Essays in public theology

Collected Essays 1

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The development of this series of study guides is an initiative of the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape. Its main purpose is to help produce affordable, readily available and contextually relevant textbooks which can be used for teaching purposes in the Southern African context. In addition, the aim of the series is to develop research tools which may be employed for postgraduate research projects in the region.

The following volumes have appeared in this series from SUN Press thus far:


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Acknowledgements

The essay entitled “South Africa” has not been published in this form in English, but formed the basis for the contribution “Südafrika”, Theologische Realenzyklopädie, Band XXXII (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 322-332.

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“Modernity and theological education – crises at “Western Cape” and “Stellenbosch”? ” was first published in Journal of African Christian Thought 2:1 (1999), 34-44.

The essay “Civil religion – in South Africa?” has not been published before.

The essay “Globalization: An orientation?” has not been published before.


“No other motives would give us the right’ – Reflections on contextuality from a Reformed experience” was first published in M.E. Brinkman & D. van Keulen (eds): Christian Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Studies in Reformed Theology 8, (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 130-159.

“Theology and the transformation of culture – Niebuhr revisited” was first published in an edited and abbreviated form in the Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 72 (September 1990), 9-23.


The essay “Shared stories for the future? Theological reflections on truth and reconciliation in South Africa” (co-authored with Elna Mouton) has not been published before.


“Reformed ethics and economic justice” was first published in *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 37:3 (1996), 438-455.


“Public worship: A tale of two stories” (co-authored with B.A. Müller) was first published in *The Relevance of Theology for the 1990s*, edited by J. Mouton & B.C. Lategan (Pretoria, HSRC, 1994), 385-408.


Editor’s foreword

The immediate stimulus for the publication of this volume of essays is an envisaged postgraduate course on “South African Theologies” to be offered in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape in the second semester of 2007.

The course is planned in two parts. In the first part students will read together a selection of texts from one influential South African theologian. In the second part students will each select one other influential South African theologian of the last 50 years or so. The names of scholars such as Denise Ackermann, Allan Boesak, David Bosch, Russel Botman, Manas Buthelezi, John de Gruchy, Jaap Durand, Felicity Edwards, Brian Gaybba, Johan Heyns, Willie Jonker, Wolfram Kistner, Adriko König, Simon Maimela, Tintyeko Maluleke, Ben Marais, Itumeleng Mosala, Klaus Nürnberger, Barney Pityana, Buti Thlagale, Desmond Tutu, Charles Villa-Vicencio and many others come to mind. Each student will then have to present a report on his or her reading of that scholar and another student will be asked to comment on this report. In this way students in the course will hopefully be able to tune into a complex chorus of (sometimes conflicting) voices in South African theology over the last few decades.

We have opted for Dirkie Smit as the one South African theologian whose work all students will read in the first part of this course. On this basis, I have invited him to make a selection of his essays, especially those essays focusing on public theology over the past few decades. In addition, I have also suggested to him that we may be able to publish a volume of selected essays in the series Study Guides in Religion and Theology. For obvious reasons, the publication of such a volume, tailor-made for the course, would be attractive from the point of view of the lecturers and students participating in this course. It would also be a welcome addition to the by now well-established series of textbooks and research tools, entitled Study Guides in Religion and Theology, and produced by the Department of Religion and Theology at UWC (see details elsewhere).

There are many reasons why the selection of Dirkie Smit’s work is appropriate for a course of this nature. Let me mention only the following:

1. He has been a member of staff at the University of the Western Cape from 1981 until 2002. Many of the essays incorporated in this volume reflect the years that he worked at UWC, its particular demographic context, its vibrant institutional history and its long struggle against apartheid and its educational impact. This volume of essays may indeed be regarded as one way to honour the work of a long-standing colleague.

2. There can be no doubt that Dirkie Smit has been one of South Africa’s most significant and influential theologians over the last few decades. In fact, he is currently one of the world’s leading theologians, especially within the context of reformed theology. This is illustrated by his immense productivity, his many awards, his international liaisons with reputable scholars and theological institutions, the many invitations which he regularly receives to participate in writing projects and a long list of doctoral students which he supervised. There is no need to elaborate on
his life and work here. The essays included in this volume bear ample witness to the sustained quality of his contributions.

His early involvement in the Confession of Belhar (1982/1986), with its distinctive emphasis on the (ecumenical) unity of the church, on the gospel of reconciliation in Christ and on justice in church and society, set the tone for his many contributions which were to follow. These contributions reflect his rootedness in a particular ecclesial tradition, namely that of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and (from 1994) the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, his concern over confessing the Christian faith within the reformed tradition, the ecumenical orientation of his work, his commitment to issues of justice, peace and a sustainable society, especially in the South African context, his concern over appropriate forms of theological education and the explicit recognition of the contextuality of his own contributions.

