

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

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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*³ (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, tears could often be shed – especially if we peel only with a view to be taken back into our history.

In this paper I am going to undertake the hazardous exercise of trying to peel off a few layers, 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. We will pause every now and then during the act of peeling to reflect specifically

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³ Published by Steidl, 2006.

on how culture⁴ and religion⁵ is revealed on that particular level, how it contributes to the transformation of society, and how it is being transformed and challenged itself. It must be stressed, however, that these levels represent only a fraction of the multi-layered South African society – many other aspects could indeed be revealed, offering different angles of interpretation of a country in transformation. This paper represents an act of experiential peeling.

2. Level 1: Sacla's seven Giants?

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. Often these are the first images that outsiders are confronted with when looking at South African society, the dominant information that could colour their perspective. 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

⁴ 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 5. 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).

⁵ 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 5 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.

David facing Goliath. The aim of this assembly, organized by the SA Council of Churches (SACC), African Enterprise (AE), and the Evangelical Association of South Africa (TEASA), was to discern and act together on what it meant according to the scriptures to be church in South Africa, facing seven of the great giants threatening society, namely: HIV/Aids, Crime and Corruption, Violence, Poverty and Unemployment, Sexism, Racism and the Crisis in the South African Family.⁶ Some of these giants were described as follows:

Looking at the giant HIV/Aids, more than 4, 2 million of the c 44, 5 million South Africans are said to be infected. In Africa, more than 2 million people are said to die every year. Worldwide, 34.4 million are suffering from it. - Looking at the giant Violence, there is a murder, suicide, or hijack-killing every 26 minutes - 20 215 per year. Every 26 seconds a woman or child is raped - 1 212 922 per year. Every 47 minutes someone dies on the roads - 11 182 per year. In the rural areas 7755 farms have been attacked and 1287 farmers killed. - Looking at the giant Corruption and Debt, every month the administrations send out 10 000 final demands, 90 000 court orders, and 142 000 summonses. R32 000 million are owed to municipalities for services such as water and electricity. 41% of the potential labour force is out of work. Jobs have decreased from 10.8 million in 1990 to 4.6 millions in June last year, and only 5% of last year's 305 774 matriculants can expect to find work in the formal sector. - As for the giant Crime, 30 000 cars have been hijacked in the past two years, more than 9000 in Gauteng alone.⁷

⁶ Sacla Newsletter 28 May 2003.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Obviously these seven giants are a reality and should be taken seriously.⁸ But ultimately they are only symptoms of more fundamental issues, only the outer skin of the onion. We need to peel deeper. The following quotation from J.M. Coetzee's novel *The Master of Petersburg*⁹ 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."*¹⁰

On peeling the South African onion we are taken to another level, which has to do with the collision of a number of paradigms, affecting the very essence of our society.

⁸ The way in which Sacla proposed to approach the challenge was, obviously, confrontational: *"If God's Spirit has anything to do with it, in the hearts of thousands, the Church will with determination descend into the valley to meet the Goliaths, perhaps pausing briefly to gather smooth stones of godly strategy, then running to meet them head on."* (Sacla Newsletter 28 May 2003) This "head-on" approach reminds one 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).

⁹ Published by Secker and Warburg, 1994.

¹⁰ Some attempts have indeed been made to name the "real forces" and "centres of power" behind the seven giants. In a reaction to Sacla a group called the Gospel Defence League, for instance, gave their interpretation of the Giants in a newsletter published shortly after the assembly in Pretoria (http://www.christianaction.org.za/GDL/Newsletters/2003-may_june.htm). According to them, there are not seven Giants but one, namely *godlessness*, and the cause of South Africa's ills is directly equated to a disdain for Christ and Christianity. This godless disdain is furthermore ascribed to the fact that South Africa has become a secular state, adopting humanistic principles of certain UN declarations of rights – inter alia on the grounds of appeals made by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and eminent South African leaders such as Frank Chikane (then general secretary of the SACC in 1990) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, another former SACC secretary. The Church is charged as having *"removed the triune God from public life...having placed South Africa under the religion of Humanism, the giant of godlessness"*. As solution the Gospel Defence League proposes that the Church needs to look at itself and repent of its promotion of Secular Humanism, whether it did so under the label of "fighting apartheid", "establishing justice", or "promoting peace". It also needs to desist from inter-faith activities. Because: *"The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God"* (1 Pet.4:17). I am of the conviction that this diagnosis – reducing the complexity of the situation to a common denominator ("in fact, the Bible speaks of only one giant, namely Goliath"), and projecting guilt onto this one giant, called Secular Humanism - is far too simplistic, if not in fact misleading.

