



## Placing reform: The ecumenical future of Reformed Theology

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### Abstract

This brief contribution offers personal reflections on the future of Reformed theology given the author's experience in ecumenical collaboration on various volumes in the field of Christian ecotheology. It offers seven generalising theses on the future of Reformed theology. These theses raise the question what it is that is being reformed. It is suggested that this cannot be reduced to the church or the Reformed tradition, always reforming itself. Instead, at best Reformed churches seek to transform their immediate, local environment by responding to the challenges of the day, perhaps by selecting and employing some of the typically Reformed categories and convictions. This requires a dialectic between reforming place and placing reform. This is illustrated with reference to the premises of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University.

### Keywords

*Church; ecotheology; ecumenism; Kingdom of God; place; Reformed tradition; Stellenbosch University*

Let me acknowledge that I am standing (sometimes falling) in the Reformed tradition and (when looking in the mirror)<sup>1</sup> have accepted that as a form of self-description. I belong to a Reformed church but find myself on its fringes, standing around the door, not in the inner sanctuary (Ps

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1 This article is based on a paper read during the final plenary session of a conference entitled "Mirrors and Windows: Reflecting on the Reformed tradition today", hosted by the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, 17-19 October 2022. This accounts not only for the imagery of windows and mirrors employed here, but for the very particular sense of place given the conference venue. The emphasis on "placing reform" and "reforming place" is concretised with reference to the prime location of the Faculty's offices in the "Kweekskool" at the top end of Dorp street in the Stellenbosch town centre

84:10).<sup>2</sup> The institution where I teach is no longer Reformed in orientation or affiliation and I bear no office in any Reformed structure.<sup>3</sup> I therefore cannot look through the window to the future of reformed theology with any official credentials. I speak as a trained member of the laity, an insider standing mostly on the outside.

The perspective on the future of Reformed theology that I may offer comes from working ecumenically on a number of edited volumes in the field of Christian ecotheology, especially through the Christian Faith and the Earth project (2007-2014),<sup>4</sup> various volumes on climate change<sup>5</sup> and more recently a series entitled *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”*.<sup>6</sup> Each of these projects seeks to optimise diversity in terms of geographical contexts, confessional traditions, theological schools, mother tongues and, of course, considerations of gender, race and age, if (with academics) not necessarily class. Where appropriate this also includes some religious diversity.

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- 2 I find consolation in a memorable sermon by Prof Hennie Rossouw on Psalm 84:10 in which he pleaded on behalf of those standing around the entrance of the temple, not quite comfortable to come in.
  - 3 A Faculty of Theology was established at the University of the Western Cape in 1974 to provide training for prospective ministers of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church. That followed failed earlier attempts (demanded by HF Verwoerd!) to establish an ecumenical faculty. In the 1980s a B-curriculum was introduced that provided training also for students in the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Congregational Church and individual students from a variety of other churches. A Faculty of Religion and Theology was established in 1995. The Theological School of the then Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa was attached to that until 1999 when it moved its training to Stellenbosch University. A Department of Religion and Theology was then established in the Faculty of Arts in 2000, with no official ties to any one church. For a recent discussion, see Conradie (2021).
  - 4 See the culminating volume of this project entitled *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (2014) as well as two volumes entitled *Creation and Salvation, Volume 1: A Mosaic of Essays on Selected Classic Christian Theologians* (2011) and *Creation and Salvation, Volume 2: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements* (2012).
  - 5 See the volumes edited by Chitando & Conradie (2017), Conradie & Koster (2019) and Chitando, Conradie & Kilonzo (2022). The two volumes with African perspectives on climate change assumed a “wider ecumenicity” involving religious traditions other than Christianity.
  - 6 For the first and second of twelve envisaged volumes in this series, see Conradie & Lai (2021); Conradie & Moe-Lobeda (2022).

Typically, it is precisely by seeking ecumenical dialogue (i.e. by looking through the window)<sup>7</sup> that I find myself being more Reformed than I may have thought I was (i.e. when looking in the mirror). Being Reformed is for me not an identity in itself<sup>8</sup> but is defined differentially in conversation with others. It is when I discern differences with Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, or Pentecostal theologians that I recognise my Reformed rootedness most clearly.<sup>9</sup> It is because others tell me I am Reformed that I recognise and accept this as a self-description. Often such differences emerge on long-standing points of divergence, not least on core issues relating to nature and grace, natural “evil”, or eschatological consummation.<sup>10</sup> The age of redrawing confessional borderlines in previous centuries may be long gone but such theological differences remain.

