


A public theology discourse in practice: Perspectives from the oeuvre of Yolanda Dreyer

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This article can serve as an overview of the work of Yolanda Dreyer, or as an introduction to her work, by conversing with her as a public theologian in the tradition of Schleiermacher. The article highlights her passion to listen to the voices that are normally ignored or to hear what needs to be heard to transform discourses. It investigates the contribution of Yolanda Dreyer to public theology with regard to the newspaper columns she has been writing for more than 17 years. It compares aspects of her public theology with the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which can be characterised by an internalised spirituality and a critical hermeneutic of suspicion towards the abuse of power. Gender injustice and cultural criticism are prominent themes within Dreyer's public theology. She emphasises the vocation to speak out, but also the necessity to listen. These contributions also characterise Dreyer as a pastor-theologian.

Public theology: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Yolanda Dreyer

The influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher can be seen throughout the theology of Yolanda Dreyer (2005:109–131; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a:1–13). Both internalised spirituality as 'absolute dependence on God'. For both, public theology is a critical theoretical hermeneutics of suspicion on the abuse of power – ecclesial and political. The term 'public theology' has recently gained much popularity.¹ The suspicion of power is central to public theology (Graham 2009:112, 224). That is why gender studies (cf. Burns & Monro 2015a) feature as strongly in this discourse as does political theology (cf. De Gruchy [2004] 2008:423–438; Van Wyk 2015). Increasingly public theology can be found in genres other than the professional academic (Cady 2014:295; Van Aarde 2008:1213–1234). Burns and Monro (2015b), referring to Andries van Aarde (and Elaine Graham), put it as follows:

Van Aarde argues that real public theologians are the 'film directors, artists, novelists, poets and philosophers' where 'public theology' is the 'inarticulate longing of believers who do not want to belong'. Public Theology in this sense overlaps with systematic theology and contextual theology but does not belong to the self-appointed guardians of public theological expression. It is the theology of the public, of the people. (p. 8)

Schleiermacher, a prominent theologian of our time, did not shy away from critical and suspicious listening to what the public had to say about church, spirituality and God. The second of the three-part book, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism*, Richard Crouter (2005a:99–194) titles 'Signposts of a public theologian'. Yolanda Dreyer's contributions over a period of 17 years to the newspaper column *Godsdiens aktueel* [Religion actuality] can also be described as 'signposts of a public theologian'.

This dedication focuses on how she hears public theologians, or what Schleiermacher would call: 'the theology of bourgeois society' (Crouter 2005b:169–194) – *their* experiences, *their* narratives, *their* depictions of church life, *their* spirituality and *their* protest against the abuse of power by the church and actions of the church that render *them* invisible and voiceless. The 'despisers of religion' in Schleiermacher's day had only disdain for the church. For Yolanda Dreyer, in Crouter's (2005b:183) words, 'the historic church, even with all its faults, still provided a viable alternative'. Schleiermacher's public theology was also articulated in a newspaper, *Der Preußische Korrespondent* (Schleiermacher [1813] 2013:395–500), of which he was the editor. Inspired by the values of the French Revolution – but abhorred by the 'barbaric' execution of the French king² – he advocated

1.The *International Journal of Public Theology* (ISSN: 1872-5171; E-ISSN: 1569-7320), published by Brill, Leiden and affiliated with the Global Network for Public Theology, is a platform for original interdisciplinary research in the field of Public Theology.

2.See his letter as a 25-year-old to his father on 14 February 1993, in Rowan (1860:109).

for the freedom of the peasantry and Jews, promoted the improvement of university education and criticised the hegemony which silenced the voices of the student population. His position as professor in Berlin (Crouter 2005c:185–191) was endangered by his criticism of the imperial monarchy for interfering with academic freedom. His political theology on the emancipation of the Jews and gender equity is expressed in correspondence with his Jewish friend, Henriette Herz. This prompted Ruth Richardson (1991) to call him ‘a harbinger or forerunner of feminism’.³

Yolanda Dreyer’s public theological discourse also aims at conscientisation. As Cecilia Ridgeway (2011), among others, she emphasises the negative consequences of patriarchy and the persisting gender inequality in church and society. Her prophetic voice was recently heard at the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in Leipzig, Germany, 29 June to 7 July 2017. The theme of the Council was ‘Living God, renew and transform us’.

Gender injustice: Yet, they do not make the connection

On 01 July 2017, Yolanda Dreyer speaks on gender injustice: I am from South Africa and my country is right up there when it comes to rape statistics. A large percentage of perpetrators – more than 90% – are known to their victims: family, friends, friends of the family, people they date. A small percentage, significantly less than 50%, is reported. Of those, only a percentage is prosecuted. A very small percentage, 7% end up in jail. In effect this means that 93 out of a 100 people who hurt the bodies of women and children, often scarring them for life, get away with it. They know they will get away with it. The women know they will get away with it.

