

CONSTRUCTING A COHERENT THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: THE MAIN CHALLENGE FACING THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY¹

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Abstract

This paper argues that the main challenge facing the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in Southern Africa is the construction of a coherent theological universe of discourse. This “universe” might be mapped out in terms of four co-ordinates, namely Reformed, ecumenical, critical-public and African from within which an agenda for the church will emerge. The article focuses on the DRC and her family, and the question whether this points the way for the church in a more general sense in South Africa, is left open for further discussion.

Introduction

Instead of making a list of possible challenges² facing the DRC in South Africa today, I wish to argue in this paper that the DRC actually faces only one major challenge, namely to construct, and enact in its life and work, a coherent theological discourse.

Within the constraints of one paper, only the main “mapping points” of such a discourse will be outlined, setting the agenda for open discussion and material construction later. To honour the fact that a church not only has an institutional face (the DRC as represented in its general and regional synods, official newspapers, theological faculties) but also a congregational face (actual churches in cities and towns, ordinary members who live as Christians in the world), each of the theological dimensions below will be translated into ecclesiological terms partially derived from the Nicene and Apostolic creeds. This determines the structure of the paper as follows:

The challenge to reconstruct a coherent theological discourse,³ requires at least the following four interrelated tasks:

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1. Paper read at a symposium hosted by the University of Hamburg (Germany) in Stellenbosch, South Africa, 12-14 March 2003. As a member of the DRC, I am writing this with the advantage and limitations of an insider-perspective. My fervent hope is to write theology from within and for a broader Reformed and ecumenical church in the near future so as to transcend the introspective phase of DRC-theology at present.
 2. See footnote 50 and its related paragraph later.
 3. This challenge was outlined by Russel Botman at the previous conference organised by our Hamburg colleagues on the role of the DRC in the period of transition in South Africa. He relies on Trinstan Borer’s argument that changes in a church occur due to three factors of which an evolving religious context is related to what Botman calls a changing “universe of theological discourse”. The rest of his article explains this in terms of the tension between Kuperian and Barthian thought and the fruitful role that the confession of Belhar could play in reconstructing such a discourse. I might venture to say that the paper presented here is to try and fill – at least methodologically – the void left by what Botman calls disempowered Barthians and “wasted Kuyperians” (Botman 2001:39).

1. The reinterpretation and re-appropriation of our tradition rooted in Reformed theology: the church as a community of thought,
2. The enrichment of our tradition via an ecumenical theology: the church as one, catholic community,
3. The conscious effort to construct a critical, public theology: the church as holy community,
4. An honest engagement with our continent toward an African theology: The church as Christian community.

1. The reinterpretation and re-appropriation of our tradition rooted in Reformed theology: the church as a community of thought

In highly simplified terms, the dominant theological paradigm of the DRC until the mid-1980's was shaped by a combination of four forces stemming from 19th century European thought. Each played an ambiguous role of positive identity formation whilst simultaneously contributed to a certain theological "deformation".⁴

- 1.1 The strength of Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) neo-Calvinism was its affirmation of God's rule over the whole of creation and the unity of humanity as created in the image of God. The weakness, however, is an idealist analogy between God and creation via Kuyper's notion of general grace (*gemeene gratie*) which is the basis for an evolutionary development of *essentiae* toward *potentiae* according to a fundamental God-willed pluriformity (see Velema 1989). The anthropological implication is that each grouping of people has its own unique law-stream according to which it realises its potential in history (see Strauss 1995). Where this potential meets God's particular grace in Christ, the highest form of civilization (like in Europe and America) is reached, whereas groups sharing only in general grace, exhibit a lower form of civilization (like some African tribes)⁵. He is of the opinion that the Afrikaner people, due to their Calvinist origin, shared in the best that this tradition could offer, and had the God-given obligation to rule over less civilised people until the latter reached the same level of development (see Kuyper 1943). The ecclesiological implication (see Jonker 1989) is a disregard for the institutional, visible unity of the church as this constitutes a form of "churchism" that restricts the freedom of people to form their own churches according to their conception of external forms of differentiation like language and culture.

Kuyper's idea of a differentiation in creation, a hierarchical construction of civilization, and subjectivist ecclesial pluriformity, struck a powerful cord in the minds of Afrikaners suffering in the time after the British war (1899-1901), and the depression of the early 1930's compounded by severe droughts in an agriculture-

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4. The discussion below is a summary of a paper entitled From pluralism to ideology. The roots of apartheid theology in Abraham Kuyper, Gustav Warneck and theological pietism. Submitted for publication to *Missionalia* (see Naude 2002). This paper contains the references to original and secondary sources assumed in the summary given here. *Die NG Kerk en apartheid* by Johann Kinghorne (et al), published in 1986, remains one of the best theological overviews of apartheid as a theology and is a fruitful source of original references to what is stated here in broad and sweeping terms.
 5. The idea of the racial superiority of the Caucasian race was supported by Social Darwinism where evolutionary theories of human societies required some implicit hierarchy of lower and higher forms of civilization. See Paris 2000: 265-266. See also the interesting note by Cornell West that the notion of black people as human beings "...is a relatively new discovery in the modern west" (West 1982, as referred to by Paris 2000:264).

based economy. It enabled leading Afrikaner intellectuals (like SJ du Toit, DJ du Toit, FJM Potgieter, AB du Preez, JD Vorster and AP Treurnicht) to turn Kuyper's specific brand of structured pluriformity into a theologically guided political ideology where separateness and *voogdyskap* could be presented as an ordinance of God, and the spiritual, invisible unity of the church could be viewed as adequate expression of the one body of Christ.

- 1.2 The strength of missiological reflection by Gustav Warneck (1934-1919) was his insight and emphasis on the fact that mission needs to take the nature of its object - specifically its cultural forms - seriously if the gospel is to be mediated not as something foreign, but as linking to the structure of the own. His weakness was however to interpret ta ethne in the great commission (Matthew 28:19) in ethnological terms (in stead of salvation-historical terms) and ultimately choosing for Volkschristianisierung (against Einzelbekehrung and the establishment of ecclesiola) as both object and method of mission.⁶ In this way the establishment of ethnically based independent churches was seen not only as the historical result of mission, but as its ultimate aim.

Warneck's work provided the theological rationale for defending the establishment of separate churches for different race groups in the DRC-family since 1881. If the *Volk* in its ethnological sense is object of mission, it follows that *Volkskirchen* should be established. And this in turn implies, that, due to different cultural expressions (e.g. language) and specific pastoral needs, these churches be independent denominations. The move from the ecclesial practice of racial separation to a political design that enforces racial separation (presented as the only viable Christian solution to the race problem) is then an easy one to make and to defend, despite the fact that this was not the intention of Warneck's own design.

