

PUBLIC MORALITY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Most of the articles in this edition of *Scriptura* derive from a conference of the Theological Society of South Africa that was held at the School of Theology, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) from 19-21 June 2002. The topic of the conference was "Public Morality in the South African context".

There can be no doubt about the importance of this theme in the current South African context – as Neville Richardson's interesting essay on numerous recent initiatives towards moral regeneration in South Africa also suggests. The complexity of constructions of public morality is well-illustrated by Tony Balcomb's stimulating paper. Etienne de Villiers offers a penetrating discussion of a Christian ethics of responsibility, asking whether the notion of responsibility can provide an adequate ethical framework for dealing with issues of public morality. In an excellent essay on the public role of the church in South Africa, Dirkie Smit argues that it cannot be taken for granted that Christian churches have a public witness and that Christian theology should play a public role in South Africa today. This essay is published here in *Afrikaans* since it is based on a speech delivered at the Open Day of the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University in February 2002. It is included here because of its obvious importance for the theme of public morality. In an instructive essay Michael Haspel offers a critical assessment of Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's influential concept of the church as a community of interpretation. This essay follows on a paper delivered at the University of Stellenbosch and is included here because of its significance for contemporary debates on public theology.

These theoretical contributions are followed by a number of essays that address some of the major challenges regarding public morality in the South African context. Robert Vosloo offers theological perspectives on an ethos of hospitality towards strangers. Nico Koopman reminds us that any society that does not care for what he calls the "dis-(otherly) abled", is itself a disabled society. Steve de Gruchy investigates the challenges posed by genetic engineering to food safety and food sovereignty in the southern African context. Pieter Fourie argues that, in terms of the South African constitution, religious freedom should not be interpreted as freedom from religion. Miranda Pillay suggests that the response of churches in South Africa to the HIV/AIDS pandemic may be understood in terms of a disaster management continuum. Ernst Conradie wonders *how* Christians can help to raise an environmental awareness in the South African context. Finally, Piet Naude offers some

Biblical and Reformed theological perspectives on restorative justice and the unfinished work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. This paper was presented at a seminar on the theme of justice at the Ecumenical Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany in November 2002 and is included here because of its obvious relevance for the theme of public morality. Together these essays offer a sobering assessment of the complexities of these moral challenges that Christians are faced with in South Africa.

A few other essays also relate to issues of public morality in one way or another. David Williams offers some pneumatological perspectives on moral decline. Gerald West investigates the ambiguous views on the place of the Bible in public life through a case study of William Burchell's early interactions with the BaTlhaping. Finally, Clint le Bruyns offers some protestant perspectives on the significance of the "Petrine Ministry".

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