Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life

Summary analysis of the proceedings of the ME99 academic workshop held in Cape Town, 30 September to 2 October, 1998.

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Introduction

Section I: Narrative framework

Theme 1: Religious discourse and public discourse

Theme 2: Religious plurality and identity in civil society

Theme 3: Citizenship of marginal/subjugated voices

Themes 4 & 5: Law, constitution, and religious organisations/choosing a human rights language

Theme 6: Interpreting corporate language and practice

Themes 7 & 8: Religion, gender and public discourse/ Black theology as public discourse

Theme 9: Reconstructing a civic moral fibre

Section II: Clarifying key concepts

Creating a conceptual language

- The key concepts: religion, public and discourse
- Secondary concepts and qualitative terms
- Symbolic-normative language

Problematising and deepening the language

- Religion
- Religious language and religious institutions
- Public and publics
- Discourse and identity
- Discourse and marginality
- Public discourse, values and symbolic language
- Race, class and gender

Conclusion

Key Concepts & Framing Questions

Introduction

The Multi-Event 1999 (ME99) was planned to include a wide range of people—including politicians, religious leaders, academics, local community group representatives and cultural workers. Chances are that understandings of religion and its role and place in the public realms of society would differ widely within such a group. This document has been created to hopefully minimise confusion, to limit debates at cross-purposes with one another and to assist the interpretative activity in which all must engage in order to arrive at generally intelligible results whilst offering possibilities for new synergies, initiatives and connections. It attempts to lay out key concepts and framing questions which offer a common foundation for the debates and discussions which will take place around concrete issues at the February conference.¹
The document arises out of a gathering of some fifty-five academics held in Cape Town in September/October 1998, with a view to sharpening our focus in looking at our own context, with comparative input from some international partners. The workshop dwelt on a number of themes in succession, providing different angles on the question of religion in public life. Brief concept papers had been commissioned for each theme and were provided to participants. These papers were briefly introduced by convenors. After a plenary debate, the issues were pursued further in smaller groups. All discussions were carefully tracked and extensive summaries developed.

These two sources of material (concept papers and discussions) has been collated in this document, which takes the form of a summary analysis of the central points that emerged. The material has been cut down to a minimum in order to provide a document which may be quickly appraised and readily referenced in debate.

What follows is organised in two ways. First, a "narrative framework" sets out the eight themes dealt with in the workshop, more or less as discussion took place. It is therefore largely schematic, raising a range of questions and views. Speakers or writers are not identified as such. This narrative framework functions in the first place to orient the reader to the intellectual "story" of the workshop. Second, a section on "clarifying key concepts" identified in the workshop is provided. In some ways, it is a rerun of the narrative framework; except it moves a step further in pursuing a more analytical investigation of the themes and issues that were dealt with. It is therefore not organised around the nine themes but rather cuts across them to probe links, contradictions, ambiguities and ideas contested in the workshop.

Together, these two sections offer a basis for further discussion, particularly in relation to the ethical and practical issues which were to be the prime focus of ME99. The aim of the document was to orient people to the languages that are being used to discuss the issues, the way these languages work, and the ambiguities and openness in them. It also aimed to give international guests some insight into how many South Africans think about their current context in respect of religion in public life. As an historical record, we believe the document will also be of interest to others seeking to relate religion and public life. For this reason, we are making it available to a wider audience.

Section I: Narrative framework

Theme 1: Religious discourse and public discourse

A major challenge of this discussion was to seek clarity on how language is used, including the variety of meanings which underlie key concepts, when religious discourse becomes public discourse.

What do we mean by the term "religious"? Specific faith communities? faith traditions? a set of core values? Often we assume that a particular nuance in our use of the term is clear to all others. The concept "religion" is fluid and contested, and notoriously difficult to constrain within any one meaning. Is it possible to work with a plurality of understandings, a plurality of "religions"?

Further, what is meant by "religious discourse"? Is this a separate type of discourse, which then requires "translation" when spoken in public? Is it essentially subversive talk, "giving voice" to those who are marginalised or silent? Does it necessarily require one to be fluent or conversant in other discourses, to develop the ability to be bilingual?

Or is religious discourse already public discourse, drawing on values which are meant for the common good of society as a whole? If so, then this suggests a need to negotiate common goals, a common vision and common language to articulate those goals and visions. In South Africa, where the need for a common centre and a harmonious vision in a deeply plural society is undermined by massive inequality and significant asymmetries of power, this task has become both a challenge and a serious problem.

Does religious discourse have to be explicitly "faith language", or can visions and symbols be expressed in non-religious language? Is there a place for an explicitly religious language in a public sphere? If so, how can this language be articulated in a way that embraces pluralism? Who participates in religious discourse in the public sphere? Is religious discourse an essentially elitist discourse (articulated by religious leaders)? or is it formed on the ground? And finally, in what ways is religious discourse a type of praxis (as, for example, the preaching of Desmond Tutu or Martin Luther King)? How does such religious discourse embody and nurture the values and attitudes relevant to the public sphere?

We may further also ask what is meant by the term "public". Does it refer to a particular space which requires rules of entry and a specific (secular?) language? or are there many and contested "publics"? If so, how do they relate and what are the dynamics of power at play? How do religious people relate to public space? Do they constitute a separate public?
If "public" is seen as a separate space, then there is a need to equip "boundary" people who can move between them. If however "religion" and "public" are seen as overlapping, potentially sharing common goals, common symbols and even a common language, what new metaphors may express this commonality? In this context, is it useful to speak of "civil society" and "civil religion"? Are they helpful in articulating certain goals and visions for society—particularly plurality, acceptance and diversity?

Concrete, limited ways in which "religion" interacts with "public" include specific joint ventures between religious groups, political organisations and/or NGO's who agree to collaborate on particular projects. Those who have worked on such ventures are able to speak of the lessons which they have learnt along the way. They suggest joint ventures require

- a specific, attainable goal or goals (communicated in language understandable to all groups)
- a language for articulating these goals which is both visionary and accountable
- a language which is able to stretch beyond "what is" (the actual) to new, imaginative possibilities
- a language which also provides a framework of accountability for the actual, concrete ways in which movement towards that goal is achieved—a "horizon language"
- positive trust in the other, built through relationship
- an internal understanding of the strengths which each group brings to the endeavour
- leaders who are capable of being open to working within and between different contexts ("religious" and "secular").

