

## **‘REMEMBERING FORWARD AND HOPING BACKWARD’?**

### **Some thoughts on women and the Dutch Reformed Church**

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#### **Abstract**

*The paper explores current challenges and opportunities facing the Dutch Reformed Church with respect to a more inclusive (gender) ethos. It sets out by briefly describing major hermeneutical and societal shifts in South Africa during the past decades. Numerous structural changes, particularly with regard to the position of women, have been accomplished in the church and society. However, these have not always been accompanied by attitudinal and behavioural changes. On the level of a collective consciousness the scars of a deeply divided society still prevail. Serious and complex issues facing the church are described as essentially theological in nature. The DRC at present is envisioned as a vulnerable, liminal cite where a new dynamic may develop and where liberating and healing discourses may be facilitated. In the process central aspects such as biblical authority, God language and liturgy need to be revisited and reclaimed as powerful resources for identity and moral transformation.*

#### **Introduction**

The organisers of the symposium on *The Dutch Reformed Church: Present challenges in the light of the past* (Stellenbosch, 7-9 March 2001) invited me to speak on the position and role of women in this context. The *what, where, how and why* questions underlying the topic, were however left open. I had no indication as to which women I was supposed to focus on - with respect to age, social status, geographical location, or specific period within the 350 years of the Dutch Reformed Church's history. Therefore, deeply aware of the vastness of the subject on the one hand and numerous limitations on the other, I will attempt to provide a few general perceptions of the rich yet in many ways tragic story of the roles and spaces of women in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). While retaining the ambit set by the symposium, I will limit myself to certain tendencies in South Africa prevalent during the twentieth century, particularly from within the context of transition toward establishing a more democratic society.

I'll start with a brief personal witness. A major turning point in my life as a member of the DRC occurred during the first part of my professional career as an ecclesial-social worker in a congregation of the then *DRC in Africa* in the former Transkei. My exposure to Xhosa-speaking Christians and their entire symbolic universe shaped my identity and thinking in many profound and irreversible ways. In years to come this experience would often create tension

and uneasiness in me with regard to the DRC's policies and practices concerning unity and plurality, human dignity and righteousness.

To speak about the position and role of women in the DRC is to assert that such a discourse does *not* have as its sole object the identity and condition of women in the DRC, but the whole of the Reformed tradition, theological as well as pastoral. Therefore, to speak about women and the DRC within the context of transition, is to speak about the self-understanding of the DRC as characterised by various responses within the present situation of change.

### A deeply divided society

I would like to take as my point of departure the emotions and assumptions, the attitude or mindset which (still) constitute many people's *collective consciousness* in the DRC at present, amidst rapid ongoing socio-political changes. At this level the personal and collective scars of a *deeply divided society* - such as poverty and HIV/AIDS, power abuse, violence, crime and corruption - are part of our daily lives, and are for sure not to disappear easily.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the evil forces of apartheid have deeply distorted the sense of humanity, dignity and identity of *all* people in South Africa. In such a culture not only anthropology, philosophy and ethics are defined in exclusive terms, but also theology and ecclesiology.

Amidst many hopeful tendencies and changes, my primary concern here is the role which the DRC played and often still plays in the justification of alienating practices, and how a vision of healing and reconciliation could be facilitated by the church. In my view, the history of the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the church for centuries sadly points to a fundamental flaw in the church's understanding of God, itself and society. In this sense it concerns not only the *heart* of the Reformed confessional tradition, but also the primary identity of the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Contextual theologies such as feminist and womanist theologies radically challenge the DRC to refocus on the transformative potential of its authoritative texts (Scripture and confessional legacy), and to re-embrace and reappropriate the positive elements of its past with honesty and accountability, in a consistent and truthful manner. The outcries of these theologies invite the church (albeit indirectly) to *listen* to the experiences of women, and to utilise them as a powerful resource toward the church's continual renewal.

