


# The impact of the symposia of the Institute for Theological Research (UNISA): 1977–1992

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Established in 1975 at the University of South Africa (UNISA), the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR), formerly known as the Institute for Theological Research (ITR), will commemorate its 50th anniversary in 2025. Among the ITR's key scholarly contributions and outputs were the annual symposia, of which 16 were held consecutively between 1977 and 1992. Prof Willem Vorster was the Director of the ITR from its establishment in 1975 to his death in 1993. It was under his leadership that these symposia were held.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** In this article, observations of these 16 symposia are made as to: (1) their relevance in the years leading up to the first democratic elections of South Africa in 1994; (2) the theological-social trends which came to expression by the 154 speakers at the symposia; and (3) their contribution to the national and international religious discourses of the day.

**Keywords:** Institute for Theological Research; Research Institute for Theology and Religion; theological trends in the 1980s and 1990s; Willem Vorster; South African theologies; South African religious discourses; Faculty of Theology, University of South Africa.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to comment on the 16 symposia held by the Institute for Theological Research (ITR) at the University of South Africa (UNISA) between 1977 and 1992. Criteria for this analysis are their relevance to the South African theological, religious and political scene, as well as their relevance to the South African society as a whole between 1977 and 1992, years that led up to the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994.

## Background

### Establishment of the Institute for Theological Research

The ITR was established in 1975 at the Unisa 'as a centre for advance research in Theology' with Professor Willem Vorster as Director (ed. Vorster 1980:79).

An undated Memorandum in Afrikaans gave the following answers to a letter from the Department of Internal Services of 23 October (1973) and provides information on the events and causes leading up to the establishment of the ITR:

- After negotiations with the Principal and Vice-Principal, the Faculty of Theology has decided to apply to Council to establish an Institute for Theology – and not an Institute for Bible Research as initially visionalised (Memorandum n.d.:1).
- No such institute exists in South Africa where in-depth research in theology is done. Neither individuals in theological departments nor theological societies can fulfil this goal (Memorandum n.d.:1–2).
- Although all theological disciplines will be accommodated, the first two projects will be in the New Testament and Missiology (Memorandum n.d.:3–4).

In 1980 Vorster, in an article titled 'Research at the Institute for Theological Research, University of South Africa (UNISA)', gave an overview of the two main foci of the Institute, which were research projects and an annual symposium (ed. Vorster 1980a:79–83). By this time, the aim of the Institute to co-operate with the six departments in the then Faculty of Theology had been realised, and every department had a project registered at the Institute. However, the symposia went beyond Unisa theologians to include academics from other universities, as well as clergy and experts in the field under discussion.

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Fifty years of theological and religion research: The history of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (1975–2025)', under the expert guidance of guest editor Professor Emeritus Christina Landman.

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## Focus and sources of this article

This article focuses on the symposia that were held between 1977 and 1992 under Willem Vorster, analysing their contribution to the theological and religio-political situation in the years leading up to the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. The sources of this article therefore are the 16 books containing the articles (and their responses) delivered at the symposia and published at UNISA in the series *Miscellanea Congregalia*. These books were retrieved from the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) collection, the UNISA collection, the Unisa library, and the private collections of Willem Vorster's students Kilian (1993), and colleagues. The books were language edited by Jansie Kilian, and the typesetting was done by Nonnie Fouché, both staff members of the ITR.

## The life and work of Willem Vorster

Following Willem Vorster's death, his doctoral student and colleague, Botha (ed. 1999), edited and published *Speaking of Jesus* with Brill, featuring Vorster's best work on biblical language, Gospel narrative and the historical Jesus. It furthermore includes a *curriculum vitae* (CV) of Vorster and a bibliography of all his works. In summary, Willem Vorster's CV states the following: He was born on 01 December 1941 in Roodepoort, Johannesburg, South Africa. He finished school in 1959 and enrolled in 1960 as a student at the University of Pretoria. Here he completed several degrees – all of them *cum laude* – in Classical Greek and Theology. After obtaining his doctorate on the semantics of the New Testament, he underwent post-doctoral studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. On his return in 1971, he was appointed in the Department of Old and New Testament Studies at Unisa; becoming the Director of the newly established ITR in 1975 and 1976. He belonged to academic societies relevant to his field of studies, received accolades from Unisa for his outstanding scholarship in New Testament studies and read articles at numerous international conferences worldwide. He is one of South Africa's most well-known New Testament scholars. He wrote two monographs and published 47 articles in academic journals, as well as 48 chapters in books. He edited 16 books, that is, the 16 books with the articles of the symposia to be discussed here. Willem Vorster died on the 10 January 1993 of a stroke (ed. Botha 1999:xiii–xxv).

