

## AFRICAN, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN!

### THE NEED FOR AFRICAN REFORMED CHRISTIANS TO SERIOUSLY ENGAGE THEIR AFRICANITY IN THEIR REFORMED THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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#### Abstract

*The rebirth of Africa lays a number of challenges at the doorstep of the Reformed church in Africa and specifically the Reformed church in South Africa. Given the history of the arrival of this faith in South Africa, African Reformed Christians are challenged to reflect on the essence of their Africanity and its relationship to this faith. By heeding this call, it is hoped that such a reflection will enable this tradition to be more at home in this continent without being seen as merely an extension of a plethora of European cultures in Africa. Among other things, those involved in this exercise are challenged to set a space where African cultures and Reformed faith can earnestly debate the terms for integrating these two fundamental issues. The Reformed faith in South Africa has a rich history. It is for this very reason that those involved in the subject suggested are reminded of the role that this very same tradition played in rebuffing the fallacies that characterized the Reformed faith in this country. It will therefore be argued that although black theology was iconoclastic in exposing the deliberate flawed hermeneutics engineered by some Reformed Christians which resulted in the consequent subjugation of African people to the politized theology of a minority group, it nonetheless dealt with the socio-economic and political context of African people in a myopic fashion because it failed to look beyond the political situation and thus failed to integrate African cultures with the Reformed faith.*

**Key words:** Africanity, African, Reformed, Renaissance, Organic intellectuals

#### Introduction

In 2003 I attended a conference that was organized jointly by the Ecumenical Foundation of South Africa (EFSA) and the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape. This conference was held in commemoration of thirty years of theology at this university. It was attended by some of the most renowned theologians and scholars from across the African continent. The theme of this conference dealt with the transformation of African theologies and many of these theologians spoke about the need for Christian theology to engage with initiatives across Africa that are aimed at instilling pride in African people, their cultures and beliefs.

In the process leading to the end of this conference I posed a question to Professor John Mbiti – a renowned African theologian – who did not deliver a lecture but was asked to say something about the proceedings of the conference and what was discussed. The question was “in our talk about African theology have we thoroughly dealt with the concept ‘Afri-

can' and have we clearly indicated who is qualified to speak on the subject of African theology?"

His response was brief and to the point although he did not dispel my ignorance on the subject of African theology and who was allowed to speak authoritatively on this subject. Looking at me he retorted, "you know who is an African". This question confirmed a number of things for me. Firstly I realized that the level that theologians and academics dealt elsewhere with this question differed tremendously to the way that it is been dealt with in South Africa (and even more so within South African Reformed theological circles). Evidently the reason for this is to be located at the backdrop of the arrival of the Christian faith in South Africa and the fundamental role that Reformed theology played in the politics that subsequently governed this country.

From Mbiti's response I concluded that the question of "who is an African" has been thoroughly discussed in some African circles to the point that it is considered sheer frivolity by some to deal with it in their talks concerning African theology today. I also discovered that consequent to the urgent need for Reformed theologians who consider themselves African to entertain this issue further, there is even greater need for African Christians in the Reformed tradition to avail space and time to deal with these two different and yet ontological aspects of their existence.

I also wondered whether he did not construe my question as being tricky and perhaps mistook it as a preliminary question to a main question that depended on his answer. To be sure, my question was a sincere question that was inform by the current perplexity of the South African socio-economic, political and cultural situation. Was an answer to the question "who is an African" to be found in the diverse cultures and races found in Africa? Or are South Africans so confused by perceptions that they are better of than the rest of Africans on this continent to the degree that they have exchanged their Africanity with being South African? I then thought that perhaps Mbiti did not see my question as being tricky but rather understood it as one belonging to a typical South African who has been assimilated so much into the West and is struggling to find room for his Africanity. Three years later as I began to teach Reformed dogmatics and ethics at the Theological College of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the need to engage the subject of being African and Reformed abounds.

This paper will attempt to deal more with some of the problems outlined. It also wishes to deal with the dearth of entertaining the question of being African in the Reformed church today. It will be argued that although this criticism is justified, Reformed theology need to seriously deal with its shortcomings concerning its attempts to make this tradition more domicile in Africa today.<sup>1</sup>

Reformed theology globally and specifically in South Africa is renowned for paying homage to some of its most distinguished church fathers. Most importantly it ought to be remembered that the Reformed faith came into existence because of some who realized that the Roman Catholic hegemony was wittingly keeping its subjects ignorant of what happens around them. A leaf is taken here from the boots of these Christians who taught that the

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<sup>1</sup> His paper acknowledges that the concept "Reformed theology" is broad and that there are a number of ecclesiastical traditions in the world and particularly in South Africa today that would characterize their theological outlook as Reformed. When reference is made in this paper to Reformed theology or to an African Reformed Christian, we refer in the first instance to the Reformed theology that stands in the tradition of the Dutch Reformed Church – a theology that was transported to South Africa by the Dutch Calvinists who were followed by the French Huguenots and the Swiss missionaries. When reference is made to the African Reformed Christian, we refer explicitly to this Christian who had made his/her home in the later Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

church must continually reform and it is argued therefore that African Reformed Christians must realize that for now when it comes to the subject in question “we are all alone” in our quest of finding amicable ways of integrating our Africanity with our being Reformed.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. African and Reformed: Assimilation or Integration?

