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# THE CHURCH HISTORY SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA (CHSSA) ATTEMPTING TO COME OF AGE: THE STORY OF THE CHSSA BETWEEN 1991 AND 2005

## ABSTRACT

In this article, the focus is on the question whether the Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA) has matured after its 35 years of existence (1970-2005) to a fairly mature theological society in the South African academic context. After an introduction, attention is given to the proposals of an *ad hoc* committee that investigated the reorganization of the society into a more inclusive and representative organization, the different conferences, the journal, membership and management of the society, theological traditions and positions present in the society and some perspectives on the road ahead. Without trying to provide an official audit of the society, it is finally concluded that it is attempting to come of age and the prospects for the future are relatively positive. However, only the years to come will prove whether this society has fully come of age.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA) was founded in 1970 by a small group of enthusiastic church historians under the leadership of professors J.A. Stoop (Unisa) and T.N. Hanekom (Stellenbosch). It gradually grew into a fairly vibrant and representative society that encouraged the study of church history and church polity.

Though the focus of this article is more specifically on the second part of the thirty-five years of the history of the CHSSA since 1970, I wish to start off where I ended in my previous historical overview some years ago. At the end of a paper

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delivered in 1991 during the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the CHSSA, I discussed the road ahead for our society (Hofmeyr 1991:1-13). The following came in focus.

The CHSSA can learn something from the experiences of the societies that were formed to promote the study of secular history in South Africa. I briefly referred to some of the highlights in this history. In 1956, the “Historiese Genootskap van Suid-Afrika” was founded with the aim to encourage the study of history among a wide range of people, but particularly among high school pupils, university students and the general public. By 1960, disillusionment had set in in some circles of the “Historiese Genootskap” because of its failure to cater for the needs of the professional historian. This society was criticized for allowing itself to be dominated by primarily Transvaal teachers’ organizations and for favouring Transvaal writers in the allocation of space in the society’s journal.

Increasing numbers of leading Afrikaner historians came to the conclusion that positive steps had to be taken to draw English-speaking academics into a national professional organization. Eventually, the South African Historical Society (SAHS) was founded in 1965. Conferences that were held biennially first focused on methodological issues and the development of new approaches to history, but gradually began to reflect more directly on recent developments in historical scholarship: the history of frontiers, African societies and race relations, slaves and free blacks, rural, urban and regional history, demographic history, culture and ideology. In general, the principle of bilingualism was scrupulously observed. The founding of the SAHS could be seen as part of the endeavour by Afrikaans- and English-speaking South Africans in the post-republic period to find each other. This society’s journal, the “South African Historical Journal”, proved to be very useful and successful in building up a strong community of historians in South Africa. It also managed to develop high standards and a strong research output (Saunders and Le Cordeur 1986: 7-23).

In later years, a new work group called the “History Workshop” was founded at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The aim was to make provision for studying and promoting radical and revisionist historiography.

Some other issues as regards the future of the CHSSA also drew the attention at that stage. The role of women and blacks in the CHSSA was not extensive though not totally negligible. Although female members of the CHSSA did not organize themselves in a formal subgroup such as is happening in the American Society for Church History (with their subgroup called “Women in Theology and Church History”), they have at various occasions delivered papers at annual conferences, and one of them, C. Landman (Unisa), was secretary of the CHSSA from 1984 to 1991. In the period 1985-1991, a small number of blacks became members of the society. However, there seemed to be some discomfort among them about the somewhat exclusive Afrikaans and reformed character of the society.

In the 1980s, an increasing number of church historians were becoming aware of the importance of a theological and philosophical reflection on their subject as a discipline. Formerly, few questions had been asked concerning the ongoing development of this subject on the subcontinent of Africa. The question was also raised whether the traditional approach to church history, or the European approach in which most South African church historians had been trained, was still relevant for the practice of this subject in the African context. Practical realities forced church historians to reformulate the needs of their task.

A weighty question with which church historians struggled at that stage was whether their subject should be practised as a theological discipline or whether it should be secularized. However, most church historians in South Africa agreed that church history should be scientific, critical, objective as far as possible and that the church as object of study should be examined honestly and theologically. However, no consensus was reached concerning a paradigm whereby a scientific theological method could be achieved.

The outlook of the CHSSA in 1991 was in some way hopeful, in some way not. Some of the problems that had to be faced urgently were the following: In spite of the initial and recurring pleas and even attempts for a representative membership the society still was not truly representative of both the ecclesiastical and cultural spheres. Furthermore, there appeared to be some lack of understanding between the different schools of thought represented in the society.

