

For Hannes Adonis: Demolishing Walls

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Abstract

The study aims to indicate how the lives of religious people can serve as a source of theological knowledge and beliefs. This study engages the life and work of Hannes Adonis through the methodology of biography as theology. A key characteristic of Hannes Adonis's life and work is the dismantling of all walls of division in church and academia. First, the methodology of biography as theology is discussed. Secondly, Adonis's contribution to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC)/Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) is engaged. Thirdly, Adonis's impact on academia, particularly the South African historiography, is discussed.

Keywords: Hannes Adonis; apartheid; Dutch Reformed Mission Church; Church History

Introduction

The life and work of Hannes Adonis personify the title of his doctoral dissertation, *Afgebreekte Skeidsmure Weer Opgebou* (Demolished Partition Walls Rebuilt), as he contested the artificial walls of racial discrimination. This article will discuss the contribution of Hannes Adonis to the South African ecclesiastical/theological landscape, academia, and historiography through the lens of biography as theology. The study commences with the methodology of biography as theology and biographical notes of Adonis's formative years in Wellington. Additionally, Adonis's service in the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC)/Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the Broederkring/Belydendekring (BK) will be discussed. Furthermore, the focus will shift towards Adonis's contribution to South African Church History, mainly South African historiography. Here, Adonis's inaugural lecture as a professor at Stellenbosch University (SU) will be discussed as he encouraged the need to re-tell history from the perspective of ordinary people, as South African historiography was mainly written from the perspective of the powerful. He emphasised the importance of oral history and the ecumenical facet to include those voices omitted from past historiographies. Hence,

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the study will conclude by arguing for the need for new and contemporary historiographies, including oral history and an ecumenical vision, if history is to evoke liberating power and define social consciousness to demolish the partitioning walls of our day.

I met the late Hannes Adonis in 2000 as a first-year student at Stellenbosch University, where he was responsible for Church History and Polity. It was an adaptive time for the URCSA as its theological training shifted from the UWC to SU. Adonis was one of the lecturers who migrated from UWC to SU. He was instrumental in the early years in assisting us to acclimatise to an environment that was not only foreign but also one that was not created with us in mind. He mentored us as we attempted to comprehend our new reality. His advice was relevant and communicated a deeper understanding of theology and life we did not always understand then. My memory of him is that he went about his work without a high level of noise or necessarily attracting attention to himself.

Conversely, in his unique way, Adonis dismantled walls of partition in more than just Church History. Reggie Nel (2022, 107–112) denotes Adonis's contribution to transforming the discipline of Missiology from the traditional discipline of sendingwetenskap (the science of mission). Nel (2022, 113) regards Adonis as a bridge-builder, not only in terms of the broader South African context but also by bridging the divide between various theological paradigms.

Biography as Theology

Traditionally, theology was studied through theological formulations, creeds, and confessions throughout the church's history. Scholars would study the work of the early Church Fathers, Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, to name a few. However, is this the single method to study and acquire theological knowledge? This study argues that at least another option exists. Barring the traditional knowledge-gaining methods, theological beliefs and values are also to be gained from actual life experiences and decisions of religious persons' biographies. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu come to mind. Biographies contain several, if not all, aspects of life, like politics, spirituality, society, personal, etc. Harry Meserve (1975, 227) states that an individual's motives, beliefs, and values can dispense significantly more than a formal school of thought. James McClendon Jr (1974, 85) mentions that images are the key to unearth these biographies. Certain dominant and controlling images can be identified in the lives and biographies of the studied individuals (McClendon 1974, 89). For individuals like Boesak, King and Tutu, the images of the Egyptian bondage of segregation and racial discrimination, the Pharaohs and empires, the promised land and the cross are distinctly identifiable. The convergence of these images is instrumental in the individual's hermeneutics of the Bible and current context, as well as the vision for the future.

The identical images are identifiable in the life of Hannes Adonis. On Adonis, one may add the image of breaking down the artificial partitions that apartheid has created. Those images undoubtedly regulated Adonis's biblical hermeneutics in the context of apartheid South Africa. It certainly guided his theological and academic decisions, as will be indicated later in this study. Like those who stood in the prophetic tradition, Adonis's faith is best learnt through his lived experiences and choices made at particular junctures in his life. If one wishes to, one may even venture into the field of psychobiology in psychology. Psychobiographers select subjects based on their personal preferences. They are typically concerned with historically significant figures since studying their lives within socio-historical contexts can be of great importance and value for their particular field of study (Welman et al. 2019, 444).

