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Redressing the past, doing justice in the present: Necessary paradoxes

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In this contribution, the connection between redressing the past and doing justice in the present is explored by presenting the notion of 'paradox' as a response to 'binary thinking'. In this regard, 'paradox' denotes contradictory, yet interrelated aspects that exist simultaneously. 'Binary thinking' refers to either/or categorical aspects that cannot co-exist. Two paradoxes are explored as a response to increasing polarisation because of a struggle in redressing past injustices: the paradox of remembering and forgetting and the paradox of difference and sameness. This is done by bringing the work of the South African practical theologian, Denise Ackermann, in conversation with the work of the Croatian systematic theologian, Miroslav Volf. From different origins and experiences, both offer a way forward, and a way to move on beyond the devastation that is caused by dealing with injustice, difference and memory in a polarising fashion. The contribution concludes with a reflection on the notion of 'ceding space' from a Trinitarian theological perspective. The ceding of space is proposed as act of transformation, as the outcome of the ideas proposed by Ackermann and Volf, and as a way to live together, 'after the locusts'.

Keywords: paradox; binary; justice; transformation; identity; diversity; otherness; memory; hybridity; Trinitarian theology.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to HTS Theological Studies in honour of its 75th anniversary. In the pursuit of making knowledge and quality research accessible, HTS has provided a platform for the dissemination of interdisciplinary theological research and supported the establishment of research networks, both local and international. It has provided opportunities for many young and established researches to share their ideas.

HTS has contributed significantly to the role of religion and theology in the academy and public life. It has been my privilege to be part of 75 years of academic excellence.

Introduction: What comes 'after the locusts'?

In 2003, South African feminist theologian Denise Ackermann published a book that was about her 'efforts to discover what is worth living for in the midst of troubled times' (Ackermann 2003:xii). The title of the book was, *After the locusts. Letters from a landscape of faith*, in reference to an event described in the Old Testament book of Joel. The land of Judah had been struck by an ecological disaster and a plague of desert locusts swept through the countryside leaving devastation in their wake:

> What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. (Jl 1:4 RSV)

The devastation is vividly described in the first chapter. In the latter part of the second chapter, Joel's tone changes and he recounts how God will have pity on the people. Then comes God's promise: 'I will restore to you the years which the swarming locusts has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer and the cutter … you shall eat plenty and be satisfied' (Jl 2:25–26 RSV).

She recounts how she read the book of Joel during repressive times in South Africa and how it became:

> [A] metaphor in my life for the ravages of apartheid as well as for my own personal demons. The idea that God would repay the years that the locusts had eaten stayed with me. The destruction wrought by the

locusts would be restored. This thought drifted down into my subconscious … in troubled times I would retrieve it. (Ackermann 2003:xiv)

She describes her time growing up during apartheid as being faced with different types of locusts and faced with daily decisions about 'what to do, what to believe, how to act as a white person, as a South African and as a woman' (Ackermann 2003:xiv). She wrote her 'letters from a landscape of faith' because South Africans were living (around the year 2003) with the ravages of the locust years and longed for restoration and healing.

Ackermann's reference to the devastation by the locusts, coupled with her reason for writing the book, has made a lasting impression on me because it is an apt description of what is happening in South Africa and the whole world *today* (2019), namely, that we are *living with the ravages of the locust years*. The last few years have witnessed profound and rapid calls for transformations of all kinds, in many different spheres of life, across the globe.[1] Injustices of the past have come knocking on the door of the present: debates rage in many sectors about the effects of colonialism, racism, slavery and patriarchy and have resulted in an adamant chorus around the world of *We have had enough* (cf. Van Wyk 2018; Pillay 2017). Miroslav Volf (2006:11) described this as a summons to remember. This *summons* has led to an explosion of separate but related discussions that connect a range of issues: identity and diversity, borders and hospitality, transformation and justice (Hill Collins & Bilge 2016; Zakaria 2016:9–15). Denise Ackermann's metaphor of the ravages of locusts and a longing for restoration is as relevant as ever.

