

*(Diverse people unite<sup>1</sup>)*

**ETHNICITY AND NATIONBUILDING:  
A SOUTH AFRICAN FAITH PERSPECTIVE  
FROM BELOW<sup>2</sup>**

KTh August

Department of Practical Theology and Missiology

Stellenbosch University

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**Abstract**

*The problem of race, ethnicity and multi-culturalism is one critical universal issue of our time. Issues of race, ethnicity, language, culture and religion, bear an enormous emotional content. South Africa is in a process of major socio-political changes, which inevitably bear within them all kinds of insecurities that need to be arrested and transformed, less these insecurities reach a point of distrust in the emerging transforming social order. The ongoing quest for a society that celebrates our unity and acknowledges the diversity of our people as our national wealth needs to be promoted. However, it needs to be emphasized that there is also a perception that the development of a common patriotism is threatened by a growing polarization in our society. This poses a challenge to the Church in being the alternative messianic community to play its critical solidarity role by assisting the fledgling democratic state in building its hegemony for the sake of a just society.*

**1. The South African challenge**

The problem of race, ethnicity and multi-culturalism is one critical issue the twentieth century failed to resolve. It plagues rich and poor nations. It simmers and erupts in the United States, the European nations, Latin American countries, Australia, Asia and Africa. No country, be it capitalist or socialist, developed or developing, has yet produced an enduring response.<sup>3</sup> That is why the debate and the solutions emerging in South Africa will continue to attract the interest and attention of all. The overwhelming majority of the world shares the vision of non-racism that drives us...<sup>4</sup> The challenge of unity in diversity (*!ke e:/karra/!ke*), which is emblazoned on the coat of arms of democratic South Africa, is awesome. Issues of race, ethnicity, language and culture, as well as religion, bear an enormous emotional content. Stereotyping, fear, chauvinism and, above all, hatred animate these issues. Inevitably, major social changes bear within them all kinds of insecurities that have to be managed. The danger lies therein that we might allow these *insecurities* to reach a point of distrust in the emerging social order and the forces that lead the process of

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1. *!ke e:/karra/!ke*: The Motto of the new Coat of Arms for South Africa is taken from one of the oldest Khoi-khoi languages of South Africa.

2. Lecture held at the Reformed Theological Institute at Princeton June/July 2001.

3. Even the Conference to Combat Racism of the UN held recently in Durban South Africa in August/Sept 2001 has demonstrated how divisive and sensitive an issue this is in view of the developing countries' demands and aspirations based on their humiliation suffered during colonialism and the stance of the First World countries, especially the USA and EU. It was sadly even difficult to come up with a joint declaration.

4. Cf. M Maharaj, *Reflections in Prison*, Zebra 2001: xiv.

change...<sup>5</sup> This poses a challenge to the Church as a public entity in its critical collaborative roll to assist the democratic state in building its hegemony for the sake of justice, dignity, peace, non-violence, a healthy economy, health, employment and social security for all its citizens!

## 2. Ethnic identity: The struggle of a people

In this article I want to share the story of a South African people called “coloureds” and their experience of being human amidst socio-political trial and tribulation.<sup>6</sup> It is a story of a community confronted with the well-nigh impossible task of persuading privileged whites to live up to their professed Christian creed and democratic convictions and do justice to men and women sharing their culture and beliefs.

But, who are the coloured people and where does the story of South Africa’s coloured people begin? This is a question to which there is no answer that will satisfy everybody. One has often heard it said in jest that the first “coloured” was born nine months after the arrival of Van Riebeeck in 1652.<sup>7</sup> As Van Der Ross<sup>8</sup> puts it: “Some (historians) start with the arrival of Van Riebeeck, others with the import of slaves, still others go even further back to the (aboriginal) Khoi or Hottentots (and the San), without or even before any interference from European or Blacks, Bantu or African.”

Marais states, “The history of the coloured People is the history of the contact of aboriginal Africans (and a few Orientals) with Europeans. Without this contact there would have been no Coloured folk, though that does not mean to say that all, or perhaps most, of them have European blood in their veins.”<sup>9</sup>

The historian of the Coloured People is at every stage in their evolution brought face to face with the European –the missionary who sought to convert and civilize them, the trader who often debauched them, the government official who tried to fit them into their “proper” place in an ordered society, and the farmer-colonist who wanted their land and their labour.