South Africa is also right up there when it comes to the Christian religion and faith. Some 75% – 80% of South Africans are Christians. They are not on-paper-Christians for the purposes of state statistics. They are church-going gospel-singing active believers. They know what Genesis says about creation in the image of God – male and female. They know that Jesus summarised the law and prophets with: love God with your entire being and your neighbour as yourself. They know all about Jesus’ injunction to do to others as you want done to you. They know how Jesus treated women. They know Paul’s words about the attitude of Jesus that should be in the hearts of his followers and that in God there is no Jew or Greek, man or woman, slave or free person. They know. Yet, they do not make the connection.

And then I came here to the Council of the WCRC in Leipzig. On the first day we heard about the procedures, also the procedure for complaints, including sexual harassment complaints. ‘Here?’ I thought. ‘Surely not! Maybe they are just covering all possibilities’. On the same day a young

³Yolanda Dreyer (2007a) however points out that: ‘[I]n Karl Barth’s (1982:136158) discussion of Schleiermacher’s ([1806] 1991) *Christmas Eve Dialogue*, he shows that Schleiermacher’s theology goes ‘wrong’ exactly where his ideas on religious experience and his view on women come together’ (p. 1534).

woman from my country and I were introduced to a young man who heard that we were from South Africa and said he wanted to visit our country. The young people exchanged email addresses. I enquired whether he was planning on studying or working in our country. He did not look at me when he answered. He looked directly at the young woman and replied: ‘No, I come to *do you*’. She and I moved away as quickly as we could. She said to me: ‘And now I must be polite!’ I replied: ‘No. This was sexual harassment. You must not be polite. You can report this’. She did not report it. He is getting away with it and will probably do it again. Some minutes after our encounter, the same young man stepped up to the podium to open the session with prayer. He prayed beautifully to the living God for church unity. He *did not make the connection*.

My church has been ordaining women for 36 odd years. They had the debates, perused Scripture and decided that they could not keep people who felt called to do God’s work from doing God’s work. During these 36 years, the church government has mostly been 100% male. Here and there one woman would be elected for a term or two. The term before last was again 100% male. A year before the last assembly in 2016, I began naming this wherever and whenever I could. Came the Assembly, one male person after another was elected. With one position left, it dawned on someone that ‘maybe we should also elect a woman’. Now my church has one woman in leadership for the next 3 years.

A while ago our students had preaching practice. There were comments on the women’s skirts and their legs. One student said: ‘I already feel exposed just standing there in front of the whole class. Now I have to worry about my body and what to wear as well’. I know there was no malice. I know these people. They have good hearts. But they are asleep, oblivious. *They do not make the connection*.

If we look in one direction and see ‘white supremacy and privilege’, the response is instant, passionate and with strong language it is condemned as ‘evil’. If we look in the other direction and see ‘male supremacy and privilege’ the response is feeble, dispassionate. *We do not make the connection*.

I ask myself: in 2017, what would it take for people to wake up and make the connection?

Yolanda Dreyer has been asking this question since 2000 in her contributions to the column in the *Beeld* daily newspaper. This article collates some themes from her contributions. It focuses on topics also broached in her academic work. She has received wide recognition for her work on sexuality, homophobia and gender justice.

Patriarchy and women’s day

In South Africa, 09 August is a public holiday, Women’s Day. Yolanda’s column on 12 August 2009 is about patriarchy (Dreyer 2009a:8). Why Women’s Day? she asks. Is it to celebrate women on Women’s Day as we celebrate freedom

on Freedom Day? Or is it rather like World AIDS Day where the aim is to conscientise people so that they will change their lifestyle? If a *celebration*, what is it that we celebrate? Males do not celebrate their maleness. They simply *are* male, human beings. *Are* women then not also simply women, human beings? No. This is not a privilege enjoyed by women. Often still chattel, unpaid house maids, submissive and obedient to the 'head of the household'. Often still invisible and voiceless. According to statistics, they are the poorest of the poor in our global village and the prime target for all sorts of violence. It is dangerous to live in the body of a woman: sexually molested as children, raped as adults, hurt or killed in intimate relationships with men they trust. Maybe the objective of Women's Day is *conscientisation* rather than celebration – in order for people to change a dangerous lifestyle.

But where to begin? Often it is just about treating the symptoms. Shelters are constructed to house abused women and children. Legislation has only recently acknowledged that rape can also occur in marriage. Underlying the *symptoms* are the cause, the root of the evil. *Patriarchy*, dating from way back when, along with slavery taken for granted in biblical times as 'they way things are'. Both are human social systems that serve the interests of a certain group at the cost of others.