Admittedly, it is through conversations with liberal, scholastic and fundamentalist Christians who regard themselves as being Reformed that the meaning of the term begins to dissipate for me. Looking into the mirror is one thing but inspecting one’s own image too closely becomes uncomfortable! Reformed theology in South Africa, as is the case elsewhere in the world, is indeed “a story of many stories”.<sup>11</sup> I may be deeply influenced by the theology of Herman Bavinck but feel myself far removed from other South African scholars sitting towards his right.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the reception

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7 For a discussion of various notions of ecumenicity, see Conradie (ed) (2013).

8 See the volumes on Reformed identity edited by Alston & Welker (2003) and Willis & Welker (1999) that form significant precursors to this conference. These volumes recognise that Reformed identity is inseparable from ecumenicity.

9 Likewise, with Desmond Tutu (2011), God may not be a Christian, but it is through engagements with Jews, and Muslims, and even more so with Asian religions, that the distinctiveness of Christianity emerges. In a similar way, the distinctiveness of religion emerges in comparison with forms of culture – and more so with technology, sport or law. The distinctiveness of being human emerges through engagements with chimpanzees – and then with other mammals and other forms of life. If humans are indeed distinct it may well be in our ability to sin (see Conradie 2017)!

10 See my conversations with, for example, Denis Edwards (2020), John Haught (2016), Christopher Southgate (2018), and David Tracy (2021).

11 See the sub-title of the essay by Dirkie Smit on “Reformed Theology in South Africa” in *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays 3* (2009:201-216).

12 Both Willie Jonker and Johan Heyns were deeply influenced by Herman Bavinck, but their different approaches are evident in *Op Weg met die Teologie* (1974), a book that they co-authored, even though they tried to underplay such differences. See also Conradie (2013).

of Reformed scholars such as John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Karl Barth and also Jürgen Moltmann has been fiercely contested.<sup>13</sup>

Given such background, let me be overly bold by offering seven generalising theses on the future of Reformed theology. These are not based on empirical research, but are aimed at some provocation, and would need to be tested in conversation with others:

1. The Reformed tradition has indeed been, from its early inception, a reforming movement. This implies that it cannot be defined in a self-referential way but by what it seeks to reform. Its aim cannot be to reform itself (that could be a desirable side-effect) but something else. What is that something else? Christendom? The church catholic? The Protestant movement itself? A particular Reformed church? Society? The whole world? Yourself, or just your mind-set? Your core group? Let me leave the question open for the moment but at least observe that the identity of the Reformed tradition is partially constituted by its conflict with others. For Zwingli already (by now 500 years ago) that meant Catholics, Lutherans, and Anabaptists, also Jews and Muslims.
2. Self-isolation in Reformed ghettos in order to protect Reformed identity soon becomes self-destructive, taking away its source of revitalisation. Strategic withdrawal (in a Genevan city state) may be an option but separation from others is not (e.g. the Dutch experiment of distinct “zuilen”). Any particular *reform* movement may be regarded as such from the inside but may well be regarded by others from the outside as a *deform* movement.<sup>14</sup> The Reformed tradition becomes deformed through self-isolation. The Dutch Reformed Church under apartheid is an obvious example.<sup>15</sup>
3. Reformed churches, at best, pride themselves to be always reforming (*semper reformanda*). This process of ongoing reformation, it is usually said, takes place through Word and Spirit, through biblical exegesis,

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13 See Smit (2009:201-238).

14 See the volume on ecclesial reform and deform movements that Miranda Pillay and I edited (2014).

15 Murray Coetzee argues that ecumenical exposure is one of the crucial differences between the critical voices of Beyers Naudé and Ben Marais, if compared with the church leadership in Reformed Churches in the 1960s. See Coetzee (2011).

listening to the living Word of God, and through a life of prayer before a living God.<sup>16</sup> As a result of self-isolation such an emphasis on an always reforming church may easily become misunderstood as if what is being reformed is the church or the reformed tradition itself. Again, that may be a desirable side-effect but it leads to deformation if this becomes the primary *goal*. Instead, in my view a Reformed church at best seeks to transform its immediate, local environment, as it were in every square inch of society,<sup>17</sup> responding to the challenges of the day, perhaps by selecting and employing some of the typically Reformed categories and convictions,<sup>18</sup> sources and sensibilities, wherever appropriate.<sup>19</sup> These surely include the

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16 See the still remarkable historical exposition of the hermeneutical shift from scholasticism to the reformation to Protestant orthodoxy by Hennie Rossouw (1963).

