

The language of “diversity” in reconstructing whiteness in the Dutch Reformed Church

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Abstract

The paper will seek to evaluate talk of ‘diversity’ in the white Dutch Reformed Church. Drawing on official work within the church as well as online forums where members participated in discussing this topic, the language and metaphors used in various theological reflections on ‘diversity’ is described and critically discussed. Drawing on critical perspectives on whiteness, some of the problems associated with talk of diversity when reflecting on race is discussed. The paper argue that while the theological reflection on diversity create language which draw white Christians out of their enclosed spaces into a place where greater knowledge of and relationships with black South Africans can be formed, it fails to draw white Christians into a deeper reflection on their own identity, and fail to engage critical dimensions of race as a system of power and privilege.

Introduction

I won’t be speaking on black church activism today, although I hope that my reflection can contribute to our dialogue on contested notions of culture and race. My focus is on critically engaging the white social location, particularly with reference to theology and church life in South Africa. I will focus on one aspect of this.

I am a member of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa. A denomination which has become notorious over the last century for the development of a theological justification of a system of legalized racism. Perhaps the ghosts of this history will not allow us to rest our reflections on religion and race for a long time to come. I write as one deeply interested not only in understanding where we are, but also seeking to critically accompany the church in facing the resistance that our own whiteness² pose to working towards a post-racial future.³

In this paper I focus on the language of ‘diversity’ within the DRC. I read this as one particular attempt within this white religious community to move beyond its racist history, and redefine what

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² For a definition from a South African author see Steyn, M. 2005. "'White talk": white South Africans and the management of diasporic whiteness'. In Lopez, A.J. *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader on Race and Empire*, New York: State University of New York Press: p. 121.

³ This is a play on Wariboko’s definition of ethical analysis as “faith seeking resistance” to the common good (Wariboko, N. 2009. 'Ethical methodology: between public theology and public policy'. *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* (vol. 1 no. 1) [online] available from <<http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol1/iss1/4>>: p. 6).

it would mean to be white and church in South Africa today.⁴ While ‘diversity’ has become a buzzword globally within the managerial world⁵, within this religious community it is given content by drawing explicitly on the repertoire of faith. I will seek to discuss the particular religious language used when speaking about ‘diversity’ and critically discuss how this relates to race and the continuing construction of whiteness in South Africa.

Background to “diversity” in the Dutch Reformed Church

A few short notes on the development of a focus on ‘diversity’ in the DRC provide background to the data which will be drawn upon. In 2004 a commission for ‘gender and diversity’ was initiated by die General Assembly,⁶ and in 2007 it was given a mandate to continue its work.⁷ In 2011 this commission was changed into a working group to ‘human dignity’.⁸ Between 2007 and 2011 this group changed its exclusive focus on gender to focus broadly on issues of ‘diversity’.⁹ Initially included in what constitutes diversity was gender, age, spirituality, race and disability. This was later expanded to a list of more than 20 topics, ranging from the size of congregations to economic inequality.¹⁰

Simultaneously, the word ‘diversity’ was increasingly used beyond the work of this commission and apart from the explicit reflection on the topic. This included:

- When speaking about its Reformed Identity, the church recognizes diversity as a positive reality.¹¹
- When working on a practical ecclesiology for the church, it was stressed that diversity between congregations and contexts has become the norm.¹²
- By the time of the 2011 General Assembly ‘diversity’ was a key concept in a number of different reports, hinting that this term has become firmly embedded within the language of the DRC and might remain important for the foreseeable future.

⁴ I follow Melissa Steyn’s argument that all white South Africans need position themselves in relation to past constructions of whiteness, while making sense of the changing political situation (Steyn, M. 2005. “White talk” p122-123). As will become clear, this includes redefining religious rhetoric to create new white identities more acceptable in a post-apartheid South Africa.

⁵ Holvino, E & Kamp, A. 2009. Diversity management: Are we moving in the right direction? Reflections from both sides of the North Atlantic. In *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (25), 395-403: pp. 395-397.

