


The unfinished business of Church history

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The Church will presumably have unfinished business until the day when Christ returns. And Church history will, in gruesome details, bear witness to the missed opportunities, the failures and wrongdoings and all the mistakes made. This is especially true in South Africa where racial tensions, violence, crimes and numerous other evils prevail, while the bride of Christ, in hiding from the realities of life, is awaiting death. The first part of the article explains why this is the case and the second part proposes some rectifications towards how adjudication and reconciliation can be attained through new life in a novel way of being Church to the world.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Christians, theologians and Church historians must openly and honestly expose the use and abuse of (Church) history, and the role that collective memory played in constructing misleading perceptions of the past through the implementation of motivated reasoning. A comprehensive, amended rewriting of Church history that includes all sources that fed Christianity in South Africa during the past nearly 370 years must reconceptualise our religious past towards a healing future. This can promote unity and bring closure to at least some issues while providing a renewed focus on the ongoing need for constant reformation, a renewed comprehension of spirituality, and inspiring Missiology towards a new, serving Christianity in a broken and bleeding society.

Keywords: South African Church history; mnemohistory; disunity; semper reformanda; priesthood of all believers; spirituality; missiology.

Introduction

'The past rushes in when the future collapses.' John Torpey (2008:24)

'Why bother with History?' asked Southgate (2000), echoing the question often heard when past events are brought into discussions about current crises. Noting the statements by Gibbon (1776) that history is little more than a register of crimes, follies and the misfortunes of mankind, together with Dominick LaCapra's (2014) view that history writing is equal to pinning down trauma, one could be tempted to discard any attention to history and the past, and instead try to focus on the future. However, history has already proved that this way of thinking is flawed because the 'afterlife' of events and the 'persistent past' (ed. Tamm 2015:10) often haunt people, sometimes for generations after these events happened. And to such an extent that a character in the James Joyes novel of 1922 claimed that history is a 'nightmare',¹ to which Ignatieff (1998:166) years later responded by stating: 'If history is a nightmare, it is because the past is not past' since the unfinished business of some historical events are still influencing the present.² In South Africa, history is often regarded as synonymous with nightmares. Therefore, a rewriting of history is needed to rethink the events and interpretations that we thought we remembered correctly and understood well. South Africans are still too emotionally linked with the 'collective traumas of the past' (Nytagodien & Neal 2004:376) for the generational shift to have a positive effect.

The focus in this article will be specifically on the unfinished business of Afrikaner Church History. 'A critical issue facing the Christian movement worldwide is that of identity' (ed. Shenk 2011:xv – original emphasis) because Western Christians mistakenly assumed that their religious identity was equal to their cultural identity. This is also the case with Afrikaner religion. Until recently, Afrikaner religious identity was intertwined with everything else in life. Religion was not restricted to the walls of the Church but was practised in all aspects of everyday life, and even determined the worldview and management of state affairs (Van der Walt 1938:68). Being

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1. In addition to describing the horrors of the First World War as a nightmare like Joyes did (Lawrence 1923; Yeats 1928), the comparison of history with a nightmare extends beyond war to an ever-increasing array of historical events such as colonialism (Osuri 2019), genocide (Monneyham 2014), human trafficking (Van der Watt 2015), including pandemics (Goodman 2021; Odegard 2019).

2. One example of such unfinished business in Church history that still has lingering effects is the interpretation linked to the *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II (Scanlon 2013). As an example of how such unfinished business was successfully addressed through the passing of time as well as the disclosure of previously unknown evidence. Mommsen (2009:74) noted the greater objectivity of the German perspective on Nazi dictatorship.

'unconsciously' religious (Rose 1902:11), Afrikaners linked politics, economics, social issues, and all other troubles, actions, and opinions with religion to create a unique case of civil religion built on mnemohistory³ of which the afterlife and long-term effects of past events are contributing to the inability to redefine national and religious identities in order to build a new future.

The article identifies some of the haunting nightmares from the past that are accompanying several of the mainstream Afrikaner churches to their graves and Christians away from institutional churches. The manipulation of history by Church historians, clergy and the institutionalised denominations alike to support their viewpoints serves as a major cause for the disunity that prevails amongst the traditional Afrikaner church denominations in South Africa. The identity crisis and convenient misuse of the term 'Christian' by South Africans are contributing to the corpse-like behaviour (blind, deaf, mute and paralysed) of the dying mainstream Afrikaner religious institutions. Intensifying the situation is unfinished business that is plaguing Protestantism in South Africa⁴ as an inheritance from the Reformation: the nullification of the principles of the priesthood of all believers and *semper reformanda*. If, however, South African Church history can be cleared up and the neglects from the Reformation be activated, the complexity, importance and possibilities of spirituality be recognised, it is possible to bring Christianity to new and transforming life in South Africa. A novel way of living the Great Commandment (Matt 22:35–40) and Great Commission (Matt 28:19, 20) will once again set the Christian religion apart from other religions and worldly institutions and powers.

