

Religion - Culture – Society:
How much lasting impact does Reformation (still) have? -
A South African perspective

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Introduction

In Rowan Williams’s book “Why study the past?”², he emphasized that historical research into the church strives “to trace the ways in which the church has demonstrated its divine origin ... or at least to avoid formulae and practices that obscure the claim to divine origin”.³ With specific reference to the meaning of the Reformation, he states that “history reinstates the confrontation between the true church and pseudo-Church – the whole public apparatus of Christendom has become unrecognizable a true church”.⁴

In his ecumenical letter to Churches on 21st December 2012, focusing on the plight of displaced persons who experienced the loss of home, security and citizenship – he emphasized that

“Spiritually, we must prepare ourselves for the journey, stripping away the trivial and comfortable habits that all of us develop in our practice of faith, and renewing our commitment to follow the Word Incarnate. And then we must work this out in action – in our own willingness to be alongside the displaced, to work devotedly with all who defend the rights and dignities of those without land or livelihood, and to speak for them and serve them in whatever way we can. Our churches should not be places where we retreat into the relief and safety of being with people who are just like ourselves. They should be places where we meet the ‘divine exile’ who invites us to follow him in bringing hope to the displaced and disinherited – where we learn something of his own liberty to be at the service of all in need and pain.”⁵

From the history of the Reformation we can learn that the history of the church always reflects some of its context – of both political and church conflicts: “the interweaving of political and theological crises” was part of the period of Reformation – which was also in a sense the start of “secularization”.⁶ Ultimately it focused on the question: what is the distinctiveness of the church? “The Church moves towards the interstices that it begins again to see its task as to imagine an alternative culture or community”.⁷ The church must be judged by its freedom to witness to the freedom of God – this is what makes the church “different”.⁸

But the history of the Reformation is also the start of the ecumenical movement – with different denominations developing across the world: “one of the most remarkable facts of recent Christian history is the willingness for an ecumenism in thinking about martyrdom. More and more we celebrate each other’s witnesses and do not ask too closely about their denominational allegiance”.⁹

The ecumenical witness of the church had a profound influence on the theological and political fight against apartheid in South Africa.

In fact there is a two-fold German–South African link in this regard: both the origins of the apartheid theology and the ecumenical campaign against the heresy of apartheid had been influenced by German developments in the 1930s. The apartheid policy of separation was introduced by the mission policy of the Dutch Reformed Church – and later it was implemented as state policy (after political lobbies by church representatives). It was influenced by theologians who studied in the 1930s in Germany – where the romantic

¹ Dr Thabo Makgoba, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town – a South African perspective on the meaning of the Reformation, Tutzing Conference, September 2016

² “Why study the past?” The Quest for the historical Church - Rowan Williams, 2005 Eerdmans, Michigan

³ Ibid p. 2

⁴ Ibid p. 18

⁵ <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles>: Archbishop's Ecumenical Letter to Churches, 21 December 2012

⁶ Rowan Williams, 2005, p. 62

⁷ Ibid p. 63

⁸ Ibid p. 69

⁹ Ibid p. 55

philosophy of a “God-given identity” of a *Volk* was one step away from creating the ideology of separation, apartheid.¹⁰

But likewise, the opposition to apartheid ideology was influenced by the German church struggle – where the Confessing Network accepted the Barmen Declaration in 1936: it resisted the anti-Semitic legislation of the Third Reich – whilst affirming the sovereignty of God in Christ over all other claims to authority!¹¹

The South African church struggle against apartheid was directly influenced by the German church struggle. It is through the leadership of people like Dr Allan Boesak of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (through local networks like the “Confessing Circle”) and Dr Beyers Naude that the ecumenical movement played an important role in rejecting apartheid as a heresy. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared that the situation in South Africa constituted a *status confessionis* – which means that the WARC regard this as an issue on which it is impossible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed Churches.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church realized that in a situation like this you have to confess anew to the truths of the Bible in the light of the pseudo-gospel and decided in 1982 to draw up a Confession in order to do that. It was a confession in concept form, which was distributed to the whole church for comment and was to be finalized at the next Synod in 1986 in Belhar, that eventually became known as the Belhar Confession. In its structure and content there is a remarkable resemblance with the Barmen Confession: in both cases the Confessing movement asserted God’s authority over the dominant political ideology.

