



Perspektiewe / Perspectives

Interview with Bennie van der Walt¹

Mr. Steve Bishop (e-mail stevebishop.uk@gmail.com and website www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk) asked prof. Van der Walt on 3 August 2008 a number of questions to which he responded below.

1. Life and family

1.1 Tell us something about your family and yourself

Steve, I was born on 12 April 1939 in the town of Potchefstroom in the present North-West Province of South Africa. I grew up on the farm Vyfhoek (divided into small holdings to help farmers to earn a living after the devastating Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902). My parents, J.J. (Mias) (1909-1989), and C.E. (Tiena) van der Walt, (1916-1991) suffered from the flu of 1918 and the economic depression of the 1930s and could not enjoy higher education after standard 6. My father, for instance, had to dig diamonds in the Lichtenburg district and later on became a mason. He inter alia helped to build the main building of the Potchefstroom University – a place where I myself would many years later continue his physical labour on an academic level. Prior to their marriage my mother (born Delport) worked for a few cents a day in a clothing factory.

They were hard-working people and God blessed their labours. While my father worked as a bricklayer, he and my mother also became farmers. First only part-time (lucerne and wheat), but later poultry farming, dairy farming (with Ayrshires imported from Scotland) and finally (before they passed away) sheep farming. Their

1 Since few readers will be able to read my (BJvdW's) philosophical memoirs in Afrikaans elsewhere in this volume of *Koers*, this interview in English is republished here with the permission of Mr. Bishop. (Fortunately the two pieces do not overlap too much.)

financial progress also benefited their children. I have one brother and three sisters of which the youngest died at the age of two. All of them enjoyed the privilege of university education. Our parents were, however, wise not to spoil us: we had to take our share in all the farming responsibilities.

During my studies (in 1964) I married J.M. (Hannetjie) Loock (born 5 December 1940). Because of her love and support, she should receive the credit for whatever I may have achieved during the past 45 years. We were blessed with four children, first three boys and then a daughter. All of them are married and we are already “oupa” and “ouma” to nine grandchildren. The whole family are lovers of nature. We have done a lot of camping and hiking in many parts of our beautiful country – especially in the Drakensberg Mountains of KwaZulu-Natal. As could be expected, I wrote a few books on our hiking experiences in Afrikaans and English.

1.2 What was it like growing up and living in South Africa?

This is a difficult question to answer, Steve, since I did not have the experience of growing up elsewhere. My ancestors arrived here from Friesland (the Netherlands) long ago in 1727 and I am already part of the eighth generation of Van der Walt's in South Africa. We, therefore, regard ourselves as true white Africans.

During my own life I experienced pre-apartheid, apartheid as well as the postapartheid era. A brief word about each of them follows.

I enjoyed the privilege of growing up in a healthy, God-fearing family in a rural environment mostly unaware of all the political problems of South Africa. Even the black farm labourer, Silas Tekiso, his wife, Dora, and their children were treated as part of an extended family. My father also donated a part of his land for a primary school to be erected for all the black kids of the Vyfhoek area.

It was only later on, especially during my studies in the Netherlands (1968-1970) and my work at the University of Fort Hare (1970-1974) that I became fully aware that something was terribly wrong with the apartheid system. Especially during my time as director of the Institute for Reformational Studies (1974-1999) South Africa became the skunk of the international world. Many white people were, however, still blinded by this ideology and I had the difficult task to convince many of my fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord that they had no biblical grounds for their viewpoint. (For examples see 4.3 below.)

After the demise of apartheid in 1994 the situation again changed drastically. We realised that the consequences of apartheid could not be eradicated immediately, but would accompany us for many years. Most of us – both black and white – hoped for a better future. South Africa's present deterioration is perhaps not so much noticed outside the country, because the country is acknowledged internationally and the upper class of both blacks and whites still enjoy economic prosperity.

As you may perhaps already know from media reports, the following factors today concern every South African citizen:

- Rampant lawlessness, like rape, robbery, murder and other forms of brutal violence. Those who can afford to take care of their own security, have to invest huge amounts to do so. The legal system cannot handle all the criminal cases, neither can the prisons accommodate the convicted.
- Wide-spread corruption, especially among politicians and state officials on national, provincial and local level. Many of our leaders today – the so-called fat cats – are not really examples for a younger generation, because they are not motivated by service, but by greed and a culture of entitlement.
- A weak state, unable to see to it that standards are maintained and to deliver the necessary public services.
- The HIV and AIDS pandemic has infected a large part of the population – with detrimental implications.
- A scarcity of jobs, while millions of refugees from other countries, e.g. Zimbabwe, are entering the country, leading to xenophobia among the South Africans who are losing their jobs.
- Reverse discrimination through inter alia one-sided affirmative action against whites and increasing racism from the side of both black and white.
- An unacceptable and dangerous gap between the very wealthy and the masses of extremely poor people.
- A huge brain drain of the highest qualified people to countries like Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- Many people, who cannot or do not want to emigrate, start emigrating inside their own individual concerns, thus withdrawing from the problems of wider society.

- An unwillingness to accept personal responsibility, blaming for instance the apartheid past or present racial tensions for own incapability, laziness and corruption.

Did I mention these examples of the disintegration of a society – in spite of the most modern Constitution and Bill of Rights – to ask for the sympathy of outsiders or to make South Africans even more despondent and eager to leave our “rainbow nation”? I will not blame people who, for their own safety and that of their children, finally decide on the last option. I am one of the many families who have a son and three grandchildren in faraway Canada. But I also firmly believe that it is not by mere chance that one belongs to a certain nation. However difficult it may be, God asks of us to get involved and try to change our own situation for the better.

