



Rev. M. Laubscher

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. JOHAN CILLIERS



1. ABBREVIATED CURRICULUM VITAE PROF JH CILLIERS

Johan Cilliers was born in Luanshya, Zambia, in 1954, and received his theological training at the Faculty of Theology in Stellenbosch, as well as the Karl Rupprecht University in Heidelberg, Germany. He has obtained the following degrees: D.Th. Theology, University of Stellenbosch (US) 1982; Licentiate in Theology, US 1979 (*cum laude*); M.Th. Theology, US 1979 (*cum laude*); B.Th. Theology, US 1978 (*cum laude*); B.A. Philosophy and Greek, US

1975 (*cum laude*). After serving as minister in two congregations in South Africa (in Durban and Stellenbosch), he was appointed as lecturer at the Faculty of Theology in Stellenbosch, and currently is Professor in Homiletics and Liturgy in the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology.

He is a member of the *International Academy for Practical Theology*, a former chairperson of the *Society for Practical Theology in South Africa*, a former Head of the *Department of Practical Theology and Missiology* at the University of Stellenbosch, and a former president of the *Societas Homiletica* (international society for Homiletics). He has lectured as visiting scholar at the University of Umea, Sweden; the University of Basel, Switzerland; the Free University in Amsterdam, the Netherlands; the University of Leipzig, Germany; The University of Würzburg, Germany; as well as the Humboldt University Berlin, Germany, and the University of Hamburg, Germany. He has written thirteen academic books, inter alia on preaching, liturgy, and aesthetics. His book on preaching (*The Living Voice of the Gospel*) was used as basis for developing a new module in Homiletics at the University of Umea, Sweden, and his book on South African preaching (*God for Us?*) was used as handbook for Master's students at Kampen University, the Netherlands. He has co-authored two books with international scholars, respectively on the foolishness of preaching (with American author Charles Campbell) and on worshipping in the network culture (with Dutch author Marcel Barnard, and former Ph.D. student Cas Wepener). Two of his books have been translated and published in Korean and German. He has published more than 120 academic articles in accredited journals and authored 23 popular religious books—for which he has received numerous book awards from Christian Books South Africa (CBSA). He has received the Rector's Award for outstanding Lecturing (2003), the Best Lecturer Award 2008 (Golden Key International Society and the Academic Affairs Council of the University of Stellenbosch); as well as the Rector's Award for outstanding Research (in 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). He is a National Research Foundation evaluated researcher and has received stipendiums for research from The Harry Oppenheimer Memorial Trust, as well as the Research Committee of the University of Stellenbosch. He is married to Elna, and is the (very proud) father of twins, Jacques and Karen.

2. INTERVIEW

ML: *I do not want to shock nor embarrass you by starting with a cliché, but some questions are just inevitable: "How has your mind change over the years?" Would it be fair to say your focus shifted from ethics to aesthetics, from exposing (a very specific form of) moralistic preaching to envisioning*

the (strange and intriguing) beauty of worship? In addition: any particular markers and little detail (influential persons, teachers, colleagues, books, events, etc.) worth highlighting in the development of your work?

JC: Hopefully, my mind has changed over the years, and hopefully for the better. I started out with a fascination for the worlds and dynamics of written texts, in particular also for the destructive elements thereof. So, I started to discover how dangerous for instance, preaching can be – if it creates and defends destructive agendas such as apartheid. Moralism could also be linked to texts that bind and judge, that instill fear and create enclaves; that enslave within the rigid laws of some forms of religion. I had a wonderful friend and mentor in Germany, Gerd Debus, who introduced me not only to the enriching movements and moods of texts, but also to the shadows and darkness lurking in, and beneath the grammar of texts – often in the seemingly innocent ingredients of grammar, such as commas and full-stops. I am still fascinated by texts. But, later on, as I was searching for alternatives, I started to appreciate aesthetics as a space which does not circle the wagons to form enclaves, but rather a space where creativity and playfulness are no strangers. In this regard, my German *Doktorvater*, Rudolf Bohren, played a major role, teaching me that moralism and aesthetics are in fact the exact opposite. The one clamps down, the other opens up.