Adonis was specifically selected for this study due to his impact on apartheid and democratic South Africa's theological and social landscape. Biographies can significantly contribute to disciplines like theology by placing a subject, like Adonis, within his particular socio-historical context and providing important insights into what makes his life a valuable study for that particular period and today. Even more, biographies accentuate the point that theology and history are not always influenced by the rich and powerful but also by ordinary people. Hence, biographies can also contribute to studying historical theology to view history "from below," as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Marty 2011, 200) describes it. This perspective emancipates historical theology from its Westernised and colonial disguises to view history from the perspective of the poor, ordinary and oppressed people. Westernised historical theology is predominantly occupied with the "macro-narrative," which often provides a colonised history, while the "micro-narrative" will include voices that would have remained silent.¹ Tapping into the life of Adonis will unearth more about the lived experiences of the oppressed under South Africa's torrid apartheid system. Often, existential crises, like apartheid, catalyse individuals to interrogate their current social, political, and economic position. Religious individuals interpret these crises through their faith to work for justice and an alternative vision for the future.

Adonis's biography will illustrate how his theology played out in his life and work. Undoubtedly, Adonis's theological biography is best appreciated if framed against the backdrop of the apartheid system that governed South Africa between 1948 and 1994.

Understanding Adonis, Wellington and Walls

DF Malan's National Party (NP) won the national elections in 1948 under the banner of apartheid. Apartheid organised every aspect of South African life according to race. The NP passed a gallery of laws erecting walls of division to prohibit racial integration. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), the Immorality Amendment Act (1950),

1 For more on the topic of "micro-narrative, see: De Gruchy, J.W. 2004. *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. London: SCM Press.

the Group Areas Act (1950), the Population Registration Act (1950), and the Bantu Authorities Act (1951) were a few of the root causes for the erection of the artificial walls that would divide the population racially.² Education, land possession and housing types were organised according to race.³ These laws came at the back end of centuries of slavery and colonialism.⁴ Furthermore, the walls of partition would emerge in ecclesiastical circles. In fact, the walls of partition, which would later formally be known as apartheid, were birthed in the womb of the church as the official mouthpiece of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) declared after the NP's election victory in 1948.⁵ In 1857, the synod of the DRC took the infamous decision to erect separate church buildings for indigenous and slave converts.⁶ These separate church buildings would eventually become separate racially based reformed churches. The first of the separate churches was the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), launched in 1881 for predominantly people of so-called mixed descent.⁷ Adonis, being a reformed Christian and classified as a person of mixed descent or "coloured"⁸ under apartheid, was compelled to membership in the DRMC.

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- 2 For more on these and other apartheid laws, see: South African History Online (SAHO). 2011. *Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/apartheid-legislation-1850s-1970s>.
- 3 See: Fortein, E.A. 2022. Vulnerable by Design. Black Theology as Prophetic Theology. *The Ecumenical Review*, 74(4),527-540.
- 4 For a decolonised history of South Africa's colonial past, see: Mellet, P.T. 2020. *The lie of 1652. A decolonised history of land*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- 5 See: *Die Kerkbode*, 22 September 1948; Loff, C. J. A. 1998. *Bevryding tot Eenwording*. Published Doctoral thesis. Kampen: Theological University of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands; Adonis, J. C. 1982. *Die Afgebreekte Skeidsmure weer Opgebou. Die Verstrengeling van die Sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika met die Praktyk en Ideologie van die Apartheid in Historiese Perspektief*. Amsterdam: Rodopi; Elphick, R. 2012. *The Equality of Believers. Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- 6 For more on the 1857 decision, see: Muller, R. 2021. *The Scots Afrikaners: Identity Politics and Intertwined Religious Cultures in Southern and Central Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd; Adonis, J.C. 1982. *Die Afgebreekte Skeidsmure weer Opgebou. Die Verstrengeling van die Sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika met die Praktyk en Ideologie van die Apartheid in Historiese Perspektief*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. The official decision of synod read as follows: The Synod considers it desirable and Scriptural that our members from the Gentiles be included and incorporated into our existing congregations; but where this measure, because of the weakness of some, would hinder the promotion of this cause of Christ among the Gentiles, erect a congregation from the Gentiles, or yet to erect, a separate building where they will enjoy their Christian privileges (my translation).
- 7 For more on the history of the genesis and development of the DRMC, see: Loff, C.J.A. 1981. *Dogter of Verstoteling? Kantaantekeninge by die Geskiedenis van die Ned. Geref. Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika*. Cape Town: Maranatha.; Pauw, J.C. 2007. *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*. Published Doctoral thesis. Vrye Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- 8 In South Africa, the term "coloured" refers to a person of mixed decent or who is not "pure." Many regard this term as offensive and is only used in this study as a point of reference and will therefore appear in inverted commas.