The question is, how to proceed? What comes *after* the locusts? In essence, Dirk Smit (2018:109–128) has the same concern in his contribution entitled *Justice and/as Compassion. On the Good Samaritan and Political Theology*, where he is concerned about the appropriate ways in which to respond to growing racism in society. Smit illustrates how governments have historically responded to this challenge by utilising legal measures at their disposal and making racism illegal. Smit (2018) remarks, however, in reference to the South African context, that:

[T]he nonracialism (professed in the Constitution) can clearly not be commanded, ordered, regulated, legalised – so how is it to be attained in a deeply racist society with racist histories and memories and racist legacies and structures? (p. 114)

One way is further polarisation and division: telling people who is to blame for their current situation and making them

afraid of those people. These arguments lead to two available options for those wanting to protect themselves from *the other*: 'those responsible' for your situation should be removed, and their trace in history abolished, or you should separate yourself (distance yourself) from them completely. Because of the very nature of polarisation, this cuts both ways. Therefore, debates about the removal of statues, the building of walls and the safeguarding of culture and identity are increasing and they have become violent.[2] With regard to the South African situation, Tinyiko Maluleke (2011) has remarked:

Our language is violent and violence is our language … If there is an area in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission failed, and failed spectacularly, it is in the area of national anger management. We are an angry people. This is an angry nation. Some of the angriest white as well as black people on earth live here. (p. 89)

Are we to remain stuck in increasing polarisation and binary *us/ them* categories? I am of the opinion that the only way to move beyond the devastation of the locusts and the locust years is to search for collective ways of life, ways in which to share space (land, resources, opportunities) and therefore to find an authentic way to live with, and to reconcile, diversity. This entails a willingness to embrace, what I describe as, *creative tension* and therefore a willingness to engage with at least two paradoxes: the paradox of remembering and *not* remembering (forgetting) past experiences and events, and the paradox of difference and sameness, that is, the connection of identity to being demarcated while opening up space and 'inviting in'.

I chose the notion 'paradox' deliberately as a response to binary thinking, or thinking and acting according to binary oppositions that divide reality into either/or categories (Elbow 1993:51–78; see also Borderland 2011). In *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, Ackermann (2014) describes a paradox as a statement that seems self-contradictory or absurd, but in reality it expresses a possible truth. For her, a paradox promises that apparent opposites can come together in our lives and that *either/or* thinking can be replaced with something that is closer to *both/and* (Ackermann 2014:55). In this contribution, I use Ackermann's notion of paradox as a departure point to reflect on what I think are necessary conditions for collective living and reconciling diversity – authentic transformation – in an era that demands it, longs for it and needs it. I do this in an attempt to move further away from division and polarisation and closer to the promise of the restoration in the form of *both/and*. I will bring Ackermann's work into conversation with that of the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf because their theology (and spirituality) has a certain *spaciousness* for *holding* the *tension* of opposites to flourish amidst the human condition.

A final remark: a reflection on conditions for reconciling diversity, collective living and transformation is of the utmost importance in South African today because the debate about land reform, land distribution and land ownership. However,

the issues discussed in this reflection are of equal importance to redressing the past and doing justice in the present with regard to other historical and present phenomena, such as the role of women in society, religious intolerance and human sexual diversity, both in South Africa and abroad.

The paradox of remembering and forgetting
An archaeology of memory

In the early 20th century, the French novelist Marcel Proust reflected on the nature of memory in a work of fiction entitled *A la recherche du temps perdu*. When the work (consisting of multiple volumes) was translated into English, its title was rendered in two ways. Between 1913 and 1927, it was translated with the title *Remembrance of Things Past* by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, and in 1981 the English translation was revised by Terence Kilmartin and published under the title *In Search of Lost Time* (cf. Proust 2012). Both these titles depict memory from different vantage points. According to Richard Bradley (2003:221), the first title suggests that remembering the past is an involuntary process, while the second 'evokes a deliberate effort to remake a past that is out of reach'. In Proust's work, the role of memory is a central theme, as it has an effect on how one assigns meaning to experiences. In this regard, memory is depicted as both a creative act and an interpretation (Bradley 2003:226). It is almost as if the different renditions of the title of the book reflect this. This highlights for me the idea that the retelling of history, in whichever form (oral, written or monuments and landmarks), is an interpretative act.

The retelling of history is the only way descendants and later generations have access to past events. This means history is related to remembering it and therefore related to memory. The most precise attempt to reproduce memories (or history) will yield different versions of it. Different mnemonic techniques (a system of ideas, letters or associations which assist in remembering something) in oral history traditions might render slight variations of the events they are recounting and even large-scale 'memories' such as monuments or landmarks are modified, rebuilt, abandoned or replaced over time (Bradley 2003:222).