To summarise: Once South Africa was an example to the whole world of what was despicable; then it became a shining model to the world of what was to be admired (e.g. the Mandela-era); today South Africans have to start working diligently to prove that their country not only deserves the respect of the outside world, but can be a place where all its own citizens can feel at home.

1.3 How did you become a Christian?

Since I grew up in a Christian family, it is not possible for me to indicate when I became a Christian. I did not experience a sudden conversion. Already during secondary school and at my official confession of faith in the Reformed Church I knew that I loved the Lord and wanted to be in his service. However, at that time I still held a somewhat narrow view of the Christian religion. If you really wanted to serve Him, full-time ministry in the church was the only option! One of the major benefits of studying Christian philosophy (starting with the B.A. degree in 1958) was that it opened my eyes to a much wider perspective: Life – one’s whole life – is either service to the real God or to an idol taking his place.

1.4 What is Christianity and the church like in South Africa?

Steve, I can only answer briefly to this question – which implies a great amount of generalisation. On the positive side according to a recent census more than 80% of South Africans regard themselves as Christians. In the light of what I have said previously (without playing God, the only One who can see into peoples’ hearts), one may, however, ask how many of these are real Christians and how many are only nominal Christians. Especially for someone like myself, who believes that Christianity does not exist for itself (to

save your soul and ensure a place in heaven), but to transform God's fallen creation in the power of his Spirit, it is difficult to accept that 80% of the South African population have so little impact on the unacceptable situation I have described above.

It is true that Christianity in South Africa is currently suffering from a crisis of legitimacy since in the past it condoned the apartheid ideology. It is also true that, since the acceptance of a secular state in 1994, secularisation in every area of life increased dramatically. The Christian faith is now wrongly regarded, as elsewhere in the globalising world, by many as something private (a personal faith in family and church) with little, if any, relevance to the so-called public life. During the apartheid era (white) Christians operated with a dualistic Christian-national worldview. After apartheid this dualism was not corrected, but Christians passively accepted a modified version of the same old dualistic perspective, viz. that of private-public.

Since dualism paralyses the power of the Christian faith, old main-line churches are at the moment in decline both in numbers and influence – they are now called the “old-line” churches. Especially the charismatic churches are growing. Many people (cf. Anon. 2008) see this as a new sign of hope for the future. These churches may grow numerically, but I doubt whether they will have much more influence on the political-economic-social situation since they also operate from a dualistic worldview. On the one hand many of them have accommodated to a “gospel” of health and wealth. On the other hand they will try to alleviate poverty, but do not get involved in politics to challenge the underlying structural causes of such poverty. (Under 5.2 and 5.3 below I would like to say more in this regard.)

As a philosopher I sometimes tend to be too critical about church life. In the final instance history, however, is not about Christianity, but about Christ. In spite of all our failures, He will not fail us. He will lead history towards the final arrival of his glorious kingdom.

2. Influences on your development

Tell us something about the following:

2.1 What/who were your early influences?

The only grandfather I knew and loved (my mother's father) told me when I was still young (11 years) that I should become a minister. Perhaps it was what he himself actually wanted to be. At home we

read the Bible, prayed and sang the Genevan hymns during our evening family devotions. The thoroughness of our Reformed minister's classes in the Heidelberg Catechism further moulded my Christian convictions. I also cannot forget the influence of committed teachers at school who encouraged me to develop the talents I have received. They were, however, not convinced that I should become a minister of religion!

2.2 How did you discover reformational philosophy?

God can lead people in mysterious ways. Some time ago I was, for instance, told that a student in Europe discovered reformational philosophy by way of one footnote in an article, making reference to a book by Herman Dooyeweerd. However, I did not discover reformational philosophy accidentally in this way. When I started my B.A. studies in 1958 with the idea to follow it up with a Th.B. (theology), at least one course in philosophy was compulsory. However, since I discovered that philosophy digs deeper than any other subject, I decided to take it as a three year major in combination with Latin.

All the lecturers in the Department taught their subject from an explicitly Christian perspective. During the three years for the B.A. degree we covered the whole history of Western philosophy, mainly under the guidance of Professor J.A.L. Taljaard (1915-1994). He received his doctoral degree from the Free University of Amsterdam (cf. Taljaard, 1955) under the supervision of Professor D.H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978), one of the fathers of reformational philosophy in the Netherlands. Taljaard translated both Vollenhoven's history of philosophy and his systematic philosophy (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005a and 2005b for recent English translations) into Afrikaans for the use of his students. For a start we used Spier, 1959 (A comparable English introduction today would be Kok, 1998.) Taljaard's own systematic philosophy was also very much in line with Vollenhoven's ideas (cf. Taljaard, 1976). In those days B.A. students intending to study theology, had to follow a compulsory course in the Dutch language. We were therefore expected also to read Dutch textbooks in our philosophy courses.

Systematic philosophy also received proper attention. We were, for instance, introduced to Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) Christian worldview as expounded in his well-known Stone Lectures (cf. Kuyper, s.a. for the Dutch version we used and Kuyper, 1961 for the English text).

In those times three main approaches to a systematic Christian philosophy were distinguished. Firstly Herman Bavinck's (1854-1921) *Philosophy (of the idea) of revelation*. We read Van der Walt's (1953) dissertation on Bavinck and Bavinck 1908 – again a Dutch version of his Stone Lectures, *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring*. (For the English text, see Bavinck, 1979.)

Secondly, Henk G. Stoker's (1899-1993) *Philosophy of the idea of creation (Wysbegeerte van die skeppingsidee)*. Stoker did his doctorate (cf. Stoker, 1925) with Max Scheler (1874-1928) as supervisor, a German irrationalist philosopher. However, very early in his career he maintained contact with the development of a Christian philosophy at the Free University (cf. Stoker, 1933a). He also developed his own distinctive brand (cf. Stoker 1933b, reworked in Stoker, 1970b:202-330; for more details about this specific Christian philosophy cf. also Stoker, 1969; 1967; 1970a).