Patriarchy is the system of the power of males over females and other 'lesser people' such as sexual minorities, children, servants, slaves and people of other races. 'Lesser people' can be oppressed, exploited and forcibly controlled. Elizabeth Dodson Gray calls patriarchy 'a conceptual trap' (Gray 1982). One would not fall into a trap on purpose, but only if you cannot see it. Patriarchy traps people's thinking. They cannot see either the trap or the consequences. Male dominance is simply the way things are and therefore the way they *should be*. Power is enticing. Power corrupts (Grouch 2013:22, 284). It is but a small step from *having* to *abusing* power.

Today people are becoming increasingly aware of power that serves the interests of dominant groups and of the variety of ways in which violence is perpetrated against the 'lesser people'. Postcolonial theories focus on what the mighty white West did to the people, families and countries of the world. Slavery, genocide, stealing their resources. Theories on globalisation describe and explain the economic tyranny of the wealthy white West and some wealthy Oriental nations. Feminist theories focus on the situation of women, how their dignity and bodies are violated on a worldwide scale.

Patriarchy is not innocent

Religions with values such as 'loving your neighbour' and 'do unto others as you want others to do unto you' struggle to see patriarchy for what it is. Oblivious religious leaders fall into the trap, call male hegemony the 'God-given order of things'. Would God who 'created man and woman in the image of God' really have ordained patriarchy? Jesus, the human face of God in this world, gave his life for others and rebuked those who were campaigning for power and positions. Those who have power do not relinquish it easily.

Having it feels good. To sit on the throne, to be the boss, to make all the decisions alone to suit yourself, to be served by others. *My* will be done. And to exclude those you do *not want* to love as yourself.

In the column of 30 April 2017, Yolanda refers to the centenary celebrations of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (Dreyer 2017b). Historical gates in front of the building that are kept open by granite stones securely cemented in place symbolise that there was a time when the gates were closed to all but white heterosexual males. Now it is different. The gates will never again be closed. No one will be excluded. For the celebrations of 1992 when the faculty was 75 years old, she had to gather material for a TV programme about its history. In all of the material there was no trace of women's presence. At that time women had been around in the faculty for 17 years, but were ignored out of existence when it came to the writing of history. As part of the centenary celebrations in 2017, 10 great men were remembered for their contribution over 100 years. They were introduced as representatives of the 'cloud of witnesses' surrounding the faculty. With the gates now *open to all*, the first black professor of the Faculty (male) was *included* in die 10 and another man was lauded for his advocacy on behalf of sexual minorities. No trace, once again, of the presence and contribution of women. 'But there were no women', it was said. Not true. The women *were there* – not for all of the 100 years of course, but at least for half of it. Women advocating for the inclusion of women were there long before the inclusion of black people or advocacy for sexual minorities. Absent in the history of the Bible. Absent in all sorts of historiography. But present in the real world. Women *were always there*: female students of the faculty who today are ministers in churches, church leaders, theology professors. Whether included in or excluded, visible or invisible, with or without a voice, acknowledged or not, women have always been and will always be part of the cloud of witnesses.

Homophobia

The column of 12 October 2009 is about sexuality, which means different things in different cultures and eras (Dreyer 2009b:8). Different societies produce different sexual practices, experiences, values and meanings and this is in flux. Societies often try to 'coerce people into conformity' (Lewes 2003:190, 191; cf. Dreyer 2006a:445–471). Prejudice leads to discrimination, abuse and violence. Harmful attitudes and actions cannot be acceptable to those who take the gospel message seriously.

In her very first column on 15 July 2000 (cf. inter al. Dreyer 2008a:499–527), the church's role in helping people to find meaningful answers to the moral dilemmas of our day is explored. Sexuality is often an embarrassment for the institutional church. People, including church-going believers of all ages, choose to cohabit before or instead of marriage. People, including believers, have sex outside of marriage. Yet the official statement of most churches remains that sex outside of marriage is unacceptable because 'the

Bible says so'. Ministers should then try and persuade couples to either get married or remain celibate. This leads to a rift between real life and the church's guidelines for leading a wholesome life. The problem is not the Bible or God, but rather the systems, rules and regulations constructed by people. These become outdated with time. Though based on the Bible initially, with changing times and insights, practices change. This requires a fresh perspective on 'what the Bible says'. Is sexual exclusivity within a very particular social institution really that important to God?

In the Bible sexual exclusivity in marriage was not so much a moral matter as a property matter. Sexual exclusivity was expected only of women. 'Illegal' sex would mean that one man has stolen something belonging to another. This would mean humiliation and dishonour for the wronged man in society. Even rape was not seen as perpetrated against the woman, but rather against the man to whom she belonged. This illustrates the enormous distance between biblical times and our times.

In light of biblical evidence, sexuality can be re-evaluated for our time as a gift of God which both gives great joy and requires great responsibility. Such a gift cannot be used to hurt others or serve selfish interests. It requires the utmost respect for the own and the other's life and body. Without such a basis, even people in a so-called 'respectable legal marriage' can do much harm to one another and to children. Maybe the focus should rather be on the content and ethics of relationships than on structures, rules and regulations. With a fresh perspective on the Bible, maybe loving the other as oneself can take its rightful place at the centre.

