

Unfinished business: Considering the Belhar Confession's prophetic critique

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Abstract

In this essay, we seek to relate the prophetic critique of the Belhar Confession to several matters that could be classified as “unfinished business” for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). In particular, we argue that Belhar – which has been a confessional document of the church since 1986 – speaks to several ongoing issues which impact South Africa and URCSA in particular. For the sake of this essay, we focus specifically on the “unfinished business” of Belhar as it relates to patriarchy, within the context of femicide, the question of the inclusion of queer bodies within the body of URCSA, and the continuing societal problem of xenophobia and Afrophobia in South Africa at large.

Keywords

Belhar Confession, URCSA, prophetic critique, patriarchy, queerphobia, xenophobia, racism, Afrophobia

1. Introduction

In the chapter “Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation: A chronology of the Belhar Confession”, the late Prof Mary-Anne Plaatjies provides an in-depth chronological account of the history of the confession, amounting to a total of ninety-six pages. Before concluding this chapter, Plaatjies-van Huffel (2017:83) devotes attention to a section entitled “unfinished business.” She posits that the unfinished business in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (hereafter URCSA) is the “issue of homosexuality.” The year 2022 was the fortieth year since the General Synod of 1982 of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church

(DRMC) where the draft confession was adopted and sent to congregations for discussion and comments. It would be at the 1986 synod of DRMC that would accept the Belhar Confession as part of the confessional basis of the church, and later in 1994 at the founding synod of URCSA the confession will become part of the confessional basis of the church.

In 1982 with the confession an accompanying letter was written, and in it the synod at the time indicated that the intention of

... this confession [is made] not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand (Accompanying letter 2017:489).

Today, forty years later, we stand amid rather different times and wish to similarly reflect on the reception of the Belhar Confession's prophetic critique within URCSA. This is done because of the deep conviction that "an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone and none is without a beam in their own eye." (Accompanying letter, 2017:490). Also, because the Belhar Confession according to Plaatjes-van Huffel (2017:87) immensely influences that way in which theology is "practiced in the URCSA." As such she further elaborates, "the confession is about the integrity of the church in the public arena." Our intention as confessing members and ministerial candidates (Proponents) in URCSA, is to highlight key challenges we believe are continued "unfinished business" that need urgent attention.

URCSA, as many other churches in Southern Africa, is faced with a myriad of challenges, nonetheless we opted for the following challenges: *patriarchy and queerphobia, racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia*. These challenges pose a grave danger on the identity of the church; an identity situated on the deeply influenced by this confession and its prophetic critique.

2. Belhar's critique of patriarchy and queerphobia

In recent years, particularly since the sitting of the Cape Regional Synod at Alice in 2018, the prevalence of sexism has been reflected on by members of URCSA. One important contribution made, in this regard, is by Plaatjes-Van Huffel in the article "A History of Gender Insensitivity

in URCSA.” Through this contribution Plaatjies-Van Huffel reflects autoethnographically on her experiences in the denomination, considering her ministry and election to various portfolios at various church meetings. She helpfully concludes this reflection with articulating the approach the denomination should instead be following; Plaatjies van Huffel (2019:20) states: “URCSA should move from clinging to power to reciprocity, from a gender-segregated approach to ministry to a multitude of forms of living and working together – from a fragmented approach to gender issues to a new culture of partnership between men and women.”

Alongside Plaatjies-Van Huffel we share in this hope – the fostering of a denomination that is built on relations of reciprocity between different genders, and mutuality between all persons. Still, in our estimation, patriarchy – as it is presently at work in URCSA – is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, patriarchy directly shapes the lived experience of women— which is one of exclusion and discrimination. On the other hand, we argue, patriarchy is also at work in the denomination’s present sexuality discussions. The former is undoubtedly more commonly acknowledged, whereas the latter is not. It is our view that addressing patriarchy requires an intersectional approach (Patil, 2019:847). Differently stated, URCSA can only adequately deal with the reality of patriarchal institutional culture if it recognises the ways in which women and LGBTIQ+ persons are treated.

2.1 Faith in the face of the femicide

More recently the issue of patriarchy presented itself again, this time at the sitting of URCSA’s General Synod, held in Stellenbosch in October 2022. At this sitting all those elected to serve on the Moderamen were men. It would therefore seem that, in the last twenty-eight years, the denomination has been wholly unable to foster a culture in which the contribution of women is recognised and celebrated. To be sure, since the founding General Synod of 1994, URCSA has recognised the calling of women to pastoral ministry; as such, the ordination of women is largely undisputed. The question, of course, is whether this ordination of women translated into the reformation of the denomination’s institutional culture. It is in response to this question; we wish to offer commentary.