After the unexpected death of Willem Vorster, Cornel du Toit took over as Director of the Institute – and in 1994 the name of the ITR was changed to the RITR.

## Literary overview

### On the Institute for Theological Research and the Research Institute for Theology and Religion

Nothing has been published on either the ITR or the RITR except for two short informational articles by Willem Vorster himself. In 1976, a year after the establishment of the ITR, Vorster (1976:109–114) published a five-pager in the Faculty

of Theology's journal, *Theologia Evangelica*. Although short, it gives an energetic overview of the situation and vision of the ITR. The Council of the UNISA approved the establishment of the ITR on 26 April 1975, and a few days later, on 01 May 1975, it became functionally in existence. The article describes the history of theological societies trying to establish a unifying centre for theological research. Next, the five projects already in existence in the ITR in 1976 are specified, most of which consisted of developing information retrieval systems. The New Testament, Church History and South African Bibliography projects were all bibliographical in nature. Compiling bibliographies was an important contribution to the fields in theology – Google only came into existence 20 plus years later. The Missiology Project concentrated on abstracting *Missionalia* article. However, the Biblical Archaeology Project in collaboration with the University of Tel Aviv organised excavations to be done in Israel. The names of the personnel of the Institute are given with four temporary assistant research officers working with Willem Vorster as Director, Jansie Kilian as full-time assistant research officer and Mrs J.M. Viljoen as secretary. The main financial source of the ITR was the Council of UNISA. Members of the Faculty of Theology were encouraged to contribute to the ITR's own fund, and this author remembers that she has contributed R5 per month to this fund for many years.

The second is Vorster's article of 1980, 'Research at the Institute for Theological Research, University of South Africa (UNISA)', that was discussed above. This article refers to the two foci of the ITR, which were the annual symposia under discussion here and the departmental projects which, since the reporting in the article of 1976, have grown substantially.

### On Willem Vorster's work and standing as an academic

In 1994, the year after Willem Vorster's death, a special issue of *Neotestamentica* 28(3) contained academic articles in which Vorster's work was assessed. The articles concentrate on his work as a New Testament scholar, and not on his achievements in the ITR.

Jurie le Roux (1994:1–21) in 'A brief description of an intellectual journey: On Willem Vorster's quest for understanding', points to Vorster's influence on a new generation of local New Testament scholars, and his own 'lifelong struggle' in dealing with the historicity of texts. Andries van Aarde (1994:235–249) in 'Tracking the pathways opened by Willem Vorster in historical Jesus research', was in praise of Vorster's post-critical historical research as well as Vorster making historical Jesus research relevant for the new South Africa. Not all were in praise, however, and Pieter Craffert (1994:51–64) in 'Through the eyes of a historian: Willem Vorster on historical interpretation', accused Vorster of not grasping fully how distant New Testament texts were. Francois Swanepoel (1994:265–277) in 'Willem Vorster and popularised theology' praised the C.B. Powell Bible Centre, which was attached to the ITR through the effort of Vorster, as an example of Vorster's wish that Bible research should be accessible to everybody.

## On theology in South Africa during 1970s, 1980s and 1990s

Willem Vorster himself gave occasional overviews of developments in New Testament scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, as in his 1987a article, 'Op weg na 'n post-kritiese Nuwe-Testamentiese wetenskap' [En route to a post-critical New Testament science]. Here he described the shift from historical critical readings of a text, which investigates the text's original meaning and its author's intentions to the emphasis on the reception of the text (ed. Vorster 1987:374–394). Andries van Aarde (1993:398–423), furthermore, gave an excellent overview of this in his 'Recent developments in South African Jesus research: From Andrie du Toit to Willem Vorster'. The developments in New Testament research from the establishment of the ITR in 1975 to the democratic elections in 1994 have been well recorded.

However, the 16 symposia held between 1977 and 1992 by the ITR, although envisioned and organised by Willem Vorster, were not focused on New Testament studies. The question asked in this article is whether the 16 symposia reflected theologically on the real political issues of the pre-1994 South African society, or whether they were white, elitist and colonial. It is therefore important to at least summarise the theological-political events that occurred in South Africa in the 20 years between 1974 and 1994. For this, two basic sources are used, which are John de Gruchy's [1978] 1986 *The church struggle in South Africa*, and *A history of Christianity in South Africa*, edited by Hofmeyr and Pillay (eds. 1994).