- 1.3 The strength of Romanticism with its emphasis on "das Gefühlsmässige, Irrationale und Volkstümliche" was that it provided an effective cultural alternative to rationalism (LThK 8:1268-1269). Its weakness was, however, the inherent potential of a theological and political misuse of exactly this romantic *Volksbegriff*. "The word Volk is quite untranslatable", bemoaned the Oxford Missionary Conference of 1938, "because it designates both sentiment and a body of convictions to which there is no exact, or even approximate, parallel elsewhere" (see Hoekendijk 1948:99, note 9).

There is no doubt that both Kuyper and Warneck (and many others of the same period) were influenced by romantic ideas about the *Volk*: In Kuyper it resonates in his successful political ambitions, his romanticising of the glorious Dutch past, and his overt nationalism. In Warneck it underlies the idea of both the German people and their relation to other nationalities: "Den Deutschen eignet als besondere Charisma eine.. Respektierung fremder Nationalität, die sie befähigt, seblstlos, unbefangen schonend auf den Eigenthümlichkeiten anderer Völker einzugehen" (*Missionslehre* III:23).

The rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the early part of the twentieth century was a natural and fertile ground for the seeds of romantic ideas about the own and the *Volk*. In the mission policy of the Cape DRC in 1932, it is stated that Christianity "does not want to rob the bantu of his language and culture, but wants to permeate and cleanse his whole nationalism so that evangelisation can never imply de-nationalisation". Each *Volk*

6. See Warneck's *Missionslehre* III:237ff, the discussion by Bosch 1983 and the brilliant analysis on the relation between church and *volk* in German missiology of the nineteenth century in Hoekendijk 1948.

has to develop according to its own *volksaard* (*eigentümliche Volksart*) and in its own geographical and socially defined context insofar as it is practically possible (see Kinghorn 1986:87).

1.4 The strength of Pietism was its emphasis on a holy lifestyle and full commitment in following Christ, a warmth of worship in new music, prayers and other liturgical forms, as well as a "passion for souls" leading to a strong missionary focus (see Bosch 1983:25, and see LThK 8: 291-293). Its weakness was strands of anti-theological and other-worldly attitudes which resulted in literal and, in some cases, fundamentalistic readings of Scripture, and a blind eye for the social construction of reality.

This tradition provided the warmth of evangelical preaching and sustained the long Pentecostal tradition (*Pinksterbidure* and *Halleluja-hymnal* book!) that uniquely shaped the DRC's spirituality (see Jonker 1988). It also, however, allowed for a privatisation of religion, and a mistrust of intellectuality and critical scholarship (to which I will turn in more detail below in point 3).

What has happened to this theological discourse with its inner tensions, but nevertheless moulded together under the specific cultural and political conditions of the apartheid era? Because each in a specific way supported apartheid as a theology, the demise of apartheid both as theology⁷ and political structure by 1994 left us with a huge vacuum and loss of direction. In this vacuum – and in the absence of a critical or viable alternative – the theological canopy collapsed and a dramatic "pluralization" of the DRC took place in the very short period between 1994 and 2000. The centrifugal cohesive force of an ecclesial-cultural-political universe turned itself outward in a dramatic fractious process of identity de- and reconstruction amongst white Afrikaans speaking South Africans in general and the DRC in particular.

The DRC is consequently today no longer one church that thinks or looks the same wherever it is found. There is a much stronger diversity of theological thought ranging from orthodox reformed,⁸ "reformed"⁹ (still the official view), evangelical/Pentecostalist,¹⁰ to liberalist forms of modernist and post-modernist¹¹ thinking about tradition, authority and truth. There is a similar congregational differentiation: Examples are mega-city-churches, so-called community churches, traditional suburban- and rural churches, and experiments in small alternative house- or family churches.

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7. There is good reason to argue that the theological justification of apartheid started to crumble in the mainline thinking of DRC since the early 1980's and found its first (albeit tentative) expression in the document *Kerk en Samelewing* (1986, and amended in 1990). When membership was declared "open" and based on faith in Jesus Christ alone, those who were of a different conviction knew the end of apartheid theology was in sight, and formed the *Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk* with about 40 000 former DRC members shortly after 1986.
 8. I refer here to those theologians and pastors who struggle against the composite character of the DRC's theological character and who would insist that the "evangelical" stream represents forms of Methodism and Pelagianism that is to be denounced by a theology wherein God's pre-election of the faithful and the objectivity of grace is emphasised against perceived subjective, anthropological elements (like calls to those in the covenant to confess sins and accept God's grace).
 9. I put Reformed in inverted commas to indicate that this is no unitary category. In terms of Hesselgrave and Rommen's typology (1989:144-157), the mainline theology in the DRC could be described between orthodox and neo-orthodox, whereas academic theology would verge in the direction of different shapes of liberalism.
 10. Evangelical and Pentecostalist ideas do rarely, if ever, appear in writing in DRC-circles, but are alive and well in some of the liturgical renewals and associated preaching, as well as in aspects of a renewed missionary awareness in the DRC over the last decade.
 11. Excellent examples in this regard are Ben du Toit (2000) and the volume *Die nuwe Hervorming* under editorship of Piet Muller (see Muller 2002). See also the recent analysis of (post)-modernity on the Afrikaans churches by Jaap Durand (2002).

The landscape of the DRC has irrevocably changed. And when I argue for a “theological coherence”, it is no plea to turn back to a situation of unitary or authoritarian theological constructs. What I do wish to argue for, are forms of theological interconnectedness that provide a sufficient (though not exclusive) framework within which the DRC can renegotiate her own identity between two extremes: on the one hand theological foundationalism and essentialism which does not allow for critical plurality and requires authoritarian, homogenous ecclesial forms. On the other hand lies deconstructive, chaotic differentiation sometimes linked to forms of epistemological nihilism that fosters ecclesial independentism.¹² The concrete theological concepts that may determine this interconnectedness are in my view the list discussed in this paper: Reformed, ecumenical, public and African. They might form, I suggest, the boundary points or co-ordinates within which to map and reconstruct DRC-theologies that are indeed pluralist, but nevertheless coherent enough to form the space of our future habitation - hopefully in a broader family of South African churches.

To explain the background to this notion of theological coherence, I take my cue from Clifford Geertz’s redefinition of “culture”¹³ in semiotic-symbolic terms (see especially Geertz 1973) and James Clifford’s idea of culture as negotiation of meaning (see Clifford 1988). “Culture” is here not perceived as an organic whole that moves naturally through successive phases of maturation, but rather as human collectives that show an ambiguous character where metaphors of unity and dissolution are kept in tension in the process of identity-seeking, identity- revision and even -subversion. “Culture is a long, relational struggle to maintain and recreate identities”(Clifford 1988: 338). In this negotiation of identity amidst chaos and order, Clifford emphasises that, despite constant flirtation with fragmentation (and we might add: despite sometimes dramatic collapses of symbolic universes), the assumption of forms of symbolic human connectedness cannot simply be abandoned (Clifford 1988: 145), as without this life would be mere chaos. Delwin Brown, in his well-known book on traditions, argues that canon and ritual plays an indispensable role in re-creating tradition as the boundaries of our habitation (Brown 1994).