Thirdly, as students we were also introduced to the philosophy of *the idea of law or cosmonomic idea* as both Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven's and Herman Dooyeweerd's (1894-1977) philosophies were called at that time. Today we know that these two Christian philosophers did not hold the same viewpoints. We did not study their original writings, but did so by reading Spier's introduction in Dutch, later also translated into Afrikaans. (Cf. Spier, 1972. For an English translation, cf. Spier, 1966. Later Kalsbeek's book (1970) became more popular as a textbook. For an English version, cf. Kalsbeek, 1975.)

2.3 Did you meet Vollenhoven when he lectured in South Africa? If so, any abiding memories?

You should be informed that for some time a good relationship existed between the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE) and the Free University of Amsterdam (FU) until the breakdown at the end of the 1970s (cf. Schutte, 2005:445 ff.). Guest lectureships were exchanged between both institutions. Already in my second year (1959) I had the privilege to attend Professor S.U. Zuidema's (1906-1975) guest lectures. Little did I know that ten years later in 1969, he would for some time be my study leader at the FU.

In 1963, when Vollenhoven gave his series of guest lectures at the PU for CHE's Department of Philosophy, I had already started my Th.B. studies in theology, but attended most of his lectures. I still have a book with all my notes and the Vollenhoven Foundation is

also in the process of publishing his Potchefstroom lectures from the tape recordings made at that time.

Of course I was greatly impressed by – as Klapwijk (1987:98) calls Vollenhoven – this intellectual giant with his wide knowledge and deep insight. However, what impressed me most – and it was the same when later in 1968-1970 in the Netherlands I attended his *privatissima* (private classes) after his official retirement at the FU – was his obvious Christian faith and his sincere humility. Vollenhoven was approachable, unsophisticated, uncomplicated and, according to his Dutch students, also lived closely to his students and the ordinary people.

Klapwijk (1987:101) also mentions the reason why this great scholar deep down in his heart remained a child: Vollenhoven was indeed a great philosopher, but never put his trust in any, not even his own, philosophy. He gave his heart to God and his Word. He realised that philosophy (*wijs-begeerte*) is merely a desire for wisdom – not less, but also not more. Philosophy (“love for wisdom”) does not own the truth, it is merely a fallible, scholarly aspiration towards wisdom. If it, therefore, gives the impression of having arrived at a final truth, it is deceiving people. According to Vollenhoven, the Word of God alone could answer our deepest questions and longings.

2.4 H.G. Stoker was an influential reformational thinker. What is your assessment of him?

I got to know Stoker better during my B.A. Honours degree in Philosophy when I was the only student to follow his lectures on “the philosophy of the idea of creation”. (For more details, cf. again his collected works in Stoker, 1967 & 1970b:202-330. An English translation of his philosophy of the idea of creation undertaken by the School of Philosophy at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University is in progress.)

In spite of the fact that I later decided to work more in the Vollenhoven line, I had the greatest respect for Stoker as a person, lecturer, as well as an original Christian philosopher. To my mind his contribution to reformational philosophy in South Africa and also internationally is underestimated. Three factors may have contributed to this. Firstly, because he did not publish much in English; secondly, because of the unwise and negative way Malan (1968) dealt with Stoker’s contribution. He criticised Stoker’s philosophy from the viewpoint of Dooyeweerd’s ideas (for Stoker’s reply to Malan’s dissertation, cf. Stoker, 1970a:411-433); thirdly, because Stoker tried to

condone apartheid as he viewed the nation (*volk*) as a separate societal relationship. (Most lecturers at the PU for CHE, however, propagated apartheid in those days.)

3. Education

3.1 Tell us something in general about your academic training

After my B.A. degree (1960) and Honours (1961), I decided to continue with an M.A. in philosophy (1962) and could finish the exam papers, but not the thesis. From 1963 to 1966 I completed a theological (Th.B.) degree at the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Churches in South Africa.

Earlier in my life I acquired the nick-name of “Bennie Bookworm” (Later in my life I tried to compensate for all the books I had devoured by writing a few new ones myself!) Because of my protracted studies, I now also earned the title of the “eternal student”. I succeeded, however, financially as a part-time student assistant (in Philosophy) and by getting paid by my father for determining the sex of thousands and thousands of day-old chickens and (after our marriage) from my wife’s salary at the University Library.

In 1967 I finally completed the thesis for the Master’s degree under the supervision of Prof. Taljaard, dealing with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

3.2 Why your M.A. topic, Aquinas in particular? Isn’t he an unusual choice for a Calvinist?

Steve, I agree that it was a rather unusual topic, since even during my theological studies a lecturer would still warn his students against “die Roomse gevaar” (the Roman Catholic danger). However, my theological studies already indicated to me that a synthetic tradition of nearly 2 000 years (starting with the early Church Fathers and systematised by Aquinas in the Middle Ages) was still with us. It was the dualism of nature and grace, reason and faith, philosophy and theology. This bifocal way of looking at God’s creation led to many other distortions, e.g. that theology would by nature be Christian, while philosophy is to be regarded as a neutral discipline; that theology is the queen of the sciences and that philosophy as well as other disciplines should get their biblical direction from a supposedly “pure” theology. This kind of dualism was, furthermore, not only of a theoretical nature, but influenced the

churches and all other areas of everyday life. Then, I already suspected that the Christian-national ideology (cf. 1.4 above) was founded in this kind of dualism. However, I did not have the courage to say so publicly before 1976.