⁶ Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk. 2004. *Besluiteregister* [online], available from <<http://www.ngkerk.org.za/besluiteregister/2004%20Besluiteregister.rtf>> [Accessed]: 36.1 & 36.2.

⁷ Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk. 2007. *Besluiteregister* [online], available from <[http://www.ngkerk.org.za/documents/Besluiteregister%202007%20\(F\)%20p193-p223.pdf](http://www.ngkerk.org.za/documents/Besluiteregister%202007%20(F)%20p193-p223.pdf)> [Accessed]: 25.1.

⁸ NG Kerk. 2012. *Gespreksforum: Menswaardigheid*. [online forum] Available at <http://www.ngkerk.org.za/index.asp?bodyType=gespreksforum_argieflees&id=38> [Accessed 15 May 2012].

⁹ Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk. 2011. *Agenda vir die 14de vergadering van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 10-14 Oktober 2011* [online] available from <>: pp. 229-230

¹⁰ NG Kerk. 2011. Diversiteitsgroep se visie en missie. [online forum] available from: <http://www.ngkerk.org.za/index.asp?bodyType=gespreksforum_argieflees&id=16>: [Msg. Botha, J. 2011-03-04]

¹¹ Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk. 2007. *Agenda vir die 13de vergadering van die Algemene Sinode van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 4-8 Junie 2007* [online] available from: <<http://www.ngkerk.org.za/documents/Agenda2007Deel1.pdf>>: pp. 11-12.

¹² Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk. 2007. *Agenda*: p. 45.

Approaching the data on language of diversity

Rather than focusing on the official church decisions on diversity, I want to look at some of the conversations which ensued between 2007 and 2011. Two sources are of particular interest. The commission working on diversity met on three instances, two of which consisted of various participants contributing thoughts on the topic from a variety of perspectives. All of this was archived and could thus be studied.¹⁵ Furthermore, the commission created a forum on the topic of 'diversity' on the official website of the DRC which was open for anyone to participate.¹⁶

The commission explicitly limited its focus on a process of reflection on diversity, rather than initiating programs.¹⁷ No particular subsection on race existed, although many direct and indirect references can be found. While I draw both on these references, as well as on how the general theological construction of diversity as found in these conversations relates to the question of race.

Neither of these sources should be seen as providing any indication of what the general sentiments of members of white church members are. Rather, it merely gives a glimpse into various possible language constructs which white religious communities might use when speaking about diversity. I therefore merely identify some common threads from the discussions, without exhausting the possibilities.

Two short comments need to be made on the second source studied. By the end of 2010 South Africa had a 13.5% internet penetration rate¹⁸, which limits access to this forum to those at the higher end of the economic and educational spectrum of the country. Furthermore the conversations took place in Afrikaans, further limiting the discussions towards the demographics of the DRC (which it almost exclusively Afrikaans). The rhetoric on the forum reflects that participants were mostly white, although participants were not required to register before gaining access, so no database of members exists. I worked with the assumption throughout studying the conversations that participants were white and Afrikaans speaking, thus reflecting a particular construction of whiteness.¹⁹

¹⁵ The commission also invited some 'expert opinions' outside the church. These included Madipoane Masenya (Masenya, M. 2010. In and through Diversity: Her-Narrative in Context. Unpublished paper read at meeting of the Algemene Sinode se Kommissie vir Diversiteit, 24-25 August 2010 [online] available from <<http://www.ngkerk.org.za/forumdocs/Teologiese%20perspektiewe%20Madipoane%20Masenya.doc>>) and Klippiess Kritzinger (Kritzinger, K. 2010. TRANSFORMATIVE ENCOUNTERS: Dealing more creatively with diversity. Unpublished paper read at meeting of the Algemene Sinode se Kommissie vir Diversiteit, 24-25 August 2010 [online] available from <http://www.ngkerk.org.za/index.asp?bodyType=gespreksforum_argieflees&id=29> & <http://www.ngkerk.org.za/index.asp?bodyType=gespreksforum_argieflees&id=30>). While the inclusion of their papers on the DRC diversity archive should be noted, I keep to those voices emerging from within the DRC.