Cultural criticism

On 25 May 2000, the column refers to the '*laager* mentality' of the Afrikaner people – quick to feel threatened and withdraw into their enclave, always ready to fight (cf. Dreyer 2015:651–662). Threat is constituted by everything that *differs* from how we know (and want) it. The reaction is to destroy the threat, the heretic, and the renegade. Energy invested in self-protection is not available for development. Development is only possible when people are willing to risk stepping out of their comfort zone. Without development, there is only stagnation. Jesus would have been an uncomfortable presence in our midst. He did not bow to cultural taboos or conform to cultural norms, such as with whom one may and may not socialise, how to act, what is 'appropriate' and what not. Following Jesus is not an easy road. It is the way to the cross. Those who choose it cannot afford to be afraid and feel threatened. They cannot focus on self-protection and annihilate 'the other'. Jesus' advice is to pray for those who persecute you and to love those who go against you. This is radical and difficult. However, if it is not reflected in the lives of individual Christians, the church and the nation, a false image of Jesus en Christianity is projected. If the highly religious people in this country can fearlessly reflect the love of Jesus in the world, then a difference can be made.

The column on 17 August 2001 is about 'integrity', which can be understood in different ways. In everyday language it refers to people whose behaviour reflects what they say they believe – a dependable person. In religious language it refers to people who live a just and moral life in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In practice it is often about a person remaining married to the same person for a lifetime, attending church regularly, not making mistakes, complying with the rules and conforming to the expectations of church and society.

Another meaning of integrity is *wholeness* (cf. Dreyer 2008b:1235–1254). Wholeness integrity and conformist integrity are mutually exclusive. It is not possible to conform to values of church and society that do not resonate with how an individual understands and tries to remain true to the values of the gospel. Non-conformism has a price. People can lose their job, friends and the acceptance of the church community. Conformism also has a price. Its price is the loss of being true to what one believes. Cultures that demand a high level of conformism do not seem to have much of a problem with lies and falsehood if these are needed for keeping up appearances. This, however, does not constitute integrity. Integrity is having the courage of one's convictions and being true to one and what one believes. It is when convictions and behaviour are congruent, irrespective of the cost.

Vocation and homosexuality

In the column of 20 July 2000 about vocation, the story of a 79-year-old female pastor in the United States was related. Her husband died when she was 65 years old. On the day of his funeral, she experienced the calling to go to seminary and study theology. Two years later at the age of 67 she did so. As a pastor, she worked in congregations and also served on church committees. One of these had the task of investigating 'the issue of homosexuality'. She had no experience of gay people. She read much and listened to their stories and was touched by their pain and struggles. Their fate became her calling. Her advocacy on their behalf caused her to receive threatening letters and some damage was done to her property. She concluded: 'If your calling has never hurt, you probably haven't been listening too well'.

In the column of 07 August 2006, the biblical expression of 'seeing the splinter in the other's eye, but not the beam in your own' is applied to 'the gay issue' (Dreyer 2006b:18). The ethical imperative for Christians is to do honest introspection, to look them in the eye. Speaking of eyes, Yolanda says, mine are green, which is much less common than blue and especially brown eyes. What if a child with eyes of a less common colour would have to hear from society: this is abnormal, deviant. This is a 'problem', you being different.

Some people discover in puberty that they are 'different', attracted to the same sex. Such an orientation is not common, some say 10% of the population. In the church, this has been labelled 'aberration', 'sin' or 'sickness'. Language dubs it

the 'problem' or 'issue' of homosexuality. What does this do to *people*? It disrupts their relationships – with God, with others and with the self. The Bible is used against them, churches reject them and families are torn apart. Many gay and lesbian people internalise this social hatred and learn to hate themselves. Their body betrays them. Love is dangerous, a sin. Their normal human need of love and touch has to be suppressed – for life. This sentence becomes unbearable and suicide becomes an option. It is the only way to escape an unacceptable self, a hateful body and the endless pain.

If Christian believers see this happening we should ask ourselves: is it remotely acceptable to do this to others? Some are without remorse, because it is not we who say so, it is the Bible. Not the Bible's fault, however. People of other religions with other holy scriptures do the exact same things to sexual minorities. So, if not a 'conviction of faith', what is it then? Maybe is it simply human prejudice, bias and bigotry. Research shows that the sexual identity of males is generally more easily threatened by the sexuality of others than women's and that some personality types are more prone to prejudice than others. Rigid personalities are more predisposed to racism, sexism and homophobia. They are not comfortable with 'difference'. Prejudice and using the Bible, language and behaviour to make life impossible for others, surely goes against the grain of the gospel message. According to that gospel message, God's grace is available not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator. The tax collector received grace and then went out to make amends. Do we, the Christian sexual majority, see the beam in our own eye?

