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The Church History Society Of Southern Africa: Indeed Coming Of Age

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The Church History Society of Southern Africa has undergone some significant developments in its twenty three year history. The author reviews the founding of the society and some of the significant themes and issues that it has addressed over the years. He closes his article with a discussion of some of the ongoing tensions within the society and possible options for the society in the future if it is to reach its full potential.

Introduction

The year 1993 marked the twenty third year since the founding of the Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA). Reflecting on the history of an organization always proves to be a worthwhile and valuable exercise, not only for looking back but quite often to look ahead. It is precisely these aims that I have in mind when I wish to trace some of the major developments in the history of the CHSSA.

Some developments and tendencies

The history of the foundation and establishment of the CHSSA is an interesting one and it reflects some of the dilemmas with which the society is even to this day struggling. At the beginning of the seventies, to be exact during May 1970, the first official overtures were made to get people interested in the idea of

founding a church historical society. After J.A. Stoop and C.F.A. Borchardt, both attached to Unisa, got B.J. Marais from the University of Pretoria and F.G.M. du Toit, the Pretoria archivist of the Ned. Geref. Kerk, interested in the idea, correspondence was transmitted between T. N. Hanekom from the University of Stellenbosch and C.F.A. Borchardt. On 26 May 1970 Hanekom replied to these overtures in a letter and mentioned that already during 1969 the “Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns” as well as the “Council for Social Research” requested that some structure ought to be found to stimulate the subject of church history in the South African context. He mentioned in his letter that he wished to raise some issues at the forthcoming meeting: the possible establishment of a church history study group within the “Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie”, the drafting of a constitution and the establishment of an annual publication. Hanekom was in agreement with Borchardt about inviting members of the three Afrikaans speaking churches. He also raised the possibility of inviting representatives from the English speaking churches at a later stage. Though one can accept it that the “Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie” did raise the possibility of a society for church history, no concrete initiative was eventually taken by Hanekom but rather by Stoop and Borchardt (Correspondence 1970).

On the afternoon of 4 June 1970 an informal meeting was held. Issues on the agenda were the desirability of such a society, its relationship with the “Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie”, a preliminary constitution and practical matters related to the official establishment of such a society. Such matters included the compilation of a list of possible members, the arrangements for a founding meeting as well as for a possible first conference, and the election of a preliminary management committee. Unfortunately no minutes of this meeting could be traced.

Eventually invitations were sent out for interested parties to attend a founding meeting on 1 October 1970 at Bourke House, Muckleneuck, Pretoria. Twenty one people attended this meeting and our society was officially founded. The constitution was finalized, and membership fees of R10,00 per year were decided upon for full members and R5,00 for associate members. A provisional arrangement was entered into with the South African Historical Society to publish papers read at conferences, as well as other articles, in their South African Historical Journal. It was also decided to compile a register of research work being done in the field of church history.

At the 1971 meeting it was decided to become an affiliate member of the “Commission International d’Histoire Ecclesiastique Comparee” (CIHEC) a society which at that stage had a membership from more than twenty countries.

And so the business of the CHSSA got underway. To refer to each and every major decision taken in the course of the society’s history is naturally impossible. I would therefore rather highlight some of the major developments and broader tendencies in the course of its twenty three years’ history.

The broad aim of the Church History Society of Southern Africa, according to the current constitution, is to further research and support publications in church history and related subjects. The goal of the CHSSA is to be attained by arranging conferences, publishing papers and communications, corresponding with similar foreign societies, inviting experts to read papers in the field of church history and related subjects, and sustain any other legitimate methods which may serve to attain this goal.

As regards the operation of the society, the constitution stipulates that as far as possible a church historical conference will be held annually and will be open to all interested persons. Papers will be presented by members of the society or guest speakers. The business meeting of the society determines the venue, date and theme of the conferences, elects a secretary for a period of three years, and appoints a chairperson and vice-chairperson annually who are responsible for the arrangements for the following conference.

With reference to membership, the constitution defines some stipulations which serve only as a guideline and may be amended by the society according to circumstances and need not be applied rigidly. It stipulates that all persons who hold a Bachelors degree in theology are eligible for membership of the society.

