PATHWAYS IN THEOLOGY:

ECUMENICAL, AFRICAN AND REFORMED

PIET NAUDÉ

Editor
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DEDICATION

For Jana, Jacques and Kari.
A small token for your huge sacrifices.
Thank you for your friendship and spiritual inspiration.
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Piet Naudé’s theological work may *inter alia* be characterised as both ecumenical and as public. As theologian he has always been interested in the *diverse* contexts in which the church exists *today*, i.e. in the body of Christ in its *differentiated* configurations.

When writing about how Edmund Schlink’s life and work shaped his and others’ thinking in South Africa, Naudé makes a striking remark about being an *ecumenical* and also a *public* theologian: “An ecumenical theologian is rooted in a specific tradition, but she is able to relativise, critique and appreciate that tradition from the perspective of Christ, the apostolic faith, and the rich plurality of Christian beliefs and practices in other traditions. An ecumenical theologian actively addresses those theological questions pertaining to the visible unity of Christ’s body and practical demands of the gospel in her specific context, but also on a catholic scale. Such a theologian is actively engaged in ecumenical bodies and practices, building networks of trust and love conducive to greater theological consensus” (p. 123).

This is indeed an accurate description of Piet Naudé himself. As an *ecumenical* theologian he is rooted firmly in the Reformed tradition, often acknowledging his Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) affiliation where he served as an ordained minister.

This rootedness has through the years become evident through his interest in the God revealed in the biblical traditions – a theme he has often written on. For Naudé, the heart of this tradition is the centrality of the Word of God – the biblical traditions being the reference point and criterion against which all (what he likes to call) non-theological factors must be measured. For him this is also the ecumenical contribution of Reformed theology – resisting the temptation to disempower the Word by these differentiated factors. For Naudé, if the biblical traditions were to lose this role, the Reformed and also the Christian identity of the church would be at stake (p. 76).

His appreciation of this particular tradition has therefore persistently been accompanied by his ability to relativise and critique his own convictions from the perspective of the God of the biblical traditions.

For Naudé, writing in the South Africa of the 1980s and 1990s, it has been important to relativise and critique the tradition he is part of from the perspective of the rich plurality of Christian beliefs and practices in other traditions. This is especially clear in his intent listening to and learning from the so-called “illiterate” – for him, those whose oral voices have been marginalised by the power of a dominant, literate theological culture (p. 27, 137).

As ecumenical theologian he has also consistently questioned his own theology from the perspective of what he considers to be “the apostolic faith”.

He has therefore been unequivocally interested in the creeds and confessions of the church of all ages, and has written extensively on the value of confession, as part of the heritage of witnesses to the apostolic faith, for theology and church today.
He demonstrated a keen interest in what the church in South Africa considered to be a *status confessionis*. And he brings the Belhar confession that emanated from this conviction into the broader picture of the church of all ages, testing it against “the apostolic faith”.

For him, however, writing from a South African perspective, the apostolicity of faith needs also to be carried forth by the enactment of confession, which he would most probably like to describe as the enactment of unity, reconciliation and justice (p. 62).

As a *public* theologian – for him, intrinsically part of being Reformed – Naudé has over the years actively addressed theological questions pertaining to the visible unity of Christ’s body. This could be seen as one of Naudé’s main concerns over the years – actively addressing what he believes to be the practical demands of the gospel in the South African context, especially the contexts of the DRC and the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA).

But this has also been his concern on a catholic scale. For Naudé there is absolutely no theological reason why visible church communion amongst the traditional faith communities cannot be realised – among other reasons – because the unity of the church is often being hindered by the non-theological factors mentioned above.

It is therefore apt that the 26 essays selected for this volume are divided into three sections. As already noted by Dirkie Smit in his foreword to the monograph, *Neither Calendar Nor Clock*, Naudé, with his engaging and often challenging, even confrontational rhetoric, is always raising broader questions for theology and the contemporary church.

In the first section on *Ecumenical Theology*, the axle around which Naudé’s theological thinking turns – doxology – is explored as constitutive of ecumenical dialogue. Already in these essays the significant value he places on so-called marginalised voices is emphasised.

Naudé asks how the concept of ecumenism might be interpreted today: What constitutes ecumenical theology? How could theology be done in ways constitutive of the body of Christ? What factors might be contributing to the schisms of the church?

