

Ackermann, Denise M  
Stellenbosch University

## On being a theologian for “others”

### ABSTRACT

This contribution, written in the form of a letter to Dirkie Smit, reflects on his weekly columns that are published in the Cape newspaper *Die Burger*. It addresses two questions: How does Smit, par essence a theologian's theologian, communicate so successfully with the readers of a newspaper? Second, what motivates his faithful writing of these weekly columns? In attempting to address the first question it is suggested that the columns are infused with the intent to achieve a communicative praxis that is liberating, and thus reminiscent of critical theory. Employing language that is simple and straightforward, laced with humour, never devoid of learning, and contextually relevant, Smit's columns are a highly effective exercise in Christian ethics. Here the two questions asked, merge, for the answer to the question of motivation is found to be an expression of Smit's spirituality and his hope for a redeemed world. Discernment (*onderskeidingsvermoë*), a key value in Christian spirituality, is central to his writing. His critical contextual awareness combined with his focus on moral discernment, all couched in a highly accessible format, make him “a theologian for others”.

### DEAR DIRKIE

Knowing you, you are already wondering who the “others” may be. It is shorthand for readers who are not trained theologians – those whom biblical scholars (rather comically) sometimes refer to as “ordinary readers”. Reading your columns in the weekend edition of *Die Burger*<sup>1</sup> has pricked my interest in two ways. First, how does a highly skilled theologian such as you communicate so successfully on quite tricky subjects with readers of a newspaper? Second, what motivates you to continue writing these columns week after week in the midst of a punishing work schedule? Only years of friendship allow me to indulge in such questions on what appears to be a non-academic subject. So bear with me as I, with some chutzpah, try to explore why I think you are a theologian “for others”.

I am not discounting the fact that you enjoy this kind of writing. This is patently clear as you move with ease from philosophy to literature, from art to a lecture you have heard or to a book you have just read, and from theological ethics to biblical exegesis. I think you find this pleasurable – drawing others into fields they may not have come across as newspaper readers. You address a wide scope of themes but are not a “ragbag theologian”<sup>2</sup> I find a certain fundamental unity of purpose in your writing and at all times the topics you touch on in your columns are contemporary and highly readable.

But first the “how” question – how does your column work? As you well know I share your desire to write in an accessible yet academically satisfying manner about theological topics.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I have an abiding interest in what constitutes meaningful communicative praxis. Your writing “for others” has prompted me to backtrack a bit to a time when my theology was nurtured by insights from critical theory.<sup>4</sup> I was, and still am, interested in communicative praxis with emancipatory intent.

Years ago it became clear to me that value-free, objective historiography was a scholarly fiction. What I balked at was the interpretation and acceptance of Christian beliefs from a patriarchal perspective of male dominance. Our traditions were not only sources of truth but also of untruth and oppression. So, like a number of early Christian feminist theologians, I found critical theory a useful tool for feminist theology as critical theology.

Feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was one such theologian. She wrote:

Critical theory as developed by the Frankfurt School provides a key for a hermeneutic understanding which is not just directed toward an actualizing continuation and a perceptive understanding of history but towards a criticism of history and tradition to the extent that it participates in the repression and domination which are experienced as alienation. Analogously (in order to liberate Christian theologies, symbols, and institutions), critical theory uncovers and criticises Christian traditions and theologies which stimulated and perpetuated violence, alienation, and oppression. Critical theology thus has as its methodological presupposition the Christian community's constant need for renewal (1986:49).

Your writing "for others" has reminded me again of the usefulness of critical theory and caused me to plunge back into the work of Jürgen Habermas. I am sure that you read Habermas with greater ease than I did when I wrestled with his writing during my doctoral studies. Nevertheless, at the time of reading Habermas' account of the profound and lasting effect on him as he discovered the horrors of the Nazi regime, I found a resonance with my own struggles in terms of racism and sexism. He tells of how he sat in front of the radio as a teenager and experienced what was being discussed before the Nuremberg tribunal; when others, instead of being struck silent by the ghastliness, began to dispute the justice of the trial, procedural questions and questions of jurisdiction, there was the first rupture, which still gapes (Habermas in Bernstein 1985:41).