Needless to say that the young radical's M.A. thesis caused furore among reformed theologians up to the highest academic body, the Senate of the University. Finally I received the degree with distinction – on condition that I should rewrite (water down) the final chapter.

3.3 Why your Ph.D. topic, viz. *Natural theology with special reference to Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and the "Synopsis Purioris Theologiae"* – a philosophical investigation (1974)?

This topic reveals my continued interest in questions on the borderline between philosophy and theology. I started to do the research at the PU for CHE, got bursaries from my alma mater as well as the FU and continued my research from July 1968 to June 1970 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. During that time (1969) I also received doctoral status (*doctoraal status*) as well as an appointment as assistant in Medieval Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the FU. This caused me to decide to rather register for a Ph.D. at the FU. Unfortunately other circumstances were not as favourable to realise this dream. My second supervisor, Professor S.U. Zuidema, got so ill that he had to retire and I had to work with a third supervisor. I then decided to rather accept the offer of a senior lectureship in Philosophy at the University of Fort Hare at Alice in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (July 1970 to June 1974).

You would, however, be more interested in the topic of the dissertation than in the circumstances surrounding its completion, finally at the Department of Philosophy of the PU for CHE in 1974 where Professor J.A.L. Taljaard was my supervisor. Of course I knew beforehand that the reformational tradition would reject a *natural* theology. What I was primarily interested in, was how to understand God's creational revelation which was – and still is – underestimated in reformed theology. Only in the second place, I was interested whether a natural theology could be built upon God's so-called general revelation. What I also wanted to achieve was to follow the philosophical lines from Aquinas (my M.A. thesis) to Calvin (father of the reformational tradition), and from him to the reformed scholasticism of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1625), a handbook in dogmatics that was re-issued by Herman Bavinck in

the previous century. I discovered, with the help of Vollenhoven's problem-historical method, that neither was Calvin's so-called theology fully biblical, nor could the *Synopsis* be called the "purest reformed theology".

4. You spent the greatest part of your life as director at the Institute for Reformational Studies (IRS) at the PU for CHE. May I ask a few questions in this regard?

4.1 How did the IRS start?

This Institute was started in 1962 at the PU for CHE. (For more about its aims and history, cf. Van der Walt, 2008:278-303.) Until the beginning of the 1980s it was called the Institute for the Advancement of Calvinism (IAC). I became its first full-time director in 1974 and recommended that the name should be changed to IRS (of course not realising that in the USA it is the abbreviation for the Internal Revenue Services). My motivation was that *Calvinism* did not cover the whole reformational tradition. Furthermore, the apartheid-ideology was, according to its proponents, built on the Calvinist worldview.

My work at the IRS provided me with many opportunities to enlarge and enrich my views: research on the reformational worldview and its implications, editing publications (620 in total) by authors from different disciplines and all over the world; organising local and international conferences (about twenty of them). Apart from other parts of the world, I travelled to fifteen different African countries during South Africa's time of isolation from the world to acquire first-hand information about situations in the rest of our continent.

Especially IRS conferences, for which we usually also invited Christians from outside South Africa, played a significant role in opening people's eyes to the real situation in our country. You should keep in mind, Steve, that these conferences were not merely academic in nature, but were characterised by deep Christian fellowship which made it possible to bridge the deep divide between black and white Christians.

4.2 Did being a South African organisation have any effect on the IRS's international status?

Yes, indeed. Let me mention only three examples of the hassles the IRS experienced in organising international meetings during South Africa's time of isolation. When I invited Christian leaders from other

African countries (remember it was before e-mails) – to help open the eyes of our own people – because of a postal boycott against South African mail, I had to send the letters to a friend in the Netherlands, who remailed them (in new envelopes with Dutch stamps) back to the specific African country. The invited speaker was then issued with a PTA (prepaid ticket advice) – which often got lost – to fly to South Africa. He could, sometimes, not even fly directly to Johannesburg International Airport, since his/her own country would then know that he/she visited the apartheid country. Therefore, we used the airport of a neighbouring country. When finally entering the country we pre-arranged with the customs officials for the person's passport not to be stamped, but for a lose-leaf immigration certificate to be issued instead. Otherwise the immigration official in the person's home country would, upon his/her return, know that she/he had visited South Africa and would not allow him/her back in his/her own country.

Since Christian literature from the West was not always relevant to African problems, the IRS started a project, Christian literature for Africa (CLA), in which Christian writers from Africa could write for Africans on the unique issues facing the continent. In this case we also experienced difficulties getting the identified writers (men and women) from countries like Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya to visit South Africa. The IRS, together with the International Association for Reformed Faith and Action (IARFA), therefore arranged for writers' workshops (including the South Africans) in neighbouring countries, for instance in Harare, Zimbabwe – next to an ANC house! Another problem was that in many cases publications from apartheid South Africa were banned in other African countries. When visiting e.g. Lesotho and Ghana, I therefore investigated the possibility of printing and publishing the books written in the CLA project outside South Africa. Eventually this project took so long that the material available was published by the IRS itself when the African boycott was no longer in place.

A third example is the position of the IRS in the international movement for Christian higher education. After the First International Conference for Christian Higher Education was held in September 1975 at Potchefstroom, the IRS was appointed to administer an International Clearing House for Christian Higher Education. Because of the political tensions between the PU for CHE and the FU after this meeting (lasting for about a decade), membership of the PU for CHE in the international body (later on to be called the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education, abbreviated as IAPCHE) was withdrawn and the Clearing House at

the IRS closed. (For more details, cf. Van der Walt, 2001a and 2005; Schutte, 2005 and Hulst, 2009.)