In a similar way the Kairos Document (a theological interpretation on the state of emergency issued in 1985 by a group of mainly black South African theologians) rejected a theological legitimization of the status quo (apartheid).

Transition to democracy – what went wrong?

After the transition to democracy in 1994 the National Religious Association for Social Development developed a shared vision for a new South Africa (2003) – as a shared agenda between different faith communities.

As a religious community in South Africa “we strive to build a just and equitable society, a society that cares for all its citizens, especially for those that are weak and marginalized; a democratic society that respects our constitution, the rule of law, that guards against the misuse of power, that fosters our diversity and plurality, and that fosters the role of civil society. Such a society can only be built on the shared moral values within our diverse traditions, in order to build a wholesome society”.¹² This formed the basis for a collaborative approach between faith communities and government under President Mbeki to fight poverty.

Yet the elation of having a constitutional democracy gave way to serious discontent about the prevailing political culture in South Africa. Delivering the annual Mandela lecture in 2004, Bishop Desmond Tutu emphasized: “We were involved in the struggle because we believed we would evolve a new kind of society. A caring, a compassionate society. At the moment many, too many, of our people live in gruelling demeaning, dehumanising poverty. We are sitting on a powder keg. We really must work like mad to eradicate poverty”.¹³

The political analyst Croucamp emphasised: “The political, moral and economic crisis in society is evident from the fact that the tentacles of tender-entrepreneurship (abuse of procurement procedures) manifests in a tight network of opportunistic relationships (between party officials, business entrepreneurs, members of Parliament/Executive) that is maintained through corruption and access to state funding – and legitimised through the quest for economic empowerment” – both on national and provincial levels.”¹⁴

On 23 October 2014, twenty years after our transition to democracy, the National Church Leaders’ Consultation (NCLC – a gathering of 35 senior church leaders from different denominations) gathered in Johannesburg to reflect on being the Church in South Africa in the new era, and the national challenges South Africans face. In a joint statement they emphasized:

¹⁰ R A Koegelenberg, Doctoral Dissertation, Ruprecht-Karls University, Heidelberg, Germany 1991

¹¹ Rowan Williams, 2005, p. 55

¹² Unpublished statement by NRASD.

¹³ Desmond Tutu, 2004, p. 56.

¹⁴ See P Croucamp, “Separate Zuma from ANC flock”, in *Die Burger*, 2 September 2014, 12.

“As church leaders we confess to the brokenness and pain of our society – we have a crisis of hope and an urgency to respond. We have seen and heard the plight of the poor. We confess that we were not conduits of creating a just and peaceful society. We should speak boldly about the challenges and issues confronting us.

We are grateful that South Africa is now a constitutional democracy that has changed our country fundamentally. We are also grateful for many positive changes and programmes that have given more citizens access to basic services, improvement of opportunities and restoring our international standing”.¹⁵

At the same time serious challenges facing South Africa have been highlighted: a large proportion of our citizens are still living in poverty and are unemployed; the challenges of crime, corruption and fraud; the violence against women and children.

The NCLC meeting criticized the political culture after 20 years of democracy: it cautioned against romanticizing democracy against the very real backdrop of the vast majority of black South Africans still experiencing the pain, suffering and exclusion of being trapped in poverty and inequality. The much vaunted rainbow-nation now has shades of grey – reflecting the social evils we are producing.

