

The confession of Belhar and an African indigenous perspective: A comparative engagement

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A study of the Christian Statement of belief, which was written in Afrikaans as *Belydenis van Belhar* (The Confession of Belhar, 26 September 1986), is critically important, as it amounts to reviewing the past in order to inform the future. A reading of indigenous confessions will enrich our comparative engagement and broaden our grasp of individual and communal-inspired confessions across historical times. As a Christian witness of biblical truth in an evil era of apartheid and oppression, the Confession of Belhar called for ecclesiastical unity among diverse peoples, reconciliation and God's justice for all. While indigenous confessions are driven by the need to: Restore social and spiritual order, respond to existential threats, and as a crucial life-stage ritual (like initiation), the article asserts that the Confession of Belhar was equally restorative and holistic. In rethinking the two models of confessions, one is driven to ask: Does the Confession of Belhar draw its parallel with African indigenous forms? If so, where do we draw their triangulation in reference to what and how both can learn from each other? Methodologically, it will simultaneously engage the two confessional epistemologies, as it strives to unveil the problem.

Contribution: The article contributes to *HTS Journal's* vision and mission by promoting a multidisciplinary perspective that explores a parallelism between the Confession of Belhar and the African indigenous forms, in its endeavour to address the myriad of problems bedevilling society.

Keywords: apartheid church; Belhar confession; Dutch Reformed Church; Dutch Reformed Mission Church; indigenous confessions; post-apartheid church.

Introduction

Although the situation in post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Africa has changed substantially, there is a strong justification for studying the Christian Statement of belief, which was written in Afrikaans as *Belydenis van Belhar* (The Confession of Belhar, 26 September 1986) and African indigenous modes of confession, as 'the challenges we are facing today accentuate [their] importance and relevance' (MacMaster 2019:1). In retracing the historical background of the Confession of Belhar, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2017) takes us through the memory lane to the arrival of Johan van Riebeeck from Holland, who landed at Table Bay, within the Cape of Good Hope region, on 06 April 1652. Table Bay developed into the city of Cape Town and is located in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Riebeeck came under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company (eds. Huffel & Modise 2017). Although he was on a trading mission between Asia and Europe, his dramatic arrival also saw the introduction of Christianity among the African indigenous peoples; and the Reformed faith was simultaneously established in South Africa (Van der Watt 1977:4). Henceforth, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) became an all-race ecclesiastical outfit for European people, coloured people, African people and slaves till its 1857 Synod that approved a decision to hold separate services for 'coloured' members. It went on to establish the policy of segregation and subsequently cemented the creation of separate churches for the African people. In other words, the DRC Synod felt that while it was desirable to have all members under one ecclesiastical armpit, it was necessary to establish separate services for the 'weaknesses of some' – as some white members could not find a theological justification for worshipping with slaves and Africans (eds. Huffel & Modise 2017). As Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2017) has noted:

Until the end of the 18th century, indigenous people and slaves were fully fledged members of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa and participated fully in the sacraments. During 1828, several problems arose in Stellenbosch, Calvinia, Caledon, Riversdale and the Swartland relating to the admission of black Christians to the Lord's Table. For example, during that year, Bentura Johannes (a black man), after being baptised, became a member of the DRC of Somerset West. His presence challenged the DRC

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members of the congregation regarding the inclusion of the black people at the Eucharist Table. There was a known practice in the DRC, namely, that 'such persons' will only share the Lord's Supper after the 'born Christians' had been invited, 'as it is done in Stellenbosch and Caledon'. (p. 1)

To this end, Fortein (2022:4) has perceptively cited *Wagenmakersvallei and Tulbagh* as some of the places where 'sacraments had been separately administered to people of mixed descent long before the decision of 1857'. This confirms that 'the 1857 synod of the DRC merely sanctioned an already existing practice into official church policy' (Fortein 2022:4) that eventually put the Church into disrepute.

Although the DRC's Synod of 1829 'rejected the separation at the Eucharist on the basis of colour' (Huffel 2017:2), the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) was still established in 1881 as an ecclesiastical outfit for coloured members. The need to generate 'funds to construct [some] building[s] where the "heathen" could receive catechism and where the sacraments could be administered to them' became a critical agenda for the DRC (Huffel 2017:2). In light of this, more DRC daughter churches that came up after the DRMC include: *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in die Oranje Vrystaat* (1910) which was established in the Orange Free State, later merging into the wider black Reformed church; the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Transvaal (1932) that was established for black people in the Transvaal; Dutch Reformed Bantu Church (1950s) that had various regional Bantu churches that were established (Cape in 1951, Natal in 1952); the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA, in 1963) which had various regional black mission churches (Transvaal, Free State, Cape, Natal) came together and gained autonomy as the DRCA (Afrikaans: *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika* – NGKA); the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) (1968) which was specifically established for the Indian community; and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) (1994), which was formed by the reunification of the DRMC and the DRCA, among others (Mahokoto 2017). Other Reformed Churches that came up includes: *Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika* (GKSA) (1859); and the *Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk* (APK) (1987), which split from the white Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) because of its rejection of the NGK's slightly more liberal stance on apartheid at the time. The DRMC and DRCA united in 1994 to form the URCSA, marking a departure from the racially divided structure of the previous century (eds. Huffel & Modise 2017; Landman 2024).

