

Radical inclusivity and the journey on the way to somewhere [irgendwohin unterwegs]



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Research Project Registration:

Project Leader: A.G. van Aarde 

Project Number: 2334682

Description:

This research is part of the research project, 'Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics', directed by Prof. Andries van Aarde, Post Retirement Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Dean's Office, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:

Received: 04 July 2023

Accepted: 08 Aug. 2023

Published: 03 Oct. 2023

Read online:



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This article represents the genre of auto-ethnographic, autobiographical research. It consists of questions which evoke narrative responses because the questions register a life story in itself. Pieter G.R. de Villiers is the interpellator and Andries G. van Aarde the respondent. They are long-standing friends and both professors of New Testament studies. De Villiers is presently the editor at LitNet Academic (Religious Studies), and Van Aarde is the editor of *HTS Theological Studies*. Since 1990, De Villiers has been Executive Director of the Centre for Christian Spirituality and Ethics and has been a Research Fellow and Professor Extraordinarius in Biblical Spirituality at the Department of Old and New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State (since 2001).

Contribution: The article reflects a conversation between Andries G. van Aarde and Pieter G.R. de Villiers. It contributes to an understanding of contemporary South African church history, including the protest by academics in Afrikaans ecclesial circles against apartheid and gender injustice.

Keywords: spirituality; view of scripture; canon *behind* canon; historical Jesus; politics; tolerance; racism and gender injustice; contextual theology.

Prelude

In October 2007, Johan Buitendag honoured the primary author of this article, Andries van Aarde with a present giving him the book of George Bizos (2007), *Odyssey to Freedom: A Memoir* by the world-renowned human rights advocate, friend and lawyer to Nelson Mandela. Inside the book, Buitendag wrote in his handwriting the following inscription (my translation and paraphrase from Afrikaans):

To Andries van Aarde – one will not find conventional theology in this book. But yes, being human in its fullest essence as God intended – free and with dignity – is to be found on each page. I want to believe that you and I share something common with George Bizos: his convictions, struggle and – who will know – eventually success! Thank you for what you meant to me the last three years of being moderator [*of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa*!] Words and gestures cannot do right to this meaningful relationship. You were (and are) to me a colleague, a friend, a mentor, a brother, an ideal ... Thank you so much! Johan Buitendag, NHK, Pretoria.

During these 3 years of Moderateship, under the leadership of Professor Johan Buitendag, the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa crossed the Rubicon and opened the gates for sexual minorities, people of colour, ecumenical relationships and kind-hearted ecclesial leadership (see Van Eck 2017). Today celebrating Johan Buitendag's 70th birthday, we also celebrate what has been achieved in terms of people's essence of life and dignity within the context of church and society, gender justice, health and human development. This article, consisting of answers to questions, serves as my (Van Aarde's) reply and gratitude to what Johan Buitendag gifted me.

The question posed by Pieter G.R. de Villiers¹ to Andries van Aarde occurs directly before his narrative response. These 'answers' are directed by a chapter heading.

1. Pieter G.R. de Villiers, editor at LitNet Academic (Religious Studies) in conversation with Andries van Aarde arising from the article 'What does it imply that the Bible is a canon?' - see De Villiers (2021); Venter (2020).

How to cite this article: Van Aarde, A.G. & De Villiers, P.G.R., 2023, 'Radical inclusivity and the journey on the way to somewhere [irgendwohin unterwegs]', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(2), a9207. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i2.9207>

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Note: Special Collection: Johan Buitendag Festschrift, sub-edited by Andries van Aarde (University of Pretoria, South Africa). The editor-in-chief confirms the originality of the research recorded in the article and that it contributed to the production of new knowledge in the field of theology.

Question

You have years of experience as biblical scholar who trained students at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. Many of your students and colleagues have a high regard for your academic work that also at times caught the attention of the general public. You are also the editor of the theological journal *HTS Theological Studies* that you developed into one of the most influential scientific journals in Africa.² An important milestone and highlight of your career is the recent publication of your two books with Cambridge Scholars Publishing with the title *Jesus, Paul and Matthew* (Parts 1 and 2) (Van Aarde 2020a, 2020b). These two books, covering 865 pages, reflect your research about the Bible over many decades. For you, the different books of the Bible share the key motifs of wisdom, justice and compassion. Could you briefly elucidate each motif and interpret how both Matthew and Paul, each in their own way, developed these. Why would it be important to keep these very own views of Jesus' messages in mind? Could you briefly, at the beginning of our conversation, tell us more about the books, and then broadly summarise the content of the two books in an accessible manner for our readers?

Spirituality

The intent was to provide to Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP) in book form an answer how my life's journey influenced my way of seeing God, Jesus and the Bible. The Commissioning Editor of CSP, Adam Rummens, had the transition from a pre-critical, more fundamentalist view of seeing to a more scientific and critical theology in mind. Fundamentalism was, however, never part of my life. I remember, how, when I was youth leader of the church in the year I matriculated and as first-year theological student, I tried to explain to my friends at the youth association at the church, Karl Barth's scriptural view. This insight was the outcome of articles I had read in *Die Hervormer* (The Reformer), the newspaper of the Reformed Church (Van Aarde 2004). Karl Barth's view was that the Bible cannot be simply equated with the 'Word of God' (see Pelser & Van Aarde 2007). My first formal Bachelor of Divinity thesis during my theological years of study dealt with the theme which of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount could be traced to Jesus and which could probably not (see Van Aarde [1974] 1978). This type of critical interpretation was part of my equipment. My spiritual life's journey did not gain momentum by virtue of a 'conversion', in the sense that there was not, in a typical 'evangelical' way, a specific day on which I accepted Jesus as my saviour, which determined my course in theology and the church substantially. It was rather my constant critical view of theology and of Scripture that had an essential effect on my life and the church.

2. HTS is accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Web of Science, Scopus, Directory of Open Access Journals, SciELO SA and Norwegian Scientific Register level 1. See Joleta van Wyk, 2021, 'HTS Theological Studies: Indexing Report', AOSIS (Pty) Ltd, 2021, viewed 27 September 2021 from https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/pages/view/journal-information#part_5.