It is often said that South Africa is the “rape capital of the world.” This was first argued in 2014, and since it would seem not much has changed (*The*

Rape Capital of the World 2014; Gouws 2022). Given the horrific reality of gender-based violence which targets women, many are now arguing that South Africa is undergoing a femicide (Brodie 2020). Femicide is, thus, the intentional killing of women because of the very fact that they are women. The feminist scholar Pumla Gqola (2015) takes this definition further, arguing:

Rape is the communication of patriarchal power, reigning in, enforcing submission and punishing defiance. It is an extreme act of aggression and of power, always gendered and enacted against the feminine. The feminine may not always be embodied in a woman's body; it may be enacted against a child of any gender, a man who is considered inappropriately masculine and any gender non-conforming people.

For her this femicide is predicated on the construction of the female fear factory, which “threatens women, mostly to remind us that nothing belongs to us – not even our bodies, neither in private nor public spaces” (Gqola 2021:10). Coming to terms with the meaning of rape (which takes place within the reality of the femicide), du Toit (2009:5) notes:

Rape thus derives its devastating meaning from this symbolic order, which in a sense pre-empts the act of rape in that it systematically and symbolically erases or problematises women's sexual subjectivity ... The rape of women is so devastatingly effective, because it reminds women of something they have always known, namely the sex-specific fragility of their selfhood.

This, therefore, requires a response on the part of the church, not least URCSA which confessionally identifies with commitments to being prophetic. It should be noted that, at least regarding policy, URCSA has not been inactive in addressing the continued discrimination of women. At its General Synod sitting in 2005, the denomination articulated a gender policy. In part the General Synod decided: “To ensure that women have at least 30% representation and strive for 40% on all decision-making structures of the church i.e., Church Councils, Presbyteries, Regional Synods, General Synod and all Commissions” (*URCSA Church Order 2016*:234). More recently, at the General Synod of 2016, URCSA affirmed “to prevent and counter incitement to gender-based violence” (*URCSA*

Acta Synod 2016 2016:164). These decisions, therefore, show that URCSA is – to some degree – responding to the challenge of patriarchy, but only on General Synodical level through decision-making. In our view this is insufficient to adequately dislodge the culture of male supremacy at root in the denomination.

What, then, is the action that the Belhar Confession inspires us to? The confession is most clear that the church “must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged” (*Belhar Confession*, art 4). In this time, we argue, part of those wronged by the institutions of the day (which includes the church) is women. The Belhar Confession therefore requires that URCSA identifies with the plight of women against gender-based violence that has led to the reality of femicide.

Even so, this identification is not without contestation. Landman argues that the language of the Belhar Confession is rather limiting, thereby also limiting its conception of justice. Rather, argues Landman (in the essay “*Can justice be embodied in sexist language? A challenge to the Confession of Belhar*”), more inclusive language is needed to give expression to justice in more gender-sensitive terms – doing so would allow for URCSA, and those who adopt the Belhar Confession to truly embody justice. Finally, we hold that the Belhar Confession is perhaps one of the most helpful tools to address the discrimination of women in URCSA; this is because of its wide acceptance of authoritative resources in congregations.

2.2 Hope in the midst of heteronormativity

Among the company of those wronged by the injustices of our time are people who identify as LGBTIQ+ – those sexual minorities, who are not heterosexual. This, therefore, means that that church is to stand with God in solidarity of these persons. Perhaps, then, it is needful to ask how sexual minorities are left destitute today? In recent years there has been an upsurge in the killing of individuals who are LGBTI+. In an open letter addressed to the South African Deputy Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, John Jeffrey, the Human Rights Watch noted that:

... at least 20 LBGTI[Q+] individuals were killed across South Africa between February and October 2021. Many of the victims were beaten or stabbed to death, and as noted above it appears that they

were targeted because of their sexual orientation and gender identity (*Letter to South African Authorities Regarding LGBTI Murders and Assaults*, 2022).