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) provided theological justification for apartheid, as it viewed it through 'State Theology'. It also maintained its formal Reformed identity to support the status quo (Kritzinger 2013; Merrett 2016; Pali 2017). Conversely, the DRMC was established by the white DRC in 1881 as a separate semi-autonomous ecclesiastical outfit. This was a result of its mission work and as an official policy of racial segregation. The DRMC differed with the 'colonial project [that] placed "Coloureds" in the middle of the population, up to a point that "Coloureds" were made to

feel just beneath Whites, but superior to Blacks' among other errors (Fortein 2022:6). Such segregationist philosophies went against the reality that the Church is an all-inclusive fellowship [*Koinonia*], as Jesus desired to create a new community that included both Jews and Gentiles, breaking down historical barriers so as to form one, unified body of believers (Gl 3:28; Jn 10:16; Eph 2:14–16).

As the General Synod of the DRMC approved the Belhar Confession on 26 September 1986, was it driven by the realisation that the 'silence' of the Church amidst evils in the country was hurting her overall mission? Was the society practising a 'religionless Christianity', as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it? In light of the 'silence' of the Church during Adolf Hitler's atrocities in Germany of the 1930s, Bonhoeffer (1971) confessed, thus:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the art of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still in use? (pp. 16–17)

In drawing from a comparative engagement, this article endeavours to establish the landmarks of the duo; and eventually assess their import to our contemporary Africa. In engaging the Confession of Belhar and the African models of confession, we intend to address the following concern: Does the Confession of Belhar draw its parallel with African indigenous forms? If so, where do we draw their triangulation in reference to what and how both can learn from each other? In its endeavour to establish the landmarks of the African Confession of Belhar and the African indigenous perspectives and their import to our contemporary society, the article will address these concerns through the following sub-topics, as its plot, thus: A non-South African Inspiration of Belhar? The theory of comparative engagement, analysis and reflections (Confessions in African Indigenous Society, and the Confession of Belhar and the African Context), a critical analysis, and a conclusion.

A non-South African inspiration of Belhar?

In his work on 'Barmen and Belhar in Conversation: A South African Perspective', Smit (2017:407–420) avers that the Confession of Belhar should be comprehended within the Barmen Theological Declaration. Barmen, which was adopted on 31 May 1934, during a Confessional Synod held in Barmen (Wuppertal), Germany, amidst the rise of the Nazi regime, and was a foundational document of the Confessing Church (Welker 2024; Winkler 2012). It was intended to oppose the German Christians' movement, which aimed to align Protestantism with National Socialism. Its primary author was Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian who was teaching at the University of Bonn, Germany (Welker 2024). Other co-authors who made significant contributions include Hans Asmussen (a Lutheran-Reformed pastor) and Thomas Breit (a Lutheran representative from the Bavarian regional church). In its six 'theses', Barmen Declaration

asserted firmly that Jesus Christ, as witnessed in Holy Scripture, is the sole Word of God to be obeyed. It rejected the idea that the state or any other power could be a source of divine revelation (Welker 2024; Winkler 2012). Specifically, Smit (2017) points out that:

Belhar was born in a long, intense struggle with Barmen – with its own historical context, its insights and contributions, the theologies, theologians and church movements informing and inspiring it, the evangelical claims expressed in it, and its own ambiguous history of reception during the decades to follow, in Germany and far outside its birthplace. Since its inception, Belhar was both a product of this long conversation with Barmen and a further historical moment in this conversation itself. (p. 407)

To an extent, implying that the Confession of Belhar was a replica of the Barmen Declaration raises pertinent concerns as apartheid era provided limited interactions, especially among black South Africans, with the rest of the world. Smit's (2017) assertions thus raise eyebrows and trigger further research. Although the DRC was born in 1571, in a multilingual country (the Netherlands) where German is spoken by over 71% of the population, as Dutch, English and French are spoken roughly by over 95%, 90% and 29%, respectively (Van Bezooijen & Gooskens 2005), the easy access of Barmen epistemologies by the rank-and-file of the society in the apartheid South Africa remains a puzzle. One may wonder how the ecumenical society encountered Barmen's epistemologies in an era where separate-isolationist policies were the key. Nevertheless, Smit (2017) goes beyond Barmen, as the chief inspirer of Belhar, when he goes on to explain that:

