

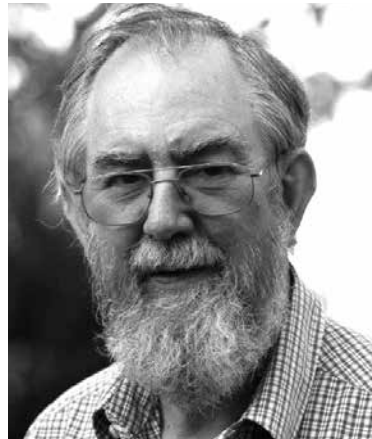


Helené van Tonder

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. JOHN DE GRUCHY

Helené: I'd like to start off with a question that is often asked at the end of interviews such as this: What are you currently working on? And since I've only recently learned that you not only work with words but also with wood, I'm curious about both mediums.

John: I am really recovering from all the excitement and activity of the Colloquium and Conference and, of course, writing A Theological Odyssey as well as Sawdust and Soul (together with Bill Everett) which is about my life in woodworking. But, several projects are beginning to creep into the pipeline. The major one is writing my autobiography, which some people have asked me to do. I am about halfway through that. Incidentally, I am going on Monday to Modimole to give some lectures to pastors of the AGS on Tradition! Very intriguing, but it is also prompting some more thoughts on the subject and why it should be of interest to Pentecostals. Then I am thinking more about neuroscience and theology, and some more thoughts on Bonhoeffer. Then there is my weekly Eucharist meditation for Volmoed! Yes, I make furniture. My current project is a large oak lectern for Bishops Preparatory School in Cape Town.



Helené: In September, there was a wonderful conference at Stellenbosch University (*Theology on the Edge*) celebrating your 75th birthday earlier this year as well as your work as a theologian. Do you mind sharing some of the moments of that event that you treasure most?

John: I was overwhelmed by the conference! How good it was for so many people to give the time to attend, often at considerable personal expense. How good it was for Stellenbosch University and the Kweekskool to host it, and do such a splendid job. What a wonderful banquet – quite over the top, but I set aside what was left of my humility and soaked up the kind words said about my work. Every lecture was so well prepared and presented and made an excellent contribution to the theological agenda that is close to my heart. The spirit – “gees” – was amazing among the participants. And what a wonderful range of people from Doppers to Catholics and everything in between and even beyond, even a good bunch of Congregationalists! And there were so many of my old friends from far and near, and also so many new friends – such as yourself. It really was not just a celebration of my life and work, but it was also a celebration of doing theology in South Africa together. And I think it all bodes well for the future. At least that is my hope and prayer. In fact, that was the original intention for the conference – theology and the next generation – and I think it made a significant contribution to that. What a community we are becoming together. That more than anything is my dream, and if I have helped to make it a little bit possible, I could not ask for more.

Helené: During the conference, one really obtained a good overview of the various areas in theology to which you have contributed: work on Bonhoeffer, aesthetics, science and religion, the church struggle in South Africa, Christian humanism. Your new book is also very helpful in giving insight into your theological thinking over many years. But I'm interested in *how* you came to think all these thoughts, and work on the areas in which you have. What is it that stimulates or triggers your theological thinking? How or when does something become a question to which you commit yourself?

John: I am not sure how to answer this question! I guess some clues are found in my Theological Odyssey and more will be found in my autobiography. The truth is that, throughout my theological journey, I have never sought topics and themes to work on. They somehow found me! The moment one project ends, another is already in process. You know, I was quite a good sportsman, playing cricket and hockey for our school's First Team. I was not the fastest or strongest, but what I brought into the game was an eye for the gap, a sense of where to be at a given time. So I ended up being captain of most teams I played in, even though I was not the best player! Keeping an ear to the ground, sensing the next move, and making connections. Although my work spans over many areas, there are important links that give it all coherence. At least I think so. Just as I like

networking with others – and I have so many wonderful colleagues – I also try and network with myself!

Helené: Of course, theology as being words/reasoning about God sometimes also confronts one with questions and mysteries that can hardly be spoken or written about. How are we to engage this limit of the discipline? Would you consider it a limit of the discipline, or perhaps rather a limit of the rhetorical habits that characterise the discipline? Are there other ways in which theology can try to communicate or engage the ineffable? (Or should we ask a completely different question about the relation between theology and the ineffable?)

John: Our knowledge of the ineffable or ultimate mystery is a process of unknowing, clearing the decks, seeking simplicity, allowing oneself to be led. Theology is far more than a discipline, it is that of course, but it is a journey full of twists and turns, surprises, discoveries, sufferings and joys. I am intrigued by how it will end ... but that is the mystery we celebrate and cannot finally explain. And we certainly cannot capture it all in the books we write and read. Rational theological discourse is undoubtedly important, and I have contributed my fair share to the enterprise. But I cannot capture the ineffable in this way, nor can I fully explain what I mean by mystery to others or myself if confined to this medium. This is where the turn to the aesthetic becomes so important for me. Aesthetic understood as the word literally means, seeing things differently. "Seeing" implies an alternative way of being apprehended by truth, goodness and beauty. This is the realm of poetry and art, where language transgresses boundaries. For, after all, doing theology is all about that, going where perhaps we should not go yet, being drawn or led towards something beyond ourselves, like Moses at the burning bush. How does that experience of mystery find expression, and what does it mean for us at present? That is the ultimate theological question and task. At the very least, we should take off our shoes.

Helené: In contrast to the previous question, what about those things that theologians simply *have* to speak about, but often omit to do clearly and boldly enough? In the past, the ecumenical movement in South Africa (especially the SACC) played an important role in these kinds of discourses. Given your own involvement with the SACC, how would you describe its current challenges and/or deficiencies? Is the SACC the most important platform for ecumenism in South Africa, or should the forms that the ecumenical movement take be reconsidered?

John: I think that there is a concerted effort at the moment to revive the SACC. It has undoubtedly gone through a serious slump and decline, lacking leadership and losing credibility. But the truth is that, if there were

no SACC, we would have to invent one because we need such a structure. But that cannot be the only structure. I think we need to encourage the emerging ecumenical church in all its forms to keep on finding each other, and keep insisting that, whatever its structures, it is true to its justice agenda. After all, any theology worthy of its name must be prophetic whatever else it might be. I have been encouraged in recent months by invitations to speak to pastors of more charismatic and Pentecostal churches. In times past, I would never have been included in their programmes to talk about some of my interests and concerns. But there is a new ecumenical spirit emerging that won't fit neatly into the boxes that were created by a previous generation. They served their purpose, often very well. So the issue becomes how do we allow a new structure to emerge that is inclusive and yet makes it possible to remain faithful to the task of the church in working for justice and reconciliation?

Helené: Since I've been in at least three settings with you where the name of the novelist and theologian Marilynne Robinson was mentioned, I will, in conclusion, ask you a question posed to her in a recent interview: What do you think people should be talking about more?

John: What I find refreshing about Marilynne Robinson's writings and lectures is that she brings to her subjects a freshness and vitality as well as a theological and deeply Christian humanist insight that is often lacking in theological discourse. She almost takes you by surprise both by the topics she loves to talk about as an author (Calvin, Bonhoeffer!) and by the way in which she probes beyond what might be regarded as common knowledge and interpretation. You just cannot fit her neatly into a particular box. I don't always think she is "right" in her conclusions, but she is invariably right in her provocations. So, what should we be talking about more? I think we should be learning from her how to talk differently about what we need to talk about. How to break open the subjects on hand in a way that takes us to a different place, deeper into mystery, I guess.