

The Religion and Social Transformation Research Niche Area

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1 Introduction

Initiated in 2002, the Durban site of the School of Religion and Theology has worked towards the establishing of a Research Niche Area, called Religion and Social Transformation. The Niche Area has four research programs, in which staff and students may register their particular research topics, namely 1) Religion and Civil Society; 2) Religion and Counseling; 3) Religion, Globalisation and Poverty; and 4) the Southern African Religion and Culture Encyclopedia. On the one hand, these programs function as areas which provide scope and possibilities for new research and production of knowledge which is decidedly different from previous focuses mainly determined by Theological and traditional Science of Religion agendas. The main difference is that the programs and the different research topics all have a contextual focus, as well as have to include critical reflection on 'social transformation'. On the other hand the programs function as administrative units through which staff and students may apply for research funding and scholarships.

In this paper, I briefly highlight some of the thinking which has gone into the establishing of the Niche Area, sharing perspectives which may be significant for other similar programs. I briefly look at the Niche Area's focus, background and current relevance, situation assessment and challenges, and the scope and rationale for the research program as a whole, and for the four main project areas.

2 Focus of Research Niche Area

This is a multi-religious research program concerning the role Religion as discipline and religious formations could play in social transformation, and the cultivation of an open, democratic and equal opportunity society in the interests of the establishing and maintaining of a peaceful and just South African polity. Each of the concepts in the research title has current theoretical significance and collectively contribute towards the definition of the scientific focus of the Niche Area.

* 'Religion' is the discipline which studies humanity's orientation towards, participation in, experience of and celebration of the divine (Pals 1996), numinous (Merkur 1998), or the transcendent as a 'socially constituted construct' emerging from 'complex social dynamics' and 'discursive conditions'. Religion constitutes the 'transcendent' objects of inquiry as a body of socially cultivated discourses and practices alongside others in human society. Positioned among other humanities discourses on 'the complex and multiple interrelated processes of cultural production, structuration and representation', Religion as discipline is characterised by its distinctive 'data-focus' but draws on theories as well as methodologies developed in the human and social sciences (cf. Braun 2000:11ff). Since fundamental questions have been raised concerning totalising meta-

discourses as well as too easy binary oppositions (between the social and aesthetic for example) the location of Religion as discipline within a humanistic, social and cultural historical perspective, allows for the critical study of religious formations, their constructive development due to an exposure to humanist critical reflection and the utilisation of secular humanist theories by religious formations.

* The ‘social’ focus of the project derives from this positioning of Religion in the Humanities. In addition, as one of the social formations in society, religious practice can be viewed as one social practice amongst others. Similar to other social formations or ‘instances’, religious interests 1) ‘develop systems of signs’; 2) ‘patterns or maps of practice’; and 3) ‘institutions’ for purposes of ‘communication, maintenance and reproduction’ (and we add, ‘experience’). Together with other social formations and the complexes of human interests they articulate, religions in addition, ‘produce[] socially significant effects[and experiences] for the structure of a society and its on-going operation’. This perspective makes religions ‘semi-autonomous’ with regard to the state. Simultaneously, however, it raises questions with regard to the ‘interaction, force, development and contradiction within and among the various practices of a society’ (cf. Mack 2000:283f). In distinction to older theories of religion, Religion as Humanities discipline allows for new possibilities concerning the development of comprehensive and multi-perspectival analytical, explanatory, (re)constructive and emancipatory theories and practices of religion.

* Apart from its distinctive conceptual focus on ‘Religion’ and the ‘social’, the research project focuses on the ‘transformation’ of the southern African community. Dating from the time of Giambattista Vico (1725), Humanities disciplines study and contribute towards the formation and transformation of social systems in society. With regard to the fact that religious formations are social system constructs which have been and are developed for the benefit and ordering of society and human community, religions, in Humanities perspective, are humanly constructed social systems. Similar to other social constructs, they comprise of articulations of systems of ideas (or beliefs) and faith traditions, institutional organisation(s), and moral codes developed in the interests of ethical self- and group fashioning and formation (cf. Smit 2001b). This implies that all religions can be studied but also transformed to new, alternative or more equitable configurations in all three these domains and their diverse articulations. Therefore, in the interests of transformation, Religion as discipline and the religions of our country as social formations could play a *critical-analytical* but also *(re)constructive* role in the development of a just, tolerant and humane society. This is important in the areas of civil society (social and scientific ethics), social and psychological group and individual counselling, the history of and interface between religious formations and poverty, and indigenous and diaspora religious and cultural heritages in southern Africa.

3 Background and Current Relevance

* In distinction to now discredited theoretical judgements on the phenomenon of religion¹, this research program is based on the assumption that religions are constitutive semi-autonomous formations and practices in the interests of social construction and production, maintenance, reproduction and especially social emancipation and transformation in society.

* In South Africa, religious formations have and could continue to play a seminal role in ensuring a just and peaceful polity, advancing the quality of life of all, independent of class, race, and gender formations or religious persuasion.

* Irrespective of the variable natures of religious formations - anti-secularist (fundamentalist), reformist or liberal - it is imperative to develop Religion as human sciences discipline and to both study religious formations and empower them through secular, humanist scholarship.

