

LIMINALITY: RECENT AVATARS OF THIS NOTION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

*The main research question of this article concerns the value of the concept of liminality and its concomitant concepts such as *communitas* for liturgical studies in South Africa by the year 2012 as pertaining to the wider South African social context. Firstly a brief general historical overview of the origins of the concept and its avatars is provided, followed by discussion of the functioning of the concept in theological literature as it operated during four different periods in recent South African history. Throughout the historical survey ritual examples based on the author's own experiential truth are provided to illustrate the points made, as well as a selection from the oeuvre of the South African poet and author Antjie Krog.*

Key Words: Liturgy; Ritual, Liminality, *Communitas*, Reconciliation, South Africa, Victor Turner

Introduction¹

In 1995 the ritual studies expert Ronald Grimes observed: “This generation’s intellectual task seems to be that of getting beyond Victor Turner”.² This was roughly when Turner’s work was being discovered by South African theologians who recognized the importance of concepts such as *societas*, *communitas* and liminality; they were also beginning to understand the significance of his notion of so-called social drama for what was then a dramatically changing South African social context and along with that, congregational contexts. Several (especially practical) theologians working in congregational studies, and some liturgists, have since explored the value specifically of the concept of liminality for the church in South Africa and for the society in general. In this article I hope to trace the path of the concept of liminality and its concomitant concepts in South African theological discourse over the past two decades.

The main question I address is whether liminality is still a helpful concept in 2011, or whether it has in some instances become rather a hindrance. Has the concept, in theological discourse in South Africa, after its ‘discovery’ in the 1990s and its application in many

¹ This article was presented in condensed form at a conference titled “Theology in times of transition. Creating a continuous inclusive conversation” *Communitas*, Stellenbosch University, January 24 2012 and I dedicate it to Dr Coenie Burger from whom I have learned much. This material is based upon work supported by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) under grant number 73974. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and therefore the NRF does not accept any liability in regard thereto. The article was first published in the Dutch *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek/ Yearbook for Liturgical and Ritual Studies* 27, 2011:189-208.

² RL Grimes: *Beginnings in ritual studies*. (Columbia 1995; revised edition) xvii.

spheres of academia, not been exhausted, now at the beginning of the second decade into the 1st century of the 3rd millennium? However, it remains important to appreciate the emergence of the concept in theology in South Africa in its very specific historical context and therefore to appreciate the fact that the optimism regarding the concept was born and grew in a very specific time in the history of South Africa – roughly from the early 1990s and for the next decade. The socio-political context before, during and right after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings was especially fertile soil for the concept in the wider South African context, but also in congregations and for worship practices. The fact that we are no longer in 1991 nor in 2001, but in 2011 prompted re-evaluation of the concept for the specific context of 2011, rather than just pointing to potentially positive insights the concept stimulated during the past two decades. My research question thus pertains to the value of the concept of liminality and its concomitant concepts such as *communitas*, for liturgical studies in South Africa in 2011 against the wider South African social context. I approach this topic from the context of a theologian who is a member of a traditional mainline church in South Africa which was historically also the church of the privileged people in the apartheid era. The conclusions I draw in this article thus target the position of traditional mainline churches in South Africa, such as the Dutch Reformed Church, and the role of the liturgy in such a denomination by the year 2011.

Firstly I provide a brief historical overview of the origins of the concept and its avatars focusing only on theological literature – except for the original anthropological literature – because in South Africa the notion of liminality is equally popular in other disciplines, such as literary studies. The article will present the functioning of the concept in theological literature during four different periods in recent history, namely the pre-TRC, TRC, post-TRC periods, as well as present-day South Africa. Throughout the historical survey ritual examples from my own *ervaringswaarheid* illustrate the arguments,³ and the South African poet and author Antjie Krog accompanies me on this journey spanning two decades of South African history.

Origin of the Concept of Liminality

Between 2001 and 2003 I researched reconciliation rituals in South Africa, using Victor Turner's work and including some background on the concept as applied by both Turner and Van Gennep. I briefly recap some comments and complement them with insights from a recent article by Marcel Barnard.⁴

Victor Turner discusses the concepts of *societas*, liminality and *communitas* several times in his work.⁵ It is well known that Turner based many of his ideas on liminality on the

³ *Ervaringswaarheid* or 'experienced truth' is a term taken from F Deist: *Vergewe en vergeet? Oor waarheid en versoening in Christelike perspektief* (Pretoria 1997) 2. With this term he referred to the kind of truth the TRC dealt with and tried to indicate that it was a different truth to the kind sought in courtrooms. Thus *Ervaringswaarheid* differs from the juridical truth that can be tested by cross-examination.

⁴ This section is based largely on C Wepener: *From fast to feast. A ritual-liturgical exploration of reconciliation in South African cultural contexts* (Liturgia condenda 19) (Leuven 2009) 74-80. For the work of Barnard on liminality cf. M Barnard: 'Flows of worship in the network society. Liminality as heuristic concept in practical theology beyond action theory', in *In die Skriflig* 44/1, 2010:67-84.