Remembering might, therefore, also include 'the art of forgetting' (Forty & Küchler 1999). One might say that what we *do* with history and how we carry it into the present or future are influenced by the paradoxical act of remembering and forgetting. This section considers this paradox with regard to the case at hand, namely, redressing the past and doing justice in the present.

Historical injustice

> Grappling with the nature of historical injustice is often a necessary feature of political life … there are no easy answers. Understanding and dealing with the moral consequences of the past is one of the most important political issues of our time, and yet also one of the most intractable. (Ivison 2006:508)

'Historical injustice' is a multifaceted notion (Ivison 2006:509). I use the word 'notion' here because the reality of injustices that have taken place in the past cannot always be neatly demarcated or precisely defined. In general, it refers to wrongs committed by individuals or groups to other individuals or groups, where the victims themselves are now dead, but their descendants are alive today. In some cases, there are no descendants of the victims and in other cases the perpetrator(s) do not exist anymore, while the victims are still alive. If descendants of neither the victim nor the perpetrator are alive, there might not be a 'historical injustice' to answer, but a great harm has still been inflicted. 'Descendants' may also refer to groups of individuals who have identified with a collective identity that has persisted through time ('women' as a group who have suffered under patriarchy, for example).

According to the political scientist Duncan Ivison (2006:509–510), a consideration of the scope and nature of historical injustice is connected to six questions or issues: the normative weight of the past in debates about what is 'owed' to one another; the matter of which historical injustices matter and the reasons why they matter; the question of to whom the reparations are owed; the question of who should make the reparations (pay for it – in whichever way); the matter of which form of reparation will suffice and finally, the question of which political considerations to factor into account when defending or criticising reparations.

Reparations can take place in three modes (Ivison 2006:509–510). The first one is restitution. This means restoring or returning that which was taken. This literal mode of reparation is not always possible; therefore, compensation as a second mode of reparation could be applicable. This might be complicated too because the value of that which was lost or taken cannot be determined or is too great to be compensated. A third mode of reparation is recognition or acknowledgement of those victims who have been denied basic humanity and subjectivity in the wrongs committed against them. Recognition of responsibility is a separate but related aspect of reparation with regard to historical injustices. It is first and foremost based on the awareness of an injustice that has been committed, and secondly, it is based on the acknowledgement of how one has been complicit in the enactment of that injustice, which may have taken the form of social and political agency that had been denied to individuals or groups of people. Recognition of responsibility can take the form of a public apology or collective remembrance. Some injustices suffered can be compensated.

A great number of injustices suffered cannot be compensated. How to respond or how to remember therefore becomes paramount.

Memory: How to respond?

Miroslav Volf (2006:7) recounts how he was summoned for military service in 1984 in the former communist Yugoslavia. Soon after he reported for duty, he realised that he was being

treated as a potential spy. He was married to an American and had received training (his Christian theological study) in the West (Germany and the United States), and therefore he was treated as a security risk. A letter from his wife was intercepted and used as a pretext for a first 'conversation' about his so-called subversiveness. The interrogations that would last for months had begun. He was not physically tortured, but the psychological torture of being at the mercy of the interrogator left its mark, as Volf remarks: 'even afterward, my mind was enslaved by the abuse I had suffered' (Volf 2006:7). The presence of the chief interrogator was so vivid and constant; it was as if he had moved into the household of Volf's mind.

Gradually, however, the interrogator was relegated to the back of his mind and his voice drowned out. Although the interrogator had been sidelined, Volf's response to the abuse and his reaction to it had not. When he started thinking about his response, he first of all felt a need for retribution. At some point, subconsciously, he realised that he could not give in to what he felt because he would be responding as a wounded animal and not a free human being. This was not an easy undertaking. Volf acknowledges that holding onto the requirement to love one's enemy becomes more difficult the more severe the wrongdoing is. Evil will triumph, however, if the evil is returned because evil needs two victories to win: the first when an evil deed is committed, and the second when that evil deed is returned. The first evil would wither away if it is not regenerated with the second one. Volf realised that although he had no control over the mistreatment against him, he did have the power to prevent a second evil. And so, he started 'stumbling in the footsteps of the enemy-loving God' (Volf 2006:9). Did the decision not to retaliate resolve the entire experience? No.

