

Religious Communities, Identities and Reconciliation

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Introduction: Faith communities and identity markers

Desmond Tutu's major contribution to reconciliation in South Africa is widely recognized. As Anglican archbishop he represented the conviction of his faith community in the interest of all people in South Africa. His public call for reconciliation has been firmly rooted in the basic Christian concept of reconciliation.

Christian faith – as is the case for all major religions – is imbedded in faith communities. With their reference to the ultimate, religions have an enormous impact on life orientation. As a consequence, belonging to a religious community very often acts as a strong identity marker. Monotheistic religions claim that their faith is universal. Because there is only one God for all people, they are not exclusive. At the same time, praxis differs from theory. Religious communities offer an identity to people, but in many cases this identity is an exclusive one. The identity marker can be a common language, a common past, a common national origin, a common racial belonging, a common tribal affiliation, a common confession, a common social class, etc.

Sometimes religious communities play an important role in uniting society, while in other cases they act as a shelter for people who feel estranged from the dominant political and/or social culture, offering them a home they lack in the public domain. At other occasions, religions refuse to define their relevance in terms of public welfare, and claim to be a religion without any ulterior motive.

Consequently, the concrete theological self-understanding of religious communities and religious organizations differs and changes over time in accordance with the identity markers and the chosen roles, in reaction to changing contexts. And as a consequence, the reconciliation potential of religions is not self-evident either and can become part of the problem, as was illustrated by the way churches on the Balkan were involved in conflict during the 1990s.

Religious communities in South Africa offer a challenging opportunity for case studies on the theme of religious communities, identity and reconciliation. Not only because one of these religious communities, the Christian Dutch Reformed church family, gradually

opted for different churches for different people before and during the apartheid era, but also because the current South Africa with its vision of a rainbow nation challenges the religious communities to reconsider their own identity in relation to ethnic diversity and other differences within society.

General aim of the programme

The programme of the Desmond Tutu Chair at the theological faculty of VU University Amsterdam will focus on the identity of religious communities in relation to their potential for reconciliation and conflict in South Africa.

Some suggestions for specific research projects

1. The public theology of Desmond Tutu: An analysis

Desmond Tutu's influence on South Africa's liberation from the apartheid regime and his influence on the reconciliation process in the aftermath are widely recognized, as is his inspiration in the Christian gospel. Some aspects of his theology have been analyzed, in the works of M. Battle (1997) and J.B. Hill (2007). Still this most famous example of a public theology is still in need of an in-depth analysis of the main elements of his thinking: the origins, developments, tensions and evaluation. This research will attempt to fill this gap.

2. The Christian doctrine of reconciliation before and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Desmond Tutu has used the social aspects of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation to contribute in an essential way to the reconciliation process in the aftermath of the apartheid era. His influence on the concept of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and his central role in the functioning of the Commission are well documented (Tutu, 1999). Ten years after the Commission finished its work the time has come to not only evaluate its fruits, but to do even more. Did the TRC really work? Political, legal, psychological, and philosophical analyses and evaluations have been produced, but a theological analysis and evaluations are still missing (see among others the multiple contributions of C. Villa-Vicencio, the research of C. Moon (2008), A.R. Chapman, and

H. van der Merwe (2008)). Which social elements of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation have been successful and which have been problematic in implementation? How can the experience of the TRC help to better express the Christian doctrine of reconciliation? This theory will analyze the movement from theory to practice and from practice to theory.

3. A theological analysis of the way reconciliation in society is expressed symbolically in liturgical acts

Apartheid started in the church in the 19th century when a white congregation forced non-whites to celebrate the Lord's Supper separately. In reality the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are full of reconciliatory meaning (See *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982)). In some Christian traditions forgiveness and reconciliation are the specific goals of a special sacrament, the sacrament of the Confession (D. Coffey (2001) and R. Hannaford (2001)). This research project will analyze the theology and practice of Christian congregations in South Africa in which the social aspects of God's reconciliation with humankind play a central role. Is the social relevance of the symbols exploited and linked to reconciliation in society?

4. Ecclesiology and reconciliation. A comparative analysis of the theological self-understanding of various churches within the Dutch Reformed Church family during and after the apartheid era.

The theology and the ecclesiology of the NG church was part and parcel of the apartheid era. It even legitimated theologically the apartheid regime. At the same time the picture was more complex; not all churches in this church family went along with the theological justification of apartheid and not all of them did so in the same way and degree. Some research has been done on this (J. De Gruchy (1986 and 1999), E. Van der Borgh (2006), C. Pauw (2007)). What has not been studied in a systematic way is the way they described their own identity as a church – their nature and mission. 15 years after the end of apartheid they are still in a difficult process of reuniting. Most of them have distanced themselves from apartheid as a political instrument, but it remains unclear how much

their identity has changed. The outcome of this research will be linked to the question about the reconciliation potential of these churches.

Applicants may wish to write a research proposal in line with the four suggestions mentioned above, or they may wish to make their own proposal in the context of the programme *Religious communities, identities and reconciliation*.

References

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Biographical note

Supervision in the Netherlands will be by Eddy Van der Borght, Desmond Tutu professor at the Faculty of Theology, VU University Amsterdam. He is also associate professor of systematic theology at the same faculty. He has published on theology of ministry, ecclesiological topics and the relation between faith communities and ethnicity.