

"LET'S GET TOGETHER AND FEEL ALL RIGHT" (BOB MARLEY – "ONE LOVE"): A RESPONSE TO PROF. DG VAN DER MERWE (DD)

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Theologians have a penchant for *joint conferences*. Yet they never seem to mean quite the same thing by it as did Bob Marley...

However, it is altogether easier to link the song "One Love" of Bob Marley¹ to the "Sense of 'Unity'" inaugural lecture of today by Prof. Dirk van der Merwe (2013). Both appeal in their pleas to oneness. Both have a strongly religious dimension to this call to harmony. Both finely observe the human condition, fraught as it is with frailty. Both have an innate sense of the natural togetherness of humankind. Both have a heartfelt sense of idealism, tempered like a precious metal by the fires of life's experiences – not to the point of disillusionment, but to an ever-evolving realism. Neither lets the practice of sheer humanity hinder their commitment to harmony: there is always the call; by repetition the appeal, the refrain: "One love"...

Prof. Van der Merwe's lecture shows again today the value of years of deep specialisation. From his doctorate (Van der Merwe 1995) onwards, through some 50 publications since 1993, in recent years to the rhythm of four to six accredited articles per annum (e.g. locally, Van der Merwe 2011:284-308 and

¹ **One love / People get ready** (Bob Marley & The Wailers, *Exodus*, 1977)

One Love! One Heart!

Let's get together and feel all right.

Hear the children cryin' (One Love!);

Hear the children cryin' (One Heart!),

Sayin': give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right;

Sayin': let's get together and feel all right. Wo wo-wo wo-wo!

Let them all pass all their dirty remarks (One Love!);

There is one question I'd really love to ask (One Heart!):

Is there a place for the hopeless sinner,

Who has hurt all mankind just to save his own beliefs?

One Love! What about the one heart? One Heart!

What about - ? Let's get together and feel all right

As it was in the beginning (One Love!);

So shall it be in the end (One Heart!),

All right!

Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right;

Let's get together and feel all right.

One more thing!

Let's get together to fight this Holy Armagiddyon (One Love!),

So when the Man comes there will be no, no doom (One Song!).

Have pity on those whose chances grows t'inner;

There ain't no hiding place from the Father of Creation.

Sayin': One Love! What about the One Heart? (One Heart!)

What about the - ? Let's get together and feel all right.

I'm pleadin' to mankind! (One Love!);

Oh, Lord! (One Heart) Wo-ooh!

Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right;

Let's get together and feel all right.

Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right;

Let's get together and feel all right.

internationally, Van der Merwe 2009: 231-262), Prof. Van der Merwe has grown to be fully "at home" in the Johannine literature in particular. His refined methodological consistency and the practiced exactitude of his textual analyses have led to confident, nuanced formulations of the theology of the Gospel and Letters attributed to John, and wider – an example of which we could again experience today. Unsurprisingly, then, his research has been cited with approval locally and internationally. Not everybody is aware, also, that Prof. Van der Merwe's talents were almost lost to us when he was headhunted by an institution outside of South Africa, principally because of the attention his research presentations have attracted internationally. We are privileged, colleague Van der Merwe, that it is still us who most directly benefit from your services to the intellectual community.

As we saw tonight, Prof. Van der Merwe has not fallen prey in his scholarship to the modernist fallacy that reason and faith are arenas set apart at all costs. Nor has Prof. Van der Merwe acceded to the post-modern temptations to subsume wholly the reality of religion under the category of language (cf. Lombaard 2013). The Holy has always been for Prof. Van der Merwe a reality, based on authentic experience (the classical works in this regard: James 1902 and Otto 1917 & 1923). Though he would never formulate it in this way or understand himself in these terms, Prof. Van der Merwe could be categorised as well at home in the emerging trends internationally of post-secularism (Nynäs, Lassander & Utriainen 2012), inclusive – as opposed to exclusive – liberalism (most recently Benson 2013:12-29), and neo-essentialism / critical realism (Bhaskar 2002 / Benedikter 2005 – cf. Schreiber 2013 & 2012:1-8). The poor logic of excluding the study of faith from the institution of the university (Lombaard 2013 & 2011a:49-65) has never directly affected Prof. Van der Merwe's writings in a negative way. Indirectly, of course, we have all laboured under this at times implied, at times explicitly stated preconceptions from the 17th and 18th centuries, that religion as a- or anti-intellectual phenomenon ought to be divorced from university-level investigation. However, with these by now old-fashioned modernist assumptions, as with buttons on men's trousers, really, we have moved on to better things. Sociologically, God has not died (cf. e.g. Berger 1999:1-19). Therefore, not to engage foundationally and critically, as can be done only within the university as institution, with this aspect of the human experience would be to do society a grave disservice.