In my attempt to understand the 'heart' (orienting perspective) of the DRC, I will make a few brief observations regarding the abovementioned collective

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1. Various alarming statistics can be quoted to underline this concern. Proportionally more women are raped in South Africa than in any other country in the world. Statistics recently published by Time Magazine indicate that a woman is raped in South Africa every 26 seconds! 'South Africa recorded 1,263 rapes in 1979. Today the official annual figure is nearly 50,000, but rape-crisis researchers say only 1 in 35 is reported. That means there are more than 1,6 million rapes a year - the highest incidence in the world, according to Interpol' (Hawthorne 1999:59). Rape victims are seriously protesting at the moment by insisting that they are not statistics, but *people*. For the DRC and other churches liturgy, *inter alia*, provides a space where these outcries could be taken seriously, even if other language forms such as art (e.g. drama, poetry, paintings) may be needed to translate and enact such experiences of humiliation in order to be 'heard'.
  2. Denise Ackermann's question during this symposium on the very soul of the DRC which was bound ('verknog') by the restricting, exclusivist influence of the Afrikaner-Broederbond, and which tragically inhibited its prophetic potential.

consciousness amongst many South Africans at the moment, including DRC members.

Since 1994 a remarkable number of initiatives was taken by the government toward the moral reconstruction of society, *inter alia* the Truth and Reconciliation and Gender Commissions. Ironically, the DRC at large more often than not did not support these initiatives and processes, and seldomly followed them through in liturgical and pastoral practices (cf Deist 1997; Smit 1999:1-3). Together with the church's ambivalent response to the Belhar Confession, the often insensitive reaction toward the TRC added to my disillusionment about the DRC's self-understanding and ethos. Its reluctance to listen to others' stories in a non-threatening way, discomfiting as it may be, easily leads to a lack of common memory-building and sense-making in the process of reinterpreting our country's history in general, and the DRC's role in particular.

### **Lack of (official) space for women in the DRC family**

The lack of official space for women in the DRC family seems to be coupled with a paralysing sense of *disillusionment* amongst many church members, particularly with regard to the use of the Bible in the justification of apartheid (Smit 1999:4). One can hardly overestimate the devastating effects of this history on the self-image of Afrikaans-speaking DRC members, characterised by a lack of credibility and even self-confidence.

In the process many black people and women in particular have become deeply suspicious of the often repressive readings of the Bible which were imposed on them and which caused them to feel like second and third class citizens not only in society, but also in the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> Very often they, as well as those who were privileged by the system, feel *disillusioned* and *deceived* by the many 'successful' ways in which Scripture has been used to justify and solidify racial and gender apartheid. For such people to be surprised (again) by Scripture's transformative and liberative vision of reconciliation, and to be persuaded by virtues such as truthfulness, authenticity and integrity, have indeed become an enormous challenge.

It is impossible to even try to give due credit here to the vast variety of roles and services rendered by women in the course of the DRC's history. Apart from their indispensable (assumed and allocated) roles as child bearers and home managers, their multi-faceted contributions in the workplace and society at large, women in the church sphere were mostly (and ironically) entrusted with extremely important roles such as catechism and practical work of compassion.

Since women in the DRC were mostly excluded from ordained offices and many decision-making processes, they began as far back as the previous century to organise themselves in terms of a variety of auxiliary services, associations and guilds, mostly *outside* mainstream activities of the official church. I have briefly described these developments (1889-1980) elsewhere (Mouton 1997c). Very often church councils and higher meetings responded during this period by

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3. Cf former Archbishop Desmond Tutu in *Apartheid is a Heresy* (edited by De Gruchy, J & Villavicencio, C 1983:46). Since then, other marginalised groups such as people of various sexual orientations, have openly voiced their pastoral neglect by the churches, based on an analogous ideologically-based interpretation of Scripture.

merely taking note (obviously with gratitude) of what the sisters were doing, without necessarily involving them in official processes of decision-making. In practice it often meant that women were held responsible for fundraising, but were not expected to suggest how these funds had to be utilised and allocated.

