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Kobus Schoeman: A “bridge-builder” practical theologian, bridging divides in the publics of the church, the academy, and society

ABSTRACT

The concept of “bridge-builder” is used within the context of higher education, understood as a form of engaged scholarship, where researchers function within both the academy and their field of practice or industry. The article focuses on the academic contribution of Prof. Kobus Schoeman whose career can be described as revolving between society, his work as a spiritual leader and minister within the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (DRC), and as academic/researcher at the Universities of Pretoria and the Free State. The article focuses first on how his sociology background impacted on his understanding of the church and, more specifically, congregations as a researchable phenomenon, and how insights and experience in statistical analysis accompanied his theological journey and its positive implications for the three publics. Secondly, the article focuses on his theological contribution, illustrated through the themes in his writings, the students he supervised, as well as the projects he led with colleagues locally and globally. Thirdly, the article considers the impact of these two publics ecumenically and societally for the South African context and its global relevance. These endeavours show the many ways in which Schoeman can be described as



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a “bridge-builder” who refused to be irrelevant and impractical in his theological journey and who demonstrates how the local congregation can become a safe space for reflexive praxis, an “ecclesiology from below” in the truest sense.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “bridge-builder” can be used in a multidisciplinary way and is understood as a form of engaged scholarship, where researchers function within both the academy and their field of practice or industry. The article focuses on the academic contribution of Prof. Kobus Schoeman, whose career can be described as engaged scholarship, revolving between the academy, the church, and society. Schoeman (2020a:94) defines ecclesiology as the “critical interaction between theology, church, and society”, underscoring the importance of theological reflection on the relationship between these three domains. The basis for his interest in “real-life problems” or context, his understanding of “lived religion”,¹ and the role that missional congregations can play would categorise his work in the academy, church, and society. The article uses the three publics of theology,² church, academy, and society³ as headings to outline and appreciate the contributions of Prof. W.J. Schoeman, fondly known as Kobus among friends and colleagues.

2. ENGAGING THE CHURCH AS MINISTER

Kobus Schoeman can be described as a “bridge-builder theologian”, joining the University of the Free State as a young theological student, aspiring to become a pastor to serve the purpose of God for his generation, and qualifying as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). After the completion of his theological studies, Kobus embarked on a Masters in Sociology without knowing that this detour into social sciences would lay

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- 1 Ganzevoort & Roeland (2014:93) describe “praxis” as the object of reflection for practical theology, emphasising action or the way in which religion is lived. They identify the three styles of doing practical theology with Tracy’s (1981) three audiences as pastoral theology (audience of the church); empirical theology (audience of the academy), and public theology (the audience of society).
 - 2 Robinson & Smit (1996) use the emergence of Tracy’s “sociological imagination” to discuss the three publics of theology, church, academy, and society for the South African context, deriving from this that an awareness of social location or context raises questions about public responsibility and the integrity of theological education.
 - 3 Thyssen & Davis (2021) also follow Tracy’s three publics of theology to appreciate the role of the late Prof. Mary Ann Plaatjies Van Huffel, considering “the form of her intellectual life within these publics”.

the foundation for his “ecclesiology from below”. During his conscription time in the Air Force, Kobus served as a chaplain and experienced the pain and heartache of families whose lives were changed through the loss of life and abilities. His compassion for the weak and the hurt was further formed in the Air Force. It would become a central part of his ecclesial journey, demonstrating the love of God for people through the local congregation, by its members and leaders. Kobus opted for a quest to understand the web of life, be informed by the lived experiences of people, and the role of the local congregation as a space of grace and reflexive praxis.

At first, he was a pastor in the DRC, serving specifically the congregations of DRC Riveira and DRC Witbank. In these ministry years as full-time minister, he had the privilege to serve people living with disabilities, a marginalised group of society, together with his wife Heiletta. In this instance, he was touched with the faith of these differently abled members of the body of Christ and the patience required from bodily abled persons to accept, genuinely care, and serve in ministry with them as equal partners in the kingdom of God.

