

Doing ethics in communion. Some lessons from the theology of Dirkie Smit

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Dirkie Smit views ethics as an essential part of theology. Theology for Smit entails the continuous attempt to read and understand the Bible afresh. This theological endeavour is carried out in communion with the catholic and ecumenical Christian tradition, in communion with the experiences of joy and sadness, guilt and pain, fear and anger of believers, in communion with other theological disciplines as well as with other academic disciplines. Based on this doing of theology and ethics in communion, Smit develops models for a comprehensive and non-reductionist approach to ethics, namely an ethics of doing, an ethics of being and an ethics of vision. The importance of these models for doing ethics in South Africa is discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his classes Dirkie Smit usually explains that systematic theology and theological ethics address three questions: What do we believe? Why do we believe it? What is the significance of our faith for our lives? From this outline it becomes clear that morality cannot be separated from faith, ethics cannot be separated from dogmatics. Ethics deals explicitly with the implications and significance of faith. Ethics for Smit is indeed theological ethics.

Two decades ago Smit (1987a:48) defined Christian theology in a way that still serves as an important framework for understanding the theological and ethical labour of this highly appreciated and renowned South African and international scholar:

“In general, I would say Christian theology is the ongoing (and more or less scientific) attempt to understand the Word of God in order to proclaim and practice this message faithfully in ever-changing circumstances. Or, to put it even more concise: it is the ongoing attempt to understand the Word of God anew.”

From this definition it becomes clear that for Smit theology is about reading the Bible. In the attempt to understand the Bible afresh, Smit uses various sources, namely the rich Christian tradition, human experience and human reason. One could even say Smit reads the Bible, embarks on the theological and ethical task, in communion with the Christian tradition, in communion with people in all their variety of experiences and in communion with those who intentionally and rationally reflect on faith and on life in formal and non-formal ways.

Based on this reading of the Bible on the shoulders of tradition, whilst taking human experience seriously, and appealing to human reason, Smit offers an inclusive definition of theological ethics. Ethics does not only focus on a set of questions regarding the good, right or wise behaviour, choices and decisions. Many modern approaches to ethics limit or reduce the ethical task to addressing this set of questions. According to Smit ethics also, in fact first of all, addresses two other sets of questions, namely what type of society are we dreaming about, and what type of persons should we be.

This article in a cursory¹ way describes how Smit reads the Bible, therefore, how he practices theology and ethics, theological ethics if you wish, and how he develops a more comprehensive approach to ethics. From his communal and comprehensive approach to theology and ethics important lessons can be learned for doing ethics in South Africa today.

2. DOING THEOLOGY AND ETHICS IN COMMUNION

To do theology and ethics in communion is a central and crucial feature of Smit's theological approach and method, in fact of his ethos and spirituality.² The attempt to understand the Bible afresh occurs in communion with the worshipping community, with Christians from other historical periods; with Christians from different regions of the world; with Christians from different confessional traditions; with Christians in their experiences of joy and sadness, hope and despair; with Christians who are concerned about the wellbeing of fellow humans and the rest of creation. It occurs in communion with scholars from disciplines other than theology, and this communion is sought with scholars in other theological disciplines, especially with biblical scholars. Smit indeed practices theology and ethics in communion. This is not witnessed to only in his various publications. Also in his daily practices this quest for doing theology in communion is expressed. From his student days right through his career as pastor and lecturer he interacts with a community of students and colleagues, friends, family and fellow-believers, contemporaries and people from the past, South Africans and people from the international faith and theological community, in the joint attempt to understand God's Word anew.

2.1 In communion with the worshipping community

The classical dictum from the fifth century *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi en lex convivendi* is central for Smit in his doing of theology and ethics. This means that our worship and what we believe, and how we live, and how we live together across various boundaries, are all interrelated. With an appeal to the works of Methodist and ecumenical theologian, Geoffrey Wainwright, Smit demonstrates the importance of worship and liturgy for doctrine and ethics. He, more than anyone else, introduced Wainwright's development of systematic theology and ethics from a liturgical perspective, to South African theological scholarship ...