For a long time coloured people were the silent victims of racism and apartheid. The history of race relations in our country reveals that successive governments hounded and segregated “people of colour” and systematically deprived them of their rights as citizens of our country.<sup>10</sup>

What concerns us most in this essay is the current debate in South African real-politics. In the current debate, the issue is not so much appearance, descent or social status. It is about identity, given the historical atrocities meted out against and the horrors inflicted on innocent and unsuspecting human beings. People have the right to determine their identity, to determine with whom they want to identify. Yet, the coloured people are ethnically and culturally estranged and confused due to the various permutations and combinations in the miscegenation<sup>11</sup> and the successive white social engineering, which deprived them of their dignity and worth.

5. M. Maharaj, *Reflections in Prison*, xvi-xvii.

6. For a critical historical account of the suffering of Coloured People under apartheid compare RE van der Ross, *The Rise and Decline of Apartheid*, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1986.

7. RH du Pré, *Separate but unequal The “Coloured” People of South Africa- A political History*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers 1994, viii.

8. RE van der Ross, “*Ons is bruin mense, en basta!*” in: *Insig* July 1995, 8.

9. JS Marais, *The Cape Coloured People (1652-1937)*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press 1968, ix.

10. RH du Pré, *Separate but unequal*, vii.

11. JS Marais, *The Cape Coloured People (1652-1937)*, 9.

I prefer to use the term “ethnic identity” when referring to our ancestry, so as not to perpetuate the use of racial identity and the erroneous assumption that “race” is a viable construct. But while racism is a legacy and a reality, the construct “race”, denoting primarily skin colour, is devoid of substance.<sup>12</sup>

I use “ethnic identity” to refer to a sense of individual and group identity based on the perception that one shares a common heritage and a common historical experience. This sense of historical experience is an essential element in the current discourse about identity.

Coloured people are more in favour of their European ancestry than their African. In some circles people even despise their African forebears. In accepting our European ancestry we should also realize that part of that heritage is the exploitation and dehumanizing of our African and Asian ancestors.

In our search to know our essence as South Africans we still need to learn to talk honestly about our particular heritage and about the historical and social realities we have experienced in order to realize the good African-ness, which will leave us with a sense of pride and dignity. An essential part of our liberation will continue to be reclaiming all aspects of our past and the past of Africa and Africans.

One cannot blame coloured people for the ambivalence they have shown through the years in their attitude to and relationships with Africans and whites. They sprang out of the European nation and shared its culture, yet were denied membership of it. They weren't Africans (in the sense of Nguni), but were similarly discriminated against, segregated and oppressed. Thus, if they were not Africans and whites said they were not Europeans, then what were they? This agony has mercifully come to an end in a statutory sense with the scrapping of the Population Act in 1991, but the psychological scars and the stigma will remain for a long time. In time, coloured people may forgive the erstwhile first class white citizens for the pain, the agony and the humiliation. However, it is doubtful that they will ever forget...

Race classification has since been scrapped but coloured people will carry the stigma of an inferior racial label for generations to come. The main question of course is – how long will it take before coloureds realize and accept that they are now free and equal? Sadly, centuries of discrimination and decades of racist laws have brainwashed coloured people, so that they now actually believe in and accept their inferior status. The psychological adjustment from “second-class” citizen to “first-class” human being is going to have difficulty coming to terms with. The problem, Du Pré<sup>13</sup> writes, “is to get the coloured people to stop thinking like “Coloureds” and to get them to realize that they are the equal of anyone else living in our country.” There are many “Coloured” heroes and roll models, sports stars, intellectuals, scientists, doctors, academics, inventors, politicians, etc. Many of these emerged in the last 20 years because for many years, “Coloured” were kept in a prison of abject poverty and subservience – virtual slaves and chattels.

In 1950, while coloured people were still reeling from the ban on mixed marriages and sex across the colour line and from the race classification laws, the government piled on the anguish by introducing three more apartheid laws. These were the Group Areas Act of 1950, the separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951 and the Separate Amenities Act of 1953. These laws, which together with race classification make up the “Coloured” pillars of apartheid, dealt coloured people an economic, political and social blow from which they

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12. J Sonn, “*Breaking down the boarders*” in: J Wilmot et al., *Now that we are Free*, Cape Town: Idasa 1996, 64.

