“A Christian Open University as Academic Matrix of South African Liberative Development”

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A. South Africa Today

1. Social Structure

South Africa has eleven tribal groups, each with its own language, traditions, areas of concentration and place in the ethnic hierarchy. Not every group, and certainly individuals in every group has an equal chance at “the good life” offered in the new South Africa.

The good news is that, between whites and blacks there is relatively more harmony, at least in some respects, than in the days of apartheid. While the employer-employee relationship continues to be one norm between blacks and whites, that is certainly not the only model. Especially in government services, it is certainly possible to have a black woman or man in authority over a white person.

Yet decades, even centuries, of unequal development and outright legal separation have wrought a myriad of trenchant inequities. The South African Human Development Report of 2003 reports that in 2001 65% of the population (up from 63% in 1996) did not have access to what are termed “good services.” In 2003, 48.5% of the population were below the poverty line, with 33% of Black households were in the lowest income quintile in 2003 (compared with 29% in 1995). Meanwhile the number of such households in the top quintiles went down from 8% to 5% during that period. At the same time the percentage of white households in the lowest quintile went down from 2% to 1% and those in the top quintile went up from 60 to 66%. Unemployment in the 2001 Census was at 41.6% overall, but at 50.2% for blacks and 6% for whites. (27% and 16.9%, respectively for Coloureds and Indians.) (Report 2003: xvii and Census in Brief, 2001 Figure 22, p. 55.) (I should note that this is the strictest interpretation of the data. In an address in Russia of 2 September, 2006 T.T. Mboweni, Governor of the South African Reserve Bank gave the 2005 unemployment rate at 27%.)

None is more rending, perhaps, than the higher education gap. Twenty-four percent of Africans have received no education (lowest section of the left-hand column), as against 10% of coloureds, 7% of Indians and 1% of whites (2001 Census in Brief, Table 2.26).

While 24% of whites have received at least some education beyond Standard 10, only 3% of Black Africans have done so. Corresponding figures for the Coloured and Indian categories are 4.3% and 10%, respectively (Ibid.) Out of a population of 35.4 million, only 292,000 blacks attended a university in 2005, whereas 136,000 whites did, out of a population of only 4.3 million (nine times the population but only just over twice as many university students.) Almost as marked as the distinction between black and white graduates, are the troubling inequities within the black citizenry, with distinctions based on province, people or lingual group, and the
The urban-rural divide. This, in spite of the government’s stated intent of bringing education into the reach of millions of ordinary South Africans historically bereft of advanced educational opportunities.

The 2001 *National Plan of Higher Education* sets targets for the size and shape of the system “including overall growth and participation rates, institutional and programme mixes, and efficiency goals” (*South Africa Yearbook, 2004/05: 208*). This plan aims for a 15-20% participation rate within 15 years. A further major initiative is the transformation of the mix among humanities; business and commerce; and science, engineering, and technology. While the current ratio among these is 49:26:25, the Department seeks to effect a movement to 40:30:30. A whole range of programs will be set in motion to achieve ethnic and gender equity, as well as leveling of the quality for historically disadvantaged institutions. A further move underway is the reduction through mergers and mission change from 24 universities and 11 technicons – a total of 36 – to a total of 22 plus two “institutes of higher education.

So the changes are massive (*Ibid.*: 209).

### 2. Economic Structure

Poverty continues in this rich and prosperous land. And not only poverty, but pockets of it; unequally distributed. Twelve years after majority elections seems too short a period for this problem to have been solved, even if addressed. Again, unemployment is unequally distributed by region and by sector. Those with better education, like everywhere in the world, tend to do better economically.

Meanwhile, the new government of Thabo Mbeki switched from Mandela’s Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP), to the more market-oriented neo-liberal-economics-inspired Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Plan.

