



Doing theology from below, from below? Bonhoeffer, De Gruchy, South Africa

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Abstract

To address the issue of doing theology from below in South Africa, I will question how Bonhoeffer's learning to see things from below has been interpreted from below. I will ask how John de Gruchy, who edited the new English edition of Bonhoeffer's final fragments, interpreted him from below. In this light I will reflect on doing theology from below in South Africa.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; John de Gruchy; theology from below; Graham Ward; decolonization

We can do more than guess the direction in which Bonhoeffer's theology would have developed ...¹

Introduction

In this article I treat the theme of a theology from below as a question. There are many ways to answer this question as it relates to South Africa. One way to answer the question is to consider how the various theologies that have characterised South African theology over the past decades further differentiate what it might mean to do theology from below. One

1 John W. de Gruchy, "Faith and witness on the boundaries: Bonhoeffer's enduring challenge." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 127 (2007): 6–21.

could, for example, look at African theology,² Black theology,³ Liberation Theology,⁴ Feminist theology,⁵ Kairos theology,⁶ and Prophetic theology,⁷ to name but a few, and ask how these theologies have done theology during the years before and after democracy.

It would be interesting, for example, to ask how, after democracy, the doing of public theology⁸ has or has not further delineated a theology from below. This might be of particular interest in the light of the critique of and even definitive decision not to do public theology.⁹

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- 2 See Luke Lungile Pato, “African theologies,” in J.W. De Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Doing Theology in Context. South African Perspectives* (New York, Orbis Books, 1994), 152–161.
 - 3 See Barney Pitsoana, “Black Theology,” in J.W. De Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Doing Theology in Context. South African Perspectives* (New York, Orbis Books, 1994), 173–183; and on Black Liberation Theology, Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence. A Social-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1976); *Coming in out of the Wilderness: A Comparative Interpretation of the Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1974); *Om het zwart te zeggen* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1975); *Black Theology. Black Power* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd, 1978); *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, 1984); and, more recently, *Children of the Waters of Meribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition, and the Challenges of Twenty-First-Century Empire* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019).
 - 4 See Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Liberation Theology,” in J.W. De Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Doing Theology in Context. South African Perspectives* (New York, Orbis Books, 1994), 184–196.
 - 5 See Denise Ackermann, “Feminism: Women Doing Theology,” in *Doing Theology in Context*, 197–212.
 - 6 See Albert Nolan, “Kairos Theology,” in *Doing Theology in Context*, 212–218.
 - 7 See, for example, Jakub Urbaniak, “Mapping a renewed prophetic theology in South Africa.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 157 (2017): 7–43.
 - 8 See, for example, Dirk J. Smit, “Notions of the Public and Doing Theology.” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1, no. 3(2007): 431–454 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973207X231716>; “The paradigm of public theology – Origins and Development,” in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Florian Hoëhne and Tobias Reitmeier (eds.), *Contextuality and Intercontextuality in Public Theology* (LIT Verlag, Berlin, 2013), 11–23; and “Does it Matter? On Whether there is Method in the Madness,” in S. Kim and K. Day (eds.), *A Companion to Public Theology* (Brill, Leiden, 2017), 67–94.
 - 9 See, for example, Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Reflections and Resources: The Elusive Public of Public Theology: A Response to William Storrar.” *International Journal of Public Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 79–89.

One should also consider the more recent debates on decolonizing theology. More recently, at the Sixth Annual Steve De Gruchy Memorial Lecture held at Rondebosch United Church, Graham Ward¹⁰ asked how decolonized South African theology is, and, if theology in South Africa would still have to be decolonized, how that might be done.

It is in this light that I have decided to pose the question in yet another way – to ask what Bonhoeffer meant with his oft repeated reference to learning to do theology from below.

Bonhoeffer's theology from below?

In an incomplete sketch omitted from *After Ten Years*,¹¹ and published only from 1967 onwards as part of the introduction to his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer wrote:

It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering. If only during this time bitterness and envy have not corroded the heart; that we come to see matters great and small, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness with new eyes; that our sense of greatness, humanness, justice, and mercy has grown clearer, freer, more incorruptible; that we learn, indeed, that personal suffering is a more useful key, a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action. But this perspective from below must not lead us to become advocates for those who are perpetually dissatisfied. Rather, out of a higher satisfaction, which in its essence

10 Graham Ward, “Decolonizing Theology?” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017): 561–584 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n2.a26>

11 See John W. De Gruchy, “Editor’s introduction to the English edition,” in *Letters and papers from prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8 (English Edition) ed. John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010), 1–36. See also Victoria J. Barnett, “*After Ten Years*”: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017).

is grounded beyond what is below and above, we do justice to life in all its dimensions and in this way affirm it.¹²

It is important, of course, to ask what Bonhoeffer himself meant with this reference, how it might be made sense of in light either of the writings preceding this incomplete sketch, or to ask what he might have meant by reviewing his theology afterwards.¹³ For the purpose of this article, it is merely important to highlight the hermeneutical nature of Bonhoeffer's oft-quoted theology from below.