In January 2022, *MambaOnline* reported that a total of twenty-four LGBTIQ+ individuals had been victims of hate killings (Igual 2022). All these victims were those who would racially be classified as black, and the majority of them were youths (younger than thirty-five years). These queerphobic crimes are, of course, happening in constitutional democracy that recognises the equality of persons; and, more importantly, that discrimination against persons on the grounds of their sexual orientation is unfair (*South African Constitution*, section 9.3).

In *Queer Activism in South African Education* (2022), the educational theorist Dennis Francis argues that schools (as institutions of order) maintain a straightening line. This means that it demands of learners, and at times educators, to adjust themselves to fit into the heteronormative mould – even as they are unable to do so, by virtue of their sexual and gender diversity. The same can be said of the church (in this case URCSA) which requires unquestioned adherence to the straightening line. As stated before, we argue that queerphobia is one of the effects of the patriarchal culture in which we live.

Linking queerphobia to patriarchy, as we do here, the intention is not to suppose that the violence experienced by women is akin to that endured by LGBTIQ+ people. Instead, we simply seek to offer an intersectional analysis of these forms of violence, recognising that they are interconnected and ought not be divorced. An intersectional analysis, therefore, also requires the consideration that patriarchy impacts bisexual men too. Helpfully, bell hooks (2010:4) writes:

Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. Since it is a system that denies men full access to their freedom of will, it is difficult for any man of any class to rebel against patriarchy, to be disloyal to the patriarchal parent, be that parent female or male.

More plainly, hooks extends the invitation, arguing that “feminism is for everyone.” The prevailing heteronormative culture in URCSA not only

silences the voices of those who are LGBTIQ+, but also implicitly shapes the conditions in which their lives may be cut short due to queerphobic violence.

In the light of this unsettling reality, it may prove helpful to consider the action that the Belhar Confession may inspire in us and in URCSA. Presently the denomination does not recognise the civil unions of LGBTIQ+ people nor does it, at this stage, have an openly LGBTIQ+ minister ordained in ministry. But, at a previous General Synod sitting, it clearly opposed the practice of homophobia, and recognised the appropriate civil rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals (*URCSA Acta Synod 2005*). Since starting the sexuality discussions in 2005, URCSA has made no real substantive progress.

Offering a contribution to URCSA's discussion on sexuality, Davids draws on the insights of the Belhar Confession. Reading the confession from below in an indecent manner, Davids maintains that it requires the recognition of the bodies of LGBTIQ+ people as constitutive to the identity of the denomination. This means, he argues, rejecting binarized and hierarchised thinking as well as the privileging of queer bodies as sites of epistemological reflection (Davids 2020:301, 303). Informed by the discipline of queer theology, Davids (2020:313) invites us to consider that "Belhar is an indecent proposal to the manner in which the URCSA wants to recognise LGBTIQ+ people." Recognising the bodies of LGBTIQ+ people—those very bodies that are representative of those killed because of queerphobia—is the only hope for URCSA to make the needed progress in its sexuality discussions. More importantly, it is the most useful tool to be used by the denomination to address the continuing hate crimes.

Faithfully confessing the Belhar Confession requires the recognition that we are living through a femicide. More importantly, it demands that the church take its stance with women whose lives continue to be rendered precarious – particularly inside the church. Faithfulness to the tradition of Belhar involves returning to the decision of the General Synod, to ensure greater gender parity. Holding on to the hope of a more just order of the world, requires that we recognise the bodies of those wronged by the power regimes of the day – yes, this may at times mean recognising dead bodies. For the church it would also mean doing away with binaries

and reductionist modes of reflection that continue to give rise to forms of oppressive violence.

What we are proposing is not new: it has been done both by Landman and Davids. We are, in effect, only calling for a return to the insight and prophetic critique the Belhar Confession has for the regimes of power that cause injustice. Moreover, we are also arguing that URCSA should be more intentional about the manner in which it sets out to develop its confessional tradition, with reference to the Belhar Confession.

3. Belhar’s critique of racism

It is no secret that the very existence of the Belhar Confession is a result of the racism of the colonial and apartheid regime since 1652 in South Africa (Plaatjies-van Huffel, 2013:188; 2017:1–90). In the article, “The Belhar Confession: born in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa”, Plaatjies-Van Huffel considers the racism of apartheid as “a structural and institutional sin” (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2013: 188). In response hereto, she explores the reception of the Belhar Confession in Southern Africa and abroad and emphasizes that the Belhar Confession remains a guiding light in discourses on racism and inequality. Standing on the pillars of justice, unity, and reconciliation, the confession provides the church with a Christian lens on racism and “calls the church to denounce all forms of racism and injustice” (Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2013:195).