13. RH Du Pré, *Separate but unequal*, 81.

have today not yet recovered. These laws stripped them of their dignity, caused intense humiliation and impoverished them even further.

Having to deal with these issues under the theme "Faith and Ethnicity" is for me, as a classified coloured,<sup>14</sup> indeed painful and at times frustrating, but necessary. Many well-meaning South Africans and even other liberal Christians may advance the view that dealing with atrocities, wrongs and grievances may retard progress to reconciliation and a non-racial democratic society. Moreover, recent occurrences in Macedonia<sup>15</sup> warn us that the obsession with group and ethnicity could once again flare up into racial intolerance, civil war and ethnic cleansing as it happened in that countries past.

I therefore trust that as we wrestle to understand the nature and consequences of ethnicity and racism, it will imbue us with the desire to ensure that this cancer is destroyed forever. But then again, the more we know about our past, the greater our understanding of the present will be, and the better equipped we will be to work for a brighter future, one in which all are equal and where no considerations in respect of race, colour or creed are made. Our Christian consciousness and understanding will also help us to realize how much people who had to endure and suffer this kind of humiliation need healing of memories and the restoration of their dignity.

South Africans must be on their guard lest future governments continue where the National Party left off. With regard to coloured people, it is to be hoped that knowledge of past actions in respect of these victims of racist attitudes and apartheid will occupy the minds of enough people to provide a watchful eye against a repeat of such discriminatory practices. Of course, one realizes that minorities have invariably had the short end of the stick in most countries. The four million strong-coloured group have been singled out for specific treatment under successive racist regimes for the past 350 years. The law, which officially labeled them "Coloured" in 1950, has now been repealed but the label and the stigma remain.

The truth regarding the treatment that coloured people suffered at the hands of whites in general and Afrikaners in particular, during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has barely begun to surface. "Coloured" people were the victims of a violent and brutal assault - an assault on their person, their dignity and their humanity, which has not yet been fully exposed. After 1948, Afrikaners cornered an innocent, defenseless and uncomprehending group and viciously humiliated and abused them. This is the story that South Africans and the World must continuously be told.

Moreover, coloured people were brutalized by a people who claimed to be Christians (in a supposedly Christian country), and that is what coloured people hold against the Afrikaner and other European racists: that God-fearing Christians in a "Christian" country act in such a barbaric, inhuman and cruel fashion is what the Europeans will always be remembered for. Moreover, they have made little attempt to effect restitution; they have made no attempt to restore to people what was brutally taken from them;<sup>16</sup> little attempt has been made at compensation. The Nationalist Government and the white supremacists had shown little, if any remorse for their crimes against humanity. Very few have made any attempt to apologize for what they did and just as many have stubbornly insisted that they

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14. People, even under our democratic dispensation, are still being requested to fill in official registration forms according to the old apartheid classification; not, we are assured, to be discriminated against, but for affirmative action and restorative justice purposes.

15. During the period of 25-27 June regarding the ethnic-Albanian rebels (cf. the Indonesian situation where Moslems fight against Christians).

16. JS Marais, *The Cape Coloured People (1652-1937)*, 6-7.

will never apologize for apartheid and white domination throughout the colonization period.

Yet with the first ever general elections in 1994 (when universal franchise was restored to all South Africans) the coloured people had to contend with a concerted effort by this same unrepentant regime to recruit its erstwhile victims to join or support the National Party. Can one forgive such unrepentance unconditionally? Is there not the danger that such a person misconstrues one's Christian principles and morality as condonation of his immoral actions? What is even worse, he will construe it as weakness and continue in his evil ways. The forgiving victim therefore remains a victim for the rest of his life. The only way to prevent abuse and further exploitation is for coloureds and other victims of racism to always be on their guard and to treat all overtures with suspicion – to operate with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Is this necessarily less Christian?! Can we not claim biblical connotation for this in what Jesus said: "...Be as cautious as snakes and as gentle as doves!" (Mtt. 10:16).