Belhar would not have been born without the role of, among many others, Beyers Naudé, the Christian Institute and its many supporters, from church leaders to many believers, and church members who increasingly understood the struggle against apartheid in continuity with the church struggle in Germany. Also, Belhar would not have come about without the South African Council of Churches (SACC) with several of its member churches, church leaders and theologians, like Desmond Tutu, Wolfram Kistner, John de Gruchy, Douglas Bax and many others, its *Message to the People of South Africa*, and the role of the broader ecumenical movement; without South African Reformed theologians like Jaap Durand, Willie Jonker, David Bosch and many others, who worked, thought and witnessed in the theological tradition of Karl Barth; without especially Allan Boesak, who played a major role as church leader, theologian, ecumenical figure and activist, also in the tradition of Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Barmen, and without whom the struggle against apartheid certainly would not have developed the way it did; without movements like the '*Broederkring*', later the '*Belydende Kring*', and the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA), all consisting of sisters and brothers who again thought and acted very consciously in this theological and ecclesial tradition; without a whole generation of other theologians and church leaders, like Daan Cloete, Chris Loff, Shun Govender, Hannes Adonis, Johan Botha, Welile Mazamisa, Takatso Mofokeng and many of their contemporaries (to mention only a few from my own small world of personal experience, although there are many others who deserve to be mentioned whenever the full story is told); without a still younger generation of then students and younger ministers, like Russel Botman, James Buys, Leonardo Appies and again many more, most of them not celebrated and publicly well-known, who

through their insights and convictions, commitment and witness, even suffering and fate, stood in the tradition of Barmen. (p. 408)

Smit (2017) further appraises, albeit uncritically, the inspirational and epistemological role of the German Barmen Declaration of 1934. He mentions the role of unsung heroes and heroines in the making of Belhar, but conversely insists on the prominent role of the Barmen Declaration in inspiring and informing the former. He says, thus:

It is a reminder that Belhar itself is the product of a long and intense conversation with Barmen, with Barth, Bonhoeffer, the German Confessing Church, and the history of its reception and interpretation. It is therefore understandable that there are indeed many formal similarities between Barmen and Belhar – structural elements, positive claims and negative rejections, appeals to Scripture, direct allusions (especially in the preface and conclusion of Belhar), the shared dependence on the Heidelberg Catechism and many more. Both were documents of the church, not of individuals; both targeted false doctrine, not specific people; both were binding and authoritative and not optional, not mere theological opinions and contributions to a discussion, born in a *status confessionis*, a moment of truth, when the gospel itself was at stake, according to those who confessed. Both, therefore, did not cause the crisis but were responses to an already existing crisis. (p. 408)

Like Smit (2017), Adonis (2017:355) traces the origin of the Confession of Belhar by showcasing the critical role of students, church leaders, church meetings and church communities. He avers that the Confession of Belhar falls within the family of DRCs rather than as individual progressions. Like Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2017), Adonis (2017) contends that the Confession can be traced to the apartheid policy of the National Party (NP), which governed South Africa from 1948 to 1994. As early as 1950, 'the former Wynberg presbytery of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (DRMC) became directly involved with the policies of apartheid' (Adonis 2017:356). By then, the NP leader and fourth Prime Minister of South Africa, the Revd Dr. Daniel François Malan (1874–1959) was active in implementing apartheid policies. Adonis (2017:356) explains that since 22 September 1948, the apartheid policy was by then called 'church policy', a phenomenon that saw Mr. J. Abrahamse sending a letter on behalf of a hundred church members who belonged to 27 congregations of the DRMC that declared that the apartheid policy was unchristian. Hence, as early as 1950, DRMC had rejected the governing policy in a manner akin to the Confession of Belhar of 1986. Unfortunately, the leadership of both the DRC and the DRMC did not support the 116 members who were pleading that the policy be exterminated like vermin. In their 1950 Synod, the DRMC 'decided that they would neither reject nor approve a political policy' (Adonis 2017:356). From time to time, however, some members of DRMC kept on condemning various aspects of the apartheid policy. By the 1970s, an increasing number were openly urging for a theological re-evaluation of apartheid. This position was largely established by the DRMC's Theological School, which was 'already a faculty of the University of the Western Cape (UWC)' (Adonis 2017:356). In particular, Prof. Jaap Durand,

who was appointed as a Systematic Theology lecturer in 1973 for UWC, made a significant contribution in urging for theological evaluation of apartheid (Conradie 2021). As a result, his UWC students drew their verdict by urging DRMC to appreciate the contradiction in the authentic gospel of Christ and embrace reconciliation theology as was propounded in the scriptures. In 1978, Durand's students-turned-clerics (refer to J.J.F. Mettler, I.J. Mentor, and R.J. Stevens) presented this position to the DRMC Synod. This was thoroughly discussed and accepted with remarkable amendments, as the DRC mission policy was rejected. Henceforth, the DRMC urged for the reunification of DRCs (Adonis 2017), and this trajectory informed the debate through to the Confession of Belhar of 1986 and the dismantling of apartheid till the early 1990s.