I have been blessed with many enriching colleagues and friends throughout the years. I must mention the name of Daniël Louw, who has been an inspiring, if not provocative dialogue partner concerning aesthetics on countless occasions. I have an American friend, Chuck Campbell, with whom I co-authored a book called *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* in which many of my strands of thought somehow came together, and the writing of which simply was fun, or better, Gospel joy. And Ian Nell, my adventurous friend, who never fails to take me out of my (physical and theological) comfort zones... and so I can go on.

ML: *Would you agree that it is not so easy or straightforward to name you as “Being a Reformed (practical) theologian”? Your reformed roots and identity is clear, yet the seriousness with which you deal with this can easily be misinterpreted. I sense much humour and play, dance and movement, creativity and imagination, lament and hope, as what you sense and anticipate it to be, as I read “between the lines”. Stated differently: Would you agree that there is a great deal of ambivalence and paradox throughout your work in the way you consciously and deliberately (without explicitly saying so) deal with the reformed tradition?*

JC: Yes, there probably is much ambivalence and paradox in my work, as I seek to resist quick answers and simplistic recipes. I would,

albeit hesitantly, call myself “reformed”, but with the belief that this opens up spaces for innovative theology, instead of clamping down on “safe and secure” dogmas. The latter have proven to be, and has indeed been, smothering, to say the least. It is exactly because I am reformed that I would like to be reformed, which, at least for me, means not taking myself too seriously – rather playing and dancing (the latter in particular meant metaphorically!) with, and towards life, and Life.

ML: Your critique on the state of preaching and liturgical renewal in the Dutch Reformed church over many years and in numerous studies is well known and documented. In fact, what struck me in particular is how much resemblances there are between your first and later works in this regard. Not only in terms of your analyses and diagnoses between 1960-1980 and post-1994, but also in terms of your own response back then and more recently. Why do you think there has been so little meaningful change in this regard?

JC: Being in the stage of my life were I am more prone to do retrospection, I am also constantly struck by the resemblances between my earlier and more current work – knowing that this is not the result necessarily of deliberate and conscious choices that I had made. I suppose this happens on deeper levels, as one progresses on your journey of life and within academia. The phenomenon of moralism, for instance, still seems to be alive and well, sadly enough. Perhaps I use different terminology now, rather speaking of religious activism, and taking cognizance of notions, such as kitsch and cliché, which almost always seem to accompany moralism and/or religious activism. Perhaps these themes will haunt us, as long as we endeavour to preach about, and worship, God?

ML: How much within the previous question should we in the academia (Homiletica) be held responsible for? I fully agree with both your diagnoses and responses to address the situations in all the studies. However, I do wonder whether more intense self-critique in terms of our teaching preaching, pedagogy, preaching theories, homiletical textbooks and formation, and our research agendas are not also involved and implied in truly facing this situation? Is this indeed an avenue worth considering, and if so, what do you think should we take especially into consideration setting out on this cause? In short, speaking out on the state of preaching in our churches and history also asks for some reflection on the state of our discipline(s) – your thoughts on this?

JC: Obviously, we need to be continuously reformed, also in terms of our (theological) pedagogy, and our modes and postures of teaching. We live in an African setting, inundated by many strands of wisdom. Our

attempts at teaching within this setting can and should be enriched by African themes and issues. I had to list my publications the other day and discovered (to my surprise and joy) how many of these themes and issues seem to keep on popping up in my attempts to be an African theologian: Ubuntu and Into, The in-between spaces of African Worship, Worship in the Townships, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the question of land ownership (space in Africa), the phenomena of HIV and Aids, the monumentalisation of religion (e.g. in the Voortrekker Monument), God-images in South African preaching, political-ethical preaching in South Africa, the contributions of Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and Beyers Naudé, notions of temporality in Africa, Religion and Justice in South Africa, the role of power and religion in South Africa, the impact of the segregation at the Eucharist Table, Koi-San rock paintings as metaphor for African Spirituality etc. – to name only a few. In short, there is no shortage of enriching impulses surrounding us, knocking at our academic doors, waiting to indaba with us. I call this grace.

ML: A significant characteristic in your books dealing with homiletical theory and the practice of preaching is in the way you make use of sermon examples to illustrate, model, and teach your work. However, I am not so sure that the way I formulate it here, is correct, unless this is all there is to it. Is there not also the conviction in this pedagogical move to not merely reflect and illustrate your theory and theology, but also indicate how your theory and theology follows and even continuously are in need of catching up with your experiences on the pulpit? In short, how often do you preach, and how vital is the role it plays in your work and theology?