As far as the two CPS books are concerned, I have decided to adapt and update about 60 relevant publications from my scientific oeuvre. This selection was published in two comprehensive volumes of more than 400 pages each: *Jesus, Paul and Matthew*, Volume 1: *Discontinuity in Content, Continuity in Substance* and *Jesus, Paul and Matthew*, and Volume 2: *To and From Jerusalem*. The first volume consists, broadly speaking, of five parts: my hermeneutic lens, my construction of the historical Jesus, my understanding of Paul and my interpretation of Matthew. In the final chapter of the first volume, as a *résumé* (Van Aarde 2020a:370-371), I end with a commentary on the wordplay by Yuval Noah Harari (2015) on the irony of the *Pax Atomica* of the present-day 'American Empire', the *Pax Augusta* of the *Roman Empire* and the *Pax Americana/Pax Atomica*. In an implicit way, Harari refers to the atomic bombs of the Americans who destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The implicature is clear: the revenge on the attack on the United States naval-base Pearl Harbour by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service on 07 December 1941 (see Nelson 2017:335). According to Craig Nelson (2017:430), 'the America we live in today was born, not on 04 July 1776, but on 07 December 1941'. This history-changing event – attack and revenge – led to the inauguration of the 'Pax Atomica'. Harari (2015) inserts into his book the striking section headings 'Imperial Retirement' and 'Pax Atomica' (resp. pp. 368 and 370). Theologically seen, according to me, over against the concept 'history-changing event', participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth presupposes the 'end of history' and the birth of the qualitatively renewed human being living existentially the life which the ethos of Jesus entails. Continuity between Jesus and Jesus-followers – then and now – is 'in mimetics rather than in mnemonics, in imitating life rather than in remembering words' (Crossan 2009a, 2009b:238). I, therefore, end my first volume *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume 1: Discontinuity in Content, Continuity in Substance* with the following words which implicate the 'end of history' by participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth:

Only then the 'Empire retires' and dies, and the 'Pax Atomica' becomes redundant.

Only then Evil stalls (Jesus) and Peace comes to realisation now – the Pax that transcends all realities amidst everydayness (Paul) – and God is With-Us (Matthew) now and always.

As we die we come alive to God (Jesus, Paul, and Matthew).

Jesus and Paul, or Matthew.

Clearly, discontinuity in content, continuity in substance (Van Aarde 2020a:375).

In the second volume *Jesus, Paul and Matthew, Volume 2: To and From Jerusalem*, I present specific perspectives that consist of sketches that form parallels between Jesus the Galilean and the fatherless mythical Perseus, the son of Zeus according to the Greek author Ovid; between the apostle Paul and the Latin author Seneca about God's adoption of children whose biological origin did not play a role; between the rabbi Matthew and the Stoic Plutarch about compassion for the

poor, who do not know where they will sleep and rest at night. The second volume ends with Chapter 5 which focuses on the relevancy of my emphasis that the community of Jesus-followers is not controlled by biological concerns. As a sort of 'in-conclusion', I follow the golden thread from Jesus to Paul to Matthew and from there to the community of Jesus-followers. The essence is the theological motif 'theosis' that refers to a specific spirituality: the profound consciousness of Jesus and Jesus-followers that God is present within the fragile and transitory human existence. When I was 8 years old, I became aware of this in a childlike manner, and now in my 70s, I am still deeply aware of this. My life story forms in an auto-ethnographical, biographical methodological way in the last chapter of the second volume.

I describe my life story in terms of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, as the German theologian Michael Wolter (2008:514) proposes. Jesus is not on his way, as a GPS might indicate. Jesus' journey criss-crossed hither and thither to and from all the corners in Galilee and ends at Calvary. In German, *irgendwohin unterwegs* denotes on the road to somewhere. That is how the Spirit of God works. The wind blows, where the wind wants to blow. The sub-title of the second volume 'To and from Jerusalem' became in autobiographical notes 'The road from Pretoria to Emmaus passing by Jerusalem'. I called it a 'journey on a surpassing road'. Emmaus represents the community³ of a woman and a man together with the risen Jesus who is, at the same time the crucified Jesus.⁴ On the cover of Volume 1 is the painting of the Crucifixion by the Spanish artist El Greco that depicts ecstasy amid suffering.⁵ The cover of Volume 2 depicts the supper at Emmaus of the three travellers from Jerusalem by the Spanish artist Maximino Cerezo Barredo.⁶ The unknown woman is on Jesus' right hand, and the man, Cleopas, on his left. In addition to the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back, with the expression of the 'surpassing road', I also had in mind Paul's three pillars of spirituality in 1 Corinthians 13: Faith, Hope and Love. I exchange that for the pillars:

3. Crossan (1991:xiii, 2002:254) refers to the Emmaus story in Luke 24:13–35 as one of the most condensed parabolic descriptions of the life of the early Jesus-followers in the period after the crucifixion of Jesus: '[T]he symbolism is obvious as is the metaphorical condensation of the first years of Christian thought and practice into one parabolic afternoon. Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens.'

4. Many biblical scholars share the conviction of gender inclusivity in Luke's narrative of the journey to Emmaus. *Female* and the male Cleopas are the two travellers with Jesus – see inter alia Peter Richardson (1986:232–261); N.T. Wright (2004:291–298); Michal Beth Dinkler (2017:687–707).

5. El Greco's art work '*Cristo abrazado a la Cruz*' (Christ carrying the cross), painted circa 1600–1608, is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In his book *The triumph of the cross: The passion of Christ in theology and the arts from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation*, Richard Viladesau describes El Greco's fascination with Jesus' 'ecstasy in suffering', as portrayed in the '*Cristo abrazado a la Cruz*', as follows: 'The ecstatic look on Christ's face, even in his suffering, illustrates ... that the "upper part" of his body enjoyed the beatific vision, even while his body and the "lower" parts of soul suffered more than any other human ...' (Viladesau 2008:251).

6. I would like to express my appreciation of the generous permission by Maximino Cerezo Barredo, Salamanca (Spain), a renowned 'painter of the liberation', for granting me the use of his painting 'Cena en Emaus (At the Emmaus Supper) Maranga, Lima Perú 1997' as cover text. See email correspondence by Maximino Cerezo (minocerezo@gmail.com), date: Mon., 12 Aug 2019 at 22:31, Subject: Cena en Emaus: 'Gladly grant you permission to reproduce my painting *At the Emmaus Supper*, without copyright. I would be grateful if you send me a copy of your publication to my postal address [Salamanca, Spain]. I attached file with good size and good resolution. Sincerely, M. Cerezo Barredo). To me, his religious art work with its constant theme of the poor and the marginalised people in Latin America is inspiring. In a 2012 interview, Cerezo Barredo said that his painting 'Supper at Emmaus' (see cover text) wants to convey God's embodiment in humanness, especially that of Jesus. God is 'not a distant, absent God' (in Jones 2017:4–5 of 10).

Wisdom Justice and Compassion. The publication of these two most recent publications forms part of the superlative amazingly evocative journey.

Both volumes reflect the diversity and multiformity of early Christianity. I show the parts Gnosticism and Ebionitism played. The first group presents a dissenting and opposing disposition against 'bio-politics' which denote a religiosity in which human being's spiritual unison with God is being realised in earthiness and worldly mindedness – that God through and by Jesus of Nazareth became a human as other humans. Gnostics aspire rather to an escape from the world. The Ebionites on the other hand believed that authentic religiousness can only be meaningful within the biological family ties of worldlings.

Both of these religious convictions disappeared early in church history, yet elements thereof emerged later unexpectedly. Current tendencies of inter-religiosity cultivate 'gnostic' affinities. The rise of the nation state in the 18th to the 19th centuries and the present *Zeitgeist* populism contribute to the fact that nationalism, racism and violence against minorities revive in 'bio-politics'.