Another example of a lack of understanding was the great emphasis that was still placed on denominationalism, in spite of the fact that, right from the beginning and in the course of the twenty-one years of its history, there was also a definite plea for ecumenical openness.

In spite of the fact that it was in some ways developing to come of age, the society had possibly reached a very critical phase in its history. The choice was either to move towards a position of greater parochialism, exclusivism and particularism or otherwise to develop a greater level of respect and understanding for one another. Eventually, the only hope for a fairly representative, understanding and relevant academic society lay in the ability of the individual membership and the society as a whole to state that nobody embraces the whole truth, that there could be a different view on any specific issue to that of a particular individual or group and, finally, that mutual general and denominational understanding, respect, openness and co-operation prove to be enriching rather than suffocating. Sadly enough, at that stage it was remarked that the subject of church history would be the loser if those aims could not materialise.

Instead of forming a new society if the current one did not fully satisfy all the particular needs, it was said at that time that the society needed to consider in its "wisdom" to redevelop the society to embrace a broader and more open outlook upon matters without losing the interest of the subgroups, and

also to use the forum sessions to provide for different needs and different areas of specialization (Minutes of the CHSSA 1991).

## 2. 1992 REPORT AND PROPOSALS

After a decision of the business meeting of January 1991, Professor G. J. Pillay (Unisa) travelled to Pietermaritzburg and Grahamstown to meet with Dr L. Jafta (Fedsem) and M. Donaldson (Rhodes) respectively, and on 17 June 1991 arranged a meeting in Pretoria with professors P. Coertzen (Stellenbosch), B. Spoelstra (Potchefstroom) and J.W. Hofmeyr (Pretoria) at which the views of the committee members were fully discussed.

The discussions on this issue were cordial and frank. After examining the history of the society, it became quite clear that it was never the intention of the society to be a “Reformed Church gathering”, and the society had never been influenced, even during the height of apartheid, by any racial consideration. For the greater part of its history, those who attended were mainly from the (Dutch) reformed churches, i.e. the family of Afrikaans reformed churches. Only a few English church historians made a strong contribution, like Calvin Cook (Rhodes), David Whitelaw (Unisa), Margaret Donaldson (Rhodes) and Joan Millard (Unisa), but they did not always have the influence they deserved. Until that time, there were very few black church historians and at most two attended more than one annual conference. On the Afrikaans side, professors often brought their graduate students along with them, and many former church history students in the ministry of the reformed churches attended regularly. In the course of the development and history of the society, the Afrikaans contingent naturally grew because of the reasons mentioned above.

It appears that the situation in the society at that time was somewhat of a “catch 22”: The society did not wish to be exclusive in any way; yet, those who are not reformed and Afrikaans did not feel attracted to the work of the society precisely because it was predominantly reformed and Afrikaans.

The meeting unanimously agreed that we must seek to be inclusive in every way and that the issue under discussion be freed from any ideological consideration. Our sole goal must be the stimulation of church historical study and research in South Africa and the creation of a sound academic forum for all church historians in the country.

In order to meet these goals, more than just “the language and denominational biases” needed consideration. The issue of inclusiveness with regard to racial and gender issues also needed to be addressed. Besides, a new approach towards the annual conference programme and the journal, the main items on the society’s annual programme, was suggested. With this new for-

mat, many of the problems discussed above could be resolved and it indeed proved to be successful in the course of time.

## 2.1 Proposals

### 2.1.1

Instead of the present five working groups (patristics, medieval and Reformation church history; modern and general church history; South African church history; historiography and methodology; and church polity) deciding on the conference programme, each group once in five years would now be given the opportunity to suggest the theme of the conference to the church history society. This would ensure that each interest is still catered for. This theme would then be advertised and a call for papers made to the whole academic community (here and abroad). The immediate benefits of this move would be the opening up of the programme to general academic participation in church historical discussion. The sole condition would be that participants would contribute to church historical research and study. (Sadly, the subgroup for church polity went its own independent way early in the 2000s).

### 2.1.2

Besides the possibility that will exist for each of the working groups to offer papers in future, their interests will be served in forum sessions at every conference. It is proposed that one afternoon (about 3 hours) be set aside for each of the working groups to present papers in its research areas. Two or more papers could be accommodated in sessions of equal duration and the working group itself will have autonomy over these sessions (speakers, themes, etc.). Each will be free to invite speakers and determine the nature of these forum discussions (whether they would have seminars, papers, film presentations, text readings, etc.). These papers do not have to relate to the theme of the conference.