The beautiful Boland town of Wellington (in the Western Cape) is a significant landmark in the life and existence of Adonis and the DRMC. Even though Johannes (Hannes) Cornelius Adonis was born on 19 April 1942 in Cape Town, it was in Wellington where the DRMC was launched in 1881, where he spent most of his childhood and finished his school career. Wellington, like the rest of South Africa, bore the brunt of apartheid. Wellington played a crucial role in Afrikaner politics, as it was home to the oldest branch of the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB)⁹ in South Africa (Zaaiman 2010, 121). According to Johan Zaaiman (2010, 125), who studied the minutes and cases of the Wellington AB branch, there can be little doubt that the local AB branch supported the NP government's policy of apartheid. The AB branch predominantly focused on the segregation of "coloured" s since black people made up a very small part of the Wellington population. The minutes of the AB indicate long discussions on strategies to segregate the white and "coloured" population of Wellington. Special mention is made of the forced removals of the "coloured" community and the eviction of the DRMC congregation in 1941 to the designated "coloured" township (Zaaiman 2010, 125). Wellington is thus a town of divisive walls, both in church and society.

Adonis's students remember him as a "man of his time, a man for his time" (Botha and Marco 2020, 220). The context of segregated Wellington undoubtedly affected Adonis in his formative years and defined his perspective on life, God, and the Bible. Adonis was exposed to the immense influence of the DRC and AB. He was aware of their respective roles in erecting the division walls in all spheres of his life. This is evident from Adonis's (1982, 131) doctoral dissertation, in which he devoted a large section to the influence of the AB on the DRC theology and NP political policies, as he recognises the inextricable link between the three. In his dissertation, Adonis (1982) traces the rise of the AB's support of white supremacy and apartheid. The AB first declared their intentions on the relationships between whites and black people in South Africa in 1933, that complete racial segregation would be the only option for the NP (Adonis 1982, 140). The AB's close support of the NP comes as no surprise. The leader of the NP, DF Malan, openly declared that he became a member of the AB on 7 November 1935 (Adonis 1982, 135). By 1935, the various Afrikaner groups, led by the AB, studied the concept of apartheid (Adonis 1982, 140). Henceforth, Malan began to use the term "apartheid" in speeches, and by 1944, the AB infiltrated the *Volkskongres* in Bloemfontein, where it adopted apartheid as its official policy. Adonis (1982, 141–142) also exposed the link between the DRC and AB to such an extent that he states that several ministers of the DRC, *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk in Afrika* (NHKA)¹⁰ and

9 The Afrikaner Broederbond is an extremely exclusive, secret Afrikaner nationalist organisation which, in a symbiotic relationship with the National Party, has played a determining role in the political development of South Africa. Its aim is the promotion of the Afrikaner's political, cultural and economic interests. For more on the Afrikaner Broederbond, see: Wilkens, I and Strydom, H. 1979. *The Broederbond*. New York: Paddington Press.

10 For the history of the NHKA, see: <https://nhka.org/about-us/>.

Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika¹¹, were members of the AB. This indicates that Adonis was aware of the *modus operandi* of the DRC and AB and of the reach the two movements had in South African life to erect walls of division.

The walls of partition that divided us from God and us from one another, which Jesus Christ destroyed on the cross of Calvary, were being erected once more. This sentiment is foundational in Adonis's addressing of the walls of segregation. Coming from a rural town and experiencing apartheid first-hand, Adonis took it upon himself to address the injustices through his faith in Jesus Christ. Adonis constructed his arguments on the biblical text of Paul in Ephesians 2, 11–22, particularly verses 13 to 18, where Paul states that Jesus Christ “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” and brought peace and reconciliation between God and humanity and among humanity itself. Paul addresses the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles through the cross of Jesus Christ. What does Paul mean by the “dividing wall of hostility?”

Adonis addresses this question by citing Markus Barth's (1959) *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians*. According to Adonis (1982, 197), Barth interprets the text in four possibilities. The “dividing wall” may refer to the dividing wall between the Jews and Gentiles in the temple in Jerusalem. It can also refer to a dividing obstacle between God and humankind, such as the diving curtain that divides the holiest of holies from the rest of the temple. This curtain tore from top to bottom upon the death of Jesus. This wall may also refer to the establishment of human barriers which obstruct the salvation of their fellow human being. This wall may also refer to the dominating forces that make people's lives unbearable. Adonis believes all four interpretations must be considered concerning the meaning of the “dividing wall.” Adonis (1982, 197) further states that Ephesians' “dividing wall” does not only refer to the religious sphere. Adonis (1982, 197) notes that Barth writes that the political and cosmic, moral and righteous, intellectual and psychological, physical and metaphysical divisions must be considered when reading Ephesians 2. Adonis (1982, 197) is of the opinion that Ephesians 2:14 also speaks to the divisions between races and nations and that Christ demolished all barriers and dividing walls. Walls that are threatening the reconciliatory work of Christ are in direct conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ and should be rejected.

