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TRANSFORMATION, THEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

This article addresses a specific issue, namely the ramifications for theology practised at a public university under (post)-apartheid conditions. In South Africa, scholarly opinion has not paid sufficient attention to what “transformation” entails for theology under these circumstances. The article describes transformation in detail by clarifying the main referents for this notion and attending to discourses in higher education. Heuristic categories such as inclusivity, alterity, critique, freedom and flourishing are identified that should inform multi-level and comprehensive embodiment in terms of knowledge, people and practices. The article identifies several critical issues such as the plurality of intellectual traditions and identity formation that should be explored in more detail. It also emphasises the distinctive theological task of theology at a public university – the articulation of transcendence and the construal of a non-naturalistic symbolic interpretation of reality.

1. IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

The transition from the apartheid dispensation to an inclusive democratic era inevitably prioritizes the undoing of the pervasively discriminatory system and the introduction of practices of justice. “Transformation” has become the simple way to signify this radical change taking place in the South African society, and at public institutions of higher learning. Recently, the #Rhodesmustfall movement highlighted the deep discontent with the pace of this process to redress the past.¹ It would be irresponsible for

1 For a brief, but apt discussion with good references to debates on the significance of this movement, see Wikipedia.

those involved with theology at public universities to dismiss these “signs of the times” and continue as *if* it is “business as usual”.² The disturbing reality is that theologians, apart from a few notable exceptions, who work at public universities have not adequately accounted for their epistemic practices under the post-1994 conditions. This article aims to participate in the wider discourse on transformation and investigates what this might entail, conceptually, for theology. The critical question to be examined is *what kind of theology* can be legitimized at public institutions, and how is this epistemic vision to be *embodied organisationally*. Put differently, how should theological reflection respond to the imperative of transformation and how should this be expressed in various institutional dimensions?

This article is written with an awareness of the complexity of the issue under investigation and the many aspects that emerge. I shall *not address two specific crucial issues*, namely the management of change and concrete classroom practices. The challenges of how to implement change and transformative activities of teaching and learning should be addressed in another article. Rather, this article focuses on the challenge to articulate a *conceptual frame* in order to consider the practice of theology under new circumstances.

This article aims to stimulate discussion and dialogue. It does not pretend to delineate a blueprint model. The mode of reflection is subjunctive, indicating how the practice of theology at public universities in South Africa *might* be like.

2. CONSTRUCTING THE REFERENTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

The often-stated claim that “transformation” is so vague and indistinct that it is basically an unusable term is unnecessary. In South Africa’s higher education, “transformation” has a clear *primary reference*: apartheid. The far-reaching impact of this ideology, of this social and discriminatory dispensation should be redressed. As complex and multilayered historical phenomenon, apartheid left no dimension of higher education untouched.³ “Transformation” has specific time and space co-ordinates. However, an understanding of its vast effects on institutions of knowledge transmission and production will require ongoing hermeneutical efforts to gauge its dynamics.

2 For a description of the slow pace of transformation, see Ramoupi (2014).

3 For a good recent discussion of various interpretations of “apartheid”, see Dubow (2014), especially chapter 9. He refers to “a Protean ideology and set of practices”.

A *second reference* to “transformation” is the *post-apartheid condition*.⁴ The replacement of a radical unjust system with an alternative democratic and humanising vision and practices takes place under specific local and global historical circumstances. “Transformation” has a definite direction in terms not only of memories of the past, but also of attentiveness to the present, and of hope for the future. Not only should interpreters of the past be interlocutors to thinkers of higher education, but also observers of the *present local context* (see Boraine (2014); Du Preez (2014); Johnson 2015)).⁵ The challenges of the present political landscape should inform the direction of transformation. At the same time, there is an awareness of the global merging of life. For example, in South Africa, economic, political, intellectual, technological and religious trends cannot be isolated from larger *global developments*. Thinking about transformation cannot escape the strange and ambivalent effects of, for example, globalisation and the digital revolution: greater global connection and less justice and community.⁶ South Africa is, intellectually, culturally and religiously, a similar hybrid mix in constant flux. Sociologists continually reinterpret heuristic labels such as “fundamentalism”, “secularism”, “post-secularism”, “modernism”, and “post-modernism” to account for complex shifts in society. Tracy’s (1987) notion of “plurality and ambiguity” captures the face of society most aptly. Knowledge transmission and production should be pursued in dialogue with these global contexts. Transformation of higher education cannot escape this thrust towards internationalisation.

Although “transformation” has clear semantic references, the interpretation(s) remain(s) hermeneutical and cannot escape the perspective of all constructions. How “transformation” could be profiled in terms of apartheid, the present post-apartheid condition, and the present global situation will obviously vary. The exposition of what theology transformation at South African universities might entail, will reflect the experience, values, concerns and interests of the author. Theologians Maluleke and Nadar (2004) refer dismissively to “alien fraudsters in the white academy”. Their concern should be heeded, and reflection on transformation should recognise the intrinsic connection between knowledge and power. However, the present

4 Scholars such as Hook (2014:15) prefer to write this as “(post)apartheid” to indicate the ambiguity of the term, “using it to signal that the current South African period might be read both as a definite break from, and yet also as a sub-category of, the apartheid past”.

5 A new genre of social cynicism has emerged in South Africa that highlights the reality of corruption, violence, weak service delivery, xenophobia, high unemployment, and slow racial reconciliation. These prompt political thinkers to raise the unsettling question about a “failed state”.