Adonis' (2017) historical survey of the Confession of Belhar aptly gives it a South African touch. On the flipside, Smit's (2017) uncritical engagement of Barmen and Belhar puts the latter at the risk of losing the local flavour. It makes the Confession lose its originality and ultimately becomes Pandora's Box that may need to remain closed or exposed altogether for further exploration. It further drives one to rethink the indigenous models of confessions in precolonial Africa and in the early church. Did these statements of faith learn from earlier initiatives, indigenous or ecclesiastical? In *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo employs a threefold structure of confession. In his Confession of Sin [*Confessio Peccantis*], he deals with his early life that includes his 'pear theft' and pursuit of immoral pleasures. He highlights his rebellion against God and his ultimate redemption. In his second confession, the Confession of Praise [*Confessio Laudis*], Augustine praises God's mercy, power and creation. He focuses on God's nature rather than just his own failings (Suchocki 1982; Van Oort 2013). His third one is on the Confession of Faith [*Confessio Fidei*], a phenomenon where he moves beyond autobiography and explores theo-philosophical concepts such as time, memory and the hermeneutics of Genesis. In his renowned book-length prayer [*Confessiones*], considered a masterpiece of Western literature, he famously characterised it by the phrase, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee' (Suchocki 1982:377). This shows that the letter and spirit of confessing church, as the situation demands, has been with us across the ages. In any case, the 'Lord's Prayer', as Jesus propounded it, is a call to confession, unity of purpose, peace of mind, repentance and reconciliation with the cosmos.

The theory of comparative engagement

The use of comparative engagement in understanding the import of the Belhar Confession and an African Indigenous Perspective to our contemporary society falls within the approaches to inter-religious and cultural dialogues. Such dialogues have shifted across historical times, from exclusivism to inclusivism and pluralism, among the world's religio-cultures (Moore-Keish & Winn 2019). Karl Barth ushered in the notion of exclusivism in his elaboration of the

so-called dialectical theology and/or theology of crisis (Moore-Keish & Winn 2019). In this, Barth contended on an infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity; a phenomenon where God was viewed as 'wholly other' and could not be known through human reason or natural theology (Almirzanah 2021). The theory went on to highlight the view that revelation occurs only through God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. As an exclusivist theory of the 1930s to 1950s, it rules out, implicitly, the comparative engagement of other religio-cultures with the Christian statements of faith (Moore-Keish & Winn 2019).

The 1960s witnessed a stark contrast, from exclusivism to inclusivism via a discipline that came to be called the 'theology of religion'. It encouraged the import of grappling with the validity of other religio-cultures of the world. In particular, Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich propounded the view that Christianity is the blueprint and/or the starting point for religious discourse. In particular, Tillich (1986:341) came up with the notion of the 'latent church' which posits that the true 'Kingdom of God' includes both the manifest church (the historical, organised Christian community) and those outside it who are determined by the Spirit, and is driven by the same ultimate concern for truth and justice. Comparatively, Rahner (1968:545–554, 1970:498ff) ushered in the notion of the 'anonymous Christian', which posits that individuals who have never heard the Gospel or consciously accepted the Christian faith can still receive salvation through Christ's grace if they follow their conscience and live by love. This inclusive theological trajectory suggests that such are 'anonymous' Christians because they live in God's grace without holding the official title. It encourages comparative engagements in religio-cultural academic discourses. In a sense, it has been embraced by liberation and inculturation theologians as it is praxiological (combines theory and practice) (Husni & Bisri 2024).

Beside inclusivism, which resonates with the notion of comparative engagement among religio-cultures, pluralism is another contemporary approach in the religious inter-relations. It was pioneered by Smith (1979) and Hick (1992), who vouched for what came to be known as 'religious pluralism'. It differed from both inclusivism and exclusivism, as it directly addressed Christianity by insisting that it is not the only religion of God; rather, it has to engage other religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism or any other. It further contended that faith transcends the given forms of belief. Nevertheless, inclusivism and pluralism, as theoretical trends, vouch for comparative engagement. As a theory that is rooted in the works of Rahner (1968, 1970) and Tillich (1986), comparative engagement is also informed by the works of Francis Clooney, Friedrich Max Müller, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Mircea Eliade, among others, in the Western academic corridors. It resonates with the works of inculturationist and liberationist theologians in Africa, North America and the Americas. In particular, Clooney, in his comparative theology, focuses on Hindu-Christian comparative studies (Nelson 2025). Müller, in his *Scientific Study of Religion*, advocates for a

comparative method which is similar to comparative linguistics, and emphasises the study of sacred texts from different cultures. Smith (1979), in his *Comparative Religion*, puts emphasis on the comparative study of religion that focuses on the living qualities and personal faith of adherents, and bridging different religio-cultures. Likewise, Mircea Eliade, in his *Patterns in Religion*, identifies patterns, symbols and myths across diverse cultural contexts (Husni & Bisri 2024).