⁵ Cf. *inter alia* VW Turner: *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure* (1969), specifically the chapters entitled 'Liminality and communitas' and 'Communitas: model and process' 94-165; *Idem: The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual* (Ithaca, NY 1967), specifically the chapter entitled 'Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage' 93-111; *Idem: 'Passages, margins and poverty: religious symbols of communitas'* in *Worship* 46/7 (1972) 390-412; also *Idem: 'Liminality and communitas'* in RL Grimes (ed.) *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ 1996:511-519.

work of Arnold van Gennep. The transitional ritual or *rite de passage*, as Van Gennep identified it, contains three phases (separation; boundary or *limen*, the Latin for threshold; re-integration).⁶ Turner describes these phases as follows:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (re-aggregation or re-incorporation) the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual, or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.⁷

The second phase is the period of liminality, a state of transition through which a situation develops that could be typified as *communitas*. The phases before and after liminality, the phases in which a 'structure of positions' exists, are referred to as *societas* (society).⁸ This *societas* therefore represents a period of structure characterized by an order that functions formally. "It is a time when a community to a great extent controls its problems, when it is *well structured* and in order, and experiences a growth phase".⁹ 'Uncertainty and transition' characterize a period of *communitas*. Turner typifies this time as anti-structural in contrast to *societas*, which tends to be structured; he describes entities in the liminal phase of *communitas* as follows:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transition.¹⁰

Furthermore Turner describes how liminal entities, such as neophytes, are introduced into rituals, but always in such a way as to distinguish them from others; for example, they have no possessions, are passive and humble.¹¹ "It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new situation in life".¹² This liminal phase is imbued with a mixture of insignificance and sanctity, of homogeneity and camaraderie.¹³ In the Western world descriptions such as these are soon dated, coming from the pens of anthropologists exploring the early and mid-twentieth century. For the average South African, however, this is a living reality, much as Turner describes. Even if you are outside of such transitional

⁶ Turner: *The ritual process* 94, as well as Van Gennep: 'Territorial passage and the classification of rites' in RL Grimes ed. *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ 1996:529-536.

⁷ Turner: *The ritual process* 94-95.

⁸ Turner: *The forest of symbols* 93.

⁹ CW Burger: *Gemeentes in transitio*. Cape Town 1995:25.

¹⁰ Turner: *The ritual process* 95.

¹¹ A secular example of such a ritual is a present-day bachelor's party in the Western world, during which the prospective bridegroom's clothes are often taken from him, and he is ridiculed in many ways and, ultimately, through the consumption of large amounts of alcohol, made to be 'motherless'. In other words, a total stripping of his identity takes place – from his clothes to his mother.

¹² Turner: *The ritual process* 95.

¹³ Turner: *The ritual process* 97.

rituals, you still see them performed everywhere. For example, the Xhosa *abakhwethas* live in a literally liminal state for extended periods beside highways in South Africa, or you may learn about these practices in the media (especially when the circumcision rites go wrong and initiates die).

In the liminal period of *rite de passage*, this anti-structure of *communitas* can exist only because of the real possibility of *societas*, or structure. “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is to be low.”¹⁴ Turner concludes that social life presents a dialectical process of consecutive experiences of high and low, of *societas* and *communitas*, and the movement of high to low passes a limbo of statuslessness.¹⁵ And about this process he says: “What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic”.¹⁶

Of special importance is the presence of power of people or groups in a liminal period. According to Turner¹⁷ the ‘weak’ (in a liminal phase) have exceptional ritual power: “In liminality, the underling becomes uppermost”. Other characteristics of such people are sexlessness, anonymity, submissiveness, quietness; they become a *tabula rasa* upon which the wisdom of the group can be written. Turner explains the characteristics of liminality in a list of binary oppositions, in contrast to status systems.¹⁸

Turner speaks of the existential quality of *communitas* through its involvement of the whole person in relation to other whole persons, and adds that *communitas* has an aspect of potential.¹⁹ So Turner mentions that *communitas* is regarded virtually everywhere as a holy or sacral time, “possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency”.²⁰

He explains this by citing the installation ritual of the chief of the Ndembus. Here one may mention that liminality and *communitas* can also be institutionalized. Turner gives the example of the Benedictines, essentially a community with liminal qualities, such as the poverty that always characterizes their order. Chiliastic movements are also a manifestation of *communitas* and have many of its traits, such as equality, anonymity and simplicity.²¹

¹⁴ Turner: *The ritual process* 96.

¹⁵ For this, cf. Turner: *The ritual process* 97.

¹⁶ Turner: *The ritual process* 129.

¹⁷ Turner: *The ritual process* 102.

¹⁸ This list, in Turner: *The ritual process* 106-107, is as follows: transition/state; totality/partiality; homogeneity/heterogeneity; *communitas*/structure; equality/inequality; anonymity/systems of nomenclature; absence of property/property; absence of status/status; nakedness or uniform clothing/distinctions of clothing; sexual continence/sexuality; minimization of sex distinctions/maximization of sex distinctions; absence of rank/distinctions of rank; humility/just pride of position; disregard for personal appearance/care for personal appearance; no distinctions of wealth/distinctions of wealth; unselfishness/selfishness; total obedience/obedience only to superior rank; sacredness/secularity; sacred instruction/technical knowledge; silence/speech; suspension of kinship rights and obligations/kinship rights and obligations; continuous reference to mystical powers/intermittent reference to mystical powers; foolishness/sagacity; simplicity/complexity; acceptance of pain and suffering/avoidance of pain and suffering; heteronomy/degrees of autonomy.

¹⁹ He contrasts this existential quality with the cognitive quality of structure that, following Lévi-Strauss, he describes as a set of classifications, “a model of thinking about culture and nature and ordering one’s public life”. Turner: *The ritual process* 127. For more on the problem of defining the concepts, community and social structure, see 125-130.

²⁰ Turner: *The ritual process* 128.

²¹ Turner: *The ritual process* 109, 111-112.

However, these movements soon become institutionalized and thus institutionalized *communitas*, unlike those that remain 'open' could spread to others and so remain anti-structural, as opposed to movement types that become structured.