The style of his work, namely essays produced in response to invitations within a particular context (typically taking the questions in the invitation as a point of departure), instead of longer monographs, makes it possible to select a range of essays over a period of time. The essays included in this volume are particularly helpful because they span a period of more than 20 years that includes the last stages of the apartheid years, the transition to democracy and the current democratic dispensation. This will enable students to engage in theological reflection in the present situation, on the basis of a memory of the past and with a view to future challenges.

All of these texts were written upon invitation and most of them follow from speeches delivered at conferences, consultations or public lectures. The original context of each of these essays is indicated in the first footnote of each essay.

The texts of the essays have not been revised for the purposes of this volume. That would have been an immense task and would have detracted from the highly contextual nature of each of these essays. The year of the first publication of each essay should therefore be carefully noted.

The original texts have been reformatted for the purposes of inclusion in the series Study Guides in Religion and Theology. The whole text has also been submitted to some typographical and very minor language editing, for example to clarify the use of language that would no longer make sense in the present context. The system of referencing employed in each of the original texts was maintained. There is therefore no uniform system for referencing and bibliography used throughout the volume of essays. In some cases very few references were used due to the popular nature of a publication, while other essays have, characteristically, very elaborate footnotes. In some cases the original speech and not the first publication was used as a point of departure for the present text. Details on such cases are provided in the first footnote of the relevant essays.

The essays selected for inclusion in this volume represent only a portion of Dirkie Smit’s published articles and essays. It excludes, for example, his many contributions published in Afrikaans, an extensive number of exegetical studies and a wide variety of essays on topics other than public theology. This volume of essays is published in consultation with the Beyers Naude Center for Public Theology (Stellenbosch University) in anticipation that subsequent volumes of collected essays by Dirkie Smit may be published by SUN PReSS in years to come.
Editor’s foreword

I trust that this volume of essays will be welcomed by theological students, pastors, former students and academics in the South African and wider African contexts, in the reformed world, in ecumenical Christianity and by Dirkie Smit’s many friends and associates further afield.

*Ernst Conradie*

January 2007
Author’s introduction

The essays collected here are all occasional pieces. They were written for particular occasions – all of them responding to very specific invitations, attempting to answer specific questions, addressing particular audiences, and all of them therefore reflecting the times in which they originated. For that reason, it was more than a surprise that Ernst Conradie was interested in publishing them again, after so many years. As answers, they no longer suffice – and many people of course disagreed with them even at the time! Times have changed, and they are witnesses to struggles of the past. Precisely as occasional pieces, however, they may demonstrate the nature of public theology. Precisely in its attempt to contribute to public opinion and to respond to the challenges and concerns of the particular moment, public theology is always occasional, contextual and historical.

Part One therefore collects essays that provide some information on the historical background, especially for readers who never knew or no longer remember. It deals with the role of church and theology in apartheid and the struggle against apartheid, but then also comments on the nature of the present historical reality, namely the radical impact of modernity, especially in the form of increasing globalization. If the church in South Africa and on the African continent has a public role today, it will have to play this role within these social realities.

Against this backdrop, Part Two includes essays that deal with the more theoretical concerns whether theology should indeed play a public role and if so, how this is possible under the conditions of modern democratic societies. Both questions are important and difficult. It indeed remains a temptation to instrumentalise the church for political and ideological reasons, also within democratic cultures, and therefore many voices are skeptical of the claim that church and theology should play public roles. Even when people agree, however, that the church does have public responsibilities, it is not always clear how this could be done in practical ways.

Part Three offers some case studies in which specific themes are addressed that were of special importance in church and society in South Africa over the past decades, namely questions of unity, questions of reconciliation and questions of justice. These were, of course, not the only themes in South African public theology. Questions of liberation and freedom, questions of peace and violence, question of social and moral responsibility, questions of human development, questions of poverty and health, questions of education and empowerment, questions of security and crime, and indeed many others, have often been discussed and are still being discussed. The essays collected here serve only as reminders and illustrations of doing public theology.

Part Four focuses on the relationship between worship and public life. Once again, it is also of extreme importance to consider other social forms of the church and to reflect in each case on the public implications of that form of being church – for example the involvement of congregations in local communities, the role of denominations in educating and organizing members and in speaking publicly, the task of the ecumenical church to address issues of common interest, etcetera. The essays offered here once
again only serve as case studies and reminders of the public implications of the regular worship of faith communities, as just one way of being church.

Because these are all occasional pieces, the volume makes the impression of a torso, of an incomplete work, for three reasons. The first reason is that only English essays are included. Many other essays, which could have complemented them, are only available in Afrikaans. The second reason is that the essays are not really integrated with one another, to construct a monograph with one coherent argument, but appear exactly as they were written or published originally, causing both overlap and omission. Given the totally different circumstances under which most of them originated, it may be difficult for many readers today to understand them within their original rhetorical situation. The third reason is that many themes that are crucial for public theology in South Africa are not dealt with at all. Many essays which were not included deal for example with ethical issues that are crucial for public life, with ecclesiological questions about the nature, task and form of the church, with the Reformed tradition as a tradition of public witness and engagement, or with the nature of Reformed confession and its call for visible and public embodiment. For the purposes of this volume, a strict selection had to be made. Whether these case studies are still instructive, is for readers to decide. My thanks to Ernst Conradie who thought that it might still be worthwhile and for his hard work in editing and publishing this manuscript.

