on the road of inhumanity know this intuitively. In- humanity starts with name-calling. Name-calling is a vicious strategy to categorise people in a derogatory manner. It creates the sharp boundary between “we” and “them”: “we” the conquerors, and “they” the lesser, indigenous ones; we the Arian race and they the Jews; we the Europeans and they the Africans; we the whites and they the blacks; we the mighty South Africans and they the lowly and unwelcome *makerekere*.²³

Derogatory language further serves the crucial strategy of making sure that the “other” is seen as “less than human”. It is difficult at first to socially isolate or physically remove or attack other human beings that are equal to or just like oneself. “They” must be made to appear inferior or even not-human. That is when language moves to words calling other people “cockroaches”²⁴ or “dogs” or “hyenas”. It is easier to kill animals or crush cockroaches beneath our feet than actual human beings.

The gradual process of dehumanisation can end in the actual killing or displacement of millions of people, or both. The histories of many postcolonial countries tell the same sad story: to ensure power, ethnic cleansing takes place; warlords control parts of geographical areas so that chaos rules and those who are out of favour are forced to move (mostly by foot) to somewhere where they might or might not find temporary shelter. The worst cases remain genocide or religious wars. Once you fight with God on your side, it is a holy war you dare not (cannot?) lose – peace is a slap in the face of God (god).

It all starts with what we say to and about one another. Whether in Africa or elsewhere around the globe, we need to attend to the ethics of language. Words, in fact, do kill – socially at first, and then physically.

THE LOSS OF UBUNTU AND MARGINALISATION OF THE “POOR”

Since John Mbiti’s famous book on African philosophy and religions (Mbiti 1969), we as Africans have proudly claimed *ubuntu* as our original contribution to theology, anthropology and sociology. The Cartesian cogito ergo sum, we said, fosters not only individuality but also self-referential or even “narcissistic individualism” (Smit 2007:84) and loss of community. Rationality (“I think”) heralded the *Aufklärung* with its benefits of science and technology, and – in the famous Kantian formulation of an enlightened person – the questioning of traditional authority, as each person discerns the truth for and by him- or herself.²⁵ We in Africa said that this also led to rationalism and scientism where truth is reduced to the empirical only; and the freedom of secularity had turned into closed secularism and even anti-religious sentiments in

22 This is a very free interpretation of the complex argument made by (for example) Heidegger on the constitutive role of discourse and understanding in the disclosedness of Da-Sein. Cf. Heidegger 1996: 150-156, and 180.

23 A reference by South Africans to the strange-sounding languages of foreigners (frequently attacked since 2008) to this country.

24 This word was used during the Rwandan massacres, and has now appeared again in South African political discourse (introduced by Julius Malema, ANC Youth League leader, describing the leader of the opposition).

25 “Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstand ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen” (Kant 1999/original 1784:20).

some European countries. Ubuntu – “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”²⁶ – makes the ontological point that we constitute each other’s personhood. Dirkie Smit, in his interpretation of ubuntu, writes:

Human beings are only human in their interdependency on other human beings. Sociality, belonging, mutual responsibility and service, connectedness, solidarity, caring and sharing are all important values, constituting our very being (Smit 2007:119).

Progress and success are not meant for self-enrichment, but for the enhancement of society. The vulnerable (children, the sick, the dying, the aged) will never be alone because *ubuntu* is the unwritten social security of societies without advanced systems of government care. A deep culture of sharing marks Africa, we say, and even if we have very little ourselves, we shall still show compassion to those who cross our path. It is sad to see the corruption and even complete loss of *ubuntu* today.

Ubuntu is corrupted when it loses its universal sense and is interpreted in a narrow nationalistic, ethnic or familial fashion. The question is how inclusive the “we” really is (Smit 2007:119). Consequently, *ubuntu* means that I use my power in society to benefit those who are “of my own”. I am a person through the ones close to me; and they benefit from my patronage to the exclusion of others who are not from my nation, tribe, family or political party. This tribalisation of *ubuntu* lies at the heart of factionalism in Africa. It knows no conflict of interest and is blinded by the pursuit of power, money and positions.