And this Christian, and specifically Reformed, tradition – expressed in the ecumenical creeds, Reformed Formulae of Unity and the Belhar confession, and most vividly carried forth by the early church fathers, John Calvin and Karl Barth – needs to be re-appropriated in a way that make sense for today. We shall have to deconstruct terms like Calvinism¹⁴ and Reformed¹⁵ and translate¹⁶ the confessions into a language of and

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12. The presbyterial system of church governance indeed allows for the relative autonomy of the local congregation, but there are growing examples that some (“successful“?) congregations build their profile increasingly independent of the church in broader circuit- or synodical structures, and some congregations are even hostile to the insitutional church in its broader sense. In its worst form, this easily leads to theological sectarianism based on us-them-typologies.
 13. Culture is for both Geertz and Clifford processes of human collectivities of which religion is a part. In the same way, I take theology as a part of what would constitute identity in the DRC.
 14. The popular notion of Calvinism is that it relates to people that work (too) hard and are highly moralistic. For a worthy reclamation of Calvin and Reformed, see the popular but well-informed publication *Ons weet aan wie ons behoort* by Coenie Burger (Burger 2002).
 15. In the alternative Afrikaans music revival of the early 1990’s one of the most popular bands named itself *Die Gereformeerde Blues Band* and one of the leadsingers became known as *Johannes Kerkorrel*. A superficial reading of both the lyrics and the movement suggest that it became the vehicle for deconstructing the Afrikaner authoritarian past constituted by church (specifically the DRC as Gereformeerde) and political party (see the highly successful hit, *Sit dit af*). The first tour was aptly name the *Vrye Voëlvlug-toer* and was banned from at least two traditionally Afrikaans campuses at the time!

for today. We shall further have to forge a link between hermeneutically enabling theological scholarship and the realities of congregations where this theology is to be translated into sermons, liturgies, catechesis and a life *coram Dei*. The lure toward unreflective actionism where the church is called upon to assist in many of the crises of our country, but where she is unable to both root and shape this assistance in her own theological character, must be equally resisted as uninhibited doctrinal freedom where the church tries to be everything to everybody. The latter specifically relates to the Protestant roots of Reformed theology as a polemical theology in search of the truth as revealed in Scripture, and being able to posit the marks of the true church exactly in the gospel, the sacraments and church discipline.

It might sound elitist, but I remind you of the groundbreaking work by JH Oldham who - in preparing the second conference of Life and Work (Oxford 1937) - aptly described the church as "community of thought", calling to its aid the best minds that it can command. If we nurture this "community of thought" as a "truth-seeking community" (Polkinghorne) it will prevent us from both anti-theological spirituality and a non-spiritual theology, enabling us to serve God and the world with the best Reformed theology we can construct under the constraints of our tradition and our time.

Will and should an overarching paradigm like the previous one emerge? I think the answer is no. We will learn to live in a more fragile theological house, a bit more eclectic than systematic, deriving coherence from the inner thrust of Reformed theology itself: *semper reformanda*.

The task has only just begun.

2. The enrichment of our tradition toward an ecumenical theology: the church as one, catholic community

In a current series of international conferences, the Centre for Theological Inquiry (Princeton) is pursuing the theme of *Reformed identity and ecumenicity*. The results so far¹⁷ confirm the basic tenet of Reformed theology to be nothing else than truly Christian and therefore ecumenical theology. The Reformation was not driven by schismatic notions of a sectarian church and the Reformed confessions are at pains to emphasise their confirmation and continuation of the apostolic faith and ecumenical creeds (see Belgic confession article 9 and Wethmar 1991).

The DRC shared this ecumenical orientation and played an important role in reformed and ecumenical bodies up to 1960. After the disastrous rejection of the Cottesloe consultation (7-14 December 1960) by the Cape and Transvaal Synods, the DRC was slowly but surely ecumenically isolated and became in stead the object of witness for many church consultations in the ensuing years (see Naude 2002a). This culminated in the dramatic events of Ottawa in 1982 when a *status confession* was accepted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and membership of the DRC and Gereformeerde Kerk was

16. I use "translate" here in the double sense of actually rewriting our confessions in modern Afrikaans (see the success of *Die Boodskap* as really dynamic equivalent Bible), but also as reappropriating them as speaking to the spiritual issues of today. A good example of work related to creeds and confessions are Dirkie Smit's trilogy of collected sermons on the Nicene Creed published by *Lux Verbi* (See Smit 2001, 2002, 2003), and *Op weg met Belhar*, a popular introduction to the Belhar confession by Johann Botha and Piet Naude (1997).

17. Three conferences have been held so far. Proceedings of the first conference were published as *Toward the future of reformed theology*, edited by Willis and Welker (see German title in bibliography). I was fortunate to be part of the other two conferences held in Heidelberg, Germany (systematicians) and Stellenbosch, South Africa (biblical scholars) in 1999 and 2001 respectively. These papers are currently under review for possible publication by Eerdmans.

suspended. In her own family, the DRC became increasingly lonely. This position was strengthened by her inability to hear the ecumenical voice that spoke through the Belhar confession in the period between 1982 and 1990.¹⁸

The history of increasing ecumenical isolation is told elsewhere.¹⁹ The impact on us had been severe: It led to the DRC becoming a typically denominational church whose identity and self-understanding lied in her very separateness. There is enough evidence to support what Lukas Vischer has observed in the broader ecumenical movement: “Frequently, confessional positions are not defended by a concern for the purity of their teaching. The real motive is often simply preservation of one’s identity which has developed over the course of history.... These may be matters of language, ethnic identity, national pride, or other things” (Vischer 1984:232, my emphases)²⁰.

If we accept with Hauerwas (1981:1) that a faith community is a story-formed community, and with Ritschl (1984:45ff) that “Story” with its implicit axioms determine our identity, a narrative analysis seems an appropriate method to “uncover” the identity of faith communities in particular and denominations in general.²¹ So the question is: What were the major factors which formed the self-understanding of the DRC?²² It is obviously a very complex question which can only be addressed by a multiplicity of inter-disciplinary studies including literary criticism, history, sociology and economics. Three South African (theological) studies – based on the concept of “myth” as a belief held to make sense of the world – are helpful in this regard.