The RDP, unveiled in 1994, in the first months of the new Mandela government, “was developed within the ANC as an economic alternative for South Africa. As an economic policy framework, it placed the challenges of meeting basic needs at the center of economic growth and development (Magubane 2004: 53). This plan was straightforwardly basic, coming from Mandela’s mandate to initiate change by immediately addressing ethnic inequality, poverty, putting people to work, and offering first, immediate sharing of the country’s wealth by means of better housing, income (even if that meant temporary welfare payments, and infrastructure development (such as water and electricity) and, second, opportunities for business growth, fair employment, access to education. This plan featured five policy programs that addressed: 1) basic needs; 2) human resource development (including education); 3) rebuilding and restructuring the economy; 4) democratization and general participation; 5) maintaining macroeconomic balance (*Ibid.*).

RDP ran into almost immediate protest from the business and financial sectors and their popularizers who dubbed it “socialist,” citing global factors as reasons to abandon it. This put the fear of a new form of revolution into the new government, which immediately began a hasty re-formulation and change of economic philosophy (that, incidentally, hinged around the latter-leader, Thabo Mbeki and his advisors in the Mandela government). Shortly a Green and then a
White Paper emerged to change the focus, resulting in the May 1996 production of a radically
different and neo-liberal market-oriented perspective in the Growth, Employment, and
Redistribution (GEAR) plan. Growth is first, and that is achieved by opening investment policy
to the outside world, with cuts to corporate taxes, ways to lower wage costs, liberalize foreign
exchange controls, guarantees of stability for investors. This program assumed that there was not
enough history or amount of domestic investment, and that only a massive infusion from the
outside would kick-start the economy. The problem was that, although there was foreign
investment, it tended to be fickle, mostly portfolio investors who simply following the best deal,
and who would run to another foreign market if that looked better. Results: more investment
flowed out than in (by $500 million in 1997), annual growth fell to .1% by 1998, 500,000 jobs
were lost in 2 years, and the rand fell 16% in 1996 alone. Rather than stop this policy, the
assumption was that they had to stay the course, which they did until very recently, with the
introduction of a new policy: Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa
(ASGISA) – with many of the same basic assumptions as GEAR, particularly in its support of
the private sector to shape policy and execute it.

3. Political Profile

Politically, divisions continue as well, and complaints abound that favors and prosperity have not
filtered down to the poor, ordinary citizen, who patiently waits for his or her ship to come in. Te
imbalance among ethnic groups that are in the highest government positions is one of the
persistent refrains in many of the 295 interviews I conducted in South Africa in 1998, 2000 and
2006. Xhosa constitute a very high percentage of the ANC membership, and certainly the
majority of its highest officials and ministers, leaving people outside the Eastern and Western
Cape Provinces and Gauteng somewhat less represented by the heavily majority party. This
results in less attention to cultural and educational issues important to these groups.

4. Higher Educational situation

University education is out of reach for many people, either because of inadequate educational
background that leaves many unable to aspire to the ivory towers, or too poor to pay for its costs,
or too needy to afford the time off their hardscrabble struggle for livelihood to attend university
in a far-away, expensive city.

In his book Access to Higher Education: Leadership Challenges in Florida and South Africa,
Marty Z. Kahn writes:

Access to education should be focused on those who have been traditionally
underrepresented so as to make higher education more participatory in the traditions of
democracy. Universities are seen as social institutions and in democratic societies their
leaders have a responsibility to create a vision and implement a strategy to recruit
traditionally underrepresented students…. The challenge for universities’ leaders … is to
move beyond traditional admission policies and practices and institute effective programs to
broaden access to higher education. Universities have a special role in a democracy so as to
create a literate society and opportunities for all. In addition, they are … knowledge
producing organizations and should … have as their mission the provision of unrestricted 
access to everyone in the society they serve. (Khan 2005:2)

B. Christianity as a Liberative Social Perspective and Basis for Social Life and Action

1. Based in Love

As a social principle, the Christian faith is based on Jesus’s command in Matt. 19: 19 and 
22:39, to “love your neighbor as yourself,” extending this love even to one’s enemies (Matt. 
5: 44 and doing good to those who hate you, Luke 6: 27. This is extended in the words of 
Jesus in Matt. 25: 40, “Whatever (inasmuch as) you do to one of the least of these brothers of 
mine, you did for me.”

