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DIVERGENT CONVICTIONS AND MORE: FREEDOM TO EXERCISE DIVERGENT CONVICTIONS

A DEWCOM DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

2014

BACKGROUND

This document is in response to a DEWCOM conversation on divergent convictions in the MCSA and a need to understand the necessity for and embracement of such a plurality. It focuses on the reality of and moral necessity for and justification of, not only divergent convictions, but the freedom to exercise such plurality of convictions within a theological/church (MCSA) context. Hopefully clergy and lay members of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa will add their voices to the conversation. The discussion, and thus DEWCOM and the MCSA as a whole, can only benefit from any such contributions. This paper is only one of a series of papers on the topic.

In the DEWCOM conversation the point was made that not only do we, clergy and other members of the MCSA, have conversations on various issues like, for instance, Family –Life, the Interpretation of Scripture, Human Sexuality, Gender, Marriage, Economic Justice and Baptism, but that as we engage with one another we find a plurality of convictions characterising our conversations. How must we deal with the tension between fundamental principles/convictions informing our conversations/viewpoints and the reality of a plurality of convictions and, more than that – the current theological and moral inconsistency which does not allow for the freedom to exercise such a plurality of convictions?

INTRODUCTION

It would seem that many conversations regarding theological and/or ethical/moral, and perhaps also other issues in the MCSA, have become inseparable from a dialogue on a plurality of convictions characterising these conversations. It seems that the MCSA's ability to move forward, in whatever way, with the conversations themselves, is closely linked to the ability of the MCSA to adequately deal with this plurality of convictions informing its discussions.

It must be stated that much has already been said on what is being dealt with here.¹ But it is, perhaps, possible to make a small shift in the discussion. The focus

¹ It must be noted that there are already well known publications in place which serve to help people dealing with this plurality as they deal with issues like, for instance, human sexuality and biblical interpretation: See Forster, D & Bentley, ed. W 2008, *What are we Thinking, Reflections on Church and Society from Southern African Methodists*, Methodist Publishing House and Attwell, T, Alistoun, R & Scholtz, R 2010, *In search of grace and truth, Christian conversations on same-sex relationships*, Cingela, Cape Town.

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here is the operation or reality of a plurality of ultimate/fundamental principles or principled convictions in the MCSA decision-making processes as part of the conversations happening. Perhaps it can be stated thus: 'Can it, for the MCSA, from a Christian ethics/moral perspective, be justifiable/good/right to accommodate or tolerate/exercise a plurality of conviction? Is there something which may necessitate, in a theological moral sense, such a position of divergent convictions so that all may agree with it? The purpose of this paper is not to provide insights into issues like conflict resolution, although these are also important, but rather insight into an ethical approach on how to deal adequately with this plurality of convictions at the same time as dealing with the various topics.

It is assumed when we speak of divergent convictions we are speaking about a divergence of fundamental principles – not 'merely opinions.' In other words, we are speaking about those moral principles/convictions, theologically informed, which are fundamental to our world views: Those things which makes us to say; 'here I stand, I can do no other.' Perhaps we can say that this paper is on: 'To be or not to be ... accepting (also the necessity of) and exercising plurality of convictions as part and parcel of the church's conversations.'

In order to do so this paper wants to further articulate a link² between, on the one hand, conversations happening in the MCSA and, on the other hand, pointing to the 'fact we can be diverse' informing these conversations. This would entail understanding the 'freedom for such divergence of conviction to be exercised.' Such an articulation would also offer further critical engagements with the current position of the MCSA.

THE CURRENT POSITION OF THE MCSA

The MCSA has articulated its position in the following way:

(All the following quotations from the 2011 Yearbook pages 105-106 paragraph 2.27 and noted that this is all related to the same-sex debate.)

1 "This recognition of the divergent convictions within the MCSA ... prompted the Conference of 2005 to commit the MCSA "... to an on-going journey of discovering what it means to be part of a church which embraces many different and even opposing views ..."
(Yearbook 2006, para. 8.3, P. 75), and to affirm that the one body of the church is "enriched and strengthened by the differing views and perspectives of its members." (Yearbook 2006, para. 8.5.5, p.76.)"

² This means that this paper is first and foremost about Christian theological ethics and the problem being dealt with is seen as a Christian ethical problem. Apart from asking about the necessity of such a plurality it is also about what is good or right behaviour from a Christian ethical perspective regarding a plurality of convictions characterising conversations within the church.

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2 “The Conference of 2007 declared its determination not to permit different viewpoints around the same-sex debate to further divide the church, and sought “... a way forward that both respects and holds in tension differing views among our ministers and people.” (2008 Yearbook, p.81, para. 2.5.1.)”

3 “Affirms that the MCSA is seeking to be a community of love rather than rejection; recognises the diversity of conviction within the church when it comes to same-sex relationships, and celebrates this diversity as a challenging but potentially life-giving gift; calls for an on-going process of respectful dialogue and truthful engagement between those who holding differing views, not with the intention of ultimately having one mind on this issue, which is unlikely, but rather to come to a deepened understanding of what it means to be the one body of Christ; ...”