* Given the history of the articulation of apartheid and Theology in South Africa², this legacy as well as the currently rising world-wide tide of fundamentalism³ in the wake of globalising tendencies⁴, make this Niche Area even more needed and relevant.

* The Niche Area is the only one in Durban, accommodates all religions, and, due to its location in the Humanities, ensures an un-biased critical study of the religions in the Greater Durban area, benefiting all equally.

4 Situation Assessment and Challenges ('What needs to be done')

* Deriving from 'social underdevelopment', religious people of the various religions in southern Africa had an unequal access to - were marginalised or blocked from - the modern social production of knowledge, professional expertise and the cultivation of and skills development in the Humanities.

* This is the case in especially the Greater Durban area. Due to now out-dated access policies and curricula, representatives of religious formations in our area could not or did not wish to enter our university to study Religion as here outlined. Moreover, representatives of the different religions have, since the founding of the School of Religion and Culture in 2000, committed themselves to this Niche Area.

¹ Stark (2000:240ff) convincingly argues against the opinions of the older paradigm that 1) religion is 'false and harmful' - cf. the opiate thesis in the Marxian tradition; 2) religion will not survive as a social phenomenon in the wake of Enlightenment rationality and modern secularisation processes; 3) religion is a mere epiphenomenological representation of repressed or disappointed material/ social causes; 4) religion is only a psychological and not a social construct (or visa versa, see Segal 1998:110f; Strenski 1998:118 amongst others); and 5) that, given religious pluralism, one or more religions must inevitably be superior to or enjoy monopoly over others (cf. Merkur 1998:75f).

² For both critical and reactionary perspectives, consult Biko (1978); Boesak (1984); Mosala (1989); Villa-Vicencio (1990); and Smit (1998) amongst many others.

³ Cf. Stolz & Merten (1991) on a good bibliography on Middle-Eastern fundamentalism. Important as it is, Westerlund's (1994) book of collected essays was an important corrective to a skewed view of anti-secular movements. It is especially valuable in that it focuses on countries normally neglected, and emically analyses how anti-secularist groups and states see the state articulating with religious entities.

⁴ Cf. Muller, Cloete & Badat (2001) and Smit (2004 forthcoming).

* Except for a privileged class which mostly studied individual faith traditions, people were excluded from such opportunities.

* This complex - figured in the legacy of imperial, colonial and apartheid governance in southern Africa - raises the challenge to engage this reality in both critical-analytical and productive, (re)constructive and enabling ways.

* Having all been party to social formations which fashioned either pro- or counter-discourses to various degrees, the *critical-analytical* role of both Religion as discipline and religions as social formations pose the challenge to both critically analyse (or describe) the dynamics of past social formations and to facilitate possibilities for social formation and transformation processes beyond the continuation of this untenable and still institutionalised legacy.

* As far as the *(re)constructive* role of Religion is concerned, the challenge is to productively contribute towards the development of discourse as well as the development of religions with regard to their 1) knowledge systems, languages and their myths and rituals; 2) their modes of production and reproduction, technologies, strategies or socialisation processes; and 3) their moral and behavioural patterns of experience, action and interaction.

* Given southern Africa's and our region's particular past, in terms of existing discourses on religion - cf. Wiebe (2000); McCalla (2000); Wolfart (2000); Murphy (2000); Lincoln (2000); Chidester (2000); and Lease (2000) - this two-pronged challenge for the research project will be engaged in ways both similar and different from challenges elsewhere⁵.

In general, the rationale of the research project is that Religion as discipline and the religions of southern Africa can both critically analytically and (re)constructively contribute towards the transformation of southern African society. Further, the rationale for change or transformation derives from the conviction that social formations are not stable, static or immovable. Rather, as is the case with discourse (with its own scholarly and interpretive fraternity or social formation) religions as semi-autonomous social practices and institutions, are subject to change too, given the challenges and exigencies of a particular period and region. The Niche Area participants are committed to meet these challenges with research according to internationally-recognised standards.

5 Scope of the Research Niche Area

* The Niche Area does not continue a former Activity Area. Situated in the School of Religion and Theology which will be founded in 2005, it is new with a new rationale and motivation.

⁵ In other words, even though the thirty-one essays in Braun and McCutcheon (2000) for example may be relevant to the study and practice of religion in the southern African context in 'Enlightenment context', they cannot be so uncritically. The sub-continent's realities - also as it has to become more integrated with the continent as a whole (cf. Ndebele 1994; Owomoyela 1996; Prah 1997; Smit 1999; Mugambi 2000; Ukpong [2001]) - will of necessity demand that the use and further development of theories constructed elsewhere, be also subjected to critical scrutiny in terms of contextual assumptions contingent to our own realities.

* Even though the scope of the Niche Area is focused, it is broad enough to accommodate differences with regard to the varying research needs in the different religions in relation to the challenges posed by the focus on 'Religion and Social Transformation'. This means that the existing gaps in research and knowledge production with regard to the different religions vary, and that the research will focus on such gaps.

* To some degree, the same is true for each of the projects within the Niche Area - they articulate with the Niche focus while still being broad, accommodating varying research needs of the different religions. The broad purpose, current research and research gaps which need to be focused on in each, can be outlined as follows.