In the column of 12 October 2006, gay marriage is discussed (Dreyer 2006c:18). That gay and lesbian people want the same rights as everyone else is understandable. Discrimination is unacceptable. But *marriage*? Would one really want that? In the film *Dr T and his women*, a successful gynaecologist proposes to a woman and adds: 'You will never have to work again'. Surprised she asks him: 'Why would I want that?' I wonder: why would sexual minorities want such an institution as marriage with all its baggage?

Marriage in some form or another is a social phenomenon found in all cultures and religions. In ancient and biblical times it was patriarchal: the man as the 'head' and the woman as submissive and dependent. He could divorce her and she would be left without a livelihood, for women had no rights. Today many a religions still proclaim the man the 'head of the household' and the 'proper place' of women as being submissive and dependent. At Christian marriage ceremonies Ephesians 5 is still quoted and the woman commanded to be obedient to the man. Marriage has the baggage of women as chattel, their virginity having market value for which good money (or an equivalent) was paid. As his possession, the man could do with and to her what he pleased. Even today the idea of people 'belonging' to one another persists. In marriage they have to take what the other chooses to dish out. The powerful one can perpetrate violence, be it physical

or emotional. The powerless one can manipulate and sabotage. They *must* stay together and they *must* love, irrespective of what is going on. The church – an institution – reinforces this mentality when it regards marriage – an institution – more highly than the well-being of people.

Sex constitutes the greatest challenge to the institutions of marriage and church today. The church had control over sex. Marriage was the *only* place for it. The main reason for marriage was procreation. Still today some churches regard marriage as *the only* legitimate space for sex (between one man and one woman, of course), but procreation is no longer the main reason for marriage. The question is whether marriage today can cast off all this baggage and be redeemed as an institution that is conducive to people's well-being. Can it acquire a content and meaning that will reflect the gospel message of radical respect and love for *all* people? This is a challenge to the church. Maybe gay and lesbian people can help!

In the column of 15 September 2003, Yolanda relates her experience with a congregation who invited her to speak on homosexuality (Dreyer 2003:8). Her first reaction was: no, I do not talk *about* or *for* people. Let them speak for themselves. I can facilitate a discussion afterwards. They then invited Pieter Cilliers (2012), well-known gay TV producer and theologian. He told his story, reading excerpts from his autobiography, *'n Kas is vir klere* (Cilliers 1997). When time came for the discussion, she writes, I was worried that we would get caught up in an endless back-and-forth on Bible texts, or the usual homosexuality as 'sin', 'aberration' or 'illness'. The first question was indeed about the Bible. What can we do? The Bible is against it. Two theologians who were present explained that what we know about sexuality today and the 'homosexuality' to which the Bible refers, are not the same thing. Contemporary translations using contemporary language to describe ancient practices do not do justice to the difference.

Homosexuality as 'illness' was not even mentioned. Pieter's horrific description of the aversion therapy that was intended to 'cure' him, was still fresh in their memories. When homosexuality as 'abnormality' was mentioned, a woman in a wheelchair spoke up. She is considered 'abnormal' because she cannot walk, she said. However, she and other physically impaired people want to be accepted as human beings and treated with dignity. After that, the personal stories came: 'I am gay and a Christian', they would start and then tell their story. One told of his experience with his parents: 'We do not understand it but you are our child and we love you'. Another told his story of utter rejection by his parents. They were uncomfortable in the church, they said. They had found a spiritual home in a gay church. The reaction of the church members was quite remarkable:

Let us stop quarrelling about Bible texts and just *love people*. That is what we as followers of Christ were supposed to do. The faith community should be a spiritual home for *all people*. All should feel welcome here. (Dreyer 2003:8)

A willingness to listen and to suspect

A column in the Cape Town daily newspaper, *Die Burger* on 28 February 2007 is titled 'Turning the other cheek' (Dreyer 2007b:17). This well-known injunction of Jesus sounds like Christians having to be a doormat and letting others get away with whatever they choose to do. That does not sit well with us. Normal human reaction would be to want to stop evil or repay the evil-doer in kind. However, retribution means joining evil in its destructive ways. Aggression breeds aggression. Jesus' comment: 'You have heard that it was said, eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not do this'. Rather turn the other cheek, which does not mean being a doormat. If a right-handed person slaps another on the left cheek they would have to use the back of the hand. In Jesus' culture that was a sign of contempt. An equal would be slapped with the palm of the hand. If the one who had been slapped disdainfully with the back of the hand, should turn the other cheek, in effect they would be turning the tables on the perpetrator. This action would force the other to acknowledge the 'victim' as an equal. In an honour and shame culture, that was quite something. Through this non-violent action, evil would be stopped and the evil-doer exposed – much to his shame.

