

On violence, the Belhar Confession and human dignity

I grew up in apartheid South Africa. I clearly remember the violence of racism that I was directly and indirectly exposed to. Let me cite a few representative examples.

1. ON VIOLENCE

I spent my primary school years in a small rural town in the Northern Cape. One Saturday afternoon a white man and his wife came walking to our house. Their vehicle had broken down a few kilometres from our house. My father was almost anxious to help them. They climbed into my father's van (bakkie). The seat was big enough to easily accommodate three people. What struck me was that the white man sat in the middle, his wife on the left side, and my father of course behind the steering wheel. The seating arrangement was strange to this more or less ten year old boy. My mother, sister and all the Coloured women who drove in my father's van, or in any other person's van in that Coloured community would, under the same circumstances, normally sit in the middle and would be flanked and (I assumed) protected by the two males.

In my matric year I, like thousands other Coloured and Black learners, struggled to get funding to study at university. Our struggle was not due to bad matric results. In the city of Kimberley, capital of the Northern Cape, I would literally walk to various institutions to apply for scholarships. At one point I made the mistake to apply for a scholarship of the state administration services (Staatsdienskommissie). The white gentleman informed me that he could not accept my application since "the scholarship is not for you people" ("hierdie beurs is nie vir julle mense nie").

During our years of theological education at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) the white *dominee* of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in our neighbouring town in the Northern Cape told the theology student of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church in his town that our ministerial formation programme at UWC was good enough to equip pastors for the Coloured, Black and Indian churches, but not for the white DRC. The ministerial formation programmes at the Universities of Stellenbosch, Pretoria and the Free State, on the other hand, were good enough to equip pastors for the white DRC, and therefore automatically also for the Black, Indian and Coloured churches.

An elder of the DRC in my town was very sympathetic to my studies and always ensured that I receive scholarships from his congregation. I however could not reconcile this caring attitude with his shocking remark during the heart of the struggle against apartheid that Allan Boesak should taste lead (*Boesak moet lood proe*) –that means Boesak should be shot to death - because his theologically-informed struggle against apartheid implies that he is a communist, traitor and threat to a safe and secure South Africa.

And when I visited the beautiful Strand Beach during those student years – when I started university studies I saw the sea for the first time in my life – I was struck numb by the notice boards on the beach: One read *Whites Only*, and the second one read *No dogs allowed*.

In my ethics courses at the University of the Western Cape I learned a definition of racism that I find helpful and illuminating (and even full of redemptive and healing potential) till today. This definition was proposed by two Dutch scholars, Hans Opschoor and Theo Witvliet: Racism is:

... the specific ideology that organises and regulates the exploitation and dependence of a specific 'race' on the basis of the assumed cultural/ and or logical inferiority of that 'race'. In this way actual differences in power are maintained and intensified.¹

This definition of racism as an ideology is helpful. Although ideology is an inflated concept, a concept with a variety of meanings, in this definition it indicates that the phenomenon of racism consists of three important elements: firstly the picture that we have of the other race, secondly the embodiment of this picture in social structures and lastly a religious rationale that is often offered for this picture and corresponding structuring of society. Often an ideology functions with a religious foundation.

The picture of the other races entails categorization in terms of inferiority and superiority.²

This picture, i.e. the prejudice against the other, namely that they are inferior in terms of features like physical attractiveness, moral, religious and cultural development, as well as intellect, is embodied in various social structures. Macro-apartheid, i.e. the segregated economic, political, educational, communication and broader social structures, and micro-apartheid, i.e. the segregation of amenities, beaches etcetera, remain one of the best examples of this structuring of racial prejudices. These structures that are based on racial prejudice reinforce the picture of superiority and inferiority. These processes of socialization and conditioning cause people to internalize the racial picture and prejudices to their subconscious levels. They consequently function with racial prejudices without being aware of it.

In South Africa these racial prejudices and the corresponding racial structures were justified by religion, specifically the so-called Apartheid Theology that gained prominence from the early years of the twentieth century. This religious dimension enhanced the internalization of racial prejudices to subconscious levels.

This threefold approach to racism helps me to understand what I was experiencing all my life. I was in fact exposed to various forms of violence. My father could not sit next to a white woman, not because of cultural reasons, protocol and etiquette, but because he was presumably inferior to white males in terms of factors like physical features, intellect, morality and religiosity. Moreover, as a Coloured person of Africa he presumably had an inborn uncontrollable animal-like sexual lust that was a threat to white women. For this reason the so-called Mixed Marriage Act and article 16 of the Indecency Act that forbade inter-racial marriages existed as part of the corner stones of macro apartheid in South Africa.