5.1 Religion and Civil Society

- The purpose of this focus derives from its ethical, educational and empirical approaches. With regard to ethics, both social and scientific ethics - especially bio-medical ethics - from within each of the religious formations of southern Africa need to be developed for the upholding of constitutional values and commitments. This, obviously, also has an educational component, in that ethical values in civil society constitute the commonly shared moral codes to which all subscribe irrespective of religious persuasion. Further, the purpose of this focus is to address social challenges such as gender, class and race disparities in religions and civil society and issues such as crime, violence and conflict amongst others.

- Recently published and current research mainly focuses on bio-medical and ethico-legal ethics. This need to be expanded to include the 1) history of the articulation of Southern African religious formations and civil society; 2) governance, morality and ethics; 3) citizenship and formative, constructive and critical perspectives from within religious formations and faith traditions; 4) socio-ethical transformation challenges in the different religions with regard to each of these three areas.

5.2 Religion and Counseling

- Given the devastating impact diseases such as HIV/Aids have on southern Africa and that many religious people have not had access to psychological and social counseling skills development, the purpose of this focus is to train religious people in both these areas. Religious people will be trained to constructively contribute towards preventative and curative counseling. Not only disease, but also different age and social group formations necessitate this focus.

- Recent research focused on the accommodating of spirituality as resource for mental and social health within counseling. Existing gaps concern 1) the developing of theories and models for the constructive accommodating of religious persuasion in counseling practices; 2) the development of such models for religions which did not have access to such theories and models under the previous dispensations; 3) the targeting of specific areas for such theory, model and practice development, such as HIV/ Aids, pre-marital, family enrichment, teenager, work-life, old-age as well as illness and death counseling.

5.3 Religion, Globalisation and Poverty

- This focus derives from the fact that the phenomenon of poverty must invariably be understood within the context of larger historical forces such as colonialism, apartheid and globalisation. Even as it is a local phenomenon, past and current regional and global imperatives necessitate its study within broader context. Moreover, contributions religious people make to poverty alleviation derive from the fact that they per definition, often live and work among the poor. The purpose of this focus is to assist religious people and religious formations in their facilitation of poverty alleviation and economic development. It is both analytical and constructive and primarily addresses class disparity.

- Recently published and current research has focused on the economic and cultural problematics around colonialism/ apartheid/ globalisation and poverty. This needs to be developed further. In addition, research needs to focus on 1) the history of the articulation and intervention of religious organisations with regard to poverty; 2) the development of models and strategic interventions in rural and urban economic and cultural development; 3) the study of formative and critical perspectives on poverty within faith traditions; 4) the study of existing practitioners and programs in the field of Religion and poverty alleviation/ job creation; 5) the study of the forces of underdevelopment and cultures of poverty.

5.4 SA Religion and Culture Encyclopaedia

- The purpose of this focus is to develop a comprehensive, multi-religious body of knowledge concerning the history of religions as it pertains to social formation and transformation in southern Africa. Since religious formations have played and still do play a crucial role within the southern African polity, it will constructively contribute towards cross-religious understanding, education, respect and tolerance.

- There is no comprehensive data base on the religious and cultural heritages of Southern Africa. The main outline for the encyclopedia, concerns the developing of sections on 1) Religious Literature and Narrative in SA (canonical and apocryphal); 2) significant religious and cultural sites; 3) significant organisations; 4) significant publications; 5) significant historical figures (biographies) and their publications; 6) significant themes for the encyclopedia on SA Religion and Culture and their future development.

* Finally, we believe that these projects will not only make a constructive contribution to transformation in Southern Africa, but that Religion as discipline will be enriched in terms of its functioning within developmental context - in our region and country, but also on the African continent.

6 Rationale and Motivation: The Religion and Social Transformation Niche Area

* In terms of the scope exposition above, the Niche Area is interventionistic with regard to current realities, has already generated new questions and methods concerning the study of Religion and Society in South Africa, and aims at the contribution towards an alternative, religio-societal dispensation for the region and the continent.

* The transformation processes it generates are interventionistic in the current states of the disciplines, traditional teaching and learning practices, and current past-inherited social conditions and their limits, aiming at a synergy between research, teaching, and

outreach. The intervention in each of these three areas are engineered through questions which have already transformed the traditional way of thinking about, studying and researching Religion.

* These questions have led to the developing of a Social Systems Transformation Theory with its own unique blend of methods. *Theoretically*, the approach questions and transforms existing epistemological configurations in the various disciplines studying Religion, facilitates the reconfiguration of organisational systems and structures in religious formations, and articulates a new ethics on each of these three levels of analysis - the epistemological, organisational and moral. *Methodologically*, well-known and recently developed empirical research instruments in the Social Sciences have been moulded into effective transformative mechanisms which analytically and (re-) constructively impact on the study of objectification, subjectivity (in individual and group context), concept and discourse formation, as well as the material realities in discursive regimes. In addition to theory and methodological developments and interventions, the Niche Area's *problematisations*, derive from the general Humanities rationale of unfettered critical thinking and inquiry, have outlined the frontiers of a new paradigm in the study of the religiously-articulated disciplines which have already led to new discovery. It aims at averting a wide array of problems articulated with Religion and Society and makes Religious formations socially accountable.

