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INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR PHILIPPE DENIS

Prof. Philippe Denis is a Senior Professor in History of Christianity at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. In the 1970s and 1980s, his research focused on the history of the Reformation in Germany, France and The Netherlands, and specifically on issues of confessional development, biblical exegesis, and cultural representations. Over the past two decades, his research focused primarily on the history of indigenous Christianity in southern Africa, along with an interest in oral history. The latter has encouraged him to reflect on issues of memory and resilience, and to found the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa.[1]

Helené: I always like to think of a historian as a traveller in time and space, so I thought I'd like to start the discussion by asking about your own travels. And the first travel I want to ask you about is your travel from Belgium to South Africa, and I'm curious to know when you came to South Africa for the first time.

Philippe: *Sure […] I like your question. I fact, I have published, in French unfortunately, a paper about ten years ago on that. It is called "The lessons of a detour" – how the fact of being born and having grown up and having begun my work in Western Europe has shaped my work as*

1 For a more detailed academic profile, visit http://srpc.ukzn.ac.za/staff-profile/theology/philippe-denis.aspx.

a historian.[2] *I was born in 1952 and I came to South Africa for the first time in January 1988. I can remember the exact date, it was the 21st of January. It was a sort of sabbatical for six months, and I was caught by the atmosphere – apartheid and many things like the churches' involvement against apartheid, and the sense that there was something I could very much identify with. You need to know that I was born in Belgium seven years after the war, and the memories of the Resistance movement were still fresh. So I just found myself in occupied Belgium, occupied France, by Nazi Germany, and it resonated in me. So I immediately identified with the anti-apartheid struggle.*

In fact, during my first stay in 1988, I even connected with a member of the clandestine ANC, who asked me to liaise with the ANC in London. I went to London three times […] So I identified strongly, and then I decided to ask the Dominican Order if I could stay in South Africa, and eventually I came to stay in the last day of December 1989, so basically in 1990. At that time I was [a] lecturer in church history at the St Joseph's Theological Institute, and I got a position at UKZN, which was called the University of Natal, in 1993. So now I have worked at UN, which became UKZN […] for 21 years. But along the way, in a festschrift for my former supervisor, Professor Jean-Pierre Massaut, I wrote a piece called "The lessons of a detour". I could briefly refer to that. But since then, I did more thinking on that. So your question is excellent. I would maybe like to expand [on] it and mention that I travelled a lot all over the world. I have travelled a lot.

Helené: Yes, I know that you have done a transcontinental tour from the south to the north of Africa. So I wanted to ask you exactly about that.

Philippe: *Absolutely. In fact, I did it twice. In 1998, I went from Pietermaritzburg to Brussels by road in two and a half months. I have written a book, also in French,*[3] *although there is an English translation waiting to be published […] I went through Africa, all the way by road or by train or by boat (to cross the Mediterranean) and it was actually a spiritual experience. But also I learned a lot, I connected with lots of people, and it gave me a unique experience of Africa. Last year I did the same in South America. I felt the need to redo it, but differently. So I left from Buenos Aires […] went to Chile, Bolivia, Peru […]. It was really a human, spiritual, intellectual, whatever, experience. I wanted to do it again just to give me time to think. I like to … almost meditate. In theological language, it is called contemplate, which I am not too sure I really do, but I like to meditate, to think, and to absorb what happens to me, and to think about what is going to happen next. So*

2 See Denis (2004).
3 See Denis (2003).

that is my state of mind. So I went from Argentina to Chile, Bolivia, Peru, I crossed the Amazon, part of it on a boat actually because there are no roads everywhere. I ended up in Guyana, Suriname, French Guyana, Brazil again, all the way – Brazil is long, you know, five or six thousand kilometres – to Paraguay, all the way back to Argentina, by bus or by boat. But I have also been to […] all sorts of places, usually for conferences, and sometimes to visit friends. But to come back to this paper which I [wrote] a few years ago, what has become clear in my mind is that in Europe, especially in French-speaking countries, but also in German-speaking countries, Dutch-speaking countries, Christianity has been deeply influenced by the French Revolution in the sense that there is a clash between church and modernity, especially in the Catholic Church, but I think in the Protestant churches as well, although in a different way, which means that the church is on the defensive. And today, Europe is very secular. The Church is even more on the defensive. So it looks like that: when you are Christian, you are anti-modern in some way. The Vatican II [Council] has tried to redress that, but it has not fully succeeded.