The evolution of the consciousness of divineness began thousands years ago with the so-called cultural Big Bang. I refer to it as the 'second Big Bang'. *Homo sapiens* established itself in Euro-Asia, Australia, Siberia, Japan and the Americas. In 2017, traces were found at *homo naledi* in the cemetery in the Dinaledi and Seledi cave systems, south-west of Swartkrans in the vicinity of the 'Cradle of Humankind' in South Africa (see Berger et al. 2017). With the 'second Big Bang', the development of the human consciousness, rational intelligence and creative, artistic and religious symbolism began 'between 250 000 and 70 000 years ago' (Van Huyssteen 2006:224). This happened by means of entopic (from the Greek ἐντός 'inside' and ὀπτικός 'visual') imagination and lingualism (see Van Huyssteen 2006:245). The first Big Bang happened 13.8 billion years ago. Palaeontology, the study of pre-historic and humanoid species, places the spirituality with which I find favour in full relief, as well as my theological view on the relevance of time and space and subsequently my *Entmythologisierung* of biblical apocalyptic and eschatological concepts and myths.

My cognition of the divine is based on the New Testament. This is a spirituality that can only with difficulty be described in rational terms by language. It is a kind of hope for infinity that cannot be fulfilled. This continuous longing helps to make sense of a life that is trapped temporality and spatiality; a life where joy and happiness is dulled by hurt and each trauma is a dark patch of the unavoidable death that life finally terminates in, without a hereafter. Does my view on the non-existence of a life hereafter come down to 'naturalism', as it is the case for example, Friedrich Nietzsche (1956:213)? I must admit, yes. But it is not anti-metaphysics (cf. Hilary Komblith 1994:39–52). As the 'naturalist' Jerome Stone (2008:228) says: 'most religious naturalists live richly

and fully without hope of immortality'. To die, metaphorically seen or cultishly ritualised, can connote existentially living. The continuous reminder of the death and life of Jesus of Nazareth – for example by means of a ritual participation in the Eucharist and during the liturgical service of Mass or by means of spiritual private devotion and mystical awareness of the Transcendence, or to decisively do ethically the right thing (in German: *Entscheidung* as 'de-tachment') for the Other without one's ego being an obstacle – makes that the crucified Jesus is for me at the same time also the risen, living Lord, as depicted in El Greco's ecstasy amidst suffering.

The sequence 'death' followed by 'life' is intentional. To die, to live. Jesus said that the human being who is willing to die for the sake of the gospel, shall live. In my endeavour to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, I am constantly aware of God's presence in my life, in other people's lives as well as in nature. It is a deep and profound feeling of dependence. It encourages me to make certain moral choices and to live hopefully. To love in a reality that is frequently characterised by more sadness than joy. To follow Jesus is the cause that I notice my own immorality and that I am ashamed about it. For me Jesus is the archetype – 'Urbild' – and role model for my life.

Of all the spiritualities which I know, that of Jesus in the New Testament – continued into the orthodoxy of the early church and ecumenical confessions – most speak to me. I refer to this tendency as the 'New Testament Christianity'. This shows a large variety. First-century registers of memories and verbal traditions find written expression in New Testament Christianity; in other words, 'performative oral sensibility within the [written Gospels]' (Crossan 2009a, 2009b:236). The writings developed in an evolutionary manner from each other, in each other and separate from each other. Some of those writings became part of the New Testament as canon and others part of various canon other lists. Amid all of this, the core stayed the same: God's wisdom, justice and compassion.

In my books published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, I refer to the fact that already early in the history of theology, the Hollander Willem van Manen (1842-1905) and his followers denied the existence of a historical figure such as Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Robert Price 2009:55–83). Paul, according to them, was the 'founder' of the Christian Church. Together with theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Bultmann, I accept that God's wisdom is based on a *historical factualness*. Jesus of Nazareth was truly a historical figure – in Schleiermacher's wording, a *Grundtatsache*.⁷ He

7. Kevin Vander Schel (2013:95) describes Schleiermacher's (CG 2 [1830] 1831; in KGA [1960/2003] 1.13.1; 93) view that the particularity of the piety (religiosity) of Jesus-followers, which distinguishes itself from other ways of faith, is that the spirituality of a Jesus-follower ('God-consciousness') relies on 'redemption accomplished through (the historical) Jesus of Nazareth (Schleiermacher [1830–1831] [1960] 2003); he formulates this *Grundtatsache* as follows: 'That Christianity traces its communal life back to Christ is a fact Schleiermacher regards as beyond dispute. The appearance of the Redeemer in history forms the "basic fact" (*Grundtatsache*) distinguishing Christianity throughout. Distinctively Christian piety could simply not be possible 'outside of all historical connection with the impulse proceeding from Christ' (*mit dem von Christo ausgegangen Impuls* – Schleiermacher, F.D.E., [1830–1831] [1960] 2003, §10.1, KGA 1.13.1:81) (see Van Aarde 2019:4 of 7).

was crucified on account of his subversive preaching and kingdom ethics. Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, among others, bid farewell to Christendom because of sharp differences in the New Testament, especially between the 'innocent' Jesus and the 'guilty' Paul, that, according to them undermined the credibility of Christians' spirituality.⁸ Matthew again stood squarely at the opposite of Paul's 'law-free' preaching and he demands obedience to Israel's laws, even to the last jot or tittle.

In my CPB books, I argue against these sharp oppositions between Jesus and Paul, and between Paul and Matthew, but for a 'continuity in substance' although admitting a discontinuity in content. Jesus was not the founder of the 'church'. He rather embodied the values of God's kingdom. The concept 'kingdom' was also not thought out by Jesus. It was the legacy of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (see Van Aarde 2020a:14–17). He was a handicapped slave from emperor Nero's household (Oaks [1993] 2009:39–56). Epictetus took over the idea from his mentor Musonius Rufus, known as the 'Roman Socrates'. The concept 'kingdom of God' was an alternative for Aristotle's city state (*polis*) ideology which is based on hierarchy, arrogance and the oppression of the poor in society (see Hands 1968:70–72).

The ethics of the kingdom of God do not exclude children, slaves, women, impoverished and humble people, but create room for them. Jesus' ethos embodies this ethos. It is known as 'God's justice' with Matthew and Paul. Matthew refers to Jesus as 'wisdom' (Mt 11:19) and his compassion as 'works of justice' (Mt 5:20). Paul (1 Cor 1:23) says that God's wisdom is 'folly' for the world. It is the calling of the church to live the ethos of Jesus to the full. The church forms a family in the metaphorical sense (cf. Hellerman 2001:59–91). In God's housekeeping, bio-politics are unimportant. Everyone, irrespective of the person, regardless of origin, gender or age, has direct access to God.

Pauline research before and after the 16th-century Reformation regarded the 'righteousness of God' as the essence of Paul's thinking. In my opinion, Martin Luther's emphasis on righteousness was actually an *ethical* conviction. Paul should be understood as follows: that a person who is justified, *lives* by reason of God's justice (Van Aarde 2020a:260–272). The realisation of this, God's wisdom, brought Jesus directly up against the conventional teachings of the Jerusalem Temple authorities and the Roman Imperial powers (based on the hierarchical city state ideology). In return for this, Jesus was brutally crucified. However, his *death* testifies of his *life* on account of God's justice.