3. ENTERING THE DOOR OF THE ACADEMY AS PRACTICAL THEOLOGIAN

After his career as a full-time minister and as a chaplain in the South African Air Force, Kobus joined the University of Pretoria as part-time lecturer (2000-2008) and later the University of the Free State as Associate Professor (2009-2018) and Full Professor in Practical and Missional Theology (2019) until his retirement. In his academic career as professional theologian and researcher that spans over more than twenty years, starting at the University of Pretoria and concluding at the University of the Free State, Prof. Schoeman would put his qualifications and expertise at work, with qualifications in Sociology (Masters in Sociology) and Theology (B.Th, Honours Theology, Masters, and Doctorate in Theology). During this time, he supervised numerous Masters and Doctoral students alone and as co-supervisor, also leading the Department of Practical and Missional Theology and fulfil research roles in the Faculty and in other institutions nationally and globally. He also served as editor and board member for many local and internationally esteemed journals while he published articles in journals, wrote chapters in books, and published some of his own.

Naming all of his works would entail another article in itself but, from some of his contributions as a prolific writer, researcher, and supervisor, one can observe a golden thread running through the mind of Kobus, in his own

words, to develop an “ecclesiology from below” (Schoeman2020b:96). He contrasts or rather compares an ecclesiology from above, which is a more general historical view of church history (deductive), with an ecclesiology from below that is more a form of comparative ecclesiology as it is found in congregational studies (inductive). Schoeman (2020b:98) emphasises the role of the church in the world through the everyday lives of the believers, which requires both theological reflection about the practices of the church and empirical analysis of the socio-economic context.

One can simply do a basic scan through some of his articles, chapter contributions, books, and topics supervised with his Masters and Doctoral students to find that thread. Schoeman (2020b:100-101) proposes a framework that can be used in understanding the interrelated role, task, and position of the local congregation in society and the local context, consisting of the essence of the congregation (identity), self-understanding of the congregation (lived theology), context and society (ecology), and spiritual and communal discernment (communal hermeneutical process). Starting already with his doctoral thesis that he completed in 2002, the theme of “a Practical theological basis theory for congregational analysis” emphasises the importance of the local congregation in his work. In his theory, Kobus believed that religion and, in particular, congregations can play a role in the demographic context of South Africa, through not only lip-service but also active engagement. This is illustrated with his observation that religion as a category last featured in the national statistics of South Africa in 2001 and was totally omitted in later years. After his consultation with StatsSA, religion was included as a category in the General Household Survey (2013 and 2016) and became part of the national census in 2022.

The focus on the congregation was further expanded in his inaugural lecture as full professor at the University of the Free State, entitled “Re-imagining the congregations calling – Moving from isolation to involvement” (Schoeman 2020b). He wanted to integrate the different dimensions in the study of congregations into a coherent framework, which he undertook not only as an academic exercise but also as a fellow traveller with his colleagues and students. He also personifies this involvement, which he expected from the congregation, with his ecumenical and global academic efforts. One can simply follow the themes of his articles and book chapters to get this sense of an engaged theologian.

The focus on the vitality of congregations defines the life work of Kobus, especially through his involvement in the *Kerk Spieël* (Church in the Mirror) project since 1988 and how this project of the DRC has evolved into a multinational and ecumenical project, continued through the Church Life Survey (CLS) and the Australia-based National Church Life Survey (NCLS). Schoeman (2020c:157) maintains the hope that the NCLS may “enhance a

contemporary ecclesiology from below”. Some of the findings from these projects were published in his book, *Church in the mirror: Developing contemporary ecclesiologies* (2020). According to Schoeman (2020d:3), the profile of the congregation is a valuable instrument to assess the church and move it from focusing merely on maintenance to the mission of the church. Especially the vitality or the decline of congregations holds huge implications for believers at both an individual and communal level (Schoeman 2020c:141).

Another important development that further supported Schoeman’s thesis that the church should not be an enclave but rather an alternative community in the world is the DRC’s embracing of the concept of a missional ecclesiology (Schoeman 2020e:109). Still focusing on the identity, calling, and purpose of the ministry of the congregation, Schoeman now uses a missional ecclesiology as a theoretical framework based on the triune God who sends the church into the world. The missional calling of the church is part of its identity. Emanating from the findings in his research, Schoeman (2020e:112) asserts that congregations in the DRC now view their outreach orientation as part of their missional calling. Schoeman (2020e:119) concludes that “a missional orientation could just as well enhance the ministry of the congregation and motivate them to move beyond maintenance”. Challenging the idea of a movement from “maintenance to mission”, Nell (2020) suggests that the balance between maintenance and mission can be found in the word “inclusion”.

