

**RADICAL ORTHODOXY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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J. ROSSOUW**

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# RADICAL ORTHODOXY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## EDITORIAL

Before I address the specific contributions in this special edition of *Acta Theologica*, first a word on how this edition came about.

The first edition of what turned out to be one of the foundational texts of what became known as the intellectual movement of Radical Orthodoxy (RO), John Milbank's *Theology and social theory: Beyond secular reason* was published in 1990. Something of this seminal book's impact is conveyed in the two blurbs on the back cover of the second edition, published in 2006. According to Stanley Hauerwas, the book "has proven to be a bombshell", while Charles Taylor writes that when "the first edition was published, the reaction was one of shock". Why was this so?

As with many great works, the answer to this question often depends on who is asked. Since there is no neutral view from which we can assess the various possible answers, I would rather answer this question from where I am nowadays as a formerly Protestant and now Christian Orthodox Afrikaner who read for a BA (with majors in Philosophy and Psychology), an Honours and a Master's degree in Philosophy between 1989 and 1998.

Those ten years coincided with the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid. It was a time of great social, political and intellectual fermentation. At the time, Afrikaans was still a medium of instruction at the universities of Pretoria, South Africa, Johannesburg (formerly Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit), Potchefstroom (now the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University), the Free State, Port Elizabeth (now Nelson Mandela University), and Stellenbosch.

Many of the academics at these universities, under whom my peers and I studied, pursued postgraduate studies in the Low Countries, Germany and France. However, when the cultural boycott was imposed on South Africa from the early 1970s, it became very difficult, if not impossible, for Afrikaner students to study in these countries. One of the consequences of the cultural boycott was that the Afrikaans academic world was slowly cut off from its interaction with the Dutch, Flemish, German and French academic world, with the result that "international" gradually became equated with "English", the Anglo-American cultural sphere. The irony of this is nearly incomprehensible, given the Afrikaans language's long struggle for parity with English in South Africa.

By the time I became a student, first at the University of Pretoria (to read for my BA and my Honours degrees) and then at the University of South Africa (for my Master's degree), French-inspired postmodern

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philosophy read in English translation was all the rage at these universities. Like neophytes being initiated into a secret society, we had the names of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze and Levinas on our lips as if they were passwords for the gatherings of this secret society.

In hindsight, this had everything to do with a reaction to the levels of oppression reached by the apartheid dispensation in the 1980s. From this vantage point, it is understandable that, for instance, Lyotard's notion of postmodernity as the end of grand narratives could joyfully be applied to the end of the grand narrative that apartheid undoubtedly was. In what states of intellectual intoxication could one claim, along with Foucault, that apartheid itself was a variety of Bentham's Panopticon? Or breathlessly embrace all kinds of otherness, with Derrida and Levinas cheering us on?

There is no question that this was good as long as it lasted, at least until the turn of the century. By then, a certain degree of disillusionment with the "new" South Africa began to set in among the Afrikaner intellectuals for whom French postmodernism represented a way out from the ruins of the stifling apartheid system. This disillusionment could be ascribed to a number of factors, including the slow erosion of Afrikaans as a language of public affairs, private enterprise and academia; the growing realisation of what it meant to be a minority governed by the majority whom your people oppressed in the past, and the growing impact of globalisation on the formerly artificially isolated South Africa. The future that these Afrikaner intellectuals in the 1990s confidently framed as the dialectical opposite of apartheid now suddenly seemed very messy and uncertain. In a word, once the uncertainty and indeterminacy so celebrated by French postmodernism against the background of a very powerful and stable French state started to make itself felt in the very different post-apartheid South African context, these Afrikaner intellectuals realised the growing need for a new intellectual basis from which Afrikaners could be re-imagined as a community.

Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* was published in a specifically British and more broadly Western context of full-blown secularisation. Undoubtedly, much of the shock value of the book stemmed from the fact that Milbank took on the, by then, dominant secular paradigm of social theory in that cultural sphere. Not only did he have the gusto to tear into the "subtractive" thesis of secularisation – that once all the "irrational" aspects of being human such as religion and superstition are stripped away, "neutral" reason will gloriously emerge – but he also went on to argue that political science, political economy and sociology and their disciplinary authority all rested on the reworking of Christian theological motifs – a reworking that built on late-medieval Latin Christendom's civil

war between the “realists” and the “nominalists”. Cries of heresy rang out all across secular Western academia.

As Graham Ward explains in his contribution to this special edition, the term “Radical Orthodoxy” was consciously embraced in the title of a collection that he co-edited a few years later. Ward’s own academic career began with literary studies and a friendly engagement with French postmodernism in a theological framework, whereas Catherine Pickstock opened her classical first book, *After writing: On the liturgical consummation of philosophy* (1998), with a devastating critique of Derrida’s reading of the *Phaedrus*, essentially accusing Derrida of being on the side of the same, and claiming Platonically inspired Christianity of being on the side of the different.

Although Milbank, Ward and Pickstock thus engaged in styles varying from hostile to friendly with French postmodernism, there is no question that, in their own literary style echoing that of the French postmodernists, they became by far the most stimulating interlocutors of French postmodernism. As Milbank points out in the first interview below, their engagement with French postmodernism was partly due to the fact that, by then, French postmodernism had become very influential in the British humanities – as was to be the case at Afrikaans universities from the late 1980s.

The leading RO thinkers thus undertook their work as a minority in their own context, a minority of High Anglican Christians in a context dominated by secular assumptions and French postmodern influences. Afrikaner intellectuals who started embracing RO ideas from the 2000s also did so as a minority – not as a religious minority in a secular context, but as a cultural minority in a mostly Christian country under the rule of an African nationalist party.

While there is no question that secularisation also began to gain momentum among Afrikaner intellectuals, what with South Africa’s sudden exposure to all the forces of globalisation that had previously been kept at bay artificially, those Afrikaner intellectuals who started engaging with RO did so with a growing realisation that many secular and liberal ideas had also crept into Christianity as practised by Afrikaners in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. These ideas include a growing emphasis on individual experience as the highest norm of faith; the emphasis of rights above duties; the rejection of politics and the embrace of the free market as the highest form of human activity, and so on.

Although I cannot claim to speak as an authority on Afrikaner theology of the past three decades or so, my own engagement over this period of time

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with Afrikaner theologians and pastors left me with the strong impression that many Afrikaner theologians and pastors of the mainstream Afrikaner Protestant churches enthusiastically embraced French postmodernism as an ally in their ever-tougher struggle to inspire their students and their congregations. Perhaps this was then a case of what Ross Douhat described in *Bad religion: How we became a nation of heretics* (2012) in the American context as “accommodationism”, that is, mainstream traditional American churches striving to become more with-it (or more like the world, in theological parlance), only to end up completely indistinguishable from other cultural influences and to lose all relevance.

Whatever the case may be, at many of the, by now, formerly Afrikaans universities at the time of writing this introduction, many Afrikaner academics of my generation in theology and philosophy still calmly invoke the hallowed names of the French postmodernists – as if the exciting work of their (Christian) peers in RO had gone completely unnoticed.

If one studies the work of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century prominent Afrikaner intellectuals such as Versfeld, Louw and Degenaar, it is striking to what extent they were prepared to think with reference to their own context. Writers such as Schoeman, Breytenbach, John Miles, Dana Snyman and Kleinboer did and still do that, but this is much less the case among contemporary Afrikaner philosophers and theologians. Could it be because the former continued writing in Afrikaans, while the latter increasingly turned to English? Is it a coincidence that the small group of Afrikaner intellectuals who engaged with RO maintain a strong link to the Afrikaans language and to their cultural identity?