**Theme 2: Religious plurality and identity in civil society**

The concepts "identity" and "plurality" are inter-dependent whilst inherently in tension—a tension that can become either creative or destructive.

The present South African context requires new ways and models for naming sameness and difference without succumbing to the tyrannies resulting from an overemphasis on one or the other—as, for example, in apartheid or colonialism. How is particularity to be affirmed within an understanding that engagement with others is essential? Equally, does "unity" language simply mask differences? Does talk of our "Rainbow Nation" create a dynamic challenge towards pluralism? or does it allow "business as usual" for those in power? The same question can be asked of the term "non-racialism".

In the task of naming sameness and difference, "chromatic language" will more and more be seen as problematic. Chromatic language recognises no nuances in identities and speaks, for example, of "black" and "white" as if the meaning of these terms are undisputed. This point is developed further in the next section.

There are important power dynamics which need to be named within the process of dialogue. Language and identity are integral to one another, yet not all groups are allocated the same power in the contested realm of identity. Is "dialogue" possible between those of unequal power—and when some have not been able to claim and articulate their own identity? How is identity formed without dialogue and difference? What are the aspects of our particularities (contexts, histories, religious traditions) which enable and prevent a truly "pluralistic conversation", where a particular identity may be affirmed without being absolutised. How does religious language reflect this goal? How do we use religious language and symbols to provide spaces for becoming?

Identity and plurality meet in the context of actual communities, through our primary communities—such as family, church, mosque and temple. How do we embody openness and plurality within our communities of identity? How is this plurality embodied in the present understanding of nationhood within South Africa?

A crucial question in this respect: Is religious language able to assist in the movement towards positive plurality? or is it mainly an obstacle? A particular challenge for religious language is to move from the idea of possessing the truth and of speaking in absolutes, to naming and opening up possibilities. All religious language comes from experience. But experience, though real for each person, remains partial, concealing as much as it reveals.

Religious language must articulate what is possible in reality as well as what is actual and, whilst doing so, recognise that there are many possibilities which may be realised. One particular faith tradition may not lay sole claim to the area of possibility without introducing a new kind of tyranny. If this is so, how are religious communities to articulate possibilities in the knowledge that truth is contested and the task of actualising their ultimate (spiritual) goals never ended?

**Theme 3: Citizenship of marginal/subjugated voices**

Because it never takes place on a level playing field, the possibility of discourse deconstructs the concept of citizenship.
"Citizenship" operates as a "deceitful" concept when we assume that, when one achieves citizenship, one is naturally invited into "public space". Such an assumption is false when public space operates on the basis of privilege—the privilege of power defined to exclude the other. Alternatively, citizenship may be understood as contested by the particular discourses of the silent and marginalised. Here citizenship is understood, in post-structuralist terms, as being "partially constituted" by discourse, or rather by many contested discourses.

The current situation in South Africa raises epistemological questions in this regard. In a post-modern context, as opposed to a liberation context, the discourse of the poor and marginalised is understood as merely another discourse, rather than a morally or epistemologically better one. This is an area of practical debate. What are the issues of power involved in this difference? How does the idea of being "partially constituted" by the discourses of the poor and marginalised offer an alternative understanding of discourse and identity? Is this a fruitful way of thinking for unlocking the positive and creative aspects of "difference"?

Within the current South African context, what is the nature of the relationship between religious identity and citizenship? The two can often be in tension, with one claiming exclusive allegiance. How do plurality and the idea of being partially constituted provide ways of working with current identity crises?

Is the concept of "marginalisation" synonymous with that of "subjugation"? Or is it possible to choose to be marginal as a strategy? By remaining "on the margins" how does one challenge the concept of power as located at the centre? Or is being on the margins simply acquiescing to the notion that power is at the centre? In speaking of marginality, do the adjectives "precarious" and "advantageous" help to unpack the issues of power at play? How would one develop an ecclesiology, for example, on the basis of an understanding of "advantageous marginality"?

If some discourse is also marginalised through its subjugation, how do we understand or have access to it, to what may be termed "silence", "absence", "hidden transcripts" and so forth? Should religious communities necessarily acknowledge marginalised discourse, or provide spaces for marginalised voices to be articulated? How else are they to be recovered? Does this not imply that centres of power need to be destabilised, and in fact, would they (or would this be a naïve vision)? Recovering the voices of those who are marginal in both public and religious discourse may first require identifying the silences.

Finally, identity is in part shaped by constructions of "the past", including the collective memories of a particular society. However, the past in South Africa is both divided and dividing, and not all memories are recorded. Besides the effects of oppression, how do we record the memories of those who operate orally?

Themes 4 & 5: Law, constitution, and religious organisations/choosing a human rights language

The term "religion" can be unpacked in both cultural and structural ways. Culturally, we may speak of the way religion functions in creating core values for particular religious communities within society. One test of the formation and articulation of these values for South Africans asks how well they serve to promote plurality and deconstruct power.

Structurally, we may speak of differing modes by which religions organise themselves. For example, one typology would see religions organised primarily (though not exclusively nor without overlap) as "communities", as "institutions" or as "associations". In simple terms, the communal mode emphasises group norms, the institutional mode emphasises institutional authority, and the associational mode emphasises the individual. Each mode—and this is the relevant point—marks a different understanding of the nature of the relationship between religious organisations and a democratic, pluralistic state. The challenge of interacting with a pluralist democracy raises particular challenges to each model. The challenge for all of them is how to engage in a genuine "civility of discourse" without surrendering particularity.

Analogously, language functions differently in multiple and different communities, the pertinent example here being the "language of human rights". It means something different to those living in an economically deprived area compared to those who are economically secure. It has a different weight in the cultural context of Africa, with its strong communal anthropological norms, than it has in the Cartesian, individualist environment of the "Enlightened" West. Not surprisingly, human rights language is a contested arena.

The example of human rights language, usually deeply shaped by religious notions, suggests that the moral context of our language (what values form our language) is significant. So, too, is our ability to communicate across contextual boundaries (raising again the question of discursive "bi-" or "multi-lingualism", and the issue of how we find or construct a new common language).

The language of human rights draws us back again to the question of whether and how religious organisations articulate the language of the experience of marginalised people, as opposed to those whose experiences reflect the norms of the "centre".
Going further: is the focus on language as such short-sighted? What is its material base and what are its material effects? And what has this to do with human spirituality, undoubtedly a central issue in most, if not all, religions?