Prof. Van der Merwe has undertaken his intellectual engagement in one way today. Could it have been done differently? Could for instance other, broader aspects from the field of Spirituality have been engaged with? Particularly the most theological Gospel, called the spiritual Gospel by Clement of Alexandria already, lends itself to such wider interaction. To give just one example, but with a few tributaries, related directly to the theme chosen by our inaugurator: *unity* with the divine has in the Christian and other mystical streams been an important, deeply existential *topos*. Within a conceivable matrix of possibilities here would lie the ideals of the disappearance-of-being, when the individual is subsumed within the holy, as we find it in the idea of nirvana in Hinduism and related faith expressions, where a unity-into-nothingness with the divine is regarded as the ultimate "heaven". Another point on such a matrix would be existentially to lose oneself within humanity, with such an utter identification of the self with the plight of the "neighbour", near and far, that we are only *therein*. On a different point would lie Tillich's God-beyond-(only- our-)existence, yet precisely therefore involved with humanity (e.g. Tillich 1951-1963). Moreover, within the Christian spiritual tradition there has for long been the unresolved, and often unreflected upon, tension of what "unity with God" would mean: is it such an all-engaging encounter of ultimate intimacy with the divine that one finds oneself taken up into the Godhead, or is it a closeness to God in which I seem to

lose myself so fully that the only possible metaphor is "to be one with God", though then not equalling the ontological intensity of the Trinity, or the human becoming divine, or similar expressions? Then, where within this matrix would one find the idea, so common in Afrikaans piety, and pietism, "om soos Jesus te wees"? Lastly, to move more broadly again, how would all of these possibilities, and others, relate to interspirituality, a theme becoming prominent in Spirituality research at present (cf. Kourie 2011a:10-31)?

Obviously, as a comedian could say: "You cannot have everything. Where would you put it?" The same is valid for an inaugural lecture: "You cannot say everything. With limited space – the final frontier (à la Star Trek) – where would you say it? So perhaps these remarks of mine are best considered next steps, rather than omitted steps, as we look forward to Prof. Van der Merwe making even greater strides in his career, as he brings exegesis and spirituality – the phenomenology of the text and the experientiality of faith – into greater discussion with one another, as indeed he will be doing in coming months in for instance Zürich, in Hong Kong and in Muckleneuk.

Today we have witnessed the fourth South African inaugural lecture in the academic field of Spirituality, the first being Celia Kourie's, on nothingness (cf. Kourie 2008:59-75), then that of Pieter de Villiers, on peace (cf. De Villiers 2008a:20-58, 2008b:110-34, 2009:1-26) and then mine, on silence (Lombaard 2012a). Prof. Van der Merwe's inaugural thus fits the mold well, with his focus on unity. A young discipline as this is, locally (cf. Kourie 2010:17-31) and internationally, all of us come from initial specialisms other than Spirituality itself. Interestingly, all of us have a background in the Biblical Sciences (De Villiers 1976, Kourie 1980, Lombaard 2009, Van der Merwe 1995) from which we have moved on, though not away from – at times combining the two fields in practice (e.g. De Villiers 2008b:110-134, Kourie 2011b:132-153, Lombaard 2012b, Van der Merwe 2012:168-185), at times moving fully within the Spirituality discipline (e.g. De Villiers 1999:883-908, Kourie 2006:75-94, Lombaard 2008:94-107), at times prompted to reflect methodologically on the various intersections (e.g. De Villiers 2006:99-121, Kourie 2011a:10-31, Lombaard 2011b:211-225). Would it be pretentious to say that nowhere else is to be found a more energetic concentration on Biblical Spirituality? – And with such methodological and epistemological diversity... However, that is only a brief moment of immodesty. Against the two and perhaps three thousand years of biblical texts we find ourselves engaged with (Rossouw 1963), and within the wake of millennia more of human religiosity (Van Huyssteen 2006) within which we find ourselves, or not, and in the presence of the ultimate questions of Life and Beyond-Life, really, who are we? A pinnacle of intellectual and professional achievement, such as we celebrate today, will always be trumped by a simple, silent prayer. In that confession, I know colleague Van der Merwe and I find full unity: we may serve in perhaps the most research-productive unit in the university, yet we feel our limits every day, more than our strengths. Hence, we work...

As one of the most influential Bible scholars of all time, Julius Wellhausen (⁴1878:656, ⁵1886:629, ⁶1893:627, in Smend 2013:20), had added to an influential introductory work he edited in the late 19th century: "What is urgently required is ... more knowing and more not-knowing ..."

Dirk, to you and all those close to you, my heartfelt congratulations.

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