

Nico Botha and Missiology

Quest for Narrative Approach

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Abstract

This article represents the scholarly journeys of two emerging researchers who are greatly indebted to the scholarship and personhood of Professor Nico Botha. Professor Nico Botha's narrative approach to life in general and the academy had a lasting impact on many emerging and some now established scholars. John and Demaine's own ecclesial and academic journey has been inspired by the person and work of Professor Nico Botha. Our interest in missiology developed into our academic careers, and more specifically when we joined the Southern African Missiological Society. In this article they fuse their journeys with that of Nico. They draw out the similarities and differences of some common themes that seem to inform our academic scholarship and our own commitment to nurture the "other" with care and compassion. Three themes have captured our imagination in our interaction with the person and work of Nico. Firstly, Nico had a strong commitment towards the poor and marginalised. Secondly, over the past decade or so, Nico has been developing a narrative theology, or, at least, a narrative approach to theology. Stories include both biblical accounts and contemporary narration of real-life situations. This second theme will be correlated with a narrative approach to theology that includes critical engagement with reason, tradition and community. The third theme is the pastoral and praxis cycle approach to development that Nico has employed throughout his academic career. The pastoral and praxis cycle approach has four interactionist stages: insertion, social analysis, biblical interpretation, and strategic planning. The pastoral and praxis cycle approach will be compared and contrasted with the four-stage interactionist approach of Don Browning. Finally, they will offer some contours and markers for further development of Nico's theology of missiology.

Keywords: Nico Botha, narrative, marginalised, poor, missiology, migrants

1. Introduction

Our own ecclesial and academic journey has been inspired by the person and work of Professor Nico Botha. We first met when John made the shift from full-time cleric to full-time academic about ten years ago and Demaine joined the Southern Afri-

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can Missiological Society. Our interest in missiology developed into our academic careers, and more specifically when we joined the Southern African Missiological Society. It was soon thereafter that we developed a close relationship with Nico. He served as the General Secretary of the society and every annual general meeting depicted the personal touch of Nico. The meeting started with a story, and most times with some form of dualism. The story had a challenging message and the nature of the story was non-linear. It was never linear historical facts, but instead, it was about imagination, transcendence, and the blurring of boundaries. The story almost always was about the transformation of spaces and places. Nico's ministry and academic scholarship was a critical challenge to both the weak and the strong – it was about the powerful and the powerless, and the deeper meaning of these sets of supposing binaries.

Nico displayed a compassionate nature and seemed to have voluntarily taken upon himself the role of nurturing emerging academics. John was nominated by Nico to take over the reins of Deputy General Secretary in 2016 and with his persuasive, yet visionary approach, started the journey towards John becoming Head of the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape. There is no doubt that other emerging or established academics will bear testimony to the nurturing role of Nico. Two missiologists that were influenced by Nico who come immediately to mind are Dr. Eugene Baron, who completed his doctoral studies in 2018, and Professor Reginald Nel, who became the second black Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University.

Nico pushed the boundaries and even blurred the boundaries of the marginalised. His theology challenged the limitations of the marginalised and asked the difficult questions that synthesised thesis and anti-thesis. Out of the curiosity developed potential that expands the fixed boundaries. Nico's theology was one of discovery through praxis. It was more praxeology than orthodoxy. It was about looking in the eyes of the "other" with an eschatological horizon. God in Christ is both Immanuel and Saviour.

In this tribute, we will fuse our journeys with that of Nico. We will draw out the similarities and differences of some common themes that seem to inform our academic scholarship and our own commitment to nurture the "other" with care and compassion. Three themes have captured our imagination in our interaction with the person and work of Nico. Firstly, Nico had a strong commitment towards the poor and marginalised. The poor included those who are poverty-stricken, women, migrants and children. Our own academic niche areas have been undergirded by the marginalised and the oppressed. Secondly, over the past decade or so, Nico has been developing a narrative theology, or a narrative approach to theology. Stories include both biblical accounts and contemporary narration of real-life situations.