Smit (1997) specifically also focused on the relationship between worship and ethics. In the ethical endeavour what we do follows from who we are, *agere sequitur esse*. Our being, our character, the virtues that we embody, determines our decisions and actions. Smit also argues that what we do is determined to a high degree by what we see, by what we perceive as priorities, by how we interpret the situation beforehand, by how we describe what is going on around us, thus *agere sequitur videre*. Who we are also determines what we see in the end. Worship helps Christians to see, to look in the right direction, to think our way into God's world, to live in a creative tension between past, present and future. And even though worship might be abused, this does not nullify the importance thereof for Christian living.

Smit emphasises the mutual impact of the notions of worship, doctrine and life on each other (2004:905). He refers to the role of Danie du Toit, former systematic theologian and ethicist at

1 Humble selections are made from the very comprehensive and most impressive repertoire of publications of Dirkie Smit.

2 His professorial inauguration lecture at Stellenbosch University with its extensive bibliography and footnotes bears witness to Smit's doing of theology in communion (cf. 2002c).

Stellenbosch University, who worked hard during the apartheid years, when liturgy and doctrine were abused to legitimise unjust and dehumanising practices, to offer criticism of worship and doctrine from the perspective of ethics, amongst others from the perspective of his work on human dignity and human rights (ibid).

2.2 In communion with the catholic and ecumenical tradition

An important notion in Smit's thinking is that churches remain faithful to the long tradition in which they stand. Thereby we ensure that we are relevant in addressing contemporary doctrinal and ethical matters. In order to keep up with the Joneses, in order to respond proactively and responsibly to current challenges in church and society, we need to remember God's story with Israel, Jesus Christ and the church through the centuries. In his work Smit cherishes communion and interaction with theologians of different centuries. This is expressed not only in his direct reading of the works of a rich variety of theologians, but also in his respect for the ecumenical and denominational confessional documents of churches through the ages. In various articles he writes about confessions, about matters such as the nature of confessions, their purpose, functions and reception, and also about the challenge to confess, embody and obey and follow anew in new times, about faith in the light of the insights from the confessions (cf. 2006a; 2002a; 2002b).

Moreover, he reads the Bible with theologians and believers from a variety of confessional traditions. He is an ecumenical theologian who strives to know the depth of Christ with all the saints. In a tribute to his father-in-law, Willie Jonker, Smit (1989:29 – 30) describes the insights of the ecumenical communion as follows: openness to the other, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers; the unifying effect of joint worship and shared spirituality; the dominant place of the vision of the one, visible church of Christ; the importance of frank dialogue, across fixed boundaries, with the willingness to listen and the expectation to be enriched; the nature of the church as community of equals, of brothers and sisters; the ecumenical community can only be serviced if everyone unapologetically live and witness from their own traditions; the essential role of a concentration on Christ; the relativising of what is less important in the hierarchy of Christian truth; the importance of a historical consciousness; the emphasis that theology is not being studied, but practiced; the connecting power of Christian praxis, in obedience to the gospel; the importance to strive for justice, humanness and peace; the persistent and inspiring hope for the coming Kingdom.³

Desmond Tutu once said: "I am a good ecumenical because I am a good Anglican." Thereby he meant that only those who take their own confessional tradition seriously can make a meaningful contribution to the ecumenical endeavour. Dirkie Smit's communion with the ecumenical movement is enriched by his communion with brothers and sisters of the Reformed tradition, especially, though not exclusively, that part of the Reformed tradition that is articulated and represented by Karl Barth, the Barmen Declaration and the Confession of Belhar (cf. Smit 2005:225). In an article (1996), for instance, on ethics from a Reformed perspective, he borrows from various Reformed theologians. From Leith he borrows the insight that for Reformed Christians the world we live in, the society we live in, the political, social and economic realities we live in are all matters of faith. The central theme of Calvinist theology is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the living God. This coincides with Lehmann's