### 2.1.3

In order to encourage new membership and wider interest in church historical study, it was proposed that one session of 1½ hours be set aside for presentation of completed post-graduate research. Master's and doctorate students from the various universities who have completed degrees will present brief papers on their findings. Their promoters may be invited to respond to their papers before these are opened for general discussion.

### 2.1.4

Regarding the language of communication at the conference, it was proposed that speakers be permitted to use the language in which they can best present their ideas, but that the society undertake (with the help of the writer) to translate these papers into English and that these translations be available at the conferences (Minutes of the CHSSA, 1992).

## 3. CONFERENCES AND THEMES

In the course of the period from 1991 to 2005, many themes were addressed at annual conferences. From the beginning of its existence, the society managed to retain a generally average standard in its conferences and mostly had a specific broad theme that was addressed at each of these events.

Some of the themes that were addressed included the following: Reform and renewal movements; thinking, believing and being; eschatology through the ages; education in the course of the history of Christianity; gender and church history; migration movements in the course of church history; healing and health care in the history of Christianity and, finally, various topics related to church polity.

However, it will be valuable to make a deeper historical analysis of a few selected themes and papers that were covered during this period and of how, together with other articles, these all found a deposit in some of the different journal editions.

In 1991, G.J. Pillay historically discussed the issue of non-violence and Christian dissent. The well-researched paper, which is on a par with international standards, describes the development of the pacifist civil disobedience tradition in history. It is concluded that the tradition of pacifist resistance as an application of the Sermon on the Mount is a Christian tradition much older than the more predominant just war tradition (SH 1991 1:14-46). Also in 1991, Heiko A Oberman (Phoenix, USA), the internationally renowned church historian, published an article in Afrikaans on "the matrix of Calvin's Reformation". After describing the decisive decade of 1525-1535, Oberman concludes with Calvin's growing insight in the life-giving refuge with God. However, he concedes that there are many obstacles in the way of anyone wishing to trace Calvin's road to reformation. (SHE 1991, 2: 123-152).

In the 1993 volume of SHE, the results of a conference on methodology and the practice of church history of that same year were produced. A number of crucial methodological considerations for the nineties with a concrete and contextual emphasis came to the fore. Some of the issues that were focused on were, for instance, P. Denis's (Kwazulu-Natal) "How to write the history of a failure (The Dominicans in the Zambezi area (1577-1837)"; J.H. le Roux

(Pretoria) on “The nature of historical understanding”; various authors on important issues for Africa, i.e. “Oral tradition”; and C.J. Botha (Unisa) on “Ecumenical Church History”. It was said in the introduction of this volume that the meeting distinguished itself in its ethos: It boiled down to an unspoken challenge to seek out, to collect, to inquire and to record, without subjectivism or an obsession with theory to thwart the cause (SHE 1993, 1:1).

In 1995, the focus in the journals was, among others, on “Nie-Bybelse bronne vir Gereformeerde Kerkregering” (Non-biblical sources for Reformed Church Polity) by P.J. Strauss, “Eschatology in Death rituals among Shona Catholics” by P. Gundani and “Reflections on Celtic Eschatology” by M. Donaldson.

In 1998, some other themes were discussed in the journal of the society. The US-based Nigerian Ogbu Kalu focused on “Pentecostalism and the reconstruction of church experience in Africa (1970-1995)”, P. Denis on “A Portuguese in South East Africa in the 16th century (João dos Santos)” and L.D. Jafta on Religion and Democracy in South Africa”. It was clear that Africa received far more attention and that socio-political issues was a specific focus of the journal.

In 2000, for instance, issues like the “Constitutional State: A turning point for the Christian Churches in South Africa” (J.M. Vorster), “The foundings of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches” (P. Gundani) and “Vatican II: A council of reconciliation” (K.B. Roy) came to the fore. Once again, these were witness to the fact that the society, its journal and its focus were constantly broadening.

In 2005, various themes were covered in the journals of that year, for instance the implications of the Reformation for Africa, histories, for instance from Malawi, Kenya and Nigeria, African independent churches, women of faith in South Africa, history as biography and autobiography, history as a process and histories of memory. Some articles worth mentioning are those of G. Thom (University of Fort Hare) “Three South African perspectives on Calvin”, P.H. Gundani’s (Unisa) “Processes surrounding the birth of the Justice and Peace Commission in Zimbabwe” and M.M. Pieterse and C. Landman’s (Unisa) “Feminist responses to the historical and current influence of belief on sexual relationships”. Some further topics of great interest in these volumes would be the histories of children, histories of hurt, histories of (in) justice and histories of healing.