It also warned of the danger of the deliberate weakening of our constitutional principles and values – even if parliamentary procedures are followed – to avoid accountability, transparency and leadership that serves the people rather than political and other elites in society. The meeting urged South Africans to give life and meaning, through active citizenship, to the Constitution as the embodiment of our democracy. In this regard, the meeting strongly emphasized the need to defend the Public Protector and her office against the political onslaught they are experiencing in the wake of, amongst other things, the “Nkandla scandal” (where millions of rands were spent on the private home of the president).

The same sentiments were echoed in the recent statement of the South African Council of Churches under the title “The South Africa we pray for” – launched at a special Reconciliation Day service on 16 December 2015. It tackles the issues of healing and reconciliation, poverty and inequality, economic transformation, family fabric, and anchoring democracy.¹⁶

What is our role today?

Reflecting on “What does it mean that we have a constitutional state?” Judge Edwin Cameron concluded:

... the Constitution is not self-executing. It needs us to give it life – us, the citizens and inhabitants of South Africa, young and old, male and female, rural and urban, township and suburb dwellers. The Constitution creates the practical structures that enable the rest of us – you and me, together with principled, honest leadership, a committed government, an active citizenry and vigorous civil society institutions – to perfect our future.¹⁷

In his book *The Role of Civil Society in a Failing State* Alex Boraine¹⁸ refers to the prominent role of NGOs in challenging the government of the day on fundamental policies: the role of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) to force President Mbeki’s government to start a treatment programme for HIV and AIDS; the Right2Know (R2K) coalition to oppose new legislation to control free access to information (the so-called Protection of State Information Bill); Corruption Watch and the Social Justice Coalition.¹⁹ He concludes: “Civil society was important under the apartheid state; it is equally important under a failing state”.²⁰

The church is part of broader civil society, and often collaborates with civil society or NGO/CBO initiatives – it is often the church that enables civil society to function by providing the enabling space (physical and intellectual), the prophetic vision that enables civil society initiatives and networks to do their work. We have seen this in South Africa and in Germany (e.g. the Leipzig democracy demonstrations in the former East Germany).

¹⁵ NCLC Statement, 23 October 2014

¹⁶ Statement released by South African Council of Churches, 16 December 2015.

¹⁷ E Cameron, 2014, 276.

¹⁸ A Boraine, 2014, 109.

¹⁹ Ibid. 112-113.

²⁰ Ibid. 114.

We must address the question of how much we can still be “critical friends” with those who were our struggle partners, but who now hold political offices, whom we must critique without fear or favour, being unafraid to speak truth to power. We also have to consider what it means to be “salt and light” in our new democracy: how to teach our people to be good citizens in promoting a Constitution that provides an excellent framework for promoting the common good, the flourishing of individuals within flourishing communities, which is so much at the heart of kingdom-building. Yet this also brings with it new challenges of pluralism and of promoting secularism that provides for an equal voice within the public arena for those of all faiths.²¹

Within the current political crisis in South Africa, where there is an open conflict within the government between different factions of the ruling ANC, the Church finds itself in a challenging position.

In February this year, one day before the budget speech of Finance Minister, Mr Pravin Gordhan, I received an urgent request that he would like to meet me in Bishopscourt. He indicated that, as a member of the Communist Party, he is not a believer... but he trusts the church. During the struggle against apartheid he was protected and hidden from police by an Anglican parish.

His request was unusual: he openly requested that the Church should again protect him – from factions within the ruling party and Cabinet and national government that wants to get rid of him – because of his fight against corruption in government and senior levels of state administration!

This has become known as “state capture” – where powerful businesses not only use their political connections to the highest political and government offices to secure preferred deals or contracts with state-owned enterprises – that directly and indirectly benefit the politicians (or family members) and senior state officials. This kind of “tenderpreneurship” (preferred access to state tenders) is exploiting South Africa’s resources to benefit a new politically connected elite – at the cost of developmental and social programmes.

