

**CREATING SPACE WITHIN THE DYNAMICS OF INTERCULTURALITY:
THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN
POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA ¹**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper a number of cultural and religious shifts taking place in post-apartheid South Africa are discussed, endeavouring to reach a deeper level of understanding of the real forces and centres of power behind these transformations. The impacts of societal crises like crime, poverty, HIV and AIDS, etc, the influence of Americanism on cultural dynamics like Ubuntu, and the clash between a market-driven economy and the spiral of poverty are taken cognizance of. The paper concludes by analyzing the quest for a new identity which takes cultural and religious diversity as well as unity seriously and is in need of intercultural and interpathetic space for redefining our identity. Religion, being part of culture, is evaluated as a definitive and formative space-creator and space-setter within culture.

1. Introduction: On peeling an onion

The South African society is like an onion. The more skin you peel away, the more layers you discover. But hopefully there is a core somewhere. Our society is indeed a multi-layered phenomenon, with different levels of possible analysis, perspectives and meanings. This reminds one of the latest publication of the prolific German author and Nobel Prize winner, Günter Grass, an intense self-reflexive autobiography called *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*² (On peeling an onion). In this book the onion functions as a metaphor for memory and with each layer of skin peeled away, one is taken back into history. But, says Grass, when you are peeling an onion you easily get tears in your eyes and this can influence the clarity of your vision. And sure enough, when peeling off the layers in search of the kernel, the essence of what constitutes our South African society,

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² Published by Steidl, 2006.

tears could often be shed – especially if we peel only with a view to be taken back into our history.

It is indeed a hazardous exercise to try and peel off a few layers of the South African society, endeavouring to reach a deeper level, perhaps a core, from which not only the past, but hopefully also the present and future of the South African society could be viewed. Such an act of peeling can reveal only a fraction of the multi-layered South African society – many other aspects could be presented, offering different angles of interpretation of a country in transformation. This paper represents an exercise in experiential peeling. It does, however, open up possibilities to reflect specifically on how the dynamic relationship between culture³ and religion⁴ contributes towards the transformation of a post-apartheid society, and how this relationship is being transformed and challenged itself.

2. Uncovering some (outer) layers of the South African society

³ Culture could of course be defined in many ways. According to Raiter and Wilson, it is “*those ideas, beliefs, feelings, values, and institutions, which are learned, and by which a group of people order their lives and interpret their experiences, and which give them an identity distinct from other groups*” (2005:122). We will return to the whole issue of identity in 3. Other definitions of culture: “*Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*” (Sarpong 2002:40). Webb simply compares culture to the air that we breathe or water that surrounds a fish: “*We live and move about in the culture with which we are closely and invisibly enmeshed*” (2001:21). The word *culture* comes from the Latin *colo*, which means to nurse (take care of), or to transform the earth through a plough (an instrument) in order to live. Culture therefore refers to the human achievement and endeavour which try to “cultivate” creation and the cosmos into a human space for living through symbols, metaphors, language, instruments (*techné*). Culture is the human attempt to “re-create” creation through spiritual-religious articulation (transcendancy); ethically driven actions (norms, values, taboos); aesthetic imagination (art), technical intervention (technology); dialogical verbalisation (language and speech) and social/political/juridical restructuring into a humane environment. Religion can therefore also not be understood apart from its situation within culture (cf. Louw 2006:9).

⁴ Religion, being imbedded in culture, is as difficult to define as culture. Religion is co-determined by the perspective of the religious person and his or her situation within (a specific) culture. Religion could be defined holistically as the acts, rituals and ideas of individuals and societies in which the relationship between the immanent reality and the transcendent reality (or aspects thereof) becomes visible through word, image and acts (cf. Hacking 2005: 6). Religion also harbours within itself the dimensions of spirituality and (the search for) meaning. The term “religion” is unfortunately often associated with rigid structures within which religious experiences and rituals are set. Perhaps the term “spirituality” offers a wider lens to evaluate certain (religious) phenomena taking place in culture. Spirituality can also be strongly linked to the search for meaning and the creation of “spaces” within which meaning can be nurtured (Cf. further on in 3 our discussion on the role of space). In the light of our designated theme I will be using the term “religion”, but with a specific view on “spirituality” as an important component of religion.