All of this reflects on an even broader focus and understanding of the task of the ecclesiastical historian in Southern Africa: Issues like the role of African societies, ecumenism, the role of women and gender and a far more contextualised interest were clearly coming to the fore. It became more and more apparent that the quality of conference papers and articles was definitely improving. From analysing various articles, specifically from the period 1991-2005, it also became clearer that the general South African approach wished to be critical and that a sound relationship with missiology and history

at large should not be neglected. By 2005, it was also already becoming clear that the profile of authors of articles and the focus of articles were becoming more representative and inclusive, i.e. white and black and male and female.

Although indirectly, the society was also involved in the globally based conference of the "Currents in World Christianity Project", which took place on the Hammanskraal campus of the University of Pretoria in July 2001. This, having been the most inclusive and best represented church history conference ever in the world, was a momentous and inspiring event and it is still bearing various fruits like the recently published "African Christianity: an African Story" (edited by O.U. Kalu, J.W. Hofmeyr and P.J. Maritz) (Minutes of the CHSSA 1991-2005).

#### 4. JOURNAL

In the period from 1991 to 2005, the journal of the CHSSA, i.e. "Studia Historiae Ecclesiae" is slowly moving to maturity, as is clear from the above section. Initially, in the period running from 1970 to 1990, the journal of the society largely consisted of annual volumes that provided exclusively for the publication of papers delivered at the annual conferences of the society. Most of these papers were of average standard, but it did prove some vibrancy within the circles of church historians. From 1990 onwards, the society published bi-annual volumes, which gradually paved the way for the development of a fairly professionally prepared journal in both appearance and contents. Most of the articles from that period on were reviewed, although they sometimes were of differing standards. Also from that time onwards, the journal received subsidies from the Department of National Education, which enabled the journal not only to survive but also to develop financially because of the gradual payment of subvention fees. At that stage, however, the system of peer reviewing was not well developed yet and there was no full guarantee for the quality of articles. The quality of articles and the editorial work improved under the editorship of professors G.J. Pillay between 1992 and 1997, J.M. Vorster (Potchefstroom) from 1998 to 2004 and C. Landman from 2005 onwards. While G.J. Pillay was the editor, the journal was published by the Unisa Publications Department. When J.M. Vorster from Potchefstroom took over with the assistance of Professor P. Denis from the University of Kwazulu-Natal, the journal was privately produced by a publisher in Potchefstroom. Under the diligent and committed leadership of J.M. Vorster, the journal developed even further into one of the rather well-respected journals within the theological field in Southern Africa. When C. Landman took over in 2005, she was the first woman to hold this position, and once again, high standards have been set for the period ahead. Articles will first undergo pre-reviewing by the editor, and obvious problematic cases are referred to the sub-editor. After that, articles

are sent for full blind peer reviewing, which is now fully in place and naturally benefits the quality of articles and the journal as a whole.

In 2001, an important index of all articles published by the CHSSA in its journal in the course of its 30 years of existence (1970-2000) was included in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* under the authorship of J.M. Vorster, P. Denis and some assistants.

Recognition is due to all the above editors and assistants who, through very diligent and constant work and commitment, were responsible for the improving quality of this journal (*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 1991-2005). It will prove to be an interesting and valuable exercise to compare the quality of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* with the journals of other South African theological societies (like *Missionalia* and *Old Testament Essays*) and with some other local and international historical and ecclesiastical history journals (like the *South African Historical Journal*, *Nederlandse Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* or *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*), but this falls outside the scope of this article.

## 5. GENERAL BUSINESS AND MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

With regard to money and business matters, the CHSSA managed to function quite well and had a period of relative plain sailing. Although it is not the most important part of an academic society's existence, the lack of a smooth financial existence would make matters so much more difficult.

Throughout the period from 1991 to 2005 (as also in the 21 years before that), the financial statements of the society always showed a positive balance. Because the society's journal managed to retain its position as an accredited journal, it constantly received so-called subvention fees from institutions to which authors were attached. This, together with membership fees, enabled the society to operate fairly positively and dynamically. From financial statements of the society, it is apparent that the major sources of this organisation came from the above as well as some interest earned from credits on bank accounts. The major expenses of the society related to the publication of the journal and the travel and other costs incurred for members attending annual conferences.