### 3. The New Democratic Dispensation

The book *Now That We are Free*,<sup>17</sup> addresses the political position of Coloured people in the new democratic South Africa. Under apartheid, coloured people were made to feel "not white enough". Now some fear they are "not black enough" to benefit from a democratic South Africa.

But the question that should be posed is: "Is there a coloured identity?"<sup>18</sup> Is there even a coloured community? In apartheid parlance, coloured was everyone who was not white, African or clearly Indian. Under apartheid, this included a wide variety of people from a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds: Khoi, San, Chinese, Malays, Griqua etc.

Within this broad coloured community, there is a profound sense of difference, even racism: Christian, Muslim, English, and Afrikaans, high society and worker, urban dwellers over against rural people, to name just a few distinctions. One could ask what social or cultural cohesion exists? What common identity does all those called coloured share? What common features do they have? Is there a uniform consciousness?

On this question a glance at the dictionary tells us that *consciousness* could mean "being conscious", possessing "the power of self-knowledge", "an internal perception" or "an aggregate of conscious states of a group of persons".<sup>19</sup> In relation to the coloured community, we may well ask whether such self-knowledge exists or whether such an aggregate of conscious states is developing within this group of people.

Any self-awareness and consciousness that are developing in the coloured community takes place by way of actions which split that community: the Khoi and San trace their history and lineages; the Malay revel in their reawakened connection with Malaysia; the Griqua chiefs demand recognition and compensation; and other identify their traditional lands. One may, therefore speak more correctly of coloured communities and coloured identities as being the more positive, natural responses to the demise of apartheid's false unities and false divisions.

Is there a coloured disquiet? One cannot dispute that, within sections of the coloured community, there has been a sense of disquiet, a fearful assertiveness, a laying down of

17. J Wilmot et al., *Now that we are Free*, Cape Town, Idasa 1996, 57.

18. E Rasool, *Unveiling the heart of fear in: J Wilmot et al., Now that we are Free*.

19. JB Sykes, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford 1982.

claims, an appeal to coloureds as a group and a search for a fixed identity.<sup>20</sup> Does this constitute a cultural awakening, an ethnic stir, a racial identity, and a linguistic awareness? Or is it a political response to a sense of socio-economic alienation and marginalisation within the process of constructing the South African nation?

Focus group research carried out by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) gives credence to this sense of alienation from the political process in the country; the absence of someone who understands and speaks for coloureds. CASE found that coloured people were “pessimistic about the future” and that most “feel insecure and scared about the future” and express it as a “fear of the unknown”.<sup>21</sup> What is this fear of the unknown? Some have said that this fear is a fear of Africans (xenophobia), and have gone so far as to accuse coloured people of racism. Racism certainly exists in significant doses among sections of the coloured community, but not necessarily more so than in many other sections of South Africa.<sup>22</sup> Coloureds are not so much racist as they fear non-racialism. The big unknowns for coloured are non-racialism, freedom and equality. This is what confounds those, including coloured activists, who have fought all their lives for these values; that at the moment of victory, when the promised land is to be constructed, the wilderness is preferred.

Coloureds were oppressed under apartheid, but they were also better placed in the hierarchy of apartheid. Non-racialism, freedom and equality usher in a future of competing equally for scarce resources, without preferential treatment and according to the same rules.

One such scarce resource is employment. Where yesterday the coloured labour preference was broadly secured jobs for coloured people, today’s equality is perceived through affirmative action to provide jobs for Africans.

Housing is another area of contention. The coloured community no longer has the guarantee to housing through the Group Areas Act. Again the playing field is level.

One can mention other spheres of life where non-racialism, freedom and equality have evoked anxiety rather than liberty. These include access to welfare benefits and reserved places at the University of the Western Cape founded in 1966 for coloured tertiary education by the apartheid regime.

It is not as if the coloured people stand ignorant and unsympathetic in the face of what must be done in South Africa. *It is that they perceive it will be done at their cost.* The need among Africans is self-evident: coloured people see the squatter camps, they see the poor at the traffic intersections and they know of the suffering through the media. More importantly, they know that they have already lost the race now that all South Africans begin from the same starting blocks. This is the heart of fear. It seems to be the material basis of the scramble for the new coloured identity and consciousness.