The first level, or outer skin so to speak, could perhaps be described as that which is glaringly evident, painfully visible and graphically depicted in the public media. At a meeting of South African Christian Leaders (Sacla) held in Pretoria on 17-20 July 2003, the gravest factors eroding South African culture(s), and indeed the greatest challenges facing the church, were depicted as seven Giants – alluding to the biblical narrative of David facing Goliath. These seven Giants were identified as: HIV/Aids, Crime and Corruption, Violence, Poverty and Unemployment, Sexism, Racism and the Crisis in the South African Family.⁵

Obviously these giants are a reality and should be taken seriously. But ultimately they are only symptoms of more fundamental issues, only the outer skin⁶ of the onion. But what then are the *real forces* and *centres of power* behind the emergence of the seven giants in South Africa? There are no quick or sure-fit answers to this. Perhaps it has got to do with a clash and resultant implosion of divergent paradigms,⁷ for instance between the phenomenon of so-called “Americanism”,⁸ and the African spirit of Ubuntu.⁹ There

⁵ Sacla Newsletter 28 May 2003.

⁶ The following quotation from J.M. Coetzee’s novel *The Master of Petersburg* (published by Secker and Warburg, 1994) puts it well: “*You are appalled by the hideous face of hunger and sickness and poverty. But hunger and sickness and poverty are not the enemy. They are only ways in which real forces manifest themselves in the world. Hunger is not a force — it is a medium, as water is a medium. The poor live in their hunger as fish live in water. The real forces have their origin in the centres of power, in the collusion of interests that takes place there.*”

⁷ The whole issue of colonialism could of course be added here. Africa and South Africa in particular, are still bearing the scars of this “clash of paradigms”.

⁸ *Americanism* could best be described in terms of the keyword: *consumerism*. Globalisation here takes on the form of a materialistic imperialism, a market driven economical manipulation that networks in such a manner that a new “McWorld” is created, a world within which particular cultures are denied their regional and national features. E Zwingle (1999: 12-13; cf. also Louw 2002: 340) characterises this brand of globalization as the “cultural assault” of McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Disney, Nike, MTV, and the English language. There is of course presently also a rising tide of “anti-Americanism” – in most cases linked to the foreign policies of the Bush Administration, and therefore called “Bushism”.

⁹ The belief that one is a human being through others (“I am because you are”). The term Ubuntu comes from the Zulu and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as: “a person is a person through other persons”: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Motho ke motho ka batho*. It articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic, both descriptive and prescriptive. (Ramose, 1999:49f; Shutte, 1993:46). Africans, indeed, have a more systemic understanding of life. Life is a dynamic space for holistic relationships, an integral whole of cosmic and social events. Africans adopt a non-analytical approach to our existence on this planet, epitomized in the words of AA Berinyuu (1988:5): “*In Africa, there is no division and/or differentiation between the animate and inanimate, between the spirit and matter, between living and non-living, dead and living, physical and metaphysical, secular and sacred, the body and the spirit, etc. Most Africans generally believe that everything (human beings included) is in constant relationship with one another and with the invisible world, and that people are in a state of complete dependence upon those invisible powers and beings. Hence, Africans are convinced that in the activities of life, harmony, balance or tranquillity must*

seems to be a vast difference between the Americanist understanding of (extreme) democratisation, which basically rests on individualism and privatisation on the one hand, and, on the other, the “democracy” of Ubuntu, which operates from the basis of community. It is indeed a valid question whether Americanism, brought to Africa within the context of globalisation, is not slowly but surely eroding that which is typical of the African spirit. Somehow it has been expected of South Africans to process and digest the workings and implications of globalisation within thirteen years after the dawn of our democracy, and to a certain extent South Africans themselves have fallen into the trap of trying to achieve this.

But let us peel deeper into the South African society. At another level an intensified clash of paradigms is taking place between the dynamics of a market-driven economy, and a growing spiral of poverty. It is common knowledge that the sound South African economy has been praised as one of the greatest achievements of our country since 1994. Although the original intended growth rate of 6% per annum¹⁰ has not yet been reached, it seems as if though the general condition of the economy is stable and indeed healthy, inter alia because the government has allowed the open market to function and create wealth without too much political interference. One of the paradoxes, however, is that in spite of political freedom gained through democracy, and in spite of increasing economic growth, violence and crime seem to be on the rise, or at least remain unacceptably high – even if statistics suggest a levelling out in terms of certain crime categories.¹¹ *Why did the dawn of democracy and increasing economic growth not bring with it a decline in crime and a safer and more secure society?*

This is not an easy question to answer. One possible analysis¹² would be that the South African society is in fact at present *not* a unity celebrating her diversity, in spite of

constantly be sought and maintained. Society is not segmented into, for example, medicine, sociology, law, politics and religion. Life is a liturgy of celebration for the victories and/or sacrifices of others.” This differs quite considerably from a Western approach to life. Whilst analyses, solutions and consumerism are typical of the latter, myth and symbol, ritual and rhythm determine everyday life in the African context.