First: in his analysis of sermons in the period 1960-1980, Cilliers (1994) found a decisive structure in the myth of the “volk” where the overriding urge for preservation is not only seen as a divine decree, but intensified by a process of clear delineation between the insiders and outsiders, “us” and “the enemy”. Second. In their discussion of apartheid as neurotic myth and dominant social source of church formation in South Africa, Adonis and Smit (1991) refer to mounting fear and an apocalyptic mind-set in the face of social change. Third. In his analysis of ten congregations from the DRC in the period up to 1990, Hendriks notes that the prescriptive power of myths (determining a view of the world) results in an astonishing lack of historical consciousness of the context in which the congregations operate and that they hold a romantic view of the past (Hendriks 1992:61ff).

As a (partial) “snapshot” of the DRC stemming from the period before 1994, the conclusions of studies from different angles nevertheless point in the same direction:

We see an ecumenically isolated, denominational church, struggling to preserve her identity in a collapsing socio-political world which underpins her dominant myths, and

18. For an analysis of how the Belhar confession grew from and exceeded ecumenical witnesses between 1948 and 1982, see Naude 2002a.

19. See the overview of the DRC and ecumenics for the period 1948-1982 with good reference to primary literature in De Villiers 1986. An illuminating early reflection, open to ecumenical relations, is found in AJ van Wijk (ed.) *Die Ekumene . n Besinning oor interkerklike verhoudinge* (1964) with contributions inter alia by WA Landman, Jaap Durand, and Ben Marais. On pages 21-23, see the very interesting – and at points contradictory – declaration on ecumenical relations and church unity by the Gefedereerde Ned Geref Kerk before the different synods joined together in 1962.

20. Although from a completely different perspective, Wesley Kort in his *Bound to differ* (1992:135, 139) is quite cynical about what is called “Christian identity” as it is a social demand expressed in the need to categorize and be categorized in order to control. The declaration of a Christian identity is according to him therefore not actually Christian pressure.

21. See Richard Niebuhr: *The social sources of denominationalism* published as early as 1929 (New York: Henry Holt) A well-known example of this approach in the field of practical theology is James Hopewell: *Congregations: Stories and structures* (Worcester: SCM, 1987).

22. The next few paragraphs are taken from Naude 2001 (hitherto unpublished paper).

which is in turn supported by the very same myths. This “narrative closure“ points to a definite “hermeneutical closure” where alternative (ecumenical) - and specifically contra-myths - are excluded, or very difficult to “read”.

Ecumenical isolation also inhibited the growth of a Reformed theology that deliberately seeks to be an ecumenical theology. I understand an ecumenical theology not as one confined to an overt engagement with discussions related to the modern ecumenical movement, nor as a kind of “supra-confessional” effort, but by a spirit of constructing theology with an urgency and openness to engage with and learn from the broader Christian tradition and inter-faith dialogue, whilst declaring the basis or specific confessional tradition from which your views are derived.²³

Her isolation made it impossible for the DRC to follow ecumenical debates, share ecumenical concerns and participate in ecumenical projects. To the contrary, during the period 1960-1986 the DRC was overtly anti-ecumenical as it attempted to defend its own theological viewpoint and practices against growing criticism from churches inside and outside South Africa (see De Villiers 1986:164). (The most important contra-voice from within the DR-church during this period has been systematic theologian Willie Jonker²⁴ who was able to develop and defend a biblical, Reformed theology whilst engaging with e.g. Catholic theology, Pentecostalism and creative but dissenting voices like Bultmann and Barth. No wonder he himself has at occasions been called both liberal and Catholic!).

Where are we heading? The tide has turned. The DRC, as confirmed by its unconditional confession on apartheid in 1999 and decisions on ecumenicity at its recent General Synod (Oct 2002), is eager to re-join the ecumenical church in a variety of ways. The DRC commitment reads: “We commit ourselves to greater unity with other churches. We really want to re-unite with our church family, as we believe God wills it. We also want to confirm and extend our ecumenical relations and take hands with other Christians to build our country and relieve painful circumstances” (my translation). The DRC knows the first step is re-unification in the DRC-family – a complex process, but with the promise to heal the rift that dates back to 1881 when the Mission Church was founded.

In this process, the DRC will for the first time in many decades learn how much it needs others and the riches derived from ecclesial reciprocity. The opportunity now arises to both construct an ecumenical theology and realise in congregations the confessional unity of the church so forcefully witnessed to in the Nicene Creed and article 2 of the Belhar confession. This will also enable the DRC to move from a denominational self-understanding to confirm the richness of the church’s catholicity. This catholicity implies that each local congregation represents the full church of Christ, but at the same stands in communion with the universal church in both space (the whole world) and time (the church through the ages). It also expresses the promise of the church’s future, because in the Catholic Church is represented the rule of Christ, a king who cannot be without subjects at any one point in history (see Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 54; Belgic Confession article 27).

23. There are many examples of this form of ecumenical theology in recent times. A random list close to the ecumenical movement may include Edmund Schlink, Geoffrey Wainwright, Dietrich Ritschl, Konrad Raiser and many others. A recent example of how a Reformed scholar treats a specific systematic-theological question from an ecumenically enriching perspective, is Michael Welker’s *What happens in holy communion*, a translation of *Was geht vor bei dem Abendmahl?* (Welker 2000). Miroslav Volf’s treatment of Trinitarian theology in his *After our likeness. The church as the image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1998) is another example of how different traditions (in his case: Catholic and Orthodox) are taken seriously in an critical but open ecumenical approach. .

24. For a moving tribute to Jonker’s ecumenicity, see Smit 1989. It remains a pity that Jonker’s work has not found a wider readership in English or German in the period between 1960 and 1998.

I cannot think of a more solid basis for hope than this – especially for a church whose members are in dire need to see the opportunities of being Christians in Africa. But for this to be realised, two further tasks need to be undertaken.

3. The conscious effort to construct a critical, public theology:

The church as holy community

The notion of a “public theology” or “revisionist theology” has its origin and major representation in the USA and to a lesser degree in Germany.²⁵ Despite quite substantial differences among different strands of public theologies, there are at least three shared common concerns:

First: Public theology is a reaction to the displacement of religion from the public sphere by philosophical and political developments inherent to modernity. It attempts to regain a foothold in the public square of society so as to combat the privatisation of religion and concomitant secularisation of public life. Second: Public theology addresses issues of public concern from a theological perspective so as to contribute to a better society. Third: Public Theology puts a high premium on the “publicness” of its own arguments and develops forms of communication that is accessible and open for scrutiny beyond the close circle of professional theologians.

The urgent need for a theology of this nature (whether it is called “public” or not) stems from the fact that the demise of apartheid and transition to a liberal democracy exposed South African society to the forces of modernity. One may refer to the emphasis on individual freedom of choice, questioning and even rejection of traditional authority, and introduction of a constitutional dispensation that shattered the *de facto* and implicit *corpus christianum* from which Christian churches operated for decades. No one will in principle question the valuable gains of a modernist democracy, but we slowly realize the completely different demands it puts on doing theology after 1994, and modernity’s eroding effect on the historical, mainline churches²⁶ of which the DRC is one.