JC: Obviously, I do not preach as often as I did when I was in full-time ministry (a time-span of eighteen years). The one activity of the ministry that I miss the most is the one I also feared the most, preaching. I miss the discipline of having to grapple with a biblical text, in order to say something meaningful, perhaps even profound, to a group of people that embody the body of Christ, the congregation. During my career as an academic (again a time-span of eighteen years), I did, and still receive invitations to preach, but not only in the DRC. I often struggle to say yes, knowing perhaps a little better what the act of preaching in fact does entail. I still fear preaching, but somehow, I keep on preaching, and I still believe that it is one of the most profound events that any human being can be part of.

Concerning the link between real sermons and the teaching of preaching, or better, between preaching and theology, I once said:

“Preaching is a display window, whether or not we are aware of it. It remains a kind of barometer of the church that reflects the church’s state

of health. One could justifiably say: *as the preaching, so the church; as the church, so the preaching*. In concrete preaching, many aspects culminate: the preacher's dogmatic, ethics, scriptural view, historical awareness, pastoral and exegetical skills, hermeneutical capacity, psychological, emotional and spiritual maturity, and much more. Concrete sermons paint pictures of theological and church (therefore human!) activities – colourful and exciting, or drab and boring. They bear witness to either regeneration, or degeneration."¹

I still believe this to be true.

ML: *Would you say your practical theological approach of observe and see, come closer and look deeper, anticipate and envision and (re-) celebrate is a clear and deliberate sharpening of the focus and questions at stake in terms of how you see Osmer's well-known (and often referenced) four tasks of a practical theological approach? The proposed shift from orthodoxy and even orthopraxis to orthopathy is not only different, but a specific seeing of our times in how to do theology. What you are proposing is not only for those theologians with an interest in the arts, or in liturgy and homiletics, but as a way of seeing our way through with more insight and hope – right? Can we imagine the epistemological implications, changes, and transformation this may bring to those entering the field (anew)?*

JC: My approach to practical theology (and preaching in particular) in terms of observation or seeing is so close to my heart, that I dedicated my whole inaugural lecture to it, calling it the *Optics of Homiletics*. Although there are some similarities to the terms used by Osmer, I believe there are also some differences. The terms I use come from the world of aesthetics, for instance including notions such as anticipation. So, observation, to my mind, entails more than just empirical research (but would not exclude it); rather it is aimed at a way of looking at life that in fact implies alternatives, that imaginatively suggests or anticipates other possibilities. This is, inter alia, what good artists do: they observe and portray in such a way, often shockingly so, that other worlds are opened up, or at least longed for. This, I believe, is what preaching, within the setting of liturgy, should do.

ML: *I am interested to know more about how you connect pneumatology, spirituality, and the South African context in your work. I sense that the secret in the peculiar way they are connected lies in a Christology that is by no means fashionable, mainstream nor afraid to work the angles, heighten the contrasts, and stress the paradoxes. The way you connect and embody these key coordinates throughout your work seems to contradict and disrupt many of the ways in which the church worships*

1 *The Living Voice of the Gospel. Revisiting the basic principles of preaching* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2004), 19.

today. On the one hand you concur to affirm the key significance of body, embodiment, and materiality within our liturgical landscape today, but then not as a means to celebrate and sanctify an escapism, which has no social-political edge, and cannot remember and testify who this God was who revealed Himself through the scandal of the cross. Please respond to such an interpretation of your work.

JC: I can agree with this interpretation of my work. The key word here is interruption. The shortest definition of preaching is interruption. The Christ event interrupts, in order to re-sanctify. The other keyword is pneumatology. Whilst the Christ-event is unique, and not repeatable, the Spirit of Christ brings about an “enormous expansion” of this event – to quote the Dutch theologian Arnold van Ruler. The interruptive, sanctifying Christ-event is taken into all the nooks and crannies of everyday life; everything is sanctified, or better, confirmed as holy. Life is holy. Therefore – because the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, body, embodiment, and materiality, inclusive of socio-political realities, it cannot and should not be escaped from in the name of some sort of pietistic religiosity. But this brings the paradoxes into play. Much of life does not seem holy; people often act in unholy ways. A spirituality of paradox observes this, but constantly interrupts by pointing towards, and anticipating, the contrary.