The difference is, the wrongdoing was now only repeated in his memory, and not in reality. Therefore, the questions were, how should the perpetrator, and what he had done, be remembered? Or forgotten?

Volf's experience and thought processes illustrate what is at stake when it comes to debates about transformation that is prevalent because of past injustices knocking on the door of the present. At the heart of the paradox of remembering and forgetting, with regard to moving on, 'after the locusts', is the question about how much of one's projected future should be 'colonised' by the locusts, whichever form they might take.

His arguments about memory and the response to injustice are based on his theological convictions about the paradoxical nature and outcome of Christian faith,[3] which, as I will point out later again, is something he has in common with Denise

Ackermann. Volf argues two broad points with regard to memory,[4] which I emphasise here as I am convinced they are both of extreme importance for redressing the past and doing justice in the present. They are: remembering *truthfully* and condemning *rightly* (Volf 2006:11–13). This pertains to the wronged person as individual as well as those that wronged the individual.

Remembering truthfully entails an interrogation of your own memories and a contextualisation of it: the time the wrongdoing took place, the system or structure in which it occurred and possibly also the context of the wrongdoer's life. This will enable you to condemn rightly: 'In memory, a wrongdoing often does not remain an isolated stain on the character of the one who committed it; it spreads over and colours their entire character' (Volf 2006:15). That spread can only be contained if one remembers virtues alongside vices, good deeds alongside evil deeds. Condemnation is done in forgiveness in which the doer and the deed are separated. In this regard, as Elie Wiesel (1990) has emphasised, redemption can (or may) be found in memory. Given how deep some injustices can cut, this type of redemption might seem impossible, or even inauthentic. For Volf (2006:27–32), however, the possible link between memory and redemption is subject to related decisions or actions, which entails, firstly, interpreting memories and inscribing them into a larger pattern of one's life story and into a broader pattern of meaning – the suffering could have contributed to your own resilience or to the exposure of the abuse of power (for example). In order for this not to be a cheap rationalising or 'cleaning-of-the-slates' exercise, a second step has to be taken: the 'acknowledgement' of what happened and what was done (Ivison 2006:511–513). This is not unqualified remembrance – it is the acknowledgement of the truth of what was done.[5] Therefore, an important part of remembering truthfully is 'naming'. 'Interrogations' cannot be described as 'conversations'. When a euphemism like this is used, it masks (hides) injustice and injury. Finally, memory can serve as a means of redemption because it can generate *solidarity* with victims (Volf 2006):

> Remembering suffering awakens us from the slumber of indifference and goads us to fight against the suffering and oppression around us … the memory of past horror will make us loathe to tolerate it in the present. (p. 30)

Is remembering in this way co-dependent on forgetting? I think so. That is what I would like to emphasise in discussion with Miroslav Volf's arguments. To remember includes forgetting – in an authentic way and with integrity. In my

opinion, this does not mean forgetting the past into 'non-existence', that is, it never happened.

What I would term 'authentic forgetting' is to forget '*into the past*'. This is forgiveness – 'blotting out the offense so that it no longer mars the offender' (Volf 2006:208). I would want to add, so that it no longer mars the victim either. The link I make here between 'forgetting *into* the past' and forgiveness is illustrated by Kenneth Briggs (2008) in his commentary on the film by Martin Doblemeier about the power of forgiveness:

> The process of cleansing oneself from vengeance and fury against someone who has caused you harm may take a long time and happen in fits and starts … but it isn't intended to wipe away the offenses or take the violator off the legal hook. It is a more mysterious pathway that can leave both parties less burdened by inner and outer pain. Many intertwine forgiveness with doing justice. (p. 41)

Volf (2006:209) is convinced that the only way to embrace this type of forgetting and embrace forgiveness is within a Christian framework: 'no argument independent of belief in the God of infinite love can be constructed to persuade those who want to keep a tight grip on strict retributive justice'. No one can be forced to *not* remember and no one may insist, that one who has suffered, *should not* remember. Forgetting, in the way described here, is a gift, from the persecuted to the perpetrator, and must remain a gift freely given.

The paradox that holds the promise of an open (and creative) future is therefore about remembering and *not* remembering: the experience or event of wrongdoing and injustice is not relegated to non-existence, but the memory of it does not have the ability to invade your existence to the point of your own non-being.

