

**A time of transition:
Theological trends in the issues of
Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae from 1997-2004**

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Abstract

This article evaluates the theological and church historical trends in the issues of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (SHE) in the period 1997-2004. The central theoretical argument of this investigation is that this period in the history of SHE is telling of a growing interest in ecumenical research. This is evident from different investigations into African Christian traditions that had not received any attention before. There are inquiries into African spirituality and the interaction between church history and social history. Added to this there are important contributions from individuals. Moreover, the issues of SHE during this period bear witness to a transition from a traditional modernist approach to history writing to a description of church history “from below”. There was a broadening in historiography so that the role of human experience, narratives, oral transmissions and spiritualities came under discussion alongside traditional sources. This development enriched the study of Christianity in Africa. The transition can be positively appraised if the established methods, sources for church historical research and fields of investigation are not set aside completely.

Introduction

It is indeed a privilege to contribute to this special issue of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (SHE) in celebration of the journal’s fortieth year of existence. It was also a great honour to be able to serve as editor-in-chief for the period 1997 to 2004. Reading the articles for placement and coming into contact with a wide variety of authors enriched me and opened new horizons.

The year 1994 can be viewed as a turning point in South Africa and it had a profound effect on many spheres of life (see Vorster 2000:108). The transition from the pre-1994 political dispensation to a complete neo-liberal

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democracy had a great impact on the practice of theology and the role of churches in South Africa. As it was for the country, the year was a watershed for the church and theology, and it will always be a special marker in the periodisation of church history and Christianity in South Africa. No church or theological tradition was left untouched by the radical political paradigm shift in South Africa. Walshe (1997:397) demonstrated this point in 1997 by showing that all churches, despite mutual differences, accepted after 1994 that Apartheid was morally wrong and that its theological justification was a sin. This removed a great obstacle in the ecumenical calling of churches and the church struggle in South Africa that De Gruchy (1979) pointed out earlier faded away. After 1994 many churches could join in the process of developing society with a better ecumenical footing and the focus of research shifted in this direction. A new era dawned for churches. This fact was recently pointed out by Swart (2013:96) as well.

For some church traditions democracy brought a time of reflection on matters such as nation building and reconciliation, the development of the South African society and the search for new and innovative forms of spirituality. Hofmeyr (2004:28) says in this regard:

... the concerns of the church in South Africa have moved from the struggle against Apartheid to the building of a new South Africa. This implies healing the wounds of the past, social reconciliation between communities and individuals who were at war, the unification of racially divided churches, and the reconstruction of society by providing work, housing, infrastructure and a better life for all.

However, democracy also ushered in an era during which the growing secularism in South Africa came into view more and more, and this caught the eye of some church history researchers. Researchers noticed that the secularism of Europe started spilling over to the Western-oriented part of the South African population and that this should be researched theologically, and especially church historically¹. Besides this trend, other developments became visible too, for example a period of disillusionment and quietism which began for especially the Afrikaans church denominations after 1994.

¹ South Africa is part of two worlds and is therefore influenced by Christianity in Africa and Christianity in Western Europe. The research of authors such as Taylor (2007 and 2010); Hölscher (2010) and Martin (2011) with regard to Europe and other parts of the worlds shows that secularism also spillt over to South Africa, particularly the Western-oriented parts of Christian culture. These developments have lead to more research being currently conducted regarding the effect of secularism, and church historical research will become more important as part of this process.

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Olivier (2009:180) addresses this in her research on South African Calvinism after 1994.

The paradigm shift of 1994 therefore influenced theological research in general. This was especially visible in the activities of the Church History Society of South Africa. In the years after 1994 the society expanded rapidly from a mainly exclusive Reformed society that focused on Western European theological influences in South Africa to an ecumenical entity that started examining different theological developments in Africa (see Denis 2001:218). Many new members from outside the circle of the Reformed ecclesiastical tradition and the traditional (white) support group joined the Society. More and more English articles were placed and this made the journal more accessible to an international audience, which in turn stimulated contributions from international authors. The organisation later became known as the Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA). Research started focusing on different South African church historical problems rather than on only the Reformed tradition.