Finally, what are the challenges that face religious communities after the inauguration of the Constitution? It is an incongruous fact (or is it?) that, contrasting with the Constitution, many religious communities are taking up reactionary positions towards human rights—for example, over the issues of abortion and sexual orientation. Do religious communities embody a "culture of human rights"? Can they? Should they?

In highly contested areas concerning the progressive values that the new South African Constitution enshrines, are there common symbols (such as "human dignity" and "worth") which might be made meaningful to diverse communities, and which simultaneously allow religious communities to find ways of bringing accountability into the legal and political realms?

In the current context, the relationship between the democratic state (political, legal, etc. institutions) and religious organisations is somewhat fluid and ambiguous. The majority of people in South Africa are "religious" while African world-views, unlike strong elements in Western world-views, do not encourage the dichotomising of life into dyads such as sacred and secular. If this is so, what do we envisage by the separation of "state" and "religion" (a constitutional principle)? How much separation? What are the appropriate and inappropriate ways in which religion functions in relation to Constitutional democratic institutions and practices?

Theme 6: Interpreting corporate language and practice

Within the corporate world, language is primarily adversarial, the language of "win or lose". It also has a two-fold link to religious schemas: First through its own pseudo-religious character (the market being the first truly global "religion"); and second, in the way that it co-opts standard religious language—as for example when "value", "equity" and "transformation" become keywords. There is a paradox, however, in that the corporate world resists any religious presence other than in privatised garb. A separation between these "two worlds" has consequences both for those who work within the corporate world and for those who are affected by it.

For those who function primarily within the corporate sector, an enforced schizophrenia prevails. Ethics and values formed within a religious context (such as "compassion" and "justice") receive little prime space or affirmation in a corporate setting. A more holistic approach is often spoken about in the current business world, such as "giving business a soul". This may however be nothing more than a fad. The value of this language is still measured in terms of profits: one "wins", for example, through cooperation rather than competition.

For the rest of the world affected by the politics of economy, the power of the market operates as a law on its own, and there is no apparent accountability in any seeming connection with the value of human life and dignity—especially the lives of those within the poorer "southern" countries. The move towards a "virtual market place", where the primary commodity is money, means that any connection the money world has with actual communities becomes even more tenuous, making the establishment of accountability on the basis of human worth more difficult.

The danger of a shared (religious) language lies with the potential of the corporate world to co-opt symbols and empty them of their religious or spiritual meaning. For example, the concept of "ubuntu" now graces almost anything that might sell better in association with it. There is also the danger of losing a certain degree of critical distance. At the same time, although there may be a certain similarity of language on occasion, this does not guarantee any shared understanding of the language. On the other hand, the chasm between standard religious and corporate discourses leads to the dismissal of any serious religious discourse in the corporate world, usually on the basis of it being judged "naïve" or "idealistic". How then is religious discourse to be "translated" into corporate discourse in a way which is powerful and meaningful?

Some clear challenges emerge. Religious traditions valuing the worth and sacredness of human life offer a voice of accountability to corporate practices. How do religious organisations inject ethics of accountability into the corporate world? Religious pluralism offers a challenge to the hegemonic power of corporate globalisation. What is the possible role religion can play in destabilising and contesting economic systems which are life-draining?

Themes 7 & 8: Religion, gender and public discourse/ Black theology as public discourse

As specific voices within the context of "religious and public discourse", black and feminist/womanist discourses offer particular vistas of critique for the broader relationship of what is religious and public discourse. Both challenge the hegemonic construction of "religion" and "public" from positions that are marginalised either by racial or gender subjugation.

Here the term "public discourse" is seen within a particularly ironic light. The word "public" is implicitly inclusive. Yet in reality the power dynamics at play within its centres necessitate the exclusion of both women and people of colour. Paradoxically, both
black and womanist/feminist discourses are continually involved in the public sphere, for both are involved in economic, political and cultural issues by the necessity of context, though often through resistance.

As resistance discourses within the context of religious discourse, black and womanist/womanist discourses evoke questions about how various traditions, or narratives, constitute "public discourse". In particular, they draw attention to narratives which are located on the periphery, implicitly critiquing the assumption that appropriate discourse is only constituted by hegemonic and essentialist definitions of what is public. They constitute discourses of "counter-" and "sub-publics".

In resistance, these discourses propose that the notion of public needs to be re-imagined to include the narratives, or memories, of those who have suffered—those who have been marginalised and ignored. The inclusion of these narratives does not mean that they simply become other narratives amongst many. The recovery and articulation of narratives on the periphery constitutes a different genre of discourse—what may be called the liberative "poetics of testimony". Challenging centres of power defined by elitism and exclusion, these discourses also envision ones which are embodied, plural and ethically responsive to those who suffer. Including these narratives into the corporate notion of what constitutes "the public", invites both diversity and an ethic of compassion. They remain vital, simply because the challenges of both racism and patriarchy remain, however much other aspects of South African life are changing.

In re-defining the nature of "public space" by intentionally constituting it through normally "absent" discourses, our understanding of power located at the centre also necessarily changes. What is projected as a goal in this process is a public space which is polyglot, requiring honesty, an openness to diversity, an ethic of listening and compassion for the other.

Religions are internally challenged in their fundamentals by black and feminist/womanist discourses and other "marginalised" discourses. Feminist discourses, for example, challenge the historical construction of "gender" as the symbol for human difference. Feminist theory names a set of social constructions which has led, from the axial age (the period when most great religions of the world arose) onward, to the dominance of males and the oppression of women within religion and society. Within Black theology, the concept of "ontological blackness" (blackness as a material, social and structural condition) presents a "contrast experience" to dominant hegemonic discourse. This is not a question of pigmentation but rather of a marginal, subjugated condition. The challenge within this concept is one of recognising and naming a global condition of the systemic use of power operating within the public sphere on the basis of racial superiority against those deemed to be inferior. That ideology remains strong, and it suggests that Black theology remains a critical discourse within the public sphere.

The radical challenge remains one of reconstituting public space through marginalised narratives. This raises difficult questions, especially in terms of the way religious communities are structured and led. How do those who have been silenced enter into the public narrative? Who provides the "space" for these voices? How is the notion of power that is constituted at the centre to be challenged? Put differently, how is the centre to be interrupted? In what way are religious organisations cultivating the "poetics of testimony"? What part does religious language, symbols, worship, liturgy or preaching play in cultivating compassion, truth-telling, diversity, or ethical and moral responses to those who suffer? In short, how are religious organisations and traditions re-imagining the notion of public space as a "space of solidarity in difference"?