¹⁰ Currently 4.2%. Projected rate for the next two years: 4.5%.

¹¹ According to the Crime Information Analysis Centre (CIAC) of the South African Police Service, the (reported) cases of murder were 25,965 per annum during 1994/1995, in comparison to 19,824 in 2003/2004. The (reported) cases of rape, however, increased from 44,751 in 1994/1995 to 52,733 in 2003/2004 – to mention only two categories of crime in South Africa.

¹² Cf., for instance Johann Rossouw in *Die Vrye Afrikaan* 1 Oktober 2004, 4-5; also Bylae by *Die Burger* 30 September 2006, 4.

constant political rhetoric reminding us of our democratic achievement in 1994 (epitomized in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's colourful phrase: *rainbow nation.*), but rather *a nation of mobile, industrialized and individualized consumers.*

For centuries most South Africans were subjected to poverty and discrimination. The dawn of 1994 brought with it enormous expectations of "a better life for all". On the one hand, these expectations have not been met; on the contrary, for the majority the situation has worsened to intolerable levels. On the other hand, the mass media paint a picture of capitalistic bliss in a relentless propagandistic onslaught on all the senses, painfully reminding the masses that they in fact have not reached the goal of a new life, and are still living in abject deprivation. The end result of this scenario is predictable: utter frustration, and in some cases, bloody violence.

3. Peeling towards the core – the search for a new identity?

It is clear that South Africa, as a young democracy, is struggling to find its identity.¹³ The basic question facing South African society after apartheid is: *can we have both national unity and celebration of our diversity?*¹⁴ Furthermore, what role can religion play in answering this question? According to Villa-Vicencio (1994:115-126), there are different options for the co-existence of unity and diversity, ranging from unfavourable (in some cases, downright dangerous) to potentially viable.

One option would be that of *cultural assimilation*, in which cultures and cultural differences are assimilated into one another, up to the point where a fully homogenized end product is created, under so-called "social consensus". The problem with this, however, is the role of *power*, with the accompanying question: who determines the

¹³ Perhaps this is epitomized best in the quest for an *African renaissance*, strongly advocated by President Thabo Mbeki. Although it has become a political slogan and is in danger of being commercialised, this quest still articulates Africa's longing for recognition, acknowledgment and therefore identity. Not only is it aimed at reviving political and economic structures, but also the reconstruction of African culture and self-esteem. It is linked to the notions of *Pax Africana* (African solutions for African problems) as well as *Pan-Africanism* (the social, political ideal of interconnectedness despite divisions on the African continent) (Cf. Landsberg and Kornegay 1998:16), and intends to rejuvenate the "spirit" of Africa in a quest for dignity and freedom.

¹⁴ Linked to this could be the question of the relationship between the effects of *globalisation* and the call for *glocalisation*. The latter phrase was coined by Robertson (1992) as an indication of the importance of local issues and the impact of culture on local communities. Glocalisation guards against the tendency of globalisation to homogenize.

process (and even outcome) of the so-called consensus? Cultures that are not in consensus with the rest may be marginalized, or will remain so, being alienated and excluded to the detriment of the richness of our diversity. *This option seems to stress unity to the detriment of diversity.*

A second possibility would be one of *multicultural pluralism*, in which people from different cultures, ethnic and racial origins, as well as genders and religions have the right and freedom to express their identities within the character and the decision-making processes of the public realm (Villa-Vicencio 1994: 117-118). Within this model ethnicity and culture seem to be the driving forces in determining individual and social identity, and it would be a valid question to ask whether these emphases, given our history, will heal our society or rather prompts a regression into apartheid once again. The problem here again is the question of power, the dominant forces and role players, as opposed to the marginalized. *Whilst cultural assimilation stresses unity to the detriment of diversity, multicultural pluralism tends to overemphasize diversity against unity.*

A third option could be *cultural engineering*, in which a certain amount of intervention in, or moulding of, cultures could take place. Obviously, although South Africa is presently going through a period of reconfiguration, which entails certain measures to redress the imbalances of the past, for South Africans emerging from apartheid the very thought of cultural manipulation is hard to swallow. The concept of intervention begs the question of power once again: who does the engineering, and with what agenda? *In my opinion, this option could in fact destroy not only the communal discovery of a new unity, but also the richness of our diversity in our quest for a new identity.*

What in fact is needed is an approach that ensures *cultural openness* (Villa-Vicencio 1994: 120). This involves a co-mingling of cultures, which does not mean an assimilation, consummation or fusion of one within the other. Rather it operates with the presumption of equal worth and openness to the possibility of discovering together something that encompasses our particular cultures, but is also bigger than the sum total of that which we bring to the national table.