4 “... Conference notes the following:

The MCSA is, de facto, a church with divergent convictions on this issue that have theological integrity; there is a current theological inconsistency within the MCSA where it allows this divergence of conviction to be held without the freedom for such divergence of conviction to be exercised.”

5 “... bring concrete suggestions to Conference as to how the MCSA can create the space for such divergence of conviction to be exercised in ways that will preserve the integrity and unity of the church.”

It is clear from the above that the MCSA has already accepted a principled position, namely, that a plurality of convictions is both morally necessary and acceptable within a theological view or integrity. What is not yet accepted is ‘...the freedom for such divergence of conviction to be to be exercised.’ The position of the MCSA is in itself a way to deal with a plurality of convictions. It must be noted that although the MCSA has adopted a principled position there is an argument that this position is fundamentally flawed because the necessity for and acceptance of a plurality of conviction per se is rejected. (See below)

HOW TO RESPOND

At the risk of over-simplification, it is possible to limit the discussion to three ways of responding to divergent convictions. It may be helpful to address the issue in terms of a dichotomy.

- (1) This plurality can be rejected on the grounds that “... there is one and only one reasonable system of values. This system is the same for all human beings, always, everywhere. Human lives are good to the extent to which they conform to this system, and particular values are better or worse depending on their standing in the system. It is acknowledged, of course, that countless people do not conform to it. The reason for this is sought, however, in the

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deviating people, not in the system of values that the conception embodies.”³

The accommodation of a plurality of conviction is seen as a ‘breakdown or disintegration’ of morality. What is important is to adhere to one’s principled convictions/fundamentals or in a theological context, perhaps, ‘dogma,’ regardless. This approach thus denies others the freedom to act according to their conscience.

- (2) An acceptance on the grounds that “ ... ultimately all values are conventional. Human life would be inconceivable without values, but what values people accept depends on the contexts in which they were born, on their genetic inheritance and subsequent experiences, on the political, cultural, economic and religious influences on them; in short, what they value depends on their subjective attitudes and not on the objective features of values.” In one way or the other there is place for a plurality of convictions. This can, however, lead to an all-out relativism which is difficult to defend within a theological framework.

The dichotomies characterising the church’s conversations can be articulated in many different ways: objective/subjective, conservatism/liberalism, fundamental/cosmopolitan, principled conviction/responsibility, deontological/teleological, to name a few. Of course the issue is never as straightforward as this might imply with many approaches using a combination of two or more. This means that these approaches are never exclusive of one another in an absolute way although in a sense one ‘chooses’ between them as a fundamental starting point.

In biblical interpretation we see this dichotomy sometimes described as the difference between ‘principled or propositional revelation and relational/contextual,’ approaches. **It might be that what is searched for is an ‘overcoming of the dichotomies’ which will enable the MCSA to strengthen, that is, do away with the theological inconsistency (not allowing for the freedom to exercise divergent convictions), while at the same time safeguard its unity and integrity.**

There are different ways people can respond to a reality characterised by a plurality of moral and other convictions. Having noted the need for such a plurality within the church, what response is the ‘right’ one, morally speaking, within a theological framework or integrity?

Perhaps a third approach can also make sense? It must be emphasised that the approach put forward here is but **an** approach put forward as a contribution to the discussion – this approach does have some merit.

³ This distinction taken from Kekes, J 1993 *The Morality of Plurality*, Princeton, New Jersey.

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Approaching the issue from a responsibility perspective can provide a kind of 'middle way.' Responsibility is an "... appropriate manner to deal with the diversity of ethical and (other) ... values ..."⁴

BECOMING RESPONSIBLE

In a reality characterised by a plurality of convictions we have the more comprehensive responsibility to take the position

(a) that for the most part different values systems are compatible and complimentary, (there are many things to agree on)

(b) to not grant ethical status to any values that would lead to conduct that is in any way harmful to human beings,

(c) to distinguish between comprehensive sets of ethical values that are part of views of life and a minimal morality on which consensus has been reached and grant to the minimal morality, in this instance within a theological/church framework, relative priority over the ethical values provided by worldviews,

(d) of a commitment to self-critically examine one's own ethical/moral values in terms of such a minimal morality agreed to,

(e) to be tolerant of those who adhere to moral belief systems different from one's own,

(f) for the de-absolutising of one's own moral beliefs and the willingness to subordinate one's own moral beliefs to the requirements of the agreed upon minimal morality.

ON RESPONSIBILITY

In the contemporary world where equality, openness, dialogue, trust, and perhaps a deepening of democracy, amongst others, are becoming more important, a plurality of convictions needs to be dealt with more directly, not just in the church but society in general. A responsibility approach is a way to organise moral and other principles/values/norms – a way which is necessary as morally adequate, within a context of divergent convictions. Responsibility is here used in a more comprehensive manner – it is not just about 'giving an account of one's past behaviour – which is responsibility in its classical sense.' We also have the more comprehensive responsibility to seriously consider the consequences of our theological viewpoints and actions.

⁴ An ethics of responsibility as developed by E de Villiers in his paper 'Max Weber's ethic of responsibility: An appropriate approach to ethics in our time?' 2012.

