

# **G.C. Oosthuizen and the Study of Religion in KwaZulu-Natal**

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This collection of essays is brought together in the honour of Gerhardus Cornelius (Pippin) Oosthuizen on his eighty third birthday. Pippin has been one of the most significant religion researchers and prolific Humanities publishers South Africa has ever produced. Among his friends and colleagues count some of the most important scholars of religion in South Africa and elsewhere. With his critical acumen and insightful understanding of the ebb and flow of the South African socio-political landscape of the last fifty-odd years, he has been a distinguished leader in research and has been honoured with Honorary doctorates from South Africa's leading universities. This collection constitutes a small token of our appreciation for his more than fifty years in academia and his academic leadership.

Born in 1922, Pippin Oosthuizen completed his graduate studies at the Universities of Stellenbosch, Cape Town and Union Seminary in New York. For his studies at Union, he received the Rockefeller scholarship for Advanced Religious Studies. He then graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy (University of South Africa) and a Doctor of Theology (Free University of Amsterdam). The well-known Kant scholar, H de Vleeschauwer was his promoter of the first and J.H. Bavinck, of the second. He was also a recipient of the prestigious Alexander von Humboldt scholarship.

Between 1944 and 1946, Pippin served as Air Force army chaplain in Italy for the Allied forces. On his return to South Africa, he served as minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and Queenstown in the Eastern Province in South Africa respectively. This spell lasted from 1950 to 1959.

In 1959 he entered academia, with a position as Head of the Department of Divinity at the very influential and historically black University College of Fort Hare. Throughout the apartheid era, Fort Hare played a very significant counter-hegemonic role and he made an important contribution in so far as he flouted apartheid ruling opinion through his scholarship, research and wisdom. He broke new ground in his research and, in 1964, became Professor and Dean of the newly established Faculty of Theology. A remarkable number of black academics and church leaders studied under him.

Preferring work at previously disadvantaged institutions, he declined three offers to move to a previously white institution and accepted a position at the then University of Durban-Westville in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. He started as Head of the Department of Theology (1969 – 1971). Realizing, however, that cosmopolitan Durban, with its many world cultures and multiplicity of religions, was in need of research of this phenomenon, he resigned as Head of this Department. This decision also came about due to his very vocal anti-apartheid ideas, his resignation from the Church and his initiative in founding the Department of Science of Religion at the same institution in 1972. He held the position as Head of Department until his retirement in 1984.

On retirement, Oosthuizen founded and became the director of the Research Unit for New Religious Movements and the Independent Churches (Nermic). This unit was based at Kwadlangezwa at the University of Zululand. Here, he and his collaborators – amongst whom count some of the most internationally recognised scholars working in this area – developed an impressive body of knowledge through fieldwork, seminars and publications. He conducted his work with funding assistance of the Human Sciences Research Council. He continued with this project until 1997 when he closed it down due to health reasons. Even so, he continues to attend and read papers at conferences up to date.

Pippin Oosthuizen is known for his research in the areas of Ecclesiology, Missiology, Science of Religion and Theological Ethics. Undoubtedly, however, his most significant work has been on the new Religious movements and the African Independent Churches. On the one hand, he published much on the different religions present in southern Africa – also conscientising the populace of this diversity and its significance for the country. On the other hand, he has been one of the foremost scholars in the

country who researched the phenomenon of the African Independent Churches. This is one of the most significant counter-hegemonic and alternative phenomena in the history of South Africa, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not only has it served as haven for destitute Africans during the days of extreme exploitation by colonial and apartheid policies and practices, it also served as religious base – even as it is diverse in its manifestation – for the developing multi-cultural and -religious African-focused consciousness in South Africa. In many ways, it constitutes the greenhouse in which the new people-focused ethic for the country is being developed – by the people and for the people.

Oosthuizen is one of the foremost scholars who contributed to the development and study of this phenomenon.

In recognition of his scholarly contributions in Religion, he was conferred life membership by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in 2000. He was also the president of the eighteenth quinquennial congress of the IAHR which took place in August 2000, in Durban, South Africa.

In the remainder of this presentation we reflect on developments in the area of Education since 1994, and Religion since 1997.

### **Education in South Africa since 1994**

It is common knowledge that the new democratic government in South Africa (1994-) have been passing legislation to eradicate and transcend the constraints of apartheid laws. One of the government's most significant achievements so far was to formulate and pass legislation related to education in 1997 with further directives and the founding of national bodies and systems to implement it. Significant for Higher Education, was the decision to merge Historically Black universities with Historically White universities or historically disadvantaged with historically advantaged institutions. This move aimed at the eradication of the colonial and apartheid legacies of the underdevelopment of indigenous peoples and the bringing about of equality in tertiary education. This also impacted on the study of Religion and Theology in South Africa. The most significant is that, whereas apartheid education espoused a system of Christian National Education, the new government, in line with its democratic ethos, had to implement a system where all the religions and religious institutions in South Africa are treated equally. For

South Africans this means a change of mindset, because they have to think and interact in equity terms not only with regard to Diaspora religions – Hinduism for example – but especially with regard to the African indigenous religions (and cultures) and the indigenous churches.

