PATHWAYS IN ETHICS

JUSTICE – INTERPRETATION – DISCOURSE – ECONOMICS

Piet Naudé
I dedicate this volume to Heinrich Bedford-Strohm: 

ethicist, bishop, public theologian and friend.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The publication of these essays brings to a close a three-year project that commenced in 2014. At the invitation of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, a collection of my essays in theology was published in 2015 with the title *Pathways in theology: Ecumenical, African and Reformed* (Sun Press, edited by Henco van der Westhuizen). It was decided to collect my essays with an “ethical” focus in a separate volume. The result is this, the second volume, which could be read separately, although it will make richer sense if viewed in tandem with the first collection.

Like the first volume, these essays were not originally written to form part of a coherent collection. Though this volume may not be as well-structured as a book that one normally plans and writes in one movement, it was possible to collect these essays under four broad headings: justice, interpretation, discourse and economics. Each subsection consists of four chapters and the collection as whole covers a fairly wide (some would say: eclectic) spectrum of “ethical” reflections. Topics covered include analysing concepts of cultural and distributive justice, reading biblical texts and scholarship from an ethical perspective, advancing ethical discourse analysis, and attempting to make sense of global and local economic policies whilst also providing a rationale for ethics education in the (quite powerful) accounting profession.

This wide range of topics is rooted in theology and the Christian tradition, but some essays were written for professional journals or as chapters for books not directly related to theology. This reflects my own academic biography: I have worked in Faculties of Art, Education and Economic Sciences and at one point set up an interdisciplinary Centre for Ethics. I was challenged to reflect on matters in business and economics due to my previous and current involvement in Business School education. I therefore argue (see Chapter 4.4) that the link between theology and economics is vital for ethics in the 21st century, in the same way that philosophy and the natural sciences are traditionally key dialogue partners for theology.

The topics addressed in this volume augment my earlier work on the ethical challenges of HIV/AIDS, gender discrimination, restorative justice and poverty as contained in *Neither calendar nor clock. Perspectives on the Belhar confession*, published by Eerdmans in 2010. Like most theologians who attempt to “do” theology in different publics, written records and formal research are but a slice of our theological work. I am honoured to interact with business, church, political and civil society structures on a regular basis in seminars and projects where we combine our best efforts for the sake of a greater public good and a more ethical society.

Back to this volume: Some editorial changes were made, but the essays are published very close to their original form and content. Chapter 2.1, a substantially revised version of my inaugural address at the University of Port Elizabeth, has not been published in peer-reviewed books or journals before. There is no attempt to “bring the strands together” or write inter-linking passages between chapters. The essays are simply collected for others to read and hopefully make sense of a small sample
of ethics reflections by a middle-class, white male person in South Africa in a crucial period of our post-apartheid history.

I decided to keep the “pathways” of the first volume in the title and would like to provide some explanation for this:

“Pathways” expresses the fact that I never intended to write “a systematic theology” or develop “an ethical approach” in the traditional sense. Instead of a “high-way” – a comprehensive system of thinking – I, like many other South African theologians and ethicists – do most of my work in response to invitations or reacting to events in church and society. My thinking was never premised on a grand design or overarching construct, and then developed along the trajectories flowing from such a design.

The “pathways” in the two volumes are, nevertheless, not simply a chaotic “following of leads”. They are constructed along a few vital contours:

My commitment to an ecumenical Christian tradition with a socially engaged Reformed focus; an acute contextual awareness shaped primarily by events in South Africa and on the African continent, seen from a global perspective; advancement of what one could broadly call humanisation and justice, with a specific heart for socially marginalised people and the natural environment, which has no voice of their own; an inter-disciplinary approach that makes room for synergy among theology, philosophy, hermeneutics, and – later in my writings – economics and business. All this work was done – for better or for worse – with the intellectual instruments provided by Western academic discourse, strongly influenced by German and (to a lesser extent) American scholars, but interpreted for and in dialogue with our African context and local scholarship.

Apart from this methodological consideration, there is the matter of the nature of theology. If theology is “faith seeking understanding”, this may lead one to see theology as contemplation on God as revealed in Scripture. If the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1), then the Old Testament image of following the right path to know God comes to mind. Psalm 1 – perhaps a prologue to the Psalter as a whole – makes clear that there is the pathway of foolishness and the pathway of wisdom. Wisdom is the fruit of those who delight in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. Wisdom, personified as a woman, calls out. “At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand” (Proverbs 8:2). Those who heed her call, and follow her on this pathway, receive insight and knowledge.

This tradition is set forth in the New Testament. Christ is our wisdom (1 Cor 1:30). He reveals the truth and is the (path)way to knowledge of God (John 14:6). Those who see him have seen the Father. No wonder the earliest Christians, witnesses to Jesus Christ, are called “people of the way” (Acts). And no wonder that the Christian life is often depicted as a journey, following in the footsteps of Christ (1 Peter 2:21), being transformed into his image as we grow in sanctification and love through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of wisdom.

