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White Christians Crossing Borders: Between Perpetuation and Transformation

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Abstract

‘Crossing borders’ is an important metaphor in Christian theology. While it has been expanded upon in numerous contexts, one of the primary spheres in which we have found theological reflection on the metaphor and Christian practices of crossing borders has been in churches’ mission work and theological reflection on mission. Historically, when white Christians in South Africa spoke about ‘mission,’ it referred exclusively to the white churches’ and missionaries work among black communities. When individual members of churches were involved in mission, it involved ‘reaching out’ to black people in particular. Missionaries and mission work played an important role in the construction of whiteness, however, the close relations between black and white Christians developing in mission contexts at times also destabilised whiteness in the minds of white Christians. Under apartheid the experiences of crossing borders associated with mission was often the first place where white Christians were confronted with the reality of black South Africa and the cost of white privilege. Post-apartheid South Africa remains largely segregated, and churches continue to facilitate encounters where racial borders can be crossed. The chapter focuses on the reappropriation of language on crossing borders in the post-apartheid white Dutch Reformed Church. The chapter will draw on earlier examples of how mission as crossing borders has both reinforced and destabilised whiteness in order to highlight the ambiguity of contemporary use of language on mission and crossing borders. The growing body of research on how whiteness is being reconstructed in post-apartheid South Africa is then used to analyse the way in which contemporary Christian talk about crossing borders might work to entrench white superiority while still, as in earlier times, contributing to transforming and destabilising whiteness.

Key Words: Whiteness, mission, Christianity, South Africa, Dutch Reformed Church, crossing borders.

1. Introduction

Let me start the short sketch of my own social location not with reference to whiteness or Afrikanerdom, but at another position which incorporates this, and provide some important background to this chapter. I participate in this dialogue as an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, a denomination which is white and at least somewhat aware of this fact, constantly haunted by having been judged by history and the ecumenical church for its support of institutionalised

racism in South Africa. I work from within this space, as theologian seeking to contribute to the internal critique of this particular religious tradition.¹ What I say specifically concerns this church, although it might have implications beyond.

While I identify with the insider-outsider experience described by at least some whiteness scholars who research their own group,² I add to this the insider-outsider relation to a very particular white religious institution or community. I work as one who is an insider to this community, while critically reflecting on the way in which whiteness is perpetuated through this same community. This consciousness add to being reminded that I cannot describe whiteness as if I am excluded from what I describe.

While a relation between Christian theology and the construction of race and whiteness would seldom, if ever, be denied, recent arguments continue to state that the inception of race cannot be understood without understanding the theology which gave rise to it.³ The influence of Christianity is not merely found in the individual arguments supporting racism but, rather, in how it was the underlying textual field supporting the construction of whiteness.⁴ However, Christian religion and theology has also contributed towards subverting racism and destabilising whiteness. In South Africa we can start by listening to South African Black Theology.

My interest in this chapter is in how Christian theology and religion continue to support the construction and reconstruction of whiteness in South Africa, but also in how people's faith convictions can contribute to subverting the rules which keep whiteness in place, and become a resource for change. Here I explicitly draw on church resources and the language developed in religious communities (as opposed to academic theology) to explore how white Christianity both affirms a sense of superiority and finds ways of shifting the centre from which it is working.

In a previous publication analysing the church's online conversations on diversity,⁵ one of the key metaphors which emerged in relation to diversity was 'Christians crossing boundaries.'⁶ Diversity in this context implied that Christians should follow Jesus in crossing boundaries, connecting with and loving people across the boundaries between groups. This chapter investigates the concept in more depth. I focus on *crossing borders* as used by white Christians within the Dutch Reformed Church in reflecting on their relation to a changing post-apartheid South Africa, and in particular to black South Africans. A key motivation for exploring this is the broad acceptance of this metaphor. I find this to be one of the central Christian tropes attempting to renegotiate white identity and place in society.

2. Ambiguity of Missionaries Crossing Borders

In the documents discussed below, the Afrikaans translation of mission, *sending*, was seldom used, but the missionary roots of the metaphor 'crossing borders' cannot be denied.⁷ There are some important differences which will be

pointed out, but the ambiguity around white missionaries under apartheid can provide a helpful introduction to a critical discussion of the use of the metaphor today.