The difficult question of identity and ecumenicity is raised, showing how the peculiarity of a specific tradition can enrich a movement towards the unity of the church, and how a disengagement and estrangement from an ecumenical way of thinking can lead to the proliferation of ideologies.

In the second section Naudé engages self-critically with *African, Feminist and Liberation Theology*.

Naudé here tries to make sense of the way in which doing theology in Africa, or rather by African theologians, might be conceived. He asks how the tradition he is part of can indeed learn to listen to these particular theological voices, clearly acknowledging the challenges posed by theologies that are not particularly interested in writing down their ways of thinking and doing. Here he often endeavours to create the necessary language for these theologies – in an attempt to help make these often neglected voices heard.

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In this section Naudé’s appreciation of feminist theology, and its remarkable sensitivity with regard to the reality-forming language employed to speak about God, becomes particularly clear. Here, again, he self-critically asks how his own tradition needs to be informed by these marginalised voices. Interested in their theological hermeneutic – in terms of methodology even calling himself a feminist theologian – he follows the road of what is known as reformist feminist theology. These theologians seek to critically, creatively and liberatively reinterpret the biblical traditions in order to include the womanist experience of reality (p. 172).

In conversation with Liberation Theology – an interest he has had since his early theological efforts – Naudé’s appreciation of the public way in which theology is done, the doing of theology, is aptly underlined. Although the reasons for his particular appraisal of this theology’s emphasis on liberation are outlined, it becomes comprehensible why he is critical of the methodological endeavour. Here the weight Naudé gives to the primacy of the Word of God is especially clear.

In the contributions selected for the final section on Reformed Theology, Naudé critically asks about the future of Reformed theology in South Africa.

Listening to a variety of different Reformed voices – those of Calvin, Barth, Moltmann and, closer to home, Jonker – he responds to the question that runs like a golden thread through this collection of essays: the visible unity of the church.

He does, however, help us think about much more.

Interested in methodology and hermeneutics he asks how a critical, interdisciplinary and creative Reformed theology could be ensured; how the public role of theology can be re-established in South Africa; and interestingly, what role the church might have in South African public theologies after the establishment of a modern constitutional state.

With the complex history and context of the DRC in mind, he also asks how his own tradition can remain Reformed, but in a non-authoritarian, pluralistic sense; how this tradition can re-join the ecumenical church and take its cue for a theological agenda from others, whilst making an own creative contribution.

He daringly asks the very important question: How can the tradition he is part of become a distinctly African Reformed church?

It is my hope that the important role Piet Naudé has played, and continues to play as ecumenical and as public theologian – as theologian interested in different pathways in theology – will inspire readers to actively engage in ecumenical bodies and practices, building networks of trust and love conducive to greater theological consensus – working towards the visible unity of the church.

Henco van der Westhuizen
Stellenbosch
January 2015
The essays collected in this monograph represent an important part of my theological journey since the late 1980s. They hopefully serve as an example of reflections on the ground-breaking events in South Africa leading up to 1994 and beyond, including a theological understanding of our current situation in a constitutional democracy.

The essays were selected by the editor around three “pathways” in theology as expressed in the title: ecumenical, African/liberation, and Reformed.

My own spiritual roots lie in Pietism. For this I remain thankful to God. This childhood orientation was transformed via studies in philosophy and theology toward perspectives that one would find in the “Reformed” part of the Christian tradition.

The ecumenical orientation of this Reformed theology was in my case shaped by at least three sources: The critical and open approach to biblical sciences at the Stellenbosch theological faculty; the ecumenical spirit in which dogmatics was taught; and – for technical content – my sabbatical periods at Heidelberg University in Germany, where I encountered the work of Edmund Schlink and Dietrich Ritschl. Whilst there, I could read the vast collection of World Council of Churches documents in the library of the Ecumenical Institute (and had many enlightening coffee-break discussions with Dirk Smit in a café across the square).

Because ecumenical theology provides the wider framework in which other work finds its place, the first part of this volume contains a few essays on topics such as reception; the link between doxology, liturgy and dogmatics; the potential role of religious experience to bridge divides among people; how non-theological factors often dominate relations amongst Christian churches; and a short exposition of core ideas from Schlink’s oeuvre interpreted for the South African situation.

Throughout these essays there is an attempt to apply the global insights regarding greater ecclesial unity to South Africa – in particular to the family of (Dutch) Reformed churches. In the last years of apartheid, and beyond, our context required us to serve societal cohesion via the way we reflect theologically.