The cliché that all of humanity is by nature religious is true and applies more especially to African people and their ways of living. Miskotte speaks in his innovative work entitled *when the gods are silent*, about the fourth man who had nullified this very cliché by his vulgar secularist inclinations.<sup>3</sup> In the African cultural setting, Africans cannot separate their spirituality from their material life therefore this vulgar secularist does not exist in the African setting. It is for this reason that Ngugi waThiongo wonders why an African must become a Christian or a Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the arrival of the Christian religion in Africa is a history that is fraught with controversy and purposeful ignorance about African people and their beliefs systems. Despite the servitude and exploitation that Africans had to endure at the behest of this new encroaching religion, African people were also eviscerated of all good knowledge about their religions and cultures. Proponents of this new faith managed to make Africans dependent upon them, as they attempted to de-culture Africans of their Africanity and consequently managed to assimilate them into their western beliefs system.

Mugambi has argued that subsequent to the conversion of Africans to the Christian faith, the opinion of the convert-subject was of no interest to the missionary. On the other hand the outspoken African converts were compelled to form their own ecclesial communities as a reaction against the missionary condescension.<sup>5</sup>

Being assimilated into the Christian faith meant in all cases the renunciation of one’s indigenous faith and beliefs system. Those sections of the African race that were yet to be assimilated into the Christian fold could not be compared with this faith. According to many missionaries, they lack an understanding of the concept God. Maluleke finds an example of this comparative approach in the criteria that the missionaries used to determine and establish religiosity among Africans. This entailed the search for evidence of belief in gods and/or monotheistic ideals. In such searches they would often make use of a name of a god that was already in use among the indigenous people.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore not by chance that

<sup>2</sup> One of the aspects that characterized the European Renaissance was the notion “nation” which was used to rightly distinguish one nation from the other and sometimes abuse the other to further a particular’s nations ideals to the detriment of the rest. African Renaissance projects should always remain conscious of the historical mistakes that were made in the advancement of one nation over the other. Yet it must be kept in mind here that African Renaissance initiatives are called into being among other things to exfoliate the layers of lies and ignorance that characterized African people and their cultures for centuries. It is this that forces those of us who supports African Renaissance initiatives within the Reformed Church in South Africa to look at ourselves as “being alone” in the course of dispelling these lies and ignorance from both those who are not in tune with African cultures and beliefs as well as those Africans who cannot imagine a Reformed Church that celebrates its Africanity.

<sup>3</sup> KH Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*. Great Britain: Harper and Row publishers. 1967, 1ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ngugi waThiongo cited by P Mukarati, “Seeking to reclaim Africa’s lost pride but...” in: *MOTO*. Jan/Feb 2006. Issue no. 264/265.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J Mugambi, “Between the Past and the Future in African Christian theology” in: E Conradie (ed.), *African Christian theologies in Transformation*. Cape Town: EFSA. 2004, 152.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. T Maluleke, “African Christianity as African Religion: Beyond the contextualization paradigm” in: E Conradie (ed.), *African Christian theologies in Transformation*. Cape Town: EFSA. 2004, 184f.

the very same names for God that were known among Africans are used to refer to the God that the pioneers of the Christian faith advocated for in their missionary campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

What they believed and their ways of conducting their affairs was taught to be in contradiction to the only true faith that was practiced by these settler whites. What is significant to recall is that the issue of the natives' conformity to Christianity stood secondary to the assimilation of Africans to Western values which would ultimately ensure the success of the colonial project – to subject the African race to a colonial role and to make it dependent upon the paternalism of the colonialists.

It was this dependence on the colonial masters and their paternalism which in turn contributed towards the dehumanization of African people. This dehumanization stretches far beyond the field of theology. Boesak is correct when he asserts that there was no field in western academic endeavor since the seventeenth century wherein the dehumanization of Africans did not become the acid test of the superiority of both the Western European cultures and beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

The Africans' ways of living, which were not considered to be in line with the ways of living of the settlers, was looked at as heathen and barbaric. Boesak refer to Hegel who is considered to date to be one of the greatest proponents of Western philosophical thought who said the following about African people:

If you want to understand [the Negro] rightly, you must abstract all elements of respect and morality and sensitivity [for] there is nothing remotely humanized in the Negro's character... Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world, shut up. It is ... the land of childhood, which lies beyond the days of self-consciousness history; it is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night... In Negro life that consciousness has not yet reached the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example God, or Law in which the interest of man's volition is involved, and in which he realizes his own being... It is the essential principle of slavery that man has not yet attained self – consciousness of his freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere Thing – an object of no value. Among Negroes moral sentiments are weak, or more strictly, non-existent".<sup>9</sup>

Many Africans have attempted to defeat this mendacity about Africans and their beliefs. Steve Bantu Biko in particular once said the following about Africans and their beliefs, that:

We believed in one God, we had our own community of saints through whom we related to our God, and we did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship in isolation from the various aspects of our lives. Hence worship was not a specialized function that found expression once a week in a scheduled building, but rather it featured in our wars, in our beer drinking, our dances and our customs in general. Whenever Africans drank, they would first relate to God by giving a portion of their beer away as a token of thanks. When anything went wrong at home they would offer sacrifice to God to appease him and atone for their sins. There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man-hence

<sup>7</sup> The names for God such as Modimo – the one that permeates all being (in Setswana and Sotho), Unkulunkulu – the great one in Zulu etc, are all names used to refer to God that were incorporated into the Christian faith in South Africa. More importantly they also reveal the fact that they were not comparable with any other statue or symbol. Cf. J Seoka, "African culture and Christian spirituality" in: M Guma and L Milton (eds.), *An African challenge to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Cape Town: Inner City Mission. 1997, 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A Boesak, "Truth crushed to the earth will rise again: Christian theology in South Africa – Looking back" in: E Conradie (ed.), *African Christian theologies in Transformation*. Cape Town: EFSA. 2004, 9.