Memories can act as a sword that simply cuts everything to pieces. The same sword can, however, also be employed to defend justice. Memories can act as a shield that protects comfort zones, but it can also be employed to protect justice. An imbalance between remembering and forgetting (or non-remembrance) will result in either hate and violence or nostalgia and ignorance. If we are able to embrace the tension and find fulfilment in the paradox, we might experience the realisation of the promise Volf (2006:232) alludes to: 'the proper goal of the memory of wrongs suffered – its appropriate end – is the formation of the communion of love between all people, including victims and perpetrators'. In this regard, perfect love is the end (the purpose) and the end (final, no more) of memory.

The paradox of difference and sameness
Identity markers and dimensions of identity

A key issue with regard to reconciling diversity, collective living and transformation is the notion of 'identity' (Fukuyama 2018:105–123). The reason for this, as Michael Rowlands (2007:59–71) has pointed out, is that concern with identity develops and grows consistently with the concern about the individual in a mass society – in other words, the more we grow in numbers (and in diversity), the greater concern is for holding onto, cultivating or demarcating 'my own' identity. Postmodern philosophers like Michel Foucault (1972, 1986) and Pierre Bourdieu (1987:1–17, 1992:220–251) have created awareness of the potential dangers of categorising identity (and identity markers) because of the influence power has on the creation of those categories of identity (cf. Meskell 2007:23–43). Keeping this 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in mind (Itao 2010:1–17; Ricoeur 1981, 1986), the notion of identity conveys a sense of individuality and personality: 'the sameness of a person or thing is itself and not something else' (Rowlands 2007:61).

There are different 'axes of identity', or points of focus around which identity coalesce, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class or age. There are other dimensions of identity that become apparent or are highlighted with regard to social roles and the connection or commitment to a piece of land or a country: religion, language, culture, nationality and the types of relationships you might enter into or be a part of. This could also be described as social identity. Ian Craib emphasised that every person has a number of social identities and that these entail constant organisation and negotiation (Craib 1998:4–9).

Rowlands (2007:61–62) distinguishes between the psychology of identity and the political dimensions of identification. Debates about hospitality and inclusivity are greatly determined by the political dimension of identification, as is seen, for example, in the research of Belgian theologian Eddy van der Borght (2006, 2009:161–174) on the nature of the Christian church. He has illustrated the influence of identity markers such as 'nationality' and 'ethnicity' in reference to the historical struggle of the Christian church to adhere to its confession of being one and catholic simultaneously. This is evidenced by the church's struggle not only with diverse interpretations of church doctrine, but also with regard to an inclusive ecclesiology based on diverse notions of theological anthropology (cf. Van Wyk & Buitendag 2008:1447–1473), as seen in the different denominations' attempts to keep women out of ministry, constitute ethnic-based churches and continue religious debate about homosexuality (and for that matter, diverse sexual and gender identities).

Roland Robertson (1990:31–45) has argued that modernisation has brought about identity problems, both in a psychological and a political sense, because it has evoked a sense of nostalgic desire: things were 'better' when everything happened at a slower pace, or when people kept to their designated social roles and spaces and everybody went to church on Sundays (for example). It could be said that postmodernism (with the emphasis on the '-ism') has brought about the same identity crisis for some because this paradigm shift is experienced or perceived as the loss of clearly demarcated boundaries and 'truths'.

In a climate where the maintenance of boundaries is perceived as safeguarding a so-called natural order or as the safeguard

against the loss of identity, anything that can threaten that maintenance is regarded with suspicion, or demonised or ostracised. Xenophobia – fear of the other, or in context of my argument here, fear of the one who has different identity markers than I do – abounds. When this happens, identity becomes an instrument of polarisation and identity is the instrument of the creation of the *us/them*-binary (Ackermann 2003:12–13). Identity becomes indicative of sameness and continuity, and therefore inclusive immigration policies, the acknowledgement of diverse sexual and gender identities, inter-religious co-operation and liberation movements are countered at all costs because they are endangering who I am and endangering my way of life (Zakaria 2016:9–15). As described in the introduction of this contribution, this polarisation becomes a locust-like plague, leaving devastation in its wake. That is why Miroslav Volf (1996:20) has said, 'it may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference'. In the following section, I will reflect on this.