This article focuses on the shifting trends in church historical research as reflected by the issues of SHE during the period 1997-2004. The central theoretical argument is that the different issues of SHE during this period attest to a change and that this period can be typified as a transitional period during which several changes entered the different research fields, theological points of departure and historiographical methodology. In the final instance this period of transition is evaluated and findings are presented regarding the extent to which the transition either negatively or positively influenced the discipline of Church History, the value of church historical research and the efficiency of South African ecclesiology. Aspects that are addressed include the increase in ecumenical awareness, the expansion of the scope of research and the things that go with that, as well as the expansion of historiographical methodology.

A new ecumenical awareness

As mentioned before, the articles in SHE before 1994 mostly concentrated on the larger ecclesiastical traditions and how they were embodied in the South African context, chiefly the Reformed context. This changed after 1994. In this regard one can refer to the articles of Gundani (1998), Hanciles (1998), Moripe (1997 and 1998), Kalu (1998), Mukuka (1998) and Mogashoa (1998) in the issues of 1998. These authors contributed from other theological paradigms and acuminated the result of the African experience in ecclesiastical developments.

Gundani (1998:14) provides an overview of the rise and work of traditional healers and prophets in the Shona community of Zimbabwe. He shows how these persons in a certain way do provide in the spiritual needs of

people who live with all kinds of fears and concerns. He points out an important phenomenon in the African religious experience and then posits that the churches in Africa will have to take this into account in future. In this way he actually advocates greater ecumenical awareness. Hanciles (1998:73) in turn reveals the necessity of the development of new hermeneutical models to unlock authentic African Christianity. After discussing different models he comes to the conclusion that all theologies inside and outside of Africa can enrich each other if there is a continuous interplay of hermeneutical models and interpretations. With this contribution he stimulated the growing interest in ecumenical awareness in SHE during the period under discussion.

Kalu (1998:29) launches an extensive inquiry into the involvement of Pentecostalism in the reconstruction of church and faith experience in Africa. He reported the results in SHE in 1998. Like Gundani, Hanciles and Moripe, he shows that Christianity in Africa has more sides than what church history researchers had considered up to that point. Beside his identification of different contributions of this tradition to the growing unique African spirituality, he indicates that the Pentecostal political theology emphasises the breakdown of ethnic identity, encourages commitment to national welfare and a concern for the black race and Mother Africa. He also asks for scholarly investigation of the many unknown aspects of the Christian traditions in Africa and their role in the advancement of an African Christianity. His research convinces readers that church history in Africa cannot be regarded as fully documented if these native traditions have not been thoroughly examined. He too made a valuable contribution to the growing ecumenical awareness of SHE in the period 1997-2004.

In the first of his two articles Moripe (1997:130) discusses the involvement of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in the development of black communities in South Africa. This large movement within South African Christianity had received little attention in church historical research before that time. He set the tone for academic awareness of the important contribution of the ZCC. Without such research Christianity in South African cannot really be gauged, especially since he shows that the movement is inherent in South African society. The movement is the "church of the poor"; a multi-ethnic movement that is widely spread all over South Africa. They only received official recognition shortly before Moripe's article was published. His contribution opened the eyes of researchers and stimulated new research on this large movement. In the following year Moripe (1998:105) showed the influence of the Reformed Apostolic Faith Mission in Africa. At the time the church had just celebrated fifty years of existence. He indicates how this church contributed to a synthesis between the traditional African religious beliefs and Christian faith and so contributed to the richness of the Christian faith. Unlike the Western churches that attempted to Christianise the African traditional faiths, this movement tried to Africanise the Christian faith.

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Researchers may differ on his research results, but the fact is that he did contribute to the new ecumenical awareness with this piece.