<sup>9</sup> GWF Hegel cited in: A Boesak, *Truth crushed to the earth will rise again*, 10.

we took it for granted that all people at death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect.<sup>10</sup>

The proselytism of Africans carried with it the pseudo belief that the assimilation of African people into the Western lifestyles and conducts could save Africans from their otherwise predestined demise. It was soon revealed that although entry into the Christian faith through baptism and the subsequent assimilation and conformity of lifestyles that befitted the “superior” race, Africans were never really seen as equal to Europeans. The system of Apartheid, which became the trademark of pre-democratic South Africa, was a clear example in this regard.

The political and economic situation which justified the position of the Europeans or better yet, white people as that which is superior to Africans was later given theological and biblical legitimacy by the very people that had once attempted to drain African people of their religion and culture under the guise that the acceptance of the Christian faith rendered them equal to whites as human beings. The emphasis on the notion of race and nation were notoriously concocted with the Christian gospel so that it soon became something acceptable both to Africans and white Christians that God had ordained the black race to be subordinate to the white race.

The socio-economic and political situation in which South Africa found itself soon proved to be a situation where some African Christians began to question the theological and biblical justifications that underpinned the Apartheid ideology. Being reformed was conveniently associated with being white. This flawed and simplistic association was used as a key to unlock the dynamism of this ecclesial tradition and it was soon discovered that being reformed is much wider than mere whiteness.<sup>11</sup> An awareness of the lies that were instilled in Africans about the cultures and beliefs conjures up the renaissance era where many began to see beyond the institutions which defined their identities.

Fundamentally we must remember that the European Renaissance was an ideological project designed to restore European identity and integrity in the context of Muslim dominance in international affairs.<sup>12</sup> The European Reformation was the religious component of that project, in that Christianity proved to be a means of uniting those sentimental with this religion against the Moslem faith. In a similar way, Mugambi suggests that the African Renaissance will have to be a conscious re-conceptualization of African identities at all levels and dimensions of culture. It becomes therefore important to have an African reformation as the religious component for African Renaissance.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> S Biko, “Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity” in: B Moore (ed.) *The challenge of Black theology in South Africa*. John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1976, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A Boesak, “Black and Reformed: Contradiction or Challenge?” in: D McKim (ed.), *Major themes in the Reformed Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1992, 416-425.

<sup>12</sup> The Visigoths invaded Roman Spain in successive waves, starting in A.D. 414. Since they had been living on the borders of the Roman Empire for a while, they were neither barbarians nor infidels and had absorbed some elements of Roman culture, as well as an Arian version of Christianity. King Euric (467-85) completed the Visigothic conquest of Spain before the end of the fifth century. In the succeeding century, Toledo became capital of Spain. The nation included an ancient, indigenous population, mainly Iberians, some Romans, the Christian Visigoths, and a community of Jews, mainly craftsmen and traders, who lived in Spain since ancient times and whose rights were protected by both secular and canon law. At the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Moors – the inhabitants of Mogreb, or Morocco – who had been intent upon entering Spain for a century or more, invaded in massive numbers and destroyed the Visigothic monarchy by defeating Don Rodrigo (last king of the Visigoths) at the battle of Gaudalete in July 711. Spain became a Moslem emirate, ruled by an emir who was ultimately dependent on the Moslem Caliphate of Damascus, in: B Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A history of the Renaissance and Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1996, 314ff.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J Mugambi, *Between the Past and the Future in African Christian theology*, 151.

The realization of the essence of an African reformation project can only be arrived at when African Christians of the Reformed tradition appreciate the urgency of attending to the dilemma of being African and Reformed. Estep has noted that dissent in the fourteenth century had taken many forms – political, religious, economic and intellectual. All these forms pointed to the timely demise of the Constantine symbiosis that had glued Europe together for ages.<sup>14</sup> That European Renaissance contributed immensely to the reformation is with no doubt simply because this era opened up the possibility that the human could understand himself/herself and his/her context better. Consequently the classic reformation remains indebted to the European Renaissance in that it allowed the propagandists of this new force to see at least four factors that necessitated the reformation. Firstly the reformation became inevitable because of nationalism and the rise of national states. Thompson argues that nationalism, which was the growing self-consciousness of several European states, insisted that taxes should be collected and used for national purposes as well as for national self-aggrandizement. This view revealed the papacy as an extranational force as well as an impediment to national development. In England as well as in Germany in particular, the reformation was worked out in explicitly nationalistic terms against the extranationalistic pretensions of the papacy.<sup>15</sup>

The second reason was the economic disaffection. Thompson reminds us that the Europe of the reformation consisted of 65–80 million inhabitants and the prevailing economic system was capitalistic. This then allowed for the bourgeois classes who normally associated with capitalist economies to flourish in cities and towns that continued to grow during the sixteenth century. New technologies in mining, printing and shipping invigorated the economy and this setting subsequently included two sorts of displaced and disaffected people.<sup>16</sup>