To address the issue of doing theology from below in South Africa, I will ask how Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic of learning to see things from below has been interpreted from below. Again, there are different ways of doing this. He has had a decisive influence on the way theology was and is being done in South Africa.¹⁴ I will, however, ask how John De Gruchy, who edited the new English edition of Bonhoeffer's final fragments, interpreted him from below.

Bonhoeffer's theology from below, from below?

Both before and after democracy, De Gruchy would reflect on Bonhoeffer, focusing on his relevance for South Africa.¹⁵ The question in

12 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," in *Letters and papers from prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8 (English Edition), ed. John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010), 53.

13 See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000); Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010). Also, Wolfgang Hüber, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Auf dem Weg zur Freiheit* (München, C.H.Beck, 2019).

14 See, for example, Robert Vosloo, "Interpreting Bonhoeffer in South Africa? The Search for a Historical and Methodological Responsible Hermeneutic," in *Bonhoeffer and Interpretive Theory: Essays on Method and Understanding*, ed. P. Frick (Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2013), 119–142.

15 John W. De Gruchy, *The dynamic structure of the church. An exposition and comparative analysis of the Ecclesiologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and an interpretation based on this exposition and analysis of the basic principles which should determine the structure of the church in our situation today*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1972); "Bonhoeffer in South Africa" in *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (London, Collins, 1975); *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984); Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Witness to Jesus Christ* (London, Collins, 1988); "Christian

this article, however, is how he interpreted Bonhoeffer from below; more particularly, how he interpreted Bonhoeffer's learning to see things from below, from below. Although De Gruchy's publications on Bonhoeffer cannot be reduced to a single theme, it is interesting that in many publications both before and after democracy, he saw Bonhoeffer's learning to see from below, in fact, saw this paragraph, as of particular importance for doing theology in South Africa.

Before asking how he interpreted Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic learning to see things from below, I turn to how he interpreted Bonhoeffer from below?

In *Bonhoeffer and South Africa* (1984), De Gruchy described his interpretation of Bonhoeffer as a *dialogue*.¹⁶

One of the great advantages in doing theology in dialogue with Bonhoeffer is, indeed, the fact that he does not provide us with a fully worked-out system of thought. We simply cannot turn to him for all the answers to our questions as though such answers could be prepacked or gift-wrapped. It would be foolish, then, if we tried to transplant it, undigested, into our situation. To proceed in such a way would indicate a failure to grasp Bonhoeffer's legacy; it would be a denial of his own understanding of theology. ... To misuse Bonhoeffer's theology in this way would result in a failure to

witness in South Africa in a time of transition," in W.W. Floyd, Jr. and C. Marsh (eds.), *Theology and the practice of responsibility. Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Harrisburg, Trinity Press, 1994), 283–293; "Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond: The reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa," in *Bonhoeffer for a new day: Theology in a time of transition*, ed. John De Gruchy (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997), 353–365; "The reception of Bonhoeffer's theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. J.W. De Gruchy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 93–112; "Bonhoeffer," in *The Blackwell companion to Modern Theology*, ed. G. Jones (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004), 357–371; "Faith and witness on the boundaries," 6–21. "With Bonhoeffer, Beyond Bonhoeffer. Transmitting Bonhoeffer's Legacy," in S. Plant, J.W. de Gruchy, and C. Tietz (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today, A Way between Fundamentalism and Secularism* (München, Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 403–416; "Who is Bonhoeffer for us today?" in G. Preece and I. Packer (eds.), *Bonhoeffer down under: Australian and South African essays celebrating the centenary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's birth* (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2012), 3–18; "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in C. Meister and J. Beilby (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought* (London, Routledge, 2013), 217–226; "Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45)," in Ian S. Markham (eds.), *The Student's Companion to the Theologians* (New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 378–389; *Bonhoeffer's Questions: A Life-Changing Conversation* (Minneapolis, Fortress Academic, 2019).

16 De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 2–10.

discover the resources that he does provide for doing theology in our own time and place.¹⁷

For De Gruchy the point was not to become a *Bonhoefferian*. As theologians, we as South Africans will have to develop a way of doing theology within and for our context, which is not to be dissociated from the doing of theology in contexts not our own, that is, we cannot do theology in South Africa as if we are our own, not also part of a contexts not our own. For De Gruchy however, Bonhoeffer's theology was and is able to build a bridge between these contexts – precisely because of its hermeneutical nature mentioned above.

De Gruchy mentioned at least three aspects to be considered in this dialogue with Bonhoeffer, all related to hermeneutics.

Firstly, to do theology in dialogue with Bonhoeffer demands considering Bonhoeffer's theology in his own context. This is not merely asking about the content of his theology, as if detached from the context in which he wrote it.

Also, in his more recent *Bonhoeffer's Questions: A Life-Changing Conversation* (2019), it is clear that for De Gruchy, Bonhoeffer's theology is about the asking of questions. Interpreting him, therefore, is precisely not to hold him at a relatively safe distance or to interpret him in such a way that he serves our own interests. What is of interest, according to De Gruchy, is Bonhoeffer's own historical and dialectical development as he asked hermeneutical questions. It is in this way that Bonhoeffer will be able to speak to us, that we will be able to listen to what he has to say, he argues.¹⁸

Secondly, theology in dialogue asks of us to consider *our* own contexts in detail. It is precisely the issues that confronted De Gruchy in *his* own context that led him beyond Bonhoeffer's own historical and dialectical development and allowed him to do theology not just about him but in dialogue with him. De Gruchy's articles were therefore not determined by Bonhoeffer and his theology, but by De Gruchy's own context.

