

INTRODUCTION

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In a previous publication we concentrated on the role of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the last phase of Apartheid (see No 76 of *Scriptura* in the year 2001 “The Dutch Reformed Church and Transition in SA”). The focus of this volume of *Scriptura* is directed to the years from 1990 to the present. The general aim is to better understand the role of the DRC in the contemporary frame of South Africa and in its future. Although the DRC does not have the power it used to have up to 1990 anymore, this church nevertheless has a big relevance within the South African Society, a factor that should not be underestimated. The members of the DRC still represent an important sector of the South African society and thus the position of this church is important in the public realm.

This is not only my opinion or the opinion of South African theologians or church leaders who perhaps could be tempted to overestimate their own role. It was Nelson Mandela who underlined the relevance of the DRC and its leaders for the transition process. Let me just refer to the speech he gave to the DRC General Synod in October 1994 (see Mandela 1994, pp. 536-37, following quotations p. 536), because it still seems relevant for today. He started saying that he is impressed “met hulle ernstige soeke na vreedsame en regverdige oplossings vir ons land se probleme” (by the search of the DRC for solving the big problems in our country). The time of apartheid has shown, so Mandela continued, that churches never should follow a certain political party or ideology. But this doesn’t mean for the churches to step down from public responsibility. I quote Mandela: “Waarvan ek egter wel oortuig is, is dat die Ned Geref Kerk nie net die reg het nie, maar ook ’n spesiale plig het om aktief deel te neem aan die opbou van ’n regverdige en vreedsame samelewing” (I am convinced that the DRC not only has the right but also a special obligation to actively take part constructing a just and peaceful society/living together). This, for him, boils down to at least four points that are of high relevance for the DRC. I will refer to them only briefly: Mandela considered it absolutely necessary:

- to remember and to appreciate prophetic figures within the DRC like BB Keet, Ben Marais or Beyers Naude,
- to publicly strive for economic justice in favour of the poor,
- to take up responsibility for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and finally
- to start immediately with the process of church unity with the NG Sendingkerk and the DRC in Africa.

So far Nelson Mandela.

Maybe the situation has changed within the last nine years, since he made this speech. But nevertheless I have the impression that Mandela addressed issues that are worth to be remembered up to now – relevant questions that are dealt with in this copy of *Scriptura*.

Our main interests – always linked to the DRC – are: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Youth and Religiosity, Church Unity, and Gender. All those themes are of extreme relevance, not only for the future of the DRC but also for the society as a whole. So the question of coping with the past, the problem of unity in church and society and the gender-issue represent central issues for the present understanding of the DRC but also for

the future of church and society. And here the youth comes in: We have a strong focus on youth and religion, because the students of today will be the leaders of tomorrow.

The contributions are mainly from the theological field, but also include perspectives from the political sciences (Herman Giliomee), the socio-linguistics (Christine Anthonissen), and an analytical poet (Antjie Krog).

The contributions that are published in this journal relate to a symposium at Stellenbosch University in March 2003. They are part of an ongoing research on the role of the DRC in the South African transition process. This research is done in cooperation of South African and German colleagues. The Germans are located at Hamburg University and are part of a bigger, interdisciplinary project – a *Sonderforschungsbereich* – with the title “Change in African Societies and the way to cope with it.” Other projects relate to the role of the African Independent Churches, Muslims and African Religion in the transition process of South Africa. Apart from South Africa we have research projects directed to processes of change in East and West Africa. On top of this we also have research projects related to African migrants in Hamburg. This is only a short indication for the overall frame in which we are working (cf Weisse 2001).

Without commenting the contributions in detail, I would like to formulate a general impression with regard to the following papers. They represent a good balance of general systematic themes and issues that are linked to questions that are or that should be discussed on a church level and in the public arena as well. Looking from the outside I am really impressed by the power of the different analyses and the stimuli of the papers. The contributions are of high relevance in view of the DRC here but also with regard to our situation in Germany. And our experiences in Germany could perhaps also contribute to a better understanding of the DRC’s role in the present South Africa. This has to be explained briefly.

The symposium and its main contributions that are published here showed me the necessity to deal in a comprehensive way with the role of the churches in my country. There is a tendency in Germany to be satisfied with the historic role and the present relevance of the church that is even supported by our constitution. The South African transition process could teach Germans to actively look for a perspective of a church which is not any more part of the societal or even political main-stream. We have more than one reason to work out such a perspective in a situation where the presupposition of our churches being a *Volkskirche* is no longer functioning - at least not in the bigger cities.

The more important point is directed to the relevance of the papers printed in this volume. Seen from a German perspective they have the character of an *avantgarde*. Why? In Germany the public as well as the academic process after World War II, only started to critically analyse the past very late and is still an unfinished business. It took 20 to 30 years after World War II before a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the past started. After the lost World War almost everybody tried just to forget the past and to concentrate on the reconstruction of the country and on personal affairs. So the public debate on the past started only in the middle of the sixties and one of the driving forces behind the so-called students unrests in 1968 in our country was closely linked to critically investigate the past and to ask parents and teachers about their own role in the Nazi-period. In the academic field it has been quite similar. The priority of students in the two decades after World War II was just to start a new and own life under difficult conditions. And the colleagues? In a time when academics with roots in the past still dominated our Universities and also in the time, when their former students became their successors, there was not enough distance from the past in order to see an academic challenge to work on it - and there was a fear to

discover that one's own role in the past or that of the own doctor-father was ambivalent or even detrimental. So we had to wait for some decades before there was an urge to cope with the past. Apart from the somehow uneasy work to critically analyse the role of the church in the past, the memory also excluded those, who did not follow the main-stream. To give you a personal example: When I started to study theology in the middle of the sixties I heard nothing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer at my University of Hamburg. I only was confronted with him when I studied in Montpellier/France. From outside there has been a greater and quicker appreciation of Bonhoeffer than from within. Only later Bonhoeffer became widely known in the academic and public field in Germany, and some years ago there even was a movie produced on Bonhoeffer. Maybe it will take some more time here as well to discover the importance of the prophetic voices in the range of the DRC which in former decades have been regarded as dissenters and trouble-makers.

This is why I think the papers offered in this edition of *Scriptura* will be regarded as ahead of their time. Only after a decade of fundamental changes in Church and Society these authors show the willingness to analyse their own situation, to reflect on new priorities on the basis of an analysis of the past. I presume that in 10 or 20 years there could come a time in South Africa when people see the necessity to work out priorities in the churches by using the tool of critical analysis of the churches' involvement in the past. Then a younger academic generation could feel the challenge to do a thorough research on the churches' role in the transition period of the 1990's. And they might see the contributions published here as early and hopeful signs of a most relevant and necessary academic discussion about the role of the DRC in a changing South Africa.

In the end of my introduction I want to thank all those who contributed to the symposium and the publication of its main results: We are grateful for the support of Stellenbosch University, we appreciate the cooperation with the Faculty of Theology, we rely on the support and cooperation with the *Studentekerk*, we couldn't have done this symposium without the financial support of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. Thanks to Matthias Gensicke, who took responsibility for all aspects of the preparation and organisation of the symposium and the publishing process of its main results. A last thank you goes to the editors of *Scriptura* for the possibility of publication.

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