**Theme 9: Reconstructing a civic moral fibre**

Of the many challenges facing a democratic South Africa, two were identified here: division and moral disintegration. A widespread consensus exists on the deep-seated moral failure within our society (including corruption and crime). Equally, the effects of the deeply-entrenched divisions of the past remain with us.

These challenges highlight the way(s) in which religious institutions and traditions are engaged, or not, within the public sphere. The context is not as clear as before in terms of a direct "enemy" when apartheid produced a history of challenging unjust government. What lessons were learnt? What strengths and weaknesses identified? Are religious groups thinking strategically now? The current context is far more "post-modern" in the sense of being more ambiguous and overtly plural. How are religious organisations responding to these new challenges?

Does the link between moral fibre and national identity suggest certain possible strategies for action? Concerns about a national moral fibre raises possibilities for the deployment of common symbols (such as "ubuntu") in order to clarify and articulate what the common goals and visions for society may be. The Constitution itself proposes a common basis for both public and religious action, with its grounding in concepts of human dignity and worth. What, then, does it mean when many religious organisations
actively oppose areas of the Constitution—such as abortion rights, sexual orientation rights and the outlawing of the death penalty—on the basis of particular faith interpretations? What is the price that religious groups pay by having a narrowly defined public agenda? These are critical questions involving the perceived role and agenda that religious organisations are assuming.

The manner in which religious organisations participate in creating the good of society also needs critical and careful thought. Absolutes are unhelpful and "give and take" essential—whatever the agenda. Do religious organisations need to begin to think differently, thinking not in terms of absolute principles, but rather in terms of specific, concrete programmes and dynamic systems of accountability?

Analysis of the issues and challenges may be aided by identifying "hard" and "soft" issues. Hard issues centre around the challenges posed by a society in transition to democracy (with the negative forces from apartheid still a present reality). Soft issues cluster around the nature of liberal democracy—issues such as individualism and capitalism. Is this the kind of democracy we want? What are the alternatives, the checks and balances? What are the links between moral formation and the type of democratic society we hope to build? Are greed and corruption to be endorsed because liberal democracy sanctifies the individual's rights above those of the common good?

In strategising roles focused around moral formation for religious groups, challenges arise to think more broadly about the concept of "moral formation". A broad understanding is needed, meaning not simply the identification of various religiously based moral issues—which may lead to a narrow, exclusivist focus. Neither can it merely be a matter of proclamation. What are the links, for example, between aesthetics and moral formation? The role of the arts in shaping moral insight and perception, as well as in enabling social transformation, must be given more attention. This includes the way in which aesthetic formation takes place in the dramas and rituals of religious liturgies and rites.

Conclusion

Discussions at the workshop were highly nuanced. At some points, inevitably, hot issues led to interchanges which were valuable in themselves, but secondary to the goal of generating conceptual categories and interrogative frameworks for the Multi-Event proper. Such have not been included in this account.

At this point, we proceed to a more analytical approach to the workshop materials and inputs. The rest of the document is as much a creation of its writing team as it is of the workshop participants, though it depends almost entirely on the content of the debates of the workshop.

Section II: Clarifying key concepts

Introduction

A conceptual language is distinct from an "everyday" language in which concepts may be embedded, but where they are tacit rather than focal. A concept is a logical "snapshot": It freezes human activity, allowing us to stop and examine its structures and relationships. Concepts are therefore tools, and malleable ones at that. They do not limit "truth" but have their value in parsing everyday experience, in identifying its structures, in clarifying its dynamics, in making important distinctions. A "common conceptual language" is not a language evacuated of particularity or interest, but rather one in which the particularities of its users may find a "home" while yet being communicable to others.

If a concept is a logical snapshot, what follows here is the making of a photo album: beginning with various snaps, followed by a general sorting and a more specific pasting-in. The point of this section is limited to providing a résumé or taxonomy of concepts as they were employed during the workshop or through concept papers, with nuances and clarifying terms. Its purpose, while recognising the limits involved, is to generate "a more or less common language" for the February 1999 events.

Creating a conceptual language

The three key concepts the conference dealt with are "religion", "public" and "discourse". In the presentations and discussions, "religion" and "public" were often seen as two different "realms" which had to be "connected" or otherwise related. Sometimes the implication was that there were "religious people" and "secular people" (i.e. believers and non-believers), at other times the terms referred to particular spheres of life (so that the same person can be seen as "religious" with reference to her attendance at cultic services and "public" when she is, say, speaking in a court of law).
The word "discourse", often meant in its everyday sense of "talk about something", was usually employed with reference to "religious" or "public" (or sometimes "secular") languages. But occasionally the term was used in a more specialised sense: a network of power relations, built on words, which constitutes and disciplines the subjects and subjectivities to which it refers (and who refer to it). When the term "religious discourse" was employed, there seemed to be an impulsion to either "translate" it into "public discourse" (which would imply that religious discourse was used by religious people) or to train "religious people" to be bilingual—that is, to speak a public language.

But these ideas of "translation" and of speaking in different tongues were used in different ways. Sometimes they carried the meaning of a person with strong religious commitments working in a sphere other than that of a religious community (as a lawyer, for instance). At other times it had to do with working in common enterprises with those of different faith commitments, including inter-religious dialogue, or with people who do not identify at all with any particular tradition. These are very different kinds of issues, and a distinction between them must be drawn.

In other uses "religious discourse" meant the particular discourse of religious or faith communities or their official representatives. So "the voice (or voices) of the churches (or church)" could be said to be either "silent" or "prominent". What was specifically religious about this was the source (i.e. who was doing the speaking, or in what name)—but not the quality or the content of the discourse (i.e. what was actually being said). This kind of discourse (church statements against apartheid, for instance), does not need to be translated. It is already "public".

At other times, religious discourse referred to a kind of language which could be spoken by faith communities, their representatives or their members, but also by those not claiming any affiliation with a faith community. This kind of language is heavily symbolic and mythic—and particular, bordering on the idiosyncratic. It is usually opaque to those not sharing the same faith commitments, and it needs translation—whether into a "public" language (which, as we shall see below, is problematic) or into political, legal, ethical and other tongues. Its varieties need translation, so that those inhabiting different symbolic universes can understand and find equivalents in their own particular traditions (such as a "Muslim" speaking so that "liberal humanists", "Hindus" or "African traditionalists" can understand).