The use and abuse of South African Church history

During the past 50 years, the once rosy visions of ongoing progress through the unfolding of history towards a better future (Budd 2009:194), crumbled⁵ and consequently, the separating lines between present, past and future began to blur. Nora (1992 as translated in ed. Tamm 2015:7) captured it as follows:

[T]he road is open for a totally different history: Instead of determinants, their effects, instead of actions remembered or commemorated, the marks they have left and the games of commemoration, not events for their own sake, but their construction in time, the gradual disappearance and

3. In his book *Moses, the Egyptian*, Assmann (1997:9) stated that mnemohistory refers to the past as it is remembered through the layered story-lines of tradition. Vosloo (2013:4) mentioned the close relationship between memory and identity. He also referred to Sabbagh (2009:194) who indicates that identity is intertwined with memories, and that our memories are often sculpted to fit in with who we are or who we want to be.

4. Meyer (1940:27) stated that the Afrikaner nation was born and formed into the Calvinistic faith, which is in theory true although, as with everything else, Afrikaners moulded and changed the term 'Calvinism' to their own understanding and interpretation thereof (cf. Akenson 1992:56).

5. Assmann (2015a:79) listed the following as contributing factors: resources that have been eroded and polluted, overpopulation and ageing societies, scarcities of fuel and water, and climate change.

reappearance of their significances; instead of the past as it was, it constant re-exploitation, utilisation and manipulation; not the tradition itself, but the way it was constituted and transmitted. (p. 24)

This paved the way for 'Presentism'⁶ that acknowledges the inclusion of events and their afterlives in history writing which are influencing current issues, actions and worldviews. Although the concepts of a continued life or *Nachleben* (Warburg [1910] 1999) of an event in the context of cultural remembrance, and *Wirkungsgeschichte*⁷ (Gadamer [1960] 2004:299) as 'history of effect', are not new, the term 'mnemohistory' or *Gedächtnisgeschichte* was only coined in 1997 by Jan Assmann, implying that the way in which things are remembered or communicated could actually be more influential than the original event. This often results in a lingering and haunting⁸ effect of the past on the present and future (Assmann 1997:9) because conceptualisations of the past have a direct bearing on our self-understanding, including our individual, social, and ecclesiastical identity (Bradley & Muller 1995:2).

The inseparable Afrikaner history and Church history fit well within this type of historiography. In the past, Afrikaner historians and Church historians (in sync with political ideology) determined what ought to be remembered, and how it should be remembered (Prinsloo 2008:411) with chosen traumas and glories (cf. Volkan 1994). Therefore, Afrikaner history writing has been labelled as apologetic, holy, and romantic (Van Jaarsveld 1953:47, 48, 1971), sacred (Den Boer 1966:33), conservative and narrow-minded (Liebenberg 1966:61), sectarian and imperial (MacCulloch 1987:3, 5), and denominational biased (Denis 1997:86). Giliomee (2003:179) tagged Afrikaner history as schismatic. Dualisms within the Afrikaner nation always existed (Coetzee 1977:154 – hero's and cowards, fighters and joiners, believers and unbelievers) and therefore, there is usually more than one account and a series of events recorded, depending on the biasness and intentions of the historians. Up to this day, there is not a single work written about the history of Christianity in South Africa or the general history of the country that complies with or accommodates both the diverse opinions of the Afrikaners (cf. Oliver 2011a:74) and all other Christian groups.

The description by Assmann (2015a:82) on how mnemohistory is developed through 'painstaking and costly human constructions' holds true for the South African context. She compared the writing of cultural history to a suitcase⁹ packed with equipment which was selected because it was deemed necessary as backup for the future (Assmann 2015a:92). Both

6. Hartog (2017) coined the term 'Presentism' to describe the fusion of the linear, causal and standardised conceptions of time.

7. By 'effective history' Gadamer meant the history of the event as it was understood and interpreted because our understanding is conditioned by the history of its interpretation (Gadamer 2004:299–306).