Demolishing Walls: In Ministry

Adonis affirmed his calling and desire to study theology after he matriculated. A local minister, Rev. Du Toit, was compassionate towards Adonis after he saw a newspaper report of a “kleurling seun”¹² who wanted to study theology (Abrahams and Bailey, 2016). Adonis studied from 1962 to 1966 at the theological school of the former DRMC.

11 For more on the history of the GKSA, see: https://eng.gksa.org.za/who_we_are/.

12 “coloured boy”

Adonis served as minister in the DRMC from 1967 to 1976 and again from 1982 to 1986 (Coertzen 2016).

Adonis greatly distinguishably served the DRMC/URCSA, influencing the church's prophetic voice on several key issues of apartheid laws and the DRMC's relationship with the DRC. He served the congregations of Transkei, Philippi and Goodwood, respectively. The congregations of Philippi and Goodwood are situated in the heart of the Cape Flats and were created as a direct result of the forced removals.¹³ Adonis (2001, 136) refers to the Group Areas Act as the "real face of the apartheid policy," as hundreds of neighbourhoods were destroyed. The social glue that held those communities together for centuries was broken. The consequences of the Group Areas Act remain to haunt those communities affected by the forced removals. Having seen and experienced the consequences of forced removals, Adonis states the following:

Since 1948 the practical implementation of apartheid had caused untold suffering, poverty, despair and great loss of life. One has but to think of the forced removals of 3.5 million people, the establishment of the homelands, the implementation of the Group Areas Act and the migrant labour system to realise this. (Adonis, 2001, 143)

It was in the mid-1970s that the black churches began to declare themselves against the political and theological implementation of apartheid. This was mainly due to the members of the black churches experiencing the uprooting effects of apartheid. The resistance of the black churches gradually emerged over a period as they freed themselves of the shackles of the DRC in terms of leadership and other forms of control (Adonis 2001, 143). Adonis was part of a progressive group within the DRMC that wanted to raise the church's prophetic voice. The winds of change began to blow since the 1974 synod of the DRMC. During this synod, Adonis made a progressive amendment¹⁴ to the Mixed Marriages Act proposal (Acta NGSK 1974, 376). This proposal indicates Adonis's foundational belief that even the dividing walls of apartheid concerning marriages cannot be justified by Scripture since Christ demolished any barrier between humankind. Furthermore, Adonis recognises that, ultimately, the law protects the "purity" of the white race and is insulting to black people. God's love, like humankind's, knows no walls of colour.

13 For more on the consequences of the Group Areas Act and the Cape Flats, see: Bowers Du Toit, N.F. 2014. Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A challenge to 'engage the powers.' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70(3). Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2727>.

14 The amendment reads as follows: Since Scripture does not prohibit mixed marriages on the basis of colour, we judge that this law offends a large portion of our country's population because it is an insult to themselves and their existence. Therefore, this law is detrimental to good relations in our country. This law, because of its motive for protecting the White identity alone, is basically selfish, one-sided and insulting to the Black people against whom it is aimed. The Honourable Synod therefore decides to urge the government to scrap the law on mixed marriages (my translation).

Roelf Meyer, who attended the 1974 DRMC synod, wrote his observations in the 1974 November edition of *Pro Veritate*.¹⁵ Under the heading, *’n Nuwe Era in Nederduits Gereformeerde Sendingkerk*¹⁶, Meyer (1974) describes the tense debates between the white and “coloured” ministers. He recollects how the then Rev. Hannes Adonis strongly condemned the Mix Marriages Act by making it clear that he (Adonis) did not regard himself as a “coloured,” even though apartheid laws may classify him as such (Meyer 1974, 6). In the mind of Adonis, the term “black” functions according to the definition of Steve Biko to include all non-white racial groupings as he makes no distinction between black people, Indians and “‘coloured’ people.” Here, Adonis sheds the artificial walls of racial discrimination and constructs placed upon him and the black masses. Like Biko, Adonis knows that the value of his humanity is not seated in the colour of his skin but rather that he is created in the image of God (imago Dei). The philosophy of Black Consciousness¹⁷ galvanised the black oppressed groups to embrace their blackness as a deliberate act of God’s creation and not something to be ashamed of.