In my Easter message of 2014 I emphasised that it is vital that our political leaders start to focus on value-based decisions as they lead South Africa into the future. The “question of leadership stands out as a key determinant of our future ... Governance is navigated by our decisions and our decisions are navigated by our values ... Governance has to do with how we exercise power, not lord it over others. Governance is how we lead, not how we order ... acting to provide humanity with a contextual framework in how we build relationships of trust with others.”²²

One of the most important fruits of the Reformation – and achievement of the ecumenical movement according to John de Gruchy – “is the awakening of this sense of complementarity amongst all the churches involved, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant.”²³

I have always believed that I am better Anglican, because of my ecumenical and interfaith involvement in South Africa. As part of our ecumenical witness (through various forums), we see our role as follows:

Shaping the future together

We have launched a programme “Shaping the future together” (which is linked to the theme of the formal partnership between the EFSA Institute and the Tutzing Academy) that refers in the first instance to the process of dialogue and consultations within South Africa – amongst the different sectors (government, business, trade unions, civil society, inter-faith networks) – on what kind of society South Africans want to build after many years of colonialism, apartheid and internal conflicts. The South African Constitution provides the legal framework, the values, the rights and the responsibilities to realize a new South Africa. A formal democracy depends on active citizens that give life to such a constitution through their actions – demanding accountability and transparency in all spheres of public life, and seeking the common good of all citizens.

Secondly, it refers to the regional and international dialogue between ecumenical partners, inter-faith partners, United Nations’ programmes – what are our global and regional challenges and responsibilities? How do we cooperate with one another on an international level to ensure the implementation of the

²¹ See my contribution on “The quest for the identity of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa”, in: *The Quest for Identity in so-called Mainline Churches in South Africa* (Eds. M. Conradie and Johan Klaassen), EFSA/Sunpress 2014), p. 48

²² T. Makgoba, 2014, *The Sunday Independent*, 20 April 2014, p. 19.

²³ John de Gruchy, in: M. Conradie and Johan Klaassen eds. 2014 p.28

Sustainable Development Goals? This is the responsibility of all countries. How do we structure partnerships between the North and the South, between the G7 and emerging markets (BRICS), developing countries – to ensure greater impact in joint programmes?

We have a shared responsibility – across the regions of the world, across political divisions, across cultural and religious diversity, across economic and social differences – to ensure a future for the coming generations. The challenges we face on a global, regional and local level are similar and related: poverty and inequality; rapid technological changes; protection of the environment and natural resources; interfaith and inter-cultural cooperation; strengthening democracy and social justice, addressing the causes of migration and refugees. Through dialogue and conversations with leading religious, political, business and civil society leaders, we strive to foster better understanding of the complexity of the challenges we face to strengthen mutual cooperation and trust and to facilitate common action through partnerships.

In this sense our work is guided, firstly, by a theological understanding of *the meaning of God's*

incarnation:

- Being present within the world with all its challenges and complexities. Therefore, being present implies that the church focuses attention on burning issues – through special “walks” (visits) to highlight social challenges (lack of toilets in poor areas; lack of school buildings; crisis of student/university funding);
- Prophetic witness: addressing corruption, lack of accountability, lack of transparency in different spheres of society, protecting the constitution and its core values – focusing on human rights and social cohesion.

Secondly, through *special dialogues* on the role of religion in development and democracy:

- Courageous conversations with all sectors involved in shaping South African society; interdisciplinary conferences on economic, social and environmental challenges;
- Creating space for grappling with tough challenges: debates on measures to control the freedom of expression and media;
- Cooperating with NGOs to ensure a vibrant civil society that can focus on problem areas and service delivery;
- Through joint actions “giving life to the South African constitution” – through responsible citizenship that seeks the common good.

Thirdly, we strive *to focus, facilitate and enable joint action* through multiple partnerships:

- to address specific national challenges: the crisis in education and youth unemployment;
- to strengthen community-based health programmes (HIV and AIDS, TB, etc.) – in the Southern African region;
- to strengthen theological education and training within Africa;
- to strengthen the leadership role of pastors – as facilitators for inclusive community-based development;
- to address the scourge of gender-based violence; to focus on children's rights and development; and
- to protect our environment through lobbies and responsible living.