8. Derrida ([1993] 2006) used the term 'hauntology' (or *hantologie* in French) in *Specters of Marx* (1993) to describe this phenomenon.

9. This suitcase must be inspected and critically evaluated through criteria that could include the following questions (Assmann 2015b:92): Does the afterlife of the chosen events make a society more revengeful or more self-conscious? Does it promote an aggressive tendency, or does it encourage cooperation and dialogue?

the main South African historical storylines and the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches' defensive and apologetic history lines were constructed to justify and protect their preferred storylines of history.

Although the focus here is on Afrikaner history,¹⁰ it is not possible to neatly separate this group and their history and Church history from that of other groups. In general, South African history is painted either from the side of the White Afrikaners who present it as their struggle for independence and freedom (Rose 1902:11) or from the side of the Black Africans and their struggle for liberation (Reddy 1992). The most important historical characteristic of both groups is their status as historical victims (Black 2008). In line with the description of Assmann on the creation of cultural history, both these South African history lines define themselves through 'decisive and memorable defeats and historical traumas, built upon a tragic or martyrological narrative' (Assmann 2015a:84). Both histories are also closely linked with theology and imbedded in a sense of holiness: The African history is founded on Liberation Theology, Black Theology and Social Gospel, while the Afrikaner interpretation of history was constructed upon the 'chosen people' fundamentalism (Oliver 2019a:2) and the covenant concept of the Old Testament (Akenson 1992; Calpin 1944:17; Mackenzie 1899:158).

The Afrikaner history line was replaced by the African line as the official line of history in 1994, confirming the words of Müller (2004:211) who claimed that 'with historical memory,¹¹ it is often the present that sets the agenda of what the past should look like'.¹² When such a point of view 'becomes the official or dominant history it often takes on a totalitarian nature' (Müller 2004:211). Both a methodologic consciousness (to promote reflection, distance and insight) and historical understanding (to see events from the past within context and in relation to the bigger picture) are needed to avoid the snare of writing popular or romantic history that is in accordance with the perspective, ideology and expectations of the intended readers (Van Jaarsveld 1951:14). The misuse and abuse of history and theology in South Africa is one of the major reasons why the people of the rainbow nation are unable to come to terms with themselves, each other and their religion. 'Nations [the Afrikaners], like individuals, need to face up to and understand traumatic past events before they can put them

10. Things are actually much more complicated because all of the Afrikaner denominations also have an intertwined history with their 'daughter' churches which also bring at least two sides of each history to the table. These histories must also be cleared from misinterpretations and biasness, but there is no space here to dig deeper into this issue.

11. Volf (2006:17–18) bluntly stated on the subject of historical memory that the 'servants of false memory – historians, journalists, public intellectuals – made some things disappear from the nation's past and others materialize in it from out of thin air. And what the manipulators of memory neither erased nor invented, they wrapped and twisted to fit within the crooked lines of self-glorifying history.' Although Volf was here referring to the political regime of Yugoslavia, this statement can also be applied to memory and history in cultural and religious spheres and also – sadly – to South African history writing.

12. The concept of historical revisionism implies that history is written from the perspective of the dominant class (Gundani 2004:76). Orwell (1949:37), in *Nineteen Eighty-four* stated that people who control the present are the ones who are controlling both the past and the future.

aside and move on to normal life' (Rosenberg 1996:xviii). Therefore, a collective and collaborative team must overhaul and rewrite the storylines of history and the embedded theology through a process of joint writing and strict peer reviewing to ensure quality assurance. A new, comprehensive official history and Christian or Church history from below (Vosloo 2009:59) can assist to heal historical wounds and build a strong national character and Christian identity.

When the short-lived Afrikaner reign ended in 1994, many Afrikaners were unable to adjust positively to the new dispensation. The triangular shaped Afrikaner identity that was built upon their interpretation of their history, and their trending personal characteristics on the base line with their unique form of Protestant religion as the culminating pinnacle, collapsed under the realisation that it was constructed in a false, hypocritical and sectarian way (Oliver 2014:285). In the 'new' South Africa, Afrikaners sank into a major identity crisis that exposed their weaknesses to both themselves and the world. Afrikaners were rudely awakened to the fact that they are far less self-confident (Patterson 1957:279) and much less principled than what popular opinion (ed. Pretorius 1988:165; Van Zonneveld 1987:20; Venter 1929:9, 10) and the media used to portray, and what they used to believe about themselves (Kingham 1994:393). Because their identity was so closely linked with their religion, the identity crisis quickly spread into the sphere of their faith, to which I will return next.