Racism is not only about unjust interpersonal relation between people. As Mitchell and Williams (2017:7) describe, racism can be at work on four levels, namely: structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalised. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on structural and institutional racism. Structural and institutional racism

... involves those broad policies and societal influences formed throughout history that privilege the dominant group while disadvantaging and often causing significant harm to people of colour. This level of racism includes the larger social systems—such as education, health care, housing, and criminal justice—which are entrenched in racist ideology and praxis. Occasionally defined together with structural racism, institutional racism is racism that

functions within the workings of particular institutions, such as schools, hospitals, or prisons. (Mitchell and Williams 2017:7)

As we write this article, we acknowledge the racism internal to URCSA, an institution not at all excluded as regards the evils hereof. It is not by accident that the then moderamen of URCSA would in the pastoral letter of 2016 on racism write that in their meetings they “discussed the issue of racism and how it affects us all. We talked about racism in our church and in society” (2016:1).

As a society we were in awe as we witnessed in May 2020, during one of the worst pandemics of our lives, the death of an American George Floyd; while uttering those words “I can’t breathe.” Words that would ring so true for many of us. In South Africa, we had to witness the death of Collins Khosa, similarly at the hands of law enforcement brutality. This all happens at a time when we are dealing with the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the midst of this, a week earlier, Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel had passed on; this was a depredation, for in celebrating the life of someone who has been a “beacon of light in denouncing racism” was followed with an act of such vile racism (Beukes 2021).

As we are reeling from this aftermath, it must be clear that the Pastoral Letter on Racism by URCSA’s General Synod’s moderamen in 2016 is not the first word on racism nor will it be the last word on it in Southern Africa. It is for this reason that racism is one of the unfinished business of South Africa.

3.1 Intersection of race and class

Race and class intersect with one another, this we can see in the social context of South Africa, given our long history and lasting the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. A history that racially segregated people to enforce separate development. This separated development created class *inequality* based upon the race policies adopted by the during colonialism and apartheid. This notion is supported by the report of the World Bank which states that “South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, with race playing a determining factor in a society where ten percent of the population owns more than percent of the wealth,” (*South Africa most unequal country in the world: Report* 2022). Weber and Bowers-Du Toit

(2018:3) similarly argue that poverty remains “racially skewed” and is largely concentrated in previously disadvantaged areas through the legacy of the *Group Areas Act 1950*. This Act “forcibly removed black and coloured people from areas which were then declared ‘whites only’ and moved to the edges of the cities to what may be termed ‘urban ghettos.’”

Today, these areas are still confronted with the challenges of lack of education and income, unemployment, high crime rates, gangsterism, poor social service delivery, inequality, social exclusion, lack of housing, overcrowding and the lack of access to basic needs such as healthy water and sanitation. These challenges are the dehumanising consequences of privilege and power unequally and unjustly taken and distributed since before the inception of apartheid and together with the injustices of the present. In the midst of these challenges in these communities, further intersections could be explored, namely race, class, gender, sexuality, and ecology (land). The purpose of this section is however not to explore these intersections. We can however refer to the words of President Cyril Ramaphosa in an address to the second Women Economic Assembly: “The face of poverty in our country is the face of an African woman,” (*African woman face of poverty in South Africa: President*, 2022). To this we can agree that it remains the face of a black African woman and that white supremacy is still alive and well, on top and indeed unfinished.

3.2 White supremacist hegemonic ideology

In the article, “White People Still Come Out on Top: The Persistence of White Supremacy in Shaping Coloured South Africans’ Perceptions of Racial Hierarchy and Experiences of Racism in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, Whitney Pirtle overtly highlights and problematizes white supremacist hegemonic ideology which she believes is still manifesting itself in post-1994 South Africa. She considers the economic growth of “Coloured” and black people in South Africa and highlights (Pirtle 2022: 1):

... a report on “White vs. Black Unemployment in South Africa” (*BusinessTech* 2015) revealed by 2014, nearly 30% of the Black/African population remained unemployed and had the highest within-group proportion (30%) of workers employed in low skilled work. That same year the unemployment rate was only 7.3% for

White South Africans, and only 5% of members of this group worked low-skilled jobs.