Dirkie Smit
Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin
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PART ONE

Context – apartheid, reconstruction, modernity, globalization
CHAPTER 1

South Africa

1. Historical: Christian denominations and religions in South Africa

1.1 A religious population

The story of South Africa is permeated by the activities of the Christian churches. A rich diversity of religions exists in the region and a majority of the population professes some kind of faith. During the 1980 census it was 86%, with 77% being Christian.

During the 1991 census it was about 70%, with 66% being Christian, 1,3% Hindu, 1,1% Muslim, and 0,2% Judaistic. A further 29,7% included people who objected against giving the information and members of African traditional religions. Only 1,2% professed no religion.

1.2 Christian denominations

The largest Christian groups in 1991 were the African Independent Churches (33,5%), the different Dutch Reformed Churches (17,8%), the Roman Catholic Church (11,4%), and the Methodist (8,8%), Anglican (5,7%), Lutheran (3,8%) and Presbyterian (2,2%) Churches.

1.3 Historical developments determining religion

Three great migrations of people into the region took place, determining the present religious scene. For centuries San and Khoikhoi people inhabited the land south of the Limpopo.

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1 This essay has not been published in this form in English before. It originally formed the basic material for a slightly changed contribution on "Südafrika" in the Theologische Realenzyklopädie, Band XXXII (Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 322-332. During and shortly before that period, Smit was often invited to write similar contributions for different encyclopedias and dictionaries, including "Apartheid", Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Band 1, edited by H.D. Betz, Don S. Browning, B. Janowski & E. Jüngel (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 1998), 580-582; recently published as "Apartheid", Religion Past and Present, Volume 1 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), 293-295; also "South Africa", in The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion. Volume 2, edited by R. Wuthnow (London: Routledge, 1998), 706-710; recently revised and published as "South Africa", in The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion, a new one-volume edition, edited by R. Wuthnow (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2006). No attempt was made to update the information in the original essay. This applies to the now outdated statistical information from an earlier census, but for example also to the experiences at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to the comments on public challenges that the church was facing at the time. The essay only serves as example of the kind of background historical reconstruction against which the other essays and papers in this volume originated, and as basic historical information for readers who may need such a backdrop to understand some of the later contributions as well. Some of the comments in this background paper are in fact repeated in some of the later essays. – Editor
From about 2000 years ago, black African people, with their traditional African religions, gradually migrated into the region, until they would populate a major part, except for the southwestern corner.

A second migration brought Europeans with their conflicting forms of Christianity: Dutch (1652), followed French and German Protestants, but particularly British settlers (especially since 1806), with major implications for the local political and religious realities.

A third religiously significant migration brought different groups from Asia, as consequence of the European settlement.

The history of Christianity in South Africa can be divided into a colonial period, since 1652, when whites first settled at the Cape of Good Hope, until 1910, when four colonies united to form the Union of South Africa, and the twentieth century, during which racial politics and apartheid had a major impact on Christianity and the churches.

1.4 Christianity in the colony: Dutch rule (1652-1795, 1803-1806)

Dutch colonial control lasted from 1652-1795 and 1803-1806. The first European settlement was not religiously motivated, but religious groups like the French Huguenots, Calvinist refugees (1688), soon joined. Reformed piety and doctrine were very influential in shaping white society at the Cape. The official policy was religiously intolerant. The Dutch East India Company promoted Reformed Christianity as public religion. All non-Calvinists were severely restricted, including Lutherans (only permitted to build a church in Strand Street, Cape Town, after a century, in 1774, with permission to have services there in 1779) and Catholics, but also Muslims. In 1804 the Dutch Commissioner issued a proclamation separating church and state, while ensuring that the church was subordinate, and promoting religious tolerance.

1.5 Christianity in the colony: British rule (1795-1803, 1806-1910)

After 1806 the British colonial power continued this policy. British colonial control lasted until 1910. The British conquest exposed the colony to the growing global economy, as well as to an explosive proliferation of Protestant churches and movements.

Many English-speaking Christians came to the Cape, bringing their own denominational divisions with them, including Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, and Catholic people, especially soldiers and civil servants, establishing settler churches. Although there was no official state church, many congregations received state support.

The British groups were mainly Evangelical and the continental groups were mainly Pietist. Two Anglican priests accompanied the 1820 Settlers to the Eastern Cape. In 1829 the first Anglican churches were built. Only in 1848 was an attempt made to give the Anglican church an administrative system. A few Presbyterians came with the second British occupation as members of a Scottish regiment and formed a first church in 1824. Some pious Methodist soldiers came to the Cape, but the Wesleyan Missionary Society really brought the church to the Cape in 1815. English Baptists came in 1820 with the Settlers and German Baptists also settled in the eastern areas. The Roman Catholic Church was slow to get started in South Africa. During the nineteenth century