### **!KE E:/KARRA //KE (*Diverse people unite*)**

Today in South African we live in a democracy that is still in its fledgling stages. We have a constitution, which incorporates a Bill of Rights and which commits South Africans to a secular state, and a society based on non-sexism and non-racism.

20. E Rasool in: J Wilmot et al., *Now that we are Free*, 56; cf. RE van der Ross, *Ons is bruin mense, en basta!* in: *Insig*, Julie 1995, 8.

21. D Everatt et al, *Finishing the job? Deepening democracy and delivery benefits through successful local government elections*, Johannesburg: Case, 1994, in: J Wilmot et al, *Now that we are free*, 1996, 57.

22. E Rasool in: J Wilmot et al., *Now that we are Free*, 57.

The quest for a society that celebrates our unity and acknowledges the diversity of our people as our national wealth, is on-going. At the same time there is a perception that the development of a common patriotism is threatened by a growing polarization in our society.

We came from a past under apartheid that had as its aim the using of ethnicity as a means for sowing conflict and division among African people. But the most stark illustration of the failure of the growing defeat of the divide and rule ethnic policy, is *the increasing assertion of a non-threatening ethnic identity* in South Africa. A unifying appreciation, where each South African is free to express her identity without it being a tool that an oppressor can exploit. However this new triumph is in its infancy. If sustained it will signal the most significant victory over the “grand design of apartheid”. Ensuring that we maintain this character in our society will require principled leadership and awareness of the potential that ethnicity holds for the sowing of conflict in any society.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. The Church and ethnicity

The South African Christian faith communities themselves are since inception divided along racial and ethnic lines due to various practical and ideological factors, e.g. colonialism, racism, language and cultural differences, mission enterprise policies and practices. The most dominant experience that a coloured Christian has of the Christian Church is that whites in the main do not want to have full church association and integration with other indigenous Christians in the beloved country of our birth, even if they speak the same language and share the same culture. It is now common knowledge that the white Christians, with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as its chief exponent, even found Biblical justification for their separateness and provided the biblical base for the political dispensation of apartheid. The DRC as a confessional entity claimed to have christened most coloureds in South Africa into the separate church of the erstwhile *Mission Church* (the DRC also made converts amongst the Indians and various other African tribes). Even within most Christian denominations different ethnic groups would worship separately and would have different constitutions and institutions.<sup>24</sup> This resulted in First generation African Christians although constituting the majority of Christians in the country not only suffering from being divided into various confessional groupings but also experiencing the hardship of poverty and misery of daily living being duplicated in the sphere of the church. All first generation African Christian Churches in South Africa have suffered the humiliation of handouts and charity by the same second generation white South African Christians who exploited and rule over them daily in the secular sphere appeasing their conscience by giving handouts as a kind of compassion that kept their fellow believers in a constant state of ecclesiastical dependency. Even today, although many other denominations have united along confessional lines, the DRC has refused to do so within its own confessional ranks although the other so-called “daughter churches” have united into the Uniting Reformed church. Could this, apart from ethnic factors, also be due to economic and membership considerations? Issues like property, investments and numbers as they relate to power and decision-making might very well play a major role in

23. Cf. N Pandor, “At ease with ourselves” in: M Maharaj et al, *The Great Debate*, June 2001, 15. Supplement in: *The Sunday Times*, Sunday 10 June publication.

24. Many of the mainline churches, eg. The Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Moravians etc. were largely divided along ethnic lines for centuries. It was only during the 70-80s of the last century due mainly to the political changes and ecumenical pressures that the Church in South Africa really came to organic unity, confessionally. Reasons that were given for the ecclesiastical ethnic division are geographical distances and situatedness, language, culture, levels of educational and civilization, self-determination, etc.

hampering the unification process. What has happened to the kenotic principle within the church? Should not the church be the continuous embodiment as well as the exponent of the incarnational nature of Christ's ministry? Only in its condescending nature can the white church start to heal the hurt of alienation and humiliation suffered at their hands by their fellow believers over so many centuries in the history of the South African church.