Although South African society is an interesting mix of all the stages of modernity, and, despite its constitutional dispensation, it is definitely not a secularist society.²⁷ The rules for “being heard on the public square” have nevertheless irrevocably changed. They shifted from an assumed prophetic role for theology and the churches to one where “prophecy” – if not replaced by a more “priestly” mode – is tied up with the art of democratic processes and lobbying at all levels of government, often in the context of inter-religious rather than exclusively Christian negotiations. It includes the difficult requirement that theology and the church meet other societal spheres (business, NGO and CBO-structures, forms of civil society) on their own turf whilst in some way retaining a distinctly theological voice. It is then further required that theology and the church communicate such voice on issues of

25. South African Reformed theologians who give overt attention to this idea include the many works over many years by John de Gruchy, and in recent times by Ernst Conradie (see Conradie’s work on David Tracy and discussion in Conradie 1998), Dirkie Smit (see recent paper, Smit 2002a), and Piet Naude (see Bezuidenhout and Naude 2002). References to major authors and different currents are found in these articles.

26. There are two groups of churches that maintain their growth despite modernist influences: The charismatic house-churches and the African Independent Churches. Both show a remarkable ability to shelter their members from the debilitating forces of individualism and secularism. There is no room here to pursue the reasons for this, nor to evaluate the theological tenets underlying these church movements. For a very brief overview of the hermeneutics involved, see chapters 24 and 25 in Maimela and Konig (eds.) 1998.

27. See an analysis of the present government’s ambiguous policy toward religion in public life by Lombaard (2001) as a reflection of how to skilfully(?) deal with the broad public’s religious sensibilities despite a liberal constitution.

public concern in a manner that reaches the hearts and minds of leaders and ordinary citizens alike. No wonder Keith Clements -writing from a British and Irish ecumenical perspective – argues that the church is in desperate need of *Learning to speak* (see Clements 1995).

(For example: The link between the church and the mass media is more important than ever, but it requires a different skill to utilise the media in a situation where you are by assumption “newsworthy” to one where you have to “make news” in a way that supports and promote the integrity of your public voice).

How prepared is the DRC to develop such a public theology? The will to make a difference in society has recently been confirmed in the General Synod commitment,²⁸ and is in line with the traditional Calvinist conviction of Christ’s rule over the whole of creation (all spheres of society) that has always been part of the DRC’s “make-up”.

A public theology however implies a form of critical theology in a multiple sense of the word: A critical analysis of society and its modernization; a critical judgement of core issues affecting society, and a critical mode of discourse enabling debate in the public realm, as well as self-critical forms of communication with a variety of publics. I am not sure whether the DRC can as yet meet these demands. Let me explain this with two remarks on critical scholarship²⁹ - one theological and the other hermeneutical.

In an interesting paper on the relation between SA and Europe, Willie Jonker observes that the DRC never fully understood the combined effect of World War Two and the Second Enlightenment represented by the critical theories of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas. What happened, says Jonker, is that the DRC relied on an earlier, pre-critical European theology (in the form of romantic and self-satisfied neo-Calvinism) exactly at a time when ideology-critique was accepted as indispensable part of any theoretical construct. This delayed the DRC’s full confrontation with new European theological trends and led to its almost total intellectual and ecumenical isolation: “From the view of the outside world as a whole, the theology of the Afrikaans churches is too uncritical, too naive with regard to the ideological presuppositions of our thoughts, too much oriented to a period in the *Geistesgeschichte* that has passed, and shows too little willingness to accept the implications of the Enlightenment” (Jonker 1988a:154, my emphasis).

It lies beyond the scope of this paper to show how many - Jaap du Rand (1985:40), Willie Jonker (1988:30-31), and recently Russel Botman (2001 and 2002:352), Dirkie Smit (2000) and Piet Naude (2001:94-95) have indicated that the theological roots of a critical theology could potentially be found in the thought of Karl Barth who was - until the mid-eighties - not appropriated in DRC-theology due to perceived problems with his views on revelation, Scripture, baptism, and election. One can now add: the invigorating theologies of liberation (black, African, feminist) that started to emerge in the early seventies with their overt ideological-critical³⁰ approach and fresh insight in to the message of the Bible,

28. There is a renewed commitment to Africa and overt expression of the will “to make a difference“ as salt of the earth and light of the world (NGK 2002).

29. The section on critical scholarship is derived from an as yet unpublished paper on the future of Reformed scholarship delivered to the Ecumenical Institute, Heidelberg on 10 January 2003. If accepted, it will be published in full in *JTSA* (see Naude 2003).

30. This type of thinking emerged in the circles of ABRECSA whose charter and supplementary declaration (1981), is a brilliant reclamation of the Reformed tradition in answer to the crucial question of how it is possible to be black and reformed (related to the title of Allan Boesak’s well-known book). Although one could question the almost naive re-appropriation of Marxist ideology-critique by most forms of liberation theologians, it does not diminish their role in focusing theological attention on “the underside of history”

could in principle not be heard in a church and society defending themselves exactly against such revolutionary forces that “mix religion and politics” in an unacceptable way.³¹

The hermeneutical remark stems from Bernard Lategan. He argues that Reformed hermeneutics in general suffered from a structural deficit in its inability to deal with the question of history as posed by the Enlightenment. Whereas the Lutheran tradition could accept critical historical ideas, utilising the *was Christum treibet*-principle and practising internal *Sachkritik*, Reformed scholars developed a dogmatic resistance against *Geschichtlichkeit* in their understanding of Scriptural authority on the assumption of truth as historical truth (i.e. correspondence between historical events recorded in Scripture and their actual occurrence). “This necessitated the defence of biblical history as historically correct” and as precondition for its truthfulness. Except for textual criticism, “there was no natural uptake and exploiting of the historical family of hermeneutical methods - historical criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, composition criticism and the like”.³²

I have indicated earlier that biblical scholarship in South Africa - probably our most enlightened group of scholars with high international standing - limited the impact of their critical scholarship in a number of ways (Naude 2001a). This was summarised by Elizabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza (1988:4) with regard to biblical scholarship in general: An assumed value-neutrality oblivious to the political context of interpretation; an inability to translate meaning beyond the historical investigation of the text; little or no consideration for ecclesial or confessional traditions; and the creation of a closed world of expertly scholarly inquiry which denies the interests and values underlying their communicative practice. I do not want to repeat the concrete examples here (Naude 2001a:97), but the broader critical effect of our biblical scholars were neutralised in advance by their “scientist ethos” (Botha 1992:197) and the fact that despite their good intentions (see the foreword to the very first edition of *Skrif en Kerk*), biblical scholars usually found themselves extremely uneasy to engage in the *wirkungsgeschichtliche* realities of the church and its confessions, avoiding the difficult question of what *sola Scriptura* could mean after the Enlightenment.