The refusal of scholarships on basis of racial discrimination was an expression of

1 See H Opschoor and T Witvliet, De onderschatting van het racisme, in: *Wending*, 1983, p.554-565 – translation from Dutch NK).

2 In a 1998 article titled Racism in postapartheid South Africa, in L Hulley and L Kretzschmar (eds) *Questions about life and morality* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 1998), I referred to the categorization of various race groups by some anthropologists into Caucasians, i.e. the white races who are closest to the so-called ideal human form, namely the classic Greek human being. The other races increasingly are further from this ideal and closest to the ape tribes. These races are the Mongoloids, Australoids and Negroids. In this article I also expressed my reservations about the continued use of the term race. The famous African-American theologian and social theorist, Cornel West, traces the development of modern racism back to the classical revival in the Early Renaissance (1300-1500) and to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Both the revival of classical aesthetics and cultural ideals and the positivistic scientific investigation has fed the exploitation and violence that racism is (*Prophesy deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1982:50-59). In the same article I argued that new forms of racism is seen in the portrayal of some cultures as superior to others.

violence in the form of systemic exclusion. Although some of us could eventually attend university, many more could not further their studies and actualize their potentialities. In fact, in post-apartheid South Africa Coloured people are the group who has the lowest representation in higher education.

And our presumed intellectual and spiritual inferiority was expressed by the white *dominee's* explanation that we could not be called as pastors to white congregations. The elder's condonation of the possible killing of Allan Boesak as a personal and physical expression of the systemic violence³ of racial prejudice, racist social structures and Apartheid Theology. It showed how the stereotyping, stigmatization and demonisation of the other could lead to their violent elimination.

The signs at Strand Beach conveyed the message that those who are not white resort in the domain of the sub-human. They were dehumanized. They are less than human. The fact that those signs received theological legitimation from white mainly Reformed Christians implied that those excluded by the signs were not only less human than white people, but they were also less children of God.

Especially this theological justification of racial violence which implied that Apartheid and its humiliation and dehumanization and violation of dignity⁴ was God's good news for diversified South Africa, caused the deepest hurt and a threat and challenge to our faith in the triune God. A congregant of Allan Boesak's first congregation articulated this threat clearly during the 1960's. This woman hopelessly watched how security forces of the apartheid regime removed her belongings from the family home where they had stayed for generations. The neighbourhood in which they had lived was declared white in terms of the Group Areas Act. The family was therefore forcefully removed to a neighbourhood that was declared Coloured. She addressed her pastor with these words: *Dominee, now you must tell me what God is saying about this.* Her question echoes the question posed by many Christians who were victims of Apartheid.

3 Hans Reinders develops a helpful description of types of violence on basis of Galtung's famous identification of types of violence. Galtung firstly identifies the direct personal and physical violence, secondly structural violence that refers to the violence in political, economic and social structures, and thirdly systemic violence that refers to the cultural and religious bases of violence. Racial violence in South Africa clearly reflected all three these dimensions. Reinders elaborates on this description of violence offered by Galtung. Violence is not only physical, i.e. inflicted on your body by means of force. It is also psychological. It can be inflicted by means of mental repression. Violence is direct in the sense that it involves personal confrontation. It is also indirect, because decisions by remote authorities can cause harm to people they do not know. Personal violence is perpetrated by individuals or groups of individuals, whilst structural violence is caused by social structures and institutions. See J.S. Reinders, *Violence, victims and rights. A reappraisal of the argument from institutionalized violence with special reference to Latin American Liberation theology*, Amsterdam 1988, 13-14.

4 Over centuries various attempts are made to define the concept of human dignity. German bishop Wolfgang Huber refers to perspectives on human dignity from the fields of law, politics, philosophy, medicine, art, as well as theology. He remarkably states that human dignity is most clearly understood exactly where it is violated. See W. Huber, *Violence. The unrelenting assault on human dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). The essence and consequences of the apartheid system as portrayed in this paper describe the conditions that should be transformed in order to restore human dignity. These conditions are separation and discrimination, exclusion, alienation and enmity, injustice, humiliation and dehumanization. For various insightful perspectives on human dignity see W. Huber, *Der Gemachte Mensch: Christlicher Glaube und Bioethnik* (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag, 2002); R. Soulen et al (eds) Kendall & Woodhead, Linda (eds) *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

What is God really saying about this? He surely could not say what Apartheid Theology tried to make us believe. This woman's challenge to Boesak was not an expression of unfaith and disbelief. On the contrary, it was because she knew and understands this God to be different that she challenged her pastor to assist her in articulating and giving account of her faith and hope amidst these dehumanizing processes.