8. In my CPB Volume 1, I put it as follows: 'Friedrich Nietzsche ([1918] 2010:54), in his work, *The Anti-Christ*, argues that Christianity represents the "low-mark in the ebbing evolution of the god-type" and in his *Ecce homo: How to become what you are* (Duncan Large's "Introduction", in Nietzsche [1888] 2007:xxiv), Nietzsche describes Christianity as the "most pernicious form of idealism to have devalued life thus far" ... According to Nietzsche, Christianity is a "way of life" rather than a redemptive religion. Paul transforms the gospel into a "dogma of redemption" but Christians' way of life bears no witness to their redemption by God. For Nietzsche, "guilty Paul of the established church" is the opposite of "innocent Jesus of the gospel" (Van Aarde 2020a:6).

Paul's theology is built on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The first relates to a historical factualness. The latter is a theological construct (Van Aarde 2020b:159–165, 169–172). This asks of the human being to let go of the 'old life' and together with Jesus rise again as a 'new creature' and to live as though there does not exist hegemony or hierarchy, for example, with regard to people from different nationality or gender. This radical inclusivity is also based on Stoic philosophy. The essence is found in Matthew's compassionate attitude towards the poor in society, biological minorities and children. This does not mean that Jesus became a non-Jew who became attracted to non-Jews and with his ethos enticed only non-Jews (see Van Aarde 2020b:79–81). Lucien Legrand (2000) puts it as follows:

His [Jesus' disposition] is an attitude of integral freedom. From within the culture that he belongs to and in which he was born, he transcends the cultural as well as the countercultural set patterns. (p. 22)

Similarly, Paul's and Matthew's embeddedness in Hellenistic mores, such as Stoic ethics, does not annul their Jewishness. Therefore, Matthew does not differ with or deviate from Paul's preaching of God's justice. It is those (deutero-Pauline) writers of the New Testament that use Paul's name opportunistically. With their conventional codes – borrowed from heteronormative conventions of the hierarchical society – they pave the way for a 'new normal' that once again demands the obedience of women and slaves towards their so-called 'masters'. An example today is ecclesial male domination not only in Roman-Catholic circles but also in Protestant churches in South Africa with a fundamentalist appeal on the authority of Scripture. It is unbelievable but there are Christian denominations which not only denude lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and asexual (LGBTQA+) from their human dignity and God's all-inclusive love but also refuse women their calling of being ordained ministers of the divine message of Jesus' good news to all people. Gerd Theissen (1995:689–711), Emeritus Professor from the University of Heidelberg (Germany) refers to this inclination as 'love-patriarchalism' [*Liebspatriarchalism*] or 'love-communism' [*Liebesskommunismus*] which pertains to a 'reversal of power relations' (Theissen 1999:98–99). I describe it as 'renewed institutionalising of male domination (patriarchy), disguised as 'love-patriarchalism (which) ignited a new surge of apocalypticism and exclusivism' (Van Aarde 2020a:2). Such an inclination is discordant with the ethos of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus belongs to the group of creators who open new dimensions of human existence, of poets who invent new languages, of prophets and mystics who enter the divine sphere and transcend human perspectives. 'They are undoubtedly people of their own times and are expression of the culture of their land. Yet they go beyond it and become, in the midst of their own generations, the explorers of new horizons of being. So was Jesus' (Legrand 2000:112; Van Aarde 2020b:80).

Today again, a departure from and alienation of the kingdom ethics of the historical Jesus finds a riverbed to grow in and to produce outgrowth. This is seen in nationalisms that reawaken worldwide and exclusivist populism in politics and in the church – hidden behind elitism, male dominance and hegemonic dictatorship. In the two volumes with a wide range of themes, I attempted to bring back the emphasis on God's wisdom, justice and compassion. I find this wisdom in the life of the peasant Jesus, the apostle Paul and the rabbi Matthew. In the last section of my CSP books, the ethno-autographical narrative of my life story closes with my personal journey in the church. Here I tell of the pain and joy, that holding on to this divine wisdom, brings.

Question

At the end of this book, you write that you foster a multi-dimensional approach to the authority and use of the Bible. For you, the Bible is the meditative book of Christian believers, the authoritative book for the Christian faith community, and the book that is investigated and analysed by theologians. These three usages of Scripture overlap each other but are clearly also different from each other. But in all three, these approaches call for questions about the role of the Bible in them. The believer who meditates on the Bible and the faith community that refers to the Bible, runs up against certain parts of the Bible. How, for example, is one to understand the authority of the Bible in its light and dark parts? Over the centuries, churches used Bible verses that authoritatively justified, among other things, slavery (Philemon), how to combat the theory of evolution (Gn 1–2), the exclusion of women from office (1 Cor 14:33–35) and the condemnation of divorce (Mt 5:31–32). Because these views were foreign to many, they not only undermined their way of seeing the authority of the Bible but also questioned the authority of ecclesiastical guidance. In his recent article on LitNet (Academic), Pieter Venter (2020) discussed this well-known description of the Bible as 'canon'. From research about the Bible as canon, it becomes clear that churches around the world differ as to which books should be included in the Bible. Most Protestant churches hold on to 69 books, whereas some churches such as the Roman Catholic Church add the apocrypha (deuterocanonical books). But some books in the Bible are less thought of or rarely interpreted, also among Protestant faith communities. This includes books such as Revelation with its dark language, Esther in which not once the name of God is mentioned and James that would teach the justification of works against which the Reformers protested. And importantly, these days people more and more ask questions about the content of the Bible that questions the authority thereof thoroughly.

Recently, I read about somebody who wrote that she no longer reads to her children from the Old Testament, because the stories contain so much violence, among others how the people of Israel were destroyed. Even I recoiled only last week at a story in Numbers 15:32–36, about the Lord who ordered the people to kill a man because he transgressed the

Sabbath Commandment when he picked up sticks instead of resting on the Sabbath. I am fully aware how utterly violent the book Revelation is in which offenders are being threatened with the most dreadful punishment and hell. And who does not know the infamous Psalm 137:9 with the comment: 'Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones' (translation according to the King James Bible). How do such violent parts influence someone's way of seeing the 'authority' of the Bible? How do church people meditate about the Bible's violent parts, just to mention one of your views about the role of the Bible? How can the Bible be seen as being an authoritative source while it contains so much arbitrary violence? It particularly becomes an acute question because we live in a society that increasingly deconstructs violent authority thinking. And, finally, theologians today are honest enough to not only examine the Bible's good message but also analyse the hard parts thereof to show these and to critically analyse them.