How could a culture that had given rise to Kant and Marx have provided such fertile soil for the largely unchallenged rise of Hitler and Nazism? How could Afrikaners who had experienced oppression and loss themselves have perpetrated the horrors of apartheid? How could God-fearing friends not question the male dominance of the church?

Now I am not suggesting that apartheid was our equivalent of the holocaust; neither are millennia of sexist practices (including the unspeakable practice of burning "witches" and the never-ending violation of women's bodies). Today we find ourselves in a constitutional democracy with guarantees for the freedom of all South Africans. Some churches ordain women. So much has been achieved. Yet I watch with more than unease as our newfound freedoms are being assailed and even abused and as the moral visions of Albert Luthuli, Beyers Naudé, Denis Hurley, Helen Joseph, Sheena Duncan, Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela are fast vanishing in the ranks of the powerful. In a different time, in a different context, and for different reasons, practices that are liberating are called for to preserve the values that are enshrined in our Constitution.

What did emerge out of my Habermasian haze was how useful his foundation for critical theory was for Christian theology concerned with emancipation. This interest was not only the concern of a woman trying to find her voice in a male dominated field in a patriarchal society. It was also a concern of a white person whose life was largely lived through apartheid times and who yearned for justice and freedom in our country.

My concerns gelled around the term “liberating praxis”. I struggled then and still do daily with what it means “to do the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21). I cling to the notion that our praxis should be grounded in actions that characterise what we understand as the reign of God, exemplified in the praxis of Jesus. Jesus never asked people to be “religious”. He proposed a radical alternative to what it means to be “religious” that challenged the reigning powers of his day. This brought him into conflict. The powerful had no time for religion that was embedded in sweeping change-making praxis. Christians are called to pray for God’s reign to come one earth “as it is in heaven”. This prayer requires exacting actions for justice and love that bring good news to our life situations. I understand God’s reign as the fulfilment of justice, love, freedom, peace, wholeness and of the flourishing of righteousness and shalom. In essence it calls us – in following Christ – “to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, and passes on the gift of life”, writes Beverly Harrison (1985:18).

According to Habermas there is always a relationship between knowledge and interests and our interests are both material and ideal. This allows him to differentiate between types of knowledge according to the interests that produce them. Self-reflection yields knowledge and is governed by interest – interest in emancipation from domination. So Habermas revises social theory in terms of communicative interaction. Social reality is seen through the pragmatics of communication.

I have always found Habermas’ need for the “ideal speech situation” – a situation in which there is uncoerced and unlimited discussion between human beings who are completely free – to be a bit of pie-in-the-sky. What I do find important in this idea is that it contains a definite moral context and it is relational. The moral subject who is the subject of liberating actions cannot be divorced from communicative relations with others. For such social interaction to be effective, it must be based on mutual recognition and moral interaction. Of course our social communication usually falls far short of this ideal. But it is still worth stating because, despite being utopian, it does serve as a critical principle when we start to analyse the contexts in which we live.

I share Habermas’ concern that language contributes towards the formation of consciousness. Every worship service I attend is still peppered with sexist language and my God is only and always a male figure! Language is, after all, foundational for our communicative practices. Reading your contributions I think you share this consciousness. Your language seeks to engage your readers – it is often colloquial, peppered with questions (in the manner of Socrates?) and short conversational comments.

Communication is not without a normative core because at the most fundamental level human beings have inescapable claims on one another. Language expresses intent and the means of communication we choose is done with a certain interest in mind.

Language encodes our sense of how we are positioned in our basic relations to and with others who make up our social world. This means that language teaches us, below the level of consciousness and intentionality, our sense of power-in-relation... The potential of language, then, is either to expand human possibility or to function as a transmitter of subtle and not so subtle, patterns of human oppression and domination (Harrison 1985:24).