The main meetings and occurrences that are of theological and political importance that occurred between 1974 and 1994 are:

- 1974: The Dutch Reformed Church Report; Race, people and nation [*Ras, volk en nasie*] that promoted the separate development of races (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:289).
- 1974: The Hammanskraal Resolution by the SACC (South African Council of Churches) on conscientious objection, confirming the right of young men not to report for compulsory military service to defend the apartheid state as a non-violent way of combat racism (De Gruchy [1978] 1986:138).
- 1976: The Soweto uprising on 16 June with between 23 (officially) and 700 (unofficially) students killed and the churches varying reactions to this (De Gruchy [1978] 1986:169ff).
- 1976: Publication of Allan Boesak's *Farewell to innocence, a Socio-ethical study on Black Theology and Black Power*.
- 1977: Death of student leader Steve Biko on 12 September.
- 1977: The Christian Institute under the directorship of Beyers Naudé banned in October 1977 (De Gruchy [1978] 1986:103).
- 1977: The Koinonia Declaration, drawn up in November by a number of South African Calvinists concerned about the political situation of apartheid in the country (De Gruchy [1978] 1986:82).

- 1985: A state of emergency was declared on 20 July 1985 during which 400 people were killed by security forces, 11500 were held in detention without trial and 25000 were imprisoned on charges of public violence (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:287).
- 1985: The Kairos Document released on 25 September 1985, signed by people commenting on the political crisis in the country (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:288).
- 1986: The Confession of Belhar accepted by the DRMC (Dutch Reformed Mission Church), confessing against injustices and placing the church with God on the side of the oppressed (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:284).
- 1986: Dutch Reformed Church's Church and society [*Kerk en samelewing*] published an ambivalent defence of the white church's support of the apartheid government (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:289).
- 1986: The Catholic Bishop's Conference's call for economic sanction in May, following similar calls by the SACC, Bishop Desmond Tutu and many others (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:293).
- 1990: The Rustenburg consultation of church leaders more representative than ever before, declaring apartheid a sin, and encouraging churches to remove discrimination from church and society (eds. Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994: 294–298).

## Method

A content analysis was conducted on the articles published in the 16 symposia books to assess their contribution on the religiopolitical discourse in South Africa during the 1994 general elections. The positioning of the speakers vis-à-vis their race, gender and affiliation were taken into account in tracing the trajectories and progress of these religious discourses, and the ITR's participation in them.

## Sixteen symposia: Themes and speakers

Details of Symposia books Institute for Theological Research from 1977–1992 (edited by Prof W.S. Vorster) are provided in Table 1. An overview in terms of the authors' race, gender and affiliation are:

As seen from Table 1, over the 16 years:

- A total of 154 speakers published their papers in the symposia books whereof 112 were main speakers (authors) and 42 were respondents.
- Of the speakers, 141 (93%) were male and only 13 (7%) were female.
- While 138 (90%) were white only 16 (10%) were African.
- A total of 115 speakers were from nine different South African universities (75%), although not all were theologians; the rest were ministers and/or pastors or from church institutions, from other religions or from secular institutions.

**TABLE 1:** Details of Symposia books Institute for Theological Research from 1977–1992 (edited by Prof W.S. Vorster).

Publication year	Title of symposium book	Speakers							
		Author ( <i>n</i> = 112)	Respondent ( <i>n</i> = 42)	Gender		Race		Affiliation	
				Male ( <i>n</i> = 141)	Female ( <i>n</i> =13)	Black people ( <i>n</i> =16)	White people ( <i>n</i> =138)	Universities ( <i>n</i> =115)	*Other ( <i>n</i> =39)
1977	Church and society	6		6	-	-	6	5	1
1978	Scripture and the use of Scripture	6	6	12	-	1	11	11	1
1979	Church Unity and Diversity in the South African Context	6	5	11	-	-	11	6	5
1980	The Spirit in biblical perspective	5	5	10	-	-	10	9	1
1981	Christianity among the religions	5	5	10	-	1	9	9	1
1982	Denominationalism – its sources and implications	5	5	10	-	1	9	9	1
1983	Church and Industry	5	4	9	-	2	7	4	5
1984	Sexism and feminism in theological perspective	6	5	3	8	1	10	10	1
1985	Views on violence	5	5	10	-	2	8	6	4
1986	Reconciliation and construction: Creative options for a rapidly changing South Africa	9	2	10	1	4	7	7	4
1987	Are we killing God’s earth: Ecology and theology	9	-	9	-	-	9	5	4
1988	The right to life: Issues in bioethics	5	-	4	1	-	5	3	2
1989	The morality of censorship	7	-	6	1	-	7	7	
1990	Morality of the marketplace	7	-	6	1	-	7	3	4
1991	Building a new nation: The quest for a new South Africa	16	-	16	-	5	11	8	6
1992	On being unemployed and religious	10	-	9	1	-	10	3	7

\* Other includes ministers, priests, religious denominations, and secular institutions.