This second theme will be correlated with a narrative approach to theology that includes critical engagement with reason, tradition and community. The third theme is the pastoral and praxis cycle approach to development that Nico has employed throughout his academic career. The pastoral and praxis cycle approach has four interactionist stages: insertion, social analysis, biblical interpretation, and strategic planning. The pastoral and praxis cycle approach will be compared and contrasted with the four-stage interactionist approach of Don Browning. Finally, we will offer some contours and markers for further development of Nico's theology of missiology.

2. Marginalised as centre space

Sociologists such as Davies refer to the centre space as that of power, influence, status and aspiration. With such an approach to space there is clear distinction, even hierarchy, of space. The centre is the socio-political and religious space that differentiates the powerful from the powerless. Power is defined as the means and ability to make decisions, to have freedoms, to have rights, to have agency and be modernised. Marginalism is to be outside of the boundaries of power and the marginalised are deemed powerless unless they are incorporated into the centre.

When addressing the issue of empire, which is defined as "an authoritarian political system of administration and dominating rule within a country, and in addition a dictating military, economic and cultural influence over other countries" (Botha, 2011:3), the church becomes that space that is at the margins of the empire. Botha asserts that the church, while at the margins, borders the empire (2011:16) and becomes the space of connection between the centre and the margins. Botha quotes Philip who states that the church is the "space in-between spaces" (2011:16). The church has the potential to transform the centre and margins because the church blurs the fix boundaries.

At the margins of society is women, children, the poor, and recently, global migration has become the new marginality. Botha reverses the power relations between centre and margin from a methodological perspective by using the poor as the point of entry for authentic research about those at the margins. Drawing on the pastoral and praxis cycle of Holland and Henriot (1983), the insertion stage refers to values and choices, and is the moral fibre of the research approach. This stage gives preference to the poor as the option for the entry point to research. The marginalised has become the new hermeneutic for authentic missiological and theological reflection. The centre is the margins and the poor who occupy the space at the margins possesses the hermeneutical key that unlocks the value of our humanity. Women challenge patriarchy through dialectics, and development of the poor does not reside with modernity and technological advancement, but with jus-

tice and participation. Botha (2016:3) asserts that; "In theology in general and in missiology in particular, a new hermeneutic has always arisen with the foregrounding of marginalised categories of people and issues".

The "stranger" is another symbol that is used by Botha for the poor. Drawing from his own ecclesial tradition and involvement over many decades, Botha (2013:108) refers to the conceptualisation of the stranger as those "grouped together with categories of human beings like the needy, the poor, widows and orphans. The Confession of Belhar projects an image of God as the God who is in a special way on the side of these categories of people".

Botha brings the poor and marginalised to the centre of what it means to be church. The poor, women, children and migrants occupy a powerful space that connects the margins and the centre. Opting for a "space in-between spaces", Botha gives to the church a space that is different from other spaces. The space of the church is opposite to the empire, patriarchy, the rich, and nationalism. What Botha does not clarify is whether the church is *of* the poor, *for* the poor or *with* the poor. The prefix of, for and with is significant because it describes the church and her relationship with the poor. Wyller (2016:43-44) draws on Foucault's notion of heterotopia when describing church as "something more radical and surprising than just one more boring form of churchification... one should think of the heterotopic as a process opposite to that, whereby the church becomes visible and significant. Maybe heterotopic ecclesiology concerns a church that dissolves itself and lets the other be prominent. And this dissolving happens and is practised because of traces of real hospitality".

The church as a Christian community is self-reflective and self-critical in such a way that the 'other' or 'stranger' becomes the 'significant other'. The other plays an indispensable role in the forming and formation of the self. The poor, women, children and immigrants are not separated from the centre by distance, space, fixation or insignificance. "Immigrants within the South African context should not be regarded as 'the other' in a sense of alien or disengaged entity or strangers. The immigrants play an important role in the formation of the citizens (Klaasen, 2017:159). "In classical social theory the figure of 'the stranger' is defined as both fascinating and unnerving because he/she upsets and ruptures the flow of the ordinary and tacit assumptions that make it possible for everyday life to cohere and reproduce itself" (Hansen, Jeanneret & Sadouni, 2009:188).