In my research on reconciliation rituals conducted between 2001 and 2003, I indicated with respect to liminality and *communitas* that, according to Turner, *communitas* is a necessary phase to be endured, but not one in which people must remain lest it develops into the despotism of absolute authority.²² Turner also alleges that 'hippies' and 'teenyboppers' have *communitas* qualities. Thus liminality and *communitas* are phenomena that appear in all phases and on all levels of cultures and societies, not just in pre-industrial tribes in Africa.

In a persuasive article Barnard combines liminality with theories on our globalizing network society, showing how liminality has become dominant in present-day society,²³ in which he considers the structure to have moved to the margins with the general flow.²⁴ "In the network society of the 21st century liminality has accomplished its journey by moving to the centre of society, pushing structured human interrelatedness to the 'margin'".²⁵ This he relates to new world-wide worship practices and, on the basis of observations in this regard, states about the concept of liminality that "the old semantic potential of the concept no longer fits societal and ecclesial reality in which people also through their worship want to be both rooted and connected also through their worship."²⁶ Barnard concludes: "I offer this article as my contribution to the discussions with my colleagues and friends in South Africa".²⁷ Gratefully I accept his offer, which also helped me to review critically the concept of liminality in my South African context, from my specific contextual point of view, and compare it to Barnard's observations.

Liminality in SA since the 1990s

The Pre-TRC Period

It is 1993. I am one of a few students in a large gathering of people in Khayamandi, outside Stellenbosch. As we wait to start marching into the town, thousands of people start singing *Nkosi sikilel' iAfrika*. Then we march to the town centre, amid hundreds of bystanders and many television and newspaper cameras. The reason for the march was to protest against the murder of Chris Hani, an anti-apartheid activist and the then leader of the South African Communist Party. I quote Antjie Krog's own experience whilst participating in such a march:

"We linked arms. We stood arm in arm. Suddenly it was as if the whole landscape stopped breathing. Then we started walking. It was a march in complete stillness. Your heart started to spin dully inside you like an overripe pear. But after a few steps, we felt the power flowing through us. We marched, therefore we were".²⁸

²² Turner: *The ritual process* 129.

²³ Barnard: 'Flows of worship' 67-84.

²⁴ Barnard: 'Flows of worship' 72.

²⁵ Barnard: 'Flows of worship' 73.

²⁶ Barnard: 'Flows of worship' 74.

²⁷ Barnard: 'Flows of worship' 81.

²⁸ A Krog: *A change of tongue* (Johannesburg 2003) 114, as well as CJ Wepener: 'Versoeningsrituele: tipologieën en prosesse. Insigte vanuit 'n beskrywende verkenning van die rituele mark', in *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 45/3 & 4. 2004:763-773.

I first encountered the concepts of liminality and *communitas* during my studies at Stellenbosch University, when I read *Gemeentes in transitio. Vernuwingsgeleentheid in 'n oorgangstyd* by South African Dutch Reformed theologian and congregational studies specialist Coenie Burger. This book was published just after the 1994 watershed year in South Africa's history with the transition from apartheid to democracy. Burger basically used Turner's insights on *societas*, *communitas*, liminality and social drama to explain how the South African context could be understood better. Additionally he aimed to indicate to faith communities that such a transitional time – although unpleasant – offers an opportunity for creativity. As I traced the incorporation of the concept of liminality in South African theological literature, my conviction grew that Burger's book was indeed the 'Q source' regarding the introduction of the concept into the discourse in mainline churches in South Africa.

While for Burger's *Gemeentes in transitio* Victor Turner was the main influence for the development of the theory, much inspiration was also derived from Gerald Arbuckle's 1991 book, *Grieving for change*. The title already implies the importance of lament and therefore also liturgy and ritual in general for the larger process of change. In a personal conversation Burger acknowledged the influence and inspiration of Walter Brueggemann's work on the Psalms (orientation, disorientation, re-orientation) and also – via the work of other American colleagues – that of De Tocqueville. A booklet by Alan Roxburgh²⁹ (1997) provides helpful insight in how these notions were appropriated in fields such as congregational studies and missiology, the latter especially as pertaining to the recent missional church movement as it emerged in North America and spread to a country such as South Africa.

The year that Burger's book was published (1995) was also the year in which we scrutinized the then most recent collection of poetry by Antjie Krog, titled *Lady Anne* (1989) in our Afrikaans poetry course.³⁰ Similar to the way in which DJ Opperman used Marco Polo as an objective correlative in *Komas uit 'n bamboesstok*, Krog uses Lady Anne Barnard as her objective correlative. In this collection Krog used the sole ('tongvis' in Afrikaans) for the first time as metaphor – a fish in the process of adapting to a new context (shallow sandy water), with the process comprising a comprehensive bodily adaptation, including language. At this stage in her oeuvre the metaphor is still used mostly from Krog's gender-based perspective, but as we shall see, it recurs in her later writings. At that time the dominant discourse was still protest and resistance, although in turbulent times when Nelson Mandela was freed from prison but Chris Hani murdered, it was a discourse hovering between resistance and emancipation. These were uncertain times and Krog opens her book of poetry with a statement by Bram Fischer to the court in Pretoria in 1966 in which Fischer quotes Paul Kruger.³¹

²⁹ It can be mentioned here that at this time Braam Hanekom also completed a doctoral dissertation in theology which was based on the work of Victor Turner. For his discussion of the concepts of liminality, *societas* and *communitas*, see AR Hanekom: *Simbool en ritueel as instrumente vir geloofsvorming*. Stellenbosch 1995: 94-100. Whilst Burger's work focused on the liminal situation in which the traditionally white mainline churches found themselves, LE Thomas focused in her work on the liminality that traditionally black African Independent Churches experienced in the same period. See LE Thomas: 'African indigenous churches as a source of socio-political transformation in South Africa', in *Africa Today* 41/1, 1994:39-56. And in this same period the theory of Van Gennep and Turner was also used by other authors globally to study immigrant churches, for example the study by Ter Haar in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam. See G ter Haar: 'Ritual as communication. A study of African Christian communities in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam', in J Platvoet and K van der Toorn: *Pluralism & identity. Studies in ritual behaviour*. Leiden 1995:115-142.