Furthermore persons holding a Masters degree in History or any other subject related to Church History, History of Missions, History of Doctrine or Church Polity, or anyone with a specialized interest in the above mentioned subjects may be considered for membership in the society. New members are proposed in writing by a current member, following which a decision is made by an official business meeting. Membership ceases when a member resigns or when he or she is more than six months in arrears with membership fees.

In the course of its twenty three years of existence, twenty conferences and general business meetings were held besides the founding meeting. It proves to be an interesting exercise to focus on *inter alia* the different venues and the topics addressed at these conferences and to try and discover some tendencies.

The first two conferences, i.e. 1970 and 1971, were held at the beginning of the calendar year, it was for understandable reasons decided not to arrange a meeting for early 1972 but rather to start this new cycle at the beginning of 1973. As regards venues it is interesting to note that four conferences were held in the Stellenbosch-Somerset West area. Two meetings were organized in Bloemfontein but only after the establishment of the theological faculty of the Ned. Geref. Kerk at the University of the Orange Free State. In Natal two conferences were put up at the University of Zululand near Empangeni, whilst the rest took place in the Transvaal: three at Potchefstroom, four at the University of Pretoria and six at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. It is clear that in spite of many practical and financial considerations an attempt was made to move around and not to tie the society to one area or institution.

With reference to the themes of the different conferences, some tendencies can be discerned and some specific areas of interest did recur. Conference themes were constantly prepared by the five odd study groups within the society. Right at the beginning of its history at two consecutive occasions in 1970 and 1971 the society addressed the status of church historiography in South Africa and the relationship between secular history, church history and salvation history. At further occasions, issues relating to theory, philosophy and methodology were addressed. In 1975 the African context received extensive coverage, and in 1976 South African church historiography.

In 1983 it was once again the historiography of the mainline churches in South Africa which came in focus and, in 1988, a major conference and workshop was held on current church historiography and related developments in the Third World, and in the subcontinent. At the 1991 conference the issue of interpretation and re-interpretation received attention. Various other relevant historical topics were also highlighted. Issues such as ecumenism (1981 and 1987), liberation (1983), social involvement (1986), violence (1990), church and state (1980), pietism and evangelicalism (1982) and reconciliation (1978) were addressed. In the meantime, various aspects of church polity such as the relation between Scriptures, Calvin and the Reformed Church order (1977 and 1984) and the various systems of church government (1989) were also focused on. Some general topics like the French Huguenots (1973), Calvin and Luther (1974) and post war developments in the South African churches (1979) also received the attention of the society. Since 1981 it was decided to add responses on papers in the programme and this definitely contributed to the higher standards attained. In conclusion it can be said that as regards the conferences, there is also a

willingness to address topical and relevant issues of our times as well as issues related to philosophy, theory and method. Furthermore, it also seems as if a rising line of openness to some discussion and re-interpretation can be detected in many papers. Sadly not enough of this has been worked through in the contributions of individual members of the society (Minutes 1970-1990).

As regards the management of the business of the society, the general guideline followed was to elect a chairperson and vice-chairperson from the inviting institution which meant that the society was led by people representative of some part of South Africa. As no conferences were held at any of the English universities it meant that most of the office-bearers came from an Afrikaans and a Reformed background. It must however be added that, because of the fact that these office-bearers were primarily responsible for organizing and chairing a specific conference, they eventually did not necessarily play a major role in deciding the direction of the society.

It was more specifically the secretaries of the society who handled the day to day business and who exerted most influence on the ongoing developments of the society. In the course of the twenty three years of its history seven individuals acted as secretaries or assistant secretaries, the latter position which was created in 1984 and in 1986 changed to a member and publication secretary over against the secretary for correspondence and minutes. The different secretaries were C.F.A. Borchardt (1970-1974); A.M. Hofmeyr (1974-1977); C.J. Botha (1977-1979); J.W. Hofmeyr (1979-1985); c. Landman (1984-1991); D.P. Whitelaw (1985-1988 and C.F.A. Borchardt (1988-date), the last two as publication secretaries. Except for A.M. Hofmeyr it is clear that the business of the society was very strongly run from Pretoria and, except for C.F.A. Borchardt's second term, very much from within Unisa. This implied that Unisa primarily provided the infra-structure for the well-being of the society, and, through the very able and constant co-operation of Mrs. A. Smit, a departmental secretary, Unisa was able to handle all these responsibilities. In the course of the society's history there was at least one non-Afrikaans and not-Reformed office-bearer and one woman who partook as office-bearer. Both of them were very well received by the membership.