Secondary concepts and qualitative terms

A number of other concepts were employed with reference to each of the key concepts, as for example when the word "identity" was used with reference to "religion", "public" (space) and "discourse". The same could be said for words like "values", "moral formation" and "marginality". One could also speak of relations between these secondary terms, for example, between "identity" and "marginality".

We may separate out a third set of modifying terms, such as "hybridity", "plurality", "particularity" and "contestation". No less important, these words qualified the primary and secondary terms. Interestingly, they recurred with reference to very different concepts: for example, identities were seen as contested and plural (alongside other identities), but so was public space, and this was applied to both "religious" and "secular" identities.

Symbolic-normative language

A fourth set of words, in some ways the most crucial, attempted to capture normative concerns symbolically. These are words like "ubuntu", "health" and "healing", "covenant" and "human dignity". Although rooted in particular "religious" or "secular" visions, they were offered to connect the various concerns.

In the synopsis that follows we will focus on the primary terms, relating them first to each other, then to the other terms.

Problematising, nuancing and deepening the language

All these words meant different things to different people (and sometimes the same people!) depending on the context of the discussion and the way each was combined with other words. This meant that people were frequently "talking past" each other. For example, in the selfsame discussion the term "religion" might have been used to refer to official religious bodies like the Catholic Church, "spirituality" and dogmatic language—without clarification or distinction.

When the term "public" was conflated with the term "secular", "religion" took on the meaning of the (secular) public's (sacred) "other". "Religion" at other times simply described a set of institutions (as much "secular" in the sense of located in the "world" as banks and libraries). Or "religion" was used to embrace a number of sectors, including the public—for example, civil religion (Everett) which is public religion. Another example of this broader use of the term "religion" was a description of capitalism as global religion.
It is thus important to clarify the key concepts used at the workshop.

Religion

The conference set out to construct “a language of religion in public life”. This task frequently took the form of relating what were termed “religious” and “secular” languages—an essentially dualist strategy. This manifested itself in a search for a “common grammar”—particularly with reference to law, human rights and religious languages—or a hermeneutic of translation or “bilingualism”. Some even proposed a hybrid discourse—something in-between “religious” and “public”—a “religiously based discourse that would make sense to a politician”.

A strict distinction between the “religious language” and “secular language” is problematic as it implies a firm boundary between sacred and secular that is not always held across traditions. Moreover, the notion of a “secular language” actually masks a plurality of languages, including academic, legal, economic, political and ethical, each of which have their own irreducible character or identity.

All of these languages have important orienting dimensions (i.e. they are not empty of spirituality or normative concerns) and they always imply a certain normative framework. Though usually not obvious, every legal discourse, every economic system, contains within it a certain idea of how society ought to be organised, of what constitutes authentic human activity, and so on. Such languages also furnish the stock of images out of which religious language is drawn—and the reverse is also true. The forensic language of the court, for example, is an important source for Christian understandings of “redemption”, while Christian understandings of redemption profoundly influence even a “quasi-juridical” institution like the TRC.

Rather than speak of “religious language” as opposed to “secular language” or “public language”, some wished to recognise a plurality of languages: “legal language”, “academic language”, “economic language” and so forth. What this would mean for religion in public life is not clear, nor is it clear whether “religious language” would appear alongside these others.

A second issue is the conflation of the terms “public” and “secular”—a conflation which masks many different communities of many different kinds, each (implicitly or explicitly) propagating different visions and commitments. Moreover, the use of the term “secular” often implies a certain understanding of the proper role of religion in society drawn largely from a Tocquevillean model of the USA—i.e. that religious institutions take their place alongside non-religious institutions as voluntary associations—while the term itself is no longer sociologically clear when seen comparatively across different cultures and societies.

Religious language and religious institutions

Different languages find their homes in specific institutions, such as the law court (legal language), the university (academic language) and the business office (corporate language). The language of faith finds its home within faith communities, particularly in their cultic practices. This was not contested at the conference. However, it was noted that faith language in particular is not the sole possession of faith communities. Languages of faith are also spoken outside “traditional” faith communities. Indeed, faith is a human activity before it is institutionalised in faith community structures. The term “spirituality” carries the meaning of faith as a part of being human. The example of global capitalism is one instance of faith language appearing outside a faith community.

On the other hand, the pronouncements of faith communities and their representatives may be couched in political, economic, juridical and ethical languages. Not all statements issuing from faith communities or their representatives constitutes faith language—either in the sense of proclamation or of testimony. While the SACC under apartheid, for example, may have been motivated by faith convictions to make pronouncements condemning state activities, the actual content of those pronouncements may have been remarkably similar to that of “secular” movements.

A further point: the language of faith is not only a spoken language. It is performed, even “sung”. It is “testimony” language expressed in narrative, poetry, music and film. A concept of “the language of faith” cannot therefore be restricted to the spoken word. Nor must it be restricted to the obvious, to the “public transcript”. Languages of faith are also spoken and performed in “hidden transcripts”—which brings in the interface with “marginality”.

Throughout the workshop it was pointed out that the language of faith is a “limit” language, not a special tongue alongside political, economic, juridical, etc. languages. It takes those languages and pushes them, opening them up to possibilities “beyond” the everyday. This is what happens in proclamation, or testimony. This contradicts to an extent the idea that faith language is spoken alongside the other languages.
Just as the language emanating from faith communities need not necessarily be faith language, so the public activities of faith communities need not necessarily be subsumed under the category of "proclamation". For faith communities are also interest groups, contesting space, negotiating power and so forth. The term "faith community" seems to indicate the representation of certain faith-convictions as its dominant feature. Yet faith communities are also tightly woven, even knotted, with strands of race, class, ethnic and other interests. Moreover, proclamation is also an activity of "secular" liberation movements and political parties. Political and constitutional movements in South Africa are often far ahead of faith communities in this regard, which paradoxically (against their prophetic traditions) appear more conservative. Indeed, the Constitution is in many respects a "vision" document and in the minds of some (especially conservative) faith communities, a rival.

Implied, though not explicated, in the conference was the idea that not all faith languages are equally legitimate. Languages of faith can also be "idolatrous". If patriarchy is (along with capitalism) a global religion, for example, it is one that closes down rather than opens up life. The language of apartheid was a faith language that understood the divine as one who divided rather than "made whole". Such a language, such a spirituality, legitimates oppression. Corporations also pay tribute to their economic gods of "growth" and "progress". Inter-faith dialogue, on this view of faith language, can be seen as a multi-lingual interaction not just between faith traditions but between different normative visions and understandings of how society should be run. The question is, who is to judge and how?