In this regard I want to make special reference to the “*South African Day of courageous conversations*”

South African Day of courageous conversations

The future of the mining sector and the communities surrounding them was the focus of the first South African Day of Courageous Conversations that I called on 9 October 2015 – only days after world leaders adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change by 2030.” The notion of “sustainability”, of building partnerships to end poverty are of particular importance to South Africa – against the background of the fight against corruption and weak political leadership – that threatens to derail South Africa's democratic development to create a

better life for all its citizens. Since this first meeting, further consultations by a small task team met with mining representatives and local faith and church leaders at three mining sites – that were identified as pilot-sites to form concrete partnerships of collaboration. Although this process has not been completed yet, challenges and opportunities have been identified.

The challenges facing mines, investors, local communities and faith networks are not different from those facing the rest of society. However, in terms of their location, the effects of these challenges *are intensified* in view of the relative economic strength of the mining sector and the extraordinary expectations of local communities – that mines can and should respond to all the problems and challenges (especially where local or regional government structures are failing):

- The history of mining is complex and controversial– as part of South African colonial and apartheid history: mine ownership and unfair migrant labour laws and regulation of black mine workers from rural areas have created a legacy that is challenged by many in the current democratic transition, within a complicated and unstable global economic system. How do you re-address previous discriminatory practices to benefit the local communities around mines – whilst ensuring the sustainability of the mines, the communities and the environment?
- The challenges linked to societies in transformation – with relatively weak local government structures that do not deliver essential services in some cases; intense competition between new political and labour movements to take control at local level; traditional leadership challenges (linked to succession conflicts);
- How do you balance the expectations of black ownership and economic empowerment of upcoming mine companies – versus the needs of local communities surrounding the mines?

Courageous conversations imply that all sectors have to work together towards the solution of poverty and inequality – it is a complex challenge. Why are we concerned about poverty and inequality? It prevents real human community! All other factors like race, culture, language are less important than the issue of inequality – which sabotages human community. Poverty equals existential uncertainty – not knowing where your next meal is going to come from. People feel “useless” – contributes nothing to society.

We need two simultaneous approaches to address problem: “top down” approach from government and business (policies, infrastructure, and programmes) versus “bottom up”, through caring networks of NGOs and churches – start from where the needs are in local communities. We need more of the latter, but both are necessary.... use buildings of the churches for schools and clinics – where local government is failing.²⁴ Inequality is bad for economic growth (Pikety/Bofinger), and it increases political and social conflicts that are difficult to manage.

From a Christian perspective there is a fundamental conflict around inequality and human dignity: all humans created in God’s image are equal. Severe inequality negates God-given value of all humans and their chances to have “a life in abundance” – a quality life.

Our Christian vision for society is based on the quest for justice and compassion; we have a “preferential option for the poor” (social justice); through advocacy and prophetic witness we challenge injustices and unjust systems (causing deprivation and inequality); we build concrete partnerships and develop community development programmes to address the negative effects of the dominant (competition-based) economic system – that excludes many people from participating meaningfully in economic, income-generating activities.

Churches have rich and poor members (highly trained experts and unemployed, unschooled members): they are called to build bridges of cooperation that benefit the common good. We are only custodians/trustees of the assets we have received (through talents given by God, including the capacity for some to work harder and smarter, to accumulate “wealth”). The Church has a special focus on the vulnerable: e.g. support through education/nutrition and development of children.

One of our biggest challenges is still that the majority of black South Africans still remain trapped in poverty after the transition to democracy – and have lost hope. Hopelessness and lack of education and employment

²⁴ Prof Francis Wilson – DRC Theology and Economy dialogue, Sandton, 15 August 2016.

opportunities destroy human dignity. We need to build partnerships and trust: church networks are very strong in leveraging cooperation with limited funds...with huge impact!

Thabo Makgoba.