2. ON THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR 1986

a. In this context of personal and structural violence, of racial prejudice, Apartheid and Apartheid Theology, of separation and discrimination, of exclusion, alienation and enmity, of injustice, humiliation and dehumanization, of threatened and challenged faith, a wonderful, God-given event of consolation and comfort, of redemption and liberation, of hope and healing appeared on our horizon, namely the declaration of a *status confessionis* on these evils and the adoption of the Confession of Belhar 1986.

In the *status confessionis* the 1982 synod of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) expressed the courageous conviction, which was also expressed earlier in 1982 by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and in 1977 by the Lutheran World Federation, that the theological legitimization of the apartheid system of violence and violation of human dignity, violated the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that it poses a threat to the essence, nature and credibility of the gospel. And where Christian faith is threatened and challenged it needs to be confessed afresh. Consequently the DRMC decided to confess faith in the triune God anew in this situation of threat to this faith.

The draft version of the Belhar Confession was formulated by a committee whose central aim was to merely articulate and give expression to the faith that lived in the hearts of the members of the DRMC. Jaap Durand, one of the members of the committee, suggested that they merely try to give voice to the faith that lives in the DRMC. The drafting committee should be commended for taking this route. And we remain thankful to the main author of Belhar, Dirkie Smit, for encapsulating in an unforgettable way the faith that lived in the hearts of DRMC people. In 1982 he was at a very young age (thirty years!) already one of the best representatives of liberating Reformed theology in South Africa. The fact that his formulation was accepted with intuitive affirmation and acclamation by the DRMC, shows the faith that sustained the people of the DRMC, was not a parochial and provincialistic faith, but it was clearly at heart Reformed faith. The continued positive reception of Belhar in Reformed churches all over the world also witness to this observation.

Old and young indeed acknowledged our deepest convictions in the words of the Belhar Confession, those convictions that helped us to resist apartheid with resilience and hope, and that eventually helped us to overcome this evil system.

b. Article 1 confesses faith in God as the One who unites his children. In the context of separation and discrimination on basis of ethnicity or any other criterion, we were strengthened by the faith in the God who makes us one amidst all our diversity. Across all types of boundaries we are one family. As one family we are equal in worth and dignity. As one family of God we are equal in freedom. Over against separation and discrimination we looked up to a God who calls us to live in unity, i.e. not unity at a distance, but unity in proximity. Belhar describes this unity as communion, as sharing in each others lives, as living in solidarity and cohesion in a clear and challenging way:

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of

ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and to build up one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

c. The reconciliation that is confessed in Belhar reflects the two dimensions of reconciliation in Pauline thought. Reconciliation as *hilasmos* has to do with the expiation of wrongs and stumbling-blocks to atonement (at-one-ment). Reconciliation as *katalassoo* refers to harmony in the relationship with the other. The reconciliation of Belhar has in mind the embrace that Miroslav Volf⁵ refers to: the embrace of different races, tribes, nationalities, socio-economic groups, genders, sexual orientations, age groups, "normal" and disabled people. To this list one could add the embrace of humans and nature. The reconciliation of Belhar pleads for the removal of stumbling-blocks in the way of peaceful living, in the way of the embrace. Reconciliation therefore implies opposition to various forms of alienation and enmity, amongst others racism, tribalism, xenophobia, classism, misogyny, homophobia, ageism, handicappism and ecocide.

The significance of God's reconciliatory work in a context of alienation and exclusion sustained us during the Apartheid years and kept us believing that reconciliation between people from diverse backgrounds, and between people who had lived in enmity, is possible. With Belhar we opposed the view that:

is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel ...

Over against exclusion of the other, the Belhar faith called out for participation in each others lives. One could even say that it calls out for participation in the affairs of life, amongst others political and economic life. Belhar indeed spelled out the road from exclusion to embrace and participation.⁶

d. The justice that is confessed in Belhar is rightly described as compassionate justice. In line with the biblical use of these concepts, both the sacrificial and forensic dimensions of justice are being referred to.

Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ God declares us just. People who are justified by the grace of God are participating in the quest for justice in the world. Justified people,

5 See M Volf, *Exclusion and embrace. A theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation* (1996) Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 171

6 Itumelang Mosala's description of reconciliation as reconciliation, at-one-ment with the land, conveys this idea of participation in the political and economic life which is signified by the notion of land. See I Mosala, The meaning of reconciliation. A Black perspective, in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 1987:19-25

people who are made right by the Triune God, i.e. right humans, seek human rights in our broken world. For Christopher Marshall⁷ justification by faith is an expression of restorative justice.

The notion of sacrifice has a second dimension. It also indicates that justice cannot be reached in this world when the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the other is not present. A third aspect of the sacrificial dimension of justice is the fact that justice does not seek revenge, but it is merciful. It seeks the healing and restoration of both perpetrators and victims. In fact it seeks the healing of all broken relationships. Therefore this justice is called restorative justice. Marshall's analysis of the use of justice in the New Testament enables him to refer to justice as restorative or covenantal justice. This covenantal justice goes beyond retribution and punishment and seeks, like reconciliation, the healing of relationships. Like reconciliation, restorative and covenantal justice seeks embrace. It seeks the renewal of the covenant between God and humans, between humans themselves and between humans and the rest of creation.⁸

Amidst the injustices of apartheid South Africa the Holy Spirit enabled us to keep faith in the God who shows compassion in a special way to his people, especially to the excluded, exploited and marginalised. This special identification with wronged people meant that God intervened and acted on their behalf. He sought the redemption and restoration of victims, perpetrators and beneficiaries of unjust practices.

3. ON HUMAN DIGNITY

On basis of the foregoing discussions I might endeavour to propose three discourses of human dignity. The three articles of Belhar provide the framework for what we can call the discourse on solidarity and cohesion, the discourse on embrace and participation, and the discourse on compassion and human rights.⁹

Twenty six years after the adoption of the Draft Confession of Belhar we have made tremendous progress in South Africa. Only extremes groups will still try to give theological legitimation to Apartheid. Structural racism, i.e. Apartheid as political system, has been to a large extent abolished, and new policies that reflect the values of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution had been formulated. On the level of racial prejudice we also made progress. Role models like Nelson Mandela and nowadays Barack Obama helped tremendously to break down racial prejudice. We, however, still need to do a lot regarding the breakdown of subtle and often subconscious forms of racial prejudice. Although we sadly often have occurrences of explicit racist remarks and acts, most of the expression of racial prejudice is on the subtle and subconscious levels. Though a lot still needs to be done we can report that South Africans did make progress with regard to matters like unity, reconciliation and justice. We have made progress with challenges like solidarity and cohesion, embrace and participation, compassion

7 See C Marshall *Beyond retribution. A New Testament vision for justice, crime and punishment* (2001). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 59.

8 See C Marshall, *Beyond retribution*, pp. 35-93. The latest publication of Nicholas Wolterstorff on justice will in years to come richly influence our thinking on human dignity and justice. See N Wolterstorff, *Justice. Rights and wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

9 These three discourses that are based on the three articles of Belhar show some resemblance with three human dignity discourses that Russel Botman identified a few years ago, namely discourses on equality, reconciliation and an *oikos*, i.e. a covenantal discourse that focuses on the challenges posed by globalization. See R Botman, *Covenantal anthropology: integrating three contemporary discourses of human dignity*, in R Kendall Soulen and L Woodhead (eds) *God and human dignity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), p.72 – 86.

and human rights. We did make progress regarding the restoration of dignity in our country. A lot more, however, need to be done. The three human dignity discourses that I suggest here might serve as an agenda of the work that we need to do regarding the restoration of dignity.

Article one of Belhar challenges us to work for dignity by building an ethos of social solidarity and social cohesion. In an African context of *ubuntu*, of communion, solidarity and care amongst people, we witness how the *Zeitgeist* of modernism and the institutions of modernism, especially the power of the global market economy, leads to a culture of privatism, excessive individualism, consumerism, fragmentation and the breakdown of cohesion and solidarity amongst people within all population groups in South Africa. We are currently the country with the biggest Gini coefficient in the world. We recently overtook Brazil as the country with the biggest gap between rich and poor. A culture of entitlement and enrichment exist among many of our leaders and citizens. The challenge for us is to build solidarity and social cohesion. We need societies in which people live with public sympathy, empathy and interpathy. The collaboration between the Protestant University and Stellenbosch University might consider these challenges as challenges that have to do with the heart of what we call human dignity. I suspect Dutch society might face challenges like this as well. Various social scientists make strong pleas for the restoration of cohesion and solidarity in order for democracies all over the world to survive and hopefully to flourish.

