

## 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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