### First symposium 20 to 21 September 1977: 'Kerk en Samelewing' [Church and Society]

A week before this ITR symposium in Pretoria, the anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko died on 12 September 1977 in police custody. The Soweto student uprising of 16 June 1976 was still fresh in the minds of the African people of South Africa. Allan Boesak published his book 'Farewell to innocence' in 1976. Did the articles delivered at the ITR symposium on 'Church and society' reflect these realities?

In the Preface to the book published in 1978 after the symposium, Vorster (1978:vii) reflected on its impact. He reported that the aim of the ITR was to 'give theologians an opportunity to contribute towards the improvement of the relationship between members of various church denominations in South Africa'. This goal was realised at the symposium, which drew a diverse audience. Attendees included Protestants, Roman Catholics, Afrikaans- and English-speaking theologians, and participants from as far as Rhodesia, Port Elizabeth and Stellenbosch. The speakers were white men, and five out of the six were academics. The speakers were known either for their right-wing (Carel Boshoff) or left-wing position vis-à-vis church and society. However, their articles rarely reflect on the political realities of the time:

- Professor Johnny Roberts (in Vorster 1978:1–11) describes the New Testament church as one that was to bring peace, reconciliation and unity to 'a disrupted and degenerate society'.
- Professor Jaap du Randt (in Vorster 1978:12–36) describes four models of the relationship between church and society: the Roman Catholic nature-grace model; the Lutheran two kingdoms model; the Reformed Christocratic model; and the Revolutionary

Eschatological model. The discussion is historical and is not made applicable to the political situation of the day.

- The UNISA sociologist, Prof. Alant (in Vorster 1978:37–42), explains the relationship between church and society using three models — the Integration Model integrates religion into society to implement its norms and values; the Manipulation Model of the Marxists sees religion as unhealthily influencing society; in the Dialogical Model the church has to negotiate a place for itself in society as a body of truth. Professor Alant asks, 'Will the church in South Africa be able to do that successfully?'.
- Professor Carel Boshoff, at the time a missiologist at the University of Pretoria, known for his conservative views, calls on the church to proclaim the revelation of God to the world and to refrain from social, anthropocentric theologies such as the Theology of Development, Theology of Hope, Liberation Theology, Theology of Obedience, Theology of Revolution, Political Theology, Black Theology and a Theology of Secularisation (Boshoff in Vorster 1978:54).
- Father Albert Nolan of the Dominican Order of Southern Africa (in Vorster 1978:61–67) analyses the problem of church in society from the perspective of preaching and dealing with problems such as drunkenness. There is no reference to the church's political voice.

### Second symposium 1978: 'Scripture and the use of Scripture'

On 19 and 20 September 1978, the ITR held its second symposium on the use of Scripture in South Africa. Church and society were still reeling from the Soweto uprisings (16 June 1976) and the consequent banning of the Christian Institute under the directorship of Beyers Naudé in October 1977. In reaction, the Koinonia Declaration was drawn up in



November 1977 by a number of concerned South African Calvinists on the political situation in South Africa.

The ITR symposium, the article of which were published in Vorster (ed. 1979) under the title *Scripture and the use of Scripture*, hardly reflected on the political issues of the time, being extremely learned. The papers were delivered by four white men and an African man, all being academics. The insights expressed at this symposium are as follows:

- In white Afrikaans churches the Bible is used with Jesus as the exclusive scopus, the authority of the Bible is regarded unproblematically, the Bible is considered to be inspired, the canon is treated as exclusive and fundamentalism is rife (Loader in ed. Vorster 1979:1–27).
- Black Theology as a liberation theology considers itself to be true to scripture and shows a preference for the Exodus motif (Mosothoane in ed. Vorster 1979:28–40).
- The Bible has always taken a central place in Christian theology, but the phrase ‘Word of God’ has been used relative to contemporary philosophy, hermeneutics and issues. It is therefore important to leave the phrase ‘Word of God’ to the existential (self)understanding of the Bible (Deist in ed. Vorster 1979:41–74).
- The Bible is inspired in as much as the participation of the faith community in its formation is acknowledged, and recognition is given that the Bible does not belong to the church, but to the whole world (Engelbrecht in ed. Vorster 1979:75–112).
- When historical research contradicts theological interpretation one can either reject the historical in favour of the theological or reject the theological as unhistorical. A better approach is to trace the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text (Lategan in ed. Vorster 1979:113–138).
- God’s will is not only revealed through scripture but also through God’s acts in history (Van Wyk & Vorster 2012:2).