What I found coming here, in South Africa, is a completely different landscape in the sense that faith, beliefs, religion, going to church is like normal – socially acceptable among Blacks, but also among Whites. There are churches everywhere. So you are not against culture by being Christian. So for a historian … In fact, it is strange to me. After twenty-five years in this country, I still find it amazing that people can talk about "I am a Methodist, I am an Anglican, I go to church" in any conversation, any meeting, even political meetings, academic meetings. So the relationship between society and Christianity is profoundly different. And now the important thing […] [that] this trip to South America helped me understand better is that in the world there are centres of power. And I like to compare power to a cyclone – you know, there is the eye of the cyclone, apparently. When you are inside this enormous chaos in the sky, within the movement that is destroying everything, there is a place that is quiet. You know what I mean? Now my observation is that the West – western civilisation, culture, which was colonial – has invaded the rest of the world very violently, and created all sorts of disturbances. When you are there you do not see it. You do not see power, because you are inside power. You cannot analyse what has happened in the world if you are in France, Belgium or Germany, in my opinion, or in the US. You do not see it. When you are in the periphery of the world – and South Africa is the periphery – you can see the effect of colonialism, and in our case apartheid.

I think apartheid is just a continuation of colonialism: more racist, more horrible, because it came late. But, in fact, there is no real difference

between colonialism and apartheid, in my opinion. […] So I like to see apartheid as an extreme form of colonialism. Now seen from Europe, you cannot measure what it means to invade the rest of the world, change a culture, change a religion, loot the economy, etc., etc. Now South Africa is a bit more complicated; it is like Algeria and, in fact, like Australia and South America, because the White settlers stayed and are still there. The difference between South Africa and Australia, or Northern America, or Argentina, or even Peru, is that the indigenous population here is completely dominant. […] The point I am trying to make is that being here allows me to see the world better. That is why I do not want to return to Europe, because I will lose something critical. I think the future is here; the future is in the South. And we are moving towards a multi-polar world. For a historian, that is fascinating. I have seen in my lifetime incredible changes – in South Africa, of course, coming out of apartheid […], but in other emerging countries too […]. So, to answer your question, travelling has helped me to see society and religion differently. Now you interview me for Acta Theologica. You have an interest in theology. I suppose I could say something about that. I would to say […] that I identify and sympathise with a postmodern approach, or if you like, a postcolonial approach, even a feminist approach. In what sense? In the sense that the relationship to truth is no longer simple. I do think [that] the question of the truth remains valid – you need to know what the truth is. But we also need to know that we create the truth.

Our knowledge is a construct – any knowledge, including religious knowledge, and historical knowledge. So this idea that you are doing good work and you are a good historian and then you have the truth about the past – it is a myth. If you like, I am very critical of any form of positivism. Now it also applies to the knowledge of God, even the knowledge of the Bible. We were trained in such a way that we believe that we know who God is and what the Bible says, but, in fact, you do not know God and the Bible in South Africa as you would know them in Belgium. And a White person does not relate to God or read the Bible as a Black person, a man as a woman, a child as an adult. There is not one way of looking at things. And historians know that more than anybody else. Historians document the changing understanding of the truth. They understand that, if you take Calvin, because I did my PhD on the Reformation and more specifically on refugee churches in the Rhine valley[4] *[…], Calvin was unbelievably naïve about that. He really believed that he re-created the early church in Geneva. He says it. It is in the introduction to the Church ordinances of the city of Geneva in 1541. He says that. And all his ecclesiology is supposed*