4.3 Why was the IRS closed in December 1999? Can you also say something about its voice against apartheid?

I am not surprised that you ask this question. Why would a University close one of its Institutes which (according to objective, outside observers) put the PU for CHE on the international map? To my mind one of the primary reasons why the IRS was closed was because of a growing tension between the political viewpoint it stood for and that of the University authorities. Even after the 1994 democratic elections it continued since not everyone at the University whole-heartedly accepted the postapartheid dispensation. However, for someone outside South Africa this explanation needs some explication. Unfortunately it will not be possible to do so in a few sentences. (The problem I have to face here is that of self-justification as director of the IRS and of blaming others. May I be excused for perhaps too subjective an interpretation?)

It should be remembered that the majority of the staff of the PU for CHE (an Afrikaner university) were supporters of the apartheid regime of the National Party. Furthermore, most of them belonged to the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA) which established, supported and staffed the University and also condoned apartheid.

From about 1976 the IRS itself had to venture into the crossfire between different political perspectives: it had to choose between the political viewpoint maintained by the University officials and what was correct according to the Bible and a genuine reformational worldview. Neither the more conservative viewpoint (*verkramp* in Afrikaans), nor the more progressive (*verlig* or enlightened) among the Afrikaners provided a real solution. Mere window-dressing was not enough – the apartheid ideology itself had to be rejected. (For detailed information on the position of the IRS during the difficult political years of 1976-1996 cf. Van der Walt, 2010:471-512.)

Steve, permit me to illustrate the growing tension between the mother (the PU for CHE) and her daughter (the IRS) with a few flashes from history.

- As early as 1976 the IRS published the proceedings of a conference of the Reformational Movement of South Africa (REMSA) with the title *Geregtigheid in die Suid-Afrikaanse same-*

lewing (“Justice in South African society”) in which apartheid was questioned.

- On 16 November 1977 a few young lecturers (including myself) and students of the PU for CHE (and a few like-minded people from outside) issued the *Koinonia Declaration*, a document which opposed apartheid and its biblical justification (cf. Villa-Vicencio & De Villiers, 1998, 4:82-83). The text of this declaration was printed by the IRS. The authors were reprimanded by the university officials. (For a reprinted text in Afrikaans cf. Van der Walt & Venter, 1998:31-44.)
- During the 1980s different local initiatives at reconciliation between blacks, coloureds and whites were undertaken. The university authorities disliked this to such a degree that we encountered problems to appoint a white minister, who had participated in such activities, on the IRS-staff.
- From 1983 to 1995 different national and international conferences organised by the IRS criticised the apartheid ideology as well as the PU for CHE – by name a Christian institution – which did not accommodate black students (cf. *Orientation*, 75-78:613-621, Jan.-Dec. 1995 for references to the various conference resolutions.) By the way, I have to emphasise that my family and I never suffered but only benefited from apartheid. The worst that happened was that I was aware that my telephone was tapped and that prior to or after an IRS-conference a “spy” of state security would enter my office to ask a few “innocent” questions. Even this worried me – I was no anti-apartheid hero.
- During 1984-1986 the violence between the ANC and the security forces (police and army) of state president P.W. Botha became so widespread and intense that he declared a state of emergency. From 29 July to 5 August 1987 IAPCHE’s International Congress met in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia – also the headquarters of the ANC. Some members of the staff of the PU for CHE who went to the congress had secret talks with a few ANC leaders. Because of the tense atmosphere during these days (the PU for CHE was no longer a member of IAPCHE, and we as white South Africans were again repudiated for the unchristian apartheid policy of our country) I had little sleep and one night at 2:00 came upon an idea. The idea was that the ten white conference participants from South Africa should try to make an appointment with Dr. Kenneth Kaunda, state president of Zambia at that time, who was an influential black leader in the Southern part of Africa. He could act as a mediator between the

ANC and NP. I was appointed by the group of ten as their spokesperson. Kaunda promised to try his best. He sent me home with the message: "Go home. Don't become a terrorist, but open the eyes of your students." That is exactly what I tried to do during the difficult years ahead.

- At an IRS-conference in 1992 I gave my own critique on apartheid (later republished in Van der Walt, 1994:375-398). Thereafter (cf. Van der Walt, 1995) I tried to explain to my fellow-Afrikaners where and how our Calvinist heritage had become derailed and how we could regain a true Christian identity. I also pleaded again for reconciliation in 1996 (cf. Van der Walt, 1996a). But since then the top University leaders abstained from participating in IRS conferences like the 1996 International Conference on "Christianity and democracy in South Africa".
- From 1996 a difference of opinion on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) further increased the tension. (For reports on the work of the TRC cf. Krog, 1998; Tutu, 1999; and Meiring, 1999 as well as the official 7 volume report edited by Villa-Vicencio & De Villiers, 1998-2002.) The TRC asked the RCSA (of which many of the leaders at the PU for CHE and also myself were members) for a submission. The synod (1997) of the RCSA, however, declined this invitation (cf. Villa-Vicencio & De Villiers, 1998, 4:83). I phoned Professor Piet Meiring (a member of the TRC), informing him that a number of RCSA members were disappointed by their synod's decision. We were planning to do something about it, maybe submit a confession of guilt of our own (cf. Meiring, 1999:102).
- Meanwhile the IRS made its own offices available to a delegation of the TRC to inform local people about its aims and procedures. The IRS also publicly appealed to its members to accept the TRC and participate in its important work (cf. Van der Walt, 1996b).
- Subsequently, on 6 August 1997 four members of the RCSA (Prof. J.H. (Amie) van Wyk, Prof. J.J. (Ponti) Venter, the Rev. A.J. (Alwyn) du Plessis and myself) in their personal capacities issued a public confession of guilt concerning apartheid. (For historical purposes I am also giving, apart from their nick-names, which are mentioned in Villa-Vicencio & De Villiers, 1998, 4:60 as well as Meiring, 1999:281, the initials of the four people. Another correction to be made is that only Van Wyk and Du Plessis were ministers and theologians. Venter and myself were reformational philosophers.)