17 De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 32.

18 See Henco van der Westhuizen "‘To ask essential questions?’ Bonhoeffer, America, South Africa," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 100 (2019):1–13.

In an article asking about a theology with Bonhoeffer beyond Bonhoeffer, he argued that with him means considering him in his own context, as set out above. Beyond him ...

... means discerning and examining those trajectories in his legacy that relate to our own concerns and take us into fresh directions as we grapple with the issues that face us concretely, here and now.¹⁹

In an article by Dirk J. Smit on the doing of theology in context, that is, in our context not dissociated from contexts not our own, he asked whether there is a particular paradigm for doing theology. He argued that theology would have to be done in and from the particular, in dialogue with those who also do theology in and from the particular.

The purpose ... would precisely not be to look for common features, for universal rules that can be deduced by way of comparison, for a shared method ..., but the opposite. Then the purpose could only be to see and appreciate the particular contexts in their specificity, even in their strangeness. ... According(ly), we only learn from paradigms when we move from one particular paradigm to the next particular paradigm. They are concrete and instructive examples of something that can precisely not be captured in general rules, whether before or after. We learn from them precisely because we see them in their singularity.²⁰

At the International Bonhoeffer Congress in Prague (2008), as De Gruchy looked back over three decades since he had attended his first Bonhoeffer Congress in 1976, he recalls how, on each occasion his attempt to understand and interpret Bonhoeffer was shaped by what he regarded as contextual issues:

19 De Gruchy, "With Bonhoeffer, beyond Bonhoeffer," 404.

20 Smit, "The Paradigm of Public Theology," 11–24. Also, Smit, "Does it Matter?" 86: "These last comments already point to a ... final characteristic of public theology, namely that it is done in widely different ways in diverse contexts. For (Bedford-Strohm) this implies that it should strive to *be inter-contextual*. Public theologians should learn from one another and from what is happening in other contexts without any attempt to emulate one another or to reduce what is called public theology to one comprehensive and all-inclusive methodology. Being inter-contextual, being widely divergent and different, belongs to the very nature of what is today known as public theology."

At Geneva in 1976, the context was the Soweto Uprising; at Oxford in 1980, the focus was on confessing Christ against the heresy of apartheid; at Amsterdam in 1988, in the midst of a state of emergency, the issue was the freedom of the Church in the liberation struggle; at New York in 1992, as South Africa emerged from the dark night of apartheid, the theme was national reconstruction; at Cape Town in 1996, we pondered whether Bonhoeffer was of any use as we moved into the era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; at Berlin in 2000, on the eve of the horrifying events of 9/11, the theme was appropriately and prophetically on religious pluralism in a global society; and then at Rome in 2004 the focus was on Bonhoeffer as Christian humanist in a world of increasing religious fundamentalism and secularism, issues that have been central here in Prague.²¹

Already in *Doing Theology in South Africa* (1994), De Gruchy argued that the task of theology is doing it. We have to learn how to move from the study of theology to doing it within context. The phrase in the title hints that theology is not merely about what we learn, but about engaging in the doing of theology in context.²² In an article on South African theology in *Religious Studies Review* (1991), he argued that theologians would have to become far more engaged.²³ Therefore also *praxis* would be part of the task of doing theology.

Thus, thirdly, doing theology in dialogue with Bonhoeffer asks for praxis. Doing theology is a form of praxis, it is engagement, a way of *being*.²⁴ Dialogue with Bonhoeffer meant moving from phraseology to reality:

21 De Gruchy, "With Bonhoeffer, beyond Bonhoeffer," 413.

22 See John W. De Gruchy, "The Nature, Necessity and Task of Theology," in J.W. De Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Doing Theology in the Context: South African Perspectives* (New York, Orbis, 1994), 2–14; "Doing theology in South Africa Today," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 139 (2011), 7–17; "Revisiting Doing Theology in Context. Re-assessing a Legacy," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 141 (2011), 21–31; also, *A Theological Odyssey: My life in writing* (Stellenbosch, African Sun Media, 2014), 36–49.

23 John W. de Gruchy, "South African theology comes of age," *Religious Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (1991): 222.

24 "Doing theology in South Africa Today," 10.

Time and again we have discovered that it prompts and prods us to move beyond the boundaries of his time and thought, and, as he would say, beyond phraseology to reality. That is, beyond academic discourse to praxis or, as we might be tempted, endlessly repeating his words without critical reflection in relation to our own historical context and action.²⁵

According to De Gruchy, as Bonhoeffer's theology developed it became increasingly inseparable from a praxis related to those below. This is also discernible in De Gruchy himself. In fact, he related dialogue with Bonhoeffer to dialogue *with* those below.