Their only option was to combine a highly critical biblical scholarship with a fairly naive dogmatics; leaving the poor dogmaticians (in the view biblical scholars) with both a naive theology and even more naive reading strategy.³³

The chickens have now come home to roost in the two forms: Ben du Toit’s book on faith in a post-modern age entitled *God? Geloof in 'n postmoderne tyd* (2000), and the surge of a so-called “new reformation” driven by critical biblical and classical scholars in

(Gutierrez). Reformed liberation theologians were consequently able to develop a credible alternative hermeneutical key to “justification by faith alone” in their insistence on the epistemological privilege of the marginalized and the poor. One of the Belhar confession’s important achievements is that it was able to draw these two lines together in one confession - look at the inner consistency and “logic of grace” in the movement from the first to the highly contested fourth article. Up till now our mainline scholarship has not been able to take the second line seriously. For text and discussion, see Cloete and Smit (eds.) 1984.

31. This is clearly illustrated in my analysis of why the DRC struggled to accept the confession of Belhar as confession: once it was popularly labelled as “liberation theology”, its fate was sealed, despite even official denials from the DRC-leadership. See Naude 1997.
32. See Lategan 2001: 2. He then - following Nash - reconstructs the well-known Du Plessis-case in terms of its implications for critical theological scholarship which they believe shifted from the Stellenbosch Seminary to Philosophy (Kirsten, Rossouw) and Semitic Languages (Fensham, Deist).
33. See the very interesting remark by Bertie du Plessis, former NT scholar at Unisa, in his newspaper review of the *Festschrift* for Willie Jonker: “For the subject specialist the thoughts of Heyns (and Jonker) appear to be naive, because it does not reflect in any way the problems arising from the exegetical discipline.” This is inter alia linked to a “probleemlose beroep op die Skrif”(my translation, emphasis original). I know that some biblical scholars also said that about Adrio Konig’s systematic work (“more sermons than exegesis”).

alliance with the Jesus-seminar (see Muller 2002). Critical scholarship has hit the streets and the pages of *Beeld*, well-known and influential Afrikaans daily newspaper.

Du Toit's book is the first attempt in Afrikaans Reformed circles to take critical scholarship to the heart of our confessional tradition.³⁴ His own roots lie in the critical realist school set up in South Africa by Wentzel van Huyssteen (1986) and appropriated hermeneutically by Ferdinand Deist (1994). In Ben du Toit's own thought, the lines of a methodologically post-Barthian systematic theology and a critical hermeneutic³⁵ come together in a very interesting genre that is more confession than formal dogmatics. This convergence has not happened before in our theology. This explains the ambiguous reaction of both rejection as obviously unorthodox, and acceptance as a liberative, post-modern account of faith. We need a lot more thinking in this regard.

A few remarks about the "new reformation": I am sure any reasonably informed theologian understands that the questions announced by our colleagues, are indeed 19th century type questions about which we were informed all along (although the details obviously differ). But because of the failed ecclesial and confessional integration of biblical scholarship, referred to by Schussler-Fiorenza, it now appears to ordinary believers as a "surprise" or a new freedom from an authoritative church "who kept these things secret". The reality is that DRC synodical reports on both Scripture and ethical issues since the debate about women-ordination in the 1970's and around apartheid in the mid-1980's, appear to deal with the issue of history in a very responsible and open manner and clearly broke with a fundamentalist reading to include a more historical-critical approach. We have perhaps failed our *dominees* and congregants to not support them in making this paradigm shift where "truth" and "history" are linked in a more complex, but much more satisfying and intellectually honest manner.

The dualism between exegesis (critical biblical scholarship) and dogmatics (confessional tradition) is now as glaring as ever. The "new reformation"³⁶ will help us to face the difficult reflective task of greater theological and ecclesial coherence - even if we have to admit to more pluralities of thought than we would feel comfortable with.

It is too early to make a judgment whether the DRC's commitment to a public theology and public church will be more than project-driven, ad hoc-engagements, or whether it will mark the very existence of the church as *communio sanctorum*. Will the DRC be able to overcome the false tension between the "evangelical" and "social" mission of the church? And will she be able to live our "logic" of the Christian religion, namely to give herself to

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34. When I saw the unpublished manuscript, I sensed this *novum*, and immediately agreed to write the recommendation on the back cover despite the ambiguities in the argument. We realised that it would be difficult to find a publisher. It is a bit ironic that the *Christelike Lektuurfonds* (CLF) - known for its printing and distribution of more pietist literature - had the courage to take the project on.
35. See his book written with Van Huyssteen on the authority of Scripture in reaction to the Synod of Delft (Netherlands) report *God met ons* in 1979: JWV van Huyssteen and BJ du Toit, *Geloof en skrifgesag*. (1982). The basic shift was away from a correspondence theory of truth to a relational, constructivist view of truth with obviously radical implications for an interpretation of Scripture and its authority.
36. The book, *Die nuwe Hervorming*, is at times a moving account of (post)-modern believers and scholars attempting to "make sense" of their faith, and at times a gross oversimplification of "orthodox" faith. One has to see the pastoral as well as academic intent of this movement to understand its widespread support (and opposition). From the website I was struck by the fact that some of the leading academics in the new reformation try to draw up a kind of "statement of faith" to clarify their position. This is exactly the point: They realise you cannot deconstruct at will, without reconstructing you presuppositions. And these statements confirm my insistence that Bultmann's notion of *Vorverstaendnis* always include systematic theological convictions as well, and lead these thinkers into views directly contradicting long held Christian convictions like the Trinity and physical resurrection of Christ.

God as holy and acceptable sacrifice? (Rom 12:1-2). There are indeed positive signs of remarkable involvement of ordinary Christians in the public sphere – represented by their daily task as a life *coram Dei*. On an institutional level, holiness is realised and “made public” in a threefold manner:

First the act of God in Christ who accord believers the status of holy priesthood despite and against their own inability to be holy (1 Cor 1:30, 1 Pet 2:9, see Barmen article II). This is the undeniable theological base of a public church, as much as faith is the base for works. Second, the act of simply being church and exemplifying holiness in God-like internal relations³⁷ – specifically the obligation and joy to serve one another with the gifts of the Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism: Question and answer 55). Third, a public life in and before the world, according to the law as fulfilled in the gospel, that serves as witness to the character of the Holy God (Lev 11:44; 1 Pet 1:15) who calls the church to be salt and light so that by her good works the Father who is in heaven be honoured and glorified (Math 5:13-16).

Let us remind ourselves that the aim of a critical public theology and concomitant public church is not the self-promotion of the church in a public relations exercise, but exactly a pointing away³⁸ from the church to the Holy One to whom we are called to witness.

Let us now turn to the last task in the building of a coherent theological discourse.