¹⁶ NG Kerk. *Diversiteitsgroep*. [online forum].

¹⁷ Agenda 2011, p230, punt 4.2

¹⁸ Internet World Stats. 2012. Africa [online 26/02/2012] available from <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm>>. [Accessed 18 May 2012].

¹⁹ For a discussion on some of the particularities of Afrikaner white rhetoric, see: Steyn, M. 2004. 'Rehabilitating a whiteness disgraced: Afrikaner white talk in post-apartheid South', *Communication Quarterly* (vol. 52 no. 2), pp. 143-169.

Religious talk/metaphors for speaking about diversity and race

While this is not an exhaustive list of possible religious talk for speaking about diversity, I identify some of the common threads used, and will continue to discuss this theological construction of 'diversity' by drawing on these examples.

Diversity as divinely ordained

While 'diversity', and particularly 'diversity management' (a word which was sometimes used to describe the work of the commission) can be considered an export product of the North American business environment²⁰, religious talk about diversity provide an alternative foundation for this concept. Through connecting it to God and creations, diversity is constructed as divinely ordained. At least three arguments in which this is done can be identified:

- *Diversity as part creation*: Against those attempting to silence alternative voices, scripture tell us that God created a diverse world. This diversity witness to God's diversity, and should be embraced by the church.²¹
- *Diversity as revelation*: The idea that diversity reveals something of God is also connected to the diversity within the trinity, with diversity connected to the identity of God, and in this way being divinely sanctioned.²²
- *Diversity as gift from God*: This approach can best be seen in official articulation of the church where it is stated that "we celebrate our diversity as a gift from God to us, because our difference to each other assist us to understand and appreciate the full extent of God's grace and love".²³

While diversity as emphasize unity and interconnectedness, the similarities between 'diversity as created by God' and the theological justification for separating groups by race warrant some reflection.²⁴ Part of the problem is that diversity is used indiscriminately of any and every aspect of difference to be found, and the historical construction of identities easily gets ignored in the process.²⁵

Concerning race this become particularly problematic sine it ignores the fact that racial categories were created by a particular social and theological process.²⁶ Well intentioned Christian creation

²⁰ Holvina & Kamp. *Diversity management*. p. 395.

²¹ Cronjé, Sl. *Diversiteit, 'n Babelse verwarring of 'n Goddelike seen?*. Unpublished paper read at meeting of the Algemene Sinode se Kommissie vir Diversiteit, 18-19 May 2009.

²² Botha, J. 2009. *Diversiteit: moontlike stories van hoop!*. Unpublished paper read at meeting of the Algemene Sinode se Kommissie vir Diversiteit, 18-19 May 2009.

²³ Original Afrikaans reads: "... vier on sons diversiteit as God se geskenk aan ons, want ons andersheid vir mekaar help ons om die volle omvang van God se genade en liefde beter te verstaan en te waardeer" (NG Kerk. 2008. *Die Kerk wat ons wil wees...*. Unpublished document, archives of commission for diversity)

²⁴ One participant on the forum repeated the argument that God created us to be different and separate (as opposed to the current dominant thread in the DRC of "different and together"). He then continues to say that one of Noah's sons was appointed "waterdraer en houthakker" (water carrier and wood chopper) (NG Kerk. *Diversiteitsgroep*. [Msg. Wonder net 2010-06-05]). Similar references to an earlier reflection on creation and race can be found in the idea that it is "natural" that we are separate (NG Kerk. *Diversiteitsgroep*. [Msg. Daniel, 2010-06-26]). While it need to be pointed out that such an interpretation is actively rejected throughout the work of the commission, it reveal that the earlier imagination on creation and race remain present.

²⁵ Zaroni, P, Janssens, M, Benschop, Y & Nkomo S. 2010. Unpacking Diversity, Grasping Inequality: Rethinking Difference Through Critical Perspectives. *Organization* (Vol 17 Issue 1, January), 9-29: p. 13.