This situation gradually - and particularly during the late seventies and eighties of the previous century - led to a new mode of discourse with regard to the official status of women and women's leagues within the church. That women in churches were obliged to express their sense of identity and ethos through separate *organisations* or *auxiliaries* (often blamed as 'a church within the church') in order to respond to a great variety of practical needs in the church and society, gradually created a sense of unease among (some) officials. Since the seventies the DRC was challenged - mainly from outside, by ecumenical bodies such as the WARC and the WCC - to deliberate the position and role of women as an issue pertaining to the very *essence* of the church and its Reformed identity. These influences resulted in negotiations on new forms of representation and cooperation in formal church structures. After long and tedious debates on the position of women during regional and general synod meetings in the late seventies and eighties (*in the conspicuous absence of women*), the DRC eventually resolved that women would be allowed to serve in the offices of deacon (1986 general synod) and elder/minister (1990 general synod). In this way women were (at least in theory) granted a dignified position and role in official church structures. In *practice*, however, it became clear that parishes and church councils did not always accept ownership of this process, and that the church was faced with the enormous challenge to rise beyond gross imbalances in the representation of leadership styles, decision-making processes and involvement in practical services of compassion as well as theological education.<sup>4</sup>

In heinzeit the story of Afrikaans Christian women represents the cry - albeit often in silence - of one group of people within the church (more than 50% of its baptised members) who had to plead from 'outside,' as it were, to be heard and recognised as full members of the church. At the same time, however, it seems that the comfort zones of these associations provided a safe space for many women against the dominant male culture and management style of the church. While DRC women are often criticised by either male leaders or feminist theologians for not being vocal enough, their silence inevitably witnesses to the 'success' of the dominant patriarchal ethos within the church for many centuries (cf Landman 1994).

Whatever one's perspective on the current mindset regarding the role of women in the DRC, it is clear that the frightening power of the church's patriarchally-based interpretative frameworks and presuppositions more often

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4. During the first decade since 1990, 65 women completed their theological training at the three institutions of the DRC (Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Stellenbosch). Unofficial statistics indicate that 25 of them (that is 38%) were called to congregations. At the moment (2001) ten are in permanent positions and 15 are part-time ministers. At the same time women are poorly represented at general and regional synodical meetings of the DRC. In 1994 only four out of 383 delegates to the general synod were women. In 1998 this number slightly improved to nine out of 393. During 2000 the first two female lecturers were appointed in a full time capacity at the faculties of theology at Stellenbosch and Pretoria.

than not dominated the process. In my view this happened at the peril of the church's identity awareness and theological imagination.

### **A sense of loss instead of celebration?**

The radical transformation with numerous societal shifts that is taking place in South Africa at the moment, ironically seem to *strengthen* the already deeply entrenched sense of alienation amongst and within people (cf Smit 1994:20-21; 1999:4-5).

A potentially constructive yet also dangerous consequence of a secular society or postmodern thinking is that it leads to a breakdown of the hegemony of truth claims. For many people this means that all truth claims merely become a matter of opinion, and that morality is a matter of personal preference. The emphasis is often on *different* rationalities and view points, with little regard for that which binds people together. Instead of celebrating the richness of plurality and complementarity as a gift, the postmodern attitude for many people becomes synonymous with a certain disintegration, to a loss of orientation and cohesion, a loss of identity and community, a lack of responsibility and involvement, to a general attitude of apathy, of 'who cares?' These tendencies go against the distinctive nature of Christianity as a life-giving *community*, and I am afraid that the DRC's response ironically reveals serious flaws within its self-understanding over a period of time.

Although the present moment bears the promise of a new, more accountable hermeneutical awareness, it is accompanied by a deep sense of *loss* – the loss of wholeness, integration and integrity, the loss of a collective moral identity, memory and destination (who we are, where we come from, where we would like to be going), the loss of trust in all forms of leadership, including church leadership, the loss of trust even in the truth and truthfulness of God's word, and as a logical result, the loss of a corresponding corporate ethos of dignity and respect for life.