4. An honest engagement with our continent toward an African theology:

The church as Christian community

One of the distinctive features of the Reformed tradition is its openness to new contexts. I have earlier (see Naude 2001) explained this from three perspectives: From a theological perspective the Reformers of the 16th century rediscovered and vigorously defended the Bible as normative canon for the church over and against the papal magisterium and “...the tyranny of human traditions which is haughtily obtruded upon us in the name of the Church”.³⁹ In this way Calvin and other Reformers not only set the Scriptures free from what they perceived to threaten its sovereignty, but they simultaneously also set it free for varied interpretations in varied contexts. “Charakteristisch fuer die reformierte Theologie ist die Grunderkenntnis, dass die reformatorische und reformierende Aktivitaet in der Kirche und in ihren Umgebungen von Gottes Wort ausgeht” (Welker and Willis 1998:10; original emphasis). That is why historical, social and cultural factors which question the power of God’s Word in fact also bring the identity of Reformed theology into question (Welker 1998: 174-175). Moltmann’s summary statement “Reformierte Theologie ist als reformierende Theologie – biblische Theologie...” (1998:172) clarifies the fundamental hermeneutical nature of reformed theologians’ endeavours.

37. This is why sexism, racism and classism are such devastating counter-forces when they play such a determinant role in the churches’ internal structures and reciprocal relations. They deny the gift of holiness and destroy the basis for publicness.

38. As member of the Year of Hope –commission (2001), we had several discussions with civic leaders on the role of the DRC in the future of our country. Aggrey Klaaste – then still editor of the *Sowetan* – answered in one sentence: “Build a home for Aids-orphan and do not say the DRC gave the money.” This sounds very much like the Sermon on the Mount about left and right hands!

39. Calvin, *Institutes*: Book IV, 10.18. See Calvin’s extensive exegesis – specifically of the Old Testament - in his arguments against the pope and Catholic Church in Book IV of his *Institutes*. The basic point remains: “Let us understand that the name of the Church is falsely pretended wherever men contend for that rash human licence which cannot confine itself within the boundaries prescribed by the word of God, but perpetually breaks out, and has recourse to its own invention” (IV, 10.17, my emphasis).

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to note that as churches of the Reformation spread over Europe and later all over the world, a rich variety of churches identifying themselves as “Reformed” (not necessarily by name) were established with a concomitant rich variety of theologies.⁴⁰ From a confessional perspective, the Catholic faith community lives within the normative tradition of the Councils⁴¹ as well as the definitive context of encyclicals as official papal teaching. The Lutheran faith community has in the *Confessio Augustana* (1530) a definitive shared confession⁴² as well as a relative closure of interpretative activity in the *Konkordienbuch* (1580). This stands in contrast to the “open” Reformed confessional developments in response to various challenges in various contexts over the past five centuries.⁴³ The very concept of Christian “confessions” and the church as “confessing church” is seen by some as a typical contribution of Reformed theologies to the broader Christian faith: “Das aktuelle Bekennen des Glaubens ist geradezu die Eigenart der reformierten Kirchen von ihren Anfänge an bis heute” (Moltmann 1998:159, my emphasis).

Cumulatively seen, these perspectives explain the fundamentally contextual sensitivity (and therewith vulnerability) of Reformed theology and churches. Looking back on 350 years in Africa, a vital question is whether the DRC became an African church with a concomitant African contextual theological orientation. This is quite a complex question due to the fact that sub-Saharan “Africa” is in itself a differentiated concept, and there are obviously many forms of “contextual theologies” in Africa between the extremes of theologies of inculturation (e.g. Mbiti, Pobee, Setiloane) and liberation (e.g. Buthelezi, Mosala) with many differences in between. These depend on the “arrangement” and “interpretation” of the four main sources of African theologies, namely African indigenous religion, the Bible, the African life-experience and relation to Western theology.⁴⁴

The answer to the question of an African church and theology with regard to the DRC is not a simple no, because the DRC mission churches indeed succeeded to gain their independence and enculturated successfully in countries like Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia and elsewhere. And the Afrikaner or Afrikaans speaking community that forms the core of the DRC up to this day, did form an own identity, culture and language that differ from their Dutch, French, and German origins. Although rooted in Europe, one could say that the theology supporting apartheid prevalent in the DRC for much of the twentieth century, was a uniquely African adaptation to the difficult questions

40. The South African journal *Acta Theologica* devoted its first number of 1992 to a special edition wherein “leading reformed theologians from various parts of the world” gave an account of theologies in their region. Unfortunately the contributors were restricted to first world countries (USA, Canada, The Netherlands, Scotland and Australia) and South Africa, excluding many exciting developments in Latin America, Korea and the then Eastern Europe, as well as “alternative” voices within these regions.

41. Obviously the Reformed tradition also sees itself as in congruence with the Ecumenical Councils between Nicea I (325) and Chalcedon (451).

42. This, according to Moltmann, is the reason why Barmen was never accepted as confession by the Lutheran churches in Germany (1998:159).

43. This ranges from the need to teach (Heidelberg Catechism 1563), doctrinal struggles in the narrower sense of the word (Dordt 1518) to contemporary issues of church – state relations under National Socialism (Barmen 1934), weapons of mass destruction (Declaration of the Reformierte Bund in Germany, 1981), general renewal of the Christian faith (The Confession of 1967, Presbyterian Church, USA) and the witness for justice, unity and reconciliation (Belhar 1986). Sources which attempt to list all confessions are quickly outdated by the ongoing process. Authoritative attempts though were EFK Mueller: *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (1903) and the more recent Lukas Vischer: *Collection of confessions and statements of faith issued by reformed churches* (1982).

44. See the many recent articles on African theologies by Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, recently appointed as professor of African theology at Unisa.

of identity and differentiation, colonialism and the struggle for freedom, the question of minority rights, and the ambiguous social power of religion that can at once liberate and enslave. By its inward orientation and self-preserving identity-formation, the DRC did indeed develop a contextual African theology, but in doing so the “other faces” of Africa – those outside the circle of exactly this theological ideology – were excluded.

At the previous conference on the DRC in transition I discussed this issue under the rubric of the general orientation of DRC-theology as being fundamentally European and North American. I repeat a few points made then (see Naude 2001a:100-102), starting with a comment of Willie Jonker in reaction to my criticism (see Naude 1991:117) that he missed opportunities to translate his theological insights on election and covenant for an African continent:

“We all have our limitations and no theologian can jump across his own shadow. My own theological position was to a great extent determined by my formation and situation. ... This means that I was from the outset oriented to European theology. To tell the truth, many of us have until recently not even noticed that it was European theology. For us it was simply ‘theology’... The realisation that the theology from Europe has itself a contextual character, only recently dawned upon us. The task to think through the full implications thereof for our theological reflection in SA, I gladly leave to the younger generation” (Jonker 1991:120, my translation and emphasis).