3. Level 2: Paradigms lost?

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. I *briefly* mention some of these¹¹ which in my opinion are of importance here, namely: the phenomenon of so-called “Americanism”,¹² the African spirit of Ubuntu and the role of the technological mass media.

Americanism could best be described in terms of the keyword: *consumerism*. Behind this keyword lurk a number of intertwined ideological paradigms, for instance the frenzied search for so-called “quality”. Materialism here takes on the form of a pathological competition to own the right “brand” and “label”. The sole object is to surpass normal consumption and to reach the highest peaks of luxury: always bigger and better. Mass production follows and creates the latest trends in order to rake in the profits. For this, of course, you need an effective advertising machine, supplied by the technological mass media (cf. the discussion further on). Globalisation 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. This form of *Americanization* influences every nook and cranny of the globe, flattens every cultural crease, and indeed produces one big “McWorld”. Hollywood, which could be seen as representing the glitzy side of Americanism, seems to be hovering everywhere. For instance, on mural paintings, to be found throughout South Africa (especially in the so-called townships) who keeps on popping up amidst the African figures and typical African settings? To name but a few: Conan the Barbarian, The Incredible Hulk, The Simpson Family (which both epitomizes

¹¹ 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”.

¹² 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”.

and caricatures the American way of life), the Ewing family (from the television series *Dallas*), and apparently an all-time favourite: Mickey Mouse!



One of the hinges on which Americanism turns, is the privatised and individualised democratization of all spheres of life. The American dream breathes the expectancy of a “good life”, the fulfilment of all needs and in the end, the satisfaction of the self. Human rights become “my rights”, the freedom to do and to possess and to experience within the paradigm of a me, I, and myself –generation. The whole notion of community is reduced and trivialized in favour of the individual in the grip of global consumerism.

In a sense this ideology completely contradicts basic African values, such as *Ubuntu*, which believes deeply 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*. Its central concept, Ubuntu, means “humanity”, “humanness”, and indeed “humaneness”. 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. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being (Ramosé, 1999:49f; Shutte, 1993:46).

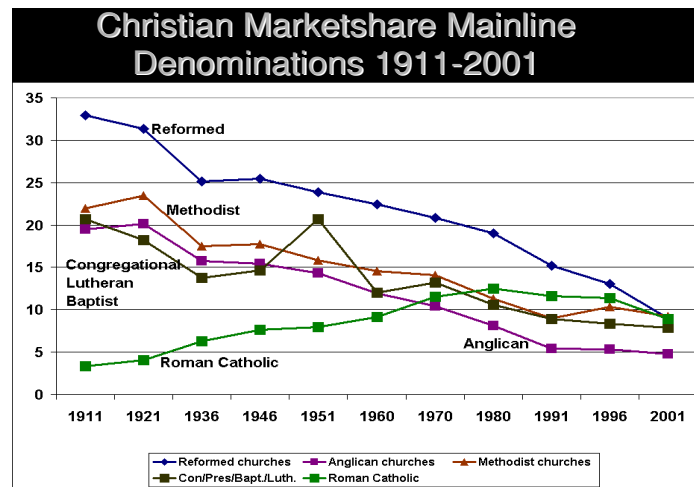
In a sense African identity and epistemology are closely intertwined with the concept of Ubuntu, although the latter should not be romanticised to such an extent that it becomes an exclusive moral principle, falling into the trap of ethnocracy or pigmentocracy once again. The point is: there seems to 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.¹³

¹³ 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 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.

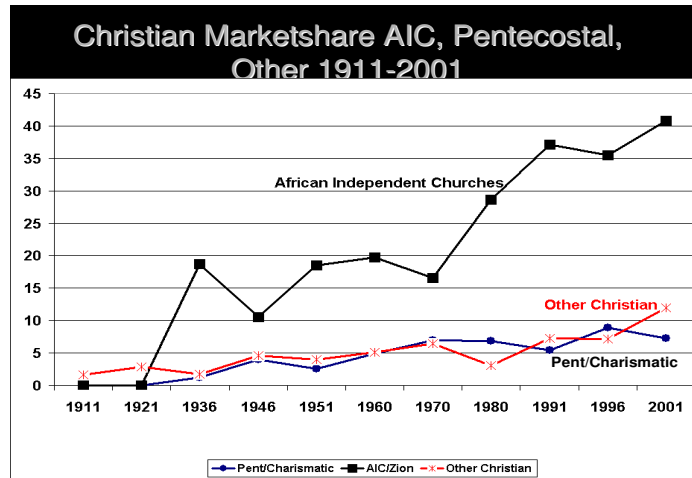
Somehow it has been expected of South Africans to process and digest the workings and implications of globalisation within twelve years after the dawn of our democracy, and to a certain extent South Africans themselves have fallen into the trap of trying to achieve this.