The Church has undisputedly played a major role in the transformation of the South African political society and in bringing about the democratic dispensation.<sup>25</sup> But the South African Church in general is not doing enough about the rising uncertainty about ethnicity and identity. We are merely ignoring it by making popular statements about a *spiritual oneness in Christ*. What does it take to become one in Christ after having accepted the theological truth? What implications does this dictate have for the church in becoming obedient to Christ? What bearing would this *oneness* have on e.g. confessional symbols, language, culture, worship, property, structures, witness and public image of the church?

We think that, especially from a Christian viewpoint, the tensions and emergent conflicts in the Western Cape and elsewhere especially amongst the coloured people, are a threat to the consolidation of democratic institutions.<sup>26</sup>

Every community in South Africa has concerns unique to their particular history and circumstances. For the coloured communities in South Africa, perhaps the most pressing concern is the fear of being marginalized. It is a fear of a perceived continuation of a history where coloureds were used by whites to try and fragment the unity of liberation to where they now feel excluded from the benefits of a democratic order. It is a fear of being made to feel like perpetual losers.<sup>27</sup> The danger, if this fear is left unattended, is to translate certain points of view into areas of life and areas of activity that are not democratic – the danger of taking up arms, the danger of xenophobia, the danger of bullying, the danger of becoming hegemonic.

How then to approach the issue of ethnicity and identity? Construing the politics of diversity as something merely “to be managed” is a tactic that leads us astray. The only acceptable construct is the embodiment of citizenship by all SA people and the central role of Christians as citizens in everyday life in society. Not only individually, but far more collectively, and especially as demonstrated by the Church in the public sphere. The Church understands the vital human issues of personhood, self-worth, and dignity of people from its perspective of Biblical anthropology embedded in God's salvific act in Christ, namely the restoration of humanness.<sup>28</sup> Relative to this is the issue of political rights and that these are the same for everyone – including the rights to culture and language.<sup>29</sup>

25. The now Uniting Reformed Church has been in the forefront as part of the Confessional Church in SA in witnessing about structural justice and love (cf. the DRMC's role in the “Struggle Years”). It had been instrumental in having had Apartheid declared a heresy by the Ottawa WAR. It has been part of the process of working out the Road to Damascus and the Kairos documents. It has taken a unique South African historical contextual confessional position in the Belhar Confession in line with the Church through out history.

26. Cf. J Wilmot, *Now that we are free*, Idasa 1996, 135.

27. J Wilmot et al., *Now that we are Free*, 135.

28. Compare the “new Adam concept” of Paul that puts humanity “right with God and sets them free” (Rom. 5:18-19). God's liberatory act freed people from all the dehumanizing shackles: personal, structural in ecclesiological, political, economic and social contexts. From this theological premise we have the freedom to speak about restorative justice, especially in the public sphere.

29. Cf. Gal. 3:28. From within the perspective of the church consisting of those previously divided and estranged due to ethnicity, culture and language but now through baptism united in Christ, the church views these issues not as issues of division but views diversity as blessings that would enrich the fellowship and society. The curse of apartheid, however lies therein that it impoverished the collective humanity of SA by dehumanizing the otherness of all God's African people and elevating the superiority of the white European.



The Church has to assist the people by building their capacity to claim these rights written into the Bill of Rights of our constitution. And, importantly, the Church has to educate our people to understand that we also have responsibilities and obligations tied to the exercising of those rights such as respect and tolerance for others and treating others consistently with the rights we claim for ourselves. Ethnic and cultural diversity must be guided by democratic principles. This education should come through *kerugma*, *leitourgia* and *didaché*, *koinonia*, *diaconia* and *marturea*.<sup>30</sup> These vital manifestations of being church in the public arena are essential to peace, harmony and progress. Thus the Church could live up to its role of being the yeast, of being the light – of being the salt of the earth!

Ecclesiologically, there is unfortunately still an unholy schism between church and church in South Africa: culturally, economically and geographically – between the church of the poor and the church of the non-poor. *The Church of the poor* is nearest to the people, is in solidarity with *the people of the land* and it understands longsuffering, humility, tolerance and reconciliation as essential to its being the Church of Jesus Christ. *This church* understands very well the marginality that people experience or feel. *This church* understands the humiliation and rejection that people still suffer in the secular sphere from people claiming to be Christians.