ML: *In the previous question, you hear my appreciation for how you manage to engage reality in both a constructive yet critical manner. The movement is clearly from the concrete particularity – the cross of Christology – to the general, inclusive, and universal reality. On the one hand, you play with the idea of the beauty of worship and preaching, and on the other hand, the arts and beauty as lived theology in their own right. I do by no means doubt the legitimacy or necessity of both ways, but I am wondering about the order and preference in this regard. Is the former not crucial and inevitable for us to see and acknowledge the latter? Is the general and universal possible without the knowledge and presence of the particular and specific? Have we not learned that liberation, re-creation, and eschatology precede creation? In short, given your own antenna and experience with the legacy of natural theology in Reformed preaching in South Africa, would you not think this theological order and logic should spur us on in the way we approach reality?*

JC: Perhaps the answer here hinges, inter alia, on the way we understand the *relationship between creation and salvation*. This is a complex, or rather, richly layered question. In the South African version of Reformed theology, at least, relatively little space was/is given to the fact that creation as such could indeed also be seen as *missio dei*, and that creation itself stems from *missio dei*, for *missio dei*; a notion that

was also defended by Rudolf Bohren, my *Doktorvater*.² Perhaps this lack of natural theology could be traced back to the way in which Calvin has been interpreted within the Dutch Reformed tradition in South Africa. It has been noted by some scholars that this interpretation, while being solid in soteriological content, indeed lacks a *mature theology of creation*. Perhaps the lack of a mature theology of creation can indeed be attributed to a dominant, and often exclusive theological focus on *ecclesiology* in ministerial training; the countering of a natural theology associated with apartheid with a strong contrasting emphasis on *Scripture*; and a narrow *pietistic notion of salvation* as personal sanctification. As far as the latter is concerned, it is well known that the Dutch Reformed Church always had a certain pietistic component in its theological make-up, dating back to the times and undeniable influence of the Scottish ministry in South Africa, the most prominent figure being Andrew Murray.³ It is, however, important to note that the Scottish influence in South Africa had many faces, distinguishing it from what is often understood under the term pietism. Although there was the puritan dimension in the Scottish tradition, which in effect led to an ethical vacuum as far as social issues were concerned, one could also state that it was in fact this Scottish tradition, with its assertion that all people are equal, that influenced for instance Beyers Naudé, together with his understanding of the so-called Utrecht School, to become more and more critical of the apartheid ideology.⁴

So, does re-creation precede creation? I remember that I once felt utterly compelled to deliver a paper on (against!) Fracking in the Karoo, stating there as follows, and quoting Luther:

There is no discrepancy here: *God is present in every leaf on every tree and in every piece of bread that we eat, and at the same time God is beyond all that is.* The whole of history is God's great masquerade, and God's masks (*larvae dei*) can take on many forms: the church, preachers, but also kings and queens, ordinary working people... and the "body" of the creation.

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- 2 Rudolf Bohren *Mission und Gemeinde. Theologische Existenz heute*. Neue Folge Nr. 12 (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1962), 4.
 - 3 Cf. Ernst Conradie, Creation and salvation in the Wake of Calvin: Some reflections from within the South African context. *NGTT* 51/2010, 357-369. Cf. also Johan Cilliers, Das Klingen des Lebens: Liedübertragungen als Transfer religiöser Kulturpraxis: Das Kirchenlied zwischen Sprache, Musik und Religion. Veranstaltung zu Ehren von Prof. Dr. Jürgen Henkys anlässlich seines 80. Geburtstages. *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 20911; 28 (2): 279-299.
 - 4 Cf. Murray Coetzee, Eertydse Nederduitse Gereformeerde teologiese denkstrome ten grondslag van Beyers Naudé se kritiek op apartheid. *NGTT*, 2013/54, 3 en 4: 1-15.