2. Seeking Good of the Other

This is extended in the words of Jesus in Matt. 25: 40, “Whatever (inasmuch as) you do to 
one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Paul, in Philip. 2:4 tells 
Christians to “look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This 
principle extends to the farthest extent of society and has led to the Christian principles of 
charity – love without regard for return – and also of justice, social equality, care, and 
peacemaking. All of these are embedded in the ancient principle of shalom, and embodied in 
the incarnation, life, sacrifice, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the manifestation of God. 
No other religion has this active principle of love in action as far as sacrifice and death, not 
for oneself or one’s own, but for the other so deeply and intimately woven into its nature, as 
the religion of Jesus.

3. Social Consciousness based on Biblical Principles Openly Applied to Society

Although the Christian faith certainly has always sought adherents, and Jesus urged people to 
follow him and urged his disciples to go and make followers of all people, he was more 
oriented to helping and healing than to teaching an orthodoxy. He taught love, care, 
humility, service, thoughtful engagement with the world and its creatures, rather than strict 
proselytizing. This principle extended even to the disciples and apostles who preached 
repentance, but also the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, 
and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matt. 11: 
5) in direct fulfillment of a similar list of good deeds in Isaiah 61: 1.

C. Critical-Analytic Tasks of Higher Education: a Radically Christian Social Perspective

By “radically Christian social perspective,” I mean one that goes to the source of the Jewish and 
Christian tradition. This includes recognition and utility of many distinct, articulate expressions 
of this tradition historically and currently, ranging from Apostle Paul’s model of participation in 
the Roman context, to Augustine’s comments in the City of God, and Constantine’s reforms and 
attempts to set up a just and Christian state, to Hugo Grotius’s conceptions of law based on 
God’s commandments. One would have to include in this survey, also the attempts by the 
Catholic Church to establish principles of justice and mercy in Christian states, as well as
Calvin’s attempts at godly community in Geneva, and those attempts of the Calvinists of England under Cromwell and the Puritans, and others preceding and succeeding them, as Mark Noll asserts:

The Puritans resemble other groups in Christian history .... They stand with the early Franciscans, the Protestant Reformers, the Jesuits, the Anabaptists, the early Methodists, and the Reformed Dutch of the late nineteenth century who, in their own separate ways, were transfixed by the glories of redemption and who went far in redeeming the world around themselves. (Mark A Noll Elwell Evangelical Dictionary as available at http://mb-soft.com/believe)

In this context, I refer to one such radical attempt in the work of “reformational Christianity.”

1. Analyzing Relations of Social and Economic Systems to Poverty and Inequality

Although not directly political, the university’s task is to inform scholar/citizens of the relations among all aspects of reality, in order to promote a just and equitable society. This is especially so in a society as complex as South Africa’s, as it emerges from the repressive apartheid era. Obviously, income has been affected, with the average annual income for Black households is R 22,770, and R136,651 for whites – a 1:6 ratio. Of course, this changes radically with the changing job market, but the task of the university is to note the relations among and between various levels of society and between social factors and the economic system. As Hendrik Van Riessen notes (1975), the main task of the university is to educate students in the ways and practice of science. In terms of social science, the university opens the minds and the abilities of students to serve the society and bring peace.

2. Regarding Economy as Stewardship

Economy is a way that the person takes on his or her responsibility to all, and cares for the creation as well as its people

3. Integrating Disciplines in an Integrated Curriculum

Not only does the university educate people in the ways of critical science, but it brings students and ideas together in such a way that the world begins to make sense to them helping them see and feel that the world is one.

4. Accessing Local, Affordable, Useful, Culturally Sensitive Education for Everyone

Education in South Africa is not equally distributed, tending to be best and most available in the highest population centers, and in those places formerly associated with the white community. Major universities of each of the provinces stem from the colonial, fusion, and apartheid eras whether the great universities of Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, and Cape Town or the major provincial ones at Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein, or Potchefstroom, although all of these are now wide open for attendance by all, and many are affected by mergers with other universities, they are still inaccessible for various reason to many people. The local universities – some associated with homelands like Venda University, Fort Hare University, University of Durban-Westville, etc. (Subotzky 1997: 1) – have recently been merged under the government’s White Paper of 1997, the Higher Education Act of 1997, and the National Plan for Higher Education, 2001. The
two goals identified in this strategy are: “1) reduction within the system of apartheid-generated inequalities based on race, gender, and location; 2) maximization of the contribution of higher education toward national and regional development” (ibid.). To a degree, this has occurred, but complaints from my own interviews indicate that because of factors like distance, lack of money, lower confidence in the quality of one’s closest branch of merged universities, poor transportation to the available or best-suited university, lack of available or affordable housing while attending university, inadequate education to qualify one for university (and attendant lack of facilities and personnel at the university to assist one in the transition to university-level work), a level of discomfort over culture or language at the premier (usually formerly white-only) campus in one’s range.