The critique against white missionaries is well known. Christian mission and colonial expansion lived in a symbiotic relationship, with missionaries spreading Western civilisation, and economic relations, under the guise of Christian religion, contributing to the dismantling of social structures of colonised people. When missionaries ‘crossed borders,’ in spite of possible good intentions, they were not the allies of the black people with whom they worked, but rather allies of the white colonialists with whom they came. A hard version of this argument would state that they were in alliance with an emerging capitalist class and working in support of it. A softer version would state that due to being white, missionaries remained in a privileged position and failed to critique the status quo to which they were ideological captives.⁸

On the other hand it is argued that from among white clergy and theologians, it is exactly those with a missionary background that were challenging and critiquing apartheid, motivated by the intimate knowledge and relations with black South Africans.⁹ But while the relationships with black South Africans built around a missionary experience might have provided the motivation to critique apartheid, this did not necessarily guard against the political naïveté which would often make these missionaries totally ineffective in challenging apartheid,¹⁰ and such actions often repeat paternalistic behaviour when good whites see their role as challenging racist structures on behalf of blacks.

Alternative examples can however also be found. In reflecting on his own journey towards working against racism, theologian Klippius Kritzinger point out how as a white student under apartheid, becoming involved with a congregation in an Indian group area was a turning point, which led to a lifelong commitment to anti-racism and critical reflection on whiteness.¹¹ Black Theologian Zuze Banda described this phase of Kritzinger’s journey as one of preparation for the road of solidarity with Black people lying ahead, and of insertion into this particular context. While Banda acknowledge the pious and ‘noble missionary’ motivation behind Kritzinger’s actions during this phase, and would be critical of these on its own, he recognises this as part of a broader process of conversion which he evaluates positively.¹²

This cursory overview reminds us that ‘reaching out’ to black people often affirmed the sense of superiority and paternalism in white missionaries, but that these experiences at times provide the door to a deeper and critical engagement of whiteness and a political stance against racist structures.

3. Elements of Religious Talk on Crossing Borders

This section will provide an overview of contemporary talk of *crossing borders*. I draw on sermons, bible studies and other church publications all dating

after 2008 as examples of how crossing borders is used within the contemporary white Reformed religious context in South Africa, as found in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Two differences need to be emphasised between the texts which were analysed and the history of mission in which the descriptions above should be read. The first is that in the sources discussed crossing borders was never used to refer to the work of professional missionaries, but always to emphasise a way of life among all the members of the community. This is connected to a broader theological shift towards the laity in congregations, and particularly a changing understanding of mission where the local congregation is seen as the primary agent in mission.

This is also partly the basis of my interest in this approach, since it attempts to be a process of formation which cuts across a broad section of white South Africans. Within the broad South African experiment of renegotiating identities,¹³ this can be described as an attempt to transform the identity of an entire community of white people through changing their religious language.

The second difference can be summarised in the words of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. 'Mission' is described as one of its key values, of which it says the following:

Our understanding of mission has changed over the past 100 years. Our grandparents believed mission involved converting people in faraway countries to Christianity while serving as ministers, doctors, nurses, teachers and agriculturalists. Mission in the 21st century still involves crossing borders. But today borders are understood to be the barriers that separate people from one another.¹⁴

Consistent with this, the sources described below emphasise local relations, participating in the local community, or even crossing borders between people within the congregations, such as generational borders. The emphasis is constantly on the borders which confront people daily.

I will in brief point out a number of elements of white Christian rhetoric of crossing borders found in Dutch Reformed congregational resources. This provides a glimpse into some of the actual uses of this metaphor. These elements are at times contradictory, and all of them will not necessarily be visible in a specific instance where the metaphor is being used, nor will all who draw on this metaphor subscribe to every aspect. But these uses of the metaphor are currently alive in the white church.

First, crossing borders is considered part of the essence of being Christian.¹⁵ In motivating this particular Christian value two traditions are particularly emphasised. God is described as one who crossed borders by reaching out to humans through Jesus Christ. This draws on the church's doctrine on the

incarnation of the divine in the God-man Jesus Christ, given a popular translation by drawing on the language of crossing borders. On the other hand Jesus is described as an example of one crossing borders to people in all spheres of society, an argument which should compel those who profess to be Christians to do the same. We might say that crossing borders is drawing from both Christian theology and Christian ethics.¹⁶

Secondly, the list of borders connected to this metaphor and the list of practices which would be considered part of crossing these borders both open a wide range of possible interpretations. Reflective of ways that the language of diversity in diversity management is used for an endless list of diversities, the borders in *crossing borders* are used to refer to anything which might separate people. In this vein one small group guide talks about ‘cultural, ethical, generational, ethnic, social, [and] economic’¹⁷ borders in the community. But the borders can also refer to internal borders such as ‘lack of knowledge’ or ‘unwillingness.’¹⁸ Race is at times explicitly mentioned as a border, but often missing from the lists.