Borders, identity and otherness

Miroslav Volf was born in Osijek, Croatia (when it was part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), moved to Novi Sad, Serbia (then part of Yugoslavia) at the age of five. Osijek was mostly Roman Catholic and Novi Sad, Orthodox. Volf's father became a minister for a Pentecostal community in Novi Sad. Protestants was in the minority and Pentecostals even more so. It is clear that Volf had a number of margins and borders with regard to national and religious 'axes of identity' to contend with. His reflection on identity and otherness (crossing borders) stems from this context. This was amplified during the Croatian war of Independence (1991–1995) in which Serbian fighters called *četnik* herded fast amounts of Croats into concentration camps, assaulted them and raped the women. During the final stages of that war, Volf is challenged by his mentor Jürgen Moltmann about whether he would be able to 'embrace' a Serbian fighter – for him, the 'ultimate other'. For Volf, this was a question about identity, justice and the Christian paradox of being demarcated and hospitable at the same time. The confession, *Jesus is Lord*, demarcates because it binds all who make the confession together and distinguishes them form those who do not. The very same confession, however, implies an inclusive invitation to 'all the nations' and does not hierarchically separate Jew, Greek, man or woman, based on different axes of identity (Patterson 2018; cf. Van Aarde 1986:77–93).

Therefore, Volf (1996:9) asks: 'What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat?' Based on this, his answer to Moltmann is that he did not think that he can embrace his own ultimate other, but as a follower of Christ he should be able to. This exchange illustrates how the paradox of difference and sameness can influence the balance between redressing the past and doing justice in the present and how notions of 'identity' factors into it.

Denise Ackermann's theological engagement with the relationship between the past and the doing justice in the present is based on embracing difference (Ackermann 1998:13–27). She emphasises the notion of a 'hybrid identity' (Ackermann 2003:2).[6] Volf too emphasises hybridity in his reflection on the connection between identity and reconciliation. He is slightly hesitant that hybrid identity could entail the maintenance of fixed boundaries; however, he affirms that from a Christian perspective, one would not want to get rid of hybridity (Volf 2006:21, 52–55, 210–211).

For Ackermann, crossing cultural barriers (or borders of any kind) is an almost automatic consequence of embracing multifaceted identity, or an *identity made up of difference*. In her letter to her granddaughters (Ackermann 2003:1–5), she describes the hybrid heritage and therefore hybrid identity of both herself and her husband. Although her theology engages substantially with the identity marker of gender (Ackermann 1994:197–211, 2009:267–286), in these reflections, language and culture are the most prominent identity markers. She and her husband both grew up speaking English and Afrikaans and were familiar with 'both cultures'. This was because of a mixed European ancestry on both sides. In particular, Ackermann grew up speaking only English to her mother and only Afrikaans to her father. She had the sense of trying to be 'many selves' as her father became a diplomat after the Second World War (for her at age 11) and thereafter she attended school on different continents. Two languages became five:

> I have many memories of being the alien, a foreigner at school and, on returning from abroad, a stranger in my own country, even among my cousins. Being a hybrid meant being an outsider. (Ackermann 2003:3)

The attempt at 'settling' her identity became more difficult as she grew increasingly uncomfortable with and eventually opposed Afrikaner nationalism – also within her immediate family circle. This was an identity marker that was utilised above all others during apartheid in South Africa to separate (not distinguish) *difference* in a hierarchical fashion. The resultant alienation Ackermann experienced from her family also shaped her identity and in the end her identity was 'settled' by embracing the contradictory aspects of it; in other words, she embraced the paradox of difference and sameness.

For Ackermann (1998:17–26, 2003:11), the very notion of 'identity' has a double meaning: it denotes sameness and difference – it is how one is identical to others, yet precisely how those who are identical to each other are different from others. Therefore, the most important aspect of 'identity' is that it is shaped in ongoing dialogue with others (cf. Taylor 1994). She does issue a warning: identity can become a dangerous issue if one identity is given a higher value than others. When this happens, identity becomes a polarising and dividing factor. The response to this polarisation, as I argue in this contribution, is rather to accept and embrace the

6. Compare the work of Bhabha (2006:42–43). He discusses the notion of hybridity in conjunction with 'identity' and the influence of colonialism. See also how his work was utilised by Frenkel and Shenhav (2006), in which they argue in favour of a shift from a binary epistemology to a hybrid epistemology in management.