This endeavour has left many South Africans and South African communities in particular, in a spiritual void. This void has resulted in the implosion of certain beliefs and traditions, leaving us in a very fragile stage of our development as a young democracy, a stage where the re-definition of our identity is of paramount importance (Cf. further on 5).

Americanism, which propagates itself in terms of a specific dynamics inherent to market-driven economy, has made successful use of the technological mass media¹⁴ to advance its ideals. The development of the media also had decisive implications for the churches in South Africa. The past decade has seen a dramatic decline in the membership of the so-called mainline churches in South Africa, mostly in favour of the charismatic movement, accompanied by a phenomenal growth in the African Independent Churches (AIC), as depicted by the following graphic illustrations:



¹⁴ In what follows I am not expressing a general negative judgment on the media as such – on the contrary. The mass media however does provide a more than adequate tool for the attainment of global goals, acting as an instrument for conveying paradigms and ideologies.



This decline among the mainline churches, on the one hand, and rise in membership of the African Independent, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, on the other, can be attributed to many complex factors. At least one reason for the unmistakable ecclesiological shift must be sought in the way churches reacted to the ways or modes in which culture has been communicated throughout history – the so-called eras or spheres of communication as proposed by the French philosopher Debray: the logo-sphere (oral tradition), grapho-sphere (printed media) and the video-sphere (transmission of images via electronic means).¹⁵

Whilst the Western world has to a large extent moved (successfully?) through these spheres, South Africa was slowed down in this process, specifically under apartheid, and now faces the challenge of processing in a condensed time-frame what certain other countries have achieved under more normal conditions. According to some commentators, Africa is still to a large extent within the logo-sphere, whilst the grapho- and video-spheres have been integrated only in an elitist fashion on corporate and governmental level.¹⁶ Although South Africa shared in many of the fruits of the video-sphere (films, etc.), television was artificially withheld from its inhabitants until as late as

¹⁵ Debray, Régis 2000. *Introduction à la médiologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

¹⁶ I owe these distinctions to a large extent to the cultural analyst Johann Rossouw. Cf. *Die Vrye Afrikaan* 1 Oktober 2004, 4-5; also Bylae by *Die Burger* 30 September 2006, 4. Of course these distinctions cannot be seen as watertight. Many ordinary Africans enjoy the benefits of the technological era. Globalisation has brought cell-phones, televisions and computers within the reach of many. Visitors to Africa are often surprised when discovering internet facilities in what seems to be a shack in a squatter camp!

1975. After this many South Africans departed at an increasing rate from the grapho-sphere in favour of the video-sphere.

These different spheres posed different challenges to the churches in the course of history. Whilst the logo-sphere left truth and its interpretation in the hands of a select few (learned priests speaking Latin with their backs turned towards the congregation), the grapho-sphere brought truth closer to home – as articulated in the usage of books and Bible translations during the Gutenberg and Reformation periods, allowing people to read for themselves, without the mediation of an educated elite. The video-sphere brings images into our homes, working places, cell phones, etc. and is as close by as the click of a button.

Coupled to this is the fact that the video-sphere places emphasis on emotion (as opposed to cerebral rationality), embodiment (calling for a “theology of the body”) and immediacy – and a new scene is set for churches to operate in. The charismatic movement seems to tap into exactly these elements, whilst many of the mainline churches, especially in the Protestant tradition, are still battling to invent or re-invent, for instance, liturgical practices that take body, emotion, imagery and immediacy seriously into consideration. Whilst this seems to be the challenge facing these churches in the video-sphere, the charismatic movement, on the other hand, is challenged to nurture a church that is not based on emotion and embodiment alone, but also takes cognizance of history, memory and tradition.

But in my opinion there is a more profound challenge set before the churches by the video-sphere, and, as a matter of fact, the other paradigms mentioned above. It is namely *that of a deepened interpretation of the link between these paradigms and the seven mentioned giants*. What, for instance, has Debray’s three spheres got to do with Sacla’s seven giants? To try and understand this, we need to remove another layer of skin from the South African onion.