View of Scripture

In the course of my career, I wrote two articles about the authority of the canon, in 2001 in a Festschrift dedicated to Professor Gert Pelser (Van Aarde 2001) and in 2012 in the Festschrift dedicated to Professor Pieter Venter (Van Aarde 2012). In my books published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, I again pay attention to the canon. In Volume 1, I refer to Paul Tillich's book published in 1996, *The Relevance and Irrelevance of the Christian Message*. I agree with his appraisal of the 'prophetic sharpness' of the appeal of the gospel (Van Aarde 2020a:211–212). However, he does not see the Bible as 'stones from heaven that rain down on us'. Biblical pronouncements, that hurt human beings in their struggle for survival, to love and to dream in a world that for them seems to be meaningful, is in my opinion totally irrelevant. In Volume 2, I refer to Paul Tillich's book published in 1987, *The Courage to Be*. Again, my point of view agrees with his (Van Aarde 2020b:335–336). The 'courage of the Protestant' is not to hesitate to differ in one's opinion from the church and its interpretation of the Bible when the church contradicts the love of Jesus.

Does this mean that the 'irrelevant' parts are to be removed out of the Bible? Does this mean that the church as an institution is to be taken leave off and left behind? No. What is required is a hermeneutics of suspicion. At times it is necessary to read against the grain of what is written in the Bible and what is proclaimed from the pulpit, and to deconstruct the 'authority' of the church and that of the Bible with the aid of the relevant parts of the Bible. It is a pity that this deconstruction is more frequently found in public theology than in ecclesiastical theology. The gospel is sometimes more viewed in movies than heard from the pulpit (see Van Aarde 2008:1213–1234).

This confirms my belief that the church does not have the sole right on the gospel. Yet, it is not only the church as institution that is able to nullify the authority of the Bible by

harmful use. The public can also do it. People on the street who with a naïve meditative spirituality uses the Bible as a magic book or as a stick to strike at other people, can do it. We do not believe *in* the Bible. We believe *in God*. For this reason, the church and the public can benefit from a theology that uses the Bible with scientific accountability. It is my plea that a multidimensional view of the Bible, individual spirituality, church-collective spirituality and rational spirituality, characterised by a second naïveté, shall mutually supplement each other.

Question

The authority of the Bible is a difficult matter because it is a book with an ancient history. One of the popular pronouncements by critics about the Bible is that it is a book of stories, fairy tales and legends from pre-modern times and as an old-fashioned book, it cannot have any authority in modern times. During your career, you have experienced important developments in our understanding of the Bible. During the past decades, more and more attention was given to historical and socio-political contexts in the Bible, especially because these determine the understanding of the Bible by human beings. It became evident that one cannot, for no particular reason, explain the Bible, as has been done for a long time. Your work about the historical Jesus is a good example of this approach. It has also become more apparent than ever from this investigation why so many different Bible books, for example, the four Gospels, exist. They each have clearly a different view of who Jesus was, depending on the context in which the books came into existence and who wrote them. In your books, you, for example, show how Matthew and Paul are different from each other, and each in his own way has their own message. As Albert Schweitzer in his overview of the research about Jesus spelled out, on top of which the scene becomes much more complex because subsequent readers of the Bible have so many different views about how Jesus is to be understood when reading the Bible. Historical-critical exegesis has made these differences clearer than ever. How can the 'ordinary' reader of the Bible find meaning in the different pictures of Jesus and the interpretations of the Bible? Is it possible to *see the different interpretations in and about the Bible as being positive?*

Canon behind canon

There are people, also biblical scholars, who see the multiplicity of Jesus-profiles, constructed by historical Jesus-researchers as a 'scientific weakness'. Frequently, these same people can positively appreciate the multicolour variety of the interpretations of the authors of the canonical gospels. I do not understand why one group of people would see the variety as a 'weakness' and the other group typify it as 'wealth'. I am not in favour that the parallel narratives of the gospels are to be harmonised with, or to belittle a particular Jesus-profile constructed by a historical Jesus-researcher. In my CSP books, I provide an overview of some of the different Jesus-profiles. I also point out the different canons in Christianity. I wanted to break through

the mono-cultural perspective and prove that there exist, outside Western Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, other canon preferences and Jesus-profiles (see *inter alia* Boesak 2017:86–116; Felder [1989] 1992:14–16; Hendricks 2007).

I demonstrate in the two-volume books that, although there exists between Jesus, Paul and Matthew a ‘discontinuity in content’, there nevertheless exists a ‘continuity in substance’ between them. This is similar to the variety of Jesus profiles. I show a minimal consensus with a ‘material’ [*sachliche*] continuity between historical Jesus researchers. I refer to it as ‘continuity in substance’. The same applies to the wide range of canons. I join the German New Testament scholar, Willi Marxsen (1976:45–62), who finds a link to Martin Luther. The point of departure is to be Martin Luther’s hermeneutical principle *was Christum treibet* – ‘aspiring to what Jesus’s disposition is’ (see Wilhelm Maurer 1970:148). I explored Luther’s principle in response to the criticism that my construction of the historical Jesus results in an abandonment of the canon as the primary authority for the church. The criticism would be valid when Luther’s view on *was Christum treibet* is seen to be a canon-*within*-the-canon, which was the reading of Alexander Schweitzer ([1863] 1877) and which could boil down to reductionism and relativising the authority of Scripture. This, however, is not what I propose. Instead, I am highlighting that aspect that is *foundational* to the authority of the canon. The authority lies not in the book itself, nor its authorship, but rather in a person, Jesus as the Crucified and Risen One (see affirmation by Dieter Reinstorf [1917] – emeritus bishop of the Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa [FELSISA], who obtained his doctorate under my supervision). To choose certain parts of the Bible is to reduce the canon to ‘a canon *within* the canon’. I prefer the approach of the ‘canon *behind* the canon’ (Van Aarde 2001a).

The existence of a variety of either Jesus profiles or gospel narratives does not invalidate this approach. The Jesus narrative contains the joyful tidings of God’s wisdom, justice and compassion. For me, the Jesus narrative, that is, the ‘matter’ (also referred to as ‘cause’) of Jesus (in the German of Marxsen: *die Sache Jesu*) has divine authority, wherever it occurs (in German: *die Sache Jesu geht weiter*): in the Old Testament, in the New Testament (irrespective material from the historical Jesus or witnesses, legends or myths about the ‘Jesus of faith’ – or the ‘two-in-one’: pre-Easter Jesus *and* post-Easter Jesus), in ecclesiastical confessions of faith, in non-canonical writings, in the fine arts, films, literature and originated in whatever ecclesiastical denomination, religion or spirituality. As long as we will have the courage to distinguish between the ‘irrelevant’ and the ‘relevant’.

Question

You are above all known for your book, *Fatherless in Galilee* (Van Aarde 2001b) that was published in 2001. You then had a special interest in the research of the historical Jesus. This was at the time of the Jesus Seminar that caused

sensation as well as doubt among some people about the trustworthiness of the Bible. Where did your interest originate and could you briefly explain how you perceive the historical Jesus? How did your research about the ‘fatherlessness’ of Jesus determine your faith and your interpretation of the Bible? And lastly, has the way of seeing the historical Jesus further developed since the writing of your book in 2001?