- The TRC organised different institutional hearings (cf. vol. 4 of Villa-Vicencio & De Villiers). One of them was held for all the faith communities in East London (17-19 Nov. 1997). At this important meeting (cf. Villa-Vicencio & De Villiers, 1998, 4:59-92) it became clear how different faiths reacted to apartheid. Through acts of commission and legitimation as well as acts of omission as agents of repression, but also as opponents and even victims of oppression.

We were invited by Professor P.G. Meiring to attend and present our public (Potchefstroom) confession at this meeting. Unfortunately it was only possible for two of the above-mentioned four (Prof. J.J. Venter and myself) to go to East London and to read and explain our confession on the last day of the meeting. (For the Afrikaans version of the confession cf. Van der Walt, 1997:28-30, and for the English text Van der Walt & Venter, 1998:29-31.)

I have to mention here my great appreciation of the way Archbishop Tutu acted as chairman of the TRC. To me he is the model of a Christian leader of integrity and consistency since he does not allow any politician to prescribe to him what to think. In the past he not only criticised apartheid, but also did not spare the present ANC regime.

It therefore caused me great joy when finally (2003) my own alma mater under new leadership showed its appreciation to Tutu by way of an honorary doctorate. It was my privilege to edit the motivation for granting the degree. A special issue of the journal *Koers* (68, 2003) was also dedicated to Tutu. (I contributed two articles on his Christian worldview on p. 15-57. For an English version cf. Van der Walt, 2008:230-277.) In the same year (2003) the Archbishop wrote the preface to my book *Understanding and rebuilding Africa*.

I do hope, Steve, that these fragments from history will provide enough background – at least according to my own viewpoint – to give one important reason why the IRS did not survive to see the 21st century. The PU for CHE made a decision that instead of the previous time of retirement at the age of 65, its staff should already retire at 60. However, simultaneously at my own retirement at 60, the IRS was also closed at the end of 1999.

It may be that I myself – because of my unwillingness to conform to the wishes of the leaders of my university – should take responsibility for the closure of the IRS. If, however, I did follow their political directions, I would not only have acted against my own con-

science, but much more, I would have betrayed a genuine reformational worldview and philosophy based on God's Word.

A few – to my mind not really substantial reasons – were afterwards (2000) offered by the University authorities for the demise of the IRS (cf. Van der Walt, 2008:292). I therefore had to guess what the decisive reasons were (cf. Van der Walt, 2008:293-295).

In spite of the promises that the PU for CHE would continue at least some of the work undertaken by die IRS (through a newly established Centre for Faith and Scholarship) nothing has been realised for the past ten years. This may add strength to my suggestions about reasons other than the political reasons (e.g. increased secularisation of a Christian institution) behind the IRS's death sentence.

I mentioned these things not primarily because it took me years to work through the trauma that one's life task had been destroyed, but because I realise that today, in an increasingly secular society in South Africa and Africa, there is an even greater need to have an institute like that which the IRS was for 37 years. I have, therefore, hoped and prayed that something similar will one day be born again – and that it will get wings to fly all over our vast continent.

The Lord has already given evidence that He is answering our prayers. In May 2005 the Kosin University, Busan, South Korea (who granted me an honorary doctorate) started its own Institute for Reformed Studies and appointed me as its honorary director. A friend, Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo, established a Centre for Biblical Transformation in Nairobi, Kenya. And more or less at the same time an interdisciplinary Kuyper Association (AKET) was founded in Belle Horizonte, Brazil.

4.4 What is the Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa (ICCA) and when/why did that come about?

Steve, I was always keenly interested in Christianity on my own continent. Also, because I knew that it would be the end of the IRS endeavours, after my retirement in 2000, I established my own independent publishing company, called ICCA, to continue at least something of the reformational publications of the erstwhile IRS. (There is, even today, still a demand for older IRS-publications.) Thus far my financial position unfortunately only allowed me to publish a few of my own works (cf. allofliferedeemed.co.uk/vanderwalt.htm). Old age also convinced me that to try to work wider

than publishing (e.g. conferences and seminars) will not be possible any more. However, at the end of my life I realise even more than previously that we have received a rich heritage in a reformational worldview and philosophy to be adapted for the African situation. At seventy I can still share it on paper with my fellow Africans.

5. Because of your interest in Africa, may I ask something in this regard?

5.1 You already mentioned your travels in Africa, your books comparing African and Western culture from a reformational perspective and inviting African Christian leaders to IRS conferences. More personal contacts with local black Africans?

Already during my years at the University of Fort Hare I was involved in missionary work and started a Christian periodical in Xhosa, called Umthombo Wamandla (Fountain of power).

When the PU for CHE finally opened its doors also to black graduate students, I became one of their lecturers for an introductory course in a Christian worldview. Prior to this, many black students received free copies of many IRS publications.

I also had close contact with black students, especially those who studied Theology, when we started a Bible study group at our home on Tuesday evenings. We were enriched by the way each one of them read the Word of God from their different cultural perspectives. During these Bible studies we also made sermons to be preached at different locations where the Word of God was preached to local black reformed congregations on Sundays. Some of these sermons were also published in an African language (Sesotho) to help ministers elsewhere. Those students were regarded as our “children” and we were called their “parents”. Some of them became ministers and one even a professor in Theology.

