

‘Living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice’: On Dirk Smit’s theological contribution to ecumenism

ABSTRACT

In this article the nature, methodology, content and promise of Dirk Smit’s ecumenical theology is explored in taking stock of past ecumenical challenges and envisioning future ecumenical demands in and beyond South Africa.

1. THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNION – A THEOLOGICAL TASK?

The various processes and practical steps through which churches attempt to realise the ecumenical task – manifesting the already-given oneness of the Church visibly and effectively (Gassmann 2002:1170) – are rooted primarily and necessarily in a theological conviction: “because God wills the church to be one, it is the state of church union which is normal, and the present state of church abnormal and requiring correction” (Best 2002:1179). The World Council of Churches (WCC) classic New Delhi text of 1961 affirms unity as “both God’s will and his gift to his Church.”

According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, “the community-forming principle” is a work of the Spirit operative in all parts of the Church “to bear against division” and facilitate “an impulse towards reunion” (Schleiermacher 1999:§150.1-2). The “communication of the Holy Spirit” (ibid §116.1) as “the continuous operation” of the Spirit (ibid §125.2) is what forms “the basis of the continuity of the Church’s co-operation and interaction” (ibid §116.1). For this reason, “complete suspension of fellowship between different parts of the Visible Church is unchristian” (ibid §151), demanding theological reflection and ecclesial renewal.

For Karl Barth, “the Church is the true Church” in the course of “the actual work of construction” as the Christian community is being built up through the work of the Holy Spirit (Barth 2004b:§67). The theological content is underlined: “It is in and through the man Jesus in the power of His Spirit that the one God is at work in the upbuilding of His community. It is He concretely who is the Lord whose activity directs and determines all the activity of men in this work of construction, and who is Himself the One who is primarily and properly at work in every human work” (ibid). To grasp the theological impact of the churches in division, Barth asserts: “Where the Church is divided ... the division reaches right down to its invisible being, its relationship to God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and it develops from this” (Barth, 2004a:§62). This “internal disruption” results in “external division,” “so that neither individuals nor the whole Church can overcome it by a flight to the invisible, but only by a healing of both its visible and its invisible hurt” (ibid).

When H. Richard Niebuhr reflects on the unity of the Church, he finds a sense of accountability and resourcefulness inherent in “the problem and the doctrine of the Trinity” and argues that it “has great importance for an ecumenical theology as a formulation of the whole

Church's faith in God in distinction from the partial faiths and partial formulations of parts of the Church and of individuals in the Church" (in Stacy Johnson 1996:51). A renewed ecumenical vision necessitates a restatement of the doctrine of the Trinity in a situation where tendencies toward an Unitarianism of the Father or Son or Holy Spirit impede the expression and realisation of the common faith (cf. *ibid* 52-62).

What each of these insights reflects is the fundamental importance of a theological framework in ecumenical theology. There is always the possibility of ecumenical activities becoming nothing more than strategic negotiations of political import, characterised by endless discussions, tomes of statements, frustrating compromises and mere tolerations for the sake of a measure of irenicism. Revisiting our sense of theological substance and grounding aids us in countering such possibilities that can only lead to ecumenical fatigue and cheap unity.

Ecumenical theology is thus a way of engaging the theological grounding required in the search for communion. Mary Tanner describes ecumenical theology as "the result of theological reflection oriented to the goal of unity: the unity of the church, the unity of humankind, and the unity of creation, in the perspective of the Kingdom of God" (Tanner 2005:556). It is carried out in a variety of contexts (local, national, regional, international), through an increasingly diverse group of people (women and men, from different continents and church traditions), informed by major currents of theological thought (biblical and historical theology, systematic theology, feminist theologies, liberation theologies), in conversation with their leading thinkers (Karl Barth, Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, et al), and in meaningful and creative ways that contribute to the ecumenical movement and its primary concern for unity and wholeness (*ibid*).

The question for consideration in this paper is to reflect critically on the theological contribution of Dirk J. Smit as an ecumenical thinker and role-player within and beyond South Africa. We consider the nature and methodology of Smit's ecumenical theology and explore the content and promise of his ecumenical contributions. Finally, we reflect on the kind of theological engagement required to advance the search for communion in the future.