In 1976, Adonis wrote a letter in *Die Ligdraer*¹⁸ concerning the issue of independence of the DRMC. He was reacting to a statement declaring that the DRMC was set on the road to church orderly independence, which Adonis rejected as a lie (Adonis 1976).¹⁹ Adonis stated that DRMC could not preside over her own affairs without the DRC intervening to ensure that the walls of division remain securely intact. Elsewhere, Adonis (1998, 114) states that the church polity subjugation and guardianship of the DRC contradicted the Reformed church polity. Since its inception, the DRMC, like the other black churches, has been fully dependent on the DRC. According to Adonis (1998, 114), if John de Gruchy and Willie Jonker are correct to assert that liberation is an important attribute of Reformed theology, why does the history of the black churches portray subjugation to the DRC and neglect liberation in terms of polity?

In most cases, the DRC contributed to ministers' salaries in the black churches. Pauw (2007, 166) cites Serfontein, who states that by 1982, the DRC contributed about 80% towards the budgets of the DRMC and DRCA. This arrangement gave the DRC a tremendous amount of control and power over those ministers in the DRMC and DRCA. Several ministers' salaries were cancelled if any political involvement came to light, especially when they became members of the CI. In some instances, properties of black

15 Official mouthpiece of the Christian Institute (CI). For more on the CI, see: Hansen, L.D. (ed.). 2005. *The Legacy of Beyers Naudé*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

16 A New Era in Dutch Reformed Mission Church.

17 For more on Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, see: Biko, S., 2004. *I Write what I Like*. Stubbs, A. (ed.). Johannesburg: Picador Africa.

18 The official mouthpiece of the DRMC.

19 For more on the letter, see: See Adonis, Akte van Ooreenkoms tussen die N.G. Kerk en die N.G. Sendingkerk. *Die Ligdraer*. 12, Maart, 1.

congregations were registered in the name of the DRC. The DRC had to approve the calling of ministers in the black churches, or they might withhold their contributions.

For a long time, the leadership of the black churches were white, promoting the agenda of the DRC. Adonis did not hesitate to rectify the statement that the DRMC was regarded as the “daughter”²⁰ in the relationship and treated as such. For Adonis (1982, 205), the terminology ‘mother-daughter church’ is unacceptable since it is an indication of the dependency and subordination of the black “daughter” churches to the white “mother” church and is contradictory to the New Testament of the church. Hence, Adonis (1982, 213) worked tirelessly to contest the establishment of separate churches and called for the reunification of the DRC family of churches²¹ since the walls of division were the creation of humankind and contradictory to the gospel.

Since its inception in 1881, a large constituency in the DRMC longed for independence from the DRC. In 1966, the DRMC petitioned for constitutional independence by calling for a new constitution. Pauw (2007, 91) states that the DRC Synod 1969 responded to this request that a Deed of Agreement (Akte van Ooreenkoms) be introduced and tabled at the DRMC Synod of 1974. The content of the deed guaranteed that the DRMC remained subordinate to the DRC. The DRMC, through Adonis and Rev. E.D.J. Jacobs, prepared a foundational proposal document for a new church order to strip itself of the subservient relationship with the DRC. The proposal document was submitted to the DRMC Synod of 1974 as an alternative to the Deed of Agreement. Unfortunately, the proposal document submitted by Adonis was rejected, and the Deed of Agreement was passed (Pauw 2007, 91). This decision indicated the extent of power and influence of the DRC in the DRMC. Adonis’s efforts were not completely in vain. After deliberations, the Deed of Agreement was amended so that the sole authority of the DRC over the theological training and discipline of the white DRC ministers in the DRMC would be seized (Pauw 2007, 91). Although not the desired outcome. It was nevertheless a small victory in the larger process of the DRMC gaining independence from the DRC.²²

Adonis’s service to the church, particularly the DRC family of churches, expands further than the demolition of racial walls. Understanding that Jesus demolished all walls of division, Adonis advocated for the demolishment of the walls of male dominance and patriarchy. The Commission of Doctrine and Current Affairs tabled a report on the ordination of women at the DRMC synod of 1986. In the report, the commission

20 The DRC referred to itself as the “mother church” and to the black churches as the “daughter churches.”

21 The term commonly refers to the group of Reformed churches in South Africa.

22 For a detailed account of how URCSA’s church order is based on Reformed church polity and parted from the subordinate relationship from the DRC, see: Adonis, J.C. 1998. ‘n Gereformeerde Kerkorde? Opmerkings oor die Kerkorde van die Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerkorde in Suider Afrika. In Boesak, W.A. and Fourie, P.J.A. (eds.). *Vraagtekens oor Gereformeerdeheid*. Belhar: LUS Publishers, 112-124.