**Public and publics**

Similar to the term "religion", the idea of the "public" implies a societal "structure", "realm" or "sphere" (a space where religion also ought to present itself), or perhaps a dimension of life, as in "public" vs. "private" life. What emerged in the conference was also the idea of public as "covering" (masking?) a number of overlapping areas—or perhaps rather "public" as itself the area of unclarified overlaps.

The term "rationality" was sometimes placed alongside the term "public", meaning that the public sphere should be governed by a process whereby those who enter it should be able to translate their visions and values into intelligible and defensible validity claims.

Further nuances became important in defining the "public" as itself constituted by "multiple languages" or discourses. This "polyglot public discourse" may be thought of as the recognition of different disciplinary languages (such as legal and economic), different genres (such as poetry and song), or the articulation of different visions (such as Christian and Afro-humanist)—all of which are public. The tension between "the public" as a homogeneous idea and "multiple publics" is supplemented by that between the idea of "public discourse as one way of articulating many visions" versus "public discourse as many genres, many visions". This tension appeared in other discussions as well (for instance, around the terms "marginality" and "citizenship").

The two dominant metaphors of the relation between religion and public, we noted, were "bilingualism" and "translation". There was also the idea of a hybrid, mediating language which would be understandable both to those speaking as religious persons and those speaking as public persons. The idea of the public as itself multiple problematises the ideas of both "bilingualism" and "translation", however. If the public is already multiple, public language becomes shorthand for a number of languages, a kind of "multilingualism". But perhaps "public discourse" simply refers to the everyday discourse—a synonym for the lowest common denominator where particularities do not interfere.

**Discourse and identity**

Besides being a broad, inclusive term (embracing in principle every "citizen"), "public" can also refer to "the centre", to the mainstream, to the realm of dominant powers. It is inhabited by "trained speakers"—those with facility in speaking to each other. Here "public" stands not against "private", but against those outside the mainstream—the disempowered. Public in this sense creates "non-public" others. Some thus spoke of "counter-publics", and "little publics"—especially where public forums are inadequate or exclusionary. We will return to this point.

Public space in the main seemed to be taken as "common space", a place where common identity is shaped—the idea of what it means to be "South African" in finding common goals or a "national identity." Paradoxically, it seems that one must have an identity in order to enter and negotiate public space. Equally paradoxical, withdrawal from public space in favour of internal, identity-forming practices (as, for instance, an independent church) can be an act of resistance in relation to a dominant public space—especially where the "public" is a realm of alienation. In another direction, public space may also place identities under threat through relativising them in reference to what is common. The notion of "advantageous marginalisation" was used of the
Muslim community in a largely Christianised South Africa in this context. Public space is thus also space where identities are contested not simply by "the common" but by other identities.

A major concern is that identities (such as ethnic, religious) be allowed to inhabit and contest public space, and that they be protected against corruption or co-option. But many also spoke of identities as hyphenated or hybrid, as "multiple-constituted". Even when the idea of a primary community as forming one's world view was put forth, it was opposed with the idea of multiple communities, influences, particularities, and even selves which arise in the dynamic process of constituting identities and cultures. This hybridity makes it conceptually impossible finally to separate "African" and "European" identities in present-day South Africa. Each is profoundly implicated in the other. Yet there is a necessary "rediscovery" of "one's own culture" in a post-apartheid context. The term used to convey the opposite of an acceptance of hybridity is "absolutism"—meaning the denial of hybridity, the closing-off of the dynamic of identity formation, a kind of cultural fundamentalism.

Perhaps we could speak of plurality as the contestation of one identity or identity-community with others, and of hybridity as the contestation of identity within communities or even selves. Identities on this view are layered and textured, with "faith" identities intertwined with and constituted by race, class, ethnic, sexual, physical and other identities. We have not yet fully come to terms with the implication of this for reconstituting "religion and public life".

The "politics of identity" was seen as the other side of the "politics of sameness." An example of the latter is globalisation under capitalism: One may see this as a "global religion" which is not one particularity among many (unlike mainstream religions) but a homogenising religion with reference not only to the many religions, but also to constructions of "public". In other discussions, moving to another point, inclusive concepts such as the idea of "embrace" were placed alongside concepts such as "sameness" and "difference" which may be named in good or bad ways (apartheid being a bad way of naming them).

Discourse and marginality

There is also the kind of marginality that is perhaps better spoken of as "subjugation". While none would have disagreed, at least in principle, that public space ought to affirm different identities, the marginality that comes with poverty, for example, is a different matter. The conceptual distinction may be seen if one notes that one has a "right" to be "Muslim", say, but one does not have a "right" to be poor. The term marginalisation was thus used of specific "categories" without regard to particular persons, such as "women", "the poor", "foreign Africans", independent church groups, and nations. But it also sometimes meant something along a dynamic, contextually determined continuum of power and consciousness—as in "more or less marginalised" (as opposed to a boundary condition between "the marginalised" and "the non-marginalised").

This discussion turns us back to the concept "citizenship". While seen as an ideal (perhaps a synonym for being "South African"), it was also held to be an ambiguous term, in its etymology even constituting a marginalisation of rural people. West pointed out two possible understandings of citizenship: the first with reference to the city and thus the centre of power. The second as a public identity "partially constituted" by the discourses of every community, including the marginalised.

The question of citizenship raises the question of discourse—no longer simply as language, but as the power to make and remake reality (which also includes language, but perhaps at a different level). One may ask, do the marginalised have a discourse? Do they help constitute "common" reality? This is especially a problem if citizenship is used in the sense of "centre" or "centred" or "empowered". Excluded from citizenship, they would in this sense be excluded from the public and from public discourse. They are neither empowered, nor even constituted as subjects. There are two possible theoretical moves at this point: the one is to locate power in hegemonic, dominant centres, and to identify power relations as wholly asymmetrical. The other is to locate power in hidden agencies, in non-public (or perhaps, "counter-public" and "counter-hegemonic") discourses, so that while still asymmetrical, power is understood as more diffuse and available than otherwise, albeit in less overtly recognisable forms.