4. Level 3: Economy – the magic wand?

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 annum¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Whilst one could still blame the system of apartheid for atrocities committed during, for instance, 1985-1994, this is strictly speaking no longer possible. Added to this is the fact that, while many acts of violence committed during the apartheid years were politically motivated, violence now has spread out over almost all of South African society, affecting, often with horrific cruelty, all population groups. *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 analysis¹⁹ would be that the South African society is in fact at present *not* a unity celebrating her diversity, in spite of constant political rhetoric reminding us of the *rainbow nation* (an expression coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu), but rather *a nation of mobile, industrialized and individualized consumers*. The dawn of the video sphere and the rise of the mass media mentioned previously have exacerbated the problems associated with this cultural shift: the ethos of the so-called “free market”, with its emphasis on consumerism, has become a tyranny dictating and exploiting the continuous stimulation of greed and desire. We have indeed bought into the ethos of buying, or at least obtaining at all costs, that which the mass media advertise as absolutely necessary for a “good life” and “true happiness” – reminiscent of true “Americanism”.

¹⁷ Currently 4.2%. Projected rate for the next two years: 4.5%.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Cf., for instance Johann Rossouw in *Die Vrye Afrikaan* 1 Oktober 2004, 4-5; also Bylae by *Die Burger* 30 September 2006, 4.

The problem, however, is that South Africa at this stage not only does not have the capital or natural resources to satisfy everybody's dreams about "a good life", but there is also the stark reality that since 1994 wealth has not necessarily been redistributed²⁰ equitably amongst the South African people, but has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of a minority of people, including the so-called new black "elite" or "middle class". In 2005 South Africa and Brazil shared the dubious honour of being the two countries with the largest gap between poor and rich – a fact that makes president Mbeki's reference to "two nations within one South Africa", namely a rich and a poor nation, understandable.²¹

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. Also keeping the spiritual void to which we referred to earlier in mind, the end result of this scenario is predictable: utter frustration, and in some cases, bloody violence.

²⁰ For instance, the whole land reform issue is still in progress and presently being emotionally debated.

²¹ In an address delivered in the National Assembly in Cape Town, 29 May 1998. He was then still the acting Deputy President of South Africa. An excerpt from the address: *"We therefore make bold to say that South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women, all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity, the development opportunities to which the Constitution of '93 committed our country. The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realization. This reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed, we are not one nation, but two nations. And neither are we becoming one nation. Consequently, also, the objective of national reconciliation is not being realized."*

Economic realities, although not being a magic wand that spirits away all ills in society, are more important than the church tends to think. If the church wishes to combat the giant of violence and crime, it will have to go further than just confronting the “secular giant of godlessness”. *It needs to address the ethos of a market-driven hyper-industrialization, fed by a highly efficient mass media propaganda machine that continuously paints a picture of proposed need and promised fulfilment.* In this sense religion and culture need to collaborate with other role players in order to construct a new ethos, one could say a *new identity*. In my view, the latter constitutes a core issue facing culture, religion and hence also the churches in the years to come.

5. Level 4: The core – the search for a new identity?

It is clear that South Africa, as a young democracy, is struggling to find its identity. 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.

In the euphoria of the political transition in 1994 much was made of the uniqueness of South Africa as a “unity in diversity”, epitomized in Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s colourful phrase: *rainbow nation*. The dark days of *ethnocracy* seemed to be over. Since then, however, there have been some indications that people are again retreating²² into ethnic categories when trying to define their identity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, for instance, said recently that politicians should not play each and every political ball with

²² A contemporary expression of this longing for the (leaders of the) past could be seen in the much debated song called *Generaal de la Rey*, sung by Bok van Blerk. It reminisces about the days of the Anglo Boer War when General de la Rey played a key role in the formation and maintenance of the Boer’s identity. Although the artist is adamant that the song is not political in nature, and simply a historic account, some groupings in South Africa, especially right-wing groupings, have associated themselves strongly with this song, linking it to the display of the old South African flag. It has sparked off a renewed debate about identity in the South African context, a debate that has even reached the international press.