A third very important thread is that borders should be crossed to care for those in need.¹⁹ This is at times explicitly disconnected from race, emphasising that Christians should care for those in need around them, regardless of ‘race, colour or nationality.’²⁰ This emphasis criticises approaches in the history of Afrikaner Christianity which explicitly argued that the church should care for ‘their own people’ (white people), but leaves silent the intimate connection to race, as congregations that are predominantly or exclusively white would mostly be found in more affluent areas, and crossing borders to poor areas would often imply moving into traditionally black areas. The two focus points associated with crossing borders, race and economy, should not be conflated, but cannot be taken apart either. At times the charity work of the church is still used to deflect criticism of racism in the church.²¹

Fourthly, an interpretation which is being developed, revealing some internal tension when placed next to the previous point, is to at least partly disconnect crossing borders from ‘charity’ or ‘outreach.’ Building on the idea that the crossing of borders between people should be considered an essential part of the Christian faith, people are motivated to cross borders with the primary purpose of listening and learning. For example, a young minister started a practice where white congregants are encouraged to cross borders by ‘moving their bodies’ in order to attend a black congregation in the city. This is seen as a learning experience.²²

Finally, a few comments on explicit connections on *crossing borders* and race need to be made. The congregational handout on the learning and listening experience mentioned in the previous point explicitly emphasises challenging prejudice and racism as part of the process which involve crossing borders.²³ But cultural difference is at times the main focus when crossing borders to black people is emphasised, apparently shying away from explicitly referencing race as it relates to this practice. In a study guide for members participating in a small group,

identified loosely as being ‘Western,’ they are challenged to cross borders towards ‘people of Africa.’ Africa is described by its primary fears, which concern forefathers and magic, and members are encouraged to make contact with people for whom these fears are a reality.²⁴

This overview cannot reveal how people respond to the use of the metaphor in local communities, but draws out some key examples of how language is being constructed. In the final section I briefly reflect on this overview.

4. Between Perpetuation and Transformation

I have elsewhere argued that the language that is being created in this church to deal with diversity is drawing on language from diversity management.²⁵ The way in which a catchall approach²⁶ is created for everything from the borders created by theological differences through to the borders of oppression by gender, race and class diverts attention from how relations of power and privilege impact on some of these borders, but not on others. The conflation of race into culture also contributes to this, opting to emphasise difference while hiding how relations of power historically developed around these differences.

The implicit assumption evident in this church literature appears to be that the whiteness which delineates the border which needs to be crossed can remain invisible. What is described as a racial border is intertwined with the construction of whiteness, yet by presenting crossing borders as a universal approach of responding to historical divides in society, the explicitly white identity at work when crossing racial borders is hidden. In a racialised world it is a particular white privilege to have the *choice* of crossing borders into a black world. But in this metaphor crossing borders is presented as simply what normal Christians would engage in, and the racialised lives of those engaging in this practice is edited out, thus contributing to making whiteness invisible.²⁷

By neglecting to critically reflect on the way in which this practice ties into whiteness, it runs the danger of perpetuating whiteness through the very act which claims to challenge racism. The mere assumption that it is normal and that people have the right, even the moral obligation, to cross racial borders builds on assumptions of whiteness: where the whole world is accessible to those who are white, while the white centre is guarded, with such a white centre being found in spaces like church or gated community.

A similar problem can be revealed when crossing borders is closely associated with reaching out to those in need. While the vast material needs in Africa, including South Africa, complicates this analysis beyond the scope of this chapter, the connection between benevolence and white Christians crossing borders create a very effective ideological support structure for guarding against any critique against the perpetuation of whiteness: in short, if these white people are so good for black people how can anyone still critique whiteness?