recommended that an ad-hoc commission investigate the practical implementation of the ordination of women during recess and report back to the next synod (Agenda en Handelinge NGSK, 1986, 339). Adonis and the elder from his congregation proposed an amendment to the report of the commission. Adonis's (Agenda en Handelinge NGSK, 1986, 640) proposal read that women should be allowed to be ordained as elders and ministers of the Word with full status. An additional amendment was tabled that women be allowed as ministers, but with status confined to women's, children's, and youth ministry (Agenda en Handelinge NGSK, 1986, 640). After voting on the matter, the synod rejected the commission's recommendations and the second amendment proposal. Adonis's (Agenda en Handelinge NGSK, 1986, 640) amendment proposal became the final decision of the synod. This decision emancipated women members in the DRMC and the DRC family to the extent that a large section of URCSA's leadership today comprises women. Adonis deserves credit for acting prophetically in an era when churches were male-dominated, as his action paved the way for the destruction of structural patriarchy.

Demolishing Walls: In Academia

A study period at the Vrije University in the Netherlands interrupted Adonis's active ministry, and Adonis obtained a B.Th. Degree from the University of South Africa in 1974. In 1982, Adonis obtained his doctoral degree from the Vrije University with the title *Afgebreekte Skeidsmure Weer Opgebou*.²³ In this dissertation, Adonis tracks the relevance and development of the DRC's Mission Policy of 1935 as one of the chief cornerstones of the theological justification of apartheid. The Mission Policy sanctioned a racially divided DRC family of churches in South Africa by regarding the idiosyncratic characteristics of every racial group as constitutive in creating separate churches for the different racial groups (Adonis 1982, 194). According to Adonis (1982, 200), the Mission Policy misapplied the principle of diversity to structure the church and society. Furthermore, Adonis indicates how the DRC's Mission Policy directed the proceedings of *Volkskongres*²⁴ of 1944 and 1947 that paved the way for DF Malan's victorious NP in 1948 by emphasising the "protection and preservation of the white Christian civilisation" (Henriksson 2010, 58). Adonis (1982, 196) regards the DRC's Mission Policy as nothing other than a synonym for NP's policy of apartheid.

The Mission Policy paints the white Afrikaner DRC as the overseers of the indigenous people. This idea was the cornerstone of Afrikaner nationalism since their victory over the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1938²⁵. The Afrikaners interpreted the victory as God's election of them to appropriate the land and rule over the indigenous people. Adonis (1982, 196) regards the close link between the DRC and the "volk" as something that needs to be severed, as the DRC cannot promote white privilege and remain

23 Demolished Partition Walls Rebuilt (My translation).

24 People's congress.

25 For more on the Battle of Blood River, see: Van Der Merwe, J. 2014. From 'Blood River' to 'Belhar': A Bridge too far. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 40(1), 137–155.

obedient to Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. It is unsurprising, then, that the Mission Policy of the DRC is a policy of racial divisions as it was born from a dogma of white supremacy (Adonis 1982, 195). The Mission Policy clearly denounces any economic, social or ecclesiastical equality between black/“coloured” and white (Handling van die Raad van Kerke, 1935, 98). Adonis (1982, 195) believes that the creation of racially different black churches was a deliberate act on behalf of the DRC to prevent racial equality. Adonis (1984, 34) states further that the DRC deliberately created the walls of division that would become three separate racial Reformed churches, as the establishment of these churches is not a result of missiological principles, as the DRC claims it to be, but from divisive apartheid policy. These churches were, therefore, not the result of organic growth but due to the sinful human nature of racism and prejudice, which manifested in the artificial walls of segregation.

Adonis was appointed as a professor in Church History and Polity in 1987 at the theological school of the DRMC, then situated at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). This appointment would also prove significant as the UWC had a major impact on the struggle for justice against apartheid. UWC may have had its genesis in colonisation and apartheid, but it also has a history of being one of the leading institutions of higher learning on decolonisation. Ernst Conradie (2021, 8) thinks that UWC was where decolonial thinking emerged in South Africa. UWC was established in 1960 according to the NP’s policy of apartheid and earmarked for “coloured” students. The year 1960 is a landmark in the history of South Africa. The year marked the indication of the first black resistance of its kind against apartheid and the apartheid regime’s brutal reaction, the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March and its aftermath.