It is her contention that even though more than double of black people entered the middle class since the 1990's, the white supremacist hegemonic ideology that has permeated the South African society since the 1600s has maintained the power and privilege of white people (Pirtle 2022:1). Apartheid then institutionalised white supremacist hegemonic ideology to such a degree that the racial hierarchy in South Africa was set in stone in the minds and everyday lives of all South Africans, whether they benefited from it or were oppressed by it (Pirtle 2022: 3). This ideology of white supremacist hegemony was supported and theologically justified by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in 1857 as they institutionalised whiteness through the assumed “weakness of some” for the DRC to be “Slegs vir blankes”. This was followed by the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the start of the apartheid rule in South Africa in 1948 which culminated in “the highest stage of White supremacy” (Senokoane 2019:3).

Not only were different races segregated from one another but were also weighed up against one another, taught to not trust one another and ultimately see themselves as inferior to white people. Since the dawn of the democratic South Africa in 1994, commitments have been made to eradicate racism, change the racial structure, and promote racial and economic equity. This was largely led by the new constitution of the democratic South Africa that advocated for the human dignity of all and a non-racist society. Pirtle (2022:3) describes “Non-racialism, as an ideology and mandate, is purported as a commitment to end apartheid-era ideals of separatism and white racial superiority; however, its implementation included the unintended consequence of colour-blindness”.

In the 2016 Pastoral Letter on Racism of URCSA, the letter's departure point is the acknowledgement and repentance that URCSA is not an example of a non-racist church and that the Belhar Confession calls and challenges the church to “set an example or to embody how a non-racist society should look like” (URCSA Pastoral Letter Regarding Racism, 2016). The letter further provides advice and information regarding programmes in addressing racism. The General Synodical Commission of URCSA also approved the “Churches Addressing Racism in Southern Africa”

programme in 2014 which follows a hermeneutical approach aimed at addressing racism in society.

Yet still in 2022, after social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #FeesMustFall which highlighted and fostered a sensitivity for the intersectionality of racial and class oppression, racism is still unfinished. This is said in the aftermath of a white student at Stellenbosch University being suspended after urinating on the belongings of a fellow black student in residence. Even though this may sound like an interpersonal incident of racism, it happened at a tertiary institution with a long history, tradition and culture of racism stretching over generations that paves the way for such behaviour (Du Toit 2022:124). We are thus still far from a non-racist society.

What prophetic critique does the Belhar Confession then still offer us given the history of colonialism and apartheid and the contemporary challenges of racism and inequality in Southern Africa?

3.3 Jesus is Lord – denouncing white supremacist hegemonic ideology

Article 5 of the Belhar Confession states:

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, it's only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

It has been suggested by Nico Botha and others (Botha 1994) that it is necessary to read the Belhar Confession backwards, starting with Art 5, and confessing “Jesus is Lord”. We concur with this argument, as the prophetic witness of the confession calls URCSA to proclaim Jesus is Lord, as the theme of the recent 8th General Synod of URCSA in Stellenbosch also was: “Fragility of the Social Order and Stability of the Christian Faith today: Jesus is Lord”.

The prophetic declaration of Jesus is Lord stems from the New Testament scriptures in the imperial and colonial context of the Roman Empire with the designation of Kurios ascribed to only the Emperor. Early Christian communities assigning the title to Jesus, an imperial/colonial subject publicly crucified, would have been in resistance, whether overtly or in private given the threat of persecution, to the emperor and the empire. The prophetic witness of “Jesus is Lord” calls us to not only resist the emperor but also problematize the oppressive hierarchical system of the empire, of which the emperor is part of, which favours a small minority at the expense of the majority non-elite. Furthermore, the conspiracy of the Jews with the imperial cult of the Roman Empire to have Jesus crucified illustrates that the prophetic witness of “Jesus is Lord” is also in opposition to the oppressive systems found in religious communities which mirrored that of the Empire. Confessing Jesus is Lord, calls us then also to consider the oppressive hierarchical systems of which we form part of.

Making this shift in understanding enables us to foreground and problematize the oppressive hierarchical systems which endorses and enforces racism, tribalism, xenophobia, classism, misogyny, homophobia, ageism, and discrimination against differently abled persons. It is our contention that the White supremacist hegemonic ideology and theology of apartheid intensified these oppressive injustices in Southern Africa to the extent that we are still influenced by it twenty-eight years in the democratic South Africa. As such, an ideal of non-racism has been found inadequate to address racism in South-Africa and in URCSA, confessing Jesus is Lord, calls us to denounce white supremacist hegemonic ideology and foster a consciousness and culture of anti-racism.