Mukuka (1998:35) focuses on the Roman Catholic tradition with his examination of different important documents, but he also deals with the topical subject of the spirituality of Black Consciousness and Black Theology as embodied in the tradition in South Africa. He shows that Black Consciousness played an oppositional role in South Africa, rather than to influence the public debate on transformation. However, he predicted that it would become a strong ecumenical movement in South Africa later on. He was correct in the sense that the developing African church history writing does focus on African Christian spirituality. Mogashoa (1998:44) in turn paid attention to the influence of the social history of South Africa on the Baptist church, especially the social stratification of the South African society. According to him, the history of the tradition is a reflection of the political history in South Africa. Apartheid appeared in this church tradition too in the sense that black leadership was kept out of the structures of the church. In well-documented research he shows how the embeddedness of the Baptist Union in Apartheid influenced the church negatively and even resulted in large-scale divisions and schism. Only a total transformation of the church would provide a solution.

In this way the inquiries from different church traditions in Africa and South Africa contributed to the increased ecumenical awareness in SHE in the period 1997-2004. In the December 1998 issue of the journal, the editorial included the following:

This volume is significant in two ways: On the one hand we have a variety of articles from a broad spectrum of traditions and from various parts in Africa. These articles, which were received from Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa deal, amongst others, with the philosophy of history, Pentecostalism in Africa, the spirituality of Black Theology, institutionalised segregation in the Baptist tradition in South Africa and superstition in East Africa in the sixteenth century (*SHE*, XXIV(2):iii).

A window had opened onto Africa, and the basis on which research was founded had been expanded. New young researchers came to the fore with experiences that differed from those of the established church history researchers of that time.

The trend of a more ecumenical directedness and interest continued in the issues of 2002. One can in this regard refer to the research article of Chitando (2002:230) from Zimbabwe, which discusses the history writing of Ranger. She indicates how Ranger analysed the growth of Christianity in

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Africa in a unique manner, especially the syncretism of the Christian faith and the African traditional religions. She then applies his results to the modern history of Christianity in Africa, particularly the development of an African Christian identity. A similar article was published from Zimbabwe. Gundani (2002:144) discusses the contribution of Ruth Chinamano to the development of political liberation thinking in Zimbabwe before independence in 1980. According to the co-editor, that issue also bears testimony to a new interest in the intersection between the history of religion and social history. He saw this as a development that should be welcomed (Denis 2002:iii).

The ecumenical directedness and wider range of topics continued in 2003. Akinade (2003:46) conducted research on the Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria and at the time referred to the tension that was building up in these relationships. He indicated that the tension would increase if Christians and Muslims would not be able to take the plurality of the Nigerian society into consideration and shape their dialogue in that fashion. It seems from current events in Nigeria that his research was very topical and his warning valuable. This article also turned the spotlight on a new interest in church historical research, namely the relationship between religions and the inter-religious dialogue. In the same vein Onyeidu in his article revealed the interaction between Zulu culture and the Christian faith in what was then Natal. He referred to the fundamental differences between the two traditions and how they influenced each other in the development of a Zulu spirituality. Scholars could gain insight into a very important different dimension of the development of the Christian faith in Africa, namely the interaction between the Christian faith and other religions. The trend of a more ecumenical focus in the issues of SHE between 1997 and 2004 therefore resulted in valuable discussions as part of the inter-faith debate that increased in intensity over the last three decades due to the guidance of the World Council of Churches since 1991. The growing ecumenical awareness also stimulated research on the interaction between church history and social history. Researchers started paying attention to church, society and human rights, specifically the fundamental human rights of women. They aimed to show what role the church played in the neglect of human rights and the role that they should play in future to rectify this. The discussion now turns to this matter.

Church, society and the human rights of women

Three articles in the second volume of 1999 reflect an interest in the role of some ecclesiastical traditions in society. Vorster (1999:56) sheds light on the Reformed tradition and the concept of human rights. He indicates how this tradition, which was initially sceptical about the concept of human rights in the nineteenth century, supported the concept in the twentieth century and

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founded it in a theological-ethical perspective. N. Vorster (2002:262; 2003a:207; 2003b:129 and 2004:192) provided information on the history of social stratification in South Africa; the development of Apartheid and the accompanying institutional violation of the human rights of the native population. He offered a background against which the conduct of churches, or rather their lack of action, could be adjudged. The contribution of this research lies in the fact that church and context can never be divorced and that church history in South Africa cannot be understood if it is not read together with the social history, particularly the history of racial relations.