The UWC may have been created as a partition wall per the government’s racial division policy. Still, with time, the name became an institution fighting to eliminate divisive walls. Dirkie Smit (2000), a fellow staff member of Adonis at UWC, mentions that the UWC was the vanguard of contextual relevance, which was the foundation of its transformative operation. Smit further mentions that this was a direct result of the demands of students in leadership positions and lecturers like Adonis. Conradie (2021, 16) states that since his appointment at UWC, Adonis was one of the pioneers of decolonising the curriculum before it was required to do so. In the age of decolonisation, Adonis’s work is yet to be revisited for it to be fully appreciated. He emphasised the necessity of developing an authentic, contextual theology which speaks to the issues of racism and oppression (Adonis 1982, 218). A theology that emerged from such lived experiences differs from traditional academic theology found in most Westernized places of learning.

Theological students at the UWC were instrumental not only in mobilising the rest of the campus in defiance of the apartheid government but also in exerting pressure on the

leadership of the DRMC.²⁶ In his history of the DRMC, Chris Loff (1998, 251) explains extensively the formative roles lecturers like Jaap Durand and Adonis played in encouraging their students to address South Africa's political situation from a theological perspective. This led the students to the conclusion that racial division and discrimination were theologically wrong and that the DRMC needed to distance itself from the policy, which eventually occurred in the 1978 Synod. This was a crucial moment in the history of the DRMC that would eventually pave the way for the formulation of a new confession of faith (Belhar). This is perhaps the trademark of Adonis's legacy is that he (and his peers at UWC) inspired and moulded future generations to theologically understand and address the injustices of apartheid in their own right (Botha and Marco 2020, 222).

Demolishing Walls: Through the Broederkring/Belydendekring (Bk)

Since the mid-1970s, the DRMC (and DRCA) became a site of struggle²⁷ between a more progressive group inspired by Black Consciousness and Black Theology and a more conservative group (Fortein 2022a, 15). Seeing that the internal struggle in the DRMC (and DRCA) complicated the expression of non-racialism, other avenues had to be sought. These avenues had to be outside of the formal church structures since the black churches were firm in the grip of the DRC, which sought to enforce racial division. One such initiative was the Broederkring (Circle of Brothers), later known as the Belydendekring (BK)²⁸ (Confessing Circle). Adonis and others, like Allan Boesak, were involved in forming the BK in 1974 (Botha and Marco 2020, 220). Adonis emerged as an organic intellectual as part of the oppressed group within the DRMC who understood the importance of collective and formal structures like the BK. He is not known to be a solo operator who challenged apartheid in isolation but worked with like-minded people who shared his vision (Botha and Marco 2020, 221).

BK was an important well where strong anti-apartheid arguments were formulated (Pauw 2007, 179). According to Adonis, the meetings of the BK discussed the Bible studies published in the monthly edition of *Pro Veritate* as a biblical response to the day-to-day experiences of apartheid (Pauw 2007, 179). Several members of the DRCA were members of the CI, which ultimately led to the formation of the BK. The BK's major objective was organic church unity²⁹ of the DRC family of churches, to which

26 For more on the political activism of the theology students at UWC, see: Beukes, E.E., Boezak, A., Botha, N., Frantz, M. and Marco, D.C. (Eds.). 2020. *Tokkies. Reflections On Solidarity*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

27 For more on the struggle in the DRMC, see: Fortein, E.A. 2020. Allan Boesak: A theology of prophetic resistance (1976-1990). Some historical-theological reflections. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 6(2), 262-265.

28 For more on the BK, see: Mokgoebo, Z.E. 1984. "Broederkring: From 1974 to ...," in: S. P. Govender (Ed.). *Unity and Justice, The witness of the Belydende Kring*. Braamfontein, South Africa, 13 – 17.

29 For the aims and objectives of the BK, see: *Broederkring: Theological Declaration*. Online: <http://www.ngkerk.org.za/abid>, 1979.

Adonis was a committed advocate since he believed that the black churches emerged from racial prejudice. The BK was formed from ministers of the DRMC and DRCA, therefore witnessing the elusive unity in church and society. Membership was open to any minister or layperson from the four Dutch Reformed Churches, once again aiming to demolish the walls of ecclesiastical racial division.

Demolishing Walls: In Historiography

Colonised people are taught a colonised history as history almost always glorifies the powerful. Colonial histories only reveal the successes and triumphs, often omitting colonialism's atrocities. Hence, Biko (1972, 25) notes that it comes as no surprise that the history of black people in South Africa is "presented as a long lamentation of repeated defeats."