³⁰ A Krog: *Lady Ann* (Bramley 1989).

³¹ A Krog: *Lady Ann* 8.

Met vertrouwen leggen wij onze zaak open voor de geheele wereld. Hetzij wij overwinnen, hetzij wij sterven: de vrijheid zal in Afrika rijzen als de zon uit de morgenwolken.

In relation to the pre-TRC South African context, Burger's introduction of the concept of liminality seems a timely contribution. Building on both Turner's work regarding liminality and other scholars' appropriation of the concept, as well as biblical images such as the desert time of the exodus, the aim was to provide insights to people into their changing contexts and to convey that, no matter how people and church members might feel, there is hope for (white) people and (Afrikaans) churches in South Africa. Burger referred to this as *Die anatomie van 'n oorgangstyd*. In many churches ministers and members realized that all was not lost, but that we were moving into a time with specific challenges. How to meet this different future as faith communities remained an open question. Burger focused on models for ministry, on congregational leadership, a deepened spirituality and a few brief remarks on the place and importance of the worship service in this overarching transitional time.³² However, as this transition progressed the need for adequate symbols and rituals in this process became more and more apparent. There was indeed a need to 'grieve for change', but the urgency became acutely apparent only during the hearings of the TRC.

The TRC Period

It is 1997 and I drive from Stellenbosch to the neighbouring town of Paarl in the Boland to attend a hearing of the TRC chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Representatives from the Ring/Classis of the Dutch Reformed Church of Stellenbosch – including Hannes Koornhof, Frederick Marais and Bethel Müller³³ – are bringing a confession to the commission. After the confession was read, Archbishop Tutu approached Professor Müller and they met in a reconciling embrace, a symbolic action which in my view was representative of the times. South Africa had had its first free and fair election. The ANC was the ruling party. Nelson Mandela was president and the dominant discourse was that of the so-called 'Rainbow Nation'. And within this still constantly changing context there was a real need to express what we experienced in a variety of ways, especially a need for symbolic actions such as a black Anglican priest embracing a white Dutch Reformed dominee, that could capture the sense of both remorse and forgiveness. And to a certain extent the TRC hearings themselves could be seen as a ritual which largely performed this function.³⁴

Besides Burger's work a more focused study and application of the work of Turner came from the pen of Mark Hay (1997) in his doctoral dissertation titled *Ukubuyisana*,³⁵ a Zulu word which means 'to turn to each other'. Hay conducted his research during the TRC period and applied Turner's concept of social drama to the South African context. The notion of liminality is implicitly operative in his application of the concept of social drama to the South African context around 1997 (the TRC period). He focuses on Turner's explanation (in *The ritual process*) of the dynamics of a society experiencing conflict, the

³² Burger: *Gemeentes in transitio*.

³³ 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission day 2 – Tuesday 15 October 1996. Submissions by Dr Hannes Koornhof, Dr Bethel Müller and Frederick Marais'. <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/Wineland/ngk.htm> (accessed April 14, 2011).

³⁴ A Krog: 'The truth and Reconciliation Commission – A national ritual?', in *Missionalia* 26/1 (1998) 5-16.

³⁵ M Hay: *Ukubuyisana. Reconciliation in South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation, Catholic Theological Union of Chicago) (Chicago 1997).

so-called social dramas with their phases of breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration/schism;³⁶ according to Hay, this process is revealing for better understanding of reconciliation. Hay's research emphasizes firstly the fact that social reconciliation is processual by nature and that different stages of the social drama demand different rituals. At the end of his discussion of Turner's work he points to the latter's emphasis on so-called 'plural reflexivity' in which there is "intense communal reflection, both in affirmation and critique, leading to evaluation and subsequent decisions".³⁷ This plural reflexivity allows for a 'soul researching' within a community.³⁸

In the same year Cas Vos and Hennie Pieterse published a book on liturgy called *Hoe lieflik is U woning*³⁹ with chapter 4 titled 'Die funksie van simbole, rituele en liggaamlikheid in die liturgie', in which a sub-section is devoted to 'Die rol van die rituele proses in 'n oorgangstyd', featuring the concepts of *societas*, *communitas* and liminality.⁴⁰ The opening sentences of this chapter describe the 1997 South African context, during which time it was written:⁴¹

Ons skryf hierdie hoofstuk in 'n besonder moeilike tydsgewrig in die geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse reformatoriese kerke in Suid-Afrika. Dit is die konteks waarin hierdie kerke van 'n situasie waarin hulle 'n groot invloed vir eeue lank in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing gehad het, nou traumaties binne enkele jare in 'n minderheisposisie geplaas is met haas geen invloed meer nie.