The position of women in some ecclesiastical traditions received special attention. Bergh and Barnard-Weiss (1999:113) showed that there is still much bias when it comes to equal rights for women, despite the fact that women have been allowed into all offices in two of the Afrikaans churches. Women are still being discriminated against in that they are still excluded from ecclesiastical leadership positions. In the same issue Henriques (2005:121) refers to the positive role that the Catholic Women's Union (CWU) played in establishing closer ties between the English-speaking and Zulu-speaking women of Natal and how this promoted the acknowledgement and experience of human dignity among women who have suffered under Apartheid. In an article from 2002 the rise of religious fundamentalism and its negative influence on women's rights are addressed (Vorster 2002:120). This article indicates that the growth in religious fundamentalism correlates with increasing discrimination against women on religious grounds. In the same issue Krüger (2002:182) analyses the main causes of prejudice against women within Christianity in a thought-provoking article.

In a later issue two important articles appeared on the pressure that colonialism, culture and Apartheid placed on women in Africa. Denis (2004:151) highlights the influence which the African patriarchal culture had on the relationship between men and women in marriage. He does this based on empirical research and he shows that women not only suffered under Apartheid, but that traditional African cultures, together with a certain African Christian interpretation of gender roles, singled out men as the absolute authority figures in marriage. Women therefore not only experienced Apartheid in society but also in their homes. Churches did not help women to improve their fate, because they were part of the problem. The social discrimination against women was condoned and even continued in churches. Denis touched on an important issue here and his article was a stimulus for research on discrimination against women on religious grounds in different ecclesiastical and religious traditions. Gundani (2004:75) follows the same line of thought when he discusses the negative influence of the African androcentrism on church historical history writing. He provided an example of how oral transmission by women can be re-interpreted to escape male-oriented interpretations of historical events. He chose the contributions of

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Filicity, Walatta Pietros and Kimpa Vita as exponents. Without such contributions from women, read non-androcentrically, the history of Christianity in Africa would always be veiled in a chauvinistic shroud and would not reflect a true version of events. This article too contributed to the new interest in the discrimination against women in Christianity in Africa, especially the role of women in the writing of history. Later studies built on this.

The debate on women's rights and the position of women in churches was continued in later issues of SHE by Landman (2004:205; 2005:147 and 2009:89), Van der Walt (2005:163), Plaatjies and Landman (2005:203), Landman and Molobi (2003:247), Frouisou (2003:28) and Mogashoa (2005:128). Landman's research is very prominent here. During the period under discussion she repeatedly moved the attention to androcentrism as it manifests within the Christian faith, the ecclesiastical traditions and in Christian literature. These contributions reveal a clear trend, namely a new focus on androcentrism and discrimination against women as revealed by the history of Christianity in South Africa. SHE made an important contribution to South African theological research in this regard and revealed the violation of the fundamental rights of women in some ecclesiastical traditions.

Historiographical broadening

The period 1997-2004 in the history of SHE showed a shift in historiographical methodology. The traditional research methodology in historical research was heavily influenced by modernism and mainly departed from a comparative literary examination of historical sources and archival materials. Little attention was paid to oral testimony and transmissions. However, budding post-modernism brought a global change in this regard.

What is post-modernism? The term became popular after the publication of Lyotard's book *La Condition post-modern: rapport sur le savoir* in 1979 (see also Lyotard 2004:123). Since then virtually all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences accepted the reality of a new emerging post-modernist paradigm, which implied a new direction in scholarly research. According to Lyotard (1991:XXIII) the time of the meta-narrative, which was the strength of modernism, has elapsed. He defines the emerging post-modernism as incredulity towards these meta-narratives (the Enlightenment, Christianity and Great Western Institutions). He says:

The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, and its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive and so on. Conveyed with each cloud are pragmatic valences specific to its

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kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these (Lyotard 1991:XXIV).