In addition to the general mnemohistorical interpretation of history that is intertwined with religion as shown above, each of the traditional Afrikaner churches cherish their own denominational line of history upon which their schism into separate denominations was built. This brings me to the second item on the list of unfinished business in Afrikaner Church history, namely the lack of unity.

Lack of unity

The Afrikaners, with no significant differences in language, culture and worldview, present a sad picture regarding unity (cf. Jacobs 2009:1). Ancient controversies and the canonisation of history¹³ obscure the way to Afrikaner religious unity (Den Boer 1966:33). Once again, the metaphor of the suitcase, packed with 'protected items to guard against the corrosive effect of time and forgetting' (Assmann 2015a:81) provides an accurate description of the way the Afrikaner churches use history to justify, develop and expand their distinct identities while refusing to unite.

Without going into detail, the extent of the schismatic tendency can be painted with a few strokes¹⁴: As soon as government restrictions on religion were lifted in 1804, the

13. Every Afrikaans speaking denominations see themselves as the only 'true' Church and accuse the others of lying (e.g. about the 'correct' name of the Church, see Bosman 1922–1923:11 and Engelbrecht 1953:13), liberalism (Schutte 1943:32; Van der Watt 1989:178), methodism and fundamentalism (Tingay & Johnson 1978:75).

14. For a more detailed description on the schismatic history of the Afrikaans speaking churches, see Oliver 2011b:39–57.

Afrikaner schismatic tendencies began to show in their religious lives. Within 30 years after settling in the northern republics, there were already three major denominations,¹⁵ which continued to splinter into more denominations over the next 150 years, despite speaking the same language, sharing the same culture and adhering to the same confessional traditions (including the confessing to 'one Church' – Oliver 2005:41). These denominations also have their own 'spaces' with their denominational 'headquarters' and theological faculties (in Stellenbosch, Pretoria and Potchefstroom). Each denomination regards themselves as 'owners' of the truth while clinging to this carefully constructed dogma and identity claims as created and treasured by their denominationally biased Church historians.¹⁶ At one point, fanatic groups were willing to take up arms to prove their views and interpretation of religion and history to be the truth (cf. Pont 1968:197). Giving up these claims, positions and spaces will leave the church members red faced about more than a century's heresy and schism, and several church leaders without jobs (Oliver 2011b:40).

In 1958, an inter-church commission between the three mainstream denominations was established to promote unity,¹⁷ but after more than 50 years, the council concluded that it is 'not realistic' to keep pushing for unity and shifted the focus to cooperation¹⁸ (Gereformeerde Kerke 2009:154). Instead of correcting the wrongs and repenting the heresies of the past, the churches chose the convenient escape route of 'ecumenism' through motivated reasoning¹⁹ to create a safe niche area for each denomination and its members. This proves how difficult it is to change the perceptions of people who choose to believe their own interpretation of events and dogma (cf. MacMillan 2009:87).

Closely linked with the convulsive clinging to century-old feuds, false dogma and the resulting disunity of Afrikaner Christianity is the current near-death status of the majority of the Afrikaans-speaking churches. The complex identity crisis and the downgrading of faith to a convenient worthless label are contributing to the current terminally ill status of the institutional churches on which I will focus next.

Status of the Church

According to Steyn (2005:551), the identity crisis of the Afrikaner churches started with the loss of credibility, status

15. The Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerke.

16. The history of the Nederduitsch Reformed Church (or Hervormde Kerk) was penned down by Engelbrecht in 1953, Pont in 1966 and in the *Gedenkalbum* (by Pont et al.) in 1986. The history of the other, bigger Dutch Reformed Church (or NG Kerk) was written by McCarter in 1869, Morrees in 1937, and Van der Watt in 1987. The history of the Enkel Gereformeerde Kerk or Reformed Church was captured by Postma (nicknamed Dr. O'Kulis) in 1918 and Spoelstra in 1963.

17. On the work done by this commission, see also Botha (1986) and Pont (1993).

18. Ironically, though, in 1960, these three churches united in their opposition against the Cottesloe Consultation and opted to leave the World Council of Churches to go into ecumenical isolation (Van der Borgh 2011:318).

