

**Faith matters:  
two aspects of the present theological scene  
in South Africa<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract*

Dedicated to Cornel du Toit, this article identifies two trends in theology which play a role in South Africa. The first trend is a possible move from or within the post-modernist cultural phase to a neo-essentialist or critical realist basic frame of understanding which suits theology as intellectual pursuit well. The second trend is in contextual theology, which – with the bibliological sciences as example – tends to move too far away from its central specialism to make meaningful contributions to the (South) African scene. By focussing on its strengths, however, theology can be a contextually valuable discussion partner in South Africa. It also fits in well with the current move from or within post-modernism, identified as the first trend, in which theology has just as valid a place as any of the other traditional academic fields.

**An initial word: hearing, reading and engaging Cornel du Toit**

I have the privilege of having had different kinds of intellectual encounters with Cornel du Toit. Although I already knew of him by reputation as a critical thinker, my first face-to-face contact with Du Toit was in 1992 when he was a guest course lecturer in Christian Ethics at the University of Pretoria where I had just started as a theology student in the BD Programme I remember very well the loneliness I felt when he asked who in the class regarded themselves as situation ethicists, and I was the only one to raise my hand. I had, because of my prior journalism studies, already felt inclined towards the lesser certainties outside secured truths (cf. Lombaard 2002:48–49, 92–95) – as expressed by Marquard in his *Farewell to matters of principle* (1989). Already during that first personal encounter, I found in Du Toit's openness a resonance that allows for critical engagement: the intellectual pursuit of difficult issues that do not allow for the at times all-too-cosy church, popular and populist answers.

After the founding of the Spirituality Association of South Africa, which drew me into the field of Christian Spirituality, Du Toit became a regular figure in my academic reading, thus leading me into a second kind of intellectual engagement with him. With his research interest in the intersection between faith and reason (e.g. Du Toit 1988:36-50; 2013), which led to his explorations in spirituality, particularly in secular spirituality (e.g. Du Toit 2006:1251-1286), Du Toit became an influential contributor to spirituality studies. This can be seen from the conferences he arranged that led to research publications comprising a wide scope in the study of spirituality, which would in no other way have seen the light (cf. Du Toit 2010; Du Toit & Mason 2006, Du Toit 1996).

My third intellectual interaction with Du Toit was even more intense. Since my appointment at the University of South Africa in 2006, I have been fortunate to experience him as an occasional discussion partner over long lunches in off-campus restaurants. His academic range was always impressive: apart from spiritual matters, he kept up his interests in faith and reason (cf. recently still Du Toit 2012a:1–19) and in African and black theology (cf. e.g. Du Toit 2003:45–76 and Du Toit 2008:28–52 respectively). The repartee of our different intellectual repertoires had proven most stimulating to me, always urging me to think more deeply; read more widely; write more.

It is, therefore, a great privilege for me to contribute to this special publication to honour Cornel du Toit. His influence in the academy, in broader circles and on me is warmly appreciated. Because of Du Toit's commitment in his intellectual engagements to track and to steer religious developments and trends in South Africa, also in interaction with international discussion partners, the theme of this contribution fits well with his oeuvre. Although our specialist backgrounds and, hence, intellectual approaches differ, Du Toit and I share an intellectual-existential placement where those who believe tend to believe we think too much, and those who do not/no longer believe, tend to think we believe too much. Still, as with our shared, always wavering commitment to maintaining bodily fitness, our intellectual commitments also keep us – as stated in the opening paragraph above: “inclined towards the lesser certainties outside secured truths” of faith and non-faith (cf. e.g. Du Toit

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a further development of basic versions presented at the Protestant Theological Faculty, Charles University of Prague, Czech Republic in May 2012, and at Åbo Akademi, Turku, Finland in November 2012.

1987:154–169; Du Toit 1997:939–955). We can try to track and try to steer religious matters, but attempting to understand and making efforts to influence always remain a limited, and yet somehow still a limitless, endeavour.