17 The reference is of course to Abraham Kuyper's famous speech in opening the Free University in Amsterdam in 1880: "... there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign overall, does not cry, 'Mine!'" Ironies and ambiguities abound here given the possessive, aggressive, even militarist tone of this quote. Kuyper's vision was both holistic and pluralist. Kuyper was establishing a university free from state control by emphasising sphere sovereignty, thus restricting state sovereignty. However, for him this did not mean isolation. The very same sentence from which this quotation is derived starts with, "Oh, no single piece of our mental work is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and ..." (Kuyper 1998:488). He was arguing here for the difference that Christian (Reformed) convictions make in studying medicine, law, natural science, and the arts. Without holding unto the "every square inch" the Reformed tradition loses its core intuition. But is the tone of such holding onto that matters. One would need to add that it is *Christ* who is sovereign (not any reformed institution), that the Messiah is the lamb who was slain, and that his reign is in that mode.

18 While noting that Reformed identity in South Africa is a story of many stories, Dirkie Smit (2009:245-250) identifies four "fundamental convictions" in one strand of this tradition, namely the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (which is in itself a story of many often-conflicting stories). He discusses the role of a confessing church, embodying the confession, facing contemporary challenges in society, and faithfully practicing such convictions in daily life. Notably, none of these fundamental convictions are particular to Reformed identity or indeed of Christian identity only.

19 Some sources (such as the Reformed confessions), some categories (e.g. "common grace") and some sensibilities (e.g. the acronym TULIP) may be distinctly Reformed in origin but none of these are characteristic of all Reformed churches and all of these are shared with at least some others once they are in the public domain. Calvin's Institutes, for example, is not read and appreciated only by Reformed scholars. It is therefore a matter of the selection of such sources, categories, and sensibilities. The Reformed tradition, like any other tradition, cannot be essentialised or preserved. As Dirkie Smit (2009:189) observes with reference to Alasdair MacIntyre, it exists as "one long argument, extended over history and socially embodied ... about the goods that constitute that tradition." Such "goods" include the use of Scripture, Reformed confessions, typical doctrinal emphases, traditions, church orders, forms of praxis and

role of Word and Spirit,<sup>20</sup> critically engaging with other responses (ecclesial or not, Reformed or otherwise), seeking God’s coming reign wherever the church finds herself.<sup>21</sup> In short, this is the paradox: if a church wishes to be always reforming it should not focus on being Reformed.

4. Reformed forms of Christianity at times constitute a majority in a particular country, region, town, or institution. Such a majority could be in terms of the number of adherents, but could also be in terms of its social, political, and economic influence. One may cite as examples (at least at times) Akropong, Amsterdam, Debrecen, Edinburgh, Geneva, Grand Rapids, Kampen, Potchefstroom, Princeton, Seoul or for that matter Stellenbosch. An organisation behaves in very different ways depending on whether it is supported by 90%, 60%, 30%, 5% or 0.1% of the population in a particular context. In the UWC Department of Religion and Theology four of the eight current academic staff members come from the Reformed tradition but in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities a Reformed influence is now almost negligible. Reformed Christianity easily becomes hegemonic (e.g. the Dutch Reformed Church under apartheid) or follows a sectarian option, depending on its sphere of influence. It is possible to withdraw from society but still be hegemonic within a particular institution (e.g. in a Reformed theological seminary). As is the case elsewhere, power can easily corrupt. It seems to me that Reformed Christianity functions best when it is *not* in a majority, when it actively engages in attempts to reform something else from within as an influential minority! If true, this assessment is rather

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Reformed spiritualities, but each of these are subject to interpretation and internal conflict. For Smit this means (with reference to Karl Barth) that “our calling is not to remain, become or feel more Reformed, but to do what Calvin did, namely, to hear the Word of God and to respond by confessing our faith publicly by word and deed.”

- 20 See the comment by Dirkie Smit (2009:176), with reference to Karl Barth: “Being Reformed only depends on listening ever anew to the Word of God in the Scriptures.”
- 21 The Reformed understanding of the kingdom of God diverges from the identification of church and kingdom in Catholic theology, the Anabaptist assumption that the kingdom can be realised already in this dispensation (or only in the next), and the Lutheran dualism of two domains. Instead, the Reformed intuition is that the church already participates in God’s reign through Christ’s triumph over sin and death. However, since this triumph is as yet incomplete, the church is called to establish signs of this kingdom in the world. On Calvin’s views on the kingdom of God and the place that this occupies in his theology, see Van Wyk (2001:191-205).

unbearable for Reformed office bearers who have been elected by a majority (presumably guided by Word and Spirit).