The fact that doing theology in dialogue asks for praxis characterised by dialogue with those below is particularly clear in Boesak's dialogue with Bonhoeffer. At the Fifth International Bonhoeffer Congress in Amsterdam (1991), this was one of Boesak's main critiques:

One must ask: Can one be a theologian in South Africa or for that matter anywhere else, and not speak up for and not fight alongside the victims of oppression and tyranny? Can one be a theologian and not find oneself compelled to be involved in the struggle for justice and peace? Can one be a theologian and not be willing to place at risk all that one has, indeed, also one's life if necessary, in order to authenticate one's doing theology in the world? When I think of Bonhoeffer, I think of a theologian who has made it impossible since his life and death for anyone to do theology without understanding from the inside the meaning of struggle, the meaning of identification with those who are voiceless, the meaning of participating in the battles in this world that seek to establish justice and peace and humanity. Can one be a theologian, and not do this? Bonhoeffer suggests that one cannot ... (He) always found it very difficult to understand, to put it very mildly, how one can study Bonhoeffer, talk about him, even love him as a theologian, be fascinated by his words, without being as involved as he has been. Can there be any real understanding of the man and of what he has written, if there is no understanding and if there is no sharing of the

25 De Gruchy, "With Bonhoeffer, beyond Bonhoeffer," 403.

commitment that he so obviously had? This was what Bonhoeffer meant to me.²⁶

For Boesak, dialogue with Bonhoeffer was a step towards doing theology from below in South Africa, to what he would want theology in South Africa to be: Black Liberation Theology.²⁷

The question in this article, however, is how De Gruchy interpreted Bonhoeffer's oft-quoted paragraph about a theology from below, from below. It is interesting how De Gruchy's interpretation differed from Boesak's theology from below.²⁸

In an article on Bonhoeffer's reception in South Africa (1997), De Gruchy questioned whether the insights that have been important for South Africa in the past, that is, before democracy, might also be important in the present.

26 Allan Aubrey Boesak, "What Dietrich Bonhoeffer has meant to me" in *Bonhoeffer's Ethics. Old Europe and New Frontiers*, edited by Guy Carter, René van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, and Jurjen Wiersma (Kampen, Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1991), 23.

27 For his dialogue with Bonhoeffer, cf. Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 21; *Running with horses. Reflections of an accidental politician* (Cape Town: Joho Publishers, 2009), 36. Following Ralph Garlin Clingan and Reggie Williams, Boesak argues: "Bonhoeffer could see (these) crucial truths (of a theology from below) because at a pivotal time in his life he was exposed, and opened himself, to black perspective: the people's liberation theology of Adam Clayton Powell Sr., the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, and in his engagement with 'the black Christ of the Harlem Renaissance'. ... The perspective 'from below', of the 'outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled' – the language of the Bonhoeffer after Harlem – the perspective of 'those who suffer' is not a perspective one learns from the sedate family discussions in aristocratic German homes or in the academic discourse of post-Enlightenment German universities. That perspective was opened up to Bonhoeffer every time he entered the highly charged atmosphere of that black church, and every time he was confronted with the Jesus not shaped by 'white civilization'." Cf. Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid. The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 90, also *Pharaohs on Both Sides of the Blood-Red Waters: Prophetic Critique on Empire: Resistance, Justice, and the Power of the Hopeful Sizwe – A Transatlantic Conversation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

28 Cf. in this regard Henco van der Westhuizen on Boesak, Bonhoeffer, and South Africa, a paper read at the recent International Bonhoeffer Congress in Stellenbosch.

He referred, for example, to “confessing Christ concretely here and now,”²⁹ to Bonhoeffer’s “putting a spoke in the wheel,”³⁰ the “acknowledging our own guilt,”³¹ and to “becoming a church for others.”³²

His third reference, viz. “learning to see things from below,” is of particular importance. In fact, it was learning to see things from below that allowed for the mentioned insights to be recognised as important in South Africa.

Learning to see from below, or at least, learning to see differently, the title also of Dirk J. Smit’s article on De Gruchy’s theology, published in his Festschrift, *Theology in Dialogue* (2002),³³ was what allowed him to ask anew what it might mean for him to do theology in South Africa today.

According to De Gruchy, the reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa has in many ways been restricted to those in more privileged positions.³⁴ It is precisely to the privileged, however, that Bonhoeffer’s seeing from below has been a particular challenge. For *them*, his challenge remains above all else to see things from below.

Also when answering the question of who Bonhoeffer is for us today, he argues that Bonhoeffer’s seeing things from below is of particular importance for the privileged: “we have found in this theologian someone

29 De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond,” 355. See also John W. De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer and confessing Christ in South Africa today,” in P.F. Theron and J. Kinghorn (eds.), *Koninkryk, kerk en kosmos. Festschrift in honour of Professor W.D. Jonker* (Bloemfontein, Pro-Christo, 1989), 164–178.

30 De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond,” 357.

31 De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond,” 359. Also see John W. De Gruchy, “Confessing guilt in South Africa today in dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 67 (1989): 37–45.