That Jonker clearly understood the issue is evident from his earlier speech before the *Akademie*: “The challenge before which we stand is to work with others toward an understanding and interpretation of the bible in our situation as people who are drenched in the European tradition but who, in the mean time, became people of Africa. Here we live and work, we think and pray... We are called to do theology on the fault line (*breuklyn*) between the First and the Third World” (Jonker 1988a:156, my translation and emphasis).

I am not suggesting that mainstream DRC theology did not address the issues of contextuality and Africa. I am also not adhering to a static, romantic or exclusively “black” view of what “Africa” means. The problem is that the issue of contextuality - specifically in New Testament science⁴⁵ - became more of a methodological issue than one of material significance in constructing theology. And the many articles about Africa and its realities emerged mainly from missiological reflections⁴⁶ without an “orientation”-effect on DRC theology as such.

Why is this so important? Because intellectual orientation determines your reflective agenda. Therefore the DRC - up to this day - was unable to really confront herself with the material effect for theology of the African context beyond the social world of white South Africa.

This had at least two effects on DRC-theology:

First: The very question of cultural thought forms and expressions in a discipline so deeply Western, was not adequately addressed⁴⁷ from the rich variety of alternative

45. One may refer to exceptions like the work of HJB Combrink (see his very informative *Die Bybel lewe in Afrika* written after a visit to Kenya in April 1991, *Acta Theologica* 11/2, 81-90). See also the very substantial contributions on contextual hermeneutics by BC Lategan, e.g. his *The challenge of contextuality* (1991) and *Aspects of a contextual hermeneutics for South Africa* (1994).

46. The work by David Bosch, Dionne Crafford and Piet Meiring over many years - too many to list here - is a pillar of hope in this regard. For a specific example, see Crafford 1993.

47. My work on orality and the very notion of theology/literacy as well as a Zionist Christology may be noted as an effort to take our African context seriously, albeit it represents very preliminary ideas. See Naude 1993, 1996.

perspectives. We only belatedly saw the “locality” of Western thought and did not know how to deal with it. Neither do we know better today.

Second: The link between theology and sub-modernity⁴⁸ was never really forged. One can only dream about the effect on DRC theological faculties if women and others from the non-powerful spheres could influence academic work. Let us remind ourselves what Thomas Kuhn (1962!) has taught us about scientific paradigms: They are community constructs that embody the commitment of a community of scientists “to see the world in a certain way” and from which the relevant questions are then generated as scientific puzzles. The best way to “interrupt” a “view of the world” and the “relevant questions posed” is to alter the composition of your community of inquirers. The new members bring with them a different social construction of reality that will most probably alter the very question asked and the very problems addressed.⁴⁹

If the relation between Stellenbosch and Kruispad, Pretoria and Mamelodi, Bloemfontein and Botshebelo were ecclesially and socially established earlier, the theological orientation would no doubt have been different. And swept forward by the hermeneutical spiral between theory and practice, the DRC could have become herself a greater transformative force in South Africa and not a church which in most cases mirrored the (changing) realities of her own situation (see Nicol 2001).

What are the potential for change in this regard? The joint theological education at Stellenbosch, the recent ecumenical efforts at all three faculties of theology traditionally related to the DRC, and reunification of the DRC-family all provide huge opportunities for a renewed contextualization of our theology. The Belhar confession is of enormous significance as the first Reformed confession speaking about the issues of unity, reconciliation and justice in our context, but at the same time making a unique contribution to the universal church’s understanding of the gospel today (see Naude 2003a). The growing sense of white congregants that this continent is our home, and the DRC’s recent explicit commitment to Africa at its General Synod (see earlier quotation), bodes very well for our future.

From this extended community, an extended agenda⁵⁰ will arise. This is already evident in the emerging theological perspectives on HIV/AIDS, the creative ongoing reflection on truth, reconciliation and restorative justice; an analysis of a public ethos and moral regeneration; land redistribution and ecology; the debt trap of African countries in a global market economy in relation to a *processus confessionis*, and the crucial issue of identity and community that requires a restated theological anthropology. There is no doubt (and I repeat): our theological task has only just begun.

The ecclesial translation of contextuality is depicted in the church as Christian church. The incarnation of Christ is the most radical expression of God’s contextuality and deep

48. I am quite aware that “sub-modernity” represents another variety of modernity as a fundamental Western phenomenon not applicable to all spheres of South African society. I owe it to colleague Bert Olivier from Philosophy at UPE who pointed out that exactly this situation represents SA as a post-modern reality! But “sub-modernity” does help to express the “social location” of reality “below” the powers of modernity.

49. This will not happen automatically: A specific ideology-critical intellectual disposition is required.

50. This agenda lists for me the most urgent material theological challenges before the DRC – and before the church in SA in general. If I have to rewrite a paper with a less methodological focus, these are the issues I would address. The “list” is obviously provisional and open for correction and extension. I am keenly aware of my own social location in “constructing” such challenges.

love for the world. Recent developments in Trinitarian theology⁵¹ attempt to infer from the cycle of perfect self-donation of the immanent Trinity a sense of the church's being in the world. Miroslav Volf rightly points out that the self-donation of God in Christ and the Spirit (economic Trinity) is met with the resistance of non-love, deceit and injustice that led to the cross. For a Christ-like (i.e. Christian) church *imitatio crucis* implies that "...we are called to imitate the earthly love of that same Trinity that led to the passion of the Cross, because it was from the start a passion for those caught in the snares of non-love" (Volf 1998: 415).

In a paraphrase of one of the earliest Christian hymns (see Phil 2:5-11) one could state:

The same attitude must be in you that are in Christ: Do not cling to your social status and position of a powerful church, but rather humble yourselves to be equal with those who suffer in Africa. Humble yourselves by taking the nature of a servant – even if it means your death, yes your death in imitating the cross. Through your attitude and service God will honour and lift the name of Christ on high, so that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is indeed the Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

5. Conclusion

This paper merely tries to set the framework for constructing a coherent theological discourse in the DRC and her broader family and does not make a substantial contribution to the actual development of such a discourse. To what extent this framework might be useful for a broader post-apartheid theology, and for being the Christian church in (South) Africa in a new millennium, needs to be answered in the course of a wider debate. If our colleagues and friends from Hamburg could assist in this regard (as they have done to unravel our past and future), it will be highly appreciated.

If we needed good theology to lead us from apartheid to democracy, our current challenges – including the very sustenance of democracy - clearly require an equally vibrant church, and equally vigilant theologies that are mapped along Reformed, ecumenical, public-critical and African lines.

God bless Africa.

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51. The list is too long to include here, but recent work by Stackhouse, Hodgson, Zikmund, Lochman, Moltmann, Pannikar, Zizioula, Boff, Gunton and Volf spring to mind. The list already suggests the immensely fruitful exploration of Trinitarian thought for our understanding of personhood, identity, and social relations.

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