As a feminist theologian of praxis, I feel that a few caveats on Habermas are called for. First, as

regards the question of religion, Habermas initially acknowledged the role of religion in the totality of universalist ideals. Yet, the role he accorded to religion in society was at first less nuanced than his approach in his later work. While not hostile to or dismissive of religion, he now describes his approach as “methodological atheism”. He sees different roles for political, philosophical and religious discourse but concedes that religion preserves an indispensable potential for meaning. Second, on the issue of gender, feminist thinkers have found Habermas’ understanding of its role in society wanting. On the one hand, his setting out of the relationship between knowledge and interest has been useful for a feminist critique of modern society. On the other hand, the role accorded to gender in his opus *The Theory of Communicative Actions* is negligible. Critical theory that is usable for a feminist critique must include gender in its analysis. Women are not absent from the work place, women are often the sole breadwinners in our society, and women are conspicuously present in church structures. Interpreting and communicating in an “ideal speech situation” call for equal participation, with no holds barred, particularly on the grounds of gender.

Despite these reservations, I found, and still find, critical theory a focussed lens through which oppressive ideologies, male-dominated theologies and church traditions and practices that are exclusionary can be analysed, and a finely honed scalpel to excise them. The vision of an ideal situation of free communication in a liberated society remains consonant with our prayers for God’s reign to come on earth and God’s will to be done so that all may live in love, justice and freedom. I continue to subscribe to Dorothee Sölle’s understanding of what it means to live one’s faith:

That God loves all of us and each and every individual is a universal theological truth, which without translation becomes the universal lie. The translation of this proposition is world-transforming praxis (1974:107).

All this harking back is simply to make the point that your columns are an effective exercise in communicative praxis. “Simple and straightforward”, they draw readers into a conversation. They work because they are contextually relevant while being critical, and above all they engage readers on ethical grounds where faith encounters morality and where hope and freedom are ever before us.

I have wondered if the fact that you often refer to a range of philosophers’ views (for instance, over the last six months to those of Plato, Aristotle, Democritus, Xenophon, Kant, Kierkegaard, Locke, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Gadamer and Hannah Arendt) to bolster your arguments may not be off-putting to your readers. It is a dazzling display of your own interests but it clearly has the potential to open doors for the more interested or informed reader. You certainly made me go back to Kant on laughter. To provoke uproarious laughter says Kant (2000:209-210), “there must be something nonsensical”. Quite! When he quotes Voltaire as saying that we are given two things as a counterweight to the burdens of life, hope and sleep (and then comments: “He could also have added laughter”), I suspect that he did not suffer the torments of insomnia!

Now my “how” and “why” questions start to merge. In my kind of language, theological theory and theological praxis come together, a concern that you share (19.02.11). Underlying all of this, I suspect, is something from the heart. Writing “for others” in this way is an expression of your spirituality, your ministry, your hope for a redeemed world. I think you are engaged in drawing your readers into greater discernment (*onderskeidingsvermoë*) required for “knowing how to interpret the present time” (Lk. 12:56) in order to follow Jesus more faithfully.

First of all, discernment is a key value in Christian spirituality. Although not specifically mentioned in the Old Testament, the idea of discerning between good and evil spirits is present. Saul is motivated by both good (1 Sam. 11:6) and evil spirits (1 Sam. 16:14-23). There is a call to discern true prophecy from false prophecy in Jeremiah (23:28). In the New Testament, John (1 Jn. 4:1-6) calls us to "... test the spirits to see whether they are from God ...", and gives guidelines for distinguishing between "... the spirit of truth and the spirit of error". Paul lists the *diakrisis pneumatōn* among the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10). In the Letter to the Philippians (1:9) we are cautioned: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight" [my italics – DA]. Ephesians (1:17, 18) speaks of "... having the eyes of your heart enlightened [so] you may know what is the hope to which he has called you". Christians are called to discern knowledge with clear insight and awareness within a life that is shaped by love.