This issue of cultural sensitivity is being addressed vigorously by the Department of Education as well as by many administrators, academicians, and scholars (see various by Mabokela; Pithouse; Sehoole; Seepe; Khan). It is often addressed as an attempt at Africanization, defined in many ways, and often at the explicit exclusion, not only of Western thought, but also of any non-indigenous African religious thought (with the occasional exception of Islam).

The issue of usefulness of education is also addressed in the government’s polices, with direct implications for the perception of traditional “liberal arts;” the view and function of science at the university; the place and kind of literature, philosophy, and social theory allowed; and the view toward the similarities, incorporation, and differences among colleges, universities, and technical schools.

D. Content and Character of this Education toward Liberative Development

1. From Poverty toward Opportunity and Work

Related to the immediately previous point, what is the role of the university, particularly the Christian liberative university based on radical Christian principle, in addressing poverty and creating meaningful, useful, stewarly, and money-making work? This role could begin as the government currently seems to hold: by pragmatizing the university, making its teaching of math, physical and biotic science, psychology, social science, history, philosophy, and ethics oriented to immediate practical ends in business, finance, industry, civic life, politics, and public norms. Or it could encourage the life of the mind that leads to assessment of what the person, the group, the community and the country need to do to get along with each other, to develop an viable economy, and to promote peace and justice.

The history of Christianity and the practices of Christian groups, even in South Africa ring with ways of applying the advantages of space, unity, cooperation, and love inherent in groups of faith to make work. An outstanding example is the KZN community of KwaSizaBantu. Whatever one thinks of the branch of Christianity underlying the community, it nonetheless stands out as an outstanding example of entrepreneurship involving a considerable combination of white and black South Africans engaged together. This enterprise includes a system of schooling that ranges from pre-school through teachers college. The enterprises of the Zionist Christian Church under current Bishop Barnabas (and formerly Eugenas and Edward, ad seq) Lekganyane, which
manufacture religiously prescribed clothing and sell particular foods for ZCC members’ uses are another, although less universal example of religious community enterprises.

The Mukhanyou Theological College enterprises are now combining a farming operation, AIDS centers, and community economic enterprises with their Christian ministry to provide viable businesses for their people. Similarly in Limpopo province, Venda Reformed Christians have started the Soutpansberg Community Development Organization some years ago, and now also hope to engage in agricultural development to help relatively poor people get into avocado orcharding and other ventures.

Only the Mukhanyo venture is associated with an academic institution, but the point is that Christian ventures are not only part of the missions past, but continue in many and innovative ways to connect faith, community, and economic activity.

Surely training in philosophy, social, biotic, and physical sciences can be closely connected with economic theory and action as evidenced by people as remote from each other as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Benjamin Franklin have shown, not to forget the connections that Islam, Catholicism, and Buddhist teaching all have with various economic enterprises.

In fact, the Christian perspective which I propose as a matrix of liberation, is far less sectarian and connected to cultic community than those just listed. What I have in mind here, is an analysis of the structures of control by which global economic empires dominate trade, resources, technology, industry, and consumption, often to the detriment of the poor, and powerless, or politically unconnected people of the world. Economic, social, historical and political analysis of global, national, and local forces lie at the rock-bottom of enlightenment leading to growth. Those who lead their field in business development do not learn their strategies and analysis of the market by means of a technikon, or seminars in money-making. They do so because they understand what is happening and what needs to be done – exactly what philosophy, social, biotic, and physical sciences do best.

A major issue in establishing Christian higher educational models and institutions is the distrust and consequent government policies aimed at preventing religious ideas, inspirations, or motivations from forming the basis for educational and policy action. This stems partly from the religious biases that under laid colonialism, Western hegemony, and, more importantly, apartheid.