This was the time that Antjie Krog first published *Country of my skull* (1998), capturing much of her experience as a journalist during the TRC hearings. A line from this book on the process of reconciliation in South Africa struck me deeply: "Yes, bit by bit we die into reconciliation".⁴² This was an observation whilst listening to the horror stories being told during the TRC hearings, a story-telling process that can only be truly captured by using metaphors related to death and dying. In this she also related to the work of a Dr Kaliski, according to whom the denial apparent at that time in South African society regarding the atrocities of apartheid was a good sign, since it could be compared to the first phase in the process of terminally ill patients, a necessary step towards acceptance.⁴³

If the marches of the pre-TRC period were a ritual building up to the threshold of a transitional time, the scene in which a professor of Reformed theology such as Müller partook in a confession followed by a symbolic gesture of reconciliation from a black Archbishop was a clear ritual signal that the country was no longer on the threshold of a transitional time – we were in it. The stories we heard at the TRC hearings and the images we saw in the media confirmed this reality. And in this time the notion of liminality as presented by theologians such as Burger, Hay, Vos and Pieterse was a helpful compass in attempting to understand an unsettling time, and the place of the church and individuals, as well as a further hint that the liturgy had no small role to play. The fact is that dying has traditionally been seen as the last phase of human life, accompanied by certain rituals in

³⁶ Hay: *Ukubuyisana* 150-155.

³⁷ Hay: *Ukubuyisana* 156.

³⁸ Hay: *Ukubuyisana* 157.

³⁹ C Vos & H Pieterse: *Hoe lieflik is U woning* (Pretoria 1997).

⁴⁰ Vos & Pieterse: *Hoe lieflik is U woning* 131-134. The section devoted to Turner and liminality is fairly brief and less than three pages long.

⁴¹ Vos & Pieterse: *Hoe lieflik is U woning* 107.

⁴² A Krog: *Country of my skull*. London 1998:196.

⁴³ Krog: *Country of my skull* 54.

this painful but unavoidable passage; however, dying must also be viewed as a prerequisite for resurrection.

The Post-TRC Period

I am sitting on the rugby field of the neighbourhood zoned for coloured people during apartheid times; it was called Bergsig, just outside the town of Calitzdorp in the Little Karoo. It is 16 December 2000. For many years 16 December was celebrated as the Day of the Vow, commemorating the Voortrekkers' victory over the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River, but since 1994 it has been renamed Day of Reconciliation. Since the vow was made in 1838 and celebrated under the leadership of Sarel Cilliers, it has been celebrated in Dutch Reformed (and other Afrikaans) churches by a church service on the day, a so-called *Gelofedagdiens* (Day of Commemoration Service) during which the vow was reaffirmed.⁴⁴ But it is 2000 and not 1838, and we are not celebrating a *Gelofedagdiens* in the DR Church but a Reconciliation Day service on the rugbyfield in which all the local churches are participating, transcending denominational, racial and even old apartheid geographical lines. The preacher is a coloured charismatic pastor who is assuring us – in theatrical style and with many gestures – that although for some of us this time is comparable to Daniel's experience in the lion's den, we have nothing to fear. We should grab those lions and use them to sleep comfortably – we should position three lions under us as a nice soft mattress and a fourth we can use as a pillow. Then each one of us can sleep every night on a Sealy Posturepedic (a well-known mattress brand in South Africa). This message was beautiful and encouraging, but to end the scene here would not convey the whole picture. Only some (then still mostly white) members of the DR Church where I served in Calitzdorp were present at this multicultural open-air service; the rest were longing for the good old days and a *Gelofedagdiens*. As a leader in a church at that time, I had my own liminal experience of being betwixt and between, neither here nor there. I borrow an expression from a more liberal Old Testament scholar upon visiting the conservative 'Dopper' town and university at Potchefstroom: "I felt like a lion in a cage full of Daniels".

Following Hay's 1997 dissertation I conducted research on ritual and reconciliation in a post-TRC period and still found the work of Turner helpful in that period. There was still a need to 'die into reconciliation', to 'grieve for change', to engage in a process 'from fast to feast'.⁴⁵ Hay's insistence that the process of reconciliation needs enough time was amply confirmed by my qualitative research. What my own research added, was just a very explicit focus on liturgical rituals. Let me quote myself here:

Regarding the concept of liminality, this means that the *societas* before the breach will be different in South Africa to the *societas* after the breach, and the nature of the *societas* after the breach will depend greatly on the experiences and events in the liminal phase of *communitas*. The rituals, more precisely reconciliation rituals, which thus are performed in the *communitas* period are of crucial importance as they help to form the new relationship. Therefore, the quality of reconciliation rituals that are performed in this phase becomes extremely important.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ CJ Wepener: 'Liturgy on the edge of tradition', in *Practical theology in South Africa* 23/2, 2008:313-335, in which I referred to Karel Schoeman, who showed how the vow actually fell into disuse for decades and was rediscovered for the purposes of Afrikaner nationalism in roughly 1938.

⁴⁵ CJ Wepener: *Van vas tot fees. 'n Ritueel-liturgiese ondersoek na versoening binne Suid-Afrikaanse kultuurkontekste* (DTh-dissertation Stellenbosch University) (Stellenbosch 2004).

⁴⁶ Wepener: *From fast to feast* 79.

According to Turner societies continually experience processes such as social drama; additionally, the accompanying rituals also have a processual structure. “Not only is ritual situated within a process of social drama; ritual itself is processual in form”.⁴⁷ This research was done in the years 2001-2003, but even then already I indicated that we could not continue forever singing the praises of liminality in the Turnerian sense of the word in South Africa with reference to reconciliation and transition, because at some stage in the South African social drama of reconciliation our Archbishop’s rainbow might start to fade.