The third reason was the weakness of the papacy. Since the 1300s it had suffered a succession of blows that might have toppled a less formidable institution. Thompson cites at least the following catastrophes:

- the Avignon papacy, 1305-76
- the Great Papal Schism, 1376-1417
- Conciliarism, 1409-60
- the Reformers Wycliffe and Hus
- the Borgia popes and the thread of secularization, 1455-1503.<sup>17</sup>

The fourth reason was the depressed state of the Latin Church. Thompson asserts that the malodorous accounts of the pontificate of Alexander VI were not only rumors heard in the taverns and marketplaces of Europe. He continues to refer to a rumor about one fine German who had informed another that ROMA really meant *radix omnium malorum avarita* (avarice is the root of all evil) and that the besetting sin of the Roman church was its

<sup>14</sup> Let it be enough to mention that the Western Renaissance project gave great impetus to the reformation of the church. During the elementary years of this Renaissance, the church was one of the movement's most generous patrons. The Roman Catholic Church devised numerous means of supporting and rewarding Renaissance humanists, both scholars and artist. Although the church became somewhat captive to the more superficial and pagan aspects of the movement, it at the same time unwittingly encouraged a scholarship that would question the Vatican's traditional claims and challenged its very foundation. Cf. W Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.1989, 28f.

<sup>15</sup> B Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers*, 373f.

<sup>16</sup> B Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers*, 374.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed discussion of these catastrophes see: B Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers*.

greed.<sup>18</sup> Unimpressed by the situation spelled out, the reformation proved to be a formidable force to be reckoned with.

The situation between Europe during its Renaissance differs considerably from calls about Renaissance in contemporary Africa. It cannot be denied that talks concerning African Renaissance today are somewhat underpinned by a sense of self-consciousness. A consciousness that should galvanize Africans into asserting their self-worth in the face of many who insist that Africans must remain forever subjected to the dictates of European ideals and norms. The Reformed church in Africa and specifically in South Africa cannot afford to exclude itself from this project. It must be emphatically stated that the Africanization of the Reformed church in line with the ideal of the African reawakening is long overdue.

It is nevertheless imperative as we embark upon this quest that we pose a while and revisit the notion of an African. Quite clearly this notion has been entertained in some disciplines, in some theological circles as well as in other ecclesial circles, yet it remains a subject that is at best avoided within the South African Reformed ecclesial circles today.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. 'Africans You are on Your Own': Who is Included in the Concept 'African'?

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) who was arrested and subsequently murdered under fascist Italian rule for his philosophies became conscious of the manner in which bourgeois societies operated. He realized that in order for these societies to function efficiently, they depended on the monopoly that they had on the minds of the masses. For Gramsci it was clear that in order to survive this, the masses had to be made aware of the importance of education, which would enable them not to let words such as "hegemony" tacitly concede to the lies of the bourgeois.

He realized that Western society with its bond between rulers and the ruled succeeded in creating "hegemony". For him the word "hegemony" was not the mere dominance by force; it was a set of ideas by which the dominant group in a society secured the consent of subordinate groups to their rule. Gramsci believed that revolutionaries who wished to eradicate this hegemony had to build up a counter hegemony to that of the ruling class. It was for him of utmost importance that people's minds be changed. This then leads Gramsci to speak in favour of what he called "organic intellectuals" – a concept which made him a household name. With this, he suggested that individuals within the masses needed to be

<sup>18</sup> B Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers*. 374.

<sup>19</sup> Within South African Roman Catholic circles this notion is enjoying much attention, as many South African Roman Catholic theologians seem to be comfortable with the idea of inculturation. Archbishop Buti Tlhagale is considered to be one of the great proponents of this inculturation project. In his essay entitled "Inculturation: Bringing African culture into the church" Tlhagale seem to have transcended the fears that were inculcated in the minds of African people about the synchrony of African culture and the Christian faith. He also locates the creation of such fear in the colonial projects that sought to make Africans redundant and dependent upon the paternalism of the West. In fact, his approach is so to the point that it renders African Reformed Christians to be speechless at best. They are rendered speechless because they have never really sought to engage their Africanity seriously in their theological reflections. Cf. B Tlhagale, "Inculturation: Bringing African culture into the church" in: E Conradie (ed.), *African Christian theologies in Transformation*. Cape Town: EFSA. 2004, 43-67. Another theologian that has frequently lambasted mainline theology for not doing enough to give theology a more African outlook was of course the Methodist theologian from Nigeria Bolaji Idowu. Cf. B Idowu, *Towards an indigenous Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

developed and educated with the goal of returning to their societies to impart the gained knowledge to the masses for their own good.<sup>20</sup>

The same ideas can best serve the goal of domesticating the Reformed faith in Africa. As much as African Reformed Christians remain indebted to their Reformed predecessors of Western Europe, it cannot be denied that the project of African reformation is bequeathed to Africans in the Reformed ecclesial tradition – African organic intellectuals. Fundamentally it is a subject that is urgent especially as we seek to avoid the possibility that the notion “African Renaissance” becomes merely a slogan and is rendered boring jargon. However it is also important – in avoidance of assumptions that everyone knows who and what is an African – that the notion of “who is an African” is revisited and is then used as a point of departure in our pursuit of an African reformation project.