This points to the redefinition of citizenship with reference to the marginalised: "Citizenship" can be said to have been extended...
to them [not simply when they can make their mark on a ballot paper but] when they hear their own voices in the public realm. Questions remain about the practical efficacy of such a view in dealing with hegemonic powers, but the insight is highly suggestive for understanding the possibilities of religion in public life, especially where religion has been "privatised" or relegated to an inferior, even useless, category of experience.

Public discourse, values and symbolic language

Two final concepts were repeatedly addressed: "national integrity" and "moral ambiguity". National integrity (which could also refer to national unity or a "common place") is seen as endangered by moral ambiguity, not in the sense of "different (incommensurable?) moralities" in the public sphere, but in the sense of the positioning of that sphere and its institutions between "morality" and "immorality". It was agreed that "religion" (whether in the sense of faith communities or of spiritualities) was "needed" to play a role here.

Identity-dynamics also enter into the picture. There was a general sense that certain values (e.g. ubuntu), though rooted in particular faith communities, might bridge the two realms of the religious and the public, perhaps even be mobilised to address especially political and corporate life. But some felt these words could be cheapened (particularly for the groups who "owned" them) when mixed with the language of commerce.55

A counter point was that the meaning of symbols needs to be open to change and development56 presumably through contact with other languages, discourses and contexts. When then is a concept "corrupted" if at all, and by whom? A similar fear arose about "prophetic" religion, should faith communities lose their distinctive voice over against the mainstream, a strong possibility if their way of speaking was too closely identified with the public.

Race, class and gender

A final set of concepts shaping debate at various points, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, were race, class and gender. They are intertwined in much of what has already been noted, and they all have implications for constructing identity. It was also noted that the idea of a homogeneous public discourse excludes the specifying discourses of race, gender and class.57

Notions having to do with race and racism included distinctions between "chromatic" ("black", "white")58 and geographic language ("African", "European"), with the two being problematised in relation to each other. For example, does "black" convey the same as "African"? Can one speak meaningfully (some do) of "white Africans"? Would it be more appropriate to develop a hybridised term, a hyphenated identity which is non-chromatic, such as Euro-Africans (a tendency which is clearly strong in the US, for example)? What is at stake in this generally, and for religion in particular? Black theology has already gone beyond chromatic language in its links with, and at points even dependency upon, African theology. It was asked whether the idea of Black theology in different contexts carries the same nuances, as for instance in the US and South Africa, especially where the meaning of "blackness" is contested.

In South Africa, the relation between "black" and "Christian" theology is also increasingly contested, with at least one leading exponent of Black theology wanting to loosen the relation.59 The relationship of black theology to African theology is also complex and in need of fuller explication. Black theology as a publicly critical discourse, it was suggested, is in need of being tied anew to political analysis and mobilisation is it is to develop. Others (from the Black theology tradition) felt that Black theology as it has been known in South Africa was terminally ill and no longer adequately addressed the changed context. Black theology, it was argued, is for the moment tied to the margins, and a question arose about whether it can move into the centre. One response was that it was precisely in being tied to the margins that Black theology functioned as a practical and theoretical critique of the centres of power and of structural racism in the wider society. It is not "in crisis" as much as it "deals with crisis" out of crisis.

This remains a profoundly challenging issue, especially if one concedes, as virtually all delegates did, that racism remains both a central issue and a practical reality.

The concept "class" was hardly dealt with overtly, an interesting matter given the strength of the ideas through the 1970s and the 80s in South Africa. No discussion of class issues took place except in the indirect sense of notions of subjugation and domination which shaped many debates. Perhaps the problematic nature of class concepts in capturing the wide and diverse nuances which enter into contemporary social analysis (at least of the kind that is not strictly Marxist) explains part of the strange silence on class as such. Perhaps it is a signal of the way in which religion often fails to grasp the reality of workers. Perhaps it is because discourse about class has been transformed into other terms in various theoretical languages (such as "hegemony" and "ideology", "domination" and "subjugation"). In any event, one factor is that various kinds of domination and
subjugation are now part of the emancipatory agenda, and not only that of workers by capital.

Thus it is that gender issues—specifically patriarchy and sexism—are seen to be as important a touchstone of transformation as race or class. Gender is a metaphor for difference, and this difference shapes the public sphere as much as any other. One matter raised in debate was a common implication in the way the questions are discussed, that gender issues are women's issues, signifying a conflation of terms which need to be distinguished.60 Gender issues are also male issues and concern the construction of maleness—suggesting the possibility of a "counter-hegemonic" construction of maleness.61

These points were made in various ways, though the workshop was unable to carry out a fuller explication of their meaning for religion in public life. Here the concept papers prove to be "thicker" in their understanding of context. One group, however, noted that a thicker understanding of context requires more than a socio-economic analysis; and it requires paying attention not only to actualities (that which is) but also possibilities (that which is still to come).62

This section has attempted to look at the question of forming a common language by which we might unpack and develop our understandings of religion in public life. It began with some caveats, identified the central concepts which generate confusion or provocation, and outlined some subordinate and modifying concepts. It then moved on to problematise, nuance and deepen the language(s) that appeared most strongly to shape the discussions and debates of the three days over which the workshop ran. In the process, it becomes clear that a great deal of attention was paid to notions of discourse on or from the margins, and of discourse as marginal. This in itself is not surprising, given the South African context and the general profile of those academics who attended the workshop—mainly people for whom "gender", "race" and (to a considerably lesser extent) "class" are not simply theoretical constructs but personal and practical matters.

Conclusion

This report has given an account of the preparatory academic conference for the Multi-Event 1999 and provided a series of snapshots of the way in which South Africans in particular, with input from international partners, frame and develop the relevant concepts. The original idea behind its production was to better prepare people for the debates scheduled to take place in Cape Town in February, 1999. It was a goal of the academic conference to provide South Africans an opportunity to clarify their own thoughts and extend their own debates in interaction with overseas participants. This document has also provided a record of this.

Perhaps the metaphor of a "map" rather than a photograph assists at this point. The workshop, and what is reflected of it in this document, in its task of pursuing framing questions and key concepts about religion in public life, was something like coming off a motorway of liberation struggle, transition, and transformation and arriving at a relatively unknown city centre. Numerous roads appear along the way, some off the main highway, some busy thoroughfares, some hidden back-streets, some going one way, some intersecting and diverting, some dead-ending in a cul-de-sac.

This report has been primarily about charting these roads—opening up issues and questions, rather than tying down specific routes or prescribing answers. Its aim is to generate further, better informed debate and reflection in the service of wiser, more penetrating practice.

