REFORMED CHURCHES in South Africa and the STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

Remembering 1960-1990

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Robert Vosloo (Editors)
Dedicated to students of theology born after 1990 who have to do theology in a faithful and creative way in the aftermath of apartheid.
CONTENTS

Foreword ................................................................................................................................................. 9

A – Memory and Reformed Identity .................................................. 13

1. Remembering the role of the Reformed Churches in the struggle for justice in South Africa (1960-1990): Some remarks on the promise and pitfalls of memory and historiography ................................................................. 15
   Robert Vosloo

2. The contest for reformed identity in South Africa during the church struggle against apartheid ................................................................................................................................. 26
   John de Gruchy

B – Remembering the role of Reformed Churches .................................. 37

3. Remembering Cottesloe: Delegates to the Cottesloe Consultation tell their stories .................................................................................................................................................................. 39
   Piet Meiring

4. The Dutch Reformed Church from Ras, Volk en Nasie to Kerk en Samelewing: The struggle goes on .................................................................................................................................................. 52
   Johan van der Merwe

5. From Church and Society (1986) to Rustenburg (1990): Developments within the Dutch Reformed Church ........................................................................................................................................... 67
   Frits Gaum

6. The voice of protest within the Dutch Reformed Mission Church:
   1976-1986 ............................................................................................................................................. 75
   Nico Botha
   Klippies Kritzinger

8. The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa’s bumpy road to the establishment of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: From Tshilidzini to Pretoria 1971-1991 ......................................................... 118
   Leepo Modise

9. Fifty Years of Isolation: The Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk 1960-2010 ................................................................................................................. 133
   Wim Dreyer

10. The witness of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa 1960-1990 .................................................................................................................. 143
    Douglas Bax

C – Remembering the Reception of Reformed Theologians and Theological Currents ........................................ 171

    Jan Lubbe

12. The reception of Karl Barth in South Africa 1960-1990:
    Selected perspectives ........................................................................... 186
    Piet Naudé

    Christina Landman

D – Remembering Prominent South African Reformed Voices ................................................................. 211

14. “The time for pious words is over”: Beyers Naudé, decision, conscience and courage in the struggle for justice ........................................ 213
    Allan Boesak
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1 CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 15. “We have a special responsibility in the sense of our Reformed background”: Beyers Naudé, 3 February 1990 (A transcription of an audiovisual presentation with comments) .................................................. 226  
*Pieter van Niekerk* |
*Henry Williams* |
| 17. The ambiguity of Johan Heyns: Sitting at Bavinck’s left or right hand? ..... 251  
*Ernst Conradie* |
| 18. The alternative community and the struggle for liberation in the work of David Bosch ................................................................. 267  
*Cobus van Wyngaard* |
| 19. Willie Jonker’s gentle Reformed promptings towards justice .............. 280  
*Christo Lombard* |
| 20. “... (T) hose who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time ...”: On Jaap Durand .................................................................................................. 293  
*Dirkie Smit* |
*Eugene Fortein* |
| 22. Troublemaker in Israel: Nico Smith and the struggle for justice in apartheid South Africa ................................................................. 316  
*Willem Saayman* |

**E – Remembering Reformed Documents** ............... 327

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1 CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 23. Reading the Belhar Confession as a historical text ................................................. 329  
*Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel* |
| 24. Revisiting Church and Society after a quarter of a century: A critical reappraisal .................................................. 346  
*Andrie du Toit* |
F – Remembering Ecumenical, Public and International Engagement .................................................. 357

   Lennart Henriksson

   Carel Anthonissen

27. Reformed Churches’ struggle for justice: Lessons learnt from their submissions before the TRC ......................................................... 385
   Christo Thesnaar

28. From divine divisions to unity in Christ? Church and reconciliation in South Africa and the southern United States, 1950-1990 .................. 400
   Marthe Hesselmans

29. Dealing with interwoven memories and histories: Some perspectives in conversation with William Kentridge’s History of the Main Complaint ...... 414
   Helené van Tonder

   Eddy Van der Borght
FOREWORD

Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel & Robert Vosloo

It is often pointed out – and rightly so – that the story of the Reformed churches in South Africa is inextricably interwoven with the story of the theological support for the ideology of racial apartheid and the story of the theological struggle against the injustices of apartheid. This fact makes the story of the Reformed churches in South Africa a fascinating and complex story that reveals a contested and ambivalent legacy. The question can and should be asked, moreover, how we should remember and narrate this complex story with its many plots and subplots. It is with this question in mind that we as editors of this volume, who are both lecturers at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, decided to organise a conference which engages explicitly with the role that the Reformed churches played in the struggle for justice in apartheid South Africa. It soon became clear that it might be wise to limit the focus to a specific period within South African history, and for reasons expanded on in the opening essay of this publication we decided to concentrate on 1960-1990, with 1960 and 1990 as important historical markers. The theme of the conference, which was held from 14-16 May 2012 in Stellenbosch, was therefore “The Role of the Reformed Churches in the Struggle for Justice in South Africa: Remembering 1960-1990.”