5. In order to maintain the dynamism in an always reforming tradition an interplay is required between reforming place and placing reform. At its best a strong sense of place is evident in the Reformed tradition.<sup>22</sup> Its confessions are always local and embodied<sup>23</sup> before they may develop a wider reach. The Belhar confession is a case in point. Likewise, the local city (e.g. Geneva) and the particularity of the local congregation is regarded as crucial. It is through such a sense of place (placing reform), by reforming this place in the light of the transforming power of the gospel, that the tradition reforms itself. The future of Reformed theology is a temporal marker only if it is always already also a spatial marker. Likewise, if God's kingdom is "near" that should be understood in a spatial, embodied sense.<sup>24</sup> Nothing that is temporal is not also, first, spatial. A history that does not take *place* is no history. However, such a sense of place can by itself become dangerous, leading to special pleading (exceptionalism) that can only compromise the gospel. The way Reformed churches in South Africa addressed the poor white question in the early 20th century is a case in point.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the transformative vision of Reformed churches (whether understood in terms of the coming kingdom of God, the theocratic ideal, the "theatre of God's glory", Christ's reign, Christ transforming culture, covenantal or federal theologies, prophetic theology, or a "world-formative" Calvinistic worldview) has always been ambiguous and controversial and therefore met with suspicion and rejection.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore necessary to test one's witness, one's interpretation of God's Word, one's discernment of the

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22 On the spatial turn in theology, see especially Bergmann (2007), also the conference theme of the annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa held in Grahamstown, 18-20 June 2008, namely "Grace race and space: Towards a theology of place in South Africa", published in *Religion & Theology: A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse* 16:1-2 (2009); also Conradie (2008).

23 The emphasis on "embodied confession" is for me epitomized in the oeuvre of Dirkie Smit. When the first volume of his *Essays in Public Theology* was studied by UWC students in 2007, they aptly captured the volume with those two words.

24 See the latitudinal instead of a longitudinal approach to eschatology as proposed by Vitor Westhelle (2012).

25 The report from the "Federale Armsorgraad" (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1948), still makes interesting reading as a form of liberation theology for whites only!

26 See Smit (2009: 427).

movement of the Spirit in this particular place, in conversation with others, in relation to other places, other congregations, other reform movements, and the wider ecumenical movement.

6. Such a sense of place also requires a consciousness of the history of that place. A similar interplay is required between the *place of story* and the *story of place*. The “place of story” implies the need to recognise both the place where a story is told but also the role of storytelling, telling one’s stories to others and listening to theirs. The story of place implies the need to recognise that any place is subject to change in cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution. This intriguing interplay forms the key to current work on creation theology under the title “The Place of Story and the Story of Place”.<sup>27</sup> The focus of any adequate creation theology must be on the material, bodily and earthly dimensions of place (a place alongside other places). However, telling the story of that place, listening to other contested stories of that place, is crucial. A reminder by Vitor Westhelle is apt here: Where landowners looking over their estate see the beauty of God’s creation, serfs and the landless see only gates and fences designed to keep them out.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, farmed animals are kept in, not out, while “wild” animals are kept out, not in!<sup>29</sup> Telling the story of any one place at best follows the heuristic of God’s economy, the story of who God is and what God is doing in the world, from creation to consummation.<sup>30</sup>

7. Such a sense of place also applies to buildings such as the one where we are gathered here. Its place, symbolically on an old island at the top end of Dorp Street, is (as I was once told) a prime location for a five-star hotel. It presides over the quaint town centre of Stellenbosch, probably one of the most unequal towns in the world in terms of the Gini-co-efficient.<sup>31</sup> The

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27 This is the title of the third volume in the series *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”*.

28 See the argument in Westhelle (1998).

29 There is an increasing corpus of specialised literature on “animal theology”. See, especially the recent work by David Clough (2019).

30 This is the task addressed in the series entitled *An Earthed Faith: Telling the Story amid the “Anthropocene”*.

31 For official data, see <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/provincial-treasury/files/atoms/files/SEP-LG%202020%20-%20WC024%20Stellenbosch%20Municipality.pdf> (accessed 21 September 2022). It has the Gini-coefficient standing at 0.65 for Stellenbosch in 2018 in terms of income inequality. This is somewhat worse than for neighbouring



lawns (kweek) of the Kweekskool and its attractive architecture is a tourist attraction, if not meant for the homeless living along the adjacent riverbed (I now live only two blocks away). Whether the training of Reformed and now other pastors looks equally attractive (looking through its windows to the inside) is less obvious and hardly a tourist attraction. Such training has gone through dramatic ongoing reforms since the days of my maternal grandfather in the 1920s, my father in the 1950s, my own formative years in the 1980s, and the developments since 2000 to this day. Perhaps this remains an appropriate test case for the future of reformed theology? How on earth does one reform this place?

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municipalities. Given the concentration of some very wealthy residents, the Gini coefficient for wealth would be quite a bit higher.

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