*The Church of the non-poor* understands superiority due to its long tradition of enjoying “first class citizenship”, power of money and possessions, political power, administrative power etc. But *this church* is also experiencing shame and an identity crisis, frustration and lost of power since 1994.

To have to say that there is no more ethnic differences, no more gender differences, no more social differences is a real Christian transformational and ideologically transcendental statement. Meta-theoretically and epistemologically, from within christocentric belief, this means that *being in Christ* transcends these differences in a meta-physical way. But how to make this a way of life? How to get the whole church in South Africa to become anew, together, *people of the Way* – a movement of the new life in Christ? How do these two churches co-operate structurally in order to serve God the best in influencing secular life in order to further democracy and quality of life in South Africa? This is a question of reconciliation, renewal and *kenotic obedience* in order to attain to the oneness that the Church is called to in Christ!<sup>31</sup>

## 5. The public role of the church

The public role of the church (*of critical collaboration*) should entail to assist in the consolidation of our recently formed democracy. The church of the poor has no tradition of helping the state to build a strong democracy – it lacks the experience and capacity; whilst on the other hand, the church of the non-poor (the white churches) has had traumatic experiences about the colonial and apartheid eras. Those were the times when the church had collaborated with the state in exploiting and dehumanizing the indigenous people and plundering the land for the enrichment of the white man.

Presently, the Church in South Africa is haunted by this ghost of uncertainty – should it engage the public arena; what if it gets co-opted by the state? Yet the Church has its prophetic role to play not as a political party, or politicians, or as a co-opted agent of the State but as God’s agent. The Church, called to manifest Gods will in the public arena in building a democratic society, operates within the framework of the theology of creation

30. Cf. Gal. 6:10-17 “...put on the full armour of God...”

31. Cf. Jn. 17:21-23; Eph. 2:11-18.

and works with the constructs of order, justice, peace and the integrity of the created world as ordained by God. If the Church is convinced that after apartheid the democratic dispensation as embodied by this government manifests Gods will for society relatively well then it should assist the government in empowering individuals and institutions in a manner that makes the framework created in 1994 a viable and sustainable one.

There is a need for a new partnership between the government and communities (especially the faith community of the Church) in South Africa in a spirit of building the democratic institutions strongly. The Prophetic role of the Church with a view of God's Reign is to engage government to make clear its goals, plans and commitments, and claim its space as Gods agent in critically accompanying government on the road of nation-building.

Being in this position of God's agent for transformation on earth the church should be inspirational in assisting not only the faith community, but all communities to embrace the new society and commit themselves to a process of nation building and a better life for all!<sup>32</sup> Not only is the church God's instrument for the restoration of humankind (here we keep the theology of Creation and Soteriology in positive tension with each other), but the church is also the alternative society, the hidden Messianic community of God in this world (our ecclesiology is informed by our understanding of the dispensation of Realized Eschatology and Pneumatology). Therefore the church in its fellowship and through its structures and witness is called to portray the dispensation of God of the "new creation in Christ" which is open to the world to enter into through the church.<sup>33</sup> Especially the Church in South Africa, given our racial background and division, should become more obedient to this "rule of the new creation" (Gal 6:15). The Church can permeate the society and transcend ethnic divisions and racial fears if it stops being preoccupied with narrow denominationalism when it comes to the public role of the church. The church can be the healing agent of God in the South African society – the church should realize that the society needs it for healing the wounds and hurt of mainly white domination and apartheid in South Africa. The church can be the transforming agent of God in creating the space in society for diversity, tolerance and respect after the model of the Reign of God. We should learn from the dictum of the ancient Protestant Church:

*In essentials unity  
In non-essential diversity  
And in all things charity*<sup>34</sup>

32. By its condescending nature (being amongst and for the people, especially the poor) the church incarnates the values of the Kingdom according to the *Kenotic principle*. NL von Zinzendorf in: KT August *Die Kruisteologie by Zinzendorf*, Unpublished MTh script, University of the Western Cape 1985, 1490, speaks of *the Cross form* of the church in the world (in the present in relation to eternity), meaning the *self-emptying form* (based on Phil. 2:5-8).

33. Gal. 3:26-28; 6:15.

34. The Moravian Church adopted this motto in 1457. Charity is used here in the sense of loving tolerance.