Christian believers, as all individuals, are victimised from time to time in their daily lives. Countries are victimised by terrorists, criminals and warmongers. People become victims of systemic injustice, of bosses who play power games, of individuals who feel that they have been wronged and retaliate. What if Christians should follow Jesus' advice and turn the other cheek? This would mean to search for a creative and non-violent way of turning the tables on the powers and exposing the evil. Rather than contributing to an escalation of violence, this can turn a volatile situation around.

Public theology in the movies

Yolanda's public theology often comes from her experience of films. The column of 28 January 2008 begins with the question: can our own experience be switched off in order for us to become 'truly objective'? (Dreyer 2008c:10). The film, *The Jane Austen Book Club*⁴ is about six people who read and discuss Austen's work. In their comments about the books, they reveal much about their own lives. For the woman whose husband left her for another, fidelity is an important virtue in the characters. She interprets the book from the vantage point of her own pain. That is also how people interpret the Bible. They relate what they read to their own experience and interpret from the vantage point of their own convictions. When Christian's various interpretations clash, the result is a big mess. Christianity is a big mess. Christians persecute one another for their convictions and beliefs. Churches are torn apart. Quarrels ensue about 'matters of faith'. People are damaged and rejected in the name of the Bible. All this is caused by believers who think they can interpret the Bible 'objectively' and that their perspective equals 'the truth'.

4. Based on the novel by Karen Joy Fowler (2004).

Albert Schweitzer, the famous medical doctor, psychiatrist and theologian who chose to work in Lambarene, Africa, explains it with the image: 'Those who look into a well, see the reflection of themselves'. In Schweitzer's day, psychological studies about Jesus were in vogue. Quite a few mental health problems were attributed to Jesus. Schweitzer pointed out that the conditions with which those psychiatrists and psychologists diagnosed Jesus were the disorders in which they themselves specialised. What is important to you is what you see in the other. Whether interpreting the Bible or voicing an opinion, one says more about oneself than about the other. Looking into the well, you will see yourself.

The solution to the big mess of Christianity, for Schweitzer, was to acknowledge the great distance between themselves and the Bible – a historical awareness. This would lead to humility rather than people claiming their own insights to be 'the universal truth' about God and forcing it onto others. Today the solution is sought in a spiritual life: to become aware of our connection with others and that *Christ* is the source of the love which binds all together in perfect unity (Col 3). From such a spiritual perspective, the Bible will not be used to deprive others of their human dignity.

The column of 29 Mei 2006 is titled 'Da Vinci Code (Brown 2003; Dreyer 2006d:14)⁵ and the sacred feminine'. The author of this gripping 'whodunnit' is male. It is well researched, a fascinating mixture of fact and fiction, history and imagination, religion and sex. Religion has always had the tendency to want to control human sexuality. People have conformed, rebelled (as in the 1960s) and throughout felt a deep-seated grudge against the power of religion and the church. The history of the church and power is not pretty. The *Da Vinci Code* rattles the skeletons in the cupboard – to the satisfaction of some. For others it threatens what is holy to them. The book pokes where it hurts most: it puts holiness and sexuality together. Did Jesus have offspring? The world sits up and takes note, though this is not the point of the story.

The main character, a professor in religious symbolism, wrote a book about 'the sacred feminine'. In the language of Judeo-Christian religions: God created human beings in God's image, male and female. Wholeness is balance. However, this balance is disrupted when religion becomes male-dominated. The Bible relates heroic male histories. The pope is male. Office bearers, rulers, formulators of dogma and persecutors of heretics (those who do not agree with the dogma) are male. A male character in the book flagellates himself to control his urges. He who perpetrates violence against his own body does not shy away from violence against others. Later he destroys the one he loves most. War and destruction perpetrated against others were done in the name of God – to protect God's honour. Or was it their own honour, power, positions and constructs that these men were protecting?

Where is the female reflection of the image of God? Ignored in the history books or burnt as witches at the stake. What

5. In reference to the book by Dan Brown (2003), titled, *Da Vinci Code*.

happened to the 'sacred feminine' in the church, *Da Vinci Code* asks. And the world reacts. Church members are warned against the book. A first-year student is incredulous that so many people are 'having a nervous breakdown over *Da Vinci Code*', as she put it. Surely, believers should be able to distinguish between fact and fiction. Can they not just be strong in their belief? In the film the main character says to the woman who, according to the story, could be Jesus' progeny: 'Would a daughter of God destroy faith or renew faith?' A good question to all who call themselves 'children of God'. At the end of the book the main character finds the symbol of the 'sacred feminine'. Now he is satisfied: this restores balance and wholeness.