The poor and marginalised is the church in both substance and function. This radical notion of church echoes the community of Jesus, the community of the apostles, the institutional community, and the informal gatherings of people who seek to be faithful to the mission of God. The church is the church of the poor and marginalised for all people. Only when the church is self-reflective and self-critical

of its own role in the constructions and teachings of what it means to be created in the image of God, then can the church embody the *missio Dei*. A brief description of the relationship between man and woman from Augustine, Aquinas and Luther by Ruether dispels the hierarchical and patriarchal church and through a dialectical approach suggests a 'cohuman church' (Klaasen, 2016a:14).

It is these symbolic notions of church by Wyller and Ruether that engage critically with Botha's alignment with the pastoral and praxis model of the preferential option for the poor. For Ruether, church is best understood when the exclusive and oppression symbols, rituals and practices are reflected upon through the lens of human experience. As the South African feminist Ackermann (2008:40) states, it is not the limited experience of men or those in power but the human experience that forms the hermeneutical key to what it means to be church.

3. Narrative

In the last decade there has been traces of narrative theology in the scholarship of Botha. Stories—in particular, biblical stories—form the nucleus of a theology of missiology. Botha takes as his starting point of biblical interpretation the stories of the Bible, and not so much theological constructs or the rational tradition. "The need for a theology or Missiology of migration has amongst others triggered the rediscovery of the Bible as a book of stories" (Botha, 2013:111). He further asserts that; "all people all over the world, not only Africans, live in dream, story, and song. Beyond the trappings of the modernist trend to rationalise, to structure, to organise for purposes of containment, people live 'dreamt lives', 'storied lives', and 'sung lives'" (2016b:4). Here is evidence of a growing interest together with other South African narrative theologians such as Julian Müller and John Klaasen to take seriously the authenticity of the marginalised and the space that they occupy in missiological and theological spaces. Stories are much more than linear facts. Rather, the telling of stories is the real forming and transforming space. Stories locate the marginalised as "co-researchers" (Müller) and as agents (Botha). Botha relates the story of Jesus as a child, who at the centre of the salvation of the world is in contrast with the disciples who were interested in the rewards of power, material possessions and status for their part in the journey of Jesus (2016b:3). The power of this story has not dissipated more than two thousand years after the death of Jesus. The retelling of the story of Jesus in the Eucharistic feast invites the marginalised, the poor, the migrant, the child and all people into the redemptive narrative of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection. The narrative of Jesus is embodied in the hope and faith of the marginalised, who, like Jesus, communicate metanoia in the telling of their story.

Narrative also considers symbols and metaphors as important parts of a narrative theology. Symbols and metaphors connect different parts of the story and

cause overlapping of boundaries. Symbols and metaphors can also bring out deeper meanings than mere abstract rationality. The poor, women, children and migrants bring with them a corpus of symbols that have been concealed, masked or veiled. When these symbols and metaphors are seen from the perspective of the marginalised then its true transforming power can be unveiled. Botha (2013:112) concludes that; "metaphorically and in real terms we are quite often separated from migrants by a wall of partition. It is only when we change our gaze by looking beyond the wall that we shall observe the discomfited, distressed, homeless migrant. The conversion required in the encounter with migrants is a deep metanoia which entails a radical gravitation from one world to another". To illustrate the symbolic and metaphorical power of narrative, Botha narrates the experience of the celebration of the Eucharistic feast by Mexican and American Christians on the border of the two countries. Despite the divide of a barrier that is sixteen feet high, the symbolic power of the Eucharist realises on interaction that has the potential to convert the alienation, marginalisation, condemnation and separation of God's people (2013:113).

Botha seems to merge narrative theology with liturgical theology and intercultural and interreligious theology to draw some contours for a theology of migration. It is perhaps within this convergence of theologies that the development of a narrative theology is limited to function. What are the epistemological implications of a narrative theology? Put differently, what does narrative theology entail that distinguishes it from other approaches to theology within the broader discipline of missiology and practical theology?