6 See, for example, the recent work by Piketty (2014); Turkle (2011).

challenge resembles a text with a surplus of meanings that invites many readers and many interpretations. A multi-perspective approach to this challenge is warranted and overdue.

3. ACKNOWLEDGING THE STATE OF REFLECTION

This reflection on the transformation of theology at public universities is part of a wider discourse on higher education post-1994, and the vast number of contributions already made should be acknowledged. The clarification of what “transformation” might entail should be developed in an ongoing conversation. It is obvious that various discourses have taken place. At least *five different conversations* could be identified. The aim at this stage (first draft) is only to register the contribution of these reflections.

There are obviously *official reports* by both the South African government and the official Higher Education bodies, namely the *White Papers* of 1997 and 2013. These reports convey the direction the government envisions for universities. For example, the 2013 *White Paper* (DHET 2013:4) refers explicitly to “social justice”. The so-called *Soudien* and *HESA Reports* are important and contain more nuanced articulations. The *Soudien Report* (2008:89), especially in the crucial sixth chapter, emphasises that

at the centre of epistemological transformation is curriculum reform – a reorientation away from the apartheid knowledge system, in which curriculum was used as a tool of exclusion, to a democratic curriculum that is inclusive of all human thought.

The *HESA Report* (2014:7) explains that

higher education transformation entails decolonizing, deracialising, demasculinising and degendering South African universities, and engaging with ontological and epistemological issues in all their complexity, including their implications for research, methodology, scholarship, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy.

It further points out that insufficient attention has been paid to the historical reproduction of dominant discourses, the relation of dominant discourses to social inclusion and justice, and respect for difference and diversity. A mere glance at the sections in the *HESA Report*, for instance, conveys a sense that there are various dimensions to transformation: “student access, opportunity and success”; “next generation of academics”; “institutional landscape”, and “epistemological transformation”.

A second world of investigation is found in *academic* or *scholarly reflection*. It is hardly possible to summarise the trends and directions of

this discourse. One could simply mention several recent titles of published volumes. The titles speak for themselves: *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past* (Jansen 2009); *Community, self and identity: Educating South African university students for citizenship* (Leibowitz et al. 2012); *Higher education for the public good: Views from the South* (Leibowitz 2012); *Beyond the apartheid university: Critical voices on transformation in the university sector* (De Wet 2013); *Academic freedom in a democratic South Africa: Essays and interviews on higher education and the humanities* (Higgins 2013); *Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions* (Tabensky & Matthews 2015). These examples give an impression of the urgent, but vibrant discussions taking place and of the search for a satisfying and accountable practice of higher education.

A third domain of reflection should be pointed out, namely the internal reports of South African universities. These reports, such as the compilatory one of the UFS (*Progress at the University of the Free State to combat racism and advance transformation* (2015), are relevant to theology. These articulations obviously convey how universities interpret official government policy, but also how they situate themselves in terms of wider academic discussion. In this regard, it is worth noting the views and interpretations of vice-chancellors of universities. Jansen (2012:10, 13) of the University of the Free State interprets epistemological transformation as follows: at stake is

a knowledge that is broader, more inclusive, more generous and more embracing than what we inherited from the past ... it is not a change in topics ... the same kind of beliefs, values and attitudes could form the foundation or bedrock upon which teaching, learning, assessment and examination rest.⁷

In a recent newspaper contribution, Habib (2015:1) of The University of the Witwatersrand identifies eight key strategies “to effect real transformation in the academy”: diversifying the academy; curriculum reform; student admission; residence experiences; institutional culture; institutional naming; language, and insourcing of activities.

7 In a recent newspaper column (“Transformasie moet dieper sny”, *Volksblad* 30 October 2013:8), he states that transformation implies “’n diep transformasie van die kurrikulum wat kennis buite die eng beperkings van ons blywende koloniale en apartheidsepistemologieë oopstel. Dit verg intellektuele ruimtes op kampusse waar ortodoksie bevaagteken en kritiese teorieë en navorsingsmetodes bevorder word.”

Since the 1990s, in particular, a vibrant discourse by theologians has emerged in South Africa on theological education as well as on theology and the university. Nobody has tried to map this *South African theological reflection* and attempted to distil the questions and the positions argued for. Thinkers such as Bosch, Brand, Brown, Buitendag, Burden, Conradie, Dames, Deist, C.W. du Toit, Karechi, Lategan, Maluleke, Naidoo, Naudé, Potgieter, Rossouw, Smit, and Wethmar have addressed a number of questions.⁸ The contributions by S. de Gruchy, Nadar, Botha, and Naidoo to the WCC's *Handbook of theological education in world Christianity* (Werner *et al.* 2010) should also be acknowledged. The World Council of Churches' (WCC) *Handbook of theological education in Africa* (2013) is a major scholarly work and the contribution by a vast number of South African theologians should be acknowledged. The contributions by Balcomb, Barrett, Conradie, J. de Gruchy *et al.*, and West require careful study. A genealogy of the state of reflection, however, is overdue and one may, primarily, raise the question about the *shape of the discourse*. A cursory glance at the work done heightens the unease of conspicuous neglect: engagement with official higher education statements; implications of the nature of "public" university; the epistemological ramifications of a new social dispensation; the politics of curriculum; the question of accountability of research and the generation of new knowledge, as well as the notion of the "common good". These are not even properly addressed in the major WCC volume of 2013. One cannot escape the impression of *church-centred* and disturbingly *a-historical* thinking, with a few exceptions. Work initiated by the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State, in terms of theology and the public university and epistemological transformation (Venter 2011; Venter & Tolmie 2012), *may* point to the future shape of the discussion. Issues that require attention focus on the disciplinary entanglement with apartheid; the social responsibility of theology; the engagement with the crisis of the post-apartheid context; the nature of theological knowledge; theology's potential contribution to human flourishing, and the nature of religious interpretations of reality.