32 De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond,” 363.

33 Dirk J. Smit, “Seeing things differently: On prayer and politics,” in *Theology in Dialogue: The Impact of the Arts, Humanities, and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought*, ed. R.K. Wustenberg and L. Holness (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002), 271–284.

34 See, for example, the dissertations of Johan Botha, *Skuldbelydenis en plaasbekleding. Teks en konteks 5* (Universiteit van die Wes-Kaapland, Die Drukkery, 1989); Carel Anthonissen, *Die geloofwaardigheid van die kerk in die teologie van Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch University, 1993). See, however, also Russel Botman, *Discipleship as transformation? Towards a theology of transformation*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Bellville, University of the Western Cape, 1994) and Boesak, “What Dietrich Bonhoeffer has meant to me,” 21–29.

who allows us recognise our bondage to privilege.”³⁵ This was also the argument in the article on the reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa.

As was the case with Bonhoeffer, it has been the case also in South Africa that some of those who have been privileged have learned, have often been forced to learn, to see things differently from below. This learning process is still taking place as we are made aware of, and challenged by, new or different perspectives from our own.³⁶

A more detailed argument was already included in *Bonhoeffer and South Africa* (1984), where De Gruchy asked how *he* was to respond to theologies from below. He learned from Bonhoeffer to see things from below, which for him had to do with the liberation of the privileged, which was also the title of his article. He recognized in Bonhoeffer a way towards liberation from the bondage of privilege.³⁷

Like Bonhoeffer himself, white South Africans need to be liberated from that which prevents them from hearing the good news – they need to be externally liberated from clinging to those things that are contrary to the gospel. They cannot change unless they come to terms with reality and are willing to let go of their privilege.³⁸

It will not be possible to change, he argued, if they were not willing to learn from those below – and here he quotes Bonhoeffer – if they were not willing to see things from the perspective of those below.

For him, however, this pertained to liberation not only from, but *for*. It was being liberated for others, for those below. For De Gruchy, this entailed acknowledgement of their own guilt. Unless this being for others or for those below was accompanied by the acknowledgement of their guilt, it would not be liberating.

35 De Gruchy, “Who is Bonhoeffer for us today?” Also, De Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 56, and, more recently, *Bonhoeffer’s Questions* (2019), 9.

36 De Gruchy, “Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond,” 360.

37 De Gruchy, “Who is Bonhoeffer for us today?” Also, de Gruchy, *A Theological Odyssey*, 56, and, more recently, *Bonhoeffer’s Questions* (2019).

38 De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 77.

It was not merely about being for those below but being *with those* below. It was seeing things with those below that allowed De Gruchy, like Bonhoeffer, to recognise this way towards liberation.

However, it also allowed him to recognise this liberation from within the tradition of which he is part. This was what he wanted to do in *Liberating Reformed Theology* (1991).³⁹ Reformed Theology, at least in South Africa, he argued, had to be liberated. Although he asked about the challenge of theologies of liberation for Reformed Theology, it was not about those theologies *per se*. For him, it was rather about the challenge posed by those from below, those for whom these theologies were liberating.

Also, for De Gruchy, it was an issue whether doing *Reformed* theology – either from below or not – would still be important for us in South Africa after democracy. The question of doing Reformed theology is, of course, even more pertinent in the light of my own tradition, the Dutch Reformed Church.⁴⁰ For me, it is not only that I want the tradition to which I belong to be liberated, to be, in fact, more Reformed, as De Gruchy argued in *The Church Struggle in South Africa, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition* (2005).⁴¹ It is also that abandoning the Dutch Reformed Church would mean, at least for me, abandoning the privilege that this tradition *still retains*. It would be not to acknowledge how I and the tradition of which I am part will *still* have to be liberated.

39 John W. De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991). See also John W. de Gruchy, “Toward a Reformed theology of liberation: A retrieval of Reformed symbols in the struggle for justice,” in D. Willis and M. Welker (eds.), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999), 103–119; John Calvin: *Christian Humanist and Evangelical Reformer* (Wellington, Lux Verbi, 2009); “The contest of Reformed identity in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid,” in eds. M. Plaatjies-Van Huffel and R. Vosloo (eds.), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the struggle for justice: Remembering 1960–1990* (Stellenbosch, Sun Press, 2013), 26–36.

40 See, for example, Robert Vosloo, “Christianity and apartheid in South Africa” in Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2015), 400–423, and also Johann Kinghorn, “Modernization and Apartheid: The Afrikaner Churches,” in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa. A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1997), 155–172. Also, Johann Kinghorn, *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid* (Johannesburg, MacMillan, 1986).

41 See John W. De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005). Also (edited with Charles Villa-Vicencio) *Apartheid is a heresy* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983).

But Reformed theology, he argued, was indeed a liberating tradition. For De Gruchy, liberating *Reformed* theology had to do with the fact that *within* the Reformed tradition there truly is a liberating trajectory. This liberation, which he described as “the bestowal and renewal of life in all its dimensions,”⁴² were, of course, also already discernible in Bonhoeffer, who wanted to do “justice to life in all its dimensions and in *that* way affirm it” (my italics).⁴³

Retrieving a tradition that wanted to do *justice* to life in all its dimensions, a tradition that affirms *life* in and through justice, concerns the way in which the tradition has developed historically and dialogically. As with interpreting Bonhoeffer, De Gruchy is interested in the tradition’s *own* historical and dialectical development.