There are also signs that *ubuntu* has disappeared completely. The annihilation of *ubuntu* has its roots in the combined effect of Africans being swept off their feet by an “accelerated modernity” (Smit 2007:83) and cultural globalisation (see Naudé 2007) together with the interiorisation of the colonial master’s image of us. The former implies an attitude of cultural diffidence (“global is always better than local”); the latter a deep sense of inferiority – that, if we do not look, act and talk like our former master (now the centre of the global village), then “we have not made it” yet.

The sad and ironic twist is, therefore, that we embrace the corrupted Enlightenment values – individualism, materialism, rationalism, secularism – against which we at first protested.²⁷ But the more we adopt this new (so-called global) lifestyle, the more we make ourselves believe that we are good and successful people. In the meantime, the weak and the vulnerable fall by the wayside; the old sit alone; those dying of AIDS are socially shunned; foreigners – many of them desperate – are attacked; and tax money (the small proportion that does reach the state’s coffers in many African countries) is spent on sport stadiums and airports for the rich and benefits for the ruling elite, instead of being invested in education and basic health care for the poor.

The result is that the terms of the contract between the state and the people (in those African countries where there are forms of democratic rule) are not complied with. Many African countries cannot be seen as “well-ordered societies” (as described by Rawls) and find themselves mostly in the opposite position, of “burdened societies” where many of the

26 Cf. Mbiti’s discussion of this in the context of kinship, Mbiti 1969:108-109.

27 Read Smit’s account of the moving Mandela Lecture by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, who laments the loss of communality: “With every passing second, they (the demons embedded in our society) advise, with rhythmic and hypnotic regularity – Get rich! Get rich! Get rich!” (Smit 2007:116).

burdens are self-inflicted (Rawls 1999). Even in resource-rich countries like Nigeria, Angola, the DRC, Sudan and South Africa (and, with its newfound oil, in Uganda as well), the question remains whether the benefits reach ordinary people in the form of improved infrastructure and living conditions.

Why must we speak of the African “curse” of resources instead of “blessings?” One of the reasons for this lack of service delivery is corruption in its many forms. The Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International (see bibliography) may be criticised on academic grounds and may show a degree of geographical bias. Nevertheless, it has become an international benchmark of progress or not against the millions of dollars lost to Africa (and others) on an annual basis. Amongst the countries with the lowest scores on this Index, we should admit – to our shame – the majority are from Africa.

If we in Africa could translate *ubuntu* philosophy into political and governance terms, this continent would have a prosperous future in the encompassing sense of the word. The philosophy is in place; it is the policies and actions that are missing.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEHUMANISATION

Let us look at the biblical passage from which the theme of this essay was selected (Gen. 4).²⁸ I assume this narrative is known to most people reading this piece. Cain, driven by jealousy, could – from his own perspective – claim victory over his brother Abel. This was in fact an ultimate victory, as Abel was no longer there to taunt him or seek favours ahead of him. When confronted by God (who had called him to restraint in advance²⁹) with the simple question, “Where is your brother?” Cain follows the well-known strategy of denial: “I do not know.” He quickly attempts to turn possible exposure of his misdeed into relinquishing the responsibility for his brother. His rhetorical question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is a hollow question, because Cain knows what the answer is (and he knows that God knows).

Inhumanity may seem like a victory over “the other”; but it usually has destructive relational consequences: As we learn from the psalmist, acts of inhumanity against others are at its deepest level acts against the will of God. “Against you alone I have sinned”, says David to God in Psalm 51, though he has (horizontally speaking) sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba and Nathan (by lying about his act). Cain’s troubled relationship with God reaches a low point as God calls him to account and pronounces judgement on him to the point of cursing him in his personal capacity (Gen. 4:11). An act of dehumanisation first and foremost strains one’s relationship with God.