In my opinion this notion of cultural openness needs to be developed further, specifically with the potential role of religion in mind. Cultural openness could also be described in

terms of *interculturality*,¹⁵ as opposed to *inculturality*.¹⁶ The concept of interculturality could in turn be refined from the perspective of *interpathy*.¹⁷ The latter denotes more than just sympathy. It is an inclusive compassion that is not only directed towards individuals, but also cultures and values. It operates from an unbiased, unconditional love, taking the ethics of love into systemic paradigms. Interpathy goes far beyond a condescending attitude¹⁸ of a “superior” culture sympathizing with an inferior one, or giving handouts on the grounds of misguided compassion. It does not romanticize either – viewing, for

¹⁵ Interculturality is a set of processes through which relations between different cultures are constructed on a basis of equality and mutual respect. This concept emerged towards the end of the twentieth century as a correction or expansion of the existing paradigm of *inculturality*. Whilst *inculturality* emphasizes the fact that interpenetration takes place between cultures, *interculturality* emphasises exchange. The theological rationale for *inculturality* can be found in incarnational theology, stressing the fact that in this process the gospel can and should be enfolded and embodied within the paradigm of a specific local culture (Cf. Louw 2006: 8-9). From a vast body of literature on this concept, the following may serve only as indication: Bennett, Milton (1998). *Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy*. In: Ders, initial? (Ed.), *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. Selected Readings*. Yarmouth & London: Intercultural Press, pp.191-214; Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge; Brislin, Richard W. & Yoshida, Tomoko (Eds.) (1994). *Improving Intercultural Interactions. Modules for Cross-Cultural Training Programs*. Thousand Oakes, London, New Delhi: Sage; Brocker, Manfred & Nau, Heino H. (Hrsg.) (1997). *Ethnozentrismus. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des interkulturellen Dialog*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft; Cesana, Andreas (Hg) (1999). *Interkulturalität – Grundprobleme der Kulturbegegnung. Mainzer Universitätsgespräche. Sommersemester 1998*. Mainz, Trier: Gutenberg Universitätsverlag; Demorgon, Jacques (1999). *Interkulturelle Erkundungen. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer internationalen Pädagogik*. Europäische Bibliothek interkultureller Studien Bd. 4. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

¹⁶ The problem of *inculturality* could once again be that of power – it can easily happen that *inculturation*, though meant well, ends up by being “Christianization”, in which the dominant culture of those doing the Christianization is imposed on the receiving culture. In the intercultural approach the separation between Christ and culture is no longer accepted, nor the domination of one (Christian) culture over the other, but rather the interconnectedness between Christ and culture. It focuses on the meaning of Christian spirituality within culture as well as the mutual exchange of paradigms between the two, a sharing with the intention to empower within a relationship of reciprocity. One is reminded of the classical distinctions concerning the relationship between Christian faith and culture (Christ and Culture) proposed by RH Niebuhr in 1951. He describes the rejection and anti-model: Christ against culture (58-92); the accommodation model: the Christ of culture (93-122); the synthesis model; Christ above culture, i.e. to maintain both the distinctions between Christ (his Lordship) and culture as well as the relatedness to culture, “both-and” (127 -128); the dualistic model: Christ and culture in paradox (154-191); and the operational model: Christ the transformer of culture (192-228). Niebuhr himself believes that, although Christ is above culture (different), He operates through it to transform (convert) it. He still works with the so-called object-subject split in a polar model, i.e. the presupposition that according to the substantial difference between the two, the relationship has to be re-established (cf. Louw 2006: 8).

¹⁷ First used by David W. Augsburger in his *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986. According to him *interpathy* is “an intentional cognitive envisioning and affective experiencing of another's thoughts and feelings, even though the thoughts rise from another process of knowing, the values grow from another frame of moral reasoning, and the feelings spring from another basis of assumptions” (1986: 56).