Secondly, it had to be asked critically how the tradition had been anything but liberating, also in South Africa. It will be important that Reformed theology, he argued, critically uncovers those anything but liberating aspects within the tradition *itself*.

Thirdly, retrieving the tradition concerned where the Reformed tradition *had* been liberating before, for those *below*. In an article on critically retrieving tradition as a way of doing theology, he argued:

Tradition is about handing on from one generation to another something that gives meaning to life ... It is handed on There is, however, a difference between traditionalism and living tradition. The former is dead, the latter dynamic and changing, always rediscovering itself, though always in continuity with its past. If this transmission stops, a tradition loses its significance, except for the archivist ... and eventually dies. ... Traditions stay alive precisely because those who share them are in conversation with the past ... and in debate with each other about their meaning for the present. This may result in strong disagreement, but it is also the path to renewal. Traditions are alive because they are always being contested from within and challenged from without.⁴⁴

42 De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 30.

43 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers*, 53.

44 “Doing theology in South Africa Today,” 12. Cf. also *John Calvin*, 23–28.

For him, retrieving a tradition that wanted to do justice to life in all its dimensions, a tradition that in and through justice affirms life, is about always being contested from within and challenged from without – where the new always remains in continuity with the old, but in creative tension.⁴⁵

What does this mean for doing theology in South Africa – from below?

Doing theology from below in South Africa?

Again, as it was with De Gruchy's interpretation of Bonhoeffer or his dialogue with him, the issue in which I am interested is not merely his interpretation of Bonhoeffer or his interpretation of his own tradition through Bonhoeffer. It is about defining more clearly what it means for *me* – influenced both by Bonhoeffer and the Reformed tradition – to do theology from below.

How am *I* to do theology from below in this creative tension?

In the light of the above it is clear that it was seeing from below that allowed those like De Gruchy to see that they *themselves*, like Bonhoeffer, had to be liberated.

Doing theology *from* below requires me to learn to see things from the perspective of those below. It is, however, not merely about seeing what those below see. It is about seeing myself through those below, seeing myself from the perspective of those below. How do those below see me?

The question is in what ways also *my* way of doing theology is still a doing of theology from above, from and for those above. How will I still have to be liberated from my privilege?

Also, how do I have to acknowledge my *own* guilt? What would it mean to acknowledge our guilt today? In addition, how do the tradition of which I am part, particularly the Dutch Reformed Church, still have to be liberated to be liberating? What would it mean for *us* to acknowledge guilt?⁴⁶

45 "Doing theology in South Africa Today," 9.

46 See Henco van der Westhuizen, "The reception of Belhar in the Dutch Reformed Church." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45, no. 3 (2019).

In Ward's article on decolonizing theology he asks: "Where is South African theology being done?"⁴⁷ If theology in South Africa will have to be decolonized, he asks how this should be done. According to him, theology in South Africa will have to provincialize Europe, to translate, and to affirm.

With provincialization,⁴⁸ but also with translation⁴⁹ and affirmation,⁵⁰ Ward, has in mind *inter alia*, a deconstruction of, for example, our European imaginations, and a construction of an imagination from and for South Africa. There is a thinking through and a thinking beyond. Of particular importance – and this holds together both provincializing and affirming – is *translating*.

Translation is always one of the first acts of colonialism; it possesses by reimagining the strange ... in terms of the familiar, the motherland. It is not simply that something is lost in the translation; something is erased. Often colonialism attempted to erase other mother tongues ... so the "outpost" can be recognized as an ... extension of the homeland. ... Colonization becomes ... an imaginative act that changes the way people come to think about, articulate (wherever) they live, or have come to live. It starts to forge a new collective memory, a new mentality, such that it becomes ... strange to think outside the box, outside of the categories that have been handed down ...⁵¹

In light of his article on decolonizing theology and its significance in South Africa, it is clear that De Gruchy, interpreting from below, has in many ways begun to provincialize and to affirm and to translate, in short, *to do theology from and for and with those below*.

De Gruchy affirms that he had to learn to do theology within his context, that is, to move *from*, for example, a European theology, to doing it within

47 Ward, "Decolonizing," 565.

48 Ward, "Decolonizing," 566–570.

49 Ward, "Decolonizing," 571–578.

50 Ward, "Decolonizing," 578.

51 Ward, "Decolonizing," 574.

context.⁵² He later launched a journal of theology not of or in but *for* Southern Africa.⁵³ Theology from below is not about seeing from below before returning above again; nor does it mean merely being able to begin to do theology for those below. To do theology from below would rather have to be about seeing with those below, doing theology *with those below*⁵⁴ – this was what the journal was all about.