The question “Who is an African?” posits a number of social, economic, political and cultural meanings. Recently South Africans from different disciplines have started to define anew what is meant by the concept in question.<sup>21</sup> It is also clear that the understanding of “who and what” constitutes Africa and therefore African people, appears to be very different to the South African situation when compared with other parts of the continent.<sup>22</sup> Self-evidently a definition of “who and what is an African” differs from context to context and therefore from interpretation to interpretation. It is therefore understandable to note a view held by some that the South African aspirations to engage this subject is a late aspiration that has already been exhausted elsewhere by Africans in other parts of Africa.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Gramsci cited in: RS Tshaka, *Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession*. Unpublished DTh dissertation Stellenbosch University. 2005, 75.

<sup>21</sup> See the collection of essays on this subject in: W Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance*. Johannesburg: Mafube Publishing, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Mbeki defines himself as an African as follows: “I owe my being to the Khoi and the Sun whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result... I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home in our native land. Whatever their actions, they remain still part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the Far East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence... I am the grand child of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to the battle, the soldiers Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonor the cause of freedom. My mind and knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind’s eyes and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk: I am the grandchild of Nongqause... I come to those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact, solely that both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that existence. Being part of all these people, and in my knowledge that none dare contest that assertion I shall claim that I am an African” T Mbeki. *Africa: The time has come*. Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishing 1998. 31-32.

The definition given above by Mbeki is but one definition of who and what an African is. It differs nonetheless from some definitions given elsewhere on the African continent. Furthermore his definition clearly exhibits the complexity that surrounds this subject. This explains that because Africans exist within the broader cosmos, they are not immune from being influenced by other cultures and values. It is therefore frivolous to attempt to hygienically separate something which is not considered African from oneself when that something has become part and parcel of one’s being.

<sup>23</sup> In my conversations with my colleagues from West Africa and elsewhere in Africa I have come to note that they do not see the debate concerning what and who an African is as one of the subjects that warrant their attention. For some of them the question “Who is an African” is a given question. An African is fundamentally someone through whose veins African blood flows. As long as this is the case one can never will away one’s Africanity, it is unavoidable.

Mbeki's definition represents for some an affirmation that South Africans tend to look at them and their country not so much as African but rather as South African. It is therefore for this reason that his redefinition of the notion "African" renders the impression that everyone can willy-nilly be African. On the other hand it can be said that this definition also displays him as a statesman with exquisite acumen. One who is well aware of the diverse socio-economic, political and cultural make up of those under his leadership. This awareness displays him as a statesman who has realized that Africa is not homogeneous in terms of its cultures and beliefs systems and because of these; Africans are free to interpret issues differently.

Nevertheless, as we regret the assimilation of Africans and their cultures and beliefs into the Western beliefs, we shall do well to guard against attempts of making the same mistakes that the westerners made so that Africans became acceptable to their ways of lives. This inclination to make everyone African was bemoaned by a number of African intellectuals. For most of these intellectuals, an African is not someone who is African by reason of being patriotic but rather and African is one who is holistically rooted in the cultural setting from which s/he originated. Therefore while it is considered possible for one to be converted to a particular faith, one cannot be converted to being an African.

Kwesi Kwaa Prah argues that Africans are people whose origin, cultures and history is derive from the African continent. In his view, Africans are in the first instance products of culture.<sup>24</sup> It must be pointed out that African cultures and beliefs have had an arrested growth, thus there is no telling how it would have turned out, had it not been interrupted and discouraged by the settlers. Nevertheless Africans are cultural beings. In speaking about culture, Kwesi Kwaa Prah concedes that culture is dynamic and that there are therefore no real borders to cultures, however Kwesi Kwaa Prah also acknowledges that there are significant continuities within historical frames or periods.<sup>25</sup> He therefore opposes the South African school of thought, which in its definition emphasizes that an African is anybody committed to the African continent.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, the criteria for determining who and what an African is, is problematic given the continuities and the diversification of people and their cultures.

The subject of Africa in South African reflections is also controversial at another point. The colonizers who had no regard for African cultures mostly monopolized South African written history. The written history of South Africa prior to 1994 starts with the arrival of a few Europeans to the Cape in 1652. The misconception of Africa as the "Dark Continent" in need of serious enlightenment thus became an inculcated view in the minds and moral fibers of white people, and consequently in the minds of the colonized. More importantly, the belief that white and Europe represented the epitome of civilization while black and Africa represented the reverse forced many whites to maintain the "European tag" long after they settled in Africa.

In South Africa the retention of this label was manifested in the many European and non-European signs that were conspicuous in Apartheid South Africa. It seems rather unfortunate and obtuse to argue that people who were content with this classification – European – should be asked to abandon it in acceptance of an African label. By insisting on this "European" classification whites saw themselves as being connected culturally, politically and otherwise with Europe. The classification of "non-European" also played an important

<sup>24</sup> Kwesi Kwaa Prah. *African Renaissance or Warlordism?* in: W Makgoba (ed.). *African Renaissance*. Johannesburg: Mafube Publishing, 1999, 38f.

<sup>25</sup> Kwesi Kwaa Prah. *African Renaissance or Warlordism?* 38f.

<sup>26</sup> Kwesi Kwaa Prah. *African Renaissance or Warlordism?* 38.

role in that it distinguished them from Africans whose culture and beliefs they considered to be barbaric and backward.

Biko calls the year 1652 an unfortunate year for it was the year in which South Africans experienced a process of acculturation – which for him suggests a process of a fusion of different cultures.<sup>27</sup> Put differently this is a tragic year for the natives because this was the commencement of assimilation into the white world and the subsequent de-culturalisation of African people.