Broad guidelines for the election of honorary members were formulated at the 1988 annual conferences of the society. In the case of a person being a member of the CHSSA, he or she must have made a long and meritorious contribution to the CHSSA as well as to Southern African church historiography. In the case of a person not being a member of the CHSSA but who is a South African citizen, he

or she must have made a contribution to South African church historiography and must have received both national and international recognition for his or her work. In the case of a person not being a South African citizen he or she must enjoy international recognition of his or her research and must show a special interest in South African church history.

Up to the present, nine different academics have been elected honorary members of the society i.e. J.N. Jooste, G.D. Scholtz, F.A. van Jaarsveld, J.A. Stoop and H.A. Oberman.

The society regarded international relations as of great importance but no major strides were made in this regard. Only on two occasions in its history did the society have the opportunity of being a co-host to foreign speakers. In 1973, Prof. J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink from Leiden (Netherlands) addressed the society on "St. Bartholomew's Night". In 1991 the society had at its annual conference Prof. H.A. Oberman from Tucson (Arizona, U.S.A.) as guest. This invitation was initiated by the Universities of South Africa and Pretoria, but as from the beginning his visit was planned to coincide with the annual meeting of the society.

Though D. Crafford suggested at the annual business meeting of 1973 that the CHSSA should consider membership of the "Society for African Church History," it was eventually decided that individual members should rather apply for membership. As for the rest of Africa there is virtually no contact with fellow church historians except for the contacts by individual members. Two of the members of the society, J.W. Hofmeyr and M. Donaldson, have however had some contact with the "Working Commission of Church History in the Third World" and its African subgroup.

The level of involvement in other international professional societies in the field of church history is also very low. Once again only a handful of individuals in the CHSSA would be members of some of these societies.

After having been a member of CIHEC since 1971, it was decided in January 1978 to discontinue its membership primarily for financial reasons. However as from 1980 attempts were made to rejoin CIHEC again after W.H.C. Friend, the newly elected president of CIHEC, in a letter dated 15 December 1980 to J.A. Stoop put it as follows: "While I am writing, I wonder if you have ever thought of forming a South African sub-commission of the CIHEC...the officers of the sub-commission would have to be carefully balanced by race and tradition; and it would probably take a bit of time to get through." Sadly enough this attempt never materialized (Correspondence 1980).

Not only did the society try to build relations with international societies of a similar nature, it also attempted to establish contact with and explore possibilities of co-operation with, for instance, the South African Historical Society. In 1987 the annual conference of the Church History Society of Southern Africa decided to make initial contacts, to inform the South African Historical Society (SAHS) of its interest in exploring fruitful means of co-operation and to request that society to suggest as how to proceed. Some possibilities were considered by the CHSSA, such as a congress to be planned by the two societies to take place at the same venue, the one succeeding the other, enabling persons to attend both if desired. Further, by means of careful planning it might be valuable to consider a combined conference where a theme or event of mutual interest could be studied. In a written reply dated 11 June 1987 from the president of the SAHS, Prof. John Benyon conveyed a positive feeling toward this suggestion: "Obviously, however, it is the practical possibilities that flow from such mutual 'positive feeling' that are of immediate concern. Such possibilities can, I suppose, only emerge when we are both well-informed of the nature of each other's organization and activities" (Correspondence 1987). Though nothing further has transpired officially, the doors are wide open and some individual members of the CHSSA have in the meantime taken up membership of the SAHS.

The road ahead

As regards the road ahead, there is possibly something to be learnt by the CHSSA from the experiences of the societies which were formed to promote the study of secular history in South Africa.

We very briefly refer to some of the highlights in this history. In 1956 the "Historiese Genootskap van Suid-Afrika" was founded, with the aim to encourage the study of history among a wide range of people, but particularly among high school pupils, university students and the general public. By 1960 disillusionment had set in in some circles of the "Historiese Genootskap" at its failure to cater for the needs of the professional historian. This society was criticized for allowing itself to be dominated by primarily Transvaal teachers' organizations and the University of Pretoria, for favouring Transvaal writers in the allocation of space in the society's journal *Historia*, as well as for the fact that the journal had not earned recognition at international level. It appeared as if that society had forfeited the confidence of many professional historians in South Africa, and especially those at the English-speaking universities.