2. DIRK SMIT – ECUMENICAL THEOLOGIAN?

To begin with, a caveat: Smit has reservations about the appropriateness of the title 'ecumenical theologian.' He continually underlines the title as a misnomer. The crucial point he seeks to make is that a theology that is oriented to the ecumenical ideals is one necessarily informed and resourced by one's particular community and tradition, such as an Anglican or Pentecostal perspective. It is therefore more accurate to refer to another as a Roman Catholic systematic theologian than simply as an ecumenical theologian. This caveat by Smit is perhaps an apt reminder of the importance and value of a theological and ecclesial rootedness in ecumenical engagement; anything less than this arguably compromises the respective ecumenical projects of their distinctive richness and enriching distinctives in a futile eclecticism.

As a Reformed theologian in the dogmatics and social ethics tradition in South Africa, Smit's ecumenical contributions have found reception in a variety of contexts – first and foremost in South Africa, then in Europe and North America, and further a field in broader Africa and Asia. He has worked collaboratively with a diverse group of women and men from many church traditions such as Reformed, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Anglican theologians, as well as with other thinkers from other theological disciplines and scientific fields such as philosophy and social sciences. Significant influences on his earlier and current persuasions include the contributions of John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edmund Schlink, Willie Jonker, Jaap Durand, Geoffrey Wainwright, Michael Welker and Wolfgang Huber.

Smit has fulfilled an active role in the life of the church, primarily in the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA), or the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) as it was previously known. The mere fact that he as a white Afrikaner during the dark days of apartheid in South Africa found himself an active member of what was then the Coloured wing of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and what is today the integrated non-white wing of the DRC, provides an insight into his openness and commitment to embracing the ecumenical ideals of the gospel.

Moreover, Smit's involvement in local, regional, national and international ecumenical dialogues and consultations on behalf of such ecumenical bodies as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) is well known and applauded for his theological and ecumenical integrity. The WCC and WARC benefited well from these roles that indirectly also extended to the affairs of other ecclesial traditions. Such has been his ecumenical capital that he played key roles in contributing to the development of theological and ecumenical exposure and expertise among his undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of the Western Cape, the University of Stellenbosch, along with the many other academic institutions at which he has taught including in South Africa, Germany, Sweden and the United States of America.

3. THE CONTENT OF ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY – A THREEFOLD CONFESSION?

As a Reformed theologian whose theological bearings are informed by such historical figures as Calvin and such sources as the *Heidelberg Confession*, there are perhaps three distinctive axiological threads that feature prominently within the spectrum of Smit's ecumenical writings and accordingly deserve ongoing attention. These are the notions of "living unity," "real reconciliation" and "compassionate justice" (cf. Smit 2002:111; 2003a:312; 2003b:435-437), drawn on the convictions within the *Confession of Belhar* (1986) as "a threefold logic of confession" (ibid 435):

"God is praised as the One who gives unity to the church and calls the church to practise this unity; as the One who reconciles believers with God self and with one another and calls them to practise this reconciliation; as the One who is in a special way the God of the suffering, the downtrodden, and the oppressed and calls the church to follow Him in this. Doxological statements about God thus lead to ecclesiology and then to ethics."

3.1 Living unity?

Notwithstanding the essential ecumenical identity of the church, Smit is cognisant of the empirical suspicions and difficulties associated with the ecumenical calling among Christians today. "Does unity in church and society still present us with a challenge, is it still necessary, and is it possible?" he asks, but finds that most people in church and society would likely answer in the negative: "*We do not live in a time of unity*" (Smit 2003a:305).

This seems to be so in the world in which we live given the tendencies to "radical individualism and pluralism, of far-reaching diversity, even of fragmentation" coupled with increasingly popular philosophies and cultural discourses "as heuristic descriptions and as moral and ideological prescriptions ... that emphasise difference and otherness and that are critical of languages of unity and grand narratives" (ibid). A similar case is made for our South African society where broadly "it is perhaps possible to argue that we moved rapidly through successive phases ... where the public discourse, with its energy and enthusiasm, was about freedom ... then unity ... then reconciliation ... then justice ... to development" (ibid), implying that newer and more complex public discourses have replaced "earlier rhetoric about strong forms of unity, about nation-building, about finding and strengthening one common identity and calling" (ibid 306). And at the individual level, the growing lack of personal unity and identity in many late modern

Western societies as discerned by social commentators reveals a similar difficulty with a living unity.