As far as Christianity in general and the DRC in particular are concerned, these symptoms tragically but definitively point toward the *essence* of our problem. They tragically witness to the reality that we have somehow lost our *orientation and integration* (integrity), our sense of calling, our *primary identity as Christians* – the most basic conviction of who we are and who we are supposed to be. This is essentially a *theological* problem, which manifests itself as a '*moral crisis*', but in actual fact goes much deeper.<sup>5</sup> It therefore calls for a careful *theological* response.<sup>6</sup> Russel Botman referred to this in his paper as the need for a coherent theological centre and discourse.

5. There have been significant changes in South Africa and in the DRC. However, the memory of nearly two thousand years of a male-dominated church, backed by theology that is derived from mainly western male scholarship has left us with an enormous challenge. Denise Ackermann's observation is significant in this respect: 'An appalling and too often unacknowledged side of the endemic violence in our society is the sexual violence inflicted on women and children. Even if this fact is acknowledged, it is often not understood that sexual violence is essentially an evil abuse of power. As such, it is a *theological* problem. Racism and sexism are structures of domination which create conditions for the abuse of power... A number of churches and certain church leaders have been justly vocal in their condemnation of apartheid. Few, if any, have spoken out against sexism' (Ackermann, 1994:205; italics mine).

6. Smit (1999:11) reiterates this observation: 'The most serious reason for concern about the state of Reformed Christianity in South Africa ... is not the alarming proportions of our moral crisis

These challenges thrust complex questions to the fore: How can an 'apartheid-oriented' perspective on difference be transformed into a community-oriented perspective which would not be threatened by plurality, but appreciate and celebrate it instead? What kind of moral discourse would impact on members of such a society (including those who have lost their trust in the church and the Bible as the Word of God)?

It is clear that the DRC is in dire need of (spiritual) *orientation*, of an accountable view of biblical authority as liberating practice for all, and of a new sense of communal identity. All these have serious implications for how we respond to the African context, for the particular images (of God) that we choose to emphasise at this moment in history, for how we define church, liturgy, spirituality, morality...

How could this be accomplished? What hermeneutical approach(es) would be appropriate for the DRC and its wider South African context right now?

### **Dare to dream...?**

As a possible way forward I envision a shared space somewhere beyond *both* the dominant (male) and marginal (female) discourses of the DRC's past history. Within such a newly shared space a *liminal* discourse may develop... In fact, I would prefer to believe that the DRC could participate in a conjoined endeavour of all churches, to serve *as a liminal cite* right now, and to create a facilitating space between the present (often contrasting) modes of existence.<sup>7</sup> It is particularly the dynamics of such an in-between stage that may provide us with the stimulus, values, and virtues to radically redefine our humanity and moral existence. And it is from such a creative yet risky stance that I propose Christian women can and should be of use to the church today (cf Mouton 1997a).<sup>8</sup> I am more than ever convinced that women and men are called and gifted to contribute substantially to such a liminal discourse and practice. In the subsequent section I briefly look at three aspects of such a proposition.

### **Biblical authority as liberating and healing practice**

In order to account for both the dynamic nature of the Biblical documents and our present day contexts, the authority of Scripture will have to be refocused and restructured in such a discourse within the dynamic site of continuous *interaction* between the Spirit of God, the pastoral needs of contemporary faith communities, and the biblical texts. Such an approach would embrace the many dimensions of the full hermeneutical circle, and would be truthful to the dynamic

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and our lack of responsibility, but the integrity of our own identity and the credibility of our own life and witness. We face a theological – not primarily a moral – crisis and we need a theological response'.