Theology is faith seeking to understand God through Jesus Christ and the Spirit, by following the pathways of Scripture, interpreted anew for every age and context, so that we may grow in wisdom.
I remain immensely grateful for the Beyers Naudé Centre for publishing this work. The Centre is slowly building a valuable collection of historical and contemporary public theologies and ethics in South Africa. It is an honour to be part of this. My sincere appreciation to the professional colleagues at Sun Press who assisted me in finalising the text and index, specifically Johannes Richter and Edwin Moose.

My collaboration with the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology (led by Nico Koopman) and, since late 2014, the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (led by Stan du Plessis), provides a fruitful environment in which to reflect. The University of Stellenbosch Business School, my current academic home, has developed a vibrant research culture, as well as a commitment to participate and influence public policy and debate in South Africa and on the African continent. I thank my colleagues for their open conversations and for providing the platforms on which we can collectively pursue ethics in public life.

Those closest to us – away from the public eye – make enormous sacrifices to create the space in which we can do research. I herewith express admiration for my wife, Elize, for her love and for her example of a Christian life marked by integrity and commitment.

Some might ask: What is our deepest motivation to do academic work? The injunction that strikes me as most appropriate is: “Love the Lord your God with all your mind”.

Piet Naudé
Stellenbosch
June 2016
PART 1 –
ETHICS, JUSTICE AND HUMANITY
1.1 GLOBALISATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURAL JUSTICE

In a recent article entitled “Globalisierung in wissenschaftlich-theologischer Sicht” Michael Welker gives an interesting brief description of globalisation: “Globalisation means: the development of an increasingly solidifying network of connections and interdependences between people and cultures. In this process, tensions, conflicts and collisions between cultures, between politico-economic interests and systems of laws and values can be highlighted” (Welker 2008:368, my translation).

He then explains how the ecumenical church and academic theology participate in and contribute to the closer interconnection of the world, but warns that we should maintain “a healthy scepticism towards general images of globalisation” (372). The reason for this scepticism is that the ideal of closer connections and communication in the world does not usually materialise in practice. In fact: “The image of the ‘global village’, the world as a village in which everyone communicates in harmony with everyone else … completely neglects present implementation opportunities in real space-time” (372). Welker bases this sober conclusion on concrete experiences in building a truly global theological network that attempts to be as inclusive as possible, but which time and again falters as a result of the vast differences in academic infrastructure, competencies and support in various parts of the world.

Based on the updated and detailed overview of ecumenical literature on globalisation by Konrad Raiser (2009) and others,¹ it is clear that the predominant focus is on the ethical and theological challenges related to the impact of a global neoliberal market economy and its concomitant “ökologische Brutalismus” (“ecological brutalism”, Welker 2008:375). A prime example is the Accra Confession,² which depicts the current global system as an evil empire that destroys not only the lives of people but also the earth.

An emerging theme – and the focus of this essay³ – is the issue of globalisation as a powerful cultural force, shaping personal and national identities, social cohesion and human coherence “at the intersection of trans-national forces, cross-cutting the local

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¹ Konrad Raiser, Globalisierung in der ökumenisch-ethischen Diskussion, Verkündigung und Forschung 54. Jahrgang, Heft 1 (2009): 6-33. See also Raiser’s excellent literature references. For a summary of views up to about 1990, see Aart van den Berg: Churches speak out on economic issues. A survey of several statements. Geneva: WCC, 1990. See also Christian faith and world economy today (Geneva: WCC, 1992); articles on “technology” and “culture” in the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement; Julio de Santa Ana (ed.) Sustainability and globalization (Geneva: WCC, 1998), and The Ecumenical Review 52/2, 2000, which was devoted to the issue of “economic globalisation”.
² The Accra Confession (AC) was adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches during its 24th General Council held in Ghana, Africa. For a summary and discussion, see Raiser 2009:11-13.
Globalisation and the challenge of cultural justice

Globalisation and the global” (Chidester 2003: vii). It is noteworthy that Welker’s description of globalisation includes a specific mention of cultural networks and tensions between cultures, and that Bedford-Strohm has recently reminded us that “cultural processes also have to be considered under the heading of ‘globalisation’” (Bedford-Strohm 2009:2, my translation). Whereas the economic face of globalisation raises issues related to distributive and ecological justice, the cultural-technological face raises issues related to cultural and aesthetic justice, and the values that shape identity formation (see Kwenda 2003).

I. GLOBALISATION AS CULTURAL FORCE IN IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

There are as many definitions of culture as there are social scientists. For the sake of our discussion here, two notions of culture will be put forward.

The first is by Clifford Geertz, who espouses a semiotic view based on his interpretation that “man (sic) is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (and) I take culture to be those webs.” Culture therefore consists of “interworked systems of construable symbols” in which social events can be intelligibly described (Geertz 1975: 5, 14). These symbols form – through their inter-relations – a cultural map within which people negotiate their identities.