It soon became clear that it is impossible for Africans whose being is characterized by his/her culture and beliefs to be completely de-cultured. This view is best expressed in the schizophrenia that was to plague Africans after their conversion to the Christian faith – being African and Christian at the same time. Maluleke parallel this with the Du Boisian twoness.<sup>28</sup> In the absence of means of integrating one's Africanity with one's Christianity they continued to find ways of retaining their Africanity by practicing their cultures and beliefs when whites were not looking. It is inevitable that many Africans remained convinced that there is much that African cultures and beliefs can contribute to Christian theology. Biko reminds us for instance of simple issues which are well known among Africans – traditional African cultures. He refers to issues such as conversations and the place of the stranger. He holds that age and division of labour determine a conversation. Thus one would find all boys whose job was to look after cattle periodically meeting at popular spots to engage in conversation about their cattle, girlfriends, parents, heroes etc.

Concerning the stranger, Biko rightly maintains that within western culture, this person is always met with the question “what can I do for you?” According to him, this is an attitude that displays people not as themselves but as agents for some particular function either to one's disadvantage or advantage which is something alien to African cultures and beliefs.<sup>29</sup> By making reference to this cardinal quality in African cultures, Biko touches on a profound issue which is the belief held by most Africans in the inherent goodness of all humanity.

It was mentioned that African cultures – which are seen as pivotal in one's quest to determine what and who an African is – has had an arrested growth due to the many interruptions that came as part and parcel of the colonial project. It was also pointed out that the notion African is not immune from reinterpretation and redefinition hence people like Mbeki prefer to locate its essence not in race but in commitment to the ideals of this continent.

But it cannot be denied that in addition to the much-deserved commitment to Africa, an African is one imbued in culture. To paraphrase Biko, an African is one who cannot distinguish the material from the spiritual. The one who knows that when s/he drinks beer s/he remains in the presence of God, the one who when s/he celebrates, knows God is always in his/her midst. Africans are also these cultural beings, who in the spirit of the African

<sup>27</sup> S Biko, “Some African cultural concepts” in: S Biko, *I write what I like*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978. 40-41.

<sup>28</sup> WEB du Bois speaks about psychological condition from which African-Americans are suffering from. He describes this condition using the concept “twoness” – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. WEB du Bois cited in: J Montmarquet and H William (eds.). *Reflections: An Anthology of African American Philosophy*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2000, 9-13; T Maluleke took this very idea as he attempted to explain the complexity with which the African Christian is confronted especially as he/she seeks to do justice to either one of these important aspects of his/her existence. Cf. T Maluleke, “African Christianity as African Religion” in: E Conradie (ed.), *African Christian theologies in Transformation*. Cape Town: EFSA. 2004, 187f.

<sup>29</sup> S Biko, *Some African cultural concepts*, 42.

Renaissance exfoliate the lies perpetuated by the West that his/her culture and beliefs are backward and barbaric and wishes to correct the ignorance that accompanied him/her for centuries.

### **3. From being Black and Reformed to being African and Reformed: Can We Still be Reformed?**

The hegemony that characterized the Reformed faith since its arrival in South Africa can only be challenged when African organic intellectuals realize that it is one that continually ensures that the Reformed faith in Africa remains at best one that appeals to European cultures and etiquettes. The story of the said Reformed hegemony in South Africa is a story of different stories. It is a tale that lays out the dynamism of this tradition.

This tale of Reformed hegemony in South Africa exhibits how the Reformed faith managed to give theological legitimacy to a political system that exploited the majority of South Africans, but also demonstrates how this very tradition was used in combating the ills that were perpetrated under the guise of Christianity. It must therefore be said that Reformed theology in South Africa proved to be dynamic in ensuring and underpinning the continuity of the ideology of Apartheid. It is consequently impossible to understand the church's struggle in South Africa without considering the role that the Reformed faith played in the theological justification of Apartheid.

The Dutch Calvinists who were later followed by the French Huguenots and later by the Scottish Presbyterians and Swiss missionaries transported the Reformed ecclesial tradition to South Africa more than three hundred years ago from Europe.<sup>30</sup> Boesak argues that when the Khoi people of the Cape were confronted for the first time with Christianity, it was the Reformed expression of it that they experienced. It also soon became clear that upon entry into this faith they soon discovered the contradictions that characterized it.

These contradictions were among others the fact that in claiming this land they maimed and killed in the name of Christianity. Incorporation into the Christian faith did not mean equalization of African people with the pioneers of this faith. While they taught on the one hand one baptism and for some time insisted on the celebration of all baptized subjects of the one Holy Communion, the converts were exploited and treated as secondary human beings. The pioneers of this faith devised a socio-economic, political and cultural program that systematically subjected the new converts to servitude while they enjoyed the wealth of the land that they have claimed for themselves.