Comparative engagement theory, which is also viewed by scholars such as Catherine Cornille as a comparative theology (Gathogo 2023; Winkler 2012), will be valuable for engaging the Belhar Confession and the African models of confession, as it allows for a 'back-and-forth' dialogue that respects the specificities of both, while highlighting their convergences. As noted in Cornille (2024), it involves the systematic theological engagement with the epistemologies of another religio-cultural tradition. Ripples are that:

It raises numerous epistemological questions, which may focus on the possibility of genuine understanding of other religions, on the status of truth in other religions, on the process of discernment of truth in those religions, and on the changes occurring in the contents of teachings and practices when transposed from one religious tradition into another. (p. 451)

As a scholarly approach and/or methodology, the theory of comparative engagement drives us to move beyond merely identifying similarities. It enables this treatise to engage in a 'deep learning' that transforms how these confessing traditions are understood together, particularly in the context of unity, reconciliation and justice. Further, the theory of comparative engagement highlights the shift from mere doctrinal statement to 'confession as act' or '*status confessionis*' [a state of confession] that is common in African theology, focusing on unity, reconciliation and justice.

In view of the foregoing, the theory of comparative engagement between Christian and Indigenous perspectives has shifted from a historical, colonial model of confrontational replacement to a modern, post-colonial and post-traditional approach emphasising dialogue, mutual enrichment and the negotiation of overlapping beliefs (McMinn 1998). This engagement is generally characterised as a 'conflict-cooperation continuum' where religious boundaries are blurred through lived practices, resulting in hybridity or multiple, simultaneous identities (Gathogo 2023:2; McMinn 1998).

Analysis and reflections

Confessions in African indigenous society

In the African indigenous societies, confessions are a fundamental part of maintaining social harmony and spiritual balance. The mode is generally communal and is entrusted to the stewardship of the local authorities and/or revered elders or religious specialists. Further, the nature of indigenous confessions is centred on restorative justice, truth-telling and reconciliation, as opposed to a purely retributive punishment (Idowu 1973; Kenyatta 1938). As a vital ritual, confession is characterised by acknowledgement

of wrongdoing to deities, ancestors or the injured party (Kenyatta 1938). Hence, cleansing rituals (including bathing, fumigation, prayers, spitting, shedding blood, truth-telling, replacing old clothes with old ones, ritual bathing after admitting infidelity and so on) and reparations to achieve forgiveness and reintegration, emphasising what the challenge means to society, and the individual impact, form part of the mode and nature of confessions. Generally, indigenous confessions amount to moral accountability, social healing and precedents for atonement and accelerate reconciliation. On matters to do with witchcraft and adultery, confession functions as a mechanism for problem-solving and the eventual restoration of wounded parties and the general society (Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1969).

Further, indigenous confessions are tied to spiritual standards and precede acts of atonement, such as sacrifices or purification rites, to appease the offended spiritual forces and remove the spiritual 'stain'. In particular, the Zulu sacrifices and purification rites, which often involve cattle or goats, address socio-spiritual stains through specific rituals like *Ukuthetha* [scolding sacrifice for misfortune] and death cleansing (Fernandez 1967; Sukdaven 2019). This is done by using animal blood, fat and smoke, along with indigenous medicines [*Muthi*] for bathing, vomiting [*Phalaza*], and steaming. All is guided by indigenous healers to restore harmony with ancestors and the divine, and in order to balance community well-being and individual spiritual health. Among the Zulu, scolding sacrifice [*Ukuthetha*] is undertaken to address grievances with the spiritual realm whenever things go wrong, as in the case of unexpected deaths. As with most African societies, the Zulu view the blood of the sacrificed animals (cattle or goats) as a powerful conduit for spiritual communication, and as the medium that transfers peoples' intentions to the divine (Sukdaven 2019).

On the whole, the confession or disclosure of wrongdoings was (and is) driven by the need to restore community harmony, appease ancestors and seek healing. This was (and is) often done through rituals involving *Sangomas* [healers] who communicated with ancestral spirits to reveal the cause of the misfortunes or challenges facing the country. This leads or led individuals to confess the imbalances or breaches of custom, and guaranteed religio-social reintegration (Fernandez 1967). Interestingly, there are pockets of continuity of indigenous forms of confessions in the 21st century Africa, as modern African Christianity has seen some rituals blending indigenous elements with Christian beliefs. In the case of post-genocide Rwanda, over 12000 *Gacaca* courts were used to reconcile the Rwandese (Powers 2011; Venter 2007). These post-1994 genocide institutions were community-based justice systems. They were revived after the conflict (1994) so as to process the overwhelming number of perpetrators whose focus was on truth-telling, reconciliation and reintegration. Through open-air public forums, elders [*Inyangamugayo*] served as judges and tried cases. Characteristically, they allowed the perpetrators to confess, and eventually helped the victims to learn the truth

about their loved ones (Venter 2007). These *Gacaca* courts restored harmony alongside the national courts. It was globally praised for expediting justice, as it speedily processed about two million cases in less than 10 years (1994 to June 2012). Addressing an immense judicial backlog that could have taken over 150 years to clear through the conventional legal system (Western courts) was a reason to celebrate indigenous legal resources (Powers 2011).