Dare I say... that Luther's notion of *ideo universa creatura eius est larva dei* - every part of creation forms part of God's masquerade – helps me towards a spiritual archaeology, and in understanding my love for a space called the Karoo? Every time I see a leaf on a tree (especially after the drought), and every time I eat a piece of bread (especially if it was baked by a local!), I am looking at, and handling, a mask of God – a mask that both reveals and conceals. I touch the cloth with which God is covered.

So, did I say this because re-creation preceded creation, at least in my thinking? Or the other way round? Compelling question...

ML: Closely related to the above is a hunch that the aesthetics of worship and preaching inevitably asks for a deconstruction of Reformed sacramental theology. Instead of prioritizing the arts, or even introducing and exploring icons as means of grace, which is legitimate and worthy projects in their own right, what about addressing first our history of dematerializing and disembodimenting the sacraments unworthy and un-Wordily? Can we truly see the beauty of the arts and icons without the beauty of a just Word in the sacraments by the Body who gathers and witness?

JC: I think it all comes down to our understanding of beauty. Many view beauty through a haze of romanticism. For them, beauty is all about objects (or experiences) that are fine, excellent, noble, and honourable. Beauty is seen as "the pretty, the merely decorative, or the inoffensively pleasant", its intention being nothing more than merely evoking a sentimental feeling about pretty sunsets and artistic flower arrangements. Others interpret beauty exclusively in terms of corporeal and even hedonistic and narcissistic trends. Beauty then becomes a slogan for lifestyle advertisements and cosmetic make-overs. And, sadly enough, in many churches beauty has simply degenerated into kitsch; and art is used as plasticised expressions of a consumerist society. In this sense, we need to constantly revisit and re-observe the strange beauty of the cross, portrayed to us, as you say, in the beauty of a just Word in the sacraments by the Body who gathers and witnesses.

*ML: Continuing within this particular line in the previous question, I sense a creative interplay and mutual enrichment over the years between homiletics and liturgy in your work. Although you set out to do proper homiletics or liturgy in either the one or the other, it is clear that the other discipline is always somehow present. In fact, I sense intensification in this reciprocal relationship between the two in your later works, such as *Dancing with Deity – Re-imagining the beauty of worship* and *A Space for Grace – towards an Aesthetics of Preaching*. I am interested to hear your response on this, because there are many great and classic works in the field that do not have this kind of sensitivity and feel for the creative*

interplay and mutual enrichment between the two (separate) disciplines. How important is it really for the one that we specialize also in the other?

JC: I often think that the distinctions we make between the theological loci are forced and in fact harmful. Homiletics and liturgy should, in my view, not be seen as two islands in the ocean, or ships passing one another in the night. But neither should, for instance, systematic theology and so-called practical theology be divided into silos; or biblical studies and ethics, and so on. I cannot be a homiletician without also being a systematic theologian, or a biblical scholar, or a church historian, and vice versa. Theology is, or should be, integrated, or else we do not serve the integration of life. Indeed, we need this creative interplay and mutual enrichment between the disciplines. There is no fun in preaching on an island, to nobody, or in doing liturgy on a lonesome ship, somewhere in the middle of the night. Sure, you can formulate your systematic theological theories, or construct your ethical values in a silo, but that is not going to help many people. I think this search for integration will be one of the challenges for doing theology in the future, once again.

ML: *A great deal of our discussion dealt with reflection on the past and deciphering its meaning in the present, so in closing, with the permitted space and time available, let us try to anticipate the future. What can we expect from you in the nearby future, and moreover, what do you see and envision as the key challenges homiletics and liturgy will be facing within the next decade or two?*

JC: Anticipation is the right word. I hope that I will be able to keep on anticipating, and I anticipate that I might keep on hoping... God willing. On a personal note, when I started out with my studies under Rudolf Bohren, he called me *Doctor In Spe...* Doctor in hope. This has become a type of credo for me, guiding me from the past, towards the future,

I am currently writing a monograph that links to the previous one, namely *A Space for Grace*. This one will be called *Timing Grace*, working with the classic notion of time that is always in tandem with space. I anticipate/hope that this book will also have a distinct (South) African aura, inclusive of notions of African time, and hearing again timely African (interruptive) voices.

The next decade or two? Who knows? I think issues, such as ecology and technology, new forms of religion, and worship will keep on posing challenges to homiletics and liturgy, to the church as such.

We are called to meet these challenges, as opportunities.

In Spe...