Of particular note is how ecumenism in general – with its talk about ‘paradigm shifts,’ ‘challenges,’ ‘crises’ and ‘stagnation’ – but especially in South Africa, has taken an ‘ecclesial beating.’ While some bemoan this loss of the ecumenical impulse, many others simply find “other more important tasks on their ecclesiastical, denominational and congregational agendas than even to think about the ecumenical form of the church and its possible calling and role in our society” (ibid). Many of those for whom the goal of visible unity is still of interest, Smit reckons it at best a “functional and practical” interest with an “*ethical* rather than ecclesiological” focus in that ecclesial unity is strategically sought “to make the collective efforts of the churches stronger, in the face of enormous social, political and economic challenges they were facing” (Smit 2003b:426).

As a Reformed theologian addressing the Reformed tradition on being both “Reformed and ecumenical” (Smit 2002:109), Smit points out that their ecumenical interest is not preoccupied with a narrow or self-serving Reformed unity but rather with the communion of the Christian faith as a whole (ibid). For this reason, they have been in general interested in and committed to all three major initiatives of the ecumenical enterprise: faith and order, life and work, and mission and evangelism (ibid). These initiatives link up appropriately with the threefold commitment of Belhar, which Smit maintains are resourceful for renewing and realising the ecumenical enterprise (ibid 111):

“It was our remarkable experience that precisely the keeping together of these three commitments united our deeply divided community and churches. Many people had been enthusiastic about church unity before, but sometimes hesitant when it came to talk about reconciliation and perhaps even critical of talk about justice. Others had been in favour of reconciliation, but not interested at all in visible unity and even less in talk of justice. Still others had been actively calling for justice, but were critical of those supporting church unity and even more so of those pleading for reconciliation. ... [But] all three ecumenical initiatives are extremely important ... and all three are needed in any responsible future development of the ecumenical movement. They belong together.”

The churches are thus challenged to attend to the search for forms of living unity as resting at the heart of Reformed faith and Christian life (Smit 2003a:312-313). We must start, he says, “with theological reflection, with faith, with spirituality, with conviction, confession and commitment” so that ecumenical activities not be relegated to matters merely bureaucratic and administrative and so fail to serve the living unity required (ibid 313). He finds that there are “several concrete examples of achieving meaningful forms of unity between activities of our churches” based on continuing “reports in the church and public media on discussions and consultations, local and regional meetings and convents, encounters and initiatives between leaders of the divided churches,” which “all seem to indicate that there is indeed some promise in the air. Whether and how the Spirit will really inject new life into our dead bones, however, remains to be seen and awaited, longingly, prayerfully, and with confession of our own failures and omissions” (ibid).

3.2 Real reconciliation?

How the oneness of the church, humanity and creation are experienced, whether positively or negatively, is indeed determined by the extent to which the reconciliation God has bestowed on the world is effectively being practiced by humankind. South African history readily attests to the divisive force of such problems as racism and oppression and how these featured as primary ecumenical challenges (Smit 2005:355-360). In this regard, Smit contributed profoundly to the

nature and calling of the ecumenical journey confronting the churches in the apartheid era, especially during the dark days of the 1980s as the church and humanity bore the brunt of apartheid's divisions, but within a fertile context of theological reflection on the socio-political crisis confronting the nation and church as evidenced through the materialisation of such initiatives as the WCC's *Programme to Combat Racism* (1970), *The Kairos Document* (1985), and the *Road to Damascus* (1989). He maintained that this struggle in South Africa represented a struggle for the very heart of the Reformed faith – for the Bible, for the church, for truth, for embodiment (cf. *ibid* 360-365).

A singularly crucial matter rested with Smit's consideration of a "*status confessionis*" (cf. Smit 1984:21) as part of the church's historical mandate. While many theologians and church leaders then were wary of the term, he was ever mindful of the gravity of the historical situation in South Africa that necessitated a serious response by the Christian community, being "of the opinion that a situation had developed, a moment of truth had dawned, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat" (*ibid* 29). Smit's grappling with the nature of this moment in South Africa along with the nature and orientation of the church's faith, confession and life opened up a fresh conception of the power of the gospel for the Christian community in the midst of a tenuous, complex and life-threatening historical situation. Such a *status confessionis* "was an evangelical cry, a cry full of love – and therefore the Church confesses explicitly, in order that the real unity, based on the truth, may be restored" (*ibid* 46).