The question, however, is what it means for a white, male in South Africa to do theology with those below. In his book on *Reconciliation* (2002), De Gruchy asks how *we* – that is, white males in South Africa – dare speak:

Many voices speak of reconciliation, but what they say depends on who is speaking ... and why they are speaking. Whose reconciliation is at stake and for what purpose? On whose terms are we seeking to achieve it? Do we speak from a position of power or out of weakness? Who, then, are we who dare speak about reconciliation? *Are we speaking for ourselves, on behalf of others, or with others?* Who are we listening to before we speak, or are we not listening at all? ... Is our speech about reconciliation forcing some to remain silent? ... Are we speaking about reconciliation in order to forget the past, or in order to deal justly with it? Dare we speak about reconciliation if in doing so we reinforce structures of injustice? ... If we dare to speak ... how should we speak? Speaking assumes a particular form of discourse, a language, a style of rhetoric. What language should we employ? What is the appropriate way for those of us who are ... heirs of ... privilege? ⁵⁵

However, before moving away from a theology with those below and to theology from above and beyond above and below, the question remains whether our theologies are indeed from below enough, that is, engaged enough.

52 De Gruchy, “The nature, necessity and task of theology,” 2.

53 See Philippe Denis, “The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa and the emergence of contextual theology in South Africa.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 146 (2013): 6–23.

54 See John W. de Gruchy, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 1 (1972): 2–4.

55 John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring justice* (London, SCM, 2002), 16.

It is doing engaged theology with those below that has been one of *the* themes in De Gruchy's theology – but also how he wanted theology to be taken further. This theology has been described as a *theology on the edge*.⁵⁶

In some ways it is a presumptuous title as it brings to mind the phrase cutting edge research, that is, research that is well in advance of the more mundane work done by some others. But that was not the intention behind the choice of the theme. We had in mind, rather, the kind of theology we wanted to celebrate and at the same time encourage the new generation of South African theologians *to engage in*. The title was prompted by a Festschrift in honour and memory of my son, Steve's life and legacy, *Living on the Edge*. Steve was, I think, and many would agree, one of a new breed of South African theologians who was showing the way forward, in some way building on what I had managed to do, but taking it further ...⁵⁷

In his reflections De Gruchy describes what I have referred to as a theology from below in terms of a theology on the edge:

Doing theology on the edge means theological engaging reality in all its dimensions, whether politics or aesthetics, science or spirituality, in ways that are transformative. This is not to deny that theology exists in the service of the ... church, but to affirm that it does so precisely because the church is called to live on the edge in its engagement with the world, not in a closet busy with its own affairs. As such, theology is not a safe or comfortable enterprise ... but a way of participation in the life of the world from the perspective of faith. As such, in doing theology we find that we are taken personally to the boundaries of our existence. And we soon discover that it is an impossible possibility, something we engage in knowing full well

56 Theology on the edge was the theme of a conference held from 3–5 September 2014 at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, honouring De Gruchy on his 75th birthday. See Robert Vosloo, "From the editor," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 55, Suppl. 1 (2014): 937–939.

57 John W. De Gruchy, "Theology on the edge – Reflections." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 55, no. 1 (2014): 1976. A theology on the edge would also be the way Steve De Gruchy did theology. See, for example, James R. Cochrane, Elias Kifon Bongmba, Isabel Apawo Phiri and Desmond Van der Water (eds.), *Living on the edge: essays in honour of Steve de Gruchy, activist & theologian* (Dorpspruit, Cluster Publications, 2012).

that it will always remain beyond us because of the subject who addresses us. Theology has to do, then, with matters of life and death; it is cosmic in its scope and yet touches us at the centre of our personal lives and relationships. It does so because theology, as I have learnt over the years, is all about being led into mystery – the mystery of the living God who meets, confronts and embraces us in the midst of life, especially when we are come face to face with personal suffering and seek to be in solidarity with others who suffer through injustice ...⁵⁸

De Gruchy would often refer to this being in solidarity as being in *critical* solidarity. Already in his first publications (1986, 1987),⁵⁹ he highlights critical solidarity. The task of theology in South Africa, he highlighted in a book on theology after democracy ...

... must be redefined in term of critical solidarity. The struggle is no longer to be understood primarily in terms of resistance and liberation, but in terms of reconstruction and transformation. Being in critical solidarity means giving support to those initiatives which may lead to the establishment not only of a new, but a just, social order. It means that the church remains prophetic in its stance towards a new democratically elected government, that it must continue to stand for truth, but now on the basis of a shared commitment to the realization of national reconstruction. Being in critical solidarity means continued resistance to what is unjust and false, and continued protest on behalf of what is just and true. ... Critical solidarity means taking sides with all who remain oppressed in one form or another in a new democratic society and participating with them in their never-ending struggle for justice, human dignity, and liberation ... Critical solidarity also means defence of human rights of all people, especially minority cultural

58 De Gruchy, "Theology on the edge," 1076.

59 John W. De Gruchy, *Standing by God in his hour of grieving: human suffering, theological reflection, and Christian solidarity* (Pretoria, C.B. Powell Bible Centre, 1986) and *Theology and Ministry in Context and Crisis: A South African Perspective* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1987).

and religious groups, and taking the side of those who may be the new victims.⁶⁰

The drive towards this is due to being *led into mystery*, the mystery of the living God who meets us in the midst of life; it is clear that doing theology from below is not to do away with what I, hesitantly, describe as theology from *above*.⁶¹

De Gruchy's interpretation of Bonhoeffer from and with those below is characterised by his continuous interest in asking *theological* questions. Bonhoeffer asked this question with regards to the God who a human being is. To ask the question of who God is for us today, as Bonhoeffer stated in *Life Together*, is to be interrupted, thwarted, frustrated.⁶² Doing theology from below would, at least from this perspective, have to ask about this being frustrated, thwarted, interrupted by *this* human being who is God. Theology from below, theology that in many ways can always be a theology from below alone, will also have to take these aspects of a theology from above into consideration critically.