* In time, we believe, that this Niche Area will impact on local and continental imperatives concerning the articulation of Religion as discipline and religious social formations with political, socio-psychological and economic domains. It focuses on an area which is in dire need of research engagement both in SA and on the continent.

* Therefore, the Niche provides distinct South African research opportunities. It is not only inter-disciplinary, straddling disciplines and enriching them. It also constitutes the epistemic and strategic conditions of possibility of what a future South African Society could be with regard to the Religion-Society interface. We believe that this project in the Niche Area's research focus, constitutes an innovative and a sound knowledge base from which our nation can operate from - now and in the future - and provides current and future research direction in the country in this area of inquiry.

* Finally, the four projects within the Niche have been chosen in such a manner, that each impacts on a distinct focus within the southern African polity. 'Religion and Civil Society' will impact on the broad field of a future morality and ethics in civil society; 'Religion and Counseling', in the field of social and psychological health and well-being; 'Religion, globalisation and Poverty' on the understanding and engagement of the economic and cultural impact of the various religions; and the Southern African Religion and Culture Encyclopedia on information, education and knowledge with regard to our diverse religious heritages. Collectively, the projects and Niche Area provide a distinct opportunity for research and social development.

7 Rationale and Motivation: The Programs

7.1 Religion and Civil Society

The different religions and religious formations in southern Africa had an unequal and in some cases, a slanted access to secular, humanistic knowledge generated from within Humanities discourse with regard to the articulation of 'Religion and Civil Society'. This

means that the morality and ethics discourses within the different religious and faith traditions form a unique problematic complex - which also constitute unique opportunities for knowledge and discourse development concerning existing gaps, distorted information and knowledge production and how this reality could be changed for the better. This project aims at the development of a sound and Africa-focused knowledge base. Furthermore, it aims at fostering social accountability ranging from socio-political to scientific ethics in the faith traditions. From within the critical and (re-) constructive Humanities discursive traditions, it is already contributing towards the development of religious understanding with a common moral and ethical ethos in the southern African polity. In general this project studies and develops the different SA religions and enriches their content and practices in the fields of especially bio-medical ethics and ethico-legal moralities. Within the different faith traditions (because they transcend political boundaries) this will impact on local, regional and continental imperatives with regard to the Religion and civil society interface - i.e. concerning scientific, political, economic and social ethics. This blend also makes for the constructive contribution of Religion and the religious formations to the facilitation of a critical as well as a responsible and accountable (southern) African citizenry. Drawing on the moral and ethical resources in the different religions, these will be focused on contributing towards regional and continental moral and ethical renewal beyond the slanted religio-moral and -ethical ideologies of the past. This will importantly contribute towards the central participation of the religions in the development of a new modern and modernizing, civil ethos and culture on the African continent.

7.2 Religion and Counseling

In terms of its own unique history - deriving from its indigenous as well as Diaspora religious and cultural heritages and formations - South Africa has a unique and rich religio-cultural constitution and diversity. From social systems and social services perspective, however, previous political dispensations (apartheid) did not develop them equally for people from the different religions and cultures. This is especially so with regard to the socio-psychological well-being and wellness of people from different religions and cultures. This research project aims at redress, impacting on this gap in research, knowledge and skills as well as social systems and -services development. Moreover, given the unique blend of psychological conflicts and traumas in the South African polity as well as added stresses and strains on its populace deriving from the fact that South Africa is currently still a society in transition, this dynamics uniquely positions the project in this Focus Area. To this may be added problems related to the socio-psychological impact of HIV/ Aids and other regional diseases; social systems crises related to political instabilities, poverty, and unemployment; and various forms of conflict arising from within this unique mix. The project is uniquely positioned to intervene in this complex, constructively facilitating wellness and socio-psychological health of individuals and groups, also addressing issues around family therapy, the constructive and enabling use of language in counseling and socio-religious contexts and conflict management and resolution. It has a local and regional opportunity to develop the needed socio-psychological services, systems and skills for people, irrespective of race, culture or religious persuasion. This could also impact continentally since similar realities exist elsewhere, even though particularities may differ from region to region. Central to

the project is that religion and religious spirituality as well as aesthetics and ethics are fundamental components in the socio-psychological health of individuals and groups in any society. Given this diversity, the research takes place within a broad 'environmental' or 'ecological' theory of society and works with comparative methodologies. The project will enrich faith traditions which have been marginalised previously in this area of research and inquiry (especially from Africa) and also facilitate an improvement of cross-religious understanding and co-operation regionally and continentally - because faith traditions transcend national boundaries. This may lead to new socio-religious patterns in society, both regionally and continentally, contributing to harmony, stability, social and mental health of the populace as well as an improvement of the understanding of the African continent, and how to live and operate as part of Africa and its peoples. This means that its point of departure is that of regional and continental religious philosophies, traditions and spiritualities - a perspective which is not imposed on it from elsewhere - and may impact on continental renewals in this area of inquiry. Knowledge and skills transfer take place through practicals, and the new socio-psychological systems developed by graduates in society - together with communities.