The effects of this one act of inhumanity are then vividly portrayed in other relations:

- The familial bond between Cain and his parents are severed. The unity of the first family is destroyed. The joy of Eve’s firstborn (“I acquired a man with the help of the Lord”, Gen. 4:1) turns into sorrow as the first parents in fact lose both their sons.
- There are also ecological consequences. The relationship with the earth, the source of our survival for Cain and others in an agricultural economy, turns nonproductive

²⁸ Quotations from this and other biblical passages are taken not from a specific translation, and is a free translation/interpretation by the author.

²⁹ Cf. Gen. 4:4-6, where the Lord addressed Cain’s anger and warned him not to give in to his sinful desires.

in the real sense of the word: If Cain works the fields, the land will no longer yield according to its potential (Gen. 4:12).

- The “political” consequence is that Cain’s bond with his homeland is threatened: as he is sent into exile with no fixed future address (Gen.4:12). He is to wander aimlessly – always on the run – with no opportunity to establish a stable future home and family life.
- His relationship with all other people is affected: they will turn against him as his reputation as first killer haunts him and makes him the object of other people’s revenge. He himself knows now that violence begets violence, and that it is very difficult to escape the circle of attack and counterattack. Hence his own admission that “whoever finds me will kill me” (Gen.4: 14).

It is clear: one act of so-called victory spins out of control and affects the whole network of relations at stake. We cannot dehumanise others and still retain our own humanity. The “victors” are – often without realising it – themselves “victims”.

THE RESTORATION OF HUMANITY: A JUDEO-CHRISTIAN VIEW

We need not accept inhumanity as normal pattern of interaction on the African continent. In fact, our hopes for a changed continent can be shaped largely by the Judeo-Christian tradition. In situations of inhumanity, the question is not only: “What is the state of affairs?”, but also and definitively: “Who is God?” “Whenever we speak about compassionate justice,” writes Dirkie Smit, “we should begin by speaking about *God*” (2009a:377, Smit’s emphasis). This should then be followed by a call to return or to turn back from our ways to this God. The Genesis narrative tells us who God is:

A return to God as Creator

The Bible commences with the simple but startling confession: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.” By God’s creative word everything that is, is called into existence. As part of this (first) creation narrative, the creation of humankind stands as the pinnacle of God’s work; as creatures created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27).

The ethical implications of these confessions are now clear to us: First, we are stewards of this creation, given to us as gift by God to use responsibly. In theology the development of ecological ethics and environmental justice has strongly built on this creation tradition. Second, the fact that humans were created in the image of God has been seen as powerful support for the notion of human rights, particularly the first-generation and non-alienable right to life. We shall not kill another person (either by word or attitude, or by physical means), because all people – no matter of what race, class, gender, HIV status, sexual orientation³⁰ or level of education – are image-bearers of God. – for whatever reasons – no court of law is able or willing to ask this piercing question of us regarding our brothers and sisters, God does so indeed.

A return to the Creator-God will serve Africa well: we shall act responsibly to protect and enhance the numerous natural gifts God freely gave us on this continent. We shall understand

³⁰ At the time of the original speech, a fierce debate raged in Uganda about punishment of gay and lesbian people, even to the point of instituting the death penalty against them.

that we are but stewards of the natural resources at our disposal to use for the good of all people and future generations. And we shall see all other people – on this continent and elsewhere – as image-bearers of God, and therefore as brothers and sisters whose keepers we are. This is the religious foundation of our indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu*.

A return to God as Judge

In civil life we have created the law as judge of our actions. No ordered and just society is possible without a sound and independent legal system. Healthy democracies are known, among other things, for their efficient and fair systems of jurisprudence. The law is important, and is usually seen as the ethical minimum below which we should not fall.

But, for a variety of reasons, the law is not a perfect guide to action: Laws may have legal force, but may also be unjust in principle and in effect; laws are slow to capture and regulate new realities, so that for a while there may be a vacuum in which no clear guidelines exist and where we have to wait for new cases to be heard to create precedents for future cases; and laws may exist or be applied ununiformly across the nations of the globe – creating loopholes for many who seek to flee from justice in one country to the next.