19. In a 2015 TED Talk, Galef (2015) explained that emotion is the underlying connection when the brain chooses to believe to be right even when proven wrong when people use motivated reasoning.

and power when apartheid was terminated. Afrikaners were on the one hand shocked, embarrassed and disillusioned with the fallibility of the Church, and on the other hand, they had to face the realities and challenges of their changed position in society, poverty, affirmative action, decolonisation and Africanisation. In addition, internal factors like the development of theological movements such as the 'Nuwe Hervormers' and charismatic streams brought a renewed focus on basic faith issues like the cross and resurrection of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, while the inability of the churches' leadership to guide effectively intensified the crisis (Hofmeyr 2009:601). In a similar vein as described by Moltmann (1974:7), the Afrikaner churches' crisis contains both aspects of identity and relevance. The questions that start plaguing the churches are: Where do you come from?, Where are you going?, Who are you? and What makes you so special? Why should we (the world) pay attention?, and What are you contributing to bring positive change to society?

Instead of creating space for 'impossible possibilities' (Meylahn 2011:147) to bring transformation and hope, it seems as if there is always something and often more than one thing that grips the attention of the institutional churches to such an extent that it prevents them from staying focused to their calling and to answer positively to the questions about relevance. These divisive issues include a large array of topics. It started centuries ago with personality clashes, envy and dogma about the singing of hymns, accusations of liberalism and fundamentalism under the influence of different theological strands to which I will return when discussing spirituality. In more recent times, the implementation of the 'apartheid' theology²⁰ that crystallised into Afrikaner colonialism (Oliver & Oliver 2017) tends to overshadow the rest. However, the spotlight of disruption is versatile and also shone on issues such as the Belhar confession, controversies about the existence of the devil, drinking wine from a communal cup or individual glasses in the light of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), church membership of non-white people, women as clergy, the place of theological education in higher education institutions, the religious rights and privileges of LGBTQ people and cohabitation, to name just a few. While these kinds of issues lead to long debates, power struggles, and even threats of schism in meetings and congregations, the same level of emotional responses is notably absent regarding issues such as rape, domestic violence, hate speech, road rage, tax fraud, theft, corruption or any other controversial issue or problem or sin that Christians, church leaders and church members regularly commit (Oliver 2011c:4).

The lingering negative afterlives of these issues can be blamed on the inability to deal with it effectively by the 'Church bullies' (Church leadership) and 'Bible bullies' (fundamentalist believers), as Oosthuizen (2018:43, 205)

20. Conradie (2018) stated that apartheid theology was developed on the notion of divine order that was founded in the neo-Calvinist cosmology of Dooyeweerd and Stoker, emphasising the numerous influences that contributed to the formation of Afrikaner theology.

tagged the insider high-jackers of the institutionalised churches. 'Church bullies' in general suffer from the 'only I am right' syndrome, a tendency to downplay severe problems,²¹ and thrive on using the dependency model through which both Church leadership and the institutions expand their control over people to accumulate wealth and power (cf. Riesebrodt 2000:21) and a secure retirement option.

Together, the culmination of these issues left the Afrikaner churches paralysed (cf. Meylahn 2011:131, 137; Steyn 2005:551). The churches are mute since the collapse of apartheid, ashamed and unable to find the courage and voice to lead and guide. Afrikaner Christianity remains deaf and blind towards the needs of the world, while turning inward to focus on maintenance and survival, which effectively draws a line through their reason for existence. Froise (2004:7, 8) accused Afrikaners of being Christians in name only,²² their faith a worthless, convenient tag and their middle of the road actions (Oliver 2011b:54) and way of living an embarrassment to the Christian faith which requires positive change and action by applying the mindset of Christ in our encounters with others and the environment.

One of the important facets that contributes to the incapacitation of the churches is the loss of influence and authority regarding ethical and moral leadership (Meylahn 2011:136). The Afrikaner churches are mirroring²³ the atrocities of the South African society by sanctioning and practising gender-based and racial discrimination, allowing the sacred cows of skewed dogma and ideology to rule the institutions and offering no different and heroic alternative to a hopeless and despondent society. In a fast-changing world, the Church is no longer able to supply answers, while medical-related ethical questions increase daily. Questions around the prolongation or termination of life by choice, euthanasia, abortion, suicide, genocide, stem cells, cloning, deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) manipulation and illnesses such as cancer, HIV/AIDS and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) are only a few examples of ethical dilemmas that Christians seek answers to (Oliver 2016:5). People also need guidance on juridical issues such as slavery, human rights, free will, the death penalty, corruption, crime, violence, and war and peace (Oliver 2016:5). The ecological crises are forcing people to contemplate about earth keeping, global warming, endangered species and life on other planets, while the churches fail to provide guidance (Oliver 2016:3).