A final intellectual inquiry that should be noted is what can be called *global theological reflection*. There is a virtually endless stream of publications on theological education and on the position of theology at academic institutions. This phenomenon *may* point to the deep sense that theological education is fundamentally inadequate, unsatisfactory and failing the church. However, it may also signal an awareness that radical changes are afoot which render the continued legitimacy of theology as academic pursuit questionable. In line with the express focus of this

8 See the bibliography in this regard.

article, the following concentrations in the wider discourse could be highlighted. Exciting recent work on the *history* of theology education has been published.⁹ Several major thinkers discuss the position of *theology at public universities*.¹⁰ Several volumes address the relation of *theology to the humanities*.¹¹ A number of recent studies address the relation of *theology to religious studies*.¹² The *fragmentation* of the theological disciplines and the need for *inter-disciplinarity* among theological subjects have been the subject of much concern and are discussed in works by Farley (1983) and Welker & Schweitzer (2005). Kelsey (1992) has dealt in detail with the issue of the *theological character* of theological education. Recently, *multi-* and *interculturality* have emerged as a new field of interest.¹³ Countless studies have been published on the need to *contextualise* theological education.¹⁴ These *eight discourses* by no means exhaust the scope of investigation, but may be directly relevant to South Africa's quest for transformation and offer fruitful insights for the local attempt to rethink the nature of the institutionalised study of theology.¹⁵

4. NARRATING HISTORICAL THEOLOGY PRACTICES

Thinking about transformation is to be informed not only by reflection about the needed change, but also by the state of actual practices. The features of apartheid higher education are crudely visible and simultaneously treacherously hidden. The narrative of separate universities based on race, language and geography is well known; the more sophisticated operations of legitimization remain elusive. No comprehensive genealogy of South African universities has yet been written; only sporadic studies are available.¹⁶ A similar situation applies to theology and the public

9 See González (2015); Miller (2014).

10 For good overviews, see Hauerwas (2007); D'Costa (2005); Kelsey (2009); Werner (2012).

11 See Brittain & Murphy (2011); Greggs *et al.* (2013).

12 See Ford *et al.* (2005); Cady & Brown (2002); Bird & Smith (2009). See also the UK benchmark statement 2007 at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/Theology.asp>.

13 See Esterline & Kalu (2006); Fernandez (2014).

14 For the most important sources, see Werner *et al.* (2010); Phiri & Werner (2013).

15 The substantial work on *feminism* and theological education (Chopp 1995), *globalisation* (Evans *et al.* 1993) and *rhetoric* (Cunningham 2004) should be mentioned.

16 See, for example, Davies (1996) who gives a good overview of the various development trajectories and argues for a complex relationship between state and university. The element of tension between accountability to the state and autonomy by the university has always been present.

universities in South Africa – no detailed history has been produced yet. Badat (2009) gives a good overview of the changes that have taken place since 1994; his view of the “troublesome stasis and continuities in conditions and institutions” is worth taking note of:

Limited access to students from working-class and rural poor social origins, the social composition of academic staff which remain largely white, limited decolonialisation, de-racialisation and de-gendering of knowledge production, and institutional cultures dominated by historical tradition (Badat 2009:455).

It should be emphasised that the position of theology at South African universities is *a narrative with many subplots and divergent storylines*. What happened at Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Western Cape, Rhodes, Fort Hare, Witwatersrand, Pretoria, UNISA, Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein, and Pietermaritzburg cannot be reduced to a singular history. Too many determinants were at play: church denominations, language and ethnic affiliations, as well as opposing attitudes to the apartheid ideology.

Maybe a history will employ case studies: specific dates, specific places. For example, in 1980, ninety students, all White male, all from the Dutch Reformed Church, all Afrikaans-speaking, attended a course in second-year Dogmatics. The basic textbook, written in Afrikaans by the White male professor from the Dutch Reformed Church, was informed by Dutch and, to some extent, German and Swiss Reformed theology. The text suggested no overt support of the apartheid regime and articulated no express critique. This single example starkly conveys something of the pathology of the situation at faculties at so-called Afrikaans-speaking universities. No caricature should be produced and a history should be fair to the systems and the persons to be studied. But the complicity at Afrikaans faculties – Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Potchefstroom, and Bloemfontein – should not be minimised. The problematic nature was found in the Reformed confessional dominance, the role of church oversight, racialised staff and student profiles, as well as subtle curricular legitimization. It would also be a very interesting study to take stock of the research done on doctoral level – choice of research problem, application of research paradigms and methodologies, as well as scope of subject interlocutors.

To account for *the history of theology* as academic endeavour is a *complex* task. One should also study individual disciplines, academic societies, and the travails of academic journals. These are all sources for examining the relationship between an ideology such as apartheid and knowledge transmission and generation. Vast possibilities exist for exciting and provocative research. A detailed genealogy should include an

investigation of institutions, scholars, student profiles, curricula, textbooks, research agendas, denominations, as well as societies and journals.

Such a narrative would have to record the *drastic changes* that have taken place. Since the 1990s, in particular, the face of theology at universities has been reconstructed. Landman (2013:239) describes the changes as follows:

Over the past thirty years, theological education in South Africa has developed from being white, male and/or denominational to liberalational, ecumenical and inclusive of gender, race and belief.