## Tracking and steering? The broad scope (trend 1)

With such a complex scene as constituted by South African religious matters (including related a-, anti- and non-religious matters – cf. e.g. recently Claassen & Gaum 2012), only some glimpses on aspects of this scene can be provided here. Naturally, the hope, even with such cautious peeks, is to gain some insight – an initially Freudian and Weberian move – in order to elicit some change – an initially Marxian move. Yet, neither of these two moves can be guaranteed. For one, the link between insight and action has always been tenuous. What is more, though, insight itself has no untarnished reputation for reliability.

Currently we find ourselves culturally-historically at something of a cusp. On the one hand, we have the uncertainties post-modernism has bequeathed us, particularly with its philosophic-hermeneutical tradition – that no understanding can be firm, since meaning is forever deferred (with Derrida 1967 usually indicated as a high point of this line of thought). On the other hand, we are currently witnessing the philosophical dawn of neo-essentialism (cf. Schreiber 2012:2, drawing on Benedikter 2005) or critical realism (cf. Schreiber 2013, drawing on Bhaskar 2002). This newest of developments, as the exact opposite of fundamentalism, yet in the face of the usually typecast “liberal” post-modernism, has been pointing out the ambiguity of the traditional ambiguity of post-modernism. The uncertainty of *epistemology*, according to neo-essentialist/critical realist thought, is not to be confused with an uncertain *ontology* (cf. Bhaskar 2002 and Schreiber 2013 for full expositions of this distinction; briefer, Kroeze 2012:1–8.). To summarise such thinking perhaps a little too poetically: post-modernism has always had *something* to be uncertain about. Postmodernism’s uncertainties are not about *nothing*. Formulated differently, from an insider’s perspective (having experienced within post-modernism my own intellectual birth ground; something for which I am most grateful): the fact that post-modernism’s tenet that there are no firm truths constitutes its own firm truth, had always been the inherent self-contradiction which could lead to its philosophical implosion or renewal.

Thus, even as post-modernism’s stance as normal science (in Kuhnian terms; cf. Kuhn 1962) is still *de rigueur*, the translation of critical realism from its highly philosophical analyses into a broader understanding may ring change. The seeds of sensed discomfort have been apparent for quite some time. As hinted at above about both Du Toit and me, the feeling had never completely disappeared within post-modernism that there is, after all, still *something* “out there”, or perhaps “in here”, namely the *experience*, the *sense* of an Other. This deep-lying awareness has been present in post-modernists fully versed in a range of academic disciplines, and has for precisely that reason given rise to the coming into being of the academic discipline of spirituality (cf. Kourie 2009:148–173), which takes seriously the awareness and the sense of the holy, in all its diversity, as its specialism. This *experience*, with the groundwork classically set by William James (1902) and Rudolph Otto (1917/1923) and of given expression by the recurring phrase of a “turn to spirituality” (influentially used by Ashley 1995:13–18), cannot do without the idea of (the reality of) the Divine. Faith is a relation to *something* that can hardly be understood existentially as a notion without reference (the concept of *nirvana* in Indian religions, for instance, stands in relation to *this* existence, *jenseits*: the idealised state of *nirvana* stands over against the life here). Even if in mystic terms this Other or Divine had already in the pre-modern era, at times, been identified as a Nothingness (cf. Kourie 2008:59–75), it was not because the *Something* was thought to be non-existent. Precisely the opposite, the object of adoration was of such fullness (*oorvloedigheid/eksessiwiteit*), to appropriate from another context the language of Goosen 2007:418–428), that no extant words, ideas, metaphors and so forth could come close to approximating *Wezer* (a term for the divine from Waaijman 2004, translatable as, perhaps, “the [great] Be-ing”).

Hence, as a vague echo of this mystic sense of the Absolutely Absolute, the children of post-modernity in our time had to add the brackets to their, or more truthfully, our religious sensibilities: “(the reality of)” ... the Divine/God/the Other. The unbelievability of belief could in the last half millennium neither shatter itself completely against the stone wall of rationalist modernism nor entirely absorb itself into the sponge of relativist post-modernism. There is no doubt that it was influenced by the base-truth assumptions of these eras, but those who retained faith nonetheless could never deal entirely with, respectively, the “firmity” or the “infirmity” of these two cultural phases. The truths of both these “worlds” were just too severe.