Post-modernism is thus a new condition that questions the suitability of the meta-narratives of the past. It questions both Christianity and the Enlightenment, both the Western ethos and its great institutions and the premise of rationalism and its scientific methods. It became a new paradigm with new features. Post-modernism departs from the view that all research is paradigm-driven and that no scientific tradition can claim to be objective in the search for truth. A scientific tradition can only invoke valid results. Research can offer diverging valid results. With this the positivistic view of science of Modernism was set aside.

The post-modern view of science influenced historiography significantly. This observation also applies to church history research. Not only did this line of thinking reveal the important place of presuppositions and the paradigm-driven nature of scientific research, in church historical research it also opened up the possibility of studying history “from below”. The new approach “from below” means that more sources for historical research are accepted as scientifically legitimate, for instance tradition, oral transmission and individual experience. Church history is therefore not only traced by looking at the development and conduct of large entities and macro-structures such as councils, churches and movements in “large narratives”, but also from the experiences of individuals, their narratives, transmissions and traditions.

This new insight into historical research was also reflected in the articles placed in SHE during the period 1997-2004 and the trend became even more visible after this period. The articles of Gundani (2003:1 & 2004:75), Denis (2004:165) and Landman (2004:205) are of special importance here.

In his article “Teaching Christian History from an African perspective” Gundani (2003:1) first defines the concept “Christian history”. According to him, this discipline deals with the practice and thought of the church and the encounter of the church with the environment. It also includes matters such as research on the influence of persecution of the church, secularism and the fulfilment of a missiological calling. But he makes the important point that the Christian faith is at its centre concerned with the practice of communion between God and humans and how people experience the encounter with God. Over the centuries people have told the tales of their experience of their encounter with God. An ecclesiastical memory has been built up over the years and in certain cases it was documented. He follows the church historian Gonzales when he emphasises the role of presuppositions in church historical research. Historicists have their own points of departure and this influences the results. There is not only one valid description of a church

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historical period, but diverging accounts that start from different points of departure. "Every history is written in a distinctive way" (Gundani, 2003:4). He mentions that Africa is rich in Christian narratives and pleads for an African church history writing that extracts this heritage and documents it. The approach should not be dogmatic, but a common heritage approach. In this approach the challenge for the researcher will be: "to expose students to historiographic perspectives that empower them to re-read history from the eyes of the recipients of Gospel, especially marginalised people such as women, evangelists and ordinary people". He therefore pleads for a history writing "from below" in terms of the post-modern view of science. The search is for the experiences and ideas behind the dates and not only the dates in themselves.

This article by Gundani was not only a plea for a new approach to historiography, but was also proof of a new historiography that arose due to a paradigm shift of modernism to post-modernism. He opens the door to a typical African history writing that entails much more than documenting dates and events surrounding ecclesiastical assemblies and councils and that extracts the experiences of Christians in Africa. In his already cited article in 2004, Gundani (2004:75) applied the historiography that he pleaded for himself. He researched the narratives of four women in the long history of Christianity in Africa to show that this history is not only a masculine history – but that women – as the marginalised persons in their societies, contributed significantly to the formation of Christianity in Africa. He concludes that this study reveals the complexity of historiography in Africa. He pleads for a continuous re-interpretation and re-writing of the available narratives of people and that students in church history should have interaction with their study material, whether in writing or orally. He furthermore asks for a study of church history in Africa where the narratives of the many dynamic women who made important contributions to the development of Christianity in Africa are interpreted and documented. He concludes: "Christian history will remain incomplete without women agency. Re-reading, re-interpreting as well as re-writing African Christian history are some of the most effective ways toward the process of according and guaranteeing the African women a place in it" (Gundani 2004:89).