Many will disagree with the above paragraph, but it was certainly based on these judgements that I, in 2014, approached Helenè van Tonder, at that time a lecturer in Church History in the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State, to co-organise a seminar in May 2015 on RO in a South African context. It was our hope that this seminar and the eventual publication of the various contributions could help introduce RO in a South African context as a valuable dialogue partner. John Milbank and Graham Ward enthusiastically accepted our invitation. The South African presenters were John de Gruchy (possibly the first South African theologian to seriously engage RO), Danie Goosen, Jaco Kruger and myself. Ultimately, over 70 people from across South Africa attended the event, which took place in an atmosphere of creativity and conviviality.

Due to circumstances, De Gruchy’s excellent contribution on the science-religion debate was not available for this special edition. Milbank’s

contribution at the seminar had since been published elsewhere, but he graciously contributed another publication for this special edition.

This special edition opens with the same contribution that opened the seminar, namely a transcription of an interview with Milbank and Ward on RO from its beginnings to the present conducted by Goosen and Kruger. This interview provides a good introduction to RO for anybody who is not familiar with it, while it also offers some very productive developments of key themes in RO, including its Christian critique of late capitalism and a theology of participation and ritual.

Following on this interview, Graham Ward in his contribution, which was written especially for the seminar, retraces the context in which RO arose, and explains what he views as the distinctive characteristics of RO. Ward stresses that RO is still very much work-in-progress, and he hopes that South Africans will contribute to RO on their own terms and from within their own context. As he poetically puts it:

However broad its ecumenical vision, this is what RO cannot do for South African theology. It cannot reflect the textures of the stars, clusters, clouds, nebulae – that you see in this hemisphere. It cannot reflect the rejoicing when rain clouds with flashing lightning gather on the horizon of the *veld*. It cannot, in its English, carry the guttering inflexions of the *trekboere* or the sound of water and birds in the clicks and vowels of Xhosa. To be in touch with these beauties, to be resonant with these beauties, is what South African theology can do – and, in doing so, it will modulate, in its own key, the emphases in RO upon participation and sacramentality. If RO has any place in the complex histories, linguistics and materialities of South Africa, then that place lies in fostering a theology that is not White, western and, on the whole, male. In doing that, the ecumenical vision is broadened, and so is RO ... (see p.39-40 of this edition)

The next contribution is that of Milbank. This interview, given early in 2017 for a Swiss Protestant audience, is now published for the first time in English in this edition. In this interview, Milbank presents at least two important aspects for a South African readership. First, he critically reflects on the unfolding of RO so far and discusses promising future paths to be explored, including a closer engagement with the Bible. Secondly, he pays particular attention to the mostly fruitful and constructive engagement between RO and Protestantism. He concludes that RO is broad and sufficiently flexible to learn from and to influence the contemporary Protestant world. The tone of the interview is undoubtedly more an improvisation than an academic article, but in its jazzy way it contains an astonishing number of insights and suggestions for future philosophical and theological reflection.

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The remaining three contributions come from three of the four South African participants in the seminar. All three of them engage intimately with the issues of post-apartheid South Africa in dialogue with RO.

In his contribution, Danie Goosen builds on RO's critique of modernist metaphysics and its apology for Platonic-Christian metaphysics to criticise the metaphysical underpinnings of apartheid and post-apartheid. He suggests that the Afrikaners could, on the condition of rediscovering their older adherence to the Platonic-Christian heritage, contribute to a more communal South African modernity.

Jaco Kruger, in his contribution, brings Bruno Latour into a conversation with RO. Kruger points out the value of Latour's process-bound notion of politics for post-apartheid South Africa, but judges it to lack the kind of reconciliation that is still needed in South Africa. He then builds on RO's ontology of participation to argue for the central role that the Church could play in reconciliation in this country.

In my own contribution, which closes this special edition, I attempt to view South Africa as a mostly Christian country between tradition and modernity. In light of this assessment of South Africa, I ask what a more liturgically sensitive South Africa would be like, speculating on the embrace of the local and the provincial in university and church.

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