It is these broad cultural-philosophical understandings that have also influenced matters related to religiosity in South Africa over the ages. These will not be traced here (for general overviews of South African history, cf. e.g. Davenport & Saunders 2000, Giliomee 2003, Thompson 2010; related to religion, cf. e.g. De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005, Sundkler & Steed 2000, Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994), but they do form the context of our time and place and of aspects of the currently changing South African theological landscape indicated here. The fact that we do find ourselves at a kind of cultural-philosophical cusp should be seen as the first characteristic of the time in which we find ourselves at present. In some respects, this placement will reverberate in what is touched on below.

## Contextuality/liberation as theological heart, but not art. An academic inclination (trend 2)

If the South African society had to be diagnosed, broadly, it would have a doctor worried. Apart from the country's economy (cf. e.g. Du Plessis & Smit 2007) and daily interpersonal relations in the urban areas, which are in good health, almost all the other aspects of society are faltering. South Africa still houses a traumatised society even though the popular expectations around 1994 (the year of the change from white rule to black democratic rule that has been much idealised) had been very different. Crime and corruption in government and the police service and the broader society, a crumbling road, water and electricity infrastructure, failing courts and correctional services, disastrous education policies and practices, unemployment at a regularly estimated rate of between 25% and 40% (depending on what exactly is measured), and the country topping world scales of murder, rape and HIV/Aids rates (cf. Faber 2009 for a brief overview), all add up to a country with a poor prognosis.

In one way, these strains can be understood as the natural by-product of a society going through massive societal adjustments; the country has been hit with major changes over the past quarter of a century, of which only two already indicate the dramatic extent of such changes:

- The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had a direct impact on the way the remaining apartheid policies in South Africa were set aside in favour of a transition to democracy, which publicly started in February 1990 and culminated just more than four years later in the April 1994 elections (cf. Lombaard 2009a:89–93);
- The 1994 transition from white minority to black majority rule, apart from the most obvious racial parity, also mediated via the 1992 Constitution worldwide trends towards other equalities and urgencies, namely of gender, sexuality, ecology, and such matters. (The open society imagined in this Constitution is demonstrated for instance by the fact that South Africa is the only country that accepts in law both homosexual and polygynous unions – cf. Rabe 2013).

These concurrent and causative changes, along with many others, fill the agenda of social identity construction in the South Africa of today in such ways that a matrix of the fluid characteristics can hardly be drawn up with any accuracy. Still, theologians have a strong tradition from the apartheid times, and earlier (pro-apartheid theology itself being highly contextual – Govender 1980:77), of reacting to the prominent socio-political matters of the day. It has become something of a truism to point out that particularly mainline English theology in post-apartheid South Africa had become fairly disoriented without its common enemy of apartheid (e.g. Tutu 1995:95–97). Still, there is a strong sense among all but fringe reactionary theology that theologians should concretely deal with “the litany of pressing socio-economic problems ... [which] are usually listed as ‘an inventory of the evils on the continent: HIV/AIDS and other health problems, poverty, war and violence and crime ...’” (Rabe & Lombaard 2011:242, drawing on Lombaard 2006:151; De Beer & De Beer 2002:256). In one sense, therefore, the majority of theologians have become liberation theologians; most theology has been contextual and most South African theologians at least intend that their research should “mean something” directly for South African society.

However, much among these sentiments, though noble, is flawed. The bibliological sciences provide a good case in point.<sup>2</sup> The kind of innocent piety of many among the younger generation of Bible scholars often lead to the expression of a felt urgency that the negative circumstances in society should be changed for the better. Similarly, a deep sense of care about pressing socio-economic issues is found across the generations of Bible scholars. The majority would agree firmly: research should be pressed towards service in dealing with these problems. This is valid across the spectrum of specialisms from, for instance, Semitic linguists to many exegetes, including deliberately politically engaged reception critics.

