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INTERVIEW WITH PIET J. NAUDÉ

ABSTRACT

Piet Naudé studied at the University of Stellenbosch where he completed a BA with Hebrew and Philosophy as majors. He furthered his studies in Philosophy and completed both an Honours and Masters degree, the latter in theories of social justice, with Willie Esterhuyse as study leader. He completed the standard postgraduate theological studies (B.Th. and Licentiate) for admission as pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church. For his doctoral studies in dogmatics under Willie Jonker, he spent a year in Utrecht, The Netherlands. His thesis explored the relation between theory and practice in Latin-American Liberation Theologies and the work of Johann Baptist Metz. As Humboldt scholar, he later built a special academic relation with Michael Welker in Heidelberg (Germany) and with the Centre for Theological Inquiry at (USA).

Martin: Reading through your recent *Pathways in theology – Ecumenical, African and Reformed* (Sun Media 2015), I know that you, as well as other people, are fond of using these adjectives to describe your theological work. I am in full concordance with these insightful characteristic rubrics of your work, but what do they have in common? Don't you think it is possible, and even important, to get beneath the surface and go beyond those clusters of theologies and discern the one, main and clear problem that you have tried to address throughout all of your work?

Piet: *What these adjectives have in common is that each one attempts to describe* ***the Christian tradition*** *from a specific vantage point. One could change the title of this volume to read: "Pathways in* ***Christian*** *theology", but we have grown accustomed to talking about "theology", whilst assuming the Christian basis thereof. My specific vantage point is*

the Reformed tradition as part of the broader Christian story. My work is an attempt to fruitfully reinterpret this tradition in the context of Africa and within the wider framework of the ecumenical church.

Martin: Still on the issue of research focus and main concern, I am curious to know about all the subtle and dramatic shifts and changes your focus (mind) has undergone. How has your mind changed in studying and wrestling with this one main concern of yours? Looking back in terms of where you came from and where you are now, what significant developments and shifts, and even U-turns, are there to highlight?

Piet: *This is a complex question as one is not always aware of what shapes one's thought and only know this after the fact. "How my mind has changed" is, however, a well-known form of self-reflection. I would, in the simplest terms, refer to three shifts. First, the shift from a fundamentalist to a richer historical-theological reading of the Bible, regaining my naivety to always be surprised at the transformative personal and ecclesial power of the Scriptures. Secondly, the shift from thinking that the Western intellectual tradition is universal to an understanding of the contextual and social-constructivist nature of all knowledge. Thirdly, the shift from thinking that the Reformed tradition is in itself fully adequate to represent the Christian faith to a much more ecumenical orientation, with a growing respect for both the Catholic and the Pentecostal perspectives.*

Martin: Whose work, theologians and books, would you highlight as being the most influential in the development of the above?

Piet: *For the first shift, a number of books in the field of hermeneutics assisted me. I taught Biblical Studies for a number of years and the different "critical" forms of exegesis (tradition criticism, redaction criticism, and so forth) helped me perceive both the complexity and the beauty of the Bible. For the second shift, Thomas Kuhn's book on scientific paradigms and Wentzel van Huyssteen's work on critical realism played a cardinal role. For the third shift, the many Faith and Order reports of the WCC helped me perceive the bigger picture, fed by the ecumenical spirit in which Willie Jonker taught us dogmatics.*

Martin: I know that Willie Jonker once said to you that the theologian cannot escape her/his own shadow. What would a self-critical take on your generation's work reveal to be the blind spots and challenges for my generation to embrace and grapple with?

Piet: *We awoke too late to the fact that a key partner discipline to theology is economics. Our generation was dominated by philosophy (which I do not regret for one moment), but the struggle for meaning, religion, and faith*

lies in the sphere of the market. Due to the historical epoch of the transition toward democracy, we also worked in the frame of prophetic theology and were not prepared for the seemingly mundane, but absolutely critical role that policy studies play in effecting faith under modernist conditions.

Martin: What I really appreciate from your work is your critical engagement with liberation theology and its significant relevance for the South African context throughout the various phases of transition and change. Am I right in saying that being at the edge resulted not only in an antenna for those voices at the edge of society, but also gave a particular and continuous critical and creative edge to your own theological work and voice?

Piet: *My dogmatics teacher, Willie Jonker, to whom we referred earlier, taught us in the course on "sektekunde": "Each sect is the unpaid account of the mainline church." I think that he wanted to let us view so-called "sects" as a mirror that reflects the blind spots of the church. The same applies to the liberation theology tradition. This tradition, with its rich variety of emphases, is the mirror in which one perceives the struggles for justice that I – due to my social position – so easily overlook.*

Martin: In light of the previous question, I am not sure what to make of a particular argument in your work since the early 2000s where you have argued for a shift from a predominantly prophetic-critique mode of doing theology towards a more priestly involvement in society. With all due respect, don't you think that that was slightly naïve (idealistic and romantic) in terms of the (theological) history and legacy we had (and still need) to deal with?

Piet: *One must take into account that the establishment of a constitutional democracy was what the church – or at least a part of the church in South Africa and globally – fought for. By the late 1990s and early 2000, this ideal was reached, and at that point it was important for the church to understand its pastoral, supporting, and priestly function in the healing and reconciliation of our broken society. That does not mean that the prophetic work is ever over. No. We know that politicians with large voter majorities become easily corrupted. This is happening all over the world and it is now also happening in this country. If it is required to return to struggle theology with a stronger prophetic emphasis, so be it. As things stand, at the time of writing this piece, the church has no option. Our democracy itself is at stake.*

Martin: Like yourself, I am also a member of the Dutch Reformed Church who would like to see the Belhar Confession fully accepted in the DRC family. Don't you think we have erred in highlighting so-called "non-theological factors" as the actual reason for its hindered reception in the

DRC? Are we not taking the theological sting out of the discussion if we interpret bad theology as "non-theological factors" as the actual reason for our struggle with Belhar?

Piet: *This is quite a perceptive question. Yes, what we sometimes call "non-theological" factors are, in fact, theological. In tandem with a specific reading of both the Bible and the context, these factors constitute a form of natural theology in the negative sense of the word. Following Barth and Barmen, this is a form of religion or bad theology, as you say.*

Martin: Lastly, what are you currently working on and what can we expect to read and thoroughly discuss in the next few years?

Piet: *My anthology of essays on ethics is in its final stages and will, it is hoped, be published later this year by Sun Press. The provisional title is "Pathways in ethics". The two volumes will be a good representation of my work over the past two and a half decades. With "Reformation year" in 2017, I am working on the social potential of the Reformed tradition, and simultaneously with colleagues in economics on the broader issues of justice and equality in the context of advancing the public nature of theology. This link between "dogmatics" and "ethics" has always been part of my work and will probably remain so for the rest of my intellectual life.*