7.3 Religion, Globalisation and Poverty

The disproportionate distribution of wealth and income in South Africa, derives from past injustices with regard to access to knowledge, skills and an equitable access to economic system participation in the area of economic development. On the one hand, this means that many people are unable to not only make a living but also to continuously improve their quality of life. On the other hand, others enjoy a quality of life, which far exceeds regional and continental averages and expectations. These conditions cut across race, class, gender and spatial location, are historically determined and inherited, and turn on access to resources, the relevant knowledge and skills to engage economic activity, and the unequal access to the means of production, investment and other material resources and systems. Since all the people across this complex are religious to various degrees, are members of religious formations and participate in religious practices, this project has as aim the study of particularly religious perspectives on globalisation, economics, wealth, and income, and how these perspectives can prompt religious formations to contribute towards the cultural and economic well-being of people and communities. Within the religious formations but also across them, this means that the religious organisations but also their members constitute primary resources to not only intervene in poverty alleviation, understand the globalising cultural and economic forces, but most importantly, also in the facilitation of the establishing of measures and mechanisms which can ensure sustainable economic activity which may contribute to the eradication of poverty. In terms of the inequities referred to above, this further means that the project focuses on both religious people and organisations of means (wealth, access to resources and socio-economic security) as well as poor communities in both rural and peri-urban informal settlements. With regard to the first, it is indicative that organisations as well as individuals become actively involved in the development of systems and resources for poor people within their respective religious traditions but also for others irrespective of religious persuasion. With regard to poor rural and peri-urban informal settlements, religious formations and individuals within these communities need to be educated and trained concerning the possibilities they can create for the establishing and maintaining of

a quality of life, free of endemic poverty and beyond their own systems of survival. The central assumption for this to happen, is that a person's religion constitutes the most basic, primary and rudimentary meaning system for oneself and the group(s) one belongs to, and that it is the unleashing, development or transformation of this system with regard to the challenges of poverty, that will ensure equitable economic activity. Moreover, since this is the case, and since it is usually religious people who are closest to poor people - working at grassroots levels - religious organisations must be acknowledged by governance structures and private enterprise as most crucial for partnership developments. For this reason, they can also most crucially participate in the analysis and study of micro- and macro-economic and -social policy effects on poor people, and their critique and alteration.

7.4 The Southern African Religion & Culture Encyclopedia

The religious and cultural traditions and heritages of a people form their primary complex of meaning systems. This means that how people interact with one another, perceive themselves and others, as well as motivate them to function within social systems, institutions, as well as on meta-theoretical levels, draw on their particular religious and cultural heritages and their interpretations. This is true for the pre-colonial, colonial and apartheid eras as well as the era of transition towards a non-racist, non-discriminatory and more equitable and open democratic society - the interregnum we are living in. Given southern Africa's unique history, this project will contribute towards the analysis and interpretation of this history and the traditions, texts, religious formations and significant historical figures which/ who played constructive and critical roles towards facilitating the religious and cultural diversity in our sub-continent. This project constitutes a challenge concerning the comprehension of this diversity on the African continent. Moreover, given that many religious and cultural formations were marginalised in the past, and that many were subjected to religio-cultural practices of underdevelopment, the project will open the way to equal and reciprocal acknowledgements and interactions between people of different religious persuasion and cultural socialisation. It will contribute towards the fostering of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, while also addressing the multi-class needs in our still socially and economically divided society. These focuses will open the possibility to also advance the development of southern Africa's religio-cultural formations and heritages in terms of the new demands of equity and redress. Further, since human cognition and learning are determined in a fundamental way by religio-cultural knowledges (ideas, beliefs), organisations and moralities (moral codes, values and self- and group fashioning mechanisms and practices), these need to be studied and developed in terms of southern Africa's own unique religio-cultural landscape. The project may also innovatively impact on the creative development of knowledges important for policies and practices, and contribute to the transformation of religio-cultural systems, the generation of knowledge of their articulations and functioning in society, inform on their contextual historicising and positionings, bring to the fore their contributions to but also limitation of social development (in both its broader and particularised religio-cultural senses), contribute towards curriculum and content development in the field of the study of southern African religions and cultures, and constitutively add to and develop theories and practices of cognition and learning in religio-cultural perspective. As such, the project aims to facilitate the production of

knowledge and strategic development of processes and procedures which will not only develop and advance indigenous religious and cultural heritages, critically and constructively relate them to the relevant social systems and institutions in southern Africa, but also feed into the quest of Diaspora religions and cultures to associate with and become a better integral part of the South African polity. As such, it is hoped, that it will bring greater transparency to a past often veiled behind opportunistic opinions and ideas currently still clouding the collective (un)consciousness of our populace. Finally, knowledge produced will be published in encyclopedic and CD-Rom/ DVD scholarly format. This, we hope, will be the source from which different versions of this knowledge could be published in formats relevant to different educational requirements.

7 Conclusion

I have in this paper, provided a brief overview of the Niche Area's focus, background and current relevance, situation assessment and challenges, and the scope and rationale for the research program as a whole, and for the four main project areas. Currently, 89 BA Hons students have completed their research projects in the program, 27 MA by full dissertation and 6 PhD theses have been written. In principle, the approach is to have students from the different religions, do research within their particular religious traditions. In other words, they are not alienated from their main springs of identity and commitment. What the research program offers, is to enlarge such students' scope, by providing access to "Humanities" scholarship. This is so in principle for all the students studying in the program, i.e. African Religion, Christianity, Islam, Eastern religions, etc., i.e. in our own pluralistic context, representing diverse religions, philosophies, ideologies, and cultures. [Beyond South Africa's boundaried landscapes and exclusivistic communities, this, in practical terms, also makes for an empathetic student interaction with regard to their different religious traditions and texts – which is obviously a process with its own dynamics.]