Nevertheless, attempts by scholars to direct intervention for the betterment of society are bound to fail, for two reasons: *we know not what we do*, and *we do not what we know*.

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<sup>2</sup> A methodological note on the section that follows here: the paragraphs below are not as thickly referenced as those above, for the reason that the intention here is not to single out specific scholars for debate. Rather, a Weberian ideal type is presented: a broad scenario into which no single work will fit perfectly, but when one takes a step aside in order to review the larger group, these are the frequently recurring characteristics that present themselves phenomenologically. Moreover, whereas in one way the older generation of scholars who created this trend may be regarded as the primary agents of the tendency, or its agenda setters, those scholars who grew up in it have only this one intellectual world into which they have been schooled. They know no other form of theologising; theology is rather narrow, with the language derived from the older generation, rather than with a new theological vocabulary invented. They are thus very strongly children of their time; even victims of their circumstances: the pressing socio-political issues of only very specific kinds form the singular backdrop against which they have (been) developed intellectually. Their relevance has therefore been limited to that backdrop. Even when the younger generation of scholars within this frame of theology criticise their foregoing generation, it is usually in order to intensify the existing frame, rather than to explore additional or alternate frames of theology. To single out some scholars within this frame would appear judgmental, whereas the purpose here is first to describe the developed trend.

*We know not what we do*

By *we know not what we do* is meant that theologians are poorly equipped to change the world for the better. For instance, the academic training provided to social workers and psychologists to deal with human problems on a smaller scale, and to development economists and sociologists on the broader-societal scale, is more appropriate for individuals who feel themselves called to active social upliftment than theological training can be. The values of “love thy neighbour” and “love [even] thy enemy” lead many, probably almost all people who enter theological training programmes, to do so. Honourable intent is unquestionable here. However, theological training does not provide the most effective intellectual and practical equipment for alleviating the litany of social evils indicated above. When theologians say they deal with societal ills, they generally present their good intentions, the principle of love, but they can seldom present intended practical results of betterment of poor circumstances.

Dissertations written by Bible scholars across the continent who intend to “mean something (to society)” give an indication of this. In such studies, the analysis of a selection from the Bible text is brought to bear on an identified problem on the (South) African socio-political scene. However, the analysis of a Bible text and the finding of (at times hardly applicable) parallels between it and the identified pressing African issue – such as post-apartheid reconstruction of South African society or the political situation in Mugabean Zimbabwe – often lead to little more than extended sermonising or legitimations of a chosen programme of action. We may be told about a good way forward, but this is done by someone who does not have the required grounding in political, economic or social theory to do so with great validity. The exegesis of the ancient text is frequently not of the best, because that is not the issue the Bible scholar wants to get to: the Bible has a kind of instrumentalist role to play in a greater, current concern. Equally, the analysis of the modern socio-political issue is too often superficial, because the primary training had, after all, mainly or exclusively been in theology. The Bible is commonly regarded one-sidedly under the banner of: “God’s preferential option for the poor”. The crucial hermeneutical issue is, however, usually left unconsidered: how can it be that the book of Amos or the gospel of Luke should in any way alleviate the plight of the poor in, say, a poor Cape Town or Tshwane township? To indicate the theological sensitivity toward the disempowered of society in 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Israel or in the 8th decade of Christianity, is one matter. However, those sensitivities have no, and can never have, any direct impact on a hungry child in Gugulethu or Eersterust. To insist that it does have direct impact, as is at times emotively done, is intellectually dishonest. Moreover, the fact that the text was not created by authors who were themselves poor, or women, or disempowered in other ways, is most often overlooked. So is the fact that in such texts the poor may simply be used rhetorically by the powerful in order to plead for God’s favour on themselves (cf. Scheffler 2011:192–207). Lastly, the dynamic is never considered in such theologising that an exegete who claims in his/her study to speak for or on behalf of the downtrodden or marginalised, does so dishonestly, since exegetes are as scholars themselves part of the highest elite of privilege (cf., influentially, Spivak [1988] 2006:28–37).