Some faculties disappeared or contracted in mere departments; student profiles have started to reflect the demographic diversity of the country and, to some minor extent, lecturers' identities have been broadened to include women and Black people. To what extent curricula, and the underlying epistemological foundations, in particular, have been re-imagined is an open question. The same applies to research agendas. Although new fashionable topics such as ecology were introduced, the unsettling question remains as to whether a radical self-critique has really taken place. Some faculties have produced reflections, in which stock has been taken of disciplines.¹⁷

The *lingering concern*, especially at historically White and Afrikaans-speaking universities, remains the role of Reformed churches, in particular, and their oversight influence, the racial imbalance of teaching staff, unreflective epistemological approaches, and the choice of research agendas. Credit should be given to changes that have taken place; however, honesty is necessary about outstanding reconstructive work.

The lack of articulated position papers is a sad neglect by faculties. There is an urgent *need for a joint manifesto* that articulates a position about – at least – the following issues: the apartheid past; the structural position of theology at the university and its relationship to the humanities; the role of religion in public life and at public institutions; accountability in terms of primary “publics” and the common good; the oversight role of participating churches; the notion of religious truth-claims; alterity; justice, and agency. Obviously, the unique and distinctive task of theology beyond “ulterior motives” should be argued.

17 See the informative issue of *Verbum et Ecclesia* 30 (2009/3) with histories of the various departments at the University of Pretoria, and *Scriptura* 100 (2009/1) with discussion on ‘*Quo Vadis’ Theology?*’ by Stellenbosch theologians of various disciplines. The Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State produced something similar, albeit some time ago, in the *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap* 1991(3).

5. SPECIFYING HEURISTIC CATEGORIES FOR TRANSFORMATION OF THEOLOGY

To clarify the ramifications of transformation for theology, a set of principles or heuristic (that is, problem-solving) categories for thinking are required that distil the thrust of intricate discourses. This will function as a mental map to navigate an unknown terrain, or even as a matrix of intuitions to allow responses to ever-new challenges.

In this instance, I suggest *an alternative* to the fundamental character of apartheid. These are *oppositional categories* to allow a new way of thinking and of acting in the sphere of higher education, specifically when doing theology. These will function comprehensively in terms of *knowledge, people and systems/practices*.

5.1 Inclusivity

Apartheid was an all-embracing ideology of exclusion that was manifested in systems and practices. A new approach should pursue inclusion of knowledges, intellectual traditions, and people (students, administrative and teaching staff). At stake is a sense of *representativity* of the rich diversity of South Africa in all its dimensions. For theology, this might entail the broadening of the traditional canon of confessional epistemic orientation, of the “publics” of theology, of methodological approaches and perspectives, as well as of the demographic profile of the institution in terms of staff and students. Sectional interest, in terms of one confessional ecclesial tradition, should be replaced by the (contested) notion of the ‘common good’.¹⁸ In theological jargon, the potential of the notion of “catholicity” should be explored. A transformed theology is *spacious*.¹⁹

5.2 Alterity

Exclusion in the apartheid dispensation was concretely manifested in the racial “other” and, more subtly, in discrimination against gender and the sexual other. Inclusion should be interpreted in terms of subalterity, agency and *justice*. Transformation should pay express attention to marginalised knowledges and people. For theology, the implications are obvious. “Otherness”, in its myriad historical expressions, should be prominent in the re-envisioning of theology and her concomitant practices. At stake is a radical redefinition of the operating notion of *identity*: is it constructed

18 See the volume of essays on higher education and the common good edited by Kezar *et al.* (2005).

19 The implicit reference to the “turn to space” should be registered (see Allen 1999).

self-referentially, or in terms of the “embrace of the other”? “Epistemic justice” could function as a productive ethical compass in this regard. Many fruitful corresponding notions have been formulated and could assist theology – for example, “hospitality” and the “face of the other”. Available resources should be utilised in theology.

5.3 Critique

The pervasive sense of superiority and certainty in the apartheid system cannot go unnoticed. It was a mind-set deeply steeped in power. The obvious and covert malpractices, for example “petty apartheid”, are well known; the more sophisticated forms, such as the underlying epistemology, are often neglected. A great deal of research is still required in this regard, but the extreme forms of modernism and positivism should not be missed. It was a self-referential ideology, prone to closure and resistant to dialogue and questioning. The operations in terms of higher education are still to be narrated in full, and an archaeology of epistemic power strategies is to be undertaken. Transformation will go against the grain of this entire constellation of certainty, replacing it with an epistemology of questioning, self-critique, and tentativeness. The ramifications for theology are obvious: a new way of doing theology will be much more *cruciform*, consistently applying a hermeneutics of suspicion to its own truth claims.

5.4 Freedom

Observers are well aware of the autocratic and authoritarian character of apartheid, and of its main exponents and leaders, in particular. Conformity and obedience were the valued ethos. A new democratic era gives rise to a different ethos: freedom, dialogue, conversation, innovation, and creativity. Theology, especially in its institutionalised form, has always thriven on control. The mere existence of a “kuratorium” acutely epitomised this tendency. What it means to do theology in freedom should still be experienced. Even more important is the question: What notions of the divine correspond to the pathology of conformity and, alternatively, to creativity and openness to newness?