In the column of 16 May 2007, Yolanda writes about the Swedish film *As it is in heaven*. A film about a church choir with a title straight out of a Christian prayer. It is a strange experience. Already in the ticket queue, complete strangers start talking to one another about the film, especially about *the song*. While she sings it, the character is transformed. *The song* is played again at the end when the credits run. Not a single person gets up to leave. At the end they applaud. Never before or since have I heard applause in a movie theatre, Yolanda writes.

The gospel message is sometimes proclaimed more powerfully in the work of artists than in the lives of Christians. In this film, however, it was done by means of the broken lives of Christians. The church choir and their families represent a microcosm. The spectrum of Christians is portrayed. The big-mouth leader who uses his position to humiliate others. The strict moralist who serves the church with dedication, but judges people viciously. The less acceptable beautiful young woman on the margins of the group is the one who reaches out to the mentally impaired youth with love and compassion. The young mother whose husband abuses her. Everybody knows, but they look the other way. The pastor suppresses and distorts his own humanity because that is 'what God expects of him'. His wife offers him liberation, but he is not able to accept it. He nearly destroys himself. The famous conductor for whom life became too much, empowers others through music and finds wholeness for himself. 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', the church prays. The artist shows what the earth looks like. Real people are good and bad. The real church is often powerless and lifeless. But earth does not have the last word. Heaven is also there. Nearly imperceptibly love and compassion sneak in to eventually triumph over human destructiveness. New life is always possible.

The column of 15 February 2010 is about the film *Invictus* (Dreyer 2010:12; *Invictus* 2009)⁶. She never cries in a film, Yolanda says. Deeply touched or intense emotion at times, but cry – never. Until *Invictus* (Latin for 'undefeatable'), the film about Nelson Mandela and the beginnings of the 'new South Africa'. After having seen the film a second time and crying in the exact same places again, I realised: it is when

⁶Based on the book of John Carlin (2009), titled, *Playing the enemy: Nelson Mandela and the game that made a nation*.

black and white South Africans overcome their deep-seated suspicion of one another and there is a moment of shared humanity. That is when I cry. When white security guards from the old regime and the new black security guards who do not want to work with them, gradually come to understanding one another better. When black government officials who want nothing to do with rugby, the Springboks and the 'green and gold', the symbols of oppression, gradually are drawn into the excitement of the World Cup. The white policeman listening to the game on the radio outside the stadium who chases away the black child. But the child persists, slowly creeps nearer to also listen to what is happening. When the Springboks win, the two of them rejoice together. All distance erased. The domestic worker of the captain's family who does the ironing in the corner of the room, listening to what the white people have to say about the new president. When the son, who is also the captain of the rugby team, announces that he is going to meet the president, she steps forward to have her say. She becomes visible and finds her voice. The captain brings home signatures of the president for his family and for her. She takes her place with them in the stadium on the day of the big game. They all rejoice together when South Africa wins the World Cup.

Inconclusion

In her public theological discourse, Yolanda Dreyer comes to an 'inconclusion' – the matter is not settled. Not by a long shot. Referring to Nelson Mandela, she says: *Invictus*, undefeatable this country can be if we win together, rejoice together, work together, are human together, believe in God together. She quotes a female student: 'Let us live today in a way that we will not regret in the future'. If today we love the other as ourselves, if today we do unto others as we would have done unto us, if today we do not take revenge, but leave it to God, if today we bless those who persecute us, if today we live according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can be *invictus* today, tomorrow and in the future. This is the choice of every South African. It is a choice we make every day. As William Ernest Henley's (1849–1903) poem, *Invictus* (first and last verses) puts it (Henley 2017 cf. Schwehn & Bass 2006:434):

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Acknowledgements

This article honours Professor Yolanda Dreyer as a public theologian and is based on selected items of her contributions in the column 'Religion in actuality' (*Godsdiens aktueel*), published in the daily newspaper *Beeld* during the period 2000–2017. In this regard, she has encouraged me to find my own voice in the academy.

Competing interests

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Appendix 1: Curriculum Vitae Yolanda Dreyer

Personal information

Yolanda Dreyer, born 01 December 1956, is currently professor of Practical Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa. She enrolled for theological study in 1975 and was ordained in the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika) in 1981. In 2000 she was appointed as associate professor at the Faculty of Theology (UP) and became the first female lecturer of the Faculty.