While I was completing my research, Antjie Krog published *A change of tongue* (2003). The front cover has a picture of the sole, with the metaphor present first in *Lady Anne* (1989) now the dominant motif. In this period South Africans were acquiring new language skills and learning to speak in a new context. We were immersed in a process of ‘a change of tongue’, and the people and the changes they experienced feature in the book, from interracial relationships occurring increasingly, to conversations with ex-soldiers who fought in the war in Namibia and who had to work through their own unique processes in a new dispensation. I refer to just one other metaphor in the book, namely that of sewerage. In large parts of the book conversations take place in the context of the sewerage works of the town of Kroonstad in the Free State. And the point made by the metaphorical context is messy but clear: we have to get rid of much in our society for eventual relief. In this post-TRC period liminality as a concept was still important and helpful, although most people were already realizing that the usefulness of the concept could be overstretched.

Today

It is Sunday, 1 February 2011 and my youngest daughter Adriana is having her sixth birthday party at our home in Pretoria. Three generations are present, my wife and I and some other parents, our parents, and also our children and their friends. The guests represent all the colours of the rainbow and a fair number of the nations of the world (Pretoria is home to most diplomats working in South Africa). My mother whispers in my ear: “Hier is dan amper niks witmense nie!” (“*Here are scarcely any white folks present!*”) My wife and I are enjoying ourselves, although quite honestly, we are still adapting to some cultural customs regarding the arrival and departure times for children’s parties. We know we must just relax, we are trying, it is difficult. And the children? Well, to quote my daughter to her grandmother: “Wat bedoel jy met ’n swart dogtertjie, wat is ’n swart dogtertjie?” (“*What do you mean by a little black girl, what is a little black girl?*”) Three generations, three positions regarding our current position with respect to the social transformation process. And looking around us we notice that the ritual landscape in South Africa pertaining to the process has also changed.

Outside Polokwane in the province of Limpopo there is a so-called Boer Genocide memorial consisting of thousands of white crosses commemorating all the (white) farmers who have been murdered on their farms since 1994.⁴⁸ At the worship services of the Corinthian Church (AIC) in the rural town of Phepheni in the Eastern Cape they sing the national anthem every week as part of the service, a custom not practiced a decade or two

⁴⁷ M Defflem: ‘Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner’s Processual Symbolic Analysis’. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30/1, 1991:5.

⁴⁸ CJ Wepener: ‘Nuwe tendense buite-om die erediens van die 21ste eeu. ’n Beskrywende liturgie-historiese en hedendaagse verkenning’, in *Vir die musiekleier* 30/37, 2010:3-19.

ago.⁴⁹ In KwaZulu-Natal there is an annual Mighty Men pilgrimage on the farm of the evangelist Angus Buchan, attended by 90000 predominantly white males for a weekend, focusing on reviving traditional values such as men being the head of the family, etc. As you drive through the South African landscape, besides the roadside shrines marking motor car accidents, there is a cross on almost every hill.⁵⁰ In local congregations such as the DRC Maitland in Cape Town volunteers from the local communities started an initiative called Cross-Cultural Conversations, in which people from different backgrounds (race, income, denomination, faith, etc.) assemble for conversations, workshops and a communal meal with the explicit aim of moving towards reconciliation. And yes, *Geloftedag* is also still being celebrated in many Afrikaans religious communities throughout South Africa.

Was the ritual landscape always like this? I believe much of it is new; studies such as *Liturgie voorbij de Liturgische Beweging*, *Liturgische bewegingen* and *Rituals in abundance* and other research by liturgists such as Barnard, Post and Lukken have helped me observe these movements.⁵¹ And regarding the Sunday worship service in a denomination such as the Dutch Reformed Church, the varied liturgical scene ranges from praise and worship services, traditional Reformed services, higher liturgical services to what is called in South Africa blended worship. So yes, in this sense a liminal flow is indeed visible in the ritual landscape, both inside and outside the church building, but I would like to stay with my theme and look at the particulars of the ritual action. I conclude that an argument for liminality as a necessary phase in a transitional period in South Africa was valid in a TRC and post-TRC period, but is no longer applicable to the South African context of mainline churches. I am addressing specifically South African theologians and theologians writing about South Africa who are still promoting the current relevance of liminality in their scholarly endeavors.⁵² So, for example, in a 2010 article Danahar lists criticism of the TRC process using mostly sources from 2000/2001 to argue that South Africa has not yet achieved a state of reconciliation. On the basis he then argues that the ongoing process of reconciliation in South Africa is still in a liminal state. Such a line of argumentation and use of source is, I believe, anachronistic. It is also noticeable how the use of the concept in theological literature has moved in some cases to an inner ecclesial domain, where it is now applied to, for example, congregational leadership.⁵³ I believe that in our current socio-political context the hymn books singing the praises of liminality should be closed. Naturally this argument must be based largely on context analysis, so it is important to have a closer look at the South Africa of 2011.

⁴⁹ BA Müller & CJ Wepener: 'A comparative study of applying grounded theory to data collected through participatory research involving aic liturgical rituals', in *Hervormde Teologiese studies/Theological studies* accepted (2011) 67(2), Art. #1034, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.1034>

⁵⁰ Wepener: 'Nuwe tendense buite-om die ereidiens van die 21ste eeu'.

⁵¹ M Barnard: *Liturgie voorbij de Liturgische Beweging: over 'praise and worship', Thomasvieringen, kerkdiensten in migrantenkerken en ritualiteit op het internet*, (Zoetermeer 2006); P Post: *Liturgische bewegingen: thema's, trends en perspectieven in tien jaar liturgiestudie. Een literatuurverkenning 1995-2005* (Zoetermeer 2006); G Lukken: *Rituals in abundance: critical reflections on the place, form and identity of Christian ritual in our culture* (Liturgia condenda 17) (Leuven/Dudley, ma 2005).

⁵² For one example cf. WJ Danaher jr: 'Music that will bring back the dead? Resurrection, reconciliation, and restorative justice in post-apartheid South Africa', in *Journal of religious ethics* 38/1, 2010:115-141.