Kobus lived “inclusion” by opening the door for the study of the vitality of congregations in diverse ecumenical settings. In the following paragraphs, his research and supervision profile further confirms how he revolved between these diverse settings. The first example is the study among congregations in the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Venter & Schoeman 2020). Another example is a study done in the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, where the role of multicultural congregations in social cohesion is investigated within a Pentecostal context (Andrew, Schoeman & Botes 2021). Kobus could easily move from a focus on children as vulnerable groups and their faith formation in the home and congregation in his supervision (Schoeman 2017) to women as victims of domestic violence (Mahomvah, Bredenkamp & Schoeman 2020).

An interesting theme about reconstructing local ecclesiologies is also explored in his work with Maritz in the Ebenhezer community in the Western Cape, a mission historically founded by the Rhenish Mission that became part of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). In this instance, the identity of the congregation is meant to be reconstructed, if it were to be relevant to this community,

bad memories about their forceful relocation, lack of trust between community members, unattended expectations of the older people, and everyday confrontations of unused buildings

bring hardly any effort for reconciliation and forgiveness (Maritz & Schoeman 2020:254).

Congregational leadership has a role to play in facilitating healing, building social capital, and rebuilding hope for the community to flourish. Schoeman and Mostert (2020:86) explore the theological identity of the congregation, stating that there might be a gap between the desired identity of the congregation and its current empirical reality, calling for a change of heart that embraces diversity and that grasps where they are now and the need to move towards God’s desire. A shift is made possible when certain practices towards inclusivity are undertaken in multicultural congregation, including contact with and appreciation of diversity; grasping God’s desire as revealed in Scripture (Acts 10), and building cultural competencies (Schoeman & Mostert 2020:87). Shifts towards inclusivity are possible when leadership is part of the process with eschatological imagination, opening up possibilities of transformation.

With his paradigm “ecclesiology from below”, Schoeman displays how the identity, contexts, and self-understanding define a local ecclesiology and how it can also be a researchable phenomenon as it exists as a social reality that can be analysed empirically.⁴ Kobus also framed these projects more locally by including congregations in townships⁵ to further engage scholarship and put the “lived experience” of congregations in diverse contexts to the test. Findings from this project were presented with the theme “Evaluating township congregations in challenging times – A South African perspective” at the conference of the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology in Italy (2022). Pali and Schoeman (2020:223) find that the DRC Africa in the Free State tends to enclave itself by remaining faithful to the traditional approaches to ministry that stifle freedom and creativity, leading to a decline in vitality. Pali and Schoeman (2020:224) report that a shift is taking place among members and leaders who are more open to embrace contemporary ecclesiological approaches.

4 In one of his major works, *The exploration of Congregations in South Africa*, Schoeman (2015:2) describes practical theology as a hermeneutical enterprise that works with both text and context; it is both theological and practical and includes both public and private life.

5 Townships in South Africa are telling the tale of two cities, the suburban areas are more middle class, wealthy, and previously White, while the townships are impoverished, mostly Black areas in South Africa (Mangayi 2018).

Some of the features of such a contemporary ecclesiology in township congregations listed, among others, the Africanising of the Christian message, worship and liturgies, which remain characteristic of the DRCA. The second feature of such a contemporary ecclesiology is that it is a Black and African liberation ecclesiology that liberates members from Eurocentric ecclesiology and White imperialism. Pali and Schoeman (2020:226) observe that the legacy of paternalistic practices and dependency on a missiological framework that undermines African agency to serve in independently, self-propagating, and self-managing from White ministers and the DRC remains a challenge. They conclude that the DRCA Free State needs “self-reflection to liberate itself from the legacy of white imperialism influencing its ecclesiological practises”. With congregations and denominations being dependant on their mother churches and missionary organisations, Pali and Schoeman (2020:232) conclude that the markers of a contemporary ecclesiology can lead to ministry renewal when there is a shift towards discernment by the Holy Spirit and a creative theological response to what it means to be a church in an African context.