The article on reconciliation challenges us to view the restoration of dignity as the task of building an ethos of embrace and participation. Social scientists make a plea for tolerance as a public virtue that societies need to exist peacefully. Dignity, I reckon, entails tolerance indeed. Tolerance literally means to carry each other, also each others burdens. We, however, need to go even further than tolerance. We need to embrace each other. Amidst differences and even incommensurable and conflicting positions, yes amidst enmity, the challenge is to embrace each other, to forgive each other, and to even enjoy each other. To restore dignity is to move beyond racism, xenophobia, classism, sexism, homophobia, handicappism, ageism and ecocide. It is to make these evils history. In the ethics classes on racism that Stellenbosch colleagues Elna Mouton, Hendrik Bosman and I teach for the past seven years we continually ask the question on how we help our students and the communities that they serve to move beyond evils like racism, to make racism and those evils history.

Reconciliation discourse on human dignity also asks that those who are excluded will be included, that they find room for participation in social processes. Exclusion did not occur only during Apartheid. The market economy with its emphasis on the so-called tertiary economy of information technology and services require sophisticated knowledge and skills. In a country with high levels of illiteracy so many people are excluded from contemporary economies. Unlike the economies of agriculture, mining and manufacturing, current dominant technological and service economies do not need their unschooled labour. They are excluded because they had become expendable. In his works Manuel Castells shows that even the whole continent of Africa has become excluded from the global market economic processes. He consequently calls Africa the fourth world. To build an ethos of inclusion and participation is part of the process of restoring human dignity.

The justice discourse on human dignity makes a plea for compassion and human rights. So many who suffer and who are wronged, marginalized and silenced need our special identification with them. They need our compassion, our care, our presence in their midst. They need us to pay attention to them. According to Exodus 3 God pays attention to his people in oppression and suffering. His eyes are open. His ears are open. His heart is open for their plight. He is moved and stirred by the misery of his people. There is no room for apathy and inertia.

Once again, social scientists articulate conceptually what we are exposed to perceptually, namely the high levels of public apathy, inertia and acedia in our societies. To build an ethos of public compassion is to serve the restoration of dignity.

The God of Exodus 3 who pays attention with open eyes, ears and an open heart, also intervenes and acts on behalf of the suffering and the wronged in the world. Compassion prompts acts of justice, restitution and reparation. In modern democracies this quest for justice is well served by the quest to fulfil human rights. The restoration of human dignity asks for participation in the implementation of the three dimensions of human rights, namely civil and political rights, socio-economic rights, developmental and environmental rights.

4. CONCLUSION

In the quest for the restoration of human dignity, i.e. in the quest to build an ethos of social solidarity and social cohesion, embrace and participation, compassion and justice we drink from the wells of the Christian tradition. So close to the celebrations of the birth of John Calvin it might be appropriate to draw upon his notion of the threefold office of Christ to phrase this threefold quest for the restoration of human dignity in Christological perspective and thereby also to indicate the way along which this restoration might be operationalised.

According to Calvin the royal office portrays Christ's work as that of uniting the world with God, of making us one with God and each other. And in this union with God we enjoy all the blessings that He has in store for us. The priestly office tells about a Christ who sacrifices Himself for the sake of the world. In a world of various forms of brokenness and alienation He is the healer and the reconciler. The prophetic office tells about a Christ who proclaims God's will for the world. In a world with a lot of knowledge (*scientia*), but a lack of wisdom (*sapientia*), Christ as prophet brings true knowledge, meaning and wisdom. The prophet proclaims the vision of a society of justice.¹⁰ The threefold office of Christ might enrich our theological contents of the three discourses on human dignity proposed in this essay.

KEY WORDS

Apartheid
Racism
Violence
Unity
Reconciliation
Righteousness
Dignity

TREFWOORDE

Apartheid
Rassisme
Geweld
Eenheid
Versoening
Geregtigheid
Menswaardigheid

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¹⁰ For contemporary comments on Calvin's understanding of the threefold office, see amongst others S Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); G Wainwright, *For our salvation. Two approaches to the work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.99 – 186.