5.5 Flourishing

Apartheid will arguably be remembered for its capacity to inflict suffering on people. This dark side should never be minimised or negated. A redressed, transformed dispensation intends to pursue exactly the opposite: the humanisation of all citizens, the flourishing of all. This has obvious and vast implications for knowledge practices: What knowledge transmission

and generation will contribute to this project of social and inclusive well-being? At stake is the notion of epistemic *performativity*. This has wide ramifications for theology: What student attributes are advocated and nurtured with our curricula? Whom and what does our research serve and in what manner? Knowledge transmission and generation are radically ethical practices and should be accounted for publicly. At stake are critically important questions: What public good does religion entail? What is the relationship between religion and theology in terms of citizenship? Are the soteriological promises of religions devoid of material content, or do they hold potential for a much-needed social contribution? The very character of religion and theology as intellectual self-reflection cannot escape this public scrutiny.

“Transformation” ultimately entails a comprehensive alternative vision to apartheid. It is a new way of thinking, acting and organising – a new “social imaginary”²⁰ of being human in the South African context. For theology at institutions of higher learning, this implies to be *epistemically spacious and catholic, just and hospitable, cruciform, free and creative, and ethically accountable*. These knowledge values should be embodied in concrete institutional ways.

One crucial perspective should be pointed out. These *cyphers* for secular transformation at public institutions of higher education are *not alien* to the very matrix of the Christian faith. The Judeo-Christian tradition has, from its earliest traditional strata, manifested a *sensitivity* to spaciousness, to justice for the foreigner, the widow and the orphan, to power in weakness, to surprising newness, and to healing. These are inherently Christian values, originating from a specific construal and concept of the divine. In the Old and New Testament, God is the God of the nations, of those who suffer; the God who died on the cross and who did new things in history. God is the One who brings liberation, righteousness, reconciliation – life to people. The challenge is how could this be expressed epistemologically in theology as academic pursuit, and how is this articulated organisationally at departments and faculties of theology. Our very practices and systems should be *iconic* of our vision of the divine.

20 For this most suggestive notion, see Taylor (2004), the Canadian philosopher, who describes it as follows: “By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in its disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, and the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”

6. EMBODYING TRANSFORMATION

Transformation should be manifested, expressed, or “happen” in at least three domains: *knowledge*, of *people* and of *practices*.²¹

6.1 Knowledge

Central to the existence of a university is *knowledge* – the transmission of existing knowledge and the generation of new knowledge. In this instance, transformation remains an elusive ideal in South Africa. It is an open question as to what extent the *curricula* of academic programmes and *research agendas* of theology have been radically re-constructed.

Concerning curricula, four questions could convey what is at stake. *Whose knowledge* is transmitted? *Whose perspective* is informing the knowledge? *To what effect* is the knowledge conveyed? *Who* are the *conversation partners*? For example, at traditional Afrikaans universities, where there are still faculties of theology, the controlling optic is still Dutch Calvinist, White male bourgeoisie, and church centred. Or have non-Reformed views, subaltern perspectives and social interests been incorporated? Is there dialogue with non-theological sources of knowledge such as the sciences and the arts?

On elementary curriculum level, transformation could be addressed in terms of motifs, topics and themes. For example, does a course in Ethics address the land question, reconciliation, and economic justice? However, the imperative of transformation penetrates much deeper by destabilising a great *academic myth*, namely that of one stable, final and essential canonical view. For example, when the phenomenon of religious salvation is curricularly addressed, what knowledge is exactly transmitted? Is it still a privatised notion impacted by a legal metaphor of the Reformation? Transformation has heightened the challenge of navigating multiple sources, perspectives, interlocutors, and formative impacts. To a certain extent, transformation has complicated curriculum construction, beyond the inclusion or omission of mere themes or motifs. Curriculum revision, in a transformative key, should address a *large scope* of questions: the spectrum of the programme mix; the underlying curriculum framework;²² the structure and integration of the theological encyclopaedia; sources of knowledge; operative intellectual traditions; orientations of the state of scholarship, and implicit epistemology. All of these would have some connection with

21 For various constructive treatments of this multi-faceted and integrative human phenomenon, see Volf & Bass (2002).

22 For an excellent overview of developments since the influential modernist models of Tyler and Taba, see Hunkins & Hammill (1995).

the five heuristic categories identified earlier.²³ A curriculum notion of “knowledge being socially organised or constructed” (Young 1975:100) is virtually inescapable; the “politics of the curriculum” should be faced and accounted for. Theology should accept the imperative of a ‘socially responsive’ curriculum (Favis & McMillan 2009).

Concerning research, four questions could indicate the challenge of transformation. *Whose research* agenda is pursued? *Who benefits* from the research? What counts as meaningful and *significant research*? What is the *character of knowledge* created? Most often, research problems are indicative of the idiosyncratic interests of students or study leaders, divorced from pressing social and intellectual exigencies. Research at public institutions should be ethically accountable to the common good of society, and not to an individual or some esoteric academic peer group in Europe. There is an urgent need for an articulation of a *criteriaology* for *meaningful research* that should address issues of accountability and significance. This is a pressing challenge for theology.²⁴

In theological research, especially in some of the subdisciplines that utilise empirical research, there is most often a fixation on methodology. The more fundamental determinant – a *research paradigm*²⁵ – should be grasped. The nature of knowledge advocated in this instance requires paradigms that extend beyond typical positivistic ones.

6.2 People

The extent to which the country’s demographical constitution is reflected in the *people* profile is a most visible way to gauge change. In this instance, the focus is on under- and postgraduate *student* representation, as well as on *administrative* and *teaching staff*. A reasonable expectation would have been that, after twenty-one years of a new dispensation, a significant – if not majority – number of Black people would be represented. The progress varies from institution to institution. Some progress has been made in terms of postgraduate student numbers; undergraduate enrolment remains a cause of concern. White women still occupy most of the administrative posts. The appointment of Black scholars in teaching posts, especially in

23 For only one example, see the discussion of “diversity scholarship” by Cross (2004).

24 It is conspicuous how hardly any fundamental reflection is available on the nature of theological research. For some outstanding work, see Ritschl (1996); Ulrich (2006).