After liberation and democracy dawned during the 1990s, the real work of reconciliation emerged as an urgent matter in post-apartheid South Africa, presenting before the ecumenical churches one of the numerous complex challenges. As Smit noted around that time, "[t]he Christian church has naturally been in the business of truth and reconciliation, and guilt and forgiveness form [*sic*] its beginnings. This is our job, the industry we work in. This is the reason for our existence" (Smit 1995:3). These were important words on which the churches could ponder at a time at which a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was being proposed. While Smit offered a frank and critical lens through which to approach such a Commission (*ibid* 13ff), his point was clear, especially in relation to real reconciliation as a form of living unity for church and society: "Without remembrance and ... acknowledgement or confession there can be no liberation and no reconciliation. No liberation is possible from the past or for the future. No reconciliation with God, with those closest to you, with others, or with yourself is possible" (*ibid* 3-4). The ways in which truth, guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation challenged and continue to challenge the churches today (cf. *ibid* 3ff) during a time of violence, exclusion and suffering, remains part of Smit's ongoing theological reflection oriented to the goal of unity and wholeness.

3.3 Compassionate justice?

Smit interpreted the past church struggle in South Africa around living unity and real reconciliation as a struggle for Calvin's legacy on God's caring, liberating justice (Smit 2005:365). How "to sustain this typically Reformed ecumenical vision and commitment in the face of the challenges and opportunities brought about by global transformations" is what has in recent years preoccupied his theological reflections on unity (Smit 2002:111ff). The issues emerging from economic globalisation around the world but particularly within the South African situation have indeed been complex (cf. Smit 2002:111-114; 2003a: *passim*; 2003b:423ff; 2003c:478ff).

Among various questions that the present global situation raises for thinking theologically and ecumenically about living unity and compassionate justice, Smit draws attention to public responsibility as part and parcel of faith, life and unity. A conviction encased *inter alia* within Calvin and Belhar, "the church's calling is described in terms of serving and embodying social and

economic justice in society” (Smit 2005:365). To describe Calvin’s use of Scripture as an important launching pad for taking public responsibility more seriously, he refers to Heiko Oberman’s phrase *sola scriptura civitate interpretata* – “... the Scriptures read and interpreted with a view to the city, with a view to public life, to the questions and issues, the challenges and crises of society” (ibid 366-367).

The Reformed faith and tradition, similar to other traditions, possesses “an enormous liberating potential ... in confessing God’s caring and compassionate justice in a world of injustice and oppression” (ibid 367; cf. Smit 2003c:491ff). Given the ways in which global developments are possibly compromising human wellbeing (e.g. claims of increasing poverty, unemployment, etc.), the WARC called “for ‘a *processus confessionis*, a committed process of progressive recognition, education, and confession, within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding world economic justice and ecological destruction” (ibid 478). Smit insists that the churches assume the public roles that their ecumenical calling demands in contemporary society with its old and new challenges, especially those regarding economic justice advocacy.

4. TOWARDS A RECEPTION OF EMBODIED CONFESSION

“Was ist gute Theologie?” So asks the German Lutheran bishop Wolfgang Huber and offers an answer (Huber 2004:39): Good theology brings together what is eternally important with what is presently urgent. It reflects how the sources and participants of the Christian faith have been in ongoing dialogue with what is essentially true in the midst of their historical situations of life. In so doing it serves not only as a language of faith, but especially as a language of prayer in paving the way forward for new horizons and possibilities. The ecumenical contribution of Smit is discernible in the good theology he has offered the churches as they work towards the realisation of different forms of living unity, as they grapple with the call to real reconciliation, and as they wrestle with being churches of compassionate justice amidst complex global developments.

Smit leaves the churches with the necessary challenge of reception, which “includes all phases and aspects of an ongoing process by which [the] church under the guidance of God’s Spirit makes the results of a bilateral or multilateral conversation a part of its faith and life because the results are seen to be in conformity with the teachings of Christ and of the apostolic community, that is, the gospel as witnessed to in Scripture” (Naudé and Smit 2000:180). As historically, contextually and theological complex as reception has been, it serves as “the umbrella ... to house the whole ecumenical movement with its deepest intention of church unity as full reciprocal reception amidst the complexities of history, context and theology” (ibid 182). One of the crucial theological engagements demanded of the churches and society today concerns the kind of good ecumenical theology that can serve them with understanding and realising moral transformation as part of the work of unity, reconciliation and justice. As Smit and other theologians assist with this challenge, a greater public reception will be in view.

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