To do theology in South Africa, to follow Bonhoeffer and the way he was interpreted from below, is, finally, to do theology that will demand of us to move beyond the above and below. It will also demand us to do theology, and that doing we will have to do justice to life in all its dimensions and in that way affirm it. According to De Gruchy, *this* is what reconciliation is about: the restoring of justice.⁶³ What is to be done is to recover the full

60 John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 222–223. Also, *A Theological Odyssey*, 94–95 and John W. de Gruchy, *I have come a long way* (Eugene, Cascade Books, 2016), 217–222. For him, also prophetic witness has to do with the theme of critical solidarity. See, for example, John W. De Gruchy, “Kairos moments and prophetic witness: Towards a prophetic ecclesiology,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3414>

61 See John W. de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (London, SCM Press, 2013). See also John W. De Gruchy, “Interview with John W. de Gruchy,” *Acta Theologica* 34, no. 2 (2014), 1–4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v34i1.13>

62 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), 99.

63 See John W. De Gruchy, *Cry Justice!: Prayers, Meditations and Readings from South Africa* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1986); “The search for unity and the struggle for justice in a pluralistic world: A South African Perspective,” in *Seventh Forum on Bilateral Dialogues* (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1997); “The dialectic

meaning and rich texture of reconciliation, and to reaffirm its inseparable interconnection *with the restoring of justice*.⁶⁴

However, what would a move beyond above and below mean? What would doing justice to life in all its dimensions entail? What would it mean to affirm life in doing justice to life?

Already in 1991, in the mentioned article on South African theology, De Gruchy argued that much of the theology prior to the article was about the struggle against apartheid. Already there, however, he argued that theology after the struggle against apartheid will have to adapt, *inter alia*, to the plurality of *struggles*.⁶⁵

In addition, doing theology in South Africa will have to amount to doing theology in a *pluralistic* South Africa that is not to be detached from a pluralistic Africa and beyond.

To do theology in the midst of pluralism would at least also mean doing theology in a *multidisciplinary* manner.

This is the direction De Gruchy took when he began to ask about the meaning of Christian *humanism*. This, I argue, is what Bonhoeffer's theology from below, from below, is all about. This is his interpretation of what I referred to as Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic from below – and it reads like a manifesto:

Christian humanists affirm the integrity of creation, recognizing that human life is rooted in and dependent on the earth. ...
Christian humanists are concerned about the well-being of the

of reconciliation: Church and the transition to democracy in South Africa," in G. Baum and H. Wells (eds.), *The reconciliation of peoples: Challenge to the churches* (New York, Orbis, 1997), 16–29; "The struggle for justice and the ministry of reconciliation in *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 62 (1998), 43–52. See also John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001).

64 De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 2.

65 "South African theology comes of age," 221–222. Cf. also Steve de Gruchy, "From Church Struggle to Church Struggles," in *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005), 223–260. Cf. also John W. De Gruchy, "From political to public theologies: The role of theology in public life in South Africa," in William Storrar and Andrew Morton (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan B. Forrester* (London, T&T Clark, 2004), 45–62.

earth in all its variety. ... Christian humanists believe that we share a common humanity with all other human beings. We are human beings first, and then only Christian by choice. ... Christian humanists believe that we should join with secular humanists and people of other faiths in the struggle for human rights, freedom, dignity, justice and peace. ... Christian humanists nonetheless affirm a humanism that is distinct because it is shaped by ... Christ. Being a Christian *humanist* implies that one is committed to human dignity, rights and freedom, and has some real hope for humanity; and being a *Christian* humanist suggests that these commitments and this hope are inseparable from ... Jesus Christ. Christian humanists believe that the salvation we have in Christ is not about making us more religious but more fully human, reconciling relationships, restoring human wholeness and well-being, and unlocking potential and creativity. ... Christian humanists believe that the Christian Church is called to be a sign of the new humanity God has brought into being through ... Christ; and therefore, to live, act, and hope in ways that contribute to human well-being in all its dimensions. ... Christian humanists today ... have a love of learning in search of practical wisdom; a respect for difference yet a commitment to truth; a passion for justice and peace ... and a sensibility to the aesthetic that espouses beauty and encourages creativity.⁶⁶

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66 John W. de Gruchy, *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006), 30–31. See also John W. de Gruchy, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist," in J. Zimmerman and B. Gregor (eds.), *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Eugene, Pickwick Press, 2010). See also "A Christian Humanist Perspective," in J.W. De Gruchy (ed.), *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* (Stellenbosch, Sun Press, 2011), 57–66.

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