¹⁸ Often our (body) language reveals our self-absorbing interests. Language, of course, remains a significant element of intercultural communication. “*Language is the medium through which a culture*

instance, African culture through a rosy tourist lens of tribal drums, wooden artefacts or colourful traditional dresses. Interpathy, as mode of interculturality, operates from the basis of mutual respect, openness to the other, reciprocal understanding, compassion and enrichment. It adheres to a *porous hermeneutics*, in which the supposed boundaries of epistemologies are revisited frequently and crisscrossed in a spirit of genuine teachability. In this regard religion can make a meaningful contribution – not, as unfortunately happens time and again, functioning as an agent that legitimizes the status quo of cultural boundaries or separateness. It's dimension of spirituality should rather help to safeguard society from changing that which is only temporal into something permanent or eternal, giving that which is transient a rigid, stable value. Religion should serve the movement from stringency to contingency, from status quo to status flux. Religion can help create a *space for graceful neighbouring*.¹⁹

The notion of *creative and respectful space*²⁰ might be explored further. The *Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*, which in the past three years has facilitated several interactions in communities across the country, aimed at creating and fostering dialogue between former enemies and ordinary citizens who endeavour to build a common future

expresses its world view... Like culture in general, language is learned and it serves to convey thoughts; in addition it transmits values, beliefs, perceptions, norms, and so on (Jandt 2004: 224). *“Vom ersten Moment an hat sich Sprache als wesentliches Element in interkulturellen Begegnung herausgestellt. Begegnung zwischen Menschen unterschiedlicher Kulturen ist Übersetzungsarbeit, die allerdings nur bedingt gelingt”* (Federschmidt et al. 2002:19).

¹⁹ Diana Nishita Cheifetz has written a beautiful essay on graceful neighbouring, which she sub-titles: *Dancing with our diversity*. She uses the metaphor of dance to illustrate some rules or guidelines for “graceful neighbouring” – one could say, interculturality. The first is simply to be aware of others on the dance floor of society (2006:16). Not to be so self-focused and engrossed with your “own” movements, but rather gracefully becoming part of the whole. A second rule would be to acknowledge, with respect, the others around you – very much like the curtsy with which medieval dancers opened up the dance. To acknowledge one another is to accept and respect the “otherness” of the other. A third rule could be added to this: to respect the space, and from time to time even to create the space, between dancers. There should be closeness without familiarity, but also space without alienation. Graceful neighbouring can mean honouring the space in between, so that we can move together respectfully even with our differences (2006:22). Of course, dancing is also something that must be learnt. Before mastering it, many toes might be stepped on and many egos end up stretched out on the floor!

²⁰ The notion of space is of course not a new one. The Greeks already referred to the importance of space in our quest for being human. The Greek word *Chora* means space or place and could also be interpreted as the *attitude* through which humans fill space with values, perceptions and associations, resulting in a created relational environment, a systemic and hermeneutical arena for living with meaning and dignity. *Chora* represents a nourishing and maternal receptacle, a womb that defines the quality of the places (*topoi*) where we encounter one another. Indeed, in this space we cannot exist without one another; it is where we meet in our diversity and unity, but also as perpetrators and victims.

after generations of violent conflict, has developed an approach that aims at so-called “safe spaces” (cf. Du Toit 2003: 212-217). These spaces originate in relationships where *honesty* is a sine qua non, but held in tension with *respect*. In other words: differences are put on the table and not hidden or masked, but these differences may never lead to disrespect of the other. On the other hand, *acknowledgment* of past and present transgressions is held in tension with *responsibility* – a deep confession coupled with the sincere desire to act and to transform that which was and still is wrong in our society. In this way, through mutual adherence to these four basic values, a framework for dialogue in a “safe space” can be created: honesty, but with respect; acknowledgment, but with responsibility.

The concept “safe space” does not indicate neutrality or inactivity, or a type of securocracy.²¹ On the contrary, it intends a spiritual space of intimacy, where reciprocal enrichment can take place. Perhaps we can coin a helpful phrase here, building on the notion of Ubuntu: what is needed in South Africa is an *intercultural and interpathetic space for redefining our identity. Religion, being part of culture, can operate as a definitive and formative space-creator and space-setter within culture.*

Within this space, a new South African identity may be formed. Within this space we have reached a deep level of the South African onion, a core: the search for identity. I am of the opinion that what transpires at this core in the years to come will influence all the layers of our society; that our mutual understanding of our identity will in fact be the most profound factor in shaping our communal future. It is exactly here, in my opinion, that the church and religion face their deepest challenge: either to be a stagnant or even destructive role player, or a heuristic agent that acts as midwife for our country in the fulfilment of her new birth. South African society is like an onion. But peeling it need not only bring tears.

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²¹ John de Gruchy, referring to the art of reconciliation, speaks of the *creating of space for interfacing* in a post-apartheid South Africa (2002: 148-149).

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