I think that you would agree that the praxis of Jesus, as we understand and interpret it, is our key to discerning the present times. His person, his history, his teaching and his presence with us, help us to understand the present times and how to act on such understanding. Yet, Jesus was quite tough when he berated people for knowing "how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Lk. 12:56). In order to do so requires discernment as well as the willingness to act upon what is discerned. We can easily become entangled in apocalyptic judgments or Gnostic certainties instead of trying to glimpse – even through that dark glass – something of God's unfolding acts for the coming of the kingdom. We interpret the present times in the hope that God "can write straight with crooked lines". We need intelligent listening to our deepest hopes and desires, as well as to the sufferings and anxieties of our world. I see something of this need in your writing. You mention *onderskeiding* expressly (see 07.08.10; 16.10.10) while in virtually all your columns there is an appeal for greater discernment (19.02.11).

The call to a discerning interpretation of the present is not an exercise in receiving clear instructions on how to act. It is rather being drawn more deeply into exploring the mind and heart of God – trying to understand what God is most concerned about. At heart this is nothing more than an increased awareness of the movements of the Holy Spirit in us.

Discernment is a quality that the desert mothers and fathers greatly valued and it undergirded their practices as they sought to follow God. Discernment understood as "right judgment in all things", involved the recognition of limits, the humility to know one's spiritual poverty before God, and the assurance that God desires what is good and loving. "The desert is about the struggle for truth or it is nothing", writes Rowan Williams (2005:28). The desert was seen as the place to discern God's will, away from the distractions and demands of everyday life. It required awareness, a kind of watchfulness in search of truth.

Benedict of Nursia (480-547) in his Rule sees discernment, or what he calls "discretion", as crucial. He does not simply mean that avoidance of excess is necessary. Discretion had a far broader meaning in the monastic community. Spiritual discernment aimed at purity of heart and the vision of God. It is attained by listening carefully "... with the ear of your heart" (Benedict 1982:15). Origen (c. 185-254), who knew the need for discernment, counsels:

We find that the thoughts which arise in our hearts ... come sometimes from ourselves, at times they are stirred up by counteracting virtues, and at other times they may be sent by God and the good angels (quoted in Leech 1977:129).

Discernment was also highly prized by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) whose Spiritual Exercises really have no other purpose than the discernment of spirits. He believed that the human heart experiences movements for good – those that are God-directed – and movements away from God. Our spiritual welfare depends on our ability to discern between what is good and what is not. Ignatius arrived at this understanding when he pondered on his future after being wounded in battle. His newfound awareness, described as “eyes [that] were opened a little”, led to new understanding and action. Ignatius’ experience, translated over years into the Exercises, made clear the great value of spiritually identifying the movements of our hearts. Knowledge and discernment have to be held together by love. Discerning knowledge without love is harmful. Love needs knowledge and discernment.

You point out that, according to Hannah Arendt, moral discernment requires “hearts that understand” (16.10.10). This you quote approvingly and write that evil begins “... when we no longer have hearts that understand. When we no longer see, know or want to know”. Discernment could be interpreted as a hermeneutic of suspicion (05.11.10) à la Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Does being discerning thus mean that we are always sceptical? Healthy discernment does involve being aware of the role played by diverse interests, power and our own subconscious desires. After all it was Jeremiah (17:9) who warned us that the “heart is devious above all else, it is perverse – who can understand it?”

In a nutshell, I find discernment a constant theme in your columns. We need to discern whether to laugh or to weep. To know what is appropriate is to have discernment. Too often our views are distorted (*skeef*). We gape at vain pretensions and miss what we ought to see. We complain about the small things and laugh at affliction when we need to find hope among the tears (07.08.10; 14.08.10). We require moral discernment in order to have eyes that truly see. Evil is closer to us than we think, more like us and of us. “We need ‘hearts that understand’ that see, that know, that want to see and know. If one of these is missing things easily go awry” (16.10.10). Differently put, we are no longer seeing with the “eyes of the heart”. When we wrestle with priorities, struggling to discern what is valuable and lasting, we need discernment. If we are not discerning we will wake up one day and be faced with the law of unintended consequences (23.10.10). We may just have “... abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4). This has puzzled you since you were young. How is it possible that the early church’s “enthusiasm, excitement and dedication became choked by new priorities, plans, projects and pleasures?” you ask, inferring that they may have lost their ability to discern what is truly meaningful.