While never explicitly mentioned, it might be helpful to read this metaphor next to the dominant Afrikaner metaphor of drawing into the *laager*. The *laager* is most famously depicted in the narratives and art surrounding the battle of Blood River, and seen in the architecture of the Voortrekker monument.²⁸ The *laager* is often used critically to describe behaviour of withdrawing into white spaces. 'Crossing borders' call white Christians out of the *laager*, but often leaves the *laager* intact. The assumption remain that a *laager* is available into which we can draw back. But some of the practices built on the metaphor do carry the potential to work the cracks in the *laager*, and these need to be noted as possibilities where this popular Christian metaphor might be used to open up a critical reflection on whiteness.

If a key aspect of white supremacy is the assumption of being the one that should speak and be listened to, then emphasis on crossing borders in order to listen and learn would be one aspect of this framework that is being constructed which challenges the normal white engagement with the black world. But the focus is mainly on learning 'about others,'²⁹ shying away from creating processes which would actively challenge our knowledge about ourselves.³⁰ What this metaphor fails to develop is a rationale for assisting white members of faith communities to listen to a black unmasking of white complicity in the suffering and oppression of black people.³¹

However, listening as part of crossing borders at times also emphasise that processes of truly listening might involve uncomfortable experiences as we are confronted by another, but since listening is such an essential value, it is expected that such discomfort should be allowed, even embraced, by Christians. Some possibilities for deeper transformation are opened up in this approach. If it is indeed possible to assist white people to move through uncomfortable processes where their own connection to systems of social injustice are revealed,³² then this might be an important step in a broader process. But at this point the limits of the metaphor must be made clear: by recasting white Christians as the acting agents, it leaves the control of which borders will be crossed and which black voices will be listened to in white hands. If white people are the acting agents crossing borders, they also determine the level of discomfort involved.

5. Conclusion

When white Christians draw on the metaphor of crossing borders as resource for finding a new identity in a changing South Africa, they choose to emphasise the transformation of society and to present those using this metaphor as the acting agent in this process. This choice repeats practises which potentially reinscribe a problematic white identity.

It does open a door into destabilising problematic white identities when developing practices which emphasise listening to black people and provide a moral and religious motivation for sitting with discomfort without withdrawing. While this is not the dominant use of the metaphor, it points to possibilities of

religious language and practices through which white assumptions on superiority might be challenged.

However, practices built on crossing borders which are successful in drawing white people into spaces where complicity in oppression is unmasked, would have to inevitably reject the very rationale which motivated these practices, since this rationale keeps the white privilege of control firmly in place.

Notes

¹ Eddy A. J. G Van der Borght, *Sunday Morning: The Most Regregated Hour. On Racial Reconciliation as Unfinished Business for Theology in South Africa and Beyond* (Inaugural Lecture, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2009), 25.

² Melissa Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), xxxv.

³ For recent publication contributing detailed arguments on this topic see: James Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (London: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁴ Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be*, 12.

⁵ George Jacobus Van Wyngaard, 'The Language of "Diversity" in Reconstructing Whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church', in *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism: Europa, Africa, and North America*, eds. R Drew Smith, William Ackah and Anthony Reddie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 184-201.

⁶ The Afrikaans discussions, sermons and study material which I work from would speak about 'om grense oor te steek.' The Afrikaans 'grense' can be translated as either 'borders' or 'boundaries.' In keeping with the panel theme, I opt for the translation 'borders' in this chapter. It should be noted however the 'boundaries' would be the more popular English word used.

⁷ Willem Saayman use both 'crossing borders' as well as 'crossing boundaries' to described various waves of Dutch Reformed Church mission work. Willem Saayman, *Being Missionary Begin Human* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2007).

⁸ Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 60.

⁹ Jaap Durand, 'Afrikaner Piety and Dissent', in *Resistance and Hope*, eds. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W De Gruchy (Johannesburg: David Philip, 1985); Saayman Willem, 'Those Pietistic Missionaries: A Time to Reconsider?', *Skrif en Kerk* 17, No. 1 (1996): 202-214.

¹⁰ Saayman, *Being Missionary Begin Human*, 41.

¹¹ Johannes Nicolaas Jacobus Kritzinger, 'Becoming Aware of Racism in the Church', in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology*, eds. McGlory T.

Speckman and Larry T. Kaufmann (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 238.

¹² Zuze Johannes Banda, “‘Solidarity With Victims’: An Appraisal of JNJ (Klippias) Kritzinger’s Contribution to the Praxis of Liberation Theology’, *Missionalia* 37, No. 3 (2009): 115.