However, *Gacaca* courts faced criticism from the international human rights organisations, who feared that its fairness had some black spots. The fear and/or perception that the justice systems were politicised, via the government's hands-on approach to the matter, provided a critique of these courts. This hybrid system of justice-seeking in post-genocide Rwanda went beyond indigenous expectations as it also elected women as lay judges, unlike the purely indigenous systems where legal structures are restricted to male elders only (Venter 2007). It is, however, encouraging to note that turning to the Belhar Confession in the 21st century, in light of modern challenges in (South) Africa, is a necessity just as it was in the 1980s, as a *Gacaca*-like confession might turn out as the panacea to the contextual woes. Such challenges include deep-seated socio-economic issues like extreme inequality, pervasive poverty, youth unemployment, crime and instability, urgent government issues such as inefficient public services and corruption, and strain on national cohesion, questionable prophetic voices, division over women's ordination and leadership, and the concern for moral authority of the church as a social institution, among others (Evans 1999; Mkhize 2024). While the justification and authenticity of the Belhar Confession can be considered from the above African indigenous perspectives, the modern challenges, however, puts South Africa, and the rest of Africa, in need of a new and urgent form of confession. In a pluralistic and post-colonial Africa, should it take a purely indigenous model or the *Gacaca*-like model or a hybridity that appreciates the new-fangled realities such as xenophobia, the Generation Z concerns, the silent and 'compromised' church, the cultic-leaning New Religious Movements, and the new forms of neo-colonialism that are threatening the gains of liberation? Why should a system that claims to be democratic and meritocratic fail to deliver the socio-spiritual promise of a nation or nations that claim to be truly liberated from injustices, oppression, discriminations, segregations and dictatorships that block creativity and innovativeness? Indeed, resonating with African indigenous confessions does not make the Belhar Confession a replica of the former, as the two do not sail in similar circumstances. Further, the 1980s and the 21st century have unique and divergent challenges. As Mkhize (2024) has perceptively noted:

The theological debate surrounding apartheid did not conclude with its downfall; rather, it persists, exerting a lasting influence on the discourse and practice of reconciliation, justice and healing in post-apartheid South Africa. Some of the questions that arise from this debate are: How can the churches and religious communities that were complicit in apartheid repent and make amends for their role? How can the churches and religious communities that resisted apartheid forgive and

reconcile with their former oppressors? How can the churches and religious communities that suffered under apartheid heal from their trauma and restore their dignity? How can the churches and religious communities that share a common faith, but have different histories and experiences of apartheid, coexist and cooperate in a pluralistic and democratic society? These challenges require a critical and constructive engagement with the past, an honest and compassionate dialogue with the present, and a hopeful and prophetic vision for the future. (p. 4)

The confession of Belhar and the African context

Though they are separate entities, the Confession of Belhar falls within the African models of confession (communal restoration, truth-telling, and spiritual and symbolic cleansing). It, however, goes beyond cultural rites embedded in the latter (see Figure 1 on Belhar and African context). Further, the five articles in the Confession of Belhar are in continuity with the South African Black Theology of Liberation (BTL), as it captures the broader African philosophies of community, hospitality, Ubuntu and *Ujamaa*, among others (Gathogo 2025). In turn, South Africa's BTL is a faith movement that emerged in the late 1960s, and was inspired by the Black Conscious Movement (BCM), which was led by Steve Biko and the North America's Black Theology under James Cone (Dolamo 2019; Gathogo 2021). Other key influential figures in South Africa's BTL include: Manas Buthelezi, Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Itumeleng Mosala and Sabelo Ntwasa, among others. Though not a theologian by trade, Biko's writings on Black Consciousness provided the philosophical foundation for BTL (Xhinti 2021). He always insisted that the 'most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed' (Dolamo 2019:2). Unlike Biko, Allan Boesak, who is associated with the Confession of Belhar and its liberating message of unity, reconciliation and justice, he was a Reformed Minister who always insisted that the God of the Bible is a God of justice, not oppression.

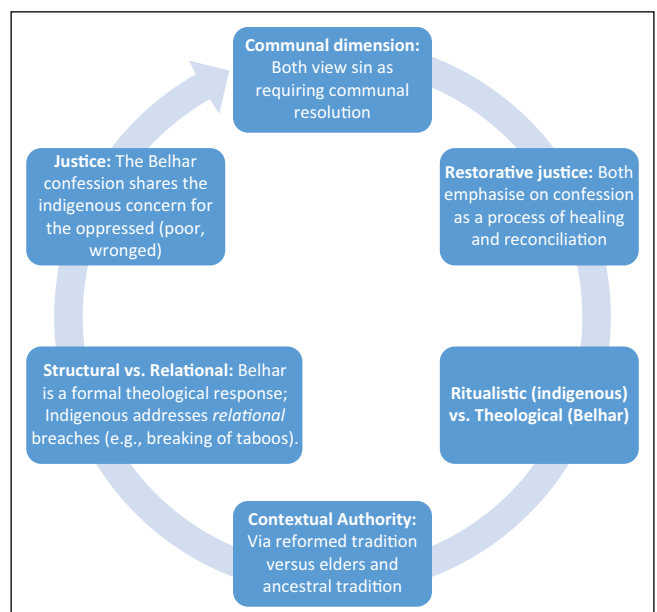


FIGURE 1: Belhar and indigenous confessions.