It takes discernment to unearth the consumerism that erodes our souls, to understand how life is commodified and all is measured in terms of monetary values, resulting in “superficiality and the loss of depth”.

From an ethical point of view many complain that today we have lost virtues, the personal virtue of simplicity, moderation and sobriety, social virtues like caring, concern and charitableness, all is exchanged for greed – but even about this many would say “so what!” (02.10.10).

It takes discernment to know the difference between “smiley-face-happiness ... the fulfilment of our desires ... and the hurried pursuit of pleasure” and meaningful happiness (27.11.10). You ask:

Do we really want to be happy? Why then do we often act against our own best interest,

better judgment ... Happiness really depends on "the object of our desires", on what we long for. This is the wisdom of thinkers over the centuries (04.12.10).

You cannot easily let go of your theme for the end of 2010 – what do we mean when we say "happy new year"? It requires discernment for

[w]e often do not want to hear what is good for us, we do not want to speak about it or listen to or reflect on it. We fear and avoid places, times, people, silences that can remind us of it (11.12.10).

Discernment is required to understand what a truly happy new year means – something more akin to the Greek idea of *eudaimonia*, the good, successful, fulfilled life.

To be a discerning human being is to understand one's self in relation to others. You raise this issue in a contribution entitled "Unto the third and fourth generation" (28.08.10). This is something we need to be reminded of for we forget our interdependence and imagine that we are islands, sufficient unto our- selves. We rely on our own strength forgetting who went before us and made ready the paths that we tread.

We want to arrogate, grab, have, forgetting that we have nothing that we have not received. Are we not lacking gratitude? Do we not have the time for a telephone call, a letter, a visit? A moment at a grave? Or if that is too far, a time of quiet and thanks?

Once again you use questions to draw the reader in, questions that are purposeful. In this piece there is a clear ethical appeal to self-examination, greater humility and gratitude for all that we have been given.

A second corollary of discernment is the cultivation of a critical, contextual awareness that is always undergirded by ethical norms. Without it we cannot read the signs of present times. So I wonder how you analyse the context of your readers. Is it largely confined to a Western Cape Afrikaans-speaking community? If so, what are the differences in this community? Given that we live in a multi- religious, pluralistic society with many differing "brands" of Christianity, are your readers a more homogenous group?

Navigating contextual issues is not easy for our local context is no longer just familiar, home grown and bounded by a horizon that we can see. Local communal life has in recent times been marked by crucial transitions such as the rapid rate of urbanisation and the irreversible process of globalisation. "Local" is now a pluralistic reality. Societal pluralism is a very vulnerable achievement. Individualism, group egotism, relativism, cultural hegemony all flourish under the rubric of pluralism. The ideal is to be able to live in a complex interplay of order and freedom in which different cultures and traditions can exist side by side. Pluralism as a reality in a country such as ours is a kind of community of communities. This is a complex, fluid, multi-faceted, fragile reality. The goal is to achieve some kind of structured pluralism in which the multi-systemic nature of our society can work together for the well-being of all its people. Pluralism is not a fad of late modernity. It is not just a late modern societal cultural achievement or even a cultural trap, as our friend Michael Welker so often reminds us. Add to this the truth that we live in the tension between contextuality and globalisation and we are confronted with a pretty fraught mixture of issues.

Pluralism is, on many levels, incorporated into Christianity and it is alive and well in the

structures of most Christian churches. We have pluralism in our doctrinal foundations, in the texture of the canon and its interpretation and in the many families of confession in the universal church. The inner texture of the Christian church is thoroughly pluralistic. We even have plurality within particular denominations and the Christian context is itself pluralistic. How pluralistic are the faith communities that read your columns? Perhaps “difference” may be a more appropriate description? I wish I knew. In any event we cannot escape questions of identity and social change raised by our dazzling, pluralistic, cultural context.