Footnotes

1 At the time of writing, these concrete issues and topics included "African renaissance"; AIDS/HIV; arts, religion & transformation; crime & corruption; does public policy need religion?; eco-justice, ecclesia & community; economic values & ethics; faith communities, NGOs & government; gender, race & class revisited; globalisation, poverty & Jubilee 2000; land & labour; media & religion; nationhood & humanity; truth, reconciliation & the future.

2 A selection of these papers is provided with this report. All the papers are available in hard copy from ME 99, c/o Dept. of Religious Studies, Univ. of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701, and on the ME99 web-site: http://www.ricsa.org.za/ME99.

3 Footnotes in this section tie specific points to the various discussion groups and concept papers. At the beginning of the
conference, groups were divided into colour-codes (red, yellow, etc.). From the middle of the second day, groups were reorganised and were designated by numbers (group one, two, etc.). We have given a reference to the particular group for the sake of those who may wish consult the full context of a specific discussion. All material is available from the ME99 office. See note 2 for details.

4 Even the Platonic notion of "universals", one participant reminded us, is properly understood to mean "tentative though enduring approximations to reality".

5 Red group discussion, Theme 1.

6 Red group discussion, Theme 2. Some also spoke of withdrawal from the public as "religious ghettoization". The blue group made a similar point, but using the term "private" as opposed to "public". The implication is that this is not how things are to be, though the talk of remaining private and of engaging the public implies that religion is more "at home" in a private sphere.

7 Cf. Paul Farlam's concept paper as well.

8 Gerald West's concept paper is sensitive to this use of the term.

9 Cf. Gary Gunderson's concept paper. In discussion it was noted that a definition of health current among professionals as "not a goal but a facilitator for achieving our goals".

10 A response to Gunderson's paper (in the plenary discussion, the semantic shift from "health" to "healing" was noted).

11 Blue group discussion, Theme 1.

12 One group saw that this concept is common to law and religion; another noted its affinity with traditional African culture.

13 The term "spirituality" was itself differently used, while some complained that it had become overused, meaning everything and therefore nothing. Red group discussion, Theme 2.

14 William Everett's concept paper. Not only is the nature of civil religion contested, but so is its authenticity. For some it means a false religion. Group Discussion, Theme 6. Everett's use is neutral.

15 Cf. Robin Petersen's concept paper. Patriarchy was similarly described as "the religion of the planet" in Susan Brooks Thistlewaite's paper.

16 Cf. also H. Russel Botman's paper. What provides the grammar is described as "morals" or "values".

17 Red group discussion, Theme 2.

18 Buti Tlhagale was one who appealed for a "mediating language" which would transcend denominational and sectarian religious interests yet be "publicly accessible". But he also made a strong distinction between what he termed "religiously based" and "secular" arguments, maintaining that in the public arena the former must give way to the latter.

19 Everett's paper offers a normative typology of religion and public, implying strongly that the third of his types is how things should be. Dwight N. Hopkins' paper observes that "African indigenous religio-cultural values were not separable from the public sphere."

20 Plenary session, Theme 1. Likewise the term "public discourse", a group noted, needs to give way to the notion of "public discourses"-the corporate world, the media, politics, etc.

21 Legal language, for example, cannot be reduced to "moral" language, though there has to be a way of "placing" each in relation to the other.

22 Cf. Stephen W. Martin's concept paper: The TRC faith hearings in particular are a good case study of a confluence of languages and genres.

23 Some kind of faith is present whenever one speaks of how the world ought to be. Pink group discussion, Theme 2. Also Douglas R. McGaughey's paper: there is an ought in every is.
ME99 -- Constructing a language of religion in public life

24 Gunderson's concept paper.

25 Rebecca S. Chopp's concept paper.

26 Discussion groups for Theme 3. James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale, 1991) was a work referred to in several discussions

27 Chopp's, Robert Franklin's and Hopkins' concept papers.

28 Red group discussion, Theme 2, noting that "religiously imbued" discussions often occurred in cabinet; it was also noted that many members of the ecumenical church which mobilised against apartheid now form a kind of "church" sitting in parliament (with prayer meetings).

29 The word "idolatry" is a normative word specific to "monotheistic religions". However, like the word "prophetic", its meaning is translatable in other contexts.

30 Plenary discussion, Theme 1. Rationality refers to the processes embodied in discourse ethics (e.g. Habermas) rather than cognitive or mental activity. A contrary assertion was that "religion" refers to the utopian and "economics" to the rational dimension. Small group discussion Theme 6.

31 Chopp's concept paper.

32 Plenary discussion, Theme 9.

33 Yellow group discussion, Theme 6.

34 Chopp's concept paper.

35 Green group discussion, Theme 2. Also cf. Daryl Balia's concept paper.

36 E.g. yellow group discussion, Theme 1.

37 Cf. A. Rashid Omar's concept paper.

38 As when a term such as "ubuntu", held "sacred" by a particular community, is co-opted to sell products or votes.

39 Cf. Petersen's paper.

40 Discussion of McGaughey's paper, Theme 2.

41 Pink group discussion, Theme 2.

42 Pink group discussion, Theme 2.

43 Some felt that dialogue amongst religions could provide a model for relating identity and difference. But others argued that whereas one (usually) chooses to identify oneself with a religious tradition, one is "born-into" an ethnic, racial or national group. Pink group discussion, Theme 2.

44 Petersen's paper, Theme 2. The green group argued in session #5 that the term "exclusion" (the opposite of embrace) was a better term that "marginalisation".

45 Omar's concept paper.

46 Pink group discussion, Theme 3.

47 Green group discussion, Theme 3.

48 Plenary session, Theme 3; green group discussion, Theme 3.

49 Plenary discussion, Theme 2. West's paper uses the same idea with reference to power: of a continuum with hegemony at
one end and a "consciously ideological" position at the other.

50 Cf. Chirevo V. Kwenda's concept paper; also Masenya and West, and Plenary discussion, Theme 3.

51 West's concept paper. See section one above.

52 West's concept paper.

53 West's concept paper.

54 Cf. West's and Chopp's concept papers.

55 Plenary discussion, Theme 9. Also plenary discussion of Theme 2.

56 Group two discussion, Theme 8.

57 Chopp's concept paper.

58 Petersen's concept paper.

59 Tinyiko S. Maluleke's concept paper.

60 Thistlewaite's concept paper.

61 Plenary discussion, Theme 7.

62 Group one discussion, Theme 8.