In the period running from 1991 to 2005, various people acted in leadership positions. Professors C.F.A. Borchardt (Pretoria) acted as president from 1991 to 1998, J.W. Hofmeyr from 1998 to 2004 and P. Gundani from 2004 up till the present. Professor C.F.A. Borchardt sadly passed away in 1998. As secretaries during the above period, Professor J.W. Hofmeyr, Dr P.J. Maritz (Pretoria), reverends H. Mogashoa (Unisa) and R. Ntsimane (Kwazulu-Natal) performed their duties with great diligence. Professor R.M. Britz (Free State), Dr P.J. Maritz, reverends H. Mogashoa and R. Ntsimane and Mr M. Madise (Unisa) acted in the capacity of assistant secretary (*Minutes of the CHSSA 1991-2005*).

## 6. WHERE DOES THE CHSSA STAND IN 2005?

From the above, it is clear that the CHSSA is developing to come of age and has gradually succeeded to become a fairly inclusive and empowering organisation during the period under discussion.

It is clear that it is no more struggling for acceptance, for an independent position within the framework of similar societies on a worldwide basis, for relative inclusiveness and representativeness or for upholding relatively good standards at conferences and in the volumes of the journal of the society.

Second, it must be stated that the society has gained greatly from the ad hoc committee initiated by the business meeting of 1991. It is clear from the proposals accepted at the business meeting of 1992 and from the history of the society since then, that these proposals largely represented something of a paradigm shift and a Rubicon experience for the society. Most of the proposals have been implemented and are still practised. In this process, next to the Southern African Missiological Society (SAMS), the CHSSA became the most inclusive and multicultural theological society. Few of the other theological societies in Southern Africa have truly made this paradigm shift.

Third, a reality of the society's history in this period is the fact that it has lost a large number of its Afrikaans and reformed members. To some extent, a common approach in this period was to argue that in the strategy of social, political and academic withdrawal, people thought their fears of being overwhelmed by majorities would be solved. Although some of these Afrikaans members may have felt estranged by the shifts in language, inclusiveness and ecumenicity, those who have withdrawn have in some ways missed the opportunity of being involved in the building of a fairly strong church historical tradition in Southern Africa, of being involved in the micro and macro discussions about our subject and of being involved in building a strong Southern African theology.

Membership numbers did shrink somewhat, but attendance at conferences remained quite well throughout the period under discussion. In the course of the period from 1991 to 2005, the society sadly lost a number of its older Afrikaans and reformed members but, on the other hand, also gained in its numbers of black and younger members.

As regards honorary membership, only two people were honoured in the period under discussion, namely professors C.F.A. Borchardt and P. Coertzen. This is a way in which the society can give recognition to those who served the society with special service over a long period. In this respect, I believe it is possibly appropriate to offer professors G.J. Pillay and J.M. Vorster this honour of our society in the near future.

## 7. THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS AND POSITIONS IN THE CHSSA

Many things can and will still be said about the theological traditions and positions represented in the circles of the CHSSA in the period from 1991 to 2005. However, at this stage, I make only a few remarks.

First, with a few exceptions, the society has definitely lost a major part of its Afrikaans and reformed membership. Their contributions are not heard enough in the circles of the CHSSA, and the society has indeed been weakened through their withdrawal.

Second, however, the society has gained not only by a more representative and inclusive membership but also by a broader perspective on previously neglected areas in the field of church history. Areas like church reunification, oral history, gender issues, the role of women, the AICs and some new theological, methodological and philosophical issues came into a stronger focus.

Third, the society has become more ecumenical and theologically inclusive than it has ever been before without sacrificing respect and tolerance for one another in the membership of the society. The denominational representation is still well balanced with a strong Roman Catholic membership.

Finally, the society realises its responsibility with regard to the role of the subject but also the membership of the society in furthering better theologising in Southern Africa. It is realised more and more that bad theology can quite often be attributed to the weak historical exposure and formation of theologians.

## 8. WHERE IS THE CHSSA HEADING?

Where exactly the CHSSA is heading is naturally difficult to say. However, I have the view and the feeling that we have come a fairly long way, that we are slowly walking the long, sound and wise road of relative academic maturity towards really coming of age in the future, and that on this journey we can learn from various other theological and academic societies in Southern Africa but also elsewhere in the world.

Areas we need to attend to are the goal to continue building higher academic standards as well as tolerance, inclusiveness and representativeness in membership but also in the journal. In this respect, special attention needs to be given by the management of the society to once again attract the Afrikaans-speaking membership back to all the activities of the society, as much as that was the case in 1991 when the English and black membership was expanded. The sooner the Afrikaans membership also takes up its responsibility again to be involved in our society, the better for them and for the society.

I believe that, besides our responsibility to “tell the story” of this society, which is developing to come of age, at the same time we can also express the hope that this story will remain a largely positive one in the years to come.

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