Your writing shows that contextual theology listens to culture, to local church traditions, and to the wider community of Christians. You address local political, social and economic factors against the background of what is happening in the wider world, as you forge a response to these factors and to the traditions and practices of the wider church, testing their validity, credibility and authority for the local context. Culture and social change consciously interact with Scripture and tradition when doing contextual theology. Contextual theology is theology as praxis. This means that it is concerned with the ongoing reflection on action in the interests of transformation. You do not skirt contemporary issues such as the fragmentation of our society, broken homes, lack of role models for children, a dearth of skills, conflict, unemployment, poverty and crime (14.08.10). You inveigh against corruption, nepotism, and greed among political leaders and mention the “anything goes” mentality that tolerates criminality in the police force, lazy teachers, paedophile priests and brutal gangsters (19.02.11). How can hope enter a context such as ours, you ask. You tackle the unpopular theme of cultural violence and the underlying systemic violence and injustice that gives rise to crime (21.08.10).

Authentic and appropriate contextual theology can be measured by the quality of action that emerges from its praxis. Is such praxis cohesive? Is it undergirded by a community centred on Word and sacrament? Does it produce a community that is known by its fruits? Does it have dialogue and open relationship with the wider church? Contextual theology is compelled to move outward from itself, often challenging other ways of being Christian, willing to accept difference and disagreement, but never closing in on itself and losing its catholicity and desire for unity with other churches (26.12.10).

No authentic critical, contextual discernment can be developed without the working of the Holy Spirit that equips us for our role in the complex, often trying, and sometimes messy pluralism of local faith communities struggling to live in a shrinking world. I find a clarion call to your readers to hone their discernment while holding out hope for freedom and wholeness presented in an entirely appropriate communicative praxis with emancipatory intent. Like your mentor Calvin, you too are keeping it “straight and simple”, and whenever appropriate, adding humour. You quote philosopher Simon Critchley: “Humour is essentially self-mocking ridicule”, and continue, “We need more humour and less tragedy. Tragedy comes from over-estimation ... Humour is an anti-depressant ... [yet] deadly earnest” (05.02.11). In your writing humour is an effective communicative tool, both funny and utterly serious. You quote Groucho Marx (19.02.11) and I am happy to share your enjoyment of Garrison Keiler’s rather deadpan humour that makes connections between humour and politics and the local (12.02.11).

Finally, as the years take their toll, you ask whether it is not time to get our affairs in order? The death of a school friend (20.11.10) and our friend Jaap Durand’s latest book *Dis Amper Dag* (It’s Almost Day) (09.01.11), both give rise to thoughts on mortality. Facing the reality of death also requires an act of discernment and moral courage. We have lost the art of dying (*sterwenskuns*) familiar to those who lived in the Middle Ages, when death was an integral part of living well.

We resort to self-help techniques such as those advocated by Dale Carnegie, to cope with life. It is better to heed Critchley's advice (22.01.11):

To be human is to make time to reflect on problems, to recognise problems for what they are – how to die is the most human of questions, as well as suffering, injustice, and violence in our world.

But we tend to ban thoughts of death from our consciousness. We forget the psalmist's reminder (Ps. 90:10) that "... our years come to an end like a sigh".

Death and dying is something I think about more often than ever before. I have come to see that nearing the end of life brings new dimensions to the present day, a sharpness and a gratitude for a bit more time to reflect, to make right, to sort out priorities, and to live with a heightened awareness of the unending nature of grace. Although you are much younger than I am, you are wise in this respect, and writing about it as you have (15.01.11), can renew our awareness of the One "... who satisfies with good as long as you live" (Ps. 103:5). Please continue being a theologian "for others". You are singularly graced for this undertaking.