3 Smit even pleads for higher levels of communion within the international ecumenical movement. He specifically supports the quest for communion and unity between the Life and Work and Faith and Order sections of the World Council of Churches, and the stronger link between ecclesiology and ethics (2003).

view that, in Reformed theology, God is called the Great Politician, and with Meeks's insight that for Reformed Christians God is the Supreme Economist. The five central features of Reformed theology that Coenie Burger (2001) identifies, is well represented in the theology of Dirkie Smit, namely to live before the countenance of God (i.e. spirituality and worship), to be bound to the Word, to focus upon life, to be aware of own weaknesses, and to live in the power of the Spirit.

2.3 In communion with brothers and sisters in their joys and sorrows

The committee that formulated the Confession of Belhar in 1982 decided that it had to articulate the faith that already lived in the hearts of members of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). One of the reasons that this confession enjoyed spontaneous and immediate acceptance in the DRMC was precisely the fact that it expressed sensitivity to and acknowledged the plights of the communities of the DRMC and how they respond in faith to these. The empathetic listening of the authors of Belhar enabled them to articulate the faith of the DRMC people, namely that there is a God who calls, assembles and cares for his people; that there is a God who gives and commands unity in diversity; that there is a God who makes an end to separation, enmity and alienation; that here is a God who shows compassion and justice and who inspires his church to position themselves where He himself stands, namely against oppression and with the downtrodden; that there is a God and a throne in heaven which signifies victory and asks for complete loyalty. The Belhar formulation and reception bears witness to Dirkie Smit's pastoral sensitivity and openness towards people and their plights and dreams, joys and sorrows, fears and guilt, pain and anger.

In reflections on reconciliation and justice Smit (1996) appeals to theologians like Helmut Richard Niebuhr, Jaap Durand, Wolfgang Huber and James Cone to emphasise the indispensability of attentiveness, of paying attention, of being open to others, of really listening to their stories, of developing empathy and real sympathy. This listening to others help us to discover who we are, where we went wrong, how we impact on them, how even our most noble acts might unintentionally impact negatively. It paves the way for confession of guilt, for agreement with the descriptions that others offer of us. Thereby the doors to truth, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution are opened. This empathetic listening helps to develop reliable self descriptions, and faithful theological and ethical projects.

Smit recognises the opposition to the idea that special solidarity should be shown to the poor, destitute, wronged and most vulnerable ones. He identifies various reasons for this opposition (1988:17). Some believe this notion of special solidarity is strange to the Bible and Christian tradition. Others reckon this claim of particularity contradicts the universality of God's love according to the New Testament. Partiality is even in opposition to their moral convictions and understanding of God. To some this sounds like a nationalistic and exclusive form of civil religion promoting the idea of an elected people. Others equate this notion with Marxist thought and class-struggle theory. Some view it as an ideological weapon. Over against these protests Smit (1982:61-62) offers sound biblical evidence for solidarity with these vulnerable ones: the Old Testament laws, like the laws about the Sabbath, the Jubilee, tithes and usury; narratives about God's continual rescuing of individuals and the people of Israel from danger and misery; the various ways in which the rights of the orphan, the widow and the stranger are protected; the doxological description of God as the Help of the helpless in the book of Psalms; the protection of the poor in the wisdom literature; the portrayal of God's justice as his active intervention to rescue and to restore; the prophetic criticism of social injustice, exploitation and the gap between rich and poor; the role of the poor and of poverty in the gospels, especially the gospel of Luke, which is also called the gospel of the poor; Jesus' identification with the marginalised; the Messianic meaning of the miracles of Jesus, amongst others the multiplication of the bread and fish and healings; the

remarkable teaching of Matthew 25:31-46 that compassion shown to the needy is compassion shown to Jesus Himself; the pursuit of sharing and equality in the congregation according to Acts, 1 Corinthians and the pastoral letters; the role of wealth and poverty in James; the urgent appeal of 1 John for concrete deeds of love and compassion.