At a global level, we have created the International Court of Justice in The Hague, but even this institution is not recognised and its injunctions not respected by all – a fact that limits its possibilities for establishing a court of appeal.

From a Judeo-Christian perspective, God is seen as the ultimate Judge. The values and requirements of God's law should be our guide, as this law in many cases asks more of us than the law of the land. Because in God there is neither darkness nor inhumanity, God cannot accept our actions of inhumanity, either towards nature or towards other human beings. Like Cain, we are first and foremost accountable not to other people (or the electorate), but to God. When – for whatever reasons – no court of law is able or willing to ask this piercing question of us regarding our brothers and sisters, God does so indeed.

God's question to African leaders is straightforward and simple: "Where is your brother Abel?" This question is a metaphor for the millions of killed, maimed, displaced and marginalised people who suffer not because of natural disasters, but because of inhumane, wilful actions of those in power or seeking power.

We must not trivialise the seriousness of God's judgement. However, we must not see this judgement as "active revenge" on God's part. No, God's "judgement" consists mostly in leaving us to face the consequences of our own ill deeds. God's judgement is first and foremost realised via the self-inflicted disastrous consequences of our inhuman actions. Like in the case of Cain, the destructive consequences spread fast in concentric circles from personal relations to the farthest corners of the earth on which we live.

However, the Old Testament teaches us that God's fury and sorrow over sin also cause him to act. God does – according to some biblical traditions – curse people and cities and countries and the earth. Therefore, we need to live "in the fear of the Lord" – a fear characterised by deep respect for God's holiness, mixed with a fear characterised by love for God's justice.

As African leaders we stand not only before earthly forms of justices (or vigorously attempt to avoid even this justice); we are confronted by the living God, in whom there is no injustice. To this God we are accountable, and by this God we are judged.

A return to God as graceful God

God the Creator-Judge is also a God of grace and restoration. “God’s justice is a saving justice, a caring justice, a merciful justice” (Smit 2009a:377). It is to the same God who cursed him and the earth (Gen. 4:10-12) that Cain turns for help: “My guilt is too big to carry”, he says, explaining to God that he will be an ever-fleeing fugitive on the earth, and that all who meet him, will want to kill him (Gen. 4:13-14).

God does not reject a humble and contrite heart. Confessing guilt and debt is the first step towards restoration. God’s successive acts of grace are amazing in the context of this narrative. He makes good precisely on the consequences of Cain’s inhumane act:

Cain will not be murdered. Instead, he will be protected by a sign so that others will know that whoever kills him will be repaid sevenfold for this act (v.15). Instead of becoming an ever-fleeing fugitive, Cain finds a fixed abode in the land Nod, east of Eden (v. 16). Instead of being alone and cut off from human community, Cain marries and receives a firstborn son, Enoch, after whom a city is named. Verses 17-23 describe Cain’s family tree and tell of the agricultural and economic achievements of his descendants.

In theology we (rightly) focus on God as the God of the oppressed and the marginalised. We need not forget that God also extends undeserved care to the oppressor; to those who cause suffering and commits inhumanities. When oppressors turn to God to seek grace, forgiveness and restoration, God is faithful and makes new beginnings possible.³¹

Not only to Cain, but also to the first parents, God extends God’s grace. Eve gives birth to another child, called Seth, “as God gifted me another child in the place of Able, because Cain killed him” (v. 25). The long genealogy starting in Genesis 4:26 and extending to the whole of chapter 5 is an enumeration of God’s faithfulness to Adam and Eve and their descendants.

The best place for African leaders is on their knees before God. We must openly bring the enormous burdens and ambiguities of this continent, and our own irresponsibility’s and misdeeds, before God. Some of us might say with Cain: “My guilt of neglect and burden of responsibility are too big to carry.” Be sure of God’s restorative response – our only hope for a new African future.