### Third symposium 1979: ‘Church unity and diversity in the South African context’

The third symposium was held – as usual at UNISA in Pretoria – on 12 and 13 September 1979, and the papers were published in Vorster (ed. 1980), under the title *Church unity and diversity in the Southern African context*.

In the Preface, Vorster (ed. 1980a:n.p.) states that this symposium on church diversity and unity is ‘an attempt to avoid the stereotyped, interfile, post-Cottesloe argumentation’ by inviting speakers from diverse backgrounds. The speakers included, among university professors, Willem Nicol from the Dutch Reformed Church, Sam Govender from the Reformed Church in Africa, Bonaventure Hinwood from the Roman Catholic Church and Wolfram Kistner from the SACC. More than before, the articles reflected the political situation in South Africa. The following views were expressed at the symposium:

- In the New Testament, the diversity and unity of the church are two sides of the same coin (Nicol in ed. Vorster 1980:1–21).

- South Africa is the most Christian country in the world; it has an ecumenical character formed by the Cottesloe Consultation (1960), the Christian Institute of South Africa and the SACC which is, however, overshadowed by the largest church in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church, supporting the apartheid government (Viljoen in ed. Vorster 1980:22–49).
- The Roman Catholic Church is a vehicle for advancing ecumenical dialogue because it no longer sees itself as the only (true) church (Gaybba in ed. Vorster 1980:50–69).
- Neither the white Dutch Reformed Church nor the black Dutch Reformed Churches are fully ecumenically (‘horizontally’) orientated or have copyright on the Scriptural notions of being ecumenical (Govender in ed. Vorster 1980:70–81).
- Churches in South Africa must not only theologise about church unity but find and develop structures to accept all people unconditionally and promote the unity of the church as the body of Christ (Kistner in ed. Vorster 1980:82–109).
- The traditional churches in South Africa should open their arms to the Pentecostal churches and come to know their theology; however, not even Pentecostal churches need to be organisationally joined (Cronjé in ed. Vorster 1980:110–146).

### Fourth symposium 1980: ‘The spirit in Biblical perspective’

The fourth symposium of the ITR was held on 10 and 11 September 1980, on a rather apolitical topic that was, however, very relevant in the current theological discourse. Articles were presented by white, male professors mainly from UNISA, and published in Vorster (ed. 1981), *The Spirit in Biblical perspective*. Some of the main insights from this symposium are as follows:

- Where, throughout history, humans have constructed the holy, it at the same time leaves a trail of light that is frightening, creative and reassuring (Verryn in ed. Vorster 1980b:16).
- A sound pneumatology should be biblical, contextual, ecumenical, critical and intelligible; since earliest times the church has formed its thinking on the Holy Spirit around the two references to the Trinity in the New Testament (Schoeman in ed. Vorster 1980s:19–38).
- The Holy Spirit plays a major role in liturgy by moving people towards service and prayer (Barnard in ed. Vorster 1980b:39–65).
- The Spirit convinces the individual and society to bear fruit in Jesus Christ (Du Plessis in ed. Vorster 1980b:66–81).
- The Spirit guides us in our choices and decisions (Janson in ed. Vorster 1980b:82–103).

### Fifth symposium 1981: ‘Christianity among the religions’

The fifth symposium of the ITR dealt with inter-religiosity and religious pluralism, which was a brave topic to deal with theologically at the time. Again, it was a non-political

topic presented by white, male Professors from the Faculty of Theology at UNISA on 09 and 10 September 1981. In the Preface, Vorster (ed. 1981:vii) admits that this topic can be deemed to be a side issue in an overwhelmingly Christian country such as South Africa. However, it was chosen as the topic for this symposium because: (1) there is a tremendous amount of ignorance in South Africa about the present religious situation in the country; and (2) there have been important developments in the study of religion during the past three decades, which can improve our understanding of the problem of Christianity among the religions. Vorster mentions two of these developments, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts about which he delivered an article (ed. Vorster 1981:36–61), and the developments following the Second Vatican Council (Gaybba in ed. Vorster 1981:77–112).