an ethnic bat,²³ and even someone like Mangosuthu Buthelezi warned former deputy-president Jacob Zuma not to fan the flames of ethnic nationalism.²⁴ On the streets of many art festivals (one of the interesting phenomena of the new South Africa) people can be seen wearing T-shirts saying something like: “100% Boer”, or “30% Boer”, etc. Perhaps this is not meant to be taken seriously, but at the very least it represents an expression of (ethnic) identity.²⁵ When the names of towns and airports are changed, however, it is a serious matter, evoking emotional debate from people from different ethnic contexts, as it affects their interpretations of (their) histories and heroes, and therefore their identity.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this withdrawal²⁶ back into the laager (Afrikaans: “om laer te trek”) could be the ongoing violence, coupled with the painful realities of poverty and HIV/AIDS. Perhaps David has decided not to tackle Goliath (be it one or seven) “head-on”. People are feeling insecure as regards their future – and therefore they retreat back into that which is well known: traditions, language, and their own people. Added to this is the fact that some political leaders are using these fears and uncertainties in a cynical and opportunistic way for political gain, and this could indeed fan the flames of a renewed embracement of ethnically based definitions of identity.

The basic question facing South African society after apartheid is: *can we have both national unity and celebration of our diversity?*²⁷ Furthermore, what role can religion play in answering this question? According to Villa-Vicencio (1994:115-126), there are

²³ *Cape Times* 1 October 2006.

²⁴ *Cape Times* 8 October 2006.

²⁵ An interesting flip-side to this would be the recent behaviour of some white students who painted their faces black, using shoe polish, in defiance of President Mbeki’s comment that only indigenous black people may be called Africans. By marching on the Union Buildings, they sought to demonstrate that being an “African” indeed transcends ethnic categories.

²⁶ At least by certain sectors of the South African population. Some people use their religion to aid in this withdrawal (or process of by-passing) from public life and politics in particular. Religion becomes internalised, privatised and in some cases apocalyptic. It is an interesting fact that people who understand the mechanisms of economics do not normally fall prey to this *syndrome of withdrawal* – they appreciate the value of interconnectedness.

²⁷ 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.

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 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 formulates this as follows: “*The challenges facing South Africa are twofold: the forging of a common or universal sense of belonging and the obligation to respect the right to particular identity*” (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 also with the potential role of religion in mind. For instance, the question should be asked as to what the *integrative factor or factors* would be in this culture of openness? What constitutes the *centripetal and centrifugal forces* that would ensure that both unity and diversity are allowed to play their role? Is it an ethical common ground of human rights and human dignity? A common vision of a just society? Something else?

This notion of cultural openness could also be described in terms of *interculturality*.²⁸ 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

²⁸ Interculturality is a set of processes through which relations between different cultures are constructed on a basis of equality and mutual respect. 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.

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).

The problem of this approach could, however, 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 (cf. Niebuhr), 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.

The concept of interculturality could also be refined from the perspective of *interpathy*.²⁹ 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 attitude 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 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

²⁹ 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).

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. In this sense it can help to counteract dangerous and dehumanizing myths, preventing 'history' from being turned into 'nature'.³⁰

Diana Nishita Cheifetz has written a beautiful essay on graceful neighbouring,³¹ 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. Often our (body) language³² reveals our self-absorbing interests.

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

³⁰ In this instance I follow the classic findings of Roland Barthes (1964:110ff) regarding the *philosophy of language* in connection with myths. He researched, linguistically, the creation and the development of *common* myths and came to the conclusion that this type of myth interprets and relates history in a way that is fundamentally different from the activities of historical science in writing history. While the ideal of the latter is the understanding of history in all its facets, *myths change history into nature* (1964:113). A few viewpoints are abstracted from the unique interrelation of historical events and changed into a repeatable pattern analogous to 'a law of nature'. This pattern or principle is applied with a specific *objective*, for example, the justification of social, political or ideological structures. In fact, the myth is richly chequered and can serve any common, human needs and actions.

According to Barthes, the essence of a myth exists in its love of, and continuous search for, timelessness. Real history is negated, annulled and *changed* into a myth. To be timeless, the myth thus *uses* history, and never becomes altogether detached from it. It also does not want to do so, because it lives on it, finds its roots in it, and especially conceals itself in it. According to Barthes (1964:97ff), this secretive game of hide and seek defines the myth.

³¹ This is of course a far cry from the chilling comment made by Hendrik Verwoerd, one of the founding fathers of apartheid, still to be seen and heard on a video clip in the apartheid museum in Johannesburg, where he states: "The word apartheid is often misunderstood... it really means friendly neighbourliness."!