2. From Ecological Damage toward Stewardship

The matrix of liberative scholarship considers the point that land is a precious gift to humanity, of which humans are stewards of an abundant, but limited world of resources. All of the creation is valuable, and, since it is the sole source of sustenance and home for all humans, it must cannot be managed, first for individual profit, but collective welfare. Thus, the stewardship principle, coupled with the value and right of every human being, implies equitable distribution of land, water, air, beauty, resources, and access. This emanates from the root principle of love for the other, which is the fundamental, irreplaceable of the Christian gospel – the sine qua non which, if compromised by any other features of this religion, destroys its legitimacy. Stewardship is this
principle of love applied to the earth itself. Looked at this way, Christianity takes on a character radically different from its acquisitive, territorial, violent, wasteful, anthropocentric reputation, amply fostered by this religion’s most powerful and presumably most accurate adherents. As a liberative principle, Christian stewardship holds that as many people as possible should have access to land and should be encouraged to care for it lovingly and wisely. Degrading the land degrades human life. Far from an incentive to consume, damage, or harm, stewardship drives people to conserve, repair, and heal; instead of taking, barring, and wasting, stewardship counsels conserving, sharing, and giving. With this stewardly ethic as the basis for land, resource, and energy development, the long-term and universal interests of a land are preserved. The poor as well as the rich, the powerful along with the weak have a place at the Creator’s table. Employed as the underlying principle of higher education’s economics, biology, chemistry, physics, and other curricula, this provides a truly liberative matrix for land and resource policy that would bring South Africa far into a peaceful and abundant future.

3. From Social and Economic Disadvantage toward Equality and Social Justice

What drives most societies and economies today is the motives of profit and control. Such being the case, even when power is rearranged, as it has been for the past 12 years in South Africa, while the deck chairs on the Titanic get rearranged, most of those without a seat still do not have one; a few who did are now without; and few who had none are now seated, but the ship is as close to disaster, and the profit/control hierarchy fundamentally unaltered. Such is not the case with the Christian social justice matrix, in which Christ’s admonition to care for the poor and powerless, because care for such constitutes care, respect, and worship of Christ, is a far cry from the advantaging of some inhabitants of the land over others.

4. From Mere Technology toward Open Science and Humanities

When, at the gathering of the first international conference of Reformed institutions for Christian Scholarship, held at Potchefstroom, South Africa in 1975, Hendrik Van Riessen made a strong case that

When the university fails to provide the student with opportunity to prove [oneself] a scholar, it will be no more than a pretension of what a university has to be.

… . The university takes the detour of science, … in order to free itself from the ties of society for the purpose of scientific knowledge…. The university does not forget about the need of the professional … and the … application of science, but it is not ruled by them. (Van Riessen 1975: 41)

Science is the prime productive medium of the university. But he adds this warning to that championship:

In the Christian approach one always has to be aware of these two features of science: its limitation and its relativity or dependence on presuppositions. The limitation not only means that scientific knowledge can never exhaust reality, but also that science cannot replace (let alone surpass) other types of knowledge such as practical knowledge. This consideration is of supreme importance with regard to applied science. We have to reject the idea that science could master the world and its problems. (Ibid.: 40)

Philosophy, literature, art, and even “practical knowledge” have their places beside the university’s legitimate and important one. He condemns the former propensity of the university to “shape an intellectual elite,” but equally warns against the emergent model of science as
striving to achieve “mastery in society and shaping rulers. The problems of science are [no longer] wonderment … but [solving] the problems of society [along with] technology and organization, both [also based] on science” *(Ibid.: 36).*

So science, the chief task of the university, according to this radical Dutch Christian thinker, is relative; not a master, but a servant to the world. Not to solve its problems, but, along with other aspects of careful humanity, to work toward their solutions.

This is the liberative hope of the Christian open university: to carefully, critically, and in the spirit of Christ hold up the society and its institutions to scrutiny, showing where its institutions, policies, and practices seek justice, provide mercy, and rule with appropriate humility – and where they do not.
Bibliography