Apart from these two articles, the symposium articles presented mainly definitions of religion and religious pluralism.

### **Sixth symposium 1982: 'Denominationalism – Its sources and implications'**

Church fragmentation has been a major characteristic of Christianity for many years, and not less so in South Africa. Although local churches had not seen this as a problem but as a question of identity, this symposium problematises fragmentation from the perspective of the (then) three Afrikaans Churches, Anglicanism, Methodism and African Independent churches. Vorster in the Preface of the published articles mentions that the articles are mainly descriptive and not evaluative (ed. Vorster 1982:ix), which is indeed the case. Interestingly, the first article of this symposium was delivered by Simon Maimela, who in 1980 became the first African professor at Unisa (apart from African languages), returning from the United States (US) after obtaining a doctorate at Harvard University. Also, the inclusion of the African Independent Churches (Daneel in ed. Vorster 1982:101–135) in mainline ecclesio-theological discussions is a remarkable achievement for the time.

### **Seventh symposium 1983: 'Church and industry'**

The seventh symposium of the ITR was held on 07 and 08 September 1983 at Unisa in collaboration with the Interdenominational Committee for Witwatersrand Industrial Mission (ICWIM). Apart from professors of the Faculty of Theology at UNISA, among the speakers were expert non-theologians such as Dr Simon Brand, Chief Executive of the Development Bank of Southern Africa, and Prof J.V. Leatt of the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town, as well as grassroots pastors. Significant was the introductory article by Klaus Nürenberger (in ed. Vorster 1983:1–36) who explained the relationship between power and economic inequalities, an important and tragic characteristic of the South African society of the time.

### **Eighth symposium 1984: 'Sexism and feminism in theological perspective'**

The ITR symposium on women's theologies through women's voices was a first in South Africa. The author did not know Willem Vorster as an academic who was personally concerned about women's issues, yet this symposium is to his credit. In his Preface (ed. Vorster 1984:x), he referred to a 'new morality' with regard to sexism and feminism at the time, specifically mentioning the recent acceptance of the Matrimonial Property Act nr. 88 of 1984, pointing out that the time has come to think theologically about women doing theology.

All the speakers at the symposium were women, with respondents being mainly men. It has to be mentioned that there were not many women theologians around in South Africa at the time. Christina Landman was a speaker, and still a lecturer in Church History at UNISA, a year or two before obtaining her doctorate, which was not on women's theologies. Denise Ackermann was the only other woman theologian from UNISA, and still a temporary junior lecturer in Practical Theology, also still not having obtained a doctorate. The author is unsure whether Felicity Edwards from Rhodes University ever called herself a 'theologian' but she specialised in Spirituality. The other speakers were women professors from Unisa, but from Psychology and Sociology, traditionally 'women's subjects'.

This was the first time that women speakers presented articles at the ITR symposia and also the last time. Ms Pretorius spoke on legal issues vis-à-vis bioethics in 1988, Ms. L.A. Gilfillan from the Department of English (UNISA) spoke on pornography at the symposium in Vorster (1989) on 'The morality of censorship', and Ms. C.M.A. Ball from the Law Faculty (UNISA) at the symposium in 1990 on 'The morality of the marketplace'. No more women theologians participated in any ITR symposia except this 1984 one, which constitutes a sort of apartheid between male and female theologians. As indicated earlier, only 7% of the 154 speakers and respondents at the 16 ITR symposia under discussion, were women.

At this symposium on women's theologies, an overview was given of feminist theology worldwide (Landman in ed. Vorster 1984:1–35). God was looked at from a feminist perspective (Edwards in ed. Vorster 1984:36–60) and the role(s) women play and should play in the church were discussed. This was basic but ground-breaking work in the sense that this was the first time women theologians voiced themselves on theological issues in South Africa – while elsewhere in the world prominent work had been published by women theologians such as Mary Daly already during the 1970s.

### **Ninth Symposium 1985: 'Views on violence'**

On 20 July 1985, the apartheid regime declared a state of emergency during which hundreds of people were killed by security forces, and thousands were imprisoned, most of

them without trial. In this year, the ITR held a symposium on violence; although Vorster (Preface in ed. Vorster 1985:x) did not link it directly to the current situation but to the (inter) national notion that 'ours is the most violent society in the Western world because it is structurally violent'. This is significant both for the outdated idea that South Africa was Western and for the view, advanced for the time, that violence in South Africa is structural, that is, because of the structural evil of apartheid.