Good theology and ethics is not possible without communion with and pastoral attentiveness to the stories of others, and without communion and identification with the most vulnerable ones in society.

2.4 In communion with the disciplines

Throughout his career Dirkie Smit engages with other theological disciplines as well as disciplines other than theology. It is especially with colleagues from the biblical sciences of Old and New Testament that he seeks communion with.

In various publications Smit argues in favour of a theological reading of the Bible. By this he means that we should view the Bible as the book of the church. This book enjoys authority in the church. It came into being for the church. It was the church who recognises and acknowledged the inherent authority of this book. The church did not give authority to the Bible, but under guidance of the Holy Spirit recognised the inherent authority of the Bible. According to Smit, Christian readers of the Bible employ various exegetical and hermeneutical methods to investigate the meaning of the Bible, to interpret the Bible, to make sense of it, to give a reliable exposition of it, and to bring to light its meaning for the worship, doctrine and life of the church today. Smit appreciates and encourages thorough, disciplined, technical exegetical work.⁴ In fact, he appeals to biblical scholars to assist theological ethicists to base their arguments and positions on thorough exegetical and hermeneutical work; he invites them to evaluate the use of the Bible in comprehensive works in the field of systematic theology and ethics like that of Johan Heyns, Willie Jonker, Jaap Durand and Adrio König, and even in the internationally renowned work of David Bosch on mission (1992:324-325); he pleads with biblical scholars to consider viewing church history as the history of the exegesis of Scripture, and the world church and mission as the real readers of Scripture (1992:323). Smit also warns against the impact of the Enlightenment thinking with its emphasis on detached inquiry, professionalisation, specialisation and technocratic rationality which promotes a reading of Scripture which is not directly translatable into concrete life in everyday practice (1982:324);⁵ and he reckons that the division of theology into disciplines after the Enlightenment has impacted negatively on theology students and theological education, the theological disciplines themselves, on Christian life, on church and society (1992:325). Communion between the various theological disciplines, also between systematic theology and biblical scholarship, can help to remedy this situation.⁶

4 In various publications Smit's own disciplined work on exegesis and hermeneutics are witnessed to, amongst others in his involvement since the early 1980's with the series *Woord teen die lig*, in which exegetical, hermeneutical and homiletical guidelines are offered for preaching on various themes. Over the years he consistently wrote popular monographs that are based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical work. He also published various works on exegesis and hermeneutics in the context of the theological reading of the Bible as book of the church (cf. 1987b; 1996a; 1998a; 1998b; 2006b).

5 For extended discussions by Smit of the inadequate impact of biblical scholarship in South Africa on the worship, faith and life of the church, cf. also Smit 1990a, 1990b and 1991.

6 This joint reading of the Bible as book of the church might have a redemptive effect on society. The church might be a community who reads the Bible to inform her own ethos, and through this impact on the public ethos of South Africa. This might entail that the Bible in this way offer to South African public life its vision, its values, its virtues, its imagination, its dream, its language (cf. Smit 1991:62,64).

Besides this quest for communion with other theological disciplines, Smit seeks communion with other scientific disciplines. In doing theology and ethics, therefore in reading and attempting to understand the Bible afresh, it is crucial that we borrow from the scholars who do cultural analyses, anthropological studies, sociology, semiotics etc. Smit (with De Villiers 1996:36-38; 2004) refers in various works with strong support for the work of Eduard Tödt on moral decision making – specifically for his strong emphasis on the role of thorough social analysis. Although this is a complicated task, and although selections and choices and even reductions need to be made in the face of overwhelming information, positions and perspectives from other disciplines, the inputs of colleagues from other disciplines help us to see what is going on around us, and eventually to judge and act adequately. This emphasis on social analysis in Smit’s work coincides with Don Browning’s (1996:51) description of one aspect of the task of systematic theology, namely to gain a comprehensive view of present society, to examine the large encompassing themes of our present practices, and the vision latent in them.⁷ In the case of the various themes that are dealt with in ethics, communion should be sought with disciplines like the bio-sciences, psychology, education, political science, economics, business, trade unions, the environmental sciences, physical science, the media, etc.⁸

3. TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO ETHICS

On basis of his communal approach to theology and ethics Smit develops a more inclusive approach to ethics. In the earlier cited article on Reformed ethics Smit sketches the framework of such an inclusive approach to ethics. Firstly, he firstly agrees with James Gustafson’s identification of four varieties of moral discourse, i.e. four ways of speaking about morality, namely the prophetic, narrative, technical and policy discourses (1996a:438-439). Ethics as formal, structured and intentional reflection upon morality takes place in the technical mode. It is informed by the other three modes, and it also impacts on those modes.

Smit then identifies three sets of questions that are dealt with within the sphere of technical reflection upon morality (1996a:439-440). These questions firstly deal with the type of choices Christians make and the behaviour we engage in. It secondly focuses upon the type of persons that we are, and thirdly on the types of societies that we dream of, that we envisage.

3.1 An ethics of communion and right choices

According to Smit one dimension of the ethical endeavour is to engage in the task of moral judgement and decision making. In line with his communal approach to theology and ethics he portrays this task as a joint effort of believers in which they draw from the Bible, tradition, experience and reason.

7 Browning (1996:51) adds that a second dimension of the systematic theological agenda is to investigate general themes of the gospel that respond to the general questions of the present cultural, political, economic and social situation.

8 Smit (1987a:56) is convinced of the importance of communion with other disciplines: “... one should use everything available in order to understand the world one lives in: literature, the theatre, the arts, are all important indicators of what people experience, think and believe: but one should also use the available scientific material, mainly the so-called humanities, including philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, economy, political science, anthropology etc. One should never trust one’s own intuition. One should never be naïve about these things and simply believe that one knows how things work, how the economy works, how human psychology works, etc.

Smit borrows from the insights of ethicists like Wolfgang Bender and Eduard Tödt. Bender distinguishes between three spheres in which people live and decide (cf. Smit 1992:307). He firstly identifies the broader macro world such as global challenges, relationships between states and global conflicts and pandemics like AIDS. Secondly, he refers to the more immediate societies in which people live, namely the place of work, local economy, leisure, educational institutions, etc. The third sphere entails the primary groups in which people live, namely the family, circles of friends and other intimate relationships. Although many people believe that the Bible only has relevance for the third sphere, Smit is of opinion that the Bible offers moral perspectives for all these spheres.

It is with an appeal to Tödt's six *Schritten*, aspects or facets or steps (not in chronological sense) that Smit (1996a; with De Villiers 1996b) offers concrete suggestions for moral decision making. These steps entails that we see, judge and act. So-called deontological and teleological as well as virtue approaches to moral decision making are all included in Tödt's model. This in fact is part of the strength of his approach.

- The aspects relating to seeing are: Seeing, accepting, and describing the problem as a moral problem; analysing the situation; considering possible responses available.
- The aspects relating to judging are: evaluating applicable norms and criteria; listening to the opinion of others.
- The last aspect has to do with taking the decision and concrete obedient action, and that we avoid the sin of omission.

3.2 An ethics of communion and new people

Smit (1996a; 1996c) argues strongly in favour of a broader approach to ethics. He is critical of the fact that ethical discourse since the Enlightenment mainly focused on the ethics of doing, of decision making. He joins theologians who plead for attention to the ethics of being, of the formation of people of virtue and character in the context of the church who reads the narratives of God's dealings with Israel, Jesus Christ and the church of two thousand years.

Smit (1996c:176-180) analyses three doctoral dissertations that had been completed in South Africa during the early 1990's and that had focused on the role of moral formation in the Christian life. The work of Robert Vosloo emphasised the role of saints, of role models, of significant others in the formation of people of virtue and character; Russel Botman's dissertation emphasised the role of discipleship in the process of moral transformation in personal and public life; and Carel Anthonissen's work highlighted the role of friendship, communion, and spiritual disciplines in moral living. Smit reckons that the new South Africa needs new South Africans. We consequently need an ethic of being, an ethics of role models and inspiring characters (saints), an ethics of commitment and responsibility (disciples), an ethics of mutual acceptance and living with the other (friends).