21. André Bartlett, the moderator of the Highveld synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) remarked about the loss of members that the Church is "so bietjie besig om agteruit te boer" [going backwards a little bit] (Prins 2018:16).

22. Using religion as a label means that while people enjoy the privileges their membership bring (like 4 × 4 outreaches), only the minimum sacrifices (such as financial) are made, but there is no active and constant growth and change into people who are growing and developing themselves, their work places and environment for the better by living the gospel in all aspects of life (including when in rush hour traffic or completing tax forms).

23. The tendency noted by Whitley (1969:14) about North America is also true about South Africa: the Church is a mirror of society and no longer a window of hope in a chaotic world.

No wonder that the traditional Afrikaner churches are caught up in a death spiral²⁴ while a growing 'churchless Christianity' (Oosthuizen 2018:153) or 'post-institutional-Christianity' (Meylahn 2011:137) is developing in South Africa. These people, of which an increasing number are Afrikaners, confess that they are often ashamed of the institutional churches on the one hand (Oosthuizen 2018:3) and are no longer willing to be dominated by the holy cow, narrow-minded or prescriptive ways of thinking (about dogma, human rights, authority of the Bible, etc.) by Church leadership and or fundamentalist believers on the other (Meylahn 2011:137).

Although nothing is impossible, and in agreement with Tickle (2008:17) who argued that when religious reformation takes place, a piece of the old Church always remains, it seems as if there is not much hope for radical and honest confession, repentance and transformation by the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches. The leadership (pastors) and fundamentalist membership will artificially keep the corpse alive to ensure that the pastors have financial security and the fundamentalist a safe space to practise their interpretation of faith. However, idealistically, these churches should be allowed to die a 'happy death to a hopeful future' (Abraham 2020). Death of the old is needed to create new life when the seeds of faith return from the church buildings to the hearts of people to grow into a new understanding, a new identity and a new theology.

The abovementioned issues, namely the misuse of history, the lack of unity and the status of the Afrikaner traditional churches explain why it is necessary to attend to the unfinished business of South African Church history. Only when these issues are acknowledged for what they are and what they are causing, can there be acceptance of responsibility and actions can be taken towards addressing the unfinished business that is haunting our lives.

In the next section, I will focus again on three aspects, this time on how, when the unfinished and neglected business of the past is faced and addressed, Church history can assist Afrikaner believers to build a renewed Christian identity. The unfinished business from the Reformation, namely the priesthood of all believers and the principle of *semper reformanda* must be activated. Afrikaner spirituality must be redefined and most importantly, Afrikaner Christians must accept the task and responsibility to proclaim and live the gospel.

The unfinished reformation

Although the Reformation tried to bring believers back to serving God, it did not go far enough (Joubert 2009:176). The

24. The DRC lost more than 37% of their members, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church more than 56% (partly because of schism) and the Reformed Churches (despite gaining the daughter churches' members) about 24% during the last 30 years (Oliver 2019b:4). Elsewhere, I compared the symptoms shown by the Afrikaner churches with that of dying churches as identified and discussed by Rainer, Noble, Niewhof and Mattera (Oliver 2019b).

principle of the priesthood of all believers emphasises access, equality and responsibility: personal access to God through Jesus Christ as only mediator, equality of all people before God and a shared responsibility of all believers to constantly practise their faith through ministry. Theoretically, this is proclaimed by most Christians, but in practice, it is a worthless slogan without impact on either believers or the spaces they occupy.

Throughout its history, the Church and believers paid lip service to the priesthood of all believers, while the damage done by defining the Church from a top-down perspective has been catastrophic (Ogden 2003:92). The traditional Afrikaner churches are clinging to hierarchical systems, dependency models and male dominance paradigms (cf. Oosthuizen 2018:43, 205). In line with the Geneva hierarchical model of church governance, the pastor is the paternalistic authority figure, the omni-competent administrator, preacher, teacher, evangelist, theologian and counsellor, with all other functionalists imbedded (Mattison 2009). This implies that there is no real need for believers to actively proclaim their faith or use their gifts and take up their responsibilities. The only way of turning this around is by replacing the present Geneva model with an inclusive and non-hierarchical equipping model (Ogden 2003:112, 121). In addition to abandoning the privileged position of pastors and denominational leadership, the sacred observance of church buildings and other property will also have to be demolished.²⁵

The second slogan from the Reformation, *semper reformanda*, is like the principle of the priesthood of all believers, just empty words to most Christians and especially to the traditional Afrikaner churches who got stuck in the 19th century, while it was supposed to bring new life and constant change and development on how the Church operates in society and react to change and crises.