25 For a discussion, see Mittwede (2012).

senior positions, remains deplorable.²⁶ The underlying dynamics could be complex, but the fact remains that this unsatisfactory situation requires serious planning and commitment.

6.3 Practices

Institutional “*practices*” is an inclusive indicator signifying systems, activities, organisational culture, and symbols. Mental convictions are embodied in myriad ways in an organisation; some expressions are visible and overt; others are more subtle. I mention six examples: *leadership; control regimes; daily relations and interaction including language preference; energy foci; international networking, and spatial arrangement*. It is significant that White males are still in leadership positions at the four remaining faculties of theology in South Africa. The continuing influence of the “*kuratoria*” of the Reformed churches at the four faculties is perplexing and anachronistic; many have not grasped the implications of a “public” university. The imbalance between minuscule financing and excessive influence must stop. Whether Black students “*feel at home*”²⁷ cannot be answered, but the hunch is fairly negative. Commitment to transformation could transpire in many ways, for example, how resources and energy are used to nurture a next generation of young scholars. The majority of the international networking remains trapped in a northern hemisphere gravitational pull. Besides a few exceptions such as the NetACT project initiated at the Stellenbosch University, contact with the South, especially Africa, remains sporadic. Spatially, places have an emotional “*feel*”; whether theology has made a transformative “*turn to space*” is debatable.

Each faculty has a certain ecology – a unique identity, formed by geographic location, denominational involvement, personality and theology of scholars, as well as management and leadership approach. No blueprint can obviously be pressed on each institution. The resistances wrought by each ecology should be carefully gauged. Intellectual commitment and strategic calibration will finally determine to what extent each institution faces up to the urgent moral and scholarly challenges.

7. ENGAGING CRITICAL QUESTIONS

To clarify the implications of transformation for theology at South African universities, the complexity of this task should not be underestimated. In this section, the discussion continues by highlighting a number of

26 For an explanation as to why the identity of lecturers matters, see Haupt (2015).

27 See the apt title of the volume by Tabensky & Matthews (2015): “Being at home”.

critical issues that should be addressed in the process of gaining greater understanding. Obviously, these six issues do not exhaust the possibilities.

7.1 The notion of “public” university

The reference to theology (and religion) at a “public” university has been used without any explanation. In this instance, two relevant issues emerge: the precise meaning of “public” and the legitimization of religion as field of study at a university. Two wider discourses emerge that should be taken note of. Both the university and religion as such are contested spaces and are intensively theorised.²⁸ The pertinent question in the South African context is whether “public” automatically implies secular. This has serious implications. In a country such as South Africa, with its large adherence to religion, could “public” have this secularising thrust? The equation of publicality with secularity is too readily made and accepted. What is needed is a continuing conversation on the meanings of this category.²⁹ A similar ambiguity is encountered with regard to religion. Practitioners assume too easily that religion belongs at a university and should be studied in a separate faculty. A different kind of self-critique is required in this instance. Why should religion and theology, with its intense private and divisive character and deplorable track record, be studied at a university, and where should it be located in terms of the study of humanities? In a post-secular era, the influence of religion is recognised, but it still does not imply that it necessarily contributes to human and planetary development and well-being. The title of Bowker’s recent book – *Why religions matter* (2015) – captures the crux of the discussion; this should be accounted for. Theology should not only resist an automatic secularising interpretation of “public” university, but also engage in critical self-questioning about the function of religion. The future for theology at a university should be navigated between the Scylla of intolerant secularism and the Charybdis of smug self-justification.

28 Lange (2012) maps the various understandings of the purpose of the university in South Africa since 1995; however, she does not discuss the question as it is raised in this paragraph. She points out how “education for citizenship” has not received adequate attention (2012:55).

29 See the comprehensive discussion by Smit (2008:20) who observes: “Dit het te make met die *algemene welsyn*, die *algemene wil* en die *algemene konsensus* oor waardes en belange in die samelewing”.

7.2 “Turn to Africa”

The challenge of doing African theology has been on the theological agenda for over half a century and it still occupies a marginal space in the curricula of theology programmes. As a rule, missiologists or a few Black theologians keep the ideal alive;³⁰ the rest are more irritated than convinced of its viability. One of the main tasks of transforming theology will entail taking this with utmost seriousness. Theology should be pursued with a sense of place, of commitment to a concrete location. Although “Africa” is a construct,³¹ and one should account for one’s exact signification when referring, this should not deter one from respecting the histories and experiences of the people of this continent. The *fundamental question* in terms of theology should be clearly discerned: Should these histories and experiences be a mere *appendix* to existing curricula or should they become an alternative governing *optic* to re-conceptualise the curricula?³² The first possibility renders Africa a mere extension of the West. In a strict Kuhnian sense, a paradigm shift should take place in this instance. One long-overdue dialogue is that between theology and African Studies. It is crucial to engage African intellectuals and their views on the present state of postcolonial Africa. Another challenge is to appreciate the intellectual tradition(s) of various forms of Africa-oriented Christianities. Although this has not been institutionalised, like those of mainline traditions, its sheer influence requires study.