From the perspective of the seven reasons given in the paragraph above, it is the unreflected acceptance of, and even a naïve commitment to directly practicing contextual or (a form of) liberation theology, which is in its futility the second characteristic of South African theology in our time. Whereas some theological work such as that done within urban ministry or in pastoral counselling may be better at dealing concretely with negative life circumstances, for the most part, this may well be the *heart* of theology, but it is not its *art*.

Naturally, to extend a critique such as this towards, what has among contemporary theologians become an accepted truth, a deeply held personal, emotional and existential commitment; an unquestioned and socially constantly reinforced truism with many layers of historical, social and political sympathies clustered together, will as a reaction– even rebuttal– always elicit a battery of quite predictable (and by now, after Lombaard 2009b:274–287 and Lombaard 2006:144–155, also tiresome) misrepresentations; even name-calling. To pre-empt these – the above criticism is not meant to imply that:

- The poor ought not to be cared for.
- Injustices in society should be left as is.
- A bad past is being pined for.
- Theologians should strive to be context-free.
- Exegesis should not be brought into discussion with modern problems, and so forth.

Any rehearsal of these reflex responses to the critique expressed above would amount to misreading the objective here. The plea here is namely not for less, but for more:

- The poor must be better cared for.
- Injustices should be eradicated more efficiently.
- The bad of the past (as with the bad in the present) should be mercilessly exposed.

- Theologians should be fully contextually aware.
- Exegesis should be a strong voice among many others in discussing modern problems, and so forth.

The underlying consideration here is that, in the urgency to do good, theologians – with those from the bibliographical sciences as example – have been doing good poorly. This may have been pointed out too harshly above, and too broadly within the confines of only an article, but the criticism had to be made clearly. Often we theologians “know not what we do”, because we know too little from outside our immediate academic specialisms; and we trust in some kind of automatic, direct effect of our writings.

Equally, the correlative point must be clearly made: *we do not what we know*.

#### *We do not what we know*

There is a strong conviction of faith among many, even most theologians within the broader contextual/liberation theological stream (and of course wider), that God can change the world for the better. Along with this goes the corollary: that human beings are called on to play their role as active agents in such processes. There is also the vague sense that theologians may have a bigger responsibility than other professions in such matters. These underlying factors play a tacit role in the way much theological scholarship is understood and practised. It is also particularly the former kind of conviction that, in a way, blinds – to remain still with the earlier example – exegetes to the urgency of combining Bible reading skills with skills in economic analysis, for instance (cf. e.g. Nürnberger 2002 and Nürnberger 1999). This is a most demanding undertaking, which glib reference to cross-disciplinary research usually belies. Even then the self-assuredness of usually less experienced scholars in assuming that proposed ideas will straightforwardly alter the world for the better should be tamed by the sense from experience that such results seldom follow. Idealism and realism should meet.

This should, however, not be taken as a call for the acceptance that exegetical or other theological work is within broader society without consequence; rather, soberness is pleaded for in this respect. Still, as scholars, when the famous Hugoean tenet that “on ne résiste pas à l’invasion des idées” (“the advance of [good] ideas cannot be halted” – Hugo 1879:464) meets the well-established conundrum within communication studies that positive attitudes do not always translate well into action (cf. e.g. Stiff & Mongeau 2003:55–77), it is to the former that exegetes should defer – albeit with modesty. However, exegesis is not activism. Theology does not straightforwardly produce engagement in the communities it serves. Yet, the better theologians do their *theological* work, the more solid and rich the theoretical framework will be with which to contribute to the formation of specialists in theology and outside it, in professional or in volunteer work (in traditional church language: in ordained or lay ministry). As a rule of thumb: the better the *theology*, the better the world – the same as with any other intellectual engagement. Though any effects are hardly as direct as would be welcomed by idealism or strong commitment to a cause, the alternative would be even less desirable. That would namely be to contribute poor theology to a noble cause, which does neither the cause nor theology any good. In addition, much else that could have been better is negatively affected along this route.