This volume offers a large selection of the papers presented at this well-attended and lively conference. The opening article, by Robert Vosloo, provides some introductory reflections on the conference theme (which is similar to the title of this publication). This article includes remarks on the relationship between memory and identity, and the theme of (Reformed) identity is also addressed in the next essay by John de Gruchy. The second section of this book (on “Remembering Reformed Churches”) focuses on some pivotal events and the role of specific churches between 1960 and 1990, including the Dutch Reformed Church, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, and the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (with essays by Piet Meiring, Johan van der Merwe, Frits Gaum, Nico Botha, Klippies Kritzinger, Leepo Modise, Wim Dreyer and Douglas Bax). The third section (on “Remembering the Reception of Theologians and Theological Currents”) presents discussions of the reception of influential Reformed theologians in South Africa, such as the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper (see Jan Lubbe’s article) and the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (see
Piet Naude’s article), while Christina Landman’s article in this section focuses on the reception of feminist theology in South Africa. In the fourth section, the emphasis shifts to some prominent figures who – in their different ways – are often associated with the critique against apartheid. This section therefore includes articles on Beyers Naudé (by Allan Boesak and Pieter van Niekerk respectively), Johan Heyns (by Henry Williams and by Ernst Conradie), David Bosch (by Cobus van Wyngaard), Willie Jonker (by Christo Lombard), Jaap Durand (by Dirkie Smit), Allan Boesak (by Eugene Fortein), and Nico Smith (by Willem Saayman). The fifth section discusses two important Reformed documents which were born out of the theological struggles in apartheid South Africa. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel provides a reading of the Belhar Confession as a historical text, while Andrie du Toit revisits the document Church and Society. The sixth, and final, section of this publication attends to the broader ecumenical, public and international engagements resulting from the struggle for justice in apartheid South Africa. This section includes an article on the role of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (by Lennart Henriksson), an article on the Stellenbosch ecumenical tours from 1984-1991 (by Carel Anthonissen), an article on some perspectives which emerged from submissions before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (by Christo Thesnaar), and an article by Marthe Hesselmans which compares the discourse on reconciliation in South Africa with that in the Southern United States. The final two chapters in the volume were first presented as part of a concluding panel discussion. In her contribution, Helené van Tonder focuses on the challenge of dealing with interwoven memories, while Eddy Van der Borght’s contribution presents some observations from a non-South African conference observer. The reader can find some biographical information on the various contributors in the opening footnotes of each chapter.

The contributions to this volume reveal that there are many windows through which one can look at the role of the Reformed churches in the struggle for justice in South Africa between 1960 and 1990. Many of the authors were themselves closely involved in this history, and therefore their contributions are often informed by personal memories. The various perspectives which come to the fore in reading this book clearly point to the fact that this period was a dramatic – and also traumatic – period in South African church and theological history. Much more needs to be said about the role of the Reformed churches’ engagement with the socio-political realities between 1960 and 1990, and it is our hope that this volume will contribute to an ongoing discussion on this topic. Many readers, no doubt, will be aware of the fact that many important voices are forgotten or muted in this volume, and that the role of several Reformed churches are not adequately discussed, and that significant events, documents and themes do not receive the attention they deserve. Nevertheless, it is our view that this publication can in a helpful way inform the vital and also often painful conversations on the question of how to remember and to narrate the role of the various Reformed churches in the struggle against the injustices of apartheid. It is our opinion that these conversations are not merely of antiquarian value, but that
a responsible engagement with the ambivalent and complex history of the Reformed faith in South Africa during this eventful period is of paramount importance, also since it may provide rich resources for the current church and theological discourse on how to respond adequately to the injustices and challenges facing us today.

The conference, from which this volume grew, was not only attended by people with vivid memories and knowledge of the church struggle against apartheid, but also by a large group of students who were born after 1990, after the beginning of the transition to a more democratic South Africa. We were surprised and delighted by the interest that many of them showed in the topics raised at the conference. We therefore dedicate this volume to the theological students born after 1990 and who have to make sense of what it means to do theology in a faithful and creative way in the aftermath of apartheid.

As editors we also want to thank the Hope Project of Stellenbosch University that provided the funding that made the conference and this publication possible. In addition, we also want to thank the joint curatorium of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) for their support of this project. A special word of thanks also goes to Dr. Len Hansen for his valuable assistance, as well as to Dr. Ria Smit for her huge role in the editing process. In addition, we would also like to thank the authors of the essays in this volume for making their contributions available for publication.

We as editors (who are both also ordained pastors, respectively in the URCSA and the DRC) realise that although the history of our churches is a history of conflict and division, it is also a shared history. It is our belief that the acknowledgment of our interwoven stories can contribute to a more truthful and hopeful engagement with the past, as well as to strengthening the commitment to greater visible unity, costly reconciliation and transformative justice.

Stellenbosch, November 2013
Section A

Memory and Reformed Identity
INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I offer some remarks on the question: “How should we remember the role of the Reformed churches in South Africa in the struggle for justice between 1960 and 1990?” The various sections of this essay address different segments of this broad question. Firstly, I attend to the last part of the question, with its reference to the period 1960-1990. Then in a somewhat longer section, I make a few remarks about the conceptually rich notion of “remembering”, followed by some brief observations about the equivocal phrases “the Reformed churches in South Africa” and “the struggle for justice” respectively. I conclude by underlining the importance of the question: “How should we remember?”

REMEMBERING 1960-1990

Both 1960 and 1990 are dates associated with dramatic events in South Africa, and as such they serve as important historical markers. In 1960, the Sharpeville massacre took place – an event that sent shock waves through the country and also caused an

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1 A slightly longer version of this paper was read as the opening address at the conference “The Reformed Churches and the Struggle for Justice in South Africa: Remembering 1960-1990”, 14-16 May 2012.

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