7. In the case of women I consider 'marginal' in this context to refer to the perspective of women 'from the margin', and not in terms of a victim mentality.
8. Mark Kline Taylor (1990:200) defines *liminality* as 'the kind of life known 'betwixt and between' differentiated persons, groups or worlds. This is an experience of the wonder, the disorientation and discomfort that can arise when one is suspended between or among different groups or persons'. He describes the liminal space between cultural boundaries as a difficult, fragile, risky, and trying experience, of which the ambiguities and strains are not easily tolerated. At the same time the liminal encounter represents a dynamic and dialectic process wherein no one remains static. As new alliances are constructed in the interaction between different worlds, people's moral identities and lifestyles are reconstituted by it.

nature of these documents, which represent continuous processes of interpretation and reinterpretation (reorientation).<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, the spiral movement between the Spirit, Scripture and the concrete needs of current readers is crucial also for the *unlocking* of the liberating meaning of those ancient texts.

To respond faithfully and with sensitivity to the rhetorical function of the Biblical documents is to account for their transformative potential amid their cultural-historical biases - that is, the typically human process of redescription in the light of new knowledge and experience underlying them. Involvement in the liminal space therefore asks for an open-endedness which humbly recognises the provisional nature of all faith utterances. To allow for explanations and experiences of a living God who is constantly revealed in new and surprising ways, present day readers of the Bible are challenged to account for its patriarchal language, and to create the inclusive language needed to express and construct their experiences. These documents do not wish to bind us in rigid, legalistic ways, but liberate us toward the imaginative appropriation of the mighty, healing power of God's love in new circumstances. In spite of their patriarchal embeddedness, these documents invite us to identify with Christ in the paradoxical triumph of his resurrection and exaltation, and to grow beyond all limited and stereotypical views of humanity. The dynamics of liminality may function as a reconciliatory strategy between different moral worlds, providing us with the vision, values, and skills to redefine our humanity. To respect the transformative potential of the Bible is to dedicate ourselves to accomplishing the full potential of the body of Christ. Anything less would confine the God of the Bible to the boundaries of ancient canonised texts in a way contradictory to their own nature, and could therefore not be considered as normative. Women and men need one another in order to take up the enormous challenge caused by the 'hermeneutical deficit' inherited from the past.

### **On the threshold with an impartial God**

A biblical image which may help to facilitate such liminal discourse is God's impartiality (Dt 10:17). This image is enhanced by Jesus' concrete life and ministry. In Jesus God is found in places where God would not be perceived. In Jesus God is particularly and dramatically present at the margins of human existence. Not to say that God is not at the centre of life, but in Jesus the centre *shifts* to marginal people and places. Jesus is born in a place where no child was meant to be born, Jesus dies at a place where criminals were executed. Jesus dies violently as an innocent victim of human sin (brought about by men who were threatened by Jesus' message and behaviour - Johnson 1992:158-9). Through this trauma of horror, humiliation and shame, a shocking vision of God is presented. The ultimate site where God would *not* be perceived, paradoxically *becomes* the site of God's presence. The church is particularly challenged to remember, re-claim and re-constitute the continuing healing presence of the living God of history in the midst of sin and suffering in the present.

This radical reversal of divine power reveals not only who God is, but also what it means to be human, with radical implications for all forms of life. In showing compassion to women, children, tax-collectors, Samaritans, Jesus

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9. I have argued aspects related to the ethics of interpretation elsewhere, particularly with regard to the use of Scripture in Christian ethos and ethics (Mouton 1997a, 1997b).

subverts the established values of power in the moral world of first century Palestine. In shifting the centre to the margins, and the margins to the centre, God's concrete presence in Jesus becomes a radical moment of shock and surprise, inviting people inside and outside those texts to *look* differently, to adopt new roles, to reorient their understanding of God and their traditions in the light of God's liberating presence in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

I believe that women may assist the church in speaking more humbly and provisionally about the healing presence of a compassionate, vulnerable and impartial God in this world.

### **New space for lament in liturgy: Remembering forward**

Where are these shifts supposed to occur? Which context may afford broken people with strong feelings of abandonment the opportunity of a counter-experience?

Of all the various contexts and resources for the shaping of moral people and behaviour, I focus here on the reorienting role of *liturgy* in general, and lamentation in particular – with regard to all spheres of life.