Best as always

Denise

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackermann, D. M. 2009. "Found Wanting and Left Untried?" Confessions of a Ragbag Theologian. In Pillay, M., Nader, S. and Le Bruyns, C. (eds.), *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise M. Ackermann, a Feminist Theologian of Praxis*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 267-282.
- Benedict, 1982. *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical. Bernstein, R. J. 1985. *Habermas and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- Fiorenza, E. Schüssler 1986. *Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation*. In Tabb W. K. (ed.), *Churches in Struggle. Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America*. New York, NY: Monthly Review, 46-66.
- Fleming, D. 1996. *Draw me into your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises*. St Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources.
- Fleming, M. 1993. *Emancipation and Illusion. Rationality and Gender in Habermas' Theory of Modernity*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Fraser, N. 1986. What's critical about critical theory? The case of Habermas and Gender. In Benhabib S. and Cornell D. (eds.), *Feminism as Critique. On the Politics of Gender*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 31-55.
- Gallagher, T. M. 2005. *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living*. New York, NY: Crossroad.
- Habermas, J. 1973. *Theory and Practice*, tr. Viertel, J. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Habermas, J. 1981. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. 2 Vols. Boston, MA: Beacon. Harrison, B. W. 1985. *Making the Connections. Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Kant, I. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Guyer, P. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, K. 1977. *Soul Friend: A Study of Spirituality*. London: Sheldon.
- Mendieta, E. (ed.) 2002. *Religion and Rationality. Essays on Reason, God and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- Tracy, D. 1987. *Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Smit, D. J. 1998. *Geloof Sien in die Donker*. (Faith Sees in the Dark.) Cape Town: Lux Verbi.
- Smit, D. J. 2000. ... *Want God is ons Hoop*. (... Because God is our Hope.) Cape Town: Lux Verbi.

- Smit, D. J. 2009. Simple and Straightforward? On Doing Theology. In Pillay M. et al. *Ragbag Theologies*, 157-174.
- Sölle, D. 1974. *Political Theology*. tr. Sheely, J. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress.
- Welch, S. O. 1985. *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity. A Feminist Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Williams, R. 2005. *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*. Boston, MA: New Seeds.

#### KEY WORDS

Communicative praxis  
Critical theory  
Ethics  
Spirituality  
Discernment

#### SLEUTELWOORDE

Kommunikatiewe praxis  
Kritiese teorie  
Etiek  
Spiritualiteit /Onder-  
skeidingsvermoë

#### CONTACT DETAILS/KONTAKBESONDERHEDE

Prof. Denise M. Ackermann  
C/o Faculty of Theology  
Stellenbosch University  
Private Bag X1  
MATIELAND  
7602  
[dmackermann35@gmail.com](mailto:dmackermann35@gmail.com)

#### (Endnotes)

1. Over the years Dirkie Smit has published his writings in this genre in a series of collections. They are too many to list here, but I have in mind books such as *Geloof Sien in die Donker* (1998), and ... *Want God is ons Hoop* (2000). For purposes of this letter, reference is restricted to columns that have appeared in the weekend edition of *Die Burger* between August 2010 and February 2011. Quotations are my translation from the Afrikaans.
2. The term "ragbag theologian" is one I have used to describe my theology – cf. Ackermann 2009.
3. See Smit 2009.
4. Critical theory emanated from the Institute for Social Research affiliated to Frankfurt University in the early 1920s. Beginning with the work of Max Horkheimer and later Theo Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, it sought a radical change in social theory and practice to cure the ills of society, as well as to critique any doctrine, including Marxism, that was considered one-sided. Jürgen Habermas subsequently became a leading member of the Frankfurt School. Critical social science, prompted by critical reason is used to interrogate the driving forces of modernism such as questions of power, economy, history and exploitation. Critical theory recognises that a position of resistance can never be fixed but must be refashioned perpetually to address shifting social conditions and circumstances. David Tracy (1987:80) explains succinctly: "Critical theory in the full sense, however, is any theory that renders explicit how cognitive reflection can throw light on systemic distortions, whether individual or social, and through that illumination allow some emancipatory action."