7.3 Epistemology

The question that is rarely, if at all, addressed is whether the post-apartheid conditions do not require a specific approach to the nature of knowledge. The danger is real that transformation could be approached and conceptualised quite superficially. The unmaking of knowledge born under hegemonic and discriminatory circumstances requires drastic intervention. A number of recent titles in epistemology could be mentioned that might signal a way forward. Works such as *Epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007), *The epistemology of resistance* (Medina 2013), and *Epistemologies of the South* (De Sousa Santos 2014) argue that knowledge, justice, ethics and subalterity are intricately linked. Uncritical and realist approaches to epistemology mask the implicit oppressive strategies of human ways of knowing. Theology has not explored this field of scholarship and it might

30 The volume edited by Stinton (2010) gives a good overview of the current state of scholarship.

31 In an interesting discussion, Fourie (2015) points to four concepts of Africa: place, commodity, condition, and ideal.

32 For a discussion of this, see Garuba (2015).

be one of the urgent tasks, in the South African context, to delineate the contours of such an epistemology. The interface between knowledge and society is especially of utmost importance. The fairly new development of a *social epistemology* should be explored for a fruitful application in the South African context.³³

7.4 Disciplinary developments

The existence of individual subject disciplines cannot be ignored. Until the present, the treatment of transformation has been done in a fairly vague and generalised sense. “Theology” is constituted by an encyclopaedic range of disciplines. The issue about transformation becomes acute and quite challenging when, for example, the heuristic perspectives discussed in section five are applied to specific subject areas such as New Testament, Liturgics, and Church History. Furthermore, what would a thorough African rethinking of these disciplines entail? Resistance to change is often encountered on this level, as subject scholars claim that their disciplines have fixed questions, approaches and methodologies – this is how it has been done internationally. For transformation to find fertile soil, a project has to be undertaken by disciplines, especially in a South African context: practitioners should narrate the histories of their disciplines, the shifts in the twentieth century, and the sporadic re-envisioning attempts in South Africa.³⁴ Disciplines have histories, and these interactions with social conditions should be mapped. At the same time, no theological discipline escaped from critical mutations and trajectories developed in the twentieth century. There have been creative attempts, in the South African context, to question and rethink these fields of study. Such a project that compiles bibliographical references to studies undertaken and that describes the contemporary states of the disciplines would make an immense contribution to scholarly reflection. Only when there is an acquaintance with the history of a discipline and contemporary trends could meaningful deliberation about the future of these subject areas take place. The task is daunting, but the existence of good resources should not be underestimated. One fruitful spin-off of such a project should be observed: such a narration would also assist in identifying research areas that deserve careful investigation. It is unlikely that meaningful research contribution could be made without an acquaintance with the current state of scholarship.

33 See Jacobson (2007).

34 Work already undertaken should be acknowledged. For example, on the state of New Testament scholarship, see De Villiers (1989); Du Toit (1993a, 1993b, 1994); Van Zyl (2000).

Often an appeal is made to “academic freedom” when the need for transformation is discussed. The implication is evident: academics can pursue their curricular and research agendas. This is an obvious conservative rhetorical ploy to escape social accountability. Transformation does not justify any state interference; it is an ethical imperative to redress the injustice of the apartheid era. To embrace transformation is to acknowledge the moral unacceptability of this ideology and the responsibility to undo that. Du Toit (2000:102) perceptively distinguishes a republican notion of academic freedom from a liberal one that is not antithetical to social accountability. A republican approach considers academic freedom a civic virtue and responsibility. This is clearly the interpretation to be preferred.

7.5 Identity, plurality and coherence of truth

The central and arguably most important challenge to address in an effort to rethink the nature of theology at a public university is probably the juggling of plurality and identity. A university requires diversity of intellectual traditions and epistemic perspectives; churches require coherent confessional identities. How to align these two matrices of values is the critical issue. One could, however, raise the question as to whether, in even a previous dispensation, Reformed theology succeeded in nurturing an integrated theological identity. For a long time, discontent has been expressed about the fragmentation of the theological encyclopaedia; the disciplines were insularly presented, and individual students had to establish some form of unified vision. The alleged unity was a perceived and deceptive coherence, and not a material one at all. The great contribution of postmodernity was at least to theorise the fragmentation.³⁵ The character of the intellectual as “bricoleur”³⁶ has acquired wide currency.

Perhaps the post-apartheid context would ironically re-open the issue. Increasingly, one finds an awareness that the human “self” is not simplistically and mono-dimensionally constructed; the human self is complex and multidimensional. This has direct implications for theology and the nurturing of student attributes. Naïve conceptions of unity and coherence should be dismissed. Life is complex; theology should be complex.

Formally, however, a theology could contribute to an integrated self, a theology with a clear and specific “attentiveness”.³⁷ In the South African

35 See, for example, Tracy’s (1999) notion of “gathering the fragments”.

36 See Kearney (1988:13): “someone who plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created”.

37 Recently, the well-known Evangelical theologian McGrath (2012) advocated the idea of “theological attentiveness”. He also argues for the need of “a theology of place”.

context, this could be developed as mindfulness of the past, present and future. A theology is to be developed which has a sense of *memory*,³⁸ *engagement* and *hope*.³⁹ Such an orientation could function centripetally. This leaves wide scope and possibilities for creative curriculum construction.

Materially, the imperative of plurality, diversity and multi-perspectivism will be inescapable. How to curricularly navigate ‘ecumenical’ and ‘catholic’ will be a particularly difficult challenge, but not an impossible ideal. Clever manoeuvring between fundamental and elective modules could be one way forward. It should be emphasised that the South African context poses, in a sense, unique intellectual tasks. The demand is for new creative and imaginative exploration, for new categories and new labels.