There is a connecting thread amongst the various forms and shapes of narrative theology. The connecting thread has sometimes been viewed in opposition with confessional forms of theology, at times as a "propaedeutic to theology, what Teselle calls a kind of 'intermediary or parabolic theology'" (Stroup, 1981:85). The connecting idea of different narrative theologies is that people can make sense of themselves, of creation and God through narratives. "A narrative approach to theology is much more than a bridge between interpretation and first order language. It is the process, structure, and form of interpretation and reflection of the experience, activities, and communication of the Christian community through stories" (Klaasen, 2017:459).

Stroup identifies three types of categories of narrative theology. In the first category, theology as an introduction to religion is associated with Dietrich Ritschl, Harald Weinrich, Johann Baptist Metz and Hans Frei. The German engagement has focussed on the role of narrative in doctrinal formulations and raised questions of the epistemological significance of stories and whether narrative interpretations are more intelligent than discursive arguments. The second category is about the

experiential root of narrative and is associated with the Yale approach of theology that is commonly known as the postliberal approach to theology. This approach is associated with theologians and ethicists such as James W. McClendon Jr., Stanley Hauerwas (and John Yoder, who together with MacIntyre were probably the single most significant influence on Hauerwas's narrative ethics and theology) and John Dunne³, who focus on the experience of humans in relation to God and creation. The third type of narrative theology has, as its proponents, Frei and Sallie McFague. This approach focuses on the structure and form of Scripture (Klaasen, 2017:459-464).

The three forms of narrative differ in structure, form and scope but narrative theology has nonetheless challenged the privileged position that traditional theologies have occupied in the face of contextual issues of the twenty-first century, such as immigration, sexuality, child-adult relationships, unprecedented high levels of poverty, the environmental crisis, and the intersectionality of feminism and Christianity. Klaasen (2017:464) asserts that; "the narrative project gives structure to the world and meaning to chaos and formlessness. Story, like social constructionism, is relativistic, but not enslaved by relativism. Within each situation and context, narrative forms and even gives meaning to identity".

Narrative theology is about reflection and critical engagement with contemporary issues such as poverty, identity, environment, violence and patriarchy from the position of the affected and effected. It is their stories, their experience, their communication, their symbols, and their hospitality that through engagement with the Christian story of Jesus gives meaning to humanity and creation. The storyteller (the poor, migrant, child and woman) initiates the movement from bondage to freedom. The poor becomes the powerful, the centre, the "constructive other" who challenges the distortion of the created image of God. Narrative, unlike doctrinal and creedal formulations, invites the listener as an active participant in the redemptive actions of Jesus Christ. Narrative is both orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

4. Pastoral and praxis cycle approach

Botha's theoretical framework has stayed within the four-step pastoral and praxis cycle of Holland and Henriot (1983). The four steps include: insertion, context analysis, biblical interpretation, and planning. The insertion step asks the question: "What are the main considerations?" as the entry point to the interpretation of research. Expressing some discomfort with the term 'insertion', which originated from the idea of the entry point within the framework of woodwork, Botha moves

³ For a discussion of the relationship between human experience, God's time and identity, see Stroup 1981:77-78).

from using insertion (Botha, 2013) to the term 'agency' (as used by Kritzing) or 'identification' (as used by Karecki). These terms, according to Botha, give a clearer description of the two central facets of the insertion. Botha asserts that the two terms provide "greater clarity on the matter, particularly if informed by questions like *who are the actors?* Additionally, *how do they position themselves in and identify with a community?*" (2015:2).

Insertion or agency is summed in the preferential option for the poor. In other words, the important persons and the important role in the understanding and description of the project or process undertaken, is the poor. It is the experiences of the poor that determines the starting point of the project. The researcher aligns herself with the experience and description of the poor. This is a bottom-up approach and gives authority to the circumstances of the marginalised who are not only the subject of research but become the subject (the knower) and the object (what needs to be known).