Afrikaner Christians are privileged to have the Bible available in several Afrikaans translations. The irony of this situation is the Afrikaner nation's current total lack of knowledge and understanding of the Bible, despite being able and free to read and study it. This stands in contrast to the history of the Afrikaner nation that was often tagged as 'unconsciously religious' and with an excellent knowledge of the content of the Old Testament (from which they copied names of people, places, rivers and mountains and applied them to their living spaces) and constructed figure of speech and idioms that are still part of the Afrikaans language. Built on this strong religious history and tradition and having a large array of spiritual and theological trends to choose from and work with, it is possible and desirable to instil new life into the idea of continuous transformation and change to promote access, equality and responsibility. Together, the principle of the priesthood of all believers and constant transformation and equipping of believers to be active agents of positive change

²⁵.As examples of how property rights can tear into the faith and Christian actions of people, serve the well-known law case of 'Witfontein' after the failed church union of 1886 and the current law suit between the two schematic factions of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk.

and missionaries should confirm that there cannot be a Christian without an active ministry (Guelzo 1991:37).

In line with and expanding on the ideas of the priesthood of all believers and constant transformation, the complex issue of Afrikaner spirituality is another way in which some of the unfinished business of the past could be transformed into something new and life-giving.

Spirituality

It is a misconception to generalise Afrikaner spirituality by saying that it is mainly or only founded upon Calvinism (Meyer 1940). Spirituality is a complex phenomenon that includes the religious personalities and perspectives of people, influencing their worldviews, acts, speech, ways of thinking and emotions (Oliver 2006:1469). Afrikaner spirituality can, as Saayman (2005) correctly described it, be compared to a dam. The Dutch Reformed tradition was the only official inlet into this dam between 1652 and 1795. However, rivers and streams as well as brooks and creeks of variable strengths and volumes continuously contributed to filling the dam from both official and unofficial sources for nearly 370 years. Built upon Pietism, Puritanism and the Reveille (Hofmeyr 2009:598), the Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformasie*) bloomed and opened the way for the evangelical-Methodist influences. The Dutch-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and the Neo-Fichtean romantic nationalism (Bosch 1984:14) with its emphasis on religion, freedom and history brought floodwaters into the reservoir, resulting in the creation of a murky 'Afrikaner civil religion' (Bosch 1984:14).

Today, South African Christians are displaying an 'everything goes' mindset. They are acting:

[A]s if they are shopping in a spiritual mall. Spiritual seekers choose a different 'answer' every second month and thereby boost the consumption of spiritual goods offered on the market. (Meylahn 2011:137)

This consumerism is the result of cultural confusion, a national and religious identity crisis and a missiological void. It leads to increased labelling, stereotyping and more 'owner of the truth' arguments without adding positives to the current debates.

If Afrikaner Christians were to test the water samples from the dam of South African spirituality, they would find a wealth of knowledge, insights, virtues, qualities, moral guidelines and practical lifelines. These can be used productively to construct a new Afrikaner spirituality and theology upon a unique, firm and broad foundation of experience and history to enable an alternative Christian way of life in the 'C'-dominant world of the 21st century: change, complexity, confusion, conflict, and COVID-19.

Missiology

As already stated, the Reformation failed to produce a radical change in the behaviour of believers at grassroots level because doctrine is still triumphing over the correct way of

living. Christians still do not understand the importance of being missionaries in everyday life (Joubert 2009:176). Furthermore, Western missiologists thought that the Westernised forms and norms of Christianity were the only correct interpretation of religion and that it had to be applied to all people and churches (ed. Shenk 2011:xiii). The messy missiological history is waiting to be addressed and sorted out before signs of a new life can be sought.

