

Theology on the edge – Some reflections

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Needless to say I was delighted and deeply honoured when the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University decided to hold a conference in celebration of my 75th birthday in 2014. I am grateful to all those who made it possible, to all who presented papers, and to all who participated, and I am now delighted that most of the papers presented, together with some given at the Volmoed Colloquium which preceded the Stellenbosch Conference, have been brought together and published in this volume. Those at the Colloquium were all related to doing theology in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as were the opening two lectures at the Conference. The rest of the lectures related to other major themes that have emerged in the course of my theological journey, though they appeared on the programme roughly in reverse order. We began with Bonhoeffer because of his influence on my theology from virtually the beginning, but ended with the church struggle in South Africa to signal that though this, too, was dominant from very early, it is a task and a struggle that continues. Other themes, namely theology and the aesthetics, Christianity and art, Christian humanism and theological engagement with science, made up the substance in the middle.

The question may justly be raised as to whether my choice of themes over the years was simply a matter of changing taste on my part, or responding to the theological developments elsewhere or, worse, a bad case of dilettantism. My response to such criticism would be threefold. The first is that throughout my theological development and work there has been what Bonhoeffer, following Bach, referred to as a strong Christological *cantus firmus* influenced chiefly by Bonhoeffer himself. This has held my theological polyphony together and given it coherence. The second is that the themes were all, and remain, situated in the South African context even though I have increasingly addressed these in global perspectives. The third is, as a matter of fact, the themes suggested themselves as I reflected theologically on Christian faith, and usually arose both out of previous work or were prompted by others with whom I was in discussion. So there was continuity as well as new directions.

The title of the Conference was “Theology on the Edge.” In some ways it is a presumptuous title as it brings to mind the phrase “cutting edge research,” that is, research that is well in advance of the more mundane work done by some others. But that was not the intention behind the choice of the theme. We had in mind, rather, the kind of theology we wanted to celebrate and at the same time encourage the new

generation of South African theologians to engage in. The title was prompted by a *Festschrift* in honour and memory of my son, Steve's life and legacy, *Living on the Edge*. Steve was, I think and many would agree, one of a new breed of South African theologians who was showing the way forward, in some way building on what I had managed to do, but taking it further. It was always my hope to fade into the background as he led the way. Sadly, his contribution was cut short.

Doing theology on the edge means theological engaging reality in all its dimensions, whether politics or aesthetics, science or spirituality, in ways that are transformative. This is not to deny that theology exists in the service of the life and mission of the church, but to affirm that it does so precisely because the church is called to live on the edge in its engagement with the world, not in a closet busy with its own affairs. As such, theology is not a safe or comfortable enterprise designed to give us a ticket to ordination, but a way of participation in the life of the world from the perspective of faith. As such, in doing theology we find that we are taken personally to the boundaries of our existence. And we soon discover that it is impossible possibility, something we engage in knowing full well that it will always remain beyond us because of the subject who addresses us.

Theology has to do, then, with matters of life and death; it is cosmic in its scope and yet touches us at the centre of our personal lives and relationships. It does so because theology, as I have learnt over the years, is all about being led into mystery -- the mystery of the "living God" who meets, confronts and embraces us in the midst of life, especially when we are come face to face with personal suffering and seek to be in solidarity with others who suffer through injustice. When the Bible speaks of the "living God" it is not simply saying that "our God," unlike the idols of others is alive, but rather that God is not a cultural entity we control and in whose name we justify ourselves. The "living God" of the Bible confronts us in surprising ways that always disturb the status quo and us. It is, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" Only then do we begin to understand that it is precisely these hands that embrace us in grace and love on the boundaries of our own existence.

It has taken me a lifetime to discover that theology is an attempt to understand this mystery within and beyond ourselves, that it is an impossible possibility. I certainly had little understanding that this was the real task ahead of me when I became a student of theology. But even so I cannot remember a time since those first steps into theology when I did not feel passionate about doing so, and a certain delight and joy in doing theology. And the more I did the more I discovered that that studying theology was not just a necessary step towards ordination, an academic exercise for the spiritual dilettante, but a life-long odyssey or quest, a way of being human in

the world. In fact anyone who thinks or acts, prays or worships, as if there is some ultimate mystery is a theologian, however rudimentary or sophisticated. But not everyone who does such things or believes in God discovers that doing theology can become a lifelong adventure, a personal odyssey driven by a passion that can become all consuming.¹ That is why I cannot understand those who felt called to the ministry who are not passionate about doing theology. It does not add up.

So passionate did I become about doing theology that I also became passionate about the need to share my passion with others, whether with students in my class or a worshipping congregation, or with people outside the church in academic or public life. I became passionate about the need to help develop theology specifically within South Africa whether within the church, the academy or public life. This is why I was so encouraged and excited by the participation of so many equally passionate theologians at the Colloquium and the Conference, by the way in which doing theology is flourishing at this time in South Africa in so many places despite obstacles, and by the work of graduate students and a growing number of younger colleagues. We cannot take all this for granted. We have to keep working at it. But at least there seems to be a fresh enthusiasm for doing so and even an excitement in doing so.

But I have one regret in all this. In the heyday of doing theology in the struggle against apartheid, the way forward, especially after the rise of Black Theology and the Soweto Uprising, was often led by black theologians. How dynamic that was, and what a challenge for me as a “white theologian.” Some of the most significant moments in my theological reflection came as a result of listening to the voices of Manas Buthelezi and many others of that and the next generation, including Tinyiko Maluleke and Allan Boesak who gave the final paper at the Stellenbosch Conference. So what is my regret? My regret is that so many of the black theologians of the past are no longer with us, or else have not been theologically as active as they were, and that there are some but too few who are standing on their shoulders.

If the Conference and this volume of papers contributes to the on-going rebirth of theology in South Africa, then all I had hoped for will be taken forward. For my passion now as I pass my sell-by-date is that the next generation of South African theologians will be equally passionate about doing theology on the edge as some of us have tried to be in the past. Doing theology may be an “impossible possibility,” but it is a possibility, a demanding yet joyous one.

1 From my book *A Theological Odyssey*, (Stellenbosch: SUN, 2014)