Denis (2004:151) examined the effect of cultural oppression and Apartheid on the lives of women in Sobantu, South Africa, in a similar fashion. With a conversational interview he tapped into their experiences as women who were caught in the patriarchate of their culture, as well as the racist oppression by the system of Apartheid. In addition to the above results that he deduces from the investigation and documents from their experiences, he refers to the positive aspects of his methodology. He indicates this as follows:

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The framework of the interview gives these women, including Thandeka, the most conservative of the three, a freedom to express themselves which one would not have expected. The discussion brings out and strengthens their consciousness as African women. Their words, however, are not unambiguous. Submissive to the demands of African culture, they will justify the injustices of which they complain. But they recognise their situation as oppressive. These interviews have made possible an extraordinary freedom of expression (Denis 2004:165).

This article by Denis indicates how the historiography used in church historical research in South Africa gradually expanded from modernist research methodology to include history writing “from below” so that the narratives and experiences of people are revealed, which ultimately makes the narrative of the church and of Christianity more credible.

The trend discussed above is also clearly visible in the article by Landman (2004). She makes a good contribution with her investigation into “Women healers in Atteridgeville”. The greatest value of her research is that she spells out her methodology very clearly and shows that her investigation into the narratives of women and on events during healing services is scientifically sound. In this regard she gives credibility to the shift in the South African church historical historiographic development. She reaches suitable and interesting conclusions based on her empirical research by indicating the dangers that these faith healers have for the spirituality of women. Her inquiry opens the way for many potential church historical research projects where the experiences of people, their religious experiences and Christian testimony can be revealed with the scientific method that she motivates here. Christianity in Africa will still benefit much from the research results uncovered in this way.

Finding and adjudication

The growth in ecumenical awareness was an important shift in the focus of articles that appeared in SHE during the period under discussion. SHE grew from a journal with an initially limited ecclesiological tradition to a journal that stimulates ecumenical research and that grapples with the way in which churches in South Africa can effectively address the problems of a post-1994 society. The entrance of several dynamic young black academics strengthened this trend. Today SHE is a model of vigorous ecumenical discourse and a rich source of information from the African ecumenical world. The journal did indeed develop into a truly ecumenical journal that has become an indispensable part of South African church historical research. Voices from all corners of the country are heard and appreciated.

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Reading the history of the church in Africa together with the social history, for instance the influence of colonialism, liberation and the growth of Black Consciousness, should also be welcomed. The role of the church cannot be understood if not read and described against the background of social history. In the post-1994 environment in South Africa the violation of human rights, oppression of people, the marginalisation of women and the poor, and government transgressions were unmasked by good church historical research. On the other hand, the new social processes such as transformation, reconciliation, nation building and ethical matters such as affirmative action and land restitution also keep church historical researchers busy. The results of these researchers will be engraved in our ecclesiastical and social historical memory. The same is true of the process of decolonisation and social edification of Africa as a whole.

The historiographic expansion that occurred during this time and which increasingly finds expression in SHE is on a par with historiographic methodology worldwide. With this SHE proved that it is not a parochial journal that does not keep up with global developments. History “from below”, which relies on human narratives, experiences and oral transmission as sources of historical research, has a definite place and gives history writing a more refined character. Future articles in SHE should perhaps focus on the development of a methodology for history “from below” that can stand the test of scientific credibility and accepted academic principles. Maybe a special issue can be planned in future to specifically address this matter and analyse the perspectives of researchers that do work in this area.

However, traditional research should not be neglected. Africa has an interest in the entire course of the story of Christianity in the world. Some of the early traces of the church can be found in Africa! In a time when interest in the classical is under pressure from the commercialisation of universities worldwide, the journal can contribute greatly to keep research alive in, among other things, patristics and the Reformation. The new paradigm of history writing has to be welcomed – especially in Africa. However, the traditional paradigm does not have to be pushed aside completely. Such a step will skew history again.

On the whole one can say that SHE has become a valuable and crucial role player in global church history writing over the last 40 years. The journal’s major contribution lies in the fact that church historicists worldwide are exposed to African Christianity. The entire world can learn from this.

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