Baron (2017:185) has, however, cautioned that the Confession of Belhar 'was never intended to be a "*stok om meet e slaan*" [*a stick to beat with*], as it is often perceived'. He cites Kritzinger (2010:211), who raises credible questions regarding its authorship and diverse perceptions that have tended to give it wrong interpretations. Baron (2017) contends that it's being perceived as a political statement rather than a pastoral statement is because of its being linked to South Africa's foremost liberation theologian, Allan Boesak.

According to Kritzinger (2010:211), linking the origin of the Confession of Belhar to Boesak made it unacceptable in some quarters, as this translated to individualisation of a confession irrespective of how the latter was perceived among the Afrikaner people and beyond. In light of this, Kritzinger (2010:211) bemoans its individualisation when he insists that the communal authorship and ownership ought to be emphasised rather than the individuals who are associated with it. In his endeavour to strengthen his argument that the original authorship of an ecclesiastical confession need not be prioritised, as its ratification makes it a church document, Kritzinger's (2010) refers to Naudé (2010), who had equally seen it from the same lenses. In their view, this is evidenced by the 16th-century European documents, where the larger socio-religious trends were given prominence rather than the individual histories. Baron (2017) and Kritzinger's (2010) 'communalisation' of the Confession of Belhar, as a pastoral document for the Reformed tradition, finds some support in the fact that even the secular trajectories such as the Age of Scholasticism (c. 1100–1500), the Renaissance (c. 1300s–1600s) and the Enlightenment (c. late 1600s–1800) among others are not scandalised by an over emphasis on individual roles (Green 1992). This is, however, problematic when we also consider the great attention given across the ages for individuals who formulated the Nicene Creed (325–381 CE) (Masvotore 2026; Shiner 2020).¹ In particular, Emperor Constantine, who called the Council, remains at the top of things in this regard. From Alexandria, the second largest city in Egypt, Athanasius, who was at a low-ranking ecclesiastical ladder (a mere Deacon), as he began to battle Arianism, has been given overt attention by scholars across the ages. He was successful in defending Christ's full divinity against Arius and is one of the key contributors in shaping the Nicene Creed (325 CE) as we know it today (Shiner 2020; West 2024). Later, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus played crucial roles in refining the creed at the Council of Constantinople (381 CE) and established Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine against heresy. On the other hand, the Nicene Creed is a foundational 'living confession' that binds the church together in faith, mission and liturgy. It is characterised as a 'transforming document' that emphasises communal identity ('we believe') and defines the church's essence through its apostolic, missionary nature (Masvotore 2026; Shiner 2020).

Further, individual-theo-doctrinal contributions of the likes of Martin Luther, the 16th century church reformer, Martin

1. Although creeds (that focuses on God/Trinity) and confessions (which focuses on what we believe) are not synonymous, they are both 'confessional' in that they are formal declarations of belief (Masvotore 2026; Shiner 2020).

Luther King Jr., the American Civil Rights leader of the 1960s, and the role of Revd John Wesley in the founding of Methodism as a Church or as a religious movement of the 18th and early 19th centuries, among other ecclesiastical cases (Gathogo 2001; Shiner 2020) cannot be ignored. Masvotore (2026:3) contends that the 'first Christian confession or creed is found in Peter's declaration, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16)'. This individual declaration ended up as the 'baptismal confession' and ultimately took a Trinitarian outlook for consumption by the global community. Despite individualising Peter's role in this premier baptismal confession, Masvotore (2026:4) also brings out a communal confession of ecclesiastical declarations when he avers that despite creeds being composed by individuals, synods or ecumenical formations, 'their significance lies in their ability to articulate the faith of the Church and provide a shared framework for belief and practice'. In Africa, as in the rest of the globe, the communal dimension of creeds and confessions has been given prominence across the generations.

Apparently, the individual role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, revered as the Mother of God [*Theotokos*], among the Roman Catholicism and Orthodox traditions, as a powerful intercessor, and as one who holds a unique position of honour [*hyperdulia*] above saints but distinct from the worship of God, is given much emphasis (Dorris 2025). Further, Mary's individual role is explicitly mentioned and given significant theological weight within the foundational creeds and confessions in the history of Christianity. Despite the creedal focus being on Christ, Mary is the only human other than Pontius Pilate named in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, highlighting her vital role in the Incarnation (Shiner 2020). However, the Reformed tradition does not view Mary as central in their theological discourses, or as a model of faith, through to salvation. She is not viewed as a co-operator in salvation in the same way as in the Catholic-Orthodox doctrines (Shiner 2020). Nevertheless, Baron (2017) and Kritzinger's (2010) insistence on ecclesiastical confessions as public documents cannot be gainsaid. In light of this, Kritzinger (2010) wonders, thus:

Does it matter who wrote a Confession? Does it matter that Guido de Brés wrote the Belgic Confession (1561) or that Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus authored the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)? An official Confession is formally approved in the Reformed tradition by a specific church, on the basis of a well-established procedure involving local (church council), regional (presbytery) and national (synod) bodies. Once a Confession has been formally approved by a Reformed church, that church 'speaks' or 'confesses' in that particular Confession, not the individual authors who formulated it or the committee that proposed it to the church. It is communal authorship and ownership that is operative here. (p. 211)