Before discussing the churches' historical missiological approaches, I want to remark on the status of Christianity in general in South Africa. At the turn of the century, there were about 5793 Christian denominations in South Africa, of which 185 were from the Reformed tradition (Johnstone, Johnstone & Mandryk 2001:511). There are more than 30 languages spoken in South Africa. Only in 2012, the Bible was translated in all 11 official languages spoken in South Africa (Kemptonexpress 2013). There are still about 10 South African languages that do not have any part of the Bible translated yet. This is an accusation towards Christianity, even though Africa is leading the world in terms of Bible translations.²⁶ It is unacceptable that the technologically driven society lacks the eschatological vision to promote contextual missiology. 'Without a doubt, the Church has and is failing in the execution of the Great Commission of her Lord' (Staples 1980:35).

The track records of the three traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches also paint a bleak picture in terms of missiology. The first settlers at the Cape called themselves Christians as a way of distinguishing them from the indigenous people and (later) the slaves (Giliomee 2009:41). They seemingly did not have a burning desire to share the gospel with the other people groups (cf. Oliver 2011b:46–49), as the South African Missionary Society was only founded in 1799 (Gerdener 1959:55), nearly 150 years after the first settlers came to South Africa. To the north of the country, none of the three traditional churches had missionaries in the field before 1899 (Van Jaarsveld 1962:245). Giliomee (2003) provided a summary of the attitude of the Afrikaans-speaking churches:

[T]he Hervormde Kerk...firmly opposed all missionary work. The Doppe majority accepted missionary work as long as it avoided common worship...The pro-British DRC [*Dutch Reformed Church or NG Kerk*] tended to be much more liberal in their attitudes towards blacks but, while in principle in favour of missionary work, did very little in practice. (p. 179)

Similar to the lack of unity between the 'sister' churches (Oliver 2011b:50–52), there is no real unity between the churches and other Christian denominations or their missiological 'daughter' churches (except for the Reformed churches that do form an official structural unity today although the 'us' and 'they' are not completely removed yet).

Neither cosmetic changes in structures and operations nor adapting to the trends and culture of the world will stop or reverse the death spiral of the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches. Confronting the skewed and unacceptable

26. In 2013, only 484 of the more than 6,600 languages spoken in the world had full Bible translations, while Bibles were available for 189 of the 2,000 African languages (Kemptonexpress 2013).

missiology by a 180 degree turn from inward to outward focus, from maintenance to risky outreach, and caring for the marginalised, can bring new perspective, actions, life and hope. When the Church becomes missionary by attending to each context in which it finds itself (Snyder 1991:17), the words of Mills (1958:166) can be reversed, allowing the Church to once again create and no longer just react, denounce and no longer just adapt, and invent new modes of conduct and sensibility instead of imitating the ills of society. When the unfinished Church history is dealt with and the traditional Afrikaner churches are left to die, a new ekklesia can rise (cf. Joubert 2009).

Conclusion

Certain things, like faith and religion, will always be work in progress with unfinished business constantly piling up in the urgent 'to do' basket. Unfinished business does not disappear. It tends to snowball. When it comes to Christian faith and the Church as institution in South Africa, it is no longer possible to hide from the avalanching mountain. It is important to seek and bring closure to some while promoting new and alternative perspectives, insight and understanding about the history and development thereof.

This will set us free from the chains of tradition and perceptions and false claims. The biased histories that we cling to, the heresies that we cherish, the schisms and unwillingness to live the commandment of love and the commission of proclaiming the gospel are killing the Afrikaner churches and the faith of people.

So, what must be done in the next two years? It is time for Afrikaner Christians to change their minds. We need to acknowledge that faith, religion and spirituality are not static. These concepts change constantly, and people's perceptions and interpretations thereof also change with time, depending on their circumstances and even their age. However, faith must always be founded on God and his Word, and cannot be customised to suit personal preferences. On the other hand, Christians, in their ministry, must be adaptable to the liquid reality they live in (Joubert 2018) – able to fit in awkward spaces and cracks to bring positive change and hope and salvation.

In a constant attempt to identify, confess and correct the nightmarish afterlife of events, South African Church history must be carefully rewritten in an honest and inclusive way. A new history will lay a foundation for a new religious identity that will not only confess to 'one Church' but be a fully functional, united and working organism. The actions of this new Christianity will, as during the first centuries, build a reputation, make a relevant contribution to society and eventually be recognised as a spearhead that provides ethical and moral leadership to all.

So, why do we bother with Church history?

To pause a moment.

To stand in awe because despite 'all its mistakes, bewildering transformations and entanglements in human bitterness' (MacCulloch 1987:11), the Church is still alive.

To take heart and gather courage for the way forward

To boldly face and clean up unfinished business

To put the nightmares to bed

To make history, history.

And then ... to start all over again ...

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