Transformation cannot be conceptualised *in abstracto* as if there were no religious communities to embody these beliefs. In Christian theology, the maxim *fides quaerens intellectum* has held sway for a long time. The problem, especially with Reformed communities that form the backbone of vast numbers of undergraduate students at faculties, is that the transition to democracy and the peculiar character of the post-apartheid context engendered severe reactionary attitudes.⁴⁰ The churches are not ready for the changes proposed in this article. This should be perceived as part of a larger failure by churches, in general, in South Africa, to find a compass direction post-1994.⁴¹ Whereas this article has argued for a broadening of identity, churches move exactly in the opposite direction – retreat to secure, introvert and fundamental positions. The relationship between academy and church deserves careful study. The exact nature of this relationship and what this might entail for theology should be the focus of sensitive and wise discernment.

It is unavoidable that one should drink from as many wells as possible. In a subject such as systematic theology, scholars such as Kärkkäinen, Coakley, and Kang pursue potentially promising projects. They are all aware of a radically changing social and intellectual horizon. Kärkkäinen’s (2013:1-33) project of “a constructive Christian theology for a pluralistic world” intentionally advocates an inclusive, dialogical and hospitable vision. Coakley (2013) proposes a *théologie totale* and engages a baffling

38 For an excellent treatment of the state of scholarship on memory and its implications for theology, see Vosloo’s (2015) inaugural lecture.

39 Botman (2011), former vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University, consistently emphasised the central role of hope at a university and in post-apartheid South Africa.

40 Excellent discussions, from different angles, can be found in Durand (2002); Theron (2008); Giliomee (2014).

41 See Egan (2007); Cuthbertson (2008); Kumalo (2014).

range of disciplines – Patristic Theology, Feminist Theory, Science, and Art. With her cosmopolitan theology, Kang (2013) deliberately tries to cross the borders of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and ability. Referring to these international scholars by no means implies that the constructive work done by South African theologians is ignored. For example, in systematic theology, reflection on feminist theology, public theology, ecological theology and faith-science dialogue⁴² deserve careful attention. The work by major South African theologians such as De Gruchy and Smit, who both have an acute sense of the social responsibility of theology, should be studied in-depth to find direction for the future.⁴³

7.6 Theological about transformation of theology?

There is a real danger for theology to become subservient to yet another secular social project. In her struggle for institutional survival, theology could easily become another social theory or practice with a thin veneer of civil religion. The discourse that struggles with the question as to what makes theological education *theological* is a crucial one that should also be conducted in the South African context.⁴⁴ I suggest that two specific perspectives or approaches inform the unique identity of theology: reference to *transcendence* and a religious *symbolic world*. Obviously, these are distinctively named by each religion. Christianity names these in terms of a specific Trinitarian construal of the divine and of a triadic interpretation of reality – creation, salvation and fulfilment. This is radically opposed to an immanentist and naturalist interpretation of reality. If theology and the study of religion aspire to keep a distinctive identity, these two perspectives should be developed in each subject discipline in dialogue with non-religious interpretations.

One should not miss the issue in this instance. The fundamental question is whether transcendence (and then specifically named as divinity, or God) and the religious symbolic world contradict, inhibit, support, or complement other scientific truth-seeking endeavours. The focus is on more than simply the preparation of religious professionals to maintain the continuation of introvert ecclesial communities. The question is how reality, truth and meaning are constructed. The task for *Christian* theology would be to argue that her conceptualisation of God stimulates creativity, novelty, innovation, justice and flourishing, and that this faith is ultimately indispensable for a

42 For excellent overviews of these theological contributions in South Africa, see Haddad 2013; De Villiers 2011; Conradie 2013; Conradie & Du Toit (in press).

43 For an excellent introduction to his vast oeuvre, see De Gruchy 2014. Smit's (2007-2013) five-volume collected essays are indispensable reading.

44 See, for example, Robinson & Smit 1996.

meaningful life. Volf (2005:206) correctly views theology as “dancing for God”. Moltmann (2008:31) concurs with this:

It is simple but true: theology has only one, single problem – God.
We are theologians for God’s sake. God is our passion – God is our
torment – God is our joy. To glorify God is our happiness.

The position advanced in this article elicits one important ramification: the imperative of vibrant dialogue among all the disciplines. Theology at a public university should not retreat in a safe and immunised space. She should initiate multi- and interdisciplinary conversation on the “big issues” at a university. Theology is the public conscience that human and cosmic existence has a depth dimension that cannot be captured and banalised in simplistic schemes. As witness to transcendence, theology should resist closure and continually remind all disciplines of the depth dimension of reality. A transformed theology may – ironically – escape from its Babylonian captivity of ecclesial self-occupation and be revitalised to reach deeper and wider and, finally, be more meaningful.

8. EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY

This article proposes a dynamic and hermeneutical process. The nature of apartheid is open to new layers of discovery, and such will be the nature of higher education in a democratic era. Only a *theologia in via* may suffice – a theology that journeys to ever new faith in the Divine and to ever greater justice for society. However, this should be a theology that is willing to question herself, a theology courageous to venture into uncharted terrain and redefine herself. To embrace the challenge of transformation could be the moment of revitalization for theology. It prompts theology to consider afresh her very nature, task and responsibility. Theology is confronted to cross traditional disciplinary boundaries to venture into unknown territory. This would, inevitably, result in innovation, creativity and adventure.⁴⁵

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