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We may also, to be clearer on what is involved here, distinguish between two kinds of responsibilities: The one kind may be called a 'simple responsibility';⁵ "Simple responsibility is the sum total of our conventional, settled duties. People who embody simple responsibility are thought to be dependable, reliable, trustworthy, and prudent. We expect them to do their duty and perform the tasks set before them." Another kind of responsibility may be called a complex or reflexive responsibility and it is this which is referred to here: "Individuals who are responsible in this way typically display:

1. A readiness to bear in mind the consequences of their acts;
2. A sense of when to consult others and when to consult their own conscience;
3. An ability to change their plans in the face of consequences boding ill to other highly valued goals or commitments.

FROM OBEDIENCE/DUTY/CONVICTION TO RESPONSIBILITY

What is at stake here is a move away from obedience and duty to responsibility and it is this which is giving us 'a necessity' for why we 'can be diverse.' The need to have or the necessity of a plurality of convictions is as a result of the context in which current-day moral decision-making (conversations) are taking place. We 'can be diverse,' or have divergent convictions and the freedom to exercise such divergent convictions characterising our life together/our unity/our integrity, again at the risk of over simplification, because we can and must be 'responsible.' There is no doubt that obedience (and duty), is often the cornerstone of Christian theological ethics but it has now become 'irresponsible' to deal with the plurality of convictions with obedience as a starting point. Pure obedience and an ethics of duty simply say that one needs to be obedient and leave, for instance, all consequences to God. We cannot rule out obedience and duty altogether – there are times, places and so on when we need to be obedient or attend to duty – but today, precisely because of the reality of plurality, responsibility is replacing this kind of obedience. By being obedient, in this pure sense, one can be irresponsible within a context or reality of plurality of convictions. The question being asked today of the church is; are you being responsible (in this more comprehensive sense) with regards to this or that topic under discussion? And this responsibility is always linked to responsibility in relation to the conversations themselves.

ACTING RESPONSIBLY

What is necessary is to have in place an appropriate moral approach to divergent convictions and the freedom to exercise such divergent convictions

⁵ From Davis, W ed. 2001 Taking Responsibility, comparative perspectives, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.

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within a theological or church context – not just an approach which will justify one's own principles with regards to the issues being dealt with. The responsibility approach, it seems, does not fall into the trap of either relativism or the absolutising of convictions (Fundamentalism).

It does not do away with people's fundamental principles/convictions and a plurality of them operating in any given conversation, but it does relate these principles to other, agreed upon, theologically informed moral principles in such a way that the 'higher,' agreed upon, 'fundamentals' (not as absolutes) might be adhered to with regards to, agreed upon, desired outcomes. Here we can see the need for on-going dialogue and 'contract making' with one another or between different viewpoints.

It is the contention that the current position of the MCSA is such a document or 'contract-making,' with regards to the same-sex debate. It seems to be something all can agree to – a minimal morality. It can, however, also serve as an 'agreed upon' minimal morality allowing for the freedom to exercise such divergent convictions although the detail or 'practical stuff' will have to be worked out. Allowing for the exercising of such divergent convictions can mean that the church acts responsibly within a context characterised by plurality of convictions.

A responsibility approach can overcome the theological inconsistency currently characterising the MCSA's official position. It may be helpful to point out that responsibility entails that no one should act contrary to her or his conscience because her or his own moral identity will then be at stake. There are limits to one's morality. According to a responsibility approach the current inconsistency is not sustainable.

It may be helpful to, at this stage, ask a few questions.

QUESTIONS

1. Can this 'responsibility' approach help the MCSA deal more adequately with or understand 'that we can be diverse,' and if so, in what ways?
2. To what extent is the elements of a responsibility approach as set out above already part of the conversations – especially related to 'In search of Grace and Truth' and the position of the MCSA as per the L&D? (For those who might have read 'In search of ...')
3. Is the position of the MCSA, thus far, a rejection of the first and second alternatives above?
4. What values/norms or principles, within a theological framework/integrity, can be included in a minimal morality, for instance, in the conversations on human sexuality?

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5. What would 'being responsible' toward the MCSA's unity and integrity entail?
6. How does this paper relate to Wesley's position on the difference between what is essential and what is opinion?

CONCLUSION

As said in the introduction this paper seeks to help by providing, for open discussion and reflection, an appropriate current-day approach to a plurality of convictions or ultimate norms and values in any given situation of decision-making (conversations). Accepting a necessity for such a plurality it serves to stimulate conversation on 'what is good or right,' with regards to a plurality or divergent convictions. It is not about the justification of any of the various convictions but about dealing in an appropriate way with a plurality of convictions so as to assist with the link between the conversations happening and a plurality of convictions characterising these conversations.

It is the contention that the issues being addressed by the conversations cannot be dealt with adequately if those who participate do not, at the same time, deal adequately with the plurality of convictions informing the conversations. They are part of the same processes because of the social reality the church finds itself in today. As we deal with our 'dogma's' so we are dealing with the reality of divergent convictions even though we may not always be aware of it and which is subject to ethical or moral investigation.

This paper must be seen as a part of a discussion paper on the topic - further research for discussion is most necessary.

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