With this approach, and since all our students come from previously disadvantaged communities, and also work with and in them, we aim to counter the colonial and apartheid legacies that prevented people from engaging global, but also Western knowledge(s) on their own terms. As such, it is a program beyond the constraints and restrictions these epochs laid down on and for our people, through their various measures of legislation but also brute force and systems of subjection and exploitation. Engaging the vast resources of Humanities knowledge on our own terms, and to do so in a multi- and inter-religious manner, we believe, is crucial for the new knowledges we may yet develop as part of empowering our own local communities – giving them access to global community, but also providing opportunities for them to compete in the global marketplace.

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Initiated in 2002, the School of religion and Culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal runs four research projects as part of this research program. Currently, 89 BA Hons students have completed their research projects in the program, 27 MA by full dissertation and 6 PhD theses have been written. In principle, the approach is to have students from the different religions, to do research within their particular religious traditions * in other words, they are not alienated from their main springs of identity and commitment. What the research program offers, is to enlarge such students' scope, by providing access to "Humanities" scholarship. This is so in principle for all the students studying in the program, i.e. African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Islam, Eastern religions, etc * i.e. in our own pluralistic context, representing diverse religions, philosophies, ideologies, and cultures.

The programme has four embedded research projects, viz.

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Problem Identification

Currently, no comprehensive encyclopaedia on the religious formations and Religion as discipline exists in southern Africa. This hiatus makes for mis- and dis-information about the religions and their articulations with culture in Southern Africa on virtually all levels of society. Firstly, with regard to cultural history, informed knowledge by the populace on the history of religions in Southern Africa is lacking. This covers the whole plethora of differences within and between religions with regard to philosophy and doctrine, morality and ethics, social organization and religio-cultural institutions, experience, ritual and myth to name just a few of these articulations (cf. Ferm 1990; Martey 1994; Mugambi 1996; Smit 2001). Secondly, there is no integrated resource on the formative and transformative effects different religions had and continue to have on the southern African region. This raises the question of the critical appreciation of the role of the different religions in southern Africa – especially the so-called new religious movements – and their socially transformative potential and effects (cf. Chidester 1997; Mosala &

Tlhagale 1990; Ross 1982; Smit 2001; Wilson 1971). Thirdly, and this is closely related to the previous point, in general, cross-religious understanding as well as an appreciation of the socio-cultural contributions of the religions in southern Africa is lacking in civil society. Culturally, this means that there is a huge need for the study of the articulations between a religion and economy, morality, politics, aesthetics, and kinship or family systems (cf. Gray 1990; Mugambi 1996; Smit 2001; Wilson 1976). This also for instance, requires a social problem approach to the critical study of the various contributions of religious formations in the history of S.A. with regard to ‘social problems’ and interventions with regard to the effecting of change for the better – i.e. whether during the colonial and apartheid eras, during the struggle period, or since 1994 (cf. Bredenkamp & Ross 1995; Crais 1992; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; 1992; Elphick & Davenport 1997; Lecky 1969; Loubser 1987; Davies 1976; Newton-King 1999; Smit 2001). Fourthly, a comprehensive knowledge about the history of the study of religions in S.A. does not exist (cf. Chidester 1996; cf. too Blakely, et al 1994). An in depth study of significant leaders could further this focus. Fifthly, religions themselves are in need of fully comprehending their role with regard to the moral, ethical, mental and social well-being of the country – which includes politics, economics, and aesthetics for instance (cf. Mbali 1987; Smit 2001). Finally, and in terms of challenges toward reflexivity, this research project aims to also interrogate its probable effects on a future pluralist S.A. polity and how it articulates with the legacies of politics in struggles on the African continent (cf. Ackermann 1998; Du Toit 1998; Kiogora 1998; Massie 1973; Oduyoye 1998; Thompson 1969; Villa-Vicencio 1987).

Rationale and Motivation

2.1 In the interests of allowing for the equal treatment of all the religions and cultures in southern Africa, they are viewed as social constructs. No distinction with regard to the pre-eminence of one before others, or of the preference of one to another is therefore accommodated. This means at least two things.

Firstly, the religions and cultures as well as their different denominations and organisations (including significant historical figures) will be studied from three separate but interrelated perspectives: 1) concerning their knowledge or epistemic significance (including scholarly studies and opinions, developments and changes but also beliefs and doctrines); 2) concerning the organisations themselves (including their founding, development, changes, significant historical figures, and their articulation with political, economic and other social forces of the day); and 3) their moral values or norms and how individuals and groups have played a role in the social formation and transformations of our religions and cultures. These are the three central perspectives on our religions and cultures as social constructs (cf. Smit 2001). They will allow both a surface (or ‘flat’) study and depth (taking into consideration variation and divergences of opinion and complexity) study of the different religions and cultures, not denying intra-religious beliefs, knowledge(s) and other faith commitments.