²⁶ Carter, JK. 2008. *Race: A Theological Account*. New York: Oxford University Press.

theologies, problematically linked to biology, become justification for the view that racial differences was created by God.²⁷ While creation language assist in subverting the idea that all should become like me, that everyone should adopt one particular culture or identity, in white theological rhetoric it silences a critical dialogue on issues of race.

Following the example of the inclusive Jesus

Probably more common than drawing on notions of creation and theology, is reflecting on the ethics of Jesus. This thread use one of the most common notions in Christianity, following Jesus, and connects it to the language of diversity. In this thread diversity is usually associated with inclusivity, and Jesus is described as the ultimate example of being inclusive of everyone.²⁸

These arguments draw on both developed perspectives on historical critical studies on Jesus as well as pious language on Jesus as example for the Christian life. In spite of these differences there seem to be an almost uncontested acceptance that Jesus would have included everyone, including black people, which is seen as a critique on an apartheid past and the explicit racist rhetoric which continue to be common in South Africa today.

This reflection on an inclusive community tacitly accepts the existence of white liturgical spaces, and considers it a particular personal and communal responsibility to invite ‘people of other colours’ to this space.²⁹ The focus is on a moral responsibility of inclusivity, disregarding the way in which liturgical spaces are racialised or examining of the social location from which the call towards inclusivity is made.³⁰

Crossing boundaries

Another metaphor also connected to diversity which has been deeply formative in the DRC, and continues to be reconstructed anew is that of “crossing boundaries”.³² The boundaries of the reigning culture³³, or more commonly the boundaries between groups. This thread cannot be disconnected from the particular history of Dutch Reformed missionary practice, which during apartheid referred primarily to white people “reaching out” to black people,³⁴ and later particularly a mission across national borders³⁵, going towards the ends of the earth.³⁶

²⁷ West, T.C. 2006. *Disruptive Christian Ethics: when racism and women’s lives matter*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: pp. 119-120.

²⁸ NG Kerk. Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Theo, 2010-06-04; Linde Janse van Rensburg, 2010-06-23; Fanie Cronje, 2010-07-03, 2010-07-04; Piet Roos, 2010-06-22; Henrietta Klaasing, 2010-07-04].

²⁹ NG Kerk. Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Linde Janse van Rensburg, 2010-06-09].

³⁰ There is examples which deviate from this norm. Connecting diversity to inclusivity allow one participant in the online conversation to challenge the construction of white religious spaces by insisting that this would require changing language patterns in church so that apart from Afrikaans, other African languages would have to become part of liturgical spaces. Such suggestions do move towards suggestions for dismantling practices which keep white liturgical spaces white. (NG Kerk, Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Gerrit, 2010-06-04, 2010-06-28]).

³² “grense oorsteek” in Afrikaans.

³³ Marais, F. *Missionale perspektiewe op diversiteit*. Unpublished paper read at meeting of the Algemene Sinode Kommissie vir Diversiteitsbestuur. 24-25 Augustus 2010: p. 5.

³⁴ Bosch DJ. *Heil vir die wêreld: Die christelike sending in teologiese perspektief*. Pretoria: N.G. Kerk-Boekhandel, pp. 12-21.

³⁵ The Afrikaans “grense” is used in a number of ways, one of which can refer to the borders between countries. It also refer to various boundaries and divides between people.

Diversity is defined as connecting across boundaries, where the various aspects associated with diversity is considered the boundaries across which these connections should be established.³⁷ Diversity is described as love across the boundaries between people.³⁸

While this metaphor emphasizes a movement outside of the dominant white social space, it firmly situated the problem as the divide between black and white, rather than on the construction of dominant identities or positions of privilege and power. While these boundary crossing experiences carry the potential to provide crucial opportunities for challenging deeply held perceptions and prejudices, it reinforces the dominant position of the one who has the power to decide which boundaries should be crossed and under which circumstances.⁴⁰ The metaphor stress an increase in contact, and has the potential to create a religious rationale for deepening the knowledge between black and white South Africans, but runs the danger of reinforcing the same patterns which gave rise to it, failing to draw those using it deeper into investigating their own racialised identities.⁴²

To use the language of the metaphor: in reflecting on diversity, the boundaries between myself and others are stressed, but the boundary between where I am currently and a deeper consciousness of how I am giving meaning to my own whiteness often remain hidden. As with many missionary movements, the increased contact does not necessarily lead to a self-critical stance, and often guards against it.