The historical Jesus

During my career as exegete, I applied different methods of interpretation. My interest in structural analysis originated during my master’s study in Aramaic and other Semitic languages. ‘Narrative criticism’ (post-structural narratology) in exegesis resulted from my Doctor of Divinity thesis in New Testament Studies. My interest in ancient cultural history turned into a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree obtained at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria. With the aid of sociological and social-psychological models, I developed a ‘myth theory’ (see Van Aarde 2003:245–265).

My years of interest in ancient Greek culminated in a Doctor of Literature (DLit) degree in which I applied this ‘myth theory’ based on the philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s (1874–1945) ‘tautegorical’ (not ‘allegorical’) interpretation of myth (Cassirer 1979; published posthumously). The outcome was my translation and exegetical commentary on the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the writings on the Thomas tradition (see Van Aarde 2005:491–516; 2020b:200–229). Since the formative years of my biblical scholarship, historical criticism was continuously part of my exegetical approach. From my first year as a lecturer in New Testament Studies in 1979 onwards, I paid attention to the different exegetical methods of historical criticism. As a lecturer in Greek, textual criticism, one of the historical-critical methods that studies the evolution of handing down manuscripts, was part of my teaching responsibility. Historical-critical exegesis of the New Testament focuses on the evolutionary formation of strata of tradition as handed down by Jesus-followers. Such a focus will necessarily treat the first stratum that goes back to the historical Jesus and that distinguishes itself from the strata that followed. It was and is not only the Jesus Seminar (in that time, located in Santa Rosa, California) that focuses on Jesus research internationally. The influential scholarly society Studiorum Novum Testamenti Societas (SNTS) as well as the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) have seminar study groups about the historical Jesus. Although I have been actively involved since the 1980s in these and other scholarly societies such as the Catholic Biblical Association of America and the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, my Matthew research specifically was the focus at the SNTS and SBL. In the circles of both the Jesus Seminar and the Context Group over two decades, I learned enormously from high-standing biblical scholars. With the financial aid of the National Research Foundation (NRF), well-known scholars from the ranks of the Jesus Seminar and the Context Group

respectively could visit South Africa: Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Carolyn Osiek, Glenna Jackson, Bruce Malina, John Elliott, Jerome Neyrey, John Pilch and Dennis Duling.

My book, *Fatherless in Galilee*, was published in 2001. Since then, Professor Joseph Ratzinger, also known as Pope Benedictus XVI, paid attention to Jesus studies between 2005 and 2013. I did not resonate with the Ratzinger school because of the uncritical view of the canon by Pope Benedictus XVI (cf. Weren 2011). This, however, does not apply to all other developments in Jesus studies. This includes a heightened focus on the role of 'registers of historical recollections' of oral memory as well as the sociological role of 'transformation agents' in the handing over of the Jesus tradition and the socio-psychological investigations of historical personalities such as Jesus of Nazareth as well as the phenomenon of fatherlessness in the ancient world. All these topics have received attention in Jesus studies (Byrskog 2000; Dunn 2003, 2009). My own focus, namely the dialectic between the historical Jesus and the Jesus-followers that put the Jesus tradition in writing, culminated in the two-volume Cambridge Scholars books. I believe I offset the aforementioned insights from the developments after 2001 in the books.

Question

It is possible to look at the authority of the Bible also from a political angle. It is generally said that the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* [NHKA] by which you are an ordained minister) is theologically progressive, but politically conservative. The clause in the church polity of the NHKA that restricted membership of the Church to whites only, is being used as a telling example. It is, however, fascinating to note that some of the NHKA's most gifted theologians stood out as critics against racism. To mind come people such as Albert Geysler, Jimmie Loader, Ernest van Eck, Johan Buitendag and yourself. Their contentious views were nevertheless contested and at times fiercely attacked and they were even prosecuted. This is of course the question, as to how the Bible can have authority if in a relatively small church, such apparent differences in the understanding of the Bible exist. This is certainly also true about other churches and issues, as is proved by the view of churches about the woman in office and minority groups such as the LGBT communities. What do you think is the role that the Bible as authoritative book played in faith communities regarding these issues? How do you think we ought to think about authority in our anti-authoritarian times?

Politics

For almost 30 years, my thoughts, which resulted in numerous publications, were branded in some circles in South Africa as being contentious. My 'social theology' and understanding of the Bible are for some people too heterodox and for others even heresy. I have, however, always continued to say that I do not deviate from the core of the 'orthodoxy'. The second

last chapter of Volume 2 centres around my view of the orthodox credo with regard to the 'divinity' of Jesus and how it connects to the Bible. My critical theology does have the openness to abundantly draw from the insights of, on the one side non-biblical testimonies, and on the other side from non-Christian religious convictions. I am still convinced that the opposition against me is, in the first place not based on theological grounds, but as in the case of Professor Albert Geysler in the 1960s, politically driven (see Van Aarde, De Villiers & Buitendag 2014; Van Aarde 2017a). I can, as it were, point out the day, date and the occasion at which people from the right wing in the NHKA started with their attack. This had a preamble. In 1993, I returned to South Africa after a year of study at the Roman Catholic St. John's University, Collegeville in Minnesota. At the Collegeville Institute For Ecumenical and Cultural Research, I worked on two books during my sabbatical, both were published in 1994. The one book focused on the motif God-with-us (Emmanuel), which I am of the opinion is the dominant theme in the Gospel of Matthew (Van Aarde 1994a). The other book deals with the 1st-century social and political background of the New Testament (Van Aarde 1994b). During this time, I became intimately involved with two international study groups that are based in the United States. Initially, two areas of focus were established at one institution, the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, California. As a result of conflicting personalities among the leaders, two groups were formed. I remained involved with both groups. The one is the Context Group, that in 2016 celebrated their 30-year reunion in Portland, Oregon. My address at this occasion is the adapted version that is published in Volume 1 of my CSP book.⁹ The other was the Jesus Seminar and we celebrated our 25-year reunion during 13–16 October 2010 in Santa Rosa in the wine district of Sonoma, California. During my participation at the Jesus Seminar, I was also involved with the international scholarly society SNTS in the capacity of being co-leader for the Matthew task group. To that post I was elected by peer scholars. My participation at the Jesus Seminar was one of the reasons why I was accused of heresy in South Africa. Much of these charges relate to my research about the historical Jesus that began in the 1990s.

The debate about postmodernity began in the 1990s in South Africa. My positive appreciation of this innovative thinking was well known. Series of 'question-and-answers articles' were initiated by the editor of *Die Hervormer* (the official magazine of the NHKA). To my extensive answers about the role of faith and theology in the 21st century, the editor as well as several theologians responded, frequently with sharp wording. I wonder now whether it was wise to have gotten so centrally involved in the debate. But what else could I have done? From my experiences during my years at high school when my father clashed with the minister-moderator of the NHKA and eminent member of the nationalist-driven Broederbond, and since the founding of the Reconstituted

⁹The central part of this section in Volume 1 of my CSP book was presented as a paper at the 30th anniversary of the Context Group, Menucha Retreat Center, Portland, Oregon, 17–20 March 2016, and published as Van Aarde 2017b.