It was this ambiguity that propelled some black theologians to question the legitimacy of a theology, and biblical hermeneutics that supported such subjugation. The black organic intellectuals had benefited a great deal from the new hermeneutics that was set forth under the auspices of black theology. Through the pioneering work of people such as James Cone and others, Black theology was transported from the shores of the United States of America to South Africa as an intellectual project that was made possible by the University Christian Movement (UCM) in 1971. All this occurred under the directorship of Basil Moore and was first spearheaded in South Africa by Sabelo Ntwasa. Black theology was expressed under the banner of the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa which owes its being to students such as Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Harry Nengwenkulu and others who were galvanized by the then political situation into organising themselves into being a van-

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. A Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Contradiction or Challenge?* in: D McKim (ed.), 416.

guard for the black peoples' total emancipation from the political pangs into which they were plunged by the white racism in South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

Although Black theology propagated itself chiefly by means of seminars and ministers' caucuses, it produced some significant publications and continued into the *Kairos* period. A number of the first-generation black theologians within the so-called mainline denominations endeavoured to develop black theology in relation to their confessional traditions. Among these theologians were Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak etc. Theologians such as Buti Tlhagale, Takatso Mofokeng, Bongajalo Goba and Itumeleng Mosala and others carried on this project. Although theologians such as Boesak managed to use black theology as a means of challenging the paradox of being black and Reformed, others like Tlhagale and others were able to exfoliate the negativity that surrounded African cultures in theological deliberations and advocated for a theology that would seriously engage African cultures without being content with the ignorance that accompanied debates relating to Africanity and Christianity.

With the exception of theologians such as Tlhagale who later managed to see beyond the economic and political situation of South Africa and thus spoke about the essence of African cultures, which could help to give African Christians a sense of identity, intellectuals from other ecclesial traditions never bothered much to entertain this important aspect of our existence. It is for this reason that a distinction is often made between black theology and African theology – the latter being aimed at the advancement of a theology that takes African cultures and beliefs seriously. Suffice it to say that unlike other African theologies that also developed during the epoch of black theology in South Africa – that was aimed at the falsehood about Africans and their cultures and beliefs, black theology focused more on the socio-economic and political situation that justified the subservient role and position of those who were not classified as being white.

It is inevitable that Africans in the Reformed ecclesial tradition in South Africa remain completely indebted to the efforts advanced by some that used black theology as a hermeneutical tool of exposing the injustices that Africans were subjected to in the name of Christianity. Maluleke is correct to charge that those who seek the sudden death of black theology ought to reconsider this request.<sup>32</sup> However as much as the black theological project must be credited for its contribution to the considerably enhanced condition of the black people in South Africa, it must equally be taken to task for its myopic approach to the complex political and cultural situation of South Africa under Apartheid.

Its approach was shortsighted because as much as it was iconoclastic in engaging the legitimacy of the politicized theology of the then regime, it did considerably less in exfoliating the ignorance about African people and their cultures and beliefs. This claim does not apply to all ecclesial traditions in South Africa. There is ample evidence that points in the direction of individuals that were influenced by black theology and succeeded to reinterpret black theology in such a manner that it gave renewed significance to Africans and their cultures and beliefs instead of ignoring it as sheer barbarism and heathenism.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. RS Tshaka, *Confessional theology*, 232.

<sup>32</sup> T Maluleke, *African Christianity as African Religion*, 183.

<sup>33</sup> In some mainline churches it seems that the church has already embarked upon ways on bringing African culture into communication with Christian faith. The question of inculturation is already taking place in these churches but it seems to be a question that has not been viewed as urgent in the Reformed church. For views about this issue in the Anglican Church in: J Seoka, "African culture and Christian spirituality" in: M Guma and L Milton (eds.), *An African challenge to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Cape Town: Inner City Mission. 1997, 1-12. For a view of this in the Roman Catholic Church see. B Tlhagale, "Inculturation: bringing African culture into

Nonetheless it is also apparent that those who dealt with the dilemma of being black and Reformed were aware of the similarities that existed within Reformed teaching and African cultural understandings of God. In what is considered to be the best exposition of the dilemma of being black and Reformed to date, Boesak draws a stark contrast between an African understanding of God with a maxim popularized by Abraham Kuyper – “there is not a single inch of life that does not fall under the lordship of Christ” which indicates that all of life is indivisible, just as God is indivisible in all personal life and public life – in politics and economics, sports etc. He continues to note that this view comes significantly closer to the African idea of the wholeness of life that these two should combine to renew the thrust that was brought to the Christian life by the followers of Calvin.<sup>34</sup>

This view alone constitutes a significant attempt of dispelling the negativity and mendacity that enveloped African cultures and beliefs. The fundamental question however remains whether in this current age in which it is a reflection of ignorance to dismiss African cultures and beliefs as absolute heathenism, it is not about time that Reformed Christians of African origin reflect seriously about their Africanness in their Reformed deliberations. Eventually what ought to be defeated in our quest to see the realization of the coexistence of our Africanness with our Reformed faith is a mental picture successfully inculcated in the minds of many Africans by the pioneers of Christianity which tends to look at everything African as suspicious and barbaric.

The question of testing our Reformedness once we embark upon the exercise of engaging our Africanness in our Reformed deliberations is a question that must be conscious of the fact that the Reformed tradition from its inception was never homogeneous.<sup>35</sup> It has become common practice that always when some within the Reformed tradition challenge particular views and misconceptions about the relationship of this tradition to our socio-economic, political and cultural situations – challenges that are usually seen as aberrant to the “pure Reformed tradition” – that one has to test whether one was still being Reformed in the European sense of the word.

It is not an intention of this call to remain African in our Reformed reflections to adhere to the political and cultural situation of theologians such as Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, but to look to scripture and how it advises us to remain a Reformed church, faithful to the scriptural principle in a different and African context. The call of being African in our Reformedness is iconoclastic in that it challenges the European cultural views as the only views that must be emulated as we seek to remain Reformed. Russel Botman has succinctly sum-

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the church” in: E Conradie (ed.), *African Christian theologies in Transformation*. Cape Town: EFSA. 2004, 43-67.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. A Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Contradiction or Challenge?*, 419.