The history of South African historiography is strongly partisan to the white, Eurocentric narrative where the advent of colonialism is seen as a blessing from God to the uncivilised people of (South) Africa. For a long time, historiography painted Africa as the stage that Europeans acted upon (Adonis 2002, 12). The history of the permanent settlement of the Dutch in 1652 is often romanticised, neglecting the adverse effects on the local Khoi community on the bank of the Camissa River. Similarly, the history of the Great Trek (1838) tells the story of God's election of the Voortrekkers to rule over the indigenous people and their land. Naturally, the history of the Battle of Blood River includes the Day of the Vow³⁰ observed by a large constituent of the white Afrikaans population.

Adonis, being a man of his time, addressed the bias of South Africa's historiography in his inaugural professoriate lecture at Stellenbosch University in 2000. In his critical evaluation of the history of South Africa's historiography, Adonis identifies the walls of exclusion in the official narrative of South Africa. Living and experiencing apartheid, Adonis (2002, 7) advocated reconstructing history to include a "view from below," where the divisive walls in historiography are demolished. This shift in methodology led Adonis to break with traditional paradigms of historiography. This methodological shift includes the voices of the outcasts, like those of oppressed groups, women, victims, and ordinary people. Traditionally, the trauma and genocide of slavery and colonialism, the loss of land and identity, and the humiliation and death of apartheid are narratives that are left unnoticed. In his inaugural lecture, Adonis quoted the old African proverb: "Until the lions have their historians, tales of history will always privilege the hunter" (Adonis 2002, 21). To date, the history of South Africa's historiography predominantly glorifies the hunter.

30 The Day of Vow is celebrated each year on 16 December. The Voortrekkers made a vow to God that they and their generations will observe this day sabbath if God to hand them victory over the Zulus at Blood River.

According to Adonis (2002, 16,17), the advent of African and Black Liberation Theology during the 1960s was instrumental in recreating a holistic historical account of Christianity through oral tradition. Adonis (2002, 17) emphasises that knowledge and history are not only to be found in written form but also in people's memories and lived experiences. There is a tendency, particularly from a Western perspective, to minimise oral traditions and accentuate written documents. Oral traditions can break down the traditional walls in historiography by including the histories “from below.” In this way, ordinary people become subjects rather than objects of their own history. Furthermore, it can highlight the ecumenical character of Christian historiography, as the ecumenical church played a crucial role in the liberation struggle towards democracy in South Africa. With his emphasis on a history “from below,” Adonis aims to include as much disregarded voices in the mainstream historiography as possible.

Conclusion: Respice Prospice³¹

This article engages the life and work of Hannes Adonis through the methodological lens of biography as theology. Demolishing the walls of racial division emerged as a major theme in Adonis’s biography, from which several lessons can be learnt. The article attempted to indicate how the context of apartheid (in church and society) impacted Adonis’s theological course of action. His impact emanated from the perspective of a racially oppressed group who had to endure several walls during his life. This is where theology can best be learnt. The biography of Adonis reflects a theology that is not confined to the ivory towers of academia but speaks to and influences the lives of ordinary believers. Being an organic intellectual from the underside of history, Adonis’s theological biography testifies to asserting his faith convictions into deeds of liberation and transformation. The outlook of the theological landscape in South Africa would have been different were it not for prophetic visionaries like Adonis.

Hannes Adonis’s name may not be prominent, but his legacy is as profound as the rest of the gallery of heroes in South Africa. He operated in an era where the names of Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Sam Buti, and others were more well-known. These faces led freedom marches and rallies in opposition to the NP’s racial laws, and their contribution to the liberation struggle is appreciated. However, the legacy of Adonis, who mostly operated in the background, is captured in his theological biography and the memory of those who knew and loved him.

The motto of UWC, *respice prospice*, holds significant meaning concerning Adonis's theological biography and the church's future. In a milieu where various walls continue to exist within the DRC family of churches, notable lessons can be learnt by looking back to look forward. In some cases, the same artificial walls that Adonis sought to demolish are still in place. Church unity, something that Adonis advocated so strongly

31 This is the motto of the University of the Western Cape, which translates to look back, to look forward - to take what is worthy from the past and build the future.

for, is still evading the DRC family of churches. Internal unity within the URCSA is currently at its lowest point as the church is mainly divided along the old apartheid racial constructs of “coloured” and black. Racial undertones continue to obstruct progress in reunifying the DRC family and the URCSA.

Looking back at Adonis’s life and work can inspire a new generation to grasp that Jesus Christ completely demolished all walls of division and that the current walls are artificial, created by humankind, and need to be demolished. Adonis reminds us that the church's future lies not in division and individualism but in embrace and unity. Furthermore, he reminds us that the future of historiography and church history, as a discipline, requires retelling history that includes ordinary people as subjects and not objects of history. In many ways, Adonis was ahead of his time. By looking back, he continues to inspire coming generations to witness publicly, purposefully and passionately against any form of injustice.

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