National Party (Herstigte Nasionale Party [HNP]), I could not but take a stand against this political ideology, mixed with theological and ecclesiastical motives, that at times were certainly too influential and even powerful. I, however, do not see myself as a 'political activist'. An 'activist for justice', Yes!

It is therefore in the 1990s that my perception that I am a 'liberal theologian' was strengthened.¹⁰ The attack began with a conversation between the church leadership and the lecturers of the Reformed division and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria (UP). The purpose of the discussion was the preparation of a continued theological training course for serving ministers. On this occasion I explained my belief that the historical Jesus taught a radical inclusivity of age, gender and ethnicity. With the Curatorium (a church synod commission that supervises the theological training), I had to defend the reason why I treated liberation theology and feminist criticism in my lectures on hermeneutics. A considerable number of churchgoers were caught up in the agitation of narrow-mindedness that tried to prevent the transition to a democratic South Africa. Enlightened thinking was for them a serious problem. To form a laager was for them the answer. An emotional as well as ideological hijacking of the church took place. It was a revival of the nationalist, anti-ecumenical resistance against theologians who opposed republican nationalism in the sixties. The recollection of the protest of Albert Geyser and Beyers Naudé against apartheid was again strong. In 1987, the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK) broke away from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). In 1995, it led to a so-called 'fork-in-the-road' manifest of the right-wing in the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NHKA) (see Steenkamp 1995). In an extraordinary national ministers' meeting, I had to present and clarify my belief of the concept 'reconciliating diversity' (already formulated in an academic article in 1987 [Van Aarde 1987]), and my belief that the view of the church, being an ethnic church ('volkskerk'), represented an immature theology (formulated in an academic article in 1995 [Van Aarde 1995]).

Based on my construction of the historical Jesus (as still described in the two-volume CSP books of 2020), I refer to exclusivism as a 'politics of holiness'. Jesus' radical 'inclusivity' represents a 'politics of compassion'. I adopt this insight from Marcus Borg ([1984] 1998), described in his book with the title *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*. I elaborate on it by applying the concept 'politics of holiness' to Paul's opposition of his fellow-Israelites adherence to Torah (Rm 10:3-4) – a disposition which represents humankind's 'own righteousness' over against the 'righteousness of God' (τοῦ Θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην, καὶ τὴν ἰδίαν). The latter is available for everyone (εἰς δικαιοσύνην παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι), not only to the 'children of Israel'. Exclusion is the turned 'inwards ideology' to demarcate the

¹⁰ However, see my contribution to the Professor James Alfred Loader Festschrift in which I investigate the legitimacy of a middle position between Reformed orthodoxy and critical theology (Van Aarde 2013).

so-called 'holy' from the 'unholy' – a heteronormative and homophobic bias according to which the 'unholy' refer to the 'other', namely different kinds of people, those who have a different faith, those of a different gender, different sexual orientation, those of a different race and so on. The reader of this dialogue will have to judge how much 'politics' and how much 'theology' are present in such a debate. As for me, the debate led to a painful marginalisation.

The ferocity of the attack against me as person in the context of a 'small church' such as the NHKA can theoretically be explained by a 'sociology of violence'. The smaller the circle, the more violent the attempt to marginalise. In practice, my disposition of 'radical inclusivity' implies criticism about Afrikaner nationalism, male dominance, ecclesiastic institutional lust for power, homophobia towards sexual minorities, the undervaluation of children by means of ecclesiastical sanction, racism and populist self-assertion accompanied by lukewarmness towards ecumenism.

Question

How do you handle differences, especially when people reject and even pursue each other when they have disagreements, when they see differences as a threat, undermining the authority of the Bible, rather than an enrichment? Volume 2 of your recent book ends with an autobiographical part (pp. 316–337). In it you speak about your very disadvantaged background and personal setbacks with a serious chronic illness that still affects you. And nevertheless, you rose above everything and had a successful career. In spite of and, in the midst of this, you were repeatedly accused by some groups in the Reformed Church of heresy and about issues that you believe were driven by a political agenda. What is difficult to explain is, that the attack against you was so ferocious, especially as it came from the members of your church. The ferocity of the resistance is not unique. I think about well-known theologians, such as Beyers Naudé, Albert Geyser and Ferdinand Deist, who all were accused of heresy and who experienced fierce resistance, and this while today they finally are honoured as people who were the conscience of the church. The church has truly had a bad reputation throughout the centuries about its malice and hatred – and that towards people in its own circle. Just think about the terrible heresy persecutions in the Middle Ages. To what do you attribute the intolerance? And in what ways do you think could the church provide a stronger lead in the manner in which people should differ? How do you feel about the matter of maintaining discipline among the ecclesiastical ranks against people with a deviant opinion? In which ways do you think, could the church in a more powerful way provide guidance in the manner in which people ought to differ? How do you feel about matters such as disciplinary actions among ecclesiastical ranks towards people with deviant opinions? In which ways do you think the church could provide stronger guidance in the way people should differ from each other?

Tolerance

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, I wrote academic articles about ecclesiastical unity and diversity (Van Aarde 1987; 1995). Because the church is human, there will always be diversity. The imperative of the gospel is 'conciliating diversity'. Nearly 40 years later, in my books published by Cambridge Scholars, I still express the plea that we should distance ourselves from binary thinking. The issue is not only a question about orthodoxy or heterodoxy. The Greek term for 'heresy' as Paul used it, means to take a 'decision'. Other 'decisions' should not be seen as a threat and be fought by excommunication and expulsion. It is not a matter of 'right' or 'wrong', 'we' as distinct from 'you (plural)'. My choice is for a 'community within communities'. And when somebody chooses a 'politics of holiness' (exclusivism) above a 'politics of compassion', I should, with my choice of what I believe is 'right', be able to so love that the 'other' who disagrees with me, will be invited to also return to the warmth of my home. I hope that this personal ethos will also be the ethos of church leaders and influence the choices of the church. Such tolerance does not mean that lust for power, homophobia, racism and the harm that heteronormativity causes, should not be pointed out with conviction and force – but always, as John Dominic Crossan (2009a, 2009b:126) describes it, in reference to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:48: 'we humans are perfected, finished, fully completed in our humanity, when we are nonviolent in imitation of and participation in the nonviolent God'.

Question

How did your own thinking about racial relationships develop? In the recent past, for example, you played a big role to restore to honour the legacy of the gifted Prof. Albert Geysers. This shows how important it is for you to ever remember the resistance against racism. Geysers was known as one of the consistent critics of apartheid and one of the few Afrikaner church leaders who fearlessly took a firm stand against racism. How did your own thinking about racism and the ideology of apartheid since your youth develop? What transformed your thinking?