Formal Education

- University of Pretoria
 - Baccalareus Artium*: Greek, Semitic Languages, Philosophy, Biblical Studies, German, Latin (1978)
 - Baccalareus Divinitatis*: Theology (1981)
 - Doctor Divinitatis*: Practical Theology, 'Pastoral Care and Counselling with Women' (1998)
 - Philosophiae Doctor*: New Testament, 'Institutionalization of Authority and Titles used for Jesus' (2000)
- Princeton Theological Seminary
 - Theologiae Magister*: Practical Theology (1990)

Lecturer and Professor

- 2000–2002: Associate Professor in Practical Theology, University of Pretoria
- 2003–present: Professor, Practical Theology
- 2010–2015: Head of Department, Practical Theology University of Pretoria

Minister of Religion

- Minister of the Netherdutch Reformed Church: Full-time Pastor (1981–2000); Part-time Pastor, Maranatha Dutch Congregation, Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (2000–present)
- Secundus member of the Executive of the Netherdutch Reformed Church (2007–2016)
- Committee-member of the Well-being Programme for Ministers, Netherdutch Reformed Church (2010–present)

International Scholarly Societies

Membership

- International Academy of Practical Theology (Member of the Executive 2007–2009)
- American Academy of Religion
- Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)
- International *Societas Homiletica* (2001–2002)

Guest professor, guest lectures and study visits

- Tantur Institute, Jerusalem (2000)
- Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (the Netherlands) (2001)

- Uppsala University, Sweden (2002)
- Stony Point Centre, NY, USA (2003)
- Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany (2007; 2008)
- Robert Berkey Inaugural Lecture Otterbein College, Ohio, USA (2011)
- Keynote address: International Academy of Practical Theology, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2011)
- Katolieke University Leuven, Belgium (2014)
- Stony Point Centre, NY, USA (2016)

National Scholarly Societies

Membership

- Society of Practical Theology in South Africa
 - Vice-Chair 2012–2013
 - Chair 2014–2016

Keynote addresses

- Keynote address: Society of Practical Theology in South Africa (2014)

Membership of Editorial Boards

- Co-Editor: *Practical Theology in South Africa* (2006–2009)
- Associate Editor: *HTS Theological Studies since* (2008–present)
- Member of the editorial board (International): *Journal of Youth and Theology* (2014–present)

Research and Publications

Collaboration

- Research group: 'New Directions in Practical Theology', Princeton Theological Seminary, USA (2013–present)
- Global Network of Theologians: Theological research for the World Communion of Reformed Church, Sola Scriptura Group (Mangalore, India 2012, Rüdlingen, Switzerland, 2013, Hannover, Germany 2014, Publication completed in 2016)
- Collaboration with Research associates: Project titled 'Theory formation and philosophical epistemology in practical theology' (Associates: B. Miller-McLemore, Vanderbilt, USA; M. Rothgangel, Vienna, Austria, F. Schweitzer, Tübingen, Germany, W. Boezak, UWC emeritus)
- Collaboration with Research Associates: Project titled, 'Gender, power, sexuality and pastoral engagement' (AxxoA Dillen, KU Leuven, Belgium, R Bons-Storm, Groningen, the Netherlands)

Monographs

- 2012, *Institutionalization and the names of Jesus*, Eugene, OR, Wipf & Stock.

Chapters in books

- 2002, 'Rouwklacht en dans: Internarrativiteit in de pastorale zorg', in Lanser-Van der Velde et al. (reds.), *Festschrift voor Gerben Heitink*, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit.

Articles in peer-reviewed journals

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Academic and Institutional Participation and Leadership

- Member: Senate, University of Pretoria (November 2010 to February 2015)
- Member: Senior Appointments Committee, University of Pretoria (2015–present)
- Member: Faculty Appointments Committee, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (2010–2015)
- Member: Research Committee of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (2009–present)
- Member: Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (2016–present)
- Coordinator of Marketing: Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (2010–2014)
- Member: Faculty Audit panel, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch (2013)
- Member: Research Audit panel, Faculty of Theology, North-West University (2013)
- HERS Academy Leadership Course for Female Academics (2012)
- HERS Academy Conflict Resolution Course (2013)
- Member: Steering committee hosting the International Academy of Practical Theology for their biannual conference in Pretoria (2015)
- Co-editor: Ubuntu publication of the International Academy of Practical Theology (2017)
- Member: Steering committee hosting the Third Joint Conference of Theological Societies, Pretoria (2016)

Ecumenical participation and engagement

- Member of the Jan Smuts Axis Group of Churches, Parktown, Johannesburg (1994–present)
- Member of the Global Network of Theologians of the World Communion of Reformed Churches: Theological advisory committee of the WCRC, responsible for theological research (2012–present); Consultations: India 2012, Switzerland 2013, Germany 2014

Community Engagement and Public Speaker

- Training workshop for the LGBTI Refugee Programme of the Church World Service Africa (2015)
- Member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Pretoria Chapter (2014–present)
- Referee for the Andrew Murray Prize for theological literature, Dutch Reformed Church (2015)
- Speaker: Morality Conference, Rant-en-Dal, Krugersdorp (2010)
- Speaker: Woordfees, Stellenbosch (2011)
- Speaker: Lentekonferensie, Dutch Reformed Church (2013)
- 'Kleingemeente konferensie' Workshop for Dutch Reformed Ministers of the Southern Free State (2015)
- Speaker: Opening of the Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State (2015)
- Participating author in the column 'Godsdiens-aktueel' in *Beeld* daily newspaper (2000–present)