According to the Hegelian theory of dialectic materialism, in line with Steve Biko’s argument in *I Write What I Like*, if we have all been influenced in various ways by white supremacist hegemonic ideology, the antithesis cannot be non-racialism that permeates colour-blindness. The prophetic witness “Jesus is Lord” calls for the antithesis to be anti-racism, calling ourselves too to consider how we have been influenced by imperialism, colonialism, and apartheid to perpetuate oppressive hierarchical systems in Southern Africa, abroad and in URCSA. Proclaiming Jesus is Lord in yearning for an anti-racist society calls us to intentionally stand with those who have been marginalised and oppressed and fight against racism on

a personal, interpersonal, institutional and structural level. This requires us to intentionally scrutinise our daily behaviour and thinking and educate ourselves on racism, the inequalities suffered by black people and the ideology of white supremacy. This is required of white people and people of colour as the ideology of white supremacy and distrust of “non-whites” was deeply ingrained in the minds of South Africans by apartheid. Moreover, on an institutional and structural level we are called to examine our representation, policies, practises, culture, and environment. This is necessary to foster an environment that is welcoming to all people but also through reparation and social justice afford opportunity and access to those who have been marginalised. A conscious and concerted effort of anti-racism is necessary in this regard because failure to do so would maintain the enduring white supremacist hegemonic ideology of the past and present where power and wealth remains only in the hands of white people. If we intentionally decide to be anti-racist, maybe then we can foster the synthesis of non-racialism, and be led by Article 2 of the Belhar Confession:

That we are a community (We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family) in which “Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;”

4. Xenophobia/Afrophobia?

The South African community has now for several years struggled with xenophobia. In 2008, about 67 foreign nationals were killed due to xenophobia. In 2015, another group of incidents occurred in Durban and some parts of Johannesburg. A few years later in early September 2019 in Johannesburg violent riots broke out targeting foreign nationals. These incidents in 2008, 2015 and 2019 are what reached the media due to the severity of the incidents, but there are seemingly many incidents of verbal abuse not reported. These verbal abuses against foreign nationals, includes inter alia name calling such as “makwerere”, “parasites”, and “foreigners” (in a derogatory manner) (Addae & Quan-Baffour 2022:1–2). Similarly, foreign nationals are blamed for the social ills and crime and drug abuse,

as well as the high unemployment rate suffered by many South Africans. These incidents, of verbal as well as physical abuse are vicious, and URCSA through the Belhar Confession is called to witness to a world where justice, reconciliation and unity is realised.

It is with the sentiment of being a confessional community that on the 16th of April 2015 the then Moderator (hereafter we will refer to the Moderator, in reference to the statement) of URCSA issued a statement condemning the attacks on foreign nationals that occurred. In the statement the Moderator draws from the heart of Belhar Confession, the message of reconciliation and justice. A justice that promotes seeking to welcome the stranger with hospitality (Addendum 14 2017:474). According to the Moderator (Addendum 14 2017:475) this

... [c]hristian hospitality involves seeing the “other” not as a threat but as a “gift”. When the “other” comes to our country, we are challenged to share these gifts with them, in thankfulness to God. Those who come as aliens are to be received kindly and treated as one of our own people (Deut 26:5–8, Ex 22:21–7, Lev 19:33–34, NRSV).

In the statement by the Moderator the issues of Xenophobia and Afrophobia are addressed, although no explanation is clearly deduced from the statement as to the relation of these two or not. What is however deducible is that the Moderator sees a reality within which these attacks in 2015 – as the statement is responding thereto – as a hatred for Africans (Afrophobia) in larger measure than that of “foreigners”. Based here upon, the question arises: are there anti-immigrant sentiments in South Africa that fuels these attacks, particularly skewed against those from other African countries?

In “*Are Foreigners Welcome in South Africa? An Attitudinal Analysis of Anti-immigrant Sentiment in South Africa during the 2003–2018 period*,” Steven Gordon investigates the attitudes of South Africans in relation to answer this fundamental question if there exists an “anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa.” He asserts that if one were to understand attitude as motivator for social behaviour, then a utilisation of this mode of analysis is helpful to investigate what is the cause of the “undercurrent of anti-immigrant sentiment” – more against immigrants from other African countries.