³² Language, of course, remains a significant element of intercultural communication. "*Language is the medium through which a culture 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).

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!

The notion of *creative and respectful space* 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 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:

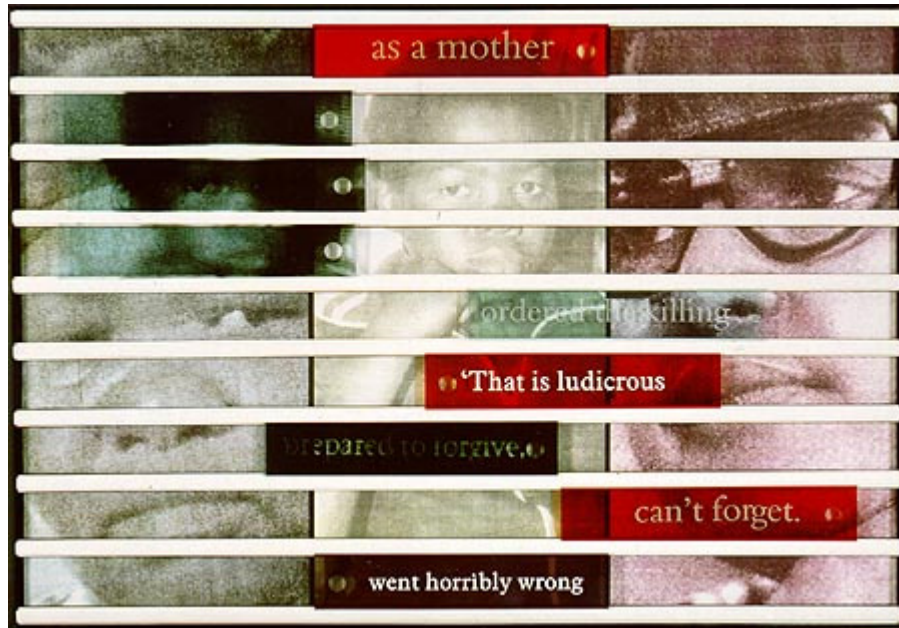


The concept “safe space” does not indicate neutrality or inactivity, or a type of securocracy. On the contrary, it intends a spiritual space of intimacy, where reciprocal enrichment can take place. Perhaps we can coin a helpful phrase here, building on the notion of Ubuntu: what is needed in South Africa 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.*

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.

John de Gruchy, referring to the art of reconciliation and the *creating of space for interfacing* in a post-apartheid South Africa, quotes the example of Cape Town artist Sue Williamson’s work (2002: 148-149; cf. also Williamson 1989: 74-77). Her works are all divided into three vertical panels – much like some classical paintings found near the altar, or as part of it, in medieval church buildings; as these panels are unfolded they tell a story, or better: create a space between different “stories”.³³ One painting, based on the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) entitled *Truth Games series: As a mother: Confrontation over Stompie* (1998 Mixed media. 86 x 120 x 6cm), shows Winnie Madikazela Mandela in the right-hand panel, the abducted and murdered young black activist Stompie Sepai in the middle, and Stompie’s mother in the left-hand panel.

³³ For instance, the work of Lucas Cranach in the Wittenberg Stadtkirche, depicting the acts of preaching, baptism, confession and the celebration of the Eucharist.



There are several wooden rails fixed across each painting. Each rail has a groove along which a narrow board can be drawn by the observer from one side of the picture to the other and placed at any point. Conversational phrases by either the victim or perpetrator is written on each board – for instance: “*How could another mother do such a thing?*” (victim); and: “*It was a horrible mistake*” (perpetrator). By moving the board the observer is taken up into the “conversation” going on between the two people on the side-boards, concerning the person depicted on the central board. It is not clear from the painting whether the two in fact hear one another, or respond to what is being said. But the observer is drawn into this middle space, taken up into the electrifying and emotionally laden interfacing taking place. According to De Gruchy, the art of reconciliation – in which the church and religion should also play a role – lies exactly in the opening up, the creation of this space for interfacing (2002: 149).³⁴

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

³⁴ Anlene Taljaard, a South African author, uses De Gruchy’s interpretation of Williamson’s work to describe the Eucharist as a middle space where “*believers meet and where time and dialogue is transformed. Therefore, this middle space could open up the possibility firstly, to realize and to act our responsibility towards one another and secondly to embody this reconciliation and restorative justice in society*” (2004: 373; cf. also 377-379).

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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