¹³ Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used to Be*, xxi.

¹⁴ ‘First word: Mission’, accessed 21 April 2013, <http://www.wcrc.ch/node/760>.

¹⁵ ‘Saam Toi-Toi ons Toe die Gang Af’, last modified 8 June 2011, accessed 13 February 2013, <http://www.beeld.com/In-Diepte/Nuus/Saam-toi-toi-ons-toe-die-gang-af-20110608>. ‘Welkom by die Gemeente wat Omgee’, last modified June 2012, accessed 16 February 2013, <http://www.ngelarduspark.org.za/artikels/2012/junie/voorwoord.html>.

¹⁶ Theunis Johannes Henn, *Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Gemeente Stellenbosch-Noord: 'n Skuiwende Identiteit* (MTh Diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2009), 39; Chris Van Wyk, Frederick Marais and Nico Simpson, *Die Vrou by die Put. Stap Saam met Jesus oor Grense* (Wellington: Bybelkor, 2009), 9.

¹⁷ Van Wyk, Marais and Simpson, *Die Vrou by die Put. Stap Saam met Jesus oor Grense*, back cover). Compare this with the Ford Motor Co. list of differences included under diversity management and Kersten’s discussion thereof: ‘Diversity in the workplace includes all differences that define each of us as unique individuals. Differences such as culture, ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, experiences, opinions and beliefs’. See Astrid Kersten, ‘Diversity Management: Dialogue, Dialectics and Diversion’, *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 13, No. 3 (2000): 242).

¹⁸ Danie Mouton, “‘n Gemeente Wat vir Dekades oor Grense Leef”, *Reisgeselskap* (blog) February 15 2010, <http://ngkok.co.za/reisgeselskap/gemeente/n-gemeente-wat-voor-dekades-oor-grense-leef/>.

¹⁹ Chris van Wyk, ‘Handelinge 6:1-7 – Jerusalem Steek Grense oor Deur om te Gee vir Behoeftiges – 25, Mei 09 – Pinkster 3’, *NG Kerk Somerstrand* (blog), May 26 2009, <http://www.ngkerksomerstrand.co.za/?p=2090>.

²⁰ Henn, *Stellenbosch-Noord*, 110.

²¹ ‘Prof. Jansen, jy is só Verkeerd’, last updated 10 April 2013, accessed 10 April 2013, <http://www.beeld.com/ opinie/2013-04-10-prof-jansen-jy-is-s-verkeerd>.

²² Announcements from Pierre van Ryneveld Gemeenskapskerk on 27 January 2013 and handouts concerning the congregations focus for 2013. Danie Mouton, ‘To Plunge: Congregations Crossing Boundaries’, *Reisgeselskap* (blog), February 27 2010, <http://ngkok.co.za/reisgeselskap/gemeente/plunge/>.

²³ Pierre van Ryneveld Gemeenskapskerk.

²⁴ Van Wyk, Marais and Simpson, *Die Vrou by die Put. Stap Saam met Jesus oor Grense*, 35.

²⁵ Van Wyngaard, 'The Language of "Diversity" in Reconstructing Whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church'.

²⁶ The explicit task for a study guide on growing beyond borders was that it should be able to address any type of border. Van Wyk, Marais and Simpson, *Die Vrou by die Put. Stap Saam met Jesus oor Grense*, 9.

²⁷ Steyn, *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used to Be*, xxvi.

²⁸ A circle of wagons into which a group of Afrikaners should draw and where protection is found against the black masses.

²⁹ Mouton, 'To Plunge'.

³⁰ Mary Hobgood point to an ethical agenda to those in dominant positions which call for both being exposed to alternative views about those oppressed, but also alternative views about the self. This involve exposing the pathology that comes from unearned privilege. Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 38.

³¹ Johannes Nicolaas Jacobus Kritzinger, *Black Theology: A Challenge to Mission* (DTh Diss., University of South Africa, 1988), 271.

³² In a recent article, Steyn and Davis argue for classroom experiences which do not shy away from discomfort and which actively challenges students in dominant positions as a crucial step for a pedagogy which transform. Danya Davis and Melissa Steyn, 'Teaching Social Justice: Reframing Some Common Pedagogical Assumptions', *Perspectives in Education* 30, No. 4 (2012): 29-38.

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