Gordon (2022:253) uses the Social African Social Attitudes Survey in his research. Since the inception of this survey, the Social African Social Attitudes Survey has asked the question:

Please indicate which of the following statements applies to you? I generally welcome to South Africa ...”

- i. All immigrants
- ii. Some immigrants
- iii. No immigrants
- iv. Don't know”

In the analysis of this survey's results, Gordon explored how the attitudes of South Africans shifted over time from 2003–2018. The analysis indicates that there had been a great shift in the sentiments towards immigration.

In 2018, about a quarter (25%) of the South African adult population said that they would welcome all immigrants, while the remainder indicated that they would accept either none (26%) or some immigrants (47%). Over the 2003–2018 period, the share of the adult populace that would be ready to welcome foreigners fluctuated within a narrow range. Anti-immigrant sentiment reached a peak in 2007 when two-fifths of the general public reported that they rejected all immigrants. But it was clear from the figure that there was a notable incline in pro-immigrant attitudes in the country in 2008. In that year, more than two-fifths (43%) of the adult population told fieldworkers that they would welcome all foreigners. (Gordon 2022:254)

These fluctuating results as outlined by Gordon clearly indicates that the South African populace has great to moderate reservations on immigration. These attitudes are so deeply affected by the myth and misconception that immigrants or rather “foreigners” take the jobs of South African's. In a study by Pew Research in 2018, a poll indicated that 62% of the South African populace are of the view that immigrants are a burden on the society by taking the jobs and social benefits intended for them. Furthermore, 61% are of the view that immigrants are responsible for crime (Tamir & Budiman 2019 in Akpan & Mkhize 2022). Akpan and Mkhize (2022:49–

50) argues in the article “Mobilizing Ubuntu as the Unifying Language for the Descendants of Bantu during Xenophobic/Afrophobic Attacks in South Africa” that studies done by the Migrating for Work Research Consortium (MiWORC) refutes the myth and misconception that immigrants are a burden as most of them are more likely to create self-employment.

Now the attacks since 2008, have been attributed to sentiments based on the myth and misconceptions as attributed above, of foreigners stealing jobs, and are responsible for crime. It must be further stated that the vicious attacks on foreign nationals, has been deeply skewed toward Africans rather than foreigners from other countries of the world. As such (*Afrophobia versus xenophobia in South Africa* 2016) the attacks had been wrongly attributed to xenophobia and should rather be correctly articulated as Afrophobia. He asserts that Afrophobia “is the fear of a specific other.” The South African populace see other races coming from Europe, Asia and America as contributing to the economy and not as a burden as such on the South African economy. This underlying view by Tshaka is supported by Gordon’s research, in that the anti-immigrant sentiment expressed by South Africans, even those open to immigrants, are indicating a favourable leaning toward some people, in particular white, in opposition to black and from Africa (Gordon 2022).

In this argument it would be wise to speak of Afrophobia, rather than a blanket xenophobia. As the anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa is directed toward a “specific other” (*Afrophobia versus xenophobia in South Africa* 2016). The question is: is the statement by the Moderator of the URCSA enough?

We will have to argue in the negative. Although helpful, URCSA, a Southern African church community, must do better. That “better” is to conscientize. To conscientize is a calling, a “farewell to innocence”, particularly those church members residing within the national borders of South Africa. As a confessional church, as the Moderator did, we ought to draw from the Confession of Belhar which in this case is calling upon all members to confess their hatred and underlying anti-immigrant sentiment skewed toward the “specific other”, that is coming from Africa. Only after confessing our own sinfulness, can we in thankfulness move to hospitality

that is welcoming the “specific other” as a gift from God (Addendum 14 2017:488).

Conclusion

As articulated, our intent is “as a cry from the heart” towards URCSA to deal decisively with the unfinished business that grapples not only the institution but also the Southern African region. The Belhar confession’s prophetic critique is thus turned inwards, as we wish to recognize the “beam in [our] own eye!” At the heart this has been the intention of taking pen to paper at this juncture, of 40 years since the drafting of the confession. As a church that identifies as confessional with commitments to being prophetic, we argue that the unfinished business of *patriarchy and queerphobia, racism, xenophobia and Afrophobia* should be at the core of the agenda for URCSA.

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