The poor, child, woman and migrant become the subject and their circumstances, their description, their reality, becomes the object. When referring to the homeless in a community engagement project of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Botha demonstrates the reversal of power relations when he asserts that; "The danger in identifying the agents in mission is that we can quite easily feed into the old paradigm of telling the story of the 'do-gooders', the benevolent, the missionary, and the charitable person... the real agents of the mission became homeless people themselves" (2015:2). This paradigm shift re-orientates us to engage critically with preconceived, fixed and abstract ideas. We are challenged to step back and gaze through the eyes of the poor and the marginalised.

5. Context analysis

The context of the subject and issues under investigation forms an integral part of the research process. The circumstances as well as external and internal factors that shape the lived reality informs the reading of Scripture and our planning. "The praxis cycle challenges theology to gravitate from a linear reading of the Bible to a mediated understanding of the text. One such mediation is context or social analysis" (Botha, 2013:107). Contextual analysis provides a sense of what is going on and what factors influence the reality (both perceived and actual). In this step, information is central to more accurate planning. Furthermore, important to note are issues regarding 'whose information' and 'what information'. The broader the scope of information provided, the greater the chances of a more comprehensive and accurate position of the poor in relation to the centre. Information does not consist only of abstract ideas but includes actual narrated

lived experiences. Social, political, religious, environmental and scientific factors are just some of the information that can inform the next step of theological reflection.

6. Theological reflection

Social and contextual analysis informs the reading and interpretation of Scripture. Botha demonstrates how Bible reading by children, migrants and homeless people challenges the conventional forms of biblical interpretation. To illustrate the theological reflection of the poor, I will provide a response by one of the homeless people to a Bible reading exercise: “Interesting is Nkhutole’s perspective on the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28. Essentially, the encounter came about because the woman had heard of the healing power of Jesus which, in His mission, was a distinct way of dealing with the debilitating effects of empire. Her daughter was demon possessed and she trusted Jesus to bestow liberation and healing on her. Jesus did not seem to have responded initially. The disciples were equally unhelpful by sending her away. The woman persevered, however, with a plea: ‘Lord help me please!’ In Nkhutole’s interpretation Jesus responded ultimately in a deceitful manner by denying the humanity and rights of this Gentile woman by suggesting ‘I can’t give the food for children to the dogs.’ For Nkhutole, the Bible was primarily written for and about the Jews. In his understanding these stories feed into the voicelessness of homeless people” (Botha, 2015:4).

This interpretation of the text problematises conventional interpretations of the text. It asks serious questions about the position of the homeless in the centre. Botha further raises important issues with textual interpretations by grouping the poor, migrants, homeless, children and women under the term “stranger”. He then draws on Sundermeier’s (1995) “konvivenz” or conceptualisation of “stranger” to indicate the biblical usage of stranger as a connection between “us and the stranger... [that] goes beyond communication and an incidental encounter”. To clarify, “konvivenz” refers to “a lasting and special connection” (2015:108-109).

Such a view of Scripture raises deeper questions about the identity of the poor and the relationship between the poor and those at the centre. The centre includes those in the church who make decisions and have power. Interpretation of Scripture addresses the possible reversal of roles of the subject and object. The interpretation of Scripture is more meaningful when the context informs the process of interpretation. The poor are not outsiders or strangers but whether they are from the margins or the centre forms an integral part of the meaning-making process of scriptural interpretation. From a missiological perspective, the stranger or the poor is taken as a serious agent in the redemptive act of God.

7. Planning

The planning step identifies the action that needs to be taken and is informed by the previous steps. In this step, the objectives and outcomes of the project are assessed and implemented based on the information gathered from all the participants. The information from the poor is given attention and forms a central part of any planning and implementation. Botha (2013:115) draws on Sundermeier’s “triad of learning, caring and celebrating communities”. He seems to agree with Wyller that community is much more than “churchification”, which is characterised by hospitality. While hospitality and a theology of hospitality has received much attention in missiological discourse over the last decade, the community focused on the poor is about mutual learning, reciprocal caring, and a community of celebration. The margins become the centre as the poor’s experience produces knowledge that would otherwise be hidden. The experience of the poor, although it is the option amongst the options, it is not restricted to the well-being of the poor. There is a social responsibility for the freedom of all people. Different symbols, metaphors, rituals and cultures are not used as barriers to separate; instead, differences are celebrated as potentialities for mutual and interactionist growth.