In a publication on social cohesion Chirevo Kwenda takes a shorter route and sees culture merely as “our way of life” and “what people take for granted”. In other words: “It is that comfort zone within, and out of which, we think, act and speak. If it is our ‘mother culture’, we do all these things without having to be self-conscious about what we are doing” (Kwenda 2003:68, 69).

Both culture and identity are fluid and hybrid notions. On an individual level, we live in overlapping social territories and migrate between different social roles constructed on the basis of who we are and who we are becoming. On a group or national level, this is equally true: cultures and identities are constantly negotiated between “what is taken for granted”, between what is an assumed network of significance and a changing environment that might seek to disarrange our symbolic cultural maps.

In an ideal world such identity negotiations may occur peacefully, in a symmetrical power relationship and over an extended period, so that natural assimilation and

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4 See Welker’s references (2008:368, footnotes 5 and 6) to the work of S.P. Huntington on the clashes of civilisation and the cultural dimensions of globalisation as discussed by A. Appudurai.

5 I am not an expert in anthropology or cultural studies, but have found the following sources very helpful (without fully integrating them into this paper): Simon During (ed.): The cultural studies reader (1993) is an excellent collection of ground-breaking essays by authors such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Barthes, Foucault, Lyotard, Cornel West and others. See specifically Part IV for its relevance to this paper. The somewhat older collection, Ideas of culture (1976) by Gamst and Norbeck, has a strong sociological focus with contributions by inter alia Durkheim, Parsons and Malinowski. Maartin J Gannon in his Understanding global cultures develops an interesting analytical instrument, namely significant social actions as metaphors for analysing local and global cultures. See Chapter 16 on the Nigerian marketplace for an example from the African continent. I am deeply aware of my limitations in this exciting field of study.
hybridisation enrich this “meeting of cultures” and evolving of identities. But we have ample examples in history and the contemporary world that such processes derail more often than not. “We know that for these four words, ‘our way of life’, people are often prepared to kill or be killed. In such instances, it becomes clear that there is a very small step from ‘a way of life’ to life itself. Thus, a threat to a people’s culture tends to be perceived and experienced as a personal threat” (Kwenda 2003:68).

The dichotomies represented by contending factions such as Israelis versus Palestinians, Hutus versus Tutsis, Catholics versus Protestants, Serbians versus Croatians, Americans versus Islamic fundamentalists are the violent consequences of derailed identity negotiations coupled with cultural acts of threats and resistance. There are also less violent, but nevertheless intense, processes of interchange among, for example, Nigerians in France, Turks in Germany, Mozambicans in South Africa, Aborigines in Australia and Hispanics and Chinese in America (and the list can go on and on).

These regional cultural negotiations are both intensified and ‘mondialised’ (le monde: French) by the Janus face of cultural globalisation. Like all globalisation processes, this one is equally ambiguous and even contradictory: The globalisation of culture is on the one hand a huge process of homogenisation, whilst at the same time fostering, on the other hand, a celebration of cultural difference and fragmentation.

In this regard one may point to the hybridisation of culture as “a global phenomenon that happens locally” through interesting cultural mixes of music, art, literature and architecture. For example, the post-colonial discourse on “creolisation”, ambivalence and multiple identities is a way of “writing back” in response to a hegemonic global culture (see Gerle 2000:159) and related to a process of identity transformation.

But the romantic idea of multiculturalism is betrayed by a globalising process that creates an illusion of differentiation, but in fact is a comprehensive force toward “Vereinheitlichung” (“unification”, Raiser 1999: 37). In this earlier work Raiser (1999:32ff) points out three central challenges facing the ecumenical church in the 21st century: a life-centred vision (lebenszentrierte Vision) to replace a destructive anthropocentrism; the acknowledgement of plurality; and facing the inner contradictions of globalisation. He expresses one of these contradictions as the simultaneous process of “unification of lifestyles and cultural forms” and the “strains” caused by a defence of “native cultures, religious traditions (and) ethnic and racial identities” (Raiser 1999:37, my translation).

Globalisation moves slowly toward creating a depersonalised mass society typified by “mass communications, mass consumption, homogeneity of patterns of life, mass culture” (De Santa Ana 1998:14). The process is driven by mega-cultural firms “based on the commodification of Anglophone culture with the aid of the electronic highway” (Louw 2002: 79). Samuel Kobia writes from an African perspective and depicts the situation of this continent as being subject to both economic and cultural colonisation, and such cultural hegemony is in part imparted by modern Western

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6 See Bedford-Strohm’s reference to “die Ambivalenz der Globalisierung” (“the ambivalence of globalization”, 2009:2) and Welker’s call that we should not be naïve about the interconnectedness of the world, as globalisation has both “Licht- und Schattenseiten” (literally: “light and shadow sides”, 2008:372).