Increasing numbers of leading Afrikaner historians came to the conclusion that positive steps be taken to draw English-speaking academics into a national professional organization. Eventually the South African Historical Society (SAHS) was founded in 1965. Conferences which were held biennially first focused on methodological issues and the development of new approaches to history, but gradually began to reflect more directly on recent developments in historical scholarship: the history of frontiers, African societies and race relations, slave and free blacks, rural, urban and regional history, demographic history, culture and ideology. In general the principle of bilingualism was scrupulously observed. The founding of the SAHS could be seen to be part of the endeavour by Afrikaans and English-speaking South Africans in the post-republic period to find each other (Saunders and Le Cordeur 1986:7-23).

In later years a new work group was founded at Wits called the "History Workshop." The aim was to provide for the study and the promotion of radical and revisionist historiography.

Some other issues as regards the future also need our attention. The role of women and blacks in the CHSSA is not extensive though not negligible. Although women members of the CHSSA have not organised themselves in a formal subgroup such as is happening in the American Society for Church History (with their subgroup called "Women in Theology and Church History"), they have at various occasions delivered papers at annual conferences and one of them (C. Landman) has been secretary of the CHSSA from 1984 to 1991. A small number of blacks have in the last six years become members of the society. However, there seems to be some discomfort amongst them about the somewhat exclusive Afrikaans and Reformed character of the society.

As regards an archive by and for church historians the collection of documentation of the CHSSA is still fairly thin and sketchy and it calls for serious organization, classification and inventorisation. Materials currently available largely relate to five different categories: firstly, the minutes generated by the annual conferences; secondly, the financial records and reports reflecting the material image of the society; thirdly, the correspondence relating to the establishment and expansion of the society; fourthly, published volumes of conference papers; and finally, the miscellaneous items on the general business of the CHSSA. Though a decision was taken in 1982 to deposit these documents with the church archives of the Ned. Geref. Kerk in Pretoria, it has as yet not been implemented.

In 1989 the annual publication of the society which was merely a collection of papers delivered at conferences, was changed into a biennial journal. With the aim to qualify with the Department of National Education as an accredited journal and naturally also to enhance its standard, it was decided to broaden the editorial board of the society's journal so as to include some internationally acclaimed academics such as W.H.C. Frend, W. van't Spijker, M.E. Marty and H.A. Oberman.

Some serious discussions in an individual or corporate context have taken place among members of the society on the status of the subject of church history in South Africa during the last decades. South African church history has for very long been plagued by polemic and apologetic historiography. To prove this one has only to cite the views of a couple of members of the society. T.H. Hanekom identified four dominant characteristics of South African church historiography: denominationally oriented, culturally shaded, ethnically restricted and geographically bound. C.W. Cook in 1970 outlined the position of English church historiography, and stated that the isolation as well as the variety of settlements and approaches ought to be noted. E. Brown stated in 1969 that in South African church historiography every church distinguishes and separates itself from the next. Consequently the need for a new and comprehensive view on South African church history has very clearly been emphasized by members of the society.

Cook stated in 1970 that South African church history has to be regarded not only denominationally but also as inseparably part of the "okumene." Brown in 1969 felt that the church needs a comprehensive history to tell its story in one bold stroke and with theological insight and judgment.

In recent years an increasing number of church historians have become aware of the importance of a philosophical and scientific theoretical reflection on their subject as a discipline. Formerly few questions had been asked concerning the ongoing development of this subject in the subcontinent of Africa. The question has also been raised as to whether the traditional approach to church history, or the European approach in which most South African church historians were trained, is still relevant for the practice of this subject in the African context. Practical realities have forced church historians to reformulate the needs of their task.

A weighty question with which church historians currently struggle is as to whether their subject should be practiced as a theological discipline or whether it should be secularized. Most church historians in South Africa are however agreed

that church history should be scientific, critical and as far as possible objective and that the church, as the object of study, should be examined honestly and theologically. No consensus has however been reached concerning a paradigm whereby a scientific theological method can be achieved. Progress towards a new methodological paradigm has however been made in that the object has been determined, as well as the norms whereby the history of the church can be tested and judged, namely, by the scriptures.