In the worship service the Spirit shapes and refines our senses: We learn to *listen* anew to the Word, to each other and to the needs of society and the world. We learn to *feel*, to *smell*, to *taste*. And to *look* and *see* in new ways. In the process the Spirit teaches and energises the community of believers to desire and *passionately yearn* for God's will to be done on earth, and that compassion, respect and trust will characterise their mutual relationships.<sup>10</sup> In recent years feminist theologians often challenged the church's inability or unpreparedness to mourn and to lament as part of a typical patriarchal mentality. According to this view men are inclined to think of themselves as 'strong, in control, and unemotional'. Women, I believe can help the church to acknowledge its own vulnerability and absolute dependence on God. Likewise women - through their skills of communication and service - can help the church to take its spatial setting in the narrative of the African continent seriously. Above all, I believe that the mothers of the church, in a special way representing God's mothering role, have the guts and integrity - often without the baggage of the official church leadership - to encourage the church toward her re-uniting as a family...

The DRC has much to celebrate and to lament. Liturgy provides the space for both. As a crucial starting point for change, liturgy provides room to *lament* our losses. It allows both perpetrators and victims the opportunity to lament the loss of their full humanity.<sup>11</sup> In liturgy the Spirit teaches us to *name* our sins (Karl

10. That is, that the way in which parents and children, women and men, neighbours, employers and employees speak *to* and *about* one another, take decisions which may impact the others' lives in many ways, how we take care of the earth... may *all* be seen as part of our lives in the presence of a living God (Rm 12:1-2).

11. No matter how powerful and moving the *logos* of the church's message may be, while the *ethos* of its hierarchical understanding of power still alienates and marginalises people, the force of its influence will remain in jeopardy. Edward Wimberly, from a pastoral counselling perspective, suggests the utilisation of the Psalms of lament as an effective way of helping people to acknowledge and express their feelings of abandonment and shame – and as a starting point for moving from complaint against God to confession of trust and faith in God, and from a sense of shame to self-worth. According to Mk 15:34 and Mt 27:46 Jesus probably made use of phrases from Pss 22 and 31 in expressing his experience of God-forsakenness. 'The wisdom of the psalms of lament is that deep feelings of frustration and agony cannot remain unexpressed



Barth), and to grow from *remembering* our inherited traditions of alienation to *dismembering* them. Phrased in terms of Letty Russell's eschatological theology, we are called 'to remember forward and hope backward'. We learn to see our *past*, our personal and collective guilt of sins committed and omitted for what it is, but also to revisit our own and others' stories through the lens of God's forgiving and healing love, and God's great deeds in history. In this way the Spirit teaches us to think, speak and act from a new collective identity, and by way of empathy to recognise, appreciate and accept the life stories of others as if they were our own...<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The dynamics from within liminal spaces are in this case provided by an eschatological dream. Although the spirit of our time is radically against every aspect of this dream, it continues to constitute and celebrate the mighty, creative presence of God in the world. By remembering forward it wishes to engage in prophetic reconstructing acts of imagination. From there we may hope backward by deconstructing past memories and myths about ourselves. To be able to live with courage and hope in the *present*.

There is no guarantee that the DRC will consistently take heed of women's stories amidst many burning issues on its agenda. May we together - for the sake of God and who we are - keep courage against all odds, even as the Syrian Phoenician woman of Matthew 15!

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without doing serious damage to the one who has them ... The problem with internalizing shame to control shame is that it makes the shameful event and its remembrance a permanent part of the self. It then becomes an internal saboteur of personal worth and self-esteem' (Wimberly 1999:54,56). Through collectively expressing our feelings of shame and humiliation in songs, poems and prayers of lament, these moments become opportunities for God's healing. See also Billman and Migliore's profound work on the relationship between lament and hope: *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (1999).

12. The Bible witnesses that Christ is able to translate different stories into one new story (cf Eph 1:10), into a new *common memory* (Niebuhr 1941:86), which might become a *common hope* for the future.

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