simultaneous contradictory and hybrid identity of each other, at all times. As Ackermann (2003) remarks:

> The temptation is either to take on the identity of one's family or culture uncritically or to adopt a full identity from an alternative culture with equally little self-reflection. Both are hideous mistakes. We cannot turn our back on our culture of origin; neither should we be its slave. We do not choose when, where, and to whom we are born. So both a sense of distance as well as a sense of belonging are necessary. Belonging without distance is destructive. Distance without belonging isolates us … the ways in which we deal with the question of difference shape our identities. (p. 12)

It is important to acknowledge and name ambiguity and contradiction in one's engagement with difference.

To address the devastation of the locusts entails the simultaneous presence of 'borders' and dialogue.

Borders show demarcation. Borders are an expression of space. It is not a case of keeping out is *bad* and taking in *is good*. Total inclusion collapses all borders. When this happens, the criteria and ability for distinguishing between *repressive identity* and *affirming identity* are lost. Boundaries can only be crossed if the challenge of difference is met, and there is dialogue to exchange views particularly with those who differ from us (Ackermann 2009:270).

This understanding of borders/boundaries being open and closed, on the cusp of sameness and difference, brings the notion of hospitality to mind (Shepard 2014:208–241) and links up with Miroslav Volf's paradoxical use of the metaphor of 'embrace' with regard to his exploration of reconciliation. In the 'embrace', there is a double act of opening and closing. Indeed, there are four elements to the movement of embrace: opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms and opening them again:

I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and of desire to include the other. They are an invitation to the others to come in and feel at home with me, to belong to me. In an embrace I also close my arms around the others – not tightly, so as to crush and assimilate them forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace, but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently – so as to tell them that I do not want to be without them in their otherness. I want them to remain independent and true to their genuine selves, to maintain their identity and as such become part of me so that they can enrich me with what they have and I do not. (Volf 1996:141–143)

For the borders to be crossed, boundaries to be transcended and ongoing dialogue to be authentic, certain conditions are necessary although dominant power relations need to be deconstructed, and private and public/political identity cannot be divided into isolated and closed identities that is separate from one another (Taljaard 2009:42).

Ackermann's hermeneutics of paradox is actually a spirituality of paradox. Her understanding of identity and context is closely related to her spirituality (Taljaard 2009:41), which is about living with freedom and with hope in the tensions that arise between dependence and autonomy, knowing and not knowing, faith and doubt. She emphasises that accepting the contradictions in herself will help her do so elsewhere:

> Christian spirituality is about learning to live with trust and hope in the middle of tensions and contradictions … when we recognise tensions that are life-giving, we will not fall prey so readily to the tensions that are death-dealing. (Ackermann 2009:279)

To move on, 'beyond the locusts' and the binary and polarising *us/them*, requires courage and creativity to thrive amidst sameness and difference and the promise of this paradox because (according to Ackermann [2014:64]) the power of the paradox presents us with series of open doors and open space – a space (according to Volf [1996:20]) in which new identities can continuously be-in-becoming. The similarities between Ackermann's experience and thought and that of Volf are quite striking.

It is to the notion of open space that I turn now in the concluding section.

Conclusion: Ceding space and doing justice in the present

In his work entitled *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Reinhold Niebuhr (1932; cf. Smit 2018:109) asked the question if it is at all possible to make any meaningful difference in the face of entrenched systemic and structural injustice. In much the same way, and also related to the notion of justice, I have been thinking (and wondering) about 'reconciling diversity' for most of my theological education. The single greatest reason for this was the experience of how my own church community, the Netherdutch Reformed Church (NRCA), dealt with 'difference' in its history. The first woman to be ordained in the NRCA was in 1981.

More than 40 years later, there is only one woman on the central leadership committee (the General Synod Committee), which consists of 12 people. Only in 2013 did the NRCA publicly recognise that the church was complicit in maintaining the structures of apartheid with their theological justification of it – and that it was wrong to do so. After this recognition, the NRCA went through a painful schism that resulted in legal battles about church property which was illegally appropriated by parties within the NRCA who disagreed with the NRCA's anti-apartheid declaration. This is an ongoing matter.