Racism

My 'skin colour blindness' in the daily interaction is probably part of my genes. In my parental home, there were never 'servants' or 'people of colour', as was the case in the more affluent middleclass South African households. My father was unskilled and worked together with unskilled colleagues, 'people of colour' at the South African Railways. They were his friends. Of course, I grew up in the 1960s South Africa and during my university student days during the 1970s, I was consciously aware of apartheid. I was also, as child of the times, socialised in the South African context. As I wrote in the autobiographical notes in the last chapter of my Cambridge Scholars books (wording borrowed from the feminist scholars Antoinette Clark and Luise Schottroff): we could not escape our 'collective family – the shame and the

glory are tangled, and this mess of pottage is our precious heritage' (Schottroff [1985] 1999:275–287).

The consequences of my father's conflict with the institutional church and his departure from the church that sided with the apartheid's ideology during the 1960s, have been engraved on my consciousness since my school days. My father's 'anger' against me because I wanted to become a minister led me to 'fatherlessness'. It left a mark. I could not but bring to mind Albert Geysers' protest against apartheid. My mentor, Jimmie Loader, held the first A.S. Geysers memorial lecture (Loader 2014)¹¹. You, Pieter de Villiers, the second (De Villiers 2016). And the current moderator of the Reformed Church, Prof. Wim Dreyer, the third (Dreyer 2017). I am delighted that the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa in a letter through the instrumentality of the previous moderator, Dr André Ungerer and the Executive of the General Synod formally apologised to Prof. Geysers and the fellow-wounded, referred to in the letter of apology as 'dissidents' (Ungerer 2019). I will accept that this was indeed a sincere gesture, if the present church leaders are prepared to submit this as a synodical decision. It will further only have real personal value for me when the leaders of the church will be able to expose the political bias behind the witch-hunt against me, and practice with heart and mouth the choice of divine wisdom, justice and compassion. In a recent article, as a contribution to the Wim Dreyer Festschrift, Dr Ungerer responded and answered me, and also explained what life-changing event this 'apology' has been (see Ungerer 2023).

Question

It always impressed me that you were, as minister, so involved with the church in a congregation until a very late stage in your career, and while you were a Professor of Theology, especially because you did so in a difficult ecclesiastical context. How did you experience this? You clearly have a passion for social justice. Also, tell us about your involvement with your work of upliftment. Why was it necessary and important to you to be involved in a practical manner with the ecclesiastical and larger community?

Contextual theology: Theologian in the congregation and society

In both Cambridge Scholars books, I express my gratitude to the NHKA congregation of Wapadrand in Pretoria for the home that I was given from its inception, amidst and despite constant accusations of heresy against me. I preached there regularly for more than three decades and presented weekly Bible Study classes as well as quarterly Bible schools.

11. In his introductory contribution to the first A.S. Geysers memorial lecture, Johan Buitendag in his capacity as Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, said: 'Like Geysers and Loader, you have also been the victim of misunderstanding, often on purpose. You accomplished what few people would have been able to do in these circumstances, namely to remain loyal to your mother, the church, while in the midst of misunderstanding, even inability to understand. There is no uncertainty in my mind that the continuous and undaunted proclamation of the gospel in the Hervormde Kerk produced only three truly great names from its own ranks: Geysers, Loader and Van Aarde. It is of no small significance that these three names are combined in a triple helix on this occasion as a *sine qua non* of the ethico-theological fibre of the Hervormde Kerk' (Buitendag [2014, p. 9 of 10], in Van Aarde, A.G., De Villiers, Pieter G.R. & Buitendag, J., 2014, 'The forgotten struggle of Albert Geysers against racism and apartheid').

Here I experienced the heartbeat of being religious. With the church government, I was on the red carpet for more than three decades. My experience with co-seekers who also sought the divine presence in life, kept me in the bosom of the church, while I knew that the church as institution is dying. For 15 years, I taught Greek at a Mission Institution in Limpopo (67 km from Pretoria) on Fridays all day to young women and men, mostly from the townships as far as KwaZulu Natal. These young people were eager to become ministers, and in order for them to comply with the university admission requirements, they needed tuition in Greek. Some of them obtained post-graduate qualifications and others became professors. Amid the COVID-19 restrictions, some of these professors who are employed at University of South Africa (Pretoria), visited me at home. We are working on a publication to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Maranatha Church (that originated from the missionary work of the NHKA) (Manala 2023). For 9 years, I was chairman of the executive board of the non-governmental organisation 'To Care for Vulnerable People' that has as its aim the alleviation of poverty. My daughter, Salomie Webb, assisted as project manager. For the past 3 years, I have been actively involved with the focus on the research area: 'GenderJustice, Health and Human Development' at the Durban University of Technology in Durban with Professor Cheryl Potgieter as its director.

My life's programme has been and indeed is full and the ecclesiastical and political context is difficult. Why have I stayed – and still am – involved with this, while the heresy-hunt against me was (and is) so ferocious? Perhaps this is the result of the consciousness of the divine amidst a corrupt world. For me, repentance to God and transformation of the world are the reverse of the same matter. The nucleus of 'New Testament Christianity' forms an ellipsis with two focal points. The one pole is the role the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled. The other pole is the testimony that Jesus is 'one in being' with God in the sense that the divine wisdom penetrated the historical Jesus, as heat penetrates a red-hot piece of iron. The divine is absorbed into the human nature until whatever is human dies. In the life of Jesus, this 'wisdom' found expression in kindness and compassion. Until today, the same wisdom guides Jesus-followers to a life of radical inclusivity. This ethos is based on God's justice, particularly towards marginalised people in the community. Jesus' kingdom ethics testifies to this. Paul's 'new creation' theology and Matthew's 'Immanuel' motif is testimony of this. In Athanasius's 'orthodox' teaching in the early church, it finds expression in the concept 'one in being', within the context of the notion Trinity. Jesus-followers share (or ought to share, if it is not the case) the Jesus' consciousness of God, that is Jesus' spiritual unison (*theosis*) with the godhead.

Acknowledgements

This ethno-autobiographical article is dedicated to Johan Buitendag at the occasion of his 70th birthday on 20 November 2023. The article is a reworking of an interview with professor Pieter G.R. de Villiers, editor at LitNet

Academic (Religious Studies). The interview was motivated by the author's publication of two volumes with Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2020. In 2022, these two books were awarded by the Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize. Professor Buitendag presented the *commendatio* during the Award Ceremony on 27 May 2022 at Wellington, Western Cape. In the *commendatio* references to situations in the careers of both Buitendag and Van Aarde were made which form the central context and location of the autobiography recorded in the interview. The article is dedicated to Johan Buitendag not only because of gratitude for his long-standing friendship and the aforementioned *commendatio*, but also and especially as appreciation for his scholarship and eminent role in the academia. With appreciation to Pieter G.R. de Villiers, Department of Old and New Testament, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Single blind peer review

The identity of the author was known to the reviewers from the outset, and a single blind peer-review process was followed for this article. The editor agreed to the exception to the journal's current policy of a double-blind peer-review process. The editor confirms the originality of the research recorded in the article and that it contributed to the production of new knowledge in the field of theology and gender studies.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

A.G.v.A. conceptualised the study. P.G.R.d.V. contributed to the introductory sections of the study by means of interview questions.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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