Theological and ecclesial diversity

I add a few notes on this last thread, because of its importance in DRC-talk on diversity, and the fact that it illustrates one of the key pitfalls of drawing on diversity in general as a notion when addressing particular historic oppressive relations. As mentioned above, diversity has become an important concept in a variety of reflections within the DRC. In the particular conversations under discussion, questions of theological and ecclesial diversity were an important thread.

Different worldviews existing in our congregations (described as modern and post-modern) is described by one important contribution as the actual issue of diversity in the DRC⁴⁴. Others emphasize that different interpretations of scripture is important⁴⁵, or that different interpretations of key theological terms should be allowed⁴⁶. All of this is seen to be part of what constitutes diversity.

³⁶ Saayman, W. 2007. *Being missionary, being human: an overview of Dutch Reformed mission*.

Pietermaritzburg: Cluster publications.

³⁷ NG Kerk. Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Allemantig, 2010-07-02].

³⁸ NG Kerk. Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Henry, 2010-07-05].

⁴⁰ Sullivan discuss in detail a similar problematic concerning whites who consciously choose to move into predominantly black urban areas (Sullivan, S. 2006. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press: Kindle location 2052-2416).

⁴² Rieger's reflection how mission which focus on outreach or building relationships, rather than allowing others to critically engage the one crossing borders, so that the experience lead to deeper self-critique is relevant here. Crossing boundaries is predominantly associated with outreach or building relationships, but rarely engage the relations of power which is already present (Rieger, J. 2004. 'Theology and mission between neocolonialism and postcolonialism', *Mission Studies* (vol. 21 no. 1): pp. 201-227).

⁴⁴ Van Schalkwyk, J. Gedagtes rondom diversiteit. Unpublished paper read at Komissie vir Diversiteit. 24-25 August 2010.

⁴⁵ NG Kerk. Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Fanie Cronje, 2010-06-29].

⁴⁶ NG Kerk. Diversiteitsgroep. [Msg. Gerhard Bothma, 2010-07-05].

In this we see a particular religious version of the general thrust of diversity management, where diversity seems to uncritically incorporate every possible aspect of difference under the same concept.⁴⁷ This has the almost inevitable result that the issue of allowing room for different interpretations of scripture and the question of racism is seen as similar problems with similar solutions, thus silencing the particular social construction of race.

Evaluating 'diversity' from a critical perspective on whiteness

Apart from some preliminary limitations pointed out in how diversity is constructed theologically, I want to suggest three further ways in which the language of 'diversity', as used within this religious community, fails to provide language for a critical engagement with whiteness.

Essentializing race

A common critique of diversity literature is that it "naturalizes identities into objective entities, rather than acknowledging their socially constructed nature."⁴⁸ Race then become an a-historical and neutral biological marker, just one more aspect of difference, disconnected from the historic development of relations of power which continue to construct particular identities and influence the structuring of society. This simultaneously silences the reality of race, and also ignore the fact that these very concepts, if historically formed, can also change.⁴⁹

In most of the conversations references to "us" and "them" remain common language which all understand. While this theological understanding of diversity emphasize movement between the "us" and "them", it fails to critically consider what brought about the "us" and "them". Broadening 'diversity' to an endless array of possibilities might contribute to this, since this assumes that different personalities (to use one example) and issues of race can be treated similarly.

Race, to my mind, call for something different than recognizing all identities as a gift from God. It requires that we face not merely the divine origin, but the structural evil which produced a society where some benefit at the expense of others. Even when reproduced by drawing on theological language, 'diversity' seems to shy away from this challenge.