A third and fourth feature of a contemporary ecclesiology in Africa is facing its civic responsibilities, addressing social ills through the activism of its members and the prophetic role of its leaders. Pali and Schoeman (2020:227) observe that the DRCA is involved in social relief projects; However, a lack of social activism and prophetic leadership still prevails. The last feature of a contemporary ecclesiology is its focus on a missional ecclesiology that Pali and Schoeman (2020:227) regard as still being rooted in the legacy of the missionary outreach of White missionaries to Black unbelievers. Such a narrow view of mission neglects the view of mission as part of the congregational identity, resulting in social in-activism by the DRCA.

4. ENGAGED GLOCALLY: WORKING WITHIN BOTH LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Kobus refused to do a theology that was not contextually relevant and globally impactful, knowing him personally, in a bold humility. This already prevails in some of the projects and partnerships mentioned earlier. In the above contributions, it is evident that Kobus could work within his own context as a DRC minister, supervise students from diverse ecumenical contexts, and deal with topics of an intersectional, decolonial, and transformative nature that impacts on the church or congregation, the academy, and society.

Any survey of his works would be incomplete if no mention is made of his long and fruitful relationship with Chris Hermans and other role players on the global scene of theology. Most of the work he did with Chris focused on issues of methodological concern in practice-oriented research in the field of practical theology. Skimming over some of the themes on which they worked and the published books and journals can give one an indication of Kobus the global theologian, being comfortable within local and global contexts. Some of the themes they explored include the utility of practical theology, where they mapped out the domain, goals, strategies, and criteria for practical research; the use of survey research in practical theology and congregational studies, and the role of practice-oriented research in designing interventions (Hermans & Schoeman 2015). The latest contributions of the duo, entitled *Theology in an age of contingency* (2019) and *Resilient religion, resilience and heartbreaking adversity* (2023) were prepared for the series International Practical Theology.

Mention is not even made of his attendance and contributions at international conferences such as the Society of the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) Congress in Tampa, Florida, USA (2007); the International Academy of Practical Theology in Amsterdam and Pretoria (2011, 2015); the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) in Finland (2013), and the International Society of Empirical Research in Theology in Finland and Italy (2018, 2022). The purpose of this is not to provide a detailed and exhaustive list of all the work of Kobus Schoeman. My fellow contributors have also much to offer, but I simply intend to demonstrate his ability to build a bridge between the three publics of theology in a global, ecumenical, intersectional, intergenerational, and decolonial way. Schoeman (2020a) is pleading for a missional ecclesiology that takes the role of the local congregation, as sent by the *missio Trinitas*, seriously, where every member is empowered by the Spirit to engage in the world in a life-giving and transformative way. In that sense, true discipleship⁶ takes place and the voice of the congregation⁷ is heard by servant leaders who position the congregation as an alternative community. A comparative ecclesiology from below that serves the purpose of God for this and future generations. In order to do this, the markers of such an ecclesiology should be considered Africanisation of ministerial practices, revisiting the

6 Nel & Schoeman (2019) regard discipleship as a missing link in missional conversations and opt for the term “discipling”, that is faith-sharing in everyday life, as a way of getting rid of the negative connotations towards becoming a vital ingredient of being church.

7 In his article in honour of Prof. Johan Cilliers, Schoeman (2019a) argues for the lived religion and theological understanding of the congregation as an important marker through which the text and context become a voice of the congregation through preaching.

Black and African ecclesiological roots of congregations, not confining the congregation only to individual members but be part of society, following the tradition of prophetic ecclesiology, and to be missional in ministry.

5. THE THREE PUBLICS: ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

The life and work of Kobus Schoeman emulate what engaged scholarship for the discipline of theology but also the church, the academy, and society may mean to move from isolation or the ivory tower approach to academic work to a more involved, inclusive, participative, and transformative approach. The four movements from being an enclave to a community of embracement as Schoeman (2017) explains is not an easy journey, but it implies opening one's arms as an invitation and as a safe space for the other to come in; to wait patiently and listen; a reciprocal act of embracement, and lastly, to open one's arms again.