Psychological (Viljoen in ed. Vorster 1985:1–20), church historical (Whitelaw in ed. Vorster 1985:21–42), historical and pastoral (Van Niekerk in ed. Vorster 1985:88–119) views on violence were given at the symposium. The only two black professors in Theology at Unisa, Bonganjalo Goba and Simon Maimela also participated.

### **Tenth symposium 1986: 'Reconciliation and construction'**

Although great European theologians such as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich celebrated their centenary birthdays in 1986, the ITR decided to address the current situation in South Africa at this symposium (Preface in ed. Vorster 1986:ix). 1986: The (white) Dutch Reformed Church's Church and Society [*Kerk en samelewing*] was published in 1986 and led to the 'Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk' succeeding from the Dutch Reformed Church.

This ITR symposium addressed a variety of topics on reconciliation by a variety of theologians and non-theologians. Reconciliation in a divided church (Mkhatshwa, Storey in ed. Vorster 1986:57–78), reconciliation in an ideologically divided South Africa (Smit in ed. Vorster 1986:79–112), reconciliation between religions in South Africa (Lubbe in ed. Vorster 1986:113–133) and educating towards reconciliation through a theology of education (Kriel in ed. Vorster 1986:134–150) were some of the topics presented. A variety of speakers support the notion that this symposium brought something new in terms of theological analyses of society. African theologians (Mofokeng, Sifobela, Mkhatshwa), a lawyer (Wiechers) and medic (Kriel) participated as speakers, and there was even a woman who gave a response (Kooverjee).

### **Eleventh symposium 1987: 'Are we killing God's earth'**

This symposium on 'Ecology and Theology' was ahead of its time and included many environmental specialists: theologians and non-theologians, academics and practitioners. All of them were male and white. The term 'Ecotheology' has already been coined in Europe and the US but has not yet caught on in South African theological circles Vorster (1987b).

### **Twelfth symposium 1988: 'The right to life'**

Again, this symposium was a first in dealing with bioethics from a theological point of view in South Africa.

Genetic engineering (Ferreira in ed. Vorster 1988:21–35), experimenting with human life (Quigley in ed. Vorster 1988:36–69) and the right to end life (Hulley in ed. Vorster 1988:86–105) were dealt with mainly by theologians and non-theologians, with a woman dealing with the legal aspects of bioethics (Pretorius in ed. Vorster 1988:70–85).

### **Thirteenth symposium 1989: 'The morality of censorship'**

Again, this was a progressive theme in the current theological discourse, although the speakers were non-theologians, except for Bertie du Plessis from the Department of New Testament at UNISA.

### **Fourteenth symposium 1990: 'Morality of the marketplace'**

Seven articles were presented at this symposium, and only one speaker, Johan Wolfaardt, was from an academic theological department. The rest were economists, with a reverend, Bushy Venter, from the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Soweto.

### **Fifteenth symposium 1991: 'Building a new nation'**

This was the symposium that never happened. It was planned to be held at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg on 04 and 05 September 1991 but had to be cancelled. The author remembers the reasons for this failure. The ITR put in an effort to move beyond its boundaries and had an event company organise the symposium in a place outside of Unisa. This resulted in the symposium fee being R800 per attendee, which was way out of reach for academics and clergy in 1991.

However, a book with the articles was published, *Building a new nation: The quest for a new South Africa* (ed. Vorster 1991), which contains articles by prominent opinion formers of the time, such as the historian Hermann Giliomee (in ed. Vorster 1991:30–50) and the journalist Harald Pakendorf (in ed. Vorster 1991:156–163). Only a few academic theologians participated. From the Christian side, the most significant contribution was by Beyers Naudé who in an article 'The role of religion in the reconstruction of society' (Naudé in ed. Vorster 1991:83–97) quotes extensively from the decisions of the Rustenburg Declaration. The Rustenburg Consultation in November of the previous year (1990), consisting of church leaders more representative than ever before, declared apartheid a sin and encouraged churches to act against racism and discrimination.

Contributions were also made by representatives of religions other than that of Christianity, which include a Jewish perspective from Rabbi A.E. Assabi (in ed. Vorster 1991: 76–82) and a Muslim contribution from Y. Dadoo (in ed. Vorster 1991:98–112) from the Department of Semitics at Unisa.