<sup>35</sup> From Martin Luther through Ulrich Zwingli down to John Calvin one can appreciate the fact that the reformation was anything but homogeneous. Although it is said that Erasmus laid the reformation egg that Luther hatched, this is arrived at primarily because the ways in which they wanted to reform the church differed from person to person. On the other hand Zwingli’s one time acquaintances later thought that he was not doing enough to reform the church and resorted to organize themselves as the Swiss Brethren also known as the Anabaptists. Luther kept some of the Roman Catholic practices albeit with some modifications, but the issues that galvanized him to set forth his reformation are interesting. Among other things Luther felt unable to be reconciled with the God that Roman Catholicism preached. Enmeshed with ideas of God as a vengeful God (an idea which became inculcated in his mind as a minor), he was confronted with the teachings of one of the Ockhamists at Erfurt, Gabriel Biel who insisted that all human beings have the ability to do their very best and if they do not, they will meet God’s justice. Otherwise those who do their very best will be helped by God. Luther became increasingly opposed to a God that expected him according to Biel to do only his very best, while he knew that as a human being he is incapable of knowing his best. The reformation for him therefore was a radical disassociation with a humorless and vengeful God that expected him to do only his very best.

marized the quintessence of this paper when he said “South Africans, especially, should seize this moment to begin shaping an African Reformed theology that will take us beyond the cultural and liturgical masquerade of a European presence on African soil”.<sup>36</sup> It must nonetheless be emphasized that South African Reformed Christians run the risk of not being able to accomplish this objective unless they begin to look at themselves as being African in the first instance and subsequently as South African.

#### 4. African and Reformed: Towards an Integration of the Two

The African Reformed church needs as a matter of urgency a reformation that will reflect its reality as African and begin to pride itself as such. It needs to realize that African Reformed people are in the first instance African, with a culture dear to them and a view about life that does not necessarily correspond to Europe, its values and cultures. Because of this uniqueness it would be folly to expect of Africans to be exact replicas of European Reformed Christians.

It is with this reality that we have to engage the issue of being African and Reformed. African Reformed Christians are therefore charged with a monumental task of correcting the misconceptions that have befuddled not only the western mind but have mystified even the colonized African mind. In the first instance the challenge is aimed at African organic intellectual for whom it has become almost impossible to imagine a Reformed church that celebrates African cultures and beliefs in its Reformed activities. It is useless to mention that most of the misunderstandings with regard to culture and beliefs are at best informed by ignorance. In some instances this ignorance was/is deliberate and sufficient in that it conveniently closes the debate on the matter of integrating values that still remain dear to Africans with their Reformed faith.

The deliberate distortions perpetuated by those who transplanted this faith also compounded the issue. Seoka is correct when he asserts that “it could not have been African people who coined the phrase “ancestor worship”, because they do not believe that ancestors can be worshipped at all”.<sup>37</sup> If it was not Africans then certainly it must have been in someone’s interest to demonize African cultures and beliefs for the purpose of encouraging that with which s/he was at ease with. Genuine conversation with African culture and beliefs also impels those involved in this venture to deal seriously with the history that rendered Africans and their cultures in the strange and alien situation that it is today.

This paper suggests a space where a critical facilitation of the conversation between our Africanity and our Reformedness is debated. In putting forward this suggestion, we remain aware of Maluleke’s view in cautioning our obsessions with methodologies. His concern is worth consideration especially when he asserts that the obsession of theologians to find workable methodologies sometimes acts as impediments to attending to other urgent issues that would have benefited from our time and energy.

However it must be pointed out that it is also not helpful to claim that the so called paradoxical Du Boisian twoness be put to rest at the request of dealing with more “urgent matters” as he suggest.<sup>38</sup> With all fairness, this twoness ought to be brought into a systematic correlation to see how African cultures and beliefs can compliment our Reformed faith and the other way around. By looking into this matter it will be realized that there remain

<sup>36</sup> Cf. R Botman, “A cry for life in a Global economic era” in: Wallace M Alston jr. and Michael Welker (eds.). *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2003, 383.

<sup>37</sup> J Seoka, *African culture and Christian spirituality*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> T Maluleke, *African Christianity as African Religion*, 187-188.

ample space for African Reformed Christians to be African and at the same time allow the scriptural principle that remains essential for the Reformed tradition to be the guiding principle.

By merely denying that the Du Boisian twoness is not applicable to African Reformed Christians, Maluleke is in no better position to that of Setiloane who admitted that the vexing problem of being African and Christian renders him as someone who has been bewitched by the very same phenomenon that captivates him.<sup>39</sup> A conversation between Africanity and Reformed faith can be a means of putting the struggle for the domination of one of these phenomena over the other within African Reformed Christian to rest. If this is achieved, the real question then is not the one asked by Ngugi waThiongo about why Africans can and must become Christian, but instead the real question for the African Reformed Christian is how to remain a Christian without submitting to compulsions of becoming exact replicas of Western Reformed Christians.

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<sup>39</sup> G Setiloane, "Where are we in African theology?" in: Appiah-Kubi *et al* (eds.), *African theology en Route*. Maryknoll: Orbis books. 1979, 69.

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