A critical analysis

Although the article has addressed some cases where some prominent scholars have appreciated the background of the Confession of Belhar beyond individual theologians and

churches, the perception that this is an individual or a single institutional effort weakens its theo-social appeal. In particular, Fortein (2022:7–9) has perceptively noted that DRMC, which played a critical role in the Confession of Belhar, was not an authentic black church but for coloured people (mixed races of black people and white people). He, however, notes that the coloured people were ‘more privileged than Blacks but less privileged than Whites’ (Fortein 2022:9) in the social hierarchies of the nation. Irrespective of the outcome of the debate, the strength of the confession can, however, be seen in the fact that the admission spoke for all who were vouching for ecclesiastical unity, reconciliation in church and society, and justice for the poor, the destitute and the wronged. In light of this, the Confession of Belhar cannot be seen uncritically as a progression from the German’s Barmen Declaration of 1934 (Smit 2017; Welker 2024); and neither can the students of the University of the Western Cape’s Faculty of Theology (Nico Botman, Appies and others), who worked alongside Professor Jaap Durand to challenge the theological justification of apartheid – ultimately leading to the declaration that it was a heresy, be seen to have been replicating the role of Karl Barth, the reformed theologian, who primarily authored the Barmen Declaration of 1934 against the Nazi despotic regime (Smit 2017; Welker 2024).

To an extent, however, the Confession of Belhar can be said to have informed or influenced the Accra Confession of 2004. Adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), which was renamed the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), this document addresses the injustices of the global economic system and ecological destruction, referred to as ‘empire’ (Pillay 2018). Like in Belhar’s prophetic voice, the Accra Confession calls for a covenant for justice in the economy and the earth. It argues that economic and environmental injustices are theological concerns that affect the integrity of Christ’s good news (Pillay 2018). In all three confessions, they arose from a *Status Confessionis* [a state of confession], a phenomenon where the Gospel message was seen to be at stake as a result of specific socio-political-economic injustices (Pillay 2018). They all serve as potent examples of how the Reformed tradition has produced confessional statements that address contemporary concerns in the light of God’s Word. Besides the three confessions, the East African Revival Movement (EARM), birthed in 1927 by two Anglican Church leaders in Rwanda, and spread across East Africa by 1937, is another case of a confessing church. While standing out primarily as a pietistic revival of East Africa’s mainline churches (refer to the Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and others), it remains a ‘church within churches’ that insists on public confession of sin, wrongdoings like theft, sexual sins, witchcraft practices and other ‘defiling’ encounters (Knoetze & Mwangi 2018). The uniqueness in this is that it’s the individual who constantly confesses to his audiences, whether in the buses, churches, fellowship or any public gathering, or even after an encounter with a friend. In the scheme of things, bumping into a friend after a day or two

starts by reminding him or her about the ‘walk with Jesus’ since the last time they met. The ‘friend’ must be reminded how the individual ‘is still born again’ and on an onward match to heaven by faith and repentance. These confessions are sometimes punctuated by references to some scriptural verses. Such constant confessions are called ‘walking by light’ (in reference to Eph 5:14). While the ecclesiastical society in Africa may not necessarily need a replication of the Accra, Belhar or Barmen or the East African Revival confessions, she may still need to recover her ‘broken’ and authentic prophetic voice, and use it to map out direction for the rest of the society.

Conclusion

From its onset, the article sought to draw a parallel between the Confession of Belhar and African indigenous forms of confession. In building from the assertion that both confessions need to engage each other and learn more insights, it has endeavoured to draw their triangulation in reference to the way they are shaped by their respective historical backcloths. As it has been noted, a confession in the African indigenous society endeavours to restore harmony, heals disorders, re-establishes peace, makes the perpetrator accept moral responsibility and accountability, averts wrath as in the case of the Igbo society where ancestral anger has to be managed (Idowu 1973), it is both public and private matter, and is often accompanied by relevant rituals such as sacrifices, ceremonial bathing, oathing, washing, shaving and other essential activities (Kenyatta 1938). As a Christian Statement of faith, the Confession of Belhar offers a realistic and relevant framework for justice, unity and reconciliation. In its findings, the article has established that the lengthy history of the Confession of Belhar can be systematically traced from 1973, when Prof. Jaap Durand was appointed as a Systematic Theology lecturer at the University of Western Cape, and did a momentous job in urging for a theological evaluation of apartheid. By engaging the African indigenous forms of confession, the article has enriched the debate beyond South Africa. Indeed, our quest for psycho-social healing remains essential to the local and the larger global community. While the ‘non-(South) African origin’ of Belhar calls for further research, simultaneous engagement of indigenous discourses and the latter’s call to ‘stand where God stands’ enriches our epistemologies as we vouch for effective policies on our systems.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Julius M. Gathogo: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author

confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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