My wife and I also decided to join (as the only two white members) a black Reformed Church (Kereke ya Gereformeerde Boskop), consisting mostly of farm labourers in the Potchefstroom district. My wife gave Sunday school classes for the kids and needlework for the ladies. Apart from elder and preacher (every Sunday), I was more or less jack of all trades, taking care of minutes, finances, transport, acting as ambulance to hospital and even as funeral undertaker. On one occasion I had to testify in court to get an innocent kid (Levi Diamond) out of jail. He was imprisoned for throwing petrol bombs,

not wanting to do so, but intimidated to join the struggle of other young radicals. It was a very precious ten years in the lives of both of us.

My wife, Hanneltjie, started her own development project, namely a clothing factory (“Another Hannah”) at our house when our children left home. She eventually trained about fifteen unemployed black women to be able to take care of their households themselves.

Because of the poverty among most black people, I was also interested in the whole issue of development in Africa. My first book in Afrikaans on the problems and possible solutions in this regard, appeared before my retirement at the IRS (cf. Van der Walt, 1999). It was followed by more scholarly articles in journals or chapters in books in English. Some of them are used today by overseas development NGOs in Africa.

5.2 Can you tell us something about Christianity in Africa?

Let me first briefly say something about the history of Christianity in Africa. You may be aware of the fact that Christianity in North Africa, for instance in Ethiopia, is far older than European Christianity (cf. Hein & Kleidt, 1999). Usually a distinction is only made between three other later periods in the development of African Christianity: the missionary Christianity of the nineteenth century and the establishment of the different mainline churches (of European origin); the beginning from the early twentieth century of the many African Independent Churches; and since the 1970s, the growth of various charismatic churches.

In the charismatic groups three phases can also be distinguished, i.e. the arrival of the Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Faith Mission in Africa; the influx after World War II of neo-Pentecostalism from the US; and the growth afterwards of indigenous African Pentecostalism.

As in the rest of the Southern hemisphere (the so-called developing world, of Asia and Latin America) Christianity in all these different forms is making extraordinary advances. (You may be aware of the books of Jenkins in this regard.) This dramatic advance is, by the way, also taking place in Eastern Europe and Russia. Simultaneously Christianity in Europe is declining. Missionaries from Africa are today, for example, re-evangelising a world that previously sent out its missionaries to Africa.

Many Europeans are not aware of this Christian fever in sub-Saharan Africa, because it is not regarded as news by the media – nobody has been killed! Until about a century ago Christians were a small minority on our continent. Today they number about 350 million, one in every six of the global Christian community. African Christianity is rapidly becoming the new centre of gravity within world Christianity.

Amazing parallels exist between this young, contemporary Christianity in Africa and early Christianity of the second to fifth centuries. A leading African theologian, Bediako (1992:xii), who passed away two years ago, even writes that, if he looks closely at the concerns of modern African theologies, it may be possible one day to wake up and find himself in the second century AD. Christians in Africa today again face the choice between four basic options, namely world-flight, world-conformity, world-compromise or world-transformation. The first three options, however, boil down to some kind of dualism (for details cf. Van der Walt, 2001b:17-22).

5.3 How do you see the future of this “new Christendom”?

In the first place we should be positive, rejoice and praise the Lord for what is happening. I also do not doubt the sincerity of my African brothers and sisters in Christ – many have died as martyrs. One should also keep in mind that African Christians should not be carbon copies of Western Christianity – they should be allowed and encouraged to serve the Lord in the garb of their own cultures.

At the same time one should not become triumphant or ignore possible weaknesses. Some scholars simply try to explain the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa as resulting from the situation of poverty on the continent. Especially a gospel of health and wealth (cf. e.g. Gifford, 1998) will naturally attract people living in economic deprivation.

Others argue that Christianity in Africa today is like a very wide river, while its water is only a few millimetres deep. Increasing secularism will eventually lead to a totally dry river bed.

Personally, I am more worried about the often unnoticed dualistic tendencies (world-flight, world-conformity or compromise) already mentioned. As you will already be aware, I do not regard Christianity as a waiting room for immortal souls to be taken to heaven. We cannot live close to God if we deny his creation. We serve Him not alongside or apart from creation, but in this everyday world. The closer we move in genuine love to all his creatures, the closer we

come to Himself. And the closer to Him, the more we will be concerned about his world – a world which He loved so much that his own Son died for it to be redeemed.

If we take this as a norm, the young Christians of Africa still have to learn more. To be converted and plant a church is only the beginning. After the apostle Paul completed these two steps (cf. the Acts), a third followed: teaching the young Christians and churches the implications of living in every aspect of their lives as kingdom citizens (cf. Paul's different letters). That is why my Nigerian friend, Tukunboh Adeyemo, emphasises the need for a Christian worldview (including a Christian view of being human and of society) for Africa. What we need at the moment, is more visible signs (shelters of hope) of God's liberating kingdom in Africa. However, let me immediately remove a possible misunderstanding: a comprehensive (pre-scientific) worldview and (scholarly) Christian philosophy will not guarantee our salvation. It will also be wrong to look down upon fellow-Christians who do not have such reformational insights.

Many of the above concerns were also voiced about my own church (the RCSA) in a book in Afrikaans that was published shortly before my retirement (1999) by the IRS. Its title was *Naby God* and the full title translated in English reads: *Nearer to God; Christian and church on the threshold of genuine spirituality*. However, apart from minor changes to the church order and liturgy as well as other formal aspects, not much that is essentially new has occurred during the past decade since the book appeared – hailed by some as a prophetic voice and by others as unnecessary criticism. Perhaps a reformed church is the most difficult of all churches to reform!

By the way, I sometimes wonder whether my Christian philosophy does not lead me astray to become a philosophical Christian. I then experience a tension between my philosophical faith and the simplicity of being a normal Christian. I envy ordinary Christians their childlike faith and sometimes doubt whether even a Christian philosopher can maintain his/her faith and be saved. When I read Christ's command not to worry about what one shall eat, drink or wear (Matt. 6:28 ff.), I wish He had also added – as a reminder to myself – that one should not be troubled about philosophising!