8. Open-ended narrative

Professor Nico Botha’s story will take on another chapter in his retirement. We acknowledge his significant contribution to scholarship and knowledge making and acknowledge his commitment to the poor and the marginalised. This tribute is a modest contribution to ensure that his story is not only narrated, but that it will continue. His story is open-ended, and it will continue to inspire emerging missiologists.

We would like to offer the following contours and markers for the continued living memory of Botha: 1) Open-ended narrative is defined as “where reason is viewed as critical engagement with community and tradition. The story of a community in a particular space and time, with specific beliefs about itself and everything that is associated with it, takes an inductive approach to morality. The shortcomings of the use of reason in modernity are fundamentals of narrative. These include the historical context and the social nature of the self” (Klaasen, 2012:104). There are three fundamentals about engagement from the perspective of open-ended narrative. Firstly, the engagement is critical and continuous reflection keeps the narrative truthful. The narrative is in continuum and encounters differences, which demands open and critical reflection for meaning making. Secondly, the narrative seeks out commonalities with other narratives, which provides a framework for contextual appropriation. Thirdly, symbols and symbolic language provides the link between two or more narratives (Klaasen, 2013:115).

Open-ended narrative invites critical reflection on the experience of the poor, marginalised, women and children, and is correlated with the transcendence of the narrative of Jesus Christ. The identity of the marginalised is not restricted to their experience of oppression but their narrative is always in dialogue with the narrative of Jesus Christ. “It is the story of Jesus’s birth, ministry, death and resurrection. The story of Jesus Christ is not a closed story that is limited to our interpretation or the interpretation of any tradition. It is a story that is connected to the story of the Israelites and that of the Christian Church” (2017:465). When the narrative of the poor interacts with the narrative of Jesus Christ and the narrative of the Christian church that the poor is the centre space of freedom and full humanity.

2) Botha uses the pastoral and praxis cycle’s four-step approach to great effect, but the approach does not adequately address the critical relationship between practice and theory. To what extent does the experience of the poor produce the theory or knowledge that conceptualises the research project? The development of Don Browning’s three-stage correlation approach extends the approach to four stages. It is termed the “practice-theory-practice-theory” approach⁴. The four stages can be characterised by four questions. The first stage asks the question “what is currently going on?” This pertains to the practices and experiences to analyse the actual experiences and is similar to the insertion stage of the pastoral and praxis cycle. The second stage is about reflecting on the practices. In other words, we ask the question: “how do we make sense of the current practices?” This is with reference to the analytical and conceptual tools that are used to describe the experiences. This differs from the contextual analysis of the pastoral and praxis cycle because the focus is not to repeat the analysis of the factors that influence the situation, but to reflect on the experience in such a way that abstract reason is challenged as an inadequate reflection on issues of identity, social justice, political interventions and scientific analysis. Thirdly, the question “what ought the experience to be?” is about transformation or metanoia. Here, the Bible becomes a tool of prophetic interventions. The oppressive forces, structures and powers are confronted with the intention to revolutionize the evil and sinful actions and forces. The fourth stage reverts to reflecting on the transformed experience so that the experience of the poor does not turn into an oppressive force.

9. Conclusion

Botha’s academic scholarship is highly regarded by missiologists in Africa and beyond. His research has had a preference for the poor and marginalised. Botha’s attempt to present a developing missiological theology from a narrative approach

⁴ For a detailed description see Klaasen, J.S., 2014, ‘Practical theology: A critically engaged practical reason approach of practice, theory, practice and theory’, HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 70(2), 1-6.

has made significant contributions to our own research and that of many emerging South African missiologists. We are particularly interested to continue with the notion of open-ended narrative and the pastoral and praxis cycle that undergirded Botha’s contribution to missiology over the last decade. To conclude, this tribute analysed Botha’s scholarly contribution and we also offered some points of contact within our own scholarship. In addition, areas for further development that will keep the memory of Botha alive, amongst missiologists in particular and theological scholarship in general, were also offered.

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