Being an engaged scholar also means having the ability to work in a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary way, and that is clearly demonstrated in Kobus' work. Considering the road ahead for practical theology together with his colleagues in the department, Schoeman, Laubscher, Pali and Van den Berg (2012:129) argue for an openness that includes cooperation across disciplinary boundaries. They view practical theology as playing a leadership role in intra-, inter- and multidisciplinary approaches to knowledge production and learning, being part of multiple sources of sense-making. It is a move away from the traditional silo mentality, towards a preference for an intra-, inter- and multidisciplinary cooperation (Schoeman *et al.* 2012:139).

In his life and work, Kobus opened his arms for the other and released them with mutual respect for others, embracing one's shared human dignity, cultivating honest and open dialogue and reciprocal teachability. Fulfilling one's missional calling in bold humility. Kobus proves through his work that a contextualised and decolonised framework will take local voices into account and give expression to the statement of developing an "ecclesiology from below". It will also help one frame one's teaching and learning differently, instead of "decontextualising" the other but to really be alert to the challenges facing the church, academy, and society. One is not simply producing ministers for the church but one is also forming agents of change that revolves in these three publics.

Engaging the pragmatic task of Osmer (2008), Schoeman (2021) investigates the influence of contingency on changes in society, church, and congregations. Using his passion for evidence-based research through

statistical analysis, Schoeman (2021:127) analyses the religious landscape and the role faith communities can play to heal the divisions from the past that remain in the present through reconciliation. He concludes that the

empirical data on the religious landscape, inequality, race and reconciliation illustrates the complexities of the challenges and the choices that face religious organisations in dealing with the challenges in the South African society.

In this instance, one can see how the door swung open towards the religious pluralist landscape of South Africa, opening the space to be inclusive for interreligious dialogue.

Even churches are challenged to “create a strategy for a humble, open and vulnerable space to enable difficult conversations”. Schoeman (2019b:133) argues that contingency challenges churches to build ecclesial spaces from below that are inclusive, enable listening to each other and the marginalised, adopt leadership styles that are not autocratic but pragmatic, adaptive, and flexible. Part of the strategic task outlined by Schoeman (2019b:134-135) is a “decentring process” of listening that takes into account the repositioning of religion within the South African society; the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations and the influence of the religious market and consumerism; the ethical responsibility of communities of faith in an unequal society such as South Africa; the consequences of contingency for so-called mainline churches; its impact on the development of a contextual and missional theology, and relevant, transformative leadership within a complex and changing context.

Embracing an “ecclesiology from below” has become a lens through which he can explore text and context critically and outline certain markers that will help one move forward in current and future times of contingency, globally, intersectionally, and intergenerationally. Schoeman (2023:131) has this to say about a congregational response to adversity:

listening, critical discerning, challenging adversity and a relevant prophetic response are necessary discernment capacities for the congregation to develop in discerning the text and context and developing a resilient framework.

In addition, the congregation as a community of practice has a symbiotic relationship with the community because their members live in both worlds. For the congregations’ engagement with the community, a missional orientation is needed to prevent isolation from it or forming itself into an enclave. Schoeman (2023:139) advocates that a

congregation as a community of discernment and good practice may develop and enhance a resilience in response to adversity in the community and society.

6. SYNTHESIS

Reviewing and appreciating the life and work of Kobus Schoeman in one essay is almost an impossible task but having other contributors spread the task among many of us, different nuances can be captured by each one. The purpose of this contribution was to use Tracy's "sociological imagination"⁸ of the three publics or contexts in which we do theology, namely the church, academy, and society, in order to appreciate Kobus Schoeman as a bridge-building theologian who emulates engaged scholarship from his initiation into theology until the conclusion of an impactful professional academic career.

Indeed, his work gives expression to the Reformed credo, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the church is always in a process of reformation. Becoming a space of grace requires opening the arms for the other, mutual embracing, deep and emphatic listening, and opening the arms to release the other for service. In this sense, an "ecclesiology from below" becomes transformative for the church, the academy, and society.

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8 Tracy (1981) borrows from Wright Mills (1959) the concept of "sociological imagination", an idea that seeks to understand the relation between the individual and society, and applies the concept of "analogical imagination" to describe the three publics of theology.

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