

REFORMED IDENTITY AND AFRICA: SOME REMARKS¹

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1. Recurring question

Cannot miss - how often the question about identity is raised
Inevitably one wonders: why?

Answers unsatisfactory

Mere catharsis - inability to deal with changes

Signify - complexity of 'capturing' identity

Elusiveness of this tradition

Large number of available reflections available

Increasingly the question about Ref Identity and Africa³

2. Continuing myths

Right at beginning dispel incorrect understandings, expectations

Identity not - stable, essence out there which can be 'domesticated'

Cannot be reduced to a single theological essence, e.g. *sola Scriptura*, or predestination.

Identity - multi-faceted, dynamic (it happens), lived reality

Analogy of personal identity

Speak, articulate - identity 'constructed', tentative, preliminary. Element of the more

Element of *recognisability*

3. Identifying structures of religious identity

Does not paralyze us

N Smart identities 'dimensions of the sacred'⁴

Ritual dimension

Doctrinal dimension

Narrative dimension

Experiential dimension

Ethical dimension

Organisational/social dimension

Material/artistic dimension

Often reduction to the doctrinal, or confessional⁵.

Intimate interplay between interpretation of life and life practices

Identity is a configuration of many elements which form a 'Gestalt', a unity, even if it contains contradictions and ambiguities.

There is a *certain logic* to a religious tradition

4. Naming the influences

Crisis of identity - radical changes in society, esp. after WW2, and the 1960s

Liberation & decolonisation movements, emergence of culture of human rights

¹ Presentation: Reformed Family Forum, Beitswil, 30th July 2017.

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³ See e.g. Phiri, J P 2016. *Reformed theology in Africa*, in Nimmo, P T & Ferguson, D A S (eds) 2016. *The Cambridge companion to Reformed theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 285-295. Tabaka, R S 2014. 'On being African and Reformed? Towards an African Reformed theology enthused by an interlocution of those on the margins of society', *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2070, 7 pages, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hus.v70i01.2070>.

⁴ See Smart, N 1996. *Dimensions of the sacred: An anatomy of the world's beliefs*. London: HarperCollins.

⁵ For an excellent treatment of Reformed confessional theology, see Robbs, J 1998. *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox. For a recent discussion see Smit, D 2011. Trends and directions in Reformed theology. *The Expository Times* 122(7):313-326. Smit has become known for his view that "the Reformed story is a story of many stories".

Growing realisation of exclusion, and otherness (alterity), and subsequent retrieval of 'other' perspectives
 Shift of centre of gravity from Europe to the South and coming of Global Christianity
 Culture as a critical conversation partner for theology, insistence on contextual theology
 Acceleration of globalisation, coming of the digital era, influence of media
 Identity and agency, and justice
 Decolonisation as continuing debate
 Plurality

2. Intimating the challenges

2.1 Retrieving intuitions

Importance of memory – identity and roots
 Continuing relevance of the Reformation.
 Scholarship of Reformation and rethinking of conventional views
 Construction of a profile

Bible and sources of authority

Central place of salvation

Renewal of the church

Transformation of society

Resistance to superstition, non-didamurgical

Valuing of reason and education, theological reflection

African reception of Reformation – new trend in scholarship⁵

Ethics of memory – what do we remember, what do we retrieve?⁶

2.2 Exploring wisdom

Memory and interpretation (hermeneutics), no static, mechanic process

Jadamer – hermeneutics/interpretation takes place in the interaction of two horizons

Interplay between context (Africa) and memory (Reformation)

Examples:

Scripture and hermeneutics

Grace and social forms, and new metaphors (importance of language!)

Justice and human rights

Simplicity, fragility and a theology of enough and economic justice

Great task in Africa – rethinking, reinterpretation of central tenets of our faith⁷

Basically every Christian doctrine

The crux of our theme may be found, arguably, precisely here.

The critical question here should be clearly seen: how do we understand 'Africa'?⁸ Do we think in terms of traditional Africa, modernist Africa or even post-colonial Africa?
What is prioritised? The open frontier between the spirit and the material worlds?¹⁰ Or the historical suffering in the colonial era? Or the continuing injustice in a global liberal-economic dispensation? Or the spread of pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel?

See e.g. Jenkins, P. 2016. *What hath Wittenberg to do with Lagos? Sixteenth-century Protestantism and global South Christianity*, in Howard, T. A. & Noll, M. A. (eds), *Protestantism after 500 years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 208-27.

See the excellent articles in the *Economical Review* 69(2), 2017 with contributions e.g. on protest (Helmer), politics of omnivorousness (Mitsa), women (Stjerna), economics (Kwok), social justice (Cervantes-Ortiz).

It may be worthwhile to refer also to the well-known definition of tradition by MacIntyre – "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition". See MacIntyre, A. 1985. *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth, p. 222.

See e.g. Fourie who argues that "Africa can be conceived of as a place, a commodity, a condition and an ideal". Fourie W., 015. 'Four concepts of Africa', *HFS Theological Studies/ Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #2847, 10 pages. <http://x.doi.org/10.4102/hfs.v71i3.2847>

These question underline utmost importance of theologizing by African Christians themselves and the production of theologies with "feet-on-the-ground".

5.3 Unlearning vices

Honesty in every tradition about its 'dark side'

Personally – view the Ref tradition as *paradoxical* tradition. Examples

Values reason, education – resistant to incorporate other sources of knowledge

Socially 'revolutionary' – tend to be resistant to change, deeply conservative

Claim to be biblical – read selectively, e.g. in terms of justice, hospitality

Claim to be holistic – body as problematic

Confess the importance of Spirit – hesitant in the face of the 'movements of the Spirit'

Perennial problems: e.g. ecclesial unity, intolerance towards otherness and plurality

5.4 Innovating the agenda

Sensitive antenna necessary for social changes, challenges

Inescapable imperatives – ecology, sexuality, economic justice, displacement of people, spiritual

'hunger' for experience

Immense task, immense opportunity to make a contribution

6. Embracing the responsibility for the future

What kind of question is the identity question?

Not one of personal survival

But one of responsibility of personal and communal flourishing, question of calling

Conviction – can make a public contribution

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why is the identity question so often raised?
- What is the popular conception of 'Reformed identity'?
- What can be done to stimulate a vibrant theological output/reflection?
- Does the Reformed tradition have a long-term future in Africa?
- What is the most crucial contribution the Reformed Church(es) can make in Southern Africa?

¹⁰ See the discussion by Walls, A. F. 2002. *The cross-cultural process in Christian history*. NY, Maryknoll: Orbis, esp. pp. 122-129.