## Sixteenth symposium 1992: 'On being unemployed and religious'

This symposium was an effort by the ITR to, yet again, address societal problems, as is particularly evident from the article of Rev Eddie Bruwer, the secretary of the Dutch Reformed Church's Church Aid in Need (CAN), entitled 'An experience of a poor church among the poor' (Bruwer in ed. Vorster 1992:119–132). Again, the face of unemployment was explored mainly by white men, among whom there were no (Christian) theologians but two ministers, and one woman from Operation Hunger, S.I. Perlman. A Buddhist perspective was given by Michel Clasquin (in ed. Vorster 1992:96–106) from the Department of Religious Studies (UNISA).

Nobody could, of course, foresee that this would be Willem Vorster's last symposium. He suddenly and unexpectedly died three months later.

## Findings and impact

The impact of these symposia on the South African theological, religious, political and grassroots society is difficult to determine, both quantitatively and qualitatively. It is not possible to determine how often the articles in the 16 symposia books were quoted because they are not indexed. Also, interviews are difficult with participants from 50 to 36 years ago, a majority of whom are not available anymore. We also mourn the loss of prominent members of the ITR and RITR Willem Vorster, Cornel du Toit, Jansie Kilian, Khumo Makgaledise and Nan Muir.

The impact of the ITR symposia (1977–1992) will therefore be implicated in the following observations made on the contents of and speaker participation in terms of the three criteria of interpretation stipulated earlier, namely the relevance of the articles in the years leading up to the first democratic elections in 1994, the theological-social trends displayed by the 154 speakers and their contribution to the national and international religious discourses of the day.

The topics, contents and speakers of the symposia reflected the theological scene of the time. Academic theology in the 1970s and 1980s was white, male, Reformed and primarily apolitical. Even addressing societal issues theologically was considered to be '*schrecklich unappetitlich*' [terribly unappetising]. This white Reformed maleness was also reflected in the teaching staff of the Faculty of Theology at UNISA – which the ITR was to serve. It was only since 1980 that a (very) few women (Christina Landman) and Africans (Simon Maimela and Bongajalo Goba) were appointed, with non-Reformed lecturers following later in the 1980s, such as David Whitelaw (Methodist) and Brian Gaybba (Roman Catholic). However, even when there were women and Africans available – albeit few in numbers – their participation in the ITR symposia was restricted.

On the one hand it can be said that the symposia of the ITR remained predominantly white, male, elitist and colonial

with only 13 female and 16 African speakers to be found among the 154 speakers. On the other hand, there was a gradual growth towards including as speakers those who made the symposia interdenominational and interreligious with a focus on grassroots expressions of religious discourse.

Although the initial aim of the ITR was to do in-depth theological research – because an institution doing this was absent in South Africa – through its symposia, the ITR had indeed expanded its mandate to include psychological and sociological views on issues of religious concern such as pneumatology and denominationalism. It also enhanced interreligious dialogue in South Africa, and invited non-theological, non-academic and non-Christian voices into the debate on morality, with reference on topics such as bioethics, censorship and economics.

'Was the ITR influenced by the (ecclesio-)politics of the day in its choice of themes?' is a question that has to be answered partly, even mainly, in the negative. Existing in the troubled years at the height of apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s – years that led to the first democratic elections in 1994 – the ITR sometimes took an ivory tower view of political events. The topics seem rather to have been influenced by Vorster's international exposure to theological developments, especially in Europe. He called South Africa a 'Western' country.

However, the international exposure of Vorster and his colleagues in the Faculty of Theology – although they were almost exclusively white men from the Reformed tradition – brought about exciting new topics to the South African religious table. Because the ITR was not under the supervision of a specific church, it was able to present very bold topics for discussion in the public sphere. Inter-religiosity (1981), women's theologies (1984), ecotheology (1987) and bioethics (1988) are some of the religious topics that have not received public discussion in South Africa before.

## Conclusion

In the 16 years between 1977 and 1992, the ITR partially succeeded, through its annual symposia, in crossing the boundaries of the white, male, reformed and colonialist theology of its time. Could the ITR have done more in doing this? The author was connected to Unisa's Faculty of Theology since 1977 and can testify to the fact that it is not easy to evaluate the theology practised in its variety in the faculty during the 1970s and 1980s. There were 'liberal theologians' such as Vorster himself who regarded the Bible simply as literature, which brought him into conflict with other professors such as Adrio König. There were 'liberation theologians' such as David Bosch who pietistically stuck to the Bible for their public and written discourse. There were public theologians whose voices were heard constantly in the media – and then there were others who were simply religion researchers.

The author can only observe that the alternative (political) voices of David Bosch, Nico Smith and Adrio König were not



heard in these conferences. And since all of them are now deceased, we shall never know why.

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### Author's contribution

C.L. is the sole author of this research article.

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### Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

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