⁵³ For example, H Delpont & JC Müller: 'Die liminale ruimte vir inkongruensie tussen predikant en lidmaat: 'n Narratief gebaseerde prakties-teologiese ondersoek in gemeentes van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika', *Hervormde Teologiese studies/Theological studies* 66/2 (2010) Art. #852, 6 pages DOI: 10.4102/hts.v66i2.852.

Where are we in South Africa today? We have come a long way.

We have protested and marched.

We have grieved and embraced.

We have joined gatherings on rugbyfields and started to adapt, although we have often felt like fish whose eyes and fins have moved sideways.

And we are currently all part of the constant ritual-liturgical flow, reminiscent of the tides of the ocean.

But I believe it is time to catch those soles that are still swimming in this ocean, skin them, fry them and serve them with a glass of Cape Chardonnay.

Liminality has served us well. I believe, however, that with regards to reconciliation and transformation in a post-apartheid South Africa ritual-liturgically we have moved beyond liminality as a country, and so we as scholars or liturgists should too. This also holds true for the socio-political context of South Africa in 2011. Looking at data obtained from the SA Reconciliation Barometer of 2010, which “measures citizen’s attitudes to political and social-economic transformation and how these impact on national unity and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa”,⁵⁴ the following highlights and points for improvement regarding the current South African context with regard to reconciliation can be listed.

Highlights:

- A majority of South African still believe that a unified country is a desirable goal;
- There is an overall increase in support for racial integration within families, neighbourhoods and schools;
- There is an increase in positive evaluations of the legal system and police, and more South Africans are beginning to feel physically secure;
- Although religious institutions still rate the highest as institutions garnering most trust, there is also a recovery of trust with regards to governance.

Points for improvement:

- Socio-economic inequality is the biggest source of division in South Africa;
- Many people still believe that political leaders are not much interested in what happens to ordinary people;
- Perpetrators of apartheid have not yet been dealt with sufficiently;
- Contact between historically-defined race groups have been relatively slow, mainly because of socio-economic inequality.⁵⁵

It is time for the poet to speak again. In 2009 Antjie Krog published *Begging to be black*, preceded by *Country of my skull* and *A change of tongue*.⁵⁶ Throughout this book Krog struggles with the idea of the African interconnectedness of black people and how this differs from that of white people. I want to quote her here when she refers to the concepts

⁵⁴ K Lefko-Everett, R Lekalake, E Penfold & S Rais: ‘2010 Reconciliation Barometer Survey Report’ 5.

⁵⁵ K Lefko-Everett, R Lekalake, E Penfold & S Rais: ‘2010 Reconciliation Barometer Survey Report’ 5-8.

⁵⁶ A Krog: *Begging to be black*. Cape Town 2009:212.

of forgiveness and reconciliation: "So what would be the difference? Christian forgiveness says: I forgive you because Jesus has forgiven me. The reward will be in heaven. 'African' forgiveness says: I forgive you so that you can change and I can begin to heal and all of us can become the selves that we were meant to be. The reward is here on earth". In the year 2011 we need what Krog also longs for: "I am trying to become others, plural, inter-connected-towards-caringness".⁵⁷ I believe this is somewhat different from being betwixt and between, neither here nor there, but building on the experience and lessons learnt in liminality, entails a concerted effort to move forward.

Beyond Liminality

Grimes makes the important observation that processes must not be viewed as structures. Scientists referring to processes often produce a handy triple beat, for example, the three phases in *rites de passage* (transitional rituals) comprising separation, transition and incorporation.⁵⁸ Grimes points out rightly that such a scheme is based on generalisation and is a reproduction of an invented scheme based on existing rituals rather than on the discovery of these patterns within the rituals.⁵⁹ He believes that a scholar such as Mircea Eliade was a mythmaker rather than an interpreter or discoverer of myths. Van Gennep's scheme derives from male initiation rituals, which then served as a prototype for all other rituals in order to indicate the movement from one social space to another.⁶⁰ However, Van Gennep's scheme is 'discovered' in rituals and later imposed onto other rituals and has served as a formula that prescribes what rites of passage should look like.⁶¹ The result is a 'how-to' manual for rituals.

According to Grimes, this is a total oversimplification and a typically Western philosophical approach that derives from the Hegelian dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), which ultimately imposes these logocentric patterns on ritual traditions where they do not fit. "In short, *invented* patterns, treated as if they were *discovered*, came to be *prescribed* as if they were laws determining how rites should be structured."⁶² Also Caroline Walker Bynum,⁶³ in a critique of Turner's theory of liminality based on the stories of saints in the late Middle Ages, concludes that Turner looked at women and not with them. According to Bynum, Turner's ideas fit the stories of men better than those of women, and in the cases

⁵⁷ Krog: *Begging to be black* 200.

⁵⁸ A van Gennep: *The rites of passage* (1960) or *Idem*: 'Territorial passages and the classification of rites' (1996) 529-536.

⁵⁹ RL Grimes: *Deeply into the bone. Re-inventing rites of passage* (2000) 100-125. G Arbuttle: *Grieving for change* (London 1991) 20, also warns in respect of models with reference to grief, i.e. "... no one model of stages can positively grasp this complexity; a model merely helps us to understand in a very general way what may happen to people or organizations in grief".

⁶⁰ Grimes: *Deeply into the bone* 105.

⁶¹ Grimes: *Deeply into the bone* 105. Grimes also considers Joseph Campbell's myth of the hero, in which Campbell discovered a so-called pattern (or rather, according to Grimes, upon which Campbell impressed a pattern!) of separation, initiation and return.