Secondly, as social constructs, religions and cultures are influenced by but also exert influences on social forces. Just as any other social system, they are liable to analysis,

critical-analytical description, assessment and transformation with regard to the nature of their formation as well as articulations within the history of polity developments, conflicts and transformations. This perspective derives from the view that all the objects of study within Humanities perspective, are humanly made for the benefit of human beings (Vico [1725]1999). The counter-view is that, as humanly made constructs, they can also impact negatively, detrimentally or disablingly on the polity. By taking the different southern African religions and cultures as main objects of study, the rationale is to initiate this encyclopaedia so that it may bring to the fore the factors and forces within and between the religions and cultures of our region, so that they may be attended to both with regard to the acknowledgement of difference, dignity and respect, and with regard to their contributions to nation building and collaborative engagements of the great challenge of nationbuilding.

2.2 For the developing of a common nationhood, South Africans need to be knowledgeable of the background and histories of their religions and cultures, conflicts and differences between them, as well as how they developed over time, and may continue to develop in the interests of a fostering of a common nationality. Positioned in the focus area of 'Distinct South African Research Opportunities', the encyclopaedia will importantly contribute towards 1) the education of the nation with regard to our common cultural and religious history; 2) the fostering and cultivation of mutual cross-religious respect and recognition; 3) the cultivation of cross-religious understanding as well as an appreciation of the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic contributions of the religions and cultures in southern Africa; 4) the dissemination of information on significant past and current religious and cultural leaders; 5) the progressive establishing of a common data base on the study of religions in southern Africa; 6) the informing of the different religions themselves on their past roles and present challenges with regard to epistemological, organisational and moral natures. We believe that this complex comprises the main elements with regard to our religions and cultures necessary for the future constitution of our society in real terms. (Below – and also referred to in the problematising section – is a sample of the critical literature which to various degrees intersect with the encyclopaedic challenges I posed above.)

Focus

Three main themes on Religion and Culture in southern Africa have been identified for the first cycle of five years of the project, viz. 1) Religious traditions and texts; 2) the History of Religions in southern Africa; and 3) Significant Historical Figures and their writings in the History of Religion and Culture in southern Africa. Researchers and scholars will focus on these in terms of the key critical questions outlined above. The focus, approaches, methodologies and limitations are as follows.

1 Religious traditions and texts

The focus here is on the central and peripheral traditions but also the canonical and apocryphal texts which inform the religions in southern Africa. This constitutes the general area of investigation, in so far as traditions constitute the religious base for knowledge, morality and behaviour in each religion. Scholars (and students) will engage

the socio-historical description of the different religious traditions, the significance of originary events, their central narratives - how they came about, developed, and found expression in oral and written literature - sacred sites, rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs. The approach is socio-historical and will employ descriptive methodologies, drawing on the most recent available research concerning these issues. (All participating scholars have worked and published on these issues with regard to their own religions already to various degrees.) The significance of the final outcome is that it will bring together research on each of the religions within one volume, facilitating cross-religious and -cultural understanding about the basic tenets and practices of the different religions. (This has affinities with the approach and methodology of Charlesworth 1983 but will have more emphasis on social factors and forces concerning these traditions and texts.)

2 The History of Religions in southern Africa

This perspective is focused on southern Africa and will provide a broad study involving all the indigenous and diaspora religions of our country, their origins, developments and transformations, but also the study of significant historical figures, institutions and organisations in these histories. Methodologies are discursive- analytical and will, apart from historical description, historicise and analyse articulations with paradigms and epistemes in knowledge as well as socio-political, -cultural and -economic ideologies at particular junctures in our history. Concerning the narrational element - which obviously also forms part of historical description - it will attempt to not generalise but be particular with regard to specific data, bringing to the fore the 'little narratives' which collectively constitute the larger tapestry of the history of religions in southern Africa (cf. Brannigan 1998; Chidester 1996; Easthope 1991; Smit 2001; and Wilmore as examples.) The significance of this focus is that it will make the history of the religions in southern Africa more transparently available to all.

3 Significant Historical Figures and their writings in the History of Religion and Culture in southern Africa

Apart from the significance of how the religions themselves developed in southern Africa, historical figures and role players within the history of religions and cultures in southern Africa studied/ researched our religions and cultures, and then either published their findings or at least wrote them down. The focus of this theme is on such figures and their texts. The outline of this study project is alphabetical and will include people from all religions, cultures, and languages. Each person will be treated according to four categories: 1) a brief biographical description; 2) a bibliography of published and/ or unpublished texts; 3) critical perspectives (published and/ or unpublished) on the person's research; and 4) an exposition of the person's scholarly contribution to the study of religion and culture in southern Africa. The fourth category will overview the person's contributions as well as represent some critical views available in the critical assessments of both peers and later scholars. (The approach here will be similar to - but not the same as - that of Devine et al 1985.)

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From: JOHANNES ANDREAS SMIT
To: wimpies@mweb.co.za
CC: Kant@mweb.co.za
Date: Friday - July 16, 2004 1:04 PM
Subject: Fwd: RE: 30July-7August Conference
comprtf.001 (2885 bytes) [\[View\]](#) [\[Open\]](#) [\[Save As\]](#)

Dear Johannes Smit,

Thank you for your mail.