In Africa, researchers have to increasingly take note of the rising tide of the various forms of Pentecostalist, Charismatic and indigenous religious movements and organisations. These organisations function at grassroots levels and fulfil a vital function for the people. On the one hand, and for more than one hundred years, they have served as spiritual havens for many of the indigenous populace who have suffered under the colonial and apartheid regimes. On the other hand, they also meet many material needs of the people. For example, through their various celebrations and feasts, they provide access to food and shelter to many. Through their 'stokvels' – a voluntary collaborative saving and purchasing organisation – they develop systemically challenging buying power through which households are elevated and their wealth increased. The same is true of the southern African region, and it is especially with regard to the study of this phenomenon that Pippin Oosthuizen has made such an impressive contribution in the 1980s and early 1990s.

These developments also brought about some local changes to the configuration of the study of Religion and Theology.

### **The Study of Religion at the University of Durban-Westville (1997-2003)**

In 1997, the University of Durban-Westville where Pippin served for fifteen years as professor, decided to dissolve its Faculty of Theology and the three Departments of Science of Religion, Hinduism, and Islamic Studies. This decision was based on two main rationales. The first was that the Faculty and the different departments were not viable financially. The second was that, given South Africa's new dispensation, the existing state of affairs did not allow for the equal and comparative study of the southern African religions, but especially in the grater Durban region, which is characterised by its plurality of religions and cultures. As an interim measure, and until new developments could take place, all staff came together in a Centre for Religious Studies in 1999. The Centre continued and phased out the older systems of the Faculty and departments. This important decision also impacted

on the offering of Biblical Studies. This subject was to be phased out and discontinued due to the fact that a very large number of students were graduating with Biblical Studies as major, and then experienced a dearth of job opportunities. This decision was also mainly due to the fact that the country as a whole – but also at local level – had to decide to focus its tertiary education investment at the training and preparation of students for viable job prospects.

Given the challenges and legacies related to colonial and apartheid underdevelopment and miseducation, the members of the Centre for Religious Studies conceived three programmes of study. The undergraduate programme was planned to service students from other departments and Faculties interested in the study of Religion, as well as students wishing to major in this field. As such, the Centre developed modules aimed at meeting the needs of prospective students from Law, Anthropology, History and Heritage Tourism amongst others. It also developed a wide variety of modules that could adequately educate, prepare, and enskill students for a variety of activities and opportunities in religious organisations. Due to the very relevant but also integrated scope of the programme, it was labelled the Programme of “Religion and Culture”.

During 1998 and 1999 the Centre also developed two post-graduate programmes, namely the Programmes of “Religion and Social Transformation” and “Religion Education”. Both these programmes contain general modules on research methodology and theory in the study of Religion, but also provide a multi-religious focus in which students may engage their own particular religion or the religion in which they wish to specialise. The aim of the first is to cater for the academic needs of religious leaders and practitioners such as pastors, imams and priests, while that of the second is educators and teachers. Given the legacy of the government-sanctioned priority of Christianity in South and southern Africa, this is a welcome incentive, because it opens perspectives on the multi-religious and –cultural constitution of the local, regional and sub-continent’s civil society. The programme in Religion Education also further contributes towards this reality by allowing for a more informed focusing on the teaching, learning and tutoring of religious people in a multi- and inter-religious way.

These developments led the Centre to found the School of Religion and Culture. It started these programmes in 2000 and has since then had more

than one hundred Honours and about fifty Masters and doctoral graduates. It is significant in this regard to also mention that many churches, especially those of Pentecostal and Charismatic persuasion, have sent their students to study in the School of Religion and Culture.

### **The Study of Religion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2004-)**

Following these developments, the Department of Education in South Africa launched its tertiary education merger strategies. It was decided that the Universities of Durban-Westville and Natal in Durban would merge. This again led to talks between the School of Religion and Culture and the School of Theology at the University of Natal. The decision was made to constitute a new school – the School of Religion and Theology – in the newly established University of KwaZulu-Natal. In this new dispensation, the former two Schools, retained their existing programmes with the Pietermaritzburg site mainly offering programmes in Theology and the Durban site offering the three programmes mentioned above – the undergraduate programme in Religion and Culture, and the two postgraduate programmes, Religion and Social Transformation, and Religion Education.

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It gives us great pleasure to present this volume in honour of Prof G.C. (Pippin) Oosthuizen. Some of the contributions come from colleagues at Durban and Pietermaritzburg, while others were contributed by friends from elsewhere. The wide range of contributions testifies to the incredible contribution Pippin made to the founding and development of the study of Religion in southern Africa, but also more widely afield. It is our hope that this volume will further stimulate our already exciting research agenda in Africa, building on the work done by scholars such as Pippin and others.

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