⁶² Grimes: *Deeply into the Bone* 107. By means of comparative verification of various ritual traditions from all over the world, Grimes arrives at these conclusions in respect of generalizing theories. Grimes then uses ethnographic data in a comparative way to disprove these generalizations and to confirm his suspicion about models. Furthermore, the way in which these Western patterns are forced onto rituals is also related to the processes that preceded inculturation and imposed Western values onto other parts of the world in an uncritical way.

⁶³ CW Bynum: 'Women's stories, women's symbols: a critique of Victor Turner's theory of liminality', in RL Grimes (ed.): *Readings in ritual studies*. Upper Saddle River, nj 1996:71-86.

where they do fit those of women, the particular story was without exception written by a man and not the woman herself. Her conclusion is that liminality may be less of a universal phenomenon than Turner suggests.

Grimes's warning does not mean that all theorizing is valueless and that it is unnecessary to indicate the processes. And Bynum's critique is helpful in assisting the researcher with the question of whether (s)he is looking at people or with people. Insights into the functioning of the comprehensive processes in societies and of rituals can be extremely useful, provided these reservations are taken into account. Liminality, *communitas* and social drama were helpful concepts for South Africans to understand the fact that individuals and societies go through processes. The question remains whether these processes can be packaged so neatly and applied to a given situation, as is often implied in some of the theological literature in our country. During the pre-TRC, TRC and post-TRC periods these scholarly inventions helped us a lot; they provided the comfort of realizing that we were not the first people to travel this particular route – unlike Lady Anne Barnard, who thought she was the first white woman to climb Table Mountain, while numerous Dutch women had in fact done so long before. We should be careful at this particular time in the history of South Africa about continuing to sing the praises of liminality in relation to the processes of transformation and reconciliation that our church and society are in. Large portions of our society are part of the continuous liminal flow, whilst some are at this moment in the bushes with painted faces awaiting circumcision. This also holds true for the ritual-liturgical movements in relation to the on-going process of reconciliation.

The discourse in theological literature on reconciliation, justice and reparation should move beyond the notion of liminality, because a liminal stage can become a hiding place and an excuse for disengaging from the process of what I will call reconciliation in South Africa. Grimes correctly showed how processes and even notions such as liminality can actually be invented notions that were prescribed rather than discovered; according to Gold⁶⁴, a notion such as liminality is indeed helpful but reductive. Similarly, I believe that the concept of liminality as applied to the South African process of transition is also a construct. We remain grateful to those, such as Burger, who first applied the concept in the 1990s. But we should also urge those who are still using the concept sixteen years later rather to start analysing context and in so doing not unnecessarily prolong the painful deathbed of reconciliation in our country. Here the debate regarding the African concept of time will of course resurface,⁶⁵ but even an appreciation of so-called 'African time' can become an excuse. The data obtained from the SA Reconciliation Barometer also show that there is still a good foundation for reconciliation that could be utilized and built upon; however, the points for improvement relate to issues of, for example, socio-economic upliftment. There is a need to move beyond the use of the concept of liminality as a state of becoming, in which the liturgy can play an important role by helping people to lament and grieve for change. It is time to grieve about those who are still grieving for change, because the change has come and we have entered a new *societas*, a new structure in which work must be done on poverty alleviation, job creation and crime prevention, to name but a few pressing issues.

What will the implications be for the liturgy? Perhaps to strive actively towards finding liturgical rituals promoting social capital formation and social cohesion? Perhaps seeking

⁶⁴ AG Gold: 'Still liminal after all these years: teaching ordeals and peregrinations', in C Bell (ed.): *Teaching ritual* (= American Association of Religion Teaching religious studies series). Oxford/New York 2007:39.

⁶⁵ Wepener: *From fast to feast* 206-208.

ways to enrich the discourse of protest in our pulpits with a new prophetic discourse of engaging with issues of poverty and crime?⁶⁶ I believe is the time to bury the corpse of apartheid in the coffin of liminality and to enter the promised *societas* in which our past can be lived right. And as in the past, the liturgy has an important role to play.

Conclusion

You have travelled with me as I shared my own life experiences through a ritual lens and the work of Antjie Krog to show how the concept of liminality went through a process of discovery and application in a specific place and time. The journey prompted me to conclude that it is time in South Africa and within our unique (mainline church) context to move beyond liminality, specifically an exclusively positive appreciation of the concept in the present South African context. Although we all continue to drift in the continuous liminal flow of our time, the time has come to live up to the new identities we have acquired by living through the previous two decades and to become fully initiated into a new dispensation. Several weeks ago a Zulu-speaking student quoted a Zulu proverb which related to initiation rites and applied it to the importance of the season of Lent in his class sermon: “You do not learn during, you learn before. Then comes the time of doing”. The boys of apartheid who have been in the bushes for the past two decades must step forward and act as men in South Africa in 2011. Antjie Krog will probably have serious problems with this very male analogy of mine, so I will give the poet the last word. If my observations and interpretations are correct, then this exploration was important. As Krog also puts it at the end of *Lady Anne*:⁶⁷

Die leuse van my vader wil ek herhaal:
hy wat versuim om sy lewe
en dié se plek noukeurig te ondersoek,
het die Skrywer van sy verhaal gefaal.

⁶⁶ H Pieterse: *Preaching in a context of poverty* (Pretoria 2001); BJ de Klerk: ‘Liturgiese antwoorde op geweld – ’n verkenning’, in *In die Skriflig* 38/1, 2004:145-166; *Idem*: ‘Die Nagmaal en broodgebrek’, in *Hervormde Teologiese studies/Theological studies* 63/2, 2007:605-624.

⁶⁷ Krog: *Lady Anne* 107.