Conclusion

The current outlook for the CHSSA is in some ways hopeful, in some ways not. Some of the problems which urgently have to be faced are the following: the society is in spite of the initial and recurring pleas and even attempts for a representative membership still not truly representative of both the ecclesiastical and cultural spheres. Furthermore there appears to be some lack of understanding between the different schools of thought represented in the society. This was first reflected by the drift of members of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika from the CHSSA. Since then also the wish of the work group for church polity to have a plenary session at every annual conference was perceived by some to be too prescriptive. A sensible way however out of this apparent dilemma is the newly created forum sessions which were implemented for the first time at the twenty first anniversary conference in 1991.

Another example of a lack of understanding is the great emphasis which is still placed on denominationalism in spite of the fact that right from the beginning and in the course of the twenty one years of its history there was also a definite plea for an ecumenical openness. The society has, in spite of the fact that it had in some way come of age, possibly reached a very critical phase in its history. The choice is either to move towards a position of greater parochialism, exclusivism and particularism or otherwise to develop a greater level of respect and understanding for one another.

Eventually the only hope for a fairly representative, understanding and relevant academic society lies in the ability of the individual membership and the society as a whole to state that nobody embraces the whole truth, that there could be a different view on any specific issue to that of a particular individual or group and, finally, that mutual understanding, respect, openness and co-operation prove to be enriching rather than suffocating. Sadly enough, the subject of church history will be the loser if these aims cannot materialize.

In practical terms, and analogous to the history of those South African societies founded to study the subject of secular history, there are basically three possible options open for the CHSSA.

It either has to return to a primarily exclusivist orientation, like the “Historiese Genootskap,” or otherwise it should move boldly ahead towards a more inclusive organization like the “South African Historical Society.” On the other extreme, there is the option like that of the Wits-based “History Workshop” with its emphasis on radical and revisionistic history. Personally I favour the middle option as the most sensible. This entails an endeavour to find each other and to build a society embracing all professional church historians and bridging all ecclesiastical, cultural and ideological barriers.

Instead of forming a new society if the current one does not fully satisfy all our particular needs, shouldn't we consider in our “wisdom” — after all have we not to some extent come of age — to redevelop our society to embrace a broader and more open outlook upon matters, and especially by using forum sessions to provide for different needs?

Apart from these laudible reasons, the lack of money and time point towards re-organising the old society rather than forming a new one which, after all, may not be able to get off the ground.

Since 1991 a number of developments have taken place in the Church History Society of Southern Africa that shed light on the direction the CHSSA should take. Something of a new maturity is developing among church historians in the subcontinent of Southern Africa. The Church History Society of Southern Africa is possibly the best barometer for this. A real chance existed for this society to split up in two or three smaller societies serving the needs for each of the ideological and parochial main groups that have co-existed in this society. Though it is still early in the re-organisation of this society, there is indeed some reason for optimism.

The choice was either to move towards a position of greater exclusivism, parochialism and particularism or otherwise to develop a greater level of respect and understanding for one another. The only hope for a fairly representative understanding and relevant academic society indeed lies in the ability of the individual membership and the society as a whole to state that nobody embraces the whole truth, that there could be a different view on any specific issue to that of a particular individual or group, and, finally, that mutual understanding, respect, openness and co-operation prove to be enriching rather than suffocating. There are already very clear indications and even decisions that the society is

following the later route which means that in some ways after 23 years of existence, a greater maturity is growing. Furthermore, new and important ties are being forged with church historians in the neighbouring countries as well as elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world.

I wish to conclude with the very apt remarks of Jaroslav Pelikan when he was asked to write a forward for the centenary publication of the American Society for Church History: "We who spend our lives on the past are understandably hesitant about projections for the (future), and I intend to take no such risks...the field of church history will also continue to be what it has been: continuity - cum - change will be a quality that it not only describes but manifests" (Bowden 1988:xi). What exactly the future holds for the Church History Society of Southern Africa cannot be stated outright. There are however indications that it is indeed coming of age.

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