

Resensies/Reviews

Smit, Dirk J. *Remembering theologians – Doing theology. Collected essays 5*, Vosloo, R. (Ed.) (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2013).

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Over the years, Dirkie Smit established himself as one of South Africa's pre-eminent theologians. The publication – by Sun Press – of his academic articles in the form of “Versamelde Opstelle” and “Collected Essays” – already five books up to date – furnishes ample reason why he is highly respected by fellow theologians. Not only is he exceptionally productive with an overwhelming output, but he is also encyclopaedically informed about developments in theology. More important, his work breathes a constructive graciousness that is truly impressive.

In the foreword to the fifth volume, *Remembering theologians – Doing theology*, editor Robert Vosloo draws attention to particular features of Smit's academic work: the centrality of the notion of *conversation* and the importance of *friendship*. Doing theology implies listening to others in the present and in the past, respecting their views, and engaging in the dialogue. Our own theology is shaped by conversation partners and, in the process, we also exert some influence. This fifth volume of essays by Smit has a unique form: it comprises occasional work written expressly for specific people, events or celebrations, as reflected in the alphabetic order. We come across the names of Ackermann, Barth, Calvin, De Gruchy, Durand, Gadamer, Lategan, Moltmann, Tracy, Wainwright, Welker, and several others. The essays reveal occasional interactions with a large number of “friends”.

It is impossible to distil this volume of articles *thematically*. The thirty-seven articles in Afrikaans and English address a wide range of topics: the Christology of Van de Beek, the theology of the Belhar confession, the ethics of responsibility of De Villiers, the meaning of history, the resurrection of Christ, and the list continues. However, the names of Calvin and Barth re-occur, history as well as the church emerge on several occasions. This collection of essays could be read as a window to some of the most prominent and significant discussions in the South African theological landscape. Whilst written for specific people as contribution to either Festschriften or various celebrations, the collection registers a sensitive antenna for the issues and dilemmas of our time. It attempts to retrieve the continuing significance of resources in the Reformed intellectual arsenal (for example, the theology of Calvin or confessions such as the Belgica) in order to address pressing ecclesial issues such as unity, or the social imperative of justice. The gravitation to the Reformed

heritage, the crucial role of the church and the inescapable social task of the Christian community cannot be missed.

Although it is impossible, in the limited purview of a review, to summarise the extremely rich contribution of the articles, we could draw attention to one integrating thread – a unique *manner of doing theology*. It is quite possible to read the articles with the aim of studying Smit's approach to systematic theology. The article, *Quo vadis, sistematiесе teologie?*, is an extremely important contribution and deserves careful attention. It conveys an impression not only of Smit's vast learning, but also of what doing systematic theology entails. He identifies five perspectives: critical reflection on what constitutes the identity of the Christian faith, that is the Trinitarian confession; engagement with existential issues such as subjectivity, rationality and historicity; reaction to the spirit of the time – that is secularisation and spirituality, post-modernity and fundamentalism, as well as globalisation and ecology; conversation with non-Western theology, other theological and non-theological disciplines, public life and the church, other Christian traditions and with systematic theology itself, and finally worship and praise of God. These five perspectives provide a fruitful entry into the intuitions governing Smit's theology: an insistence on the uniqueness of the Christian faith; her catholic openness; her social responsibility, but also her doxological orientation. This vision could hardly be improved, and should be carefully heeded.

It is a very difficult task to evaluate the articles in this volume, as they do not aim to address one single research problem. They are occasional essays and consistently well informed and coherently argued. Any evaluation should place them intertextually in the context of Smit's entire oeuvre to determine the recurring motifs and pre-occupations. They should also be placed in the context of the history of systematic theology in South Africa; this move may reveal their particular quality. With Smit's work, South African systematic theology has come of age. Although it still has a strong Reformed orientation, it embodies a theological, philosophical and social openness and scope not, arguably, witnessed previously in South Africa.

We might demur the claim in the Introduction (p. viii) that these conversations “come from all communities and traditions”. This is just too pretentious. Contemporary theological discourses have become too variegated, too pluralistic that one could make such a claim. Despite their wide scope, the essays in this volume remain Protestant, masculine, Western and middle-class oriented. No experience behind a text, no world evoked by a text could ever be adequately inclusive. Every text will have its contingency and its limitations. Conversations with non-Christian religions,

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with Christian traditions such as the Orthodox and Pentecostalism, with women, with postcolonial African intellectuals, with natural science and the arts are conspicuously absent. The imperative of epistemological transformation in higher education in South Africa has made us sensitive to issues such as perspective, representivity and inclusivity with regard to intellectual traditions and the production of knowledge. No theologian, even the most gifted, could ever engage in all conversations. But some voices and their concerns do claim our attention, especially those representing a subaltern experience, and those from our own continent. The “turn to the South” has not yet been embraced by systematic theologians labouring at institutions of higher learning in South Africa. This remains a conversation that should be started. But, the conversations reflected in this volume should be overheard, and heeded. They are fascinating and important.

Prof. R. Venter
Department of Systematic Theology
Faculty of Theology
University of the Free State
South Africa