It was my living and teaching for five years in the traditional rural Venda area (today part of the Northern Province) that radically challenged my education in Western, rationalist thinking, based on an assumed reading and writing culture. In Venda I found church communities functioning quite well without anyone being able to read. Here I encountered living theologies based on oral transmission akin to the early Jewish and Christian faith communities.

The first three essays of Part Two reflect some of my arguments for an “oral theology” in South Africa based on insights gained from actual field work in a Zion Christian Church congregation framed by a sizeable body of work in oral history, poetry and culture. The idea of “local theologies”, especially influenced by Robert Schreiter, assisted me to see all theologies – even the assumed “universal” ones I was taught – as reflecting on faith in a specific context.
The first cluster of “liberation” theologies derives from reading feminist writers both from a biblical exegesis and a systematic theological perspective. I found myself steeped in a patriarchal tradition where the very language in many cases oppressed and failed to express feminist or womanist experiences of God and our Christian tradition. The two middle essays in Part Two deal with the re-reading of biblical metaphors (“pregnancy” and “birth”) and creeds (Nicea and Belhar) from a reformist-feminist viewpoint.

It was an interest in the relation between (theological) theory and (ethical) praxis that led me to read the works of Latin American liberation theologians in tandem with the political theologies of Johann Metz and Jürgen Moltmann. The last three essays in the second part of the volume are devoted to insights gained from a link between liberation theologies and biblical sciences. For a great part these insights were drawn from my doctoral thesis completed at the Stellenbosch Theological Faculty under Professor Willie Jonker.

African type “oral theologies” challenged my very understanding of theology and transmission of the gospel itself. And liberation theologies – in various forms – assisted me to develop a mind-set that was critical of ideologies that are so easily accepted as “normal”.

The volume is concluded in Part Three with a number of essays in Reformed theology. My role in university leadership since my early career is reflected in the first essay on scholarship in a challenging higher education context. It is furthermore no surprise to find two reflections on confessions – typical of the Reformed tradition – and the names of Calvin, Barth and Moltmann, who fundamentally shaped this tradition. The “letter from Calvin” is the (hitherto unpublished) text of a sermon held at Stellenbosch during the 500th anniversary celebrations of Calvin’s birth and it therefore differs in genre from the more academically oriented essays in the rest of the volume.

Closer to home, there is one essay in philosophical theology (on problem solving) inspired by the work of Wentzel van Huyssteen, in whose chair I was appointed at the former University of Port Elizabeth. There is one essay attempting to take forward core ideas presented by my dogmatics teacher, Willie Jonker, supplementing my earlier work in Afrikaans on his relationship with Calvin and his pastoral approach to systematic theology. And there is a critical reflection on the role of my denomination, the Dutch Reformed Church, in the transition period after 1994, as well as a constructive essay on a theological framework required for the DRC’s future.

The editor has excluded essays with a distinctly ethical orientation as there is the possibility of a second volume in which some of these could be collected. The essays in this volume were – except for translations from Afrikaans to English and minor editorial improvements – for the most part left unchanged. It is therefore left to today’s readers to interpret and re-assess these dated essay in the context in which they were originally written – perhaps seeking better pathways for theology in the future?

I thank the former University of Port Elizabeth and the current Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University where I received good financial and sabbatical support.
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I sincerely thank Dr Henco van der Westhuizen for his hard work in collecting and editing this volume, and writing a foreword for it. SUN Press was willing to take on this project and provided key guidance and support along the way.

I also thank the colleagues at the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Theology: Len Hansen, Mary-Anne Plaatjes-Van Huffel, Dirk Smit and Robert Vosloo, as well as the Dean, Nico Koopman, who provided kind support and encouragement over many years of cooperation. You provided me with an academic home for my theological work, honouring me with an extra-ordinary appointment from 2011 until my acceptance of a position as Director of the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) in 2014.

On a personal note, I honour my wife, Elize, for her years of support and taking on additional parental responsibilities. She, more than anyone else, always encourages me to test social, ecclesial, and intellectual boundaries. Anyone who is active in both research and in tough university leadership roles during transformation times will understand what it takes to continue reading, thinking and writing. Our three children are adults now. I also thank them for the joy and encouragement and for having to deal with a late-night father over many years.

I am humbled by the opportunity to publish this volume in the Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology.

Piet Naudé
Cape Town
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