I say this since *intellectual* Christians may tend to become too critical without any inspiration to other church members. At the same time, however, thinking Christians have a responsibility to not simply swallow anything going by the name of Christianity or church. Therefore, I find rest in the fact that God also created, and bears

with, people like myself. In our own unique, but limited way we are also called “to seek first his kingdom and righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). Whether his kingdom will arrive, will not be dependent upon answers to all my philosophical questions.

5.4 Is there anything non-Africans can do?

My honest viewpoint is that especially Western people will have more influence in Africa if they do not prescribe to Africans with an attitude of superiority how they should develop. With a humble attitude, outside help of all kinds will be appreciated and much can be achieved. Apart from financial assistance (Africa will not be able to get out of its poverty trap without outside help from the rich northern part of the world), we need all kinds of expertise. For instance, Christian teachers and lecturers are badly needed at the growing numbers of Christian schools, colleges and universities on the continent.

I am in no way shifting the blame for its own poverty away from the Africans themselves, but I do hope that most African countries have by now realised that “first to seek the political kingdom and everything else will be yours” (Nkhrumah) will not solve their problems. Christians themselves have to mobilise their own resources, build a strong civil society and not expect everything from their governments.

6. You have been a Christian scholar for over forty years. Two final questions:

6.1 What lessons have you learned?

With this kind of question, Steve, you are enticing me to write another book. Let me suffice with only a few things that come to my mind at the moment.

In my philosophical memoirs (in Afrikaans elsewhere in this volume of *Koers*) I explain my life history as a footpath, sometimes not straight and also including turn-offs along the way. Initially I wanted to become a minister (preferably a missionary) to be able to serve the Lord. However, through my acquaintance with a reformational worldview and philosophy, I discovered that He wanted to use me elsewhere in his creation-wide kingdom. In this way I finally became a Christian philosopher. The first lesson I have thus learned, is that one should always pray to God that He will use you as He has

decided, and then fully trust Him to guide you through all of life's zigzags.

Concerning a Christian philosophy, I have realised that even the greatest reformational thinkers stood on the shoulders of their predecessors and were, furthermore, influenced by the philosophical trends of their times. Because their deepest intention was to be obedient to God's revelation, they moved a few steps ahead of their teachers. At the same time, however, some of their ideas remained unreformed. Therefore, Calvin's adage, *semper reformanda*, will be valid until our Lord comes again. Every new generation has to take up this task anew. An important implication is that – in spite of the fundamental critique offered by a reformational approach – we should always share our insights with others in genuine humility.

As far as lecturing is concerned, I have realised – perhaps too late in my life – how important it is in teaching a Christian philosophy to be a mentor or model for one's students. Of course they have to study the contents of a reformational worldview and philosophy, but they also need its confirmation in the example of an older person who him-/herself lives accordingly. Apart from that they also need the support of a like-minded community of younger people. I say this especially in the light of the increasing commercialisation of life, including universities, resulting in less and less personal contact between students and their lecturers.

In spite of the secularisation of my own alma mater (and this can also be a message to Christian scholars at other secular universities), Christians should be innocent as doves, but also shrewd like snakes (Matt. 10:16). Taking an example from the red-chested cuckoo, we can still lay our Christian eggs to be hatched in a secular nest (curriculum). The students will be able to see the difference between one's own viewpoint and the prescribed syllabus. As Christians we have received a great gift in our reformational tradition. We have the obligation to share it – and the more we share, the richer we will become!

6.2 What advice would you give to budding Christian students and scholars?

If I start sermonising, Steve, please bear with me – I am a philosophical missionary after all! Again only a few remarks:

In our contemporary, materialistic, market and consumption-driven societies the temptation to get wealthy – even at great costs – can

be very strong. Since a Christian philosophy cannot be weighed, measured and counted in cash value, its real value may be severely underestimated. However, do not be misled: the wisdom it offers is worth far more than gold. For the time invested in studying it, you will reap a rich harvest on both the theoretical and practical level.

The contemporary postmodern world and philosophy is confusing, while a reformational perspective provides direction. Of course this does not imply that reformational thinkers should be afraid to ask questions. One should, therefore, first shape an own Christian viewpoint before one spends all the time unravelling present philosophical tendencies.

Do not try to be accepted by simply following the most recent philosophical currents. Remember that a reformational worldview can be traced back to the sixteenth century. It is 75 years since the revival of a genuine reformational philosophy in the Netherlands. While it should never be regarded as a closed system, it is a tried and tested tradition, not simply something fashionable that will be replaced tomorrow by a new philosophical freak. We need students and lecturers to carry the torch of this liberating philosophy into the new context of contemporary culture, a world that was still unknown to Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd, Stoker and their many followers worldwide.

I have also realised that our so-called contemporary tolerance of all viewpoints can in fact be very intolerant – especially of a clear Christian perspective. Do not be scared, do not withdraw. You have a basic right to serve the Lord with your mind. And the rest of the world has a right to hear his Good News. He will finally bless us, not necessarily for what we have achieved, but for our faithfulness as Christian scholars. Revelation 14:13b promises something amazing. Not that our works will precede us, but that they will follow us. God will use them as building blocks for his renewed creation.

To talk about oneself can be very difficult. The danger of thinking too much of one's own life is always present, while God's Word in many places (e.g. Prov. 27:2) advise humility. May I nevertheless thank you, Steve, for this interview. The kind of questions you asked forced me to review important aspects of my past life. It also helped me to ascertain whether I want to share something with a new generation of reformationally-minded Christians. Finally, it reminded me that I have to look ahead, because God leads one's life journey "like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day" (Prov. 4:18) when He will awake us on his renewed earth.

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