*Theo-logians* do *God-talk* best, with much greater depth, validity, nuance and elegance than practitioners of any other discipline can offer. When *theological* work of the highest calibre is not rendered, it means that theology cannot render service to the widest horizons. This would stand in direct contradiction to the practical love premises of faith and to the commitments of contextual engagement by theologians.

To take this one step further: the earlier insistence in a then divided South Africa that contextual theology stands over against a kind of esoteric or “needle point” theology – often brusquely worded as African and Black theology over against Western theology, or as relevant versus outdated approaches to theology – no longer has the valid resonance it carried in earlier decades. Continuing with such an inaccurate analysis in our context may perhaps feed into familiar earlier understandings, but currently it plays in a damaging way into the hands of the modernist assumption that theology has nothing valid to offer within the intellectual atmosphere of university life: that faith is for the most part non-reason/able.

The latter assumption is a contextual fallacy of modernism that ought not to be carried through within postmodernism which, as a more humanely accommodating understanding of our life world, recognises again seemingly non-concrete aspects of humanity such as ethics, spirituality and ecology. Least of all should this assumption be carried forward as we enter the intellectual climate of post-secularism referred to above. Though many arguments from principle may be advanced, for the moment the pragmatic argument will already state the point strongly enough: despite the fact that the existence or non existence of God is beyond proof, the existence of the *experience* of God and of *faith* in God is as much a phenomenological certainty as is the subject matter of for instance Psychology, Economics, Sociology, History, Literature, Art, Law, Architecture, Music, Culture and more. In fact, the contents of faith had a foundational impact on all such areas of human activity, and continue to do so; as have actions and non-actions springing from faith. If religion is then such an important impulse in the make-up, culture and interactions of humanity, it would amount to gross negligence on the part of the university,

**Comment [cl1]:** Earlier the subject indications (such as “Spirituality Studies”) were changed so that they no longer had capital letters. Should the same be done here?

as an institution that fosters both the analysis of humanity and the critical engagement therewith, to gloss over religion. Faith matters, foundationally; that is: contextually. It has been the case ever since *homo sapiens* became sentient (Van Huyssteen 2006; cf. Du Toit 2012b). It is the particular strength of theology as intellectual discipline to explore, expose and expand the strands of faith and their influences that have come down to us, critically to track and to steer.

### Among many, two trends and two friends

The choice of the two trends indicated above has not been in the usual modes of analysis. These include the interpretation of quantitative research data (eg Froise 2012/2013, Hendriks 2000:73–97, Hendriks 1999:18–19, Hendriks 1995:35–58, Hendriks & Erasmus 2005:88–111, Hendriks & Erasmus 2003:80–96, Hendriks & Erasmus 2001:41–65), pointing out more or less unequivocal historical and contemporary developments (e.g. Lombaard 2008:291–293, Olivier 2006:1469–1487, Steyn 2006:661–676), and analysis of political leadership (West 2011:122–144, West 2010:43–70, West 2009a:78–106, West 2009b:89–120). All these approaches offer some self-insight. Yet, understanding can also be deeper, more seeking; the sensing of developed and developing trends, and attempting to express such awareness in words. In attempting to point to our current broadly cultural balancing act on what may be a cusp of post-modernism and neo-essentialism, and in recasting, in this light, the role of South African theology in its attempts to be contextual, holy cows are, being disturbed. Not only self-insight, but dramatic change may be implied. Such catharsis is seldom easy; the process may be harsh. On the other hand, the analysis offered here may be entirely mistaken. That is in the nature of scholarship: that we at times go tentatively where nobody has gone before, and such explorations are always stumbling assessments.

I endeavour to map these developing territories, though, because of the intellectual climate Cornél du Toit has helped to set. It is possible in such an atmosphere to be the only one in class with a raised hand. There will be an ear that listens carefully, and a critical mind that engages in order further to track and to steer.

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