THE FUTURE OF HUMANISATION

Genesis 4 tellingly ends with a simple but important observation: “Then they (Adam’s descendants) began to call on the Name of the Lord” (v.26).³²

This is the ultimate act of a restored humanity: to give honour and praise to God; to acknowledge God as Creator, Judge, and the source of grace; to elevate God’s Name above all other names known to us; to rely not on our own power and ingenuity, but on God to

31 Cf. Smit’s essays on reconciliation, confession, guilt, truth and seeking forgiveness in the Christian tradition; Smit 2007:287-342. On restorative justice and grace, cf. Naudé 2010b:201-210.

32 I interpret this verse in a doxological sense. The ecclesiological theme of worship is a key feature of Smit’s theology. He maintains the public and political significance of prayer and liturgy, drawing on the insights of diverse authors like John de Gruchy, Douglas Hall, Dietrich Ritschl, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Geoffrey Wainwright. Cf. Smit 2007:425-53. Cf. also his short statement, “Justice, compassion and worship – these three together. The one cannot do without the other” (2009a:378).

create and co-create with us a blessed future in which culture, technology and economy work together to make Africa a continent of humanity.

We need to dream a new dream and build a “transformative vision” for this continent in the good faith that God makes possible the impossible.³³ The dissonance and distance between Cain – guilty before God – and his subsequent history demonstrate how far God’s restoration can reach. Tradition has painted Cain mostly in a negative way, as representing the power of sin from the very beginnings of humankind.³⁴ This view is only partially correct, and not in line with the witness or structure³⁵ of the Genesis narrative:

Cain, the condemned, receives protection from God. Cain, the lone fugitive, receives land to live on. Cain, the murderer of his brother, receives his own children and is rich in descendants. Cain, the simple farmer whose sacrifice was rejected, turns into an architect and the builder of a city (4:17). Cain, remembered in tradition mainly for his fratricide, brings forth generations of achievers in the field of agriculture (Gen. 4:20), music (4:21) and technology (4:22).³⁶

In many political and economic circles, Africa is the continent of negativity; the land that fell off the global radar screen. Even among Africans themselves there are some who share in a general Afro-pessimism and who will do all in their power to leave this continent, as they have lost the expectation of a new and different future. That is quite understandable if the concept of “future” is nothing more than the prolongation of existing potential. This type of orientation towards the future will always sway between optimism and pessimism, depending on perceptions about the current situation.

However, what we call hope in the Judeo-Christian tradition is different. It does not look at the potential or constraints of the current situation and then make up a balanced scorecard of how the future might look. No, Christian faith is rooted in God’s promises and God’s ability to make all things new far beyond our calculations, efforts and highest expectations.

Only God can turn a Cain into a blessing to himself, to others, and to the world in which he lives.

Why not Africa as well? God bless Africa ... and her leaders.

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33 Dirkie Smit refers to Niebuhr’s idea of a transformative vision as having both an affirming and critical function: affirming the important potential of politics, culture and economics, and “at the same time criticizing the sinful aspects of a particular situation” (Smit 2007:414, note 9).

34 Even the intra-canonical reception of the Cain narrative demonstrates this negative interpretation: Hebrews 11:4 mentions that Abel brought a better sacrifice than Cain; Matthew 23:35 speaks of Abel in the context of the shedding of innocent blood; 1 John 3:12 calls to brotherly love in contrast to Cain, who killed his brother because he was filled with the Evil One; and Jude 1:11 is a call not to follow the ways of Cain.

35 There is fair consensus amongst exegetes that Genesis 2:4b-11:26 is structured around the sequential themes of God as Creator, the problem of sin, God’s judgement and God’s sustaining grace. For a discussion, cf. William Lasor (et al.) 1994:75-87; and for a more technical analysis, read the standard reference work on Genesis, Westermann 1974:24-88.

36 Westermann interprets the enumeration of different occupations here and elsewhere in Genesis 1-11 as references to “die Kulturrigenschaften der Menschheit”, each implying a new “Fähigkeit” (1974:15).

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KEY WORDS

Dirk Smit
Public theology
Humanization
Africa
Ubuntu

TREFWOORDE

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