Recentring whiteness

Much has been written about hidden practices which recenter whiteness, language and habits which reproduce the assumption that whiteness is the norm against which everything else needs to be evaluated. Various parts of the language on diversity discussed above seem to repeat this phenomenon.

These rhetorical strategies fall into the habit of speaking about how "they" differ from "us", focussing primarily on "them". "We" should develop strategies to better understand "them", not ourselves, and difference is always measured from the perspective of this dominant position. In this way whiteness remain unexamined, and the problem of race remain outside of white identities, something which we can look towards as innocent bystanders.

⁴⁷ Holvina & Kamp. Diversity management. p. 398

⁴⁸ Zanon, P, Janssens, M, Benschop, Y & Nkomo S. 2010. Unpacking Diversity, Grasping Inequality: Rethinking Difference Through Critical Perspectives. *Organization* (Vol 17 Issue 1, January), p. 13.

⁴⁹ Sullivan. *Revealing whiteness*. p. 3.

Silencing discernment on power and oppression

Let me move towards the end by suggesting a deeply theological problem with the language of diversity. Jennings argues that in the early theological developments on race, race functions as a soteriological marker. The difficult discernment on redemption is bypassed and replaced by ordering creation so that white bodies reflect God's election, and black bodies are furthest away from God's salvific work.⁵¹ Thus we can easily know where to find the saving work of God by looking towards the elect white European.

But silence on the particularities of race, as opposed to other aspects associated with 'diversity', can similarly bypass a difficult process of discernment. The announcement of the kingdom of God which is disconnected from the articulation of the system of power in the face of which we call Jesus Lord easily become a vague theological statement without sociological effect. The theological reflections on diversity discussed above work with an eschatological vision of God's creation as diverse yet inclusive, where the boundaries, also racial divides, between people no longer define who we are. Yet, it unproblematically accepts the division of the world into black and white, as if these categories are somehow natural.

This theology of diversity disconnects white and black from its historic construction as a hierarchy of privilege and oppression. In such a reflection salvation is not found when the privileged are converted towards the cause of the oppressed, and where those who are white are called to recognize how their own identity are intertwined with the oppression of black people. Rather, salvation is found in an inclusive space which requires little to no conversion apart from an acceptance (at times translated as 'tolerance') of the 'other'. It becomes a one-sided emphasis on inclusion which does not struggle with the reality of historic injustices and systemic inequality.

Beyond diversity, engaging race

Rather than speaking about a universal task for the church in engaging racism, I want to focus on the particular responsibility associated with the social location of being white. Mary Hobgood define the ethical task facing those privileged as both exposing ourselves to alternative about those oppressed as well as exposing ourselves to new views about ourselves.⁵² It would seem that the religious language of 'diversity' provide creative avenues for pursuing the first half of this task, but fail to call the privileged towards the second half in any meaningful way.

Aspects of the conversations analysed, although not discussed in detail above, do however hold potential to open this door. In one paper developing out of the work of the commission, a particular form of missional theology is discussed which draw on the notion of *kenosis*, and explicitly connects this with a recognition of the privilege associated with whiteness in South Africa.⁵³ Furthermore, through the conversations between 2007 and 2011 a growing consensus emerged that one key aspects of addressing questions of race, gender and other forms of social oppression is to

⁵¹ Jennings, WJ. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Yale University Press: Kindle Locations 458-774.

⁵² Hobgood, ME. 2009. *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press: p. 38.

⁵³ Marais, F. Missionale perspektiewe op diversiteit.

theologically rethink the theological anthropology of the DRC. This, in part, lead to a change of focus from 'diversity' towards 'human dignity'.

Conclusion

While this language create theological constructs which invite a move out of an enclosed white space, it do not establish a theology which would critically engage the privileged position from which it originates nor challenge dominant spaces or positions of power, particularly when related to questions of race. While this challenge is not entirely rejected within the church rhetoric, the theological resources (or might it be moral will?) to engage in such a process remain largely absent.