Smit (1996c:181-182) argues in favour of an ethics of being despite various oppositions to this approach. He is aware of the fact that some ethicists view this approach as a dialect, a pre-modern form of uninformed moral babble, and not as standard ethical discourse; as sectarian and fostering in-group mentalities, virtues and values; and as encouraging works righteousness and moralisation. Smit (1996c:182-183) is however positive about the ethics of being and poses the challenge to biblical scholars and ethicists to explore, amidst the difficulties this might awake, the potential of the Bible for moral living by reading it from the perspectives of sainthood, discipleship and friendship.

Smit also is of opinion that the worship service plays a crucial role in the formation of people of virtue and character (cf. 1996a:445-446). In worship subversion takes place. Everyday reality is interrupted, resistance is offered, worshippers are liberated, their experience of reality, of life, of

the world is transformed, and they learn anew how to look and to see with new eyes. In worship moral formation takes place. Smit, with an appeal to the work of Andrew Phillips, states that the memory of Christ, the expectation of the coming Christ, and the experience of the presence of the living Christ in the Lord's Supper transform the worshippers. In worship, specifically in preaching, people experience a calling, a vocation to follow Christ afresh. According to Smit, in Christian worship "people experience *koinonia*, they learn how to live *with others in community*. They call one another brothers and sisters. They learn to love, they learn to belong, they learn to share" (1996a:446).

3.3 An ethics of communion and good societies

Smit argues that after the so-called *Gesinnungsethik*, i.e. ethics of the moral attitudes, convictions, motives and values of individuals as was dominant in the nineteenth century, an ethics of responsibility developed during the first half of the twentieth century. This development was triggered by the World Wars of that century and the almost universal suffering that it caused. After the optimism with which the twentieth century started these tragic events caused humans to reconsider their optimism about the potential of human beings to bring about the good life. This approach to ethics, with prominent exponents like Max Weber, Hans Jonas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Helmut Richard Niebuhr, Georg Picht and Hannah Arendt, pleads for concrete responsible living in society. This approach to moral living does not only focus on the values required to build a new society, but asks for concrete action in concrete challenging situations. Driven by the hopeful vision of an alternative society, a new society, a good society, an ethics of vision and responsibility requires of us to take responsibility before God for society, for the environment, for coming generations. It therefore opposes apathy amongst people; it pleads for involvement in building good and humane societies – even at the risk of making mistakes, being misunderstood and taking suffering upon oneself; and it entails concrete and hopeful acting, even though one's contribution might look insignificant and embarrassing in the face of so many overwhelming problems and challenges.

4. CONCLUSION

Dirkie Smit offers crucial guidelines for the undertaking of Christian ethics in South Africa. Ethics form an essential part of theology. As such it entails the endeavour to read and understand the Bible afresh. The theological and ethical task is embarked on in communion with the rich catholic and ecumenical Christian tradition, with the concrete life experiences of people and with those who reflect cognitively and intentionally in formal and non-formal ways on Christian faith and Christian living. Such a communal approach to ethics paves the way for developing a comprehensive approach to ethics, which implies the development of an ethics of doing, of being and of vision. By practicing ethics in communion and by developing inclusive and comprehensive models of ethics, this discipline can enrich the ethos, the morality, i.e. the concrete envisioning, formation of character and virtue, as well as the concrete choices and behaviour of Christians in remarkable ways. And by impacting on Christians this inclusive ethics in communion might influence the public ethos in South Africa in surprising ways.

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KEYWORDS

Theology
Ethics
Communion
Bible
Ecumenical

TREFWOORDE

Teologie
Etiek
Gemeenskap
Bybel
Ekumenies

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