You are indeed welcome to the conference.

Please register via the online registration form at www.missionstudies.org.

All practical information sent to participants until now, you will find at www.missionstudies.org/conference (conference info 1 and 2, list of participants, etc.).

Please inform us of arrival and departure time.

You do not need to pay the deposit, but can pay the full amount at once by credit card via the payments option on www.missionstudies.org - or in US\$ cash at the conference.

You are welcome to submit a paper for the conference, which will formally be delivered by being tabled at the conference and published on the IAMS-web-page. All papers will be considered for publication in "Mission Studies" or in a special volume of conference proceedings. Further to that you are welcome to share on the research project in a special session for sharing of research projects. Please prepare a one-page summary on the research project for that purpose (an expanded version of the summary below).

Welcome!

Birger Nygaard

General Secretary - IAMS - International Association for Mission Studies -
(secretary@missionstudies.org) - www.missionstudies.org

Ph: +45 3838 4915 - Fax: +45 3838 4917 - Mobile: +45 2482 4440 - Peter Bangsvej 1D - DK-2000 Frederiksberg - Denmark

-----Original Message-----

From: JOHANNES ANDREAS SMIT [mailto:SmitJ@ukzn.ac.za]

Sent: Wednesday, July 07, 2004 12:22 PM

To: iams@missionstudies.org

Subject: 30July-7August Conference

Dear IAMS Secretariat

I am Prof Johannes A Smit, Assoc. Prof at the School of Religion and Culture, Durban, South Africa. I am heading a research programme, Religion and Social Transformation, which, it appears to me could link up with some of your concerns as highlighted in your IAMS invitation to the 2004 Confernece in Malaysia.

I only received information about your confernece yesterday, and see that the closing date for application to attend was end of May 2004. Since it would be possible for me to attend your conference, and since we as South Africans do not need visas for Malaysia, I hreby cordially request to consider this very late application, if possible. If you would accept my late application, I shall deposit the conf. fee as requested a.s.a.p. after having had confirmation from you.

On the one hand, and because we are living and working in a very pluralistic community in Durban, because I have and am busy devloping further links in similar communities in Africa, and because I form part of a pluralistic staff in my Research Programme, I think that my attending of your conference, will be very helpful to learn from other parts of the world as to how to develop our strategies with regard to remaining true to religious callings and imperatives, while simultaneously forming part of a civil society requiring full co-operation.

Please also note, that I could make a presentation/ read a paper on our experiences and our programme, for those interested. I provide a brief summary below.

Yours sincerely

Jannie Smit

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Prof JA Smit

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Notice Placed By: nadupallis@ukzn.ac.za On Monday, July 19, 2004

Attention all Master's, Doctoral and Post Doctoral Applicants

NRF SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS FOR 2005

The NRF's Scholarships and Fellowships Programme (previously Student Support) has implemented an online application system for the following Scholarship Applications:

- NRF/Department of Labour Scare Skills Scholarships for Masters and Doctoral study - closing date 02 August 2004 for support in 2005,
- NRF/National Laser Centre Scholarships for Masters and Doctoral study - closing date 20 August 2004 for support in 2005,
- NRF Prestigious and Equity Scholarships for Masters and Doctoral study - closing date 20 August 2004 for support in 2005, as well as
- NRF Postdoctoral research - closing date 02 August 2004 for support thereafter.

The following steps will have to be followed in order to complete an application form:

- a. Register on the NRF online system at <http://nrfonline.nrf.ac.za> and complete your CV.
- b. Complete the application form.
- c. Print the completed application form, attach the required documentation, i.e. academic transcripts, etc. and submit it to Scholarships Office for onward transmission to the NRF. Forward assessment/review forms to appropriate reviewers for completion and forward to the Scholarships Office by the above closing dates. The Scholarships Office will then send the complete application with attachments to the NRF.

Further information will be posted on this site as soon as it becomes available.

Contact:

NRF: Supportdesk

email: supportdesk@nrf.ac.za

Direct all enquiries to the helpdesk at tel: +27 12 481 4202

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PMB

Sibongile Zimu

Tel: (031) 260 6145

Subject: **SAA ONLINE SPECIALS**

Notice Placed By: patherp@ukzn.ac.za **On Wednesday, July 21, 2004**

Dear Purco Colleague

Some people prefer to do their airline bookings online.

Do yourself a favour and go look on our homepage www.purco.co.za at the really favourable online specials on SAA domestic flights between now and the end of the year.

Payment for all online bookings is by credit card.

Note that during this period Voyager members get 1000 bonus Voyager miles for every return flight booked online !! These bonuses will be added to Voyager members' accounts in January 2005.

Since this offer is equal to an up-front discounted ticket, no booking on the webpage will also qualify for the cash incentive in terms of the Purco corporate agreement with SAA.

Please also ensure that other staff in your institution that makes airline bookings are notified of this offer. Bookings for private travel may also be made on this website.

(We are still awaiting an upgrade of the booking engine by SAA in terms whereof special provision would be made for online bookings with corporate credit cards. This will have the added advantage that the relevant corporate credit card will not have to be taken along when collecting the ticket).

Regards

Pieter Kruger