At the 2016 Synod meeting, the NRCA ended years of theological debate in the church about homosexuality by confirming the conviction (belief) that God loves all human beings and that it is the church's prophetic task to see that justice is done. In effect this means that ministers from my church denomination could marry gay couples. Currently,

there are congregations in the church that are threatening to withhold their financial support of the larger church structure if the 2016-statement/decision is not overturned. As a church community therefore, we are still experiencing challenges to move beyond the locust years.

The recurring challenge we face is because of an inability to move towards the 'promise of the paradox' – that 'space' where apparent opposites can come together in our lives and either/or thinking (binary thinking) can be replaced with something that is closer to both/and. A major reason for this, in my opinion, is because the church is both trying to hang on to a romanticised nostalgia about things being better in the past and also trying to revisit history (to go back in time) and determine if so-called historical injustices were really intended as injustice. This pertains to their approach to racism, sexism, homophobia and also their participation in the current land debate in South Africa. They are trying to go back in time to determine *who* did *what* to *whom*, *first* – because if the originating point or factor can be determined, the assignment of responsibility and the assignment of guilt can take place. This type of reasoning results in being stuck in *us/them* thinking. The problem, in its simplest form, is the nature of the relationship between past and present and specifically the relationship between remembering and forgetting – the paradox. This paradox relates to the others: dealing with difference and being hospitable. I use my own church community as an example, but they are by no means the only institutional church or denomination struggling with this.

In my theological reflection about these paradoxes, I have turned to the Christian church's confession about belief in a Trinitarian God for vocabulary to ask necessary questions and to describe creative possibilities for living with difference and transcending binary thought and practice (Van Wyk 2017). This more than anything else has been my partner in thought about 'difference' or 'otherness' and the notion of or attempt at reconciling diversity. The primary influence on my thought in this regard has been the 'social Trinitarian' theology of Jürgen Moltmann ([1980]1981:xiv), in which he conceives of God as a 'society of equals and a community of being (cf. Boff 2007:276–291)', in which there is a 'perichoretic'[7] unity. This community exists by virtue of the reciprocal indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity. In this community of being, each of the persons is 'spaces' for each other and each one mutually *cedes the others* life and movement, that is, making themselves inhabitable for one another (Moltmann [2002]2003, 2015), while remaining persons with particular identities. This is rather profound.

If we truly believe what we confess, namely, that creation came to be according to the image of God, then creation in the image of a Trinitarian God of reconciling diversity should have ample resources for dealing with diversity. But the idea or confession of *Imago Dei*, or *Imago Trinitatis* (Volf 1998) is

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7.A substantial amount of research has been done over a number of years about the notion and implications of the Greek term 'perichoresis' in theology. See, for example, Durand (2012:177–192) and Rohr and Morrel (2016).

often a much debated and contested theological discourse in the church because it would assume an uncritical 'correspondence' between God and humanity. To this I always reply that there is not an 'equation symbol' between God and humanity, but rather that a social Trinitarian understanding provides an 'analogy' for the way for humanity transcends binarity and the ensuing isolation and oppression that occurs.

Moltmann's understanding of God as social Trinity is connected to his view of God as a 'broad place' – a space in which there is no more cramping. His Trinitarian thinking was his attempt at critically resolving the naive self-centredness of one's, also his own, thinking. In his autobiography, *A Broad Place*, he states (Moltmann [2006]2008):

> Of course I am a European, but European theology no longer needs to be Eurocentric. Of course I am a man, but my theology does not have to be androcentric in its emphasis. Of course I am living in the so-called First world, but my theology does not have to reflect the ideas of those at the top, but should make the voices of the oppressed heard. (p. 287)

The greater the diversity, the greater the struggle to live with it. This struggle could become a plague of locusts, destroying everything in its path it if goes unchecked. What will be left of the land, so to speak? Embracing the apparent contradiction between the past and the present, identity and difference, and borders and hospitality will enable us to cede living space to one another. In this regard, the creative tension of the paradox opens up space. Opening, but more specifically, *ceding* space is justice in itself: to give up some of yourself and some of your space in order for all who inhabit the space to participate mutually and equally in opportunities, resources and land. Ceding space will not be comfortable. Paradoxes do not make sense and we would want to 'settle' them. Embracing their tension, however, might just help us to live, creatively, collectively, and help us to flourish in the midst of our *broken whole* – our beautiful mosaic.

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Disclaimer

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