4 See Denis (1984).

to be a replica of what happened in the early church. But we know now that the early church … First of all, we are not too sure what happened there. It changed very much. The different ministries came over time in a certain context, and of course they do not correspond to what Calvin did. [That is] just an example. Of course, the Catholics do that even more. With their concept of tradition, [they] pretend that they are the faithful tradition. And, well, I am a Catholic, but I am an historian too, and I know all that is constructed in a certain context, for political, economic, social, [and] cultural reasons. So, it does not mean that faith is impossible, but faith needs to take that into account and be very modest about whatever we can say or know, you see. […]

Helené: I want to come back to the point you made about how living in South Africa or travelling to countries in the South puts you on the periphery and make you see the world differently. And I am interested in how exactly that changed your way of doing history. Because you are also known in South Africa for the oral history work that you are doing and the [Sinomlando] Centre[5] that you put up. So how did this periphery of the world change your way of doing history?

Philippe: *Well, I would say that, when I came to South Africa, first in 1988, when I got the position, at the time, as senior lecturer in History of Christianity in what was called at the time School of Theology, I immediately came to the conclusion that I had to change my way of writing history. Before that, I focused on 16th century Europe. I did some work on the Christian worker movement as well, but most of my work was on the 16th century. I was highly specialised, and I worked exclusively on archives and ancient books – [these were] my sources. But, fortunately, I had already done some worker history. I did some oral history in Belgium as an activist. I was actually working with the Christian unions in Belgium and, in that context, I had done a little bit of worker history. We did not use the [term] 'oral history' at the time, but I had done it in the early 1980s. We even published a book about that sort of thing.*[6] *But coming here, I started from the idea that, if you only use written sources, you only reflect the missionary point of view, and you ignore the vast majority of the people in the church – mostly Blacks, especially women – who actually do not write. So you only know their point of view by reading between the lines in missionary reports. So that is why I trained myself in oral history. As I said, I had [some] background, but then I really trained myself.*

5 www.sinomlando.org.za.

6 See Cellule (1982).

Over time, I became associated with the International Oral History Association; I even became a member of its Council. I organised an international conference in Pietermaritzburg in 2002.[7] *I am one of the founders of the Oral History Association of South Africa; I [was] its first chairperson for four years. And I have created an oral history centre. We ran six or seven [oral history] projects, most of which are completed and all the documentation is available at the Alan Paton Centre [of the University of KwaZulu-Natal]. So why all of that, to answer your question? To capture the voices of marginalised people. Sometimes I also interview famous people, like [Professor] John de Gruchy, for instance. But most of the people we interviewed were interviewed in Zulu. It was manyano women, Black clergy, sangomas, victims of political violence, people living with HIV/AIDS. [These are] all the people we have interviewed. We have conducted hundreds of interviews [with] that category of people. Most of it was in Zulu, because those people speak Zulu. So that is another way of being, if you like, postcolonial: to understand that their truth is not the same truth as, for instance, that of the missionaries or political leaders.*

So I would say [that] I do not think this focus on oral history is inconsistent with the sort of idea I have that you see the world differently from the periphery. I may add something here. When we speak about the periphery, we also need to deconstruct that notion itself, because South Africa is a regional power. So, at the level of the world, it is at the periphery; at the level of Southern Africa, it's not. And it is visible with the migrant workers, and the illegal immigrants, and South Africa is building walls around itself, just like France is doing, or the US or Australia. So we are the periphery, but for some people we are the centre. But that is okay. The whole point is to integrate, in the thinking, this notion of the centre and the periphery. The centres are moving, and the periphery is moving, but that is okay.

Helené: You mentioned the relation [of] your memory work to HIV/AIDS. Can you maybe expand a little on how these relate to each other in your work? And why you put those things together in a project.

Philippe: *Sure. I would like to say that I am one of those who do not separate academic work or, if you like, intellectual life and social action. Not everybody is doing that. But maybe the fact that I am a religious [brother], I am in the Dominican Order, contributes to that. We have been founded to preach, to speak the Word outside. So I have always been attentive to what is happening in society now. In Pietermaritzburg, many of my colleagues, for instance Gerald West, like to speak of "contextual theology". I am very much in line with this type of movement of being contextual. Now, when*

7 See Denis & Worthington (eds) (2002).

I arrived here in 1988, the big, big issue was apartheid. Now personally, I have always been involved with children with psychosocial needs or even economic needs – needy children, if you like. Already in Europe, I [was] [involved] for many years in children's homes, so I have this background. When I came here, I was interested in the big picture of apartheid, but also in the impact of apartheid on children. And, in 1990, I became involved with abandoned children in a project called Thandanani Association. In fact, I have adopted some of those children. Twenty years later, they are still with me, in fact twenty-five years later. They are here [in the house where the interview is conducted], some of them.

Now from abandoned children, all of us moved to another problem, AIDS orphans, because the number of abandoned children was much smaller than the potential number of AIDS orphans. In fact, hundreds of thousands of children have been orphaned by AIDS. It started to be visible in the mid-1990s and, as you know, it became bigger and bigger. For me, it was an existential issue. I could not ignore that. I knew some of those children, actually. In fact, one of my children is HIV positive. Another one is an AIDS orphan, etc. So I was personally involved. For the first years, I was just an activist, an AIDS activist. But gradually I started to connect my historical work and HIV/AIDS. Along the way we started […] a second department or section [in the oral history project] to do memory work with children affected by HIV/AIDS. It consists in helping people living with AIDS to process their stories through storytelling and a sort of oral history in this context. But that was the early years – as I said, I was an activist. But I think my first interest on the academic side of it was at a conference called "AIDS in Context" in 2001 at Wits [Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg]. And after that I realised that this is also a field of research. And then in 2004, I think – at the time I was a visiting professor in Louvain-la-Neuve – I organised a conference on the history of HIV/AIDS. It became a book, also published in French, but there is an English version online.[8] *And then some of us in Pietermaritzburg started to understand that there was more work to do on HIV/AIDS and religion, because, at first, this issue was ignored.*

People dealing with HIV/AIDS were [investigating] the biomedical aspects or maybe the epidemiological aspects, and gradually the social aspects of HIV/AIDS. But then, I myself, with the help of Prof. Ronald Nicolson […] in 1997/1998, said to my colleagues: We need to do something about AIDS. So we offered a course called "Church and AIDS" – Honours and Masters. I have been the lecturer for that course for six or seven years. Then Professor Beverley Haddad took over […] But I am the one who introduced this idea of Church and AIDS. I can say that, apart from Prof.

8 See Denis & Becker (2006).

Nicolson, I was the first. But gradually all my colleagues […] one by one, started to be interested in HIV/AIDS – Gerald West as a biblical scholar, Edwina Ward as a practical theologian, and so on. Beverley Haddad herself in something called "Theology and Development". So collectively, we decided to create a platform at the School of Religion and Theology called CHART – Collaborative HIV and AIDS Religion and Theology – to coordinate our work.

In that context, I started to develop a research interest in the history of the involvement of churches in HIV/AIDS in South Africa, and later in Africa. First, I did some literature surveys – I have written a few papers on that.[9] *But then, at one point, I proposed to the National Research Foundation (NRF) a project called "Memories of AIDS" to interview a certain number of community workers dealing with HIV/AIDS directly, and I had some funding from the NRF. And then we got more funding from SANPAD, which is a Dutch-South African research partnership. I managed to get a grant form SANPAD as well. As a result of this double funding, over five years we interviewed about 100 people. And all those interviews are now in Pietermaritzburg,*[10] *most of them in Zulu. So we have created a massive amount of documentation on AIDS and the church. […] What came out eventually [is that] the real interest of that documentation is to show the agency of members of AIDS support groups or volunteers of home-based care organisations, who are Christian or non-Christian – but most of them are Christian. We were interested to see the initiatives or the agency of these people, especially to disclose [their status], to deal with stigma, to deal with gender oppression, etc. in that context.*

Helené: I don't want to end the conversation, but I think for the sake of the space we have available to publish the interview, we shall have to stop the formal conversation here […]

Philippe: *Well, I think I have said a few things.*

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9 See Denis (2011, 2013).

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