

## Africanisation—Religion—Education

Sibusiso Bengu

Wolfram Weisse in conversation with the  
South African Minister of Education.<sup>1</sup>

*Weisse:* I would like to start with the following quotation from a recent bulletin of the Pan African Congress: “The battle for social change starts as a battle of ideas and ideology. This battle is now taking the form of struggle for Africanisation against white liberalism. Non-racism and reconciliation aids this ideology, which is the advanced ideological mantle of white privileged forces.” And the author continues that the aim and the term of multicultural education is also in the interest of white liberalism. Instead of multicultural education they go for Africanisation. How would you comment on this?

*Bengu:* I would believe that this view, that is being expressed there, still has to be debated. You know that I have been a student of culture myself, and my doctoral programme and doctoral thesis was on African cultural identity and international relations. And I went out to Ghana and Nigeria to analyse my sources there. I think culture is not contrary to reconciliation. To say that, as we seek to reconcile the people of this country, we want to reconcile them on the liberal principles, which are western dominated by whites, is to miss the point completely. You know the majority of us in Parliament are African and Africanisation as far as I am concerned cannot be an exercise that is divorced from the Africans. Our president for instance is the main reconciler in this South African setting and

I cannot say our president is not African. And I refer to myself as an African: I have grown up in Africa, I belong to Africa, and the values that I expose are African. What is lacking in the analysis there is the fact that at one level you have customs, on a lower level customs of different people, which are different, on a higher level you have culture. We have different cultures in this country, as a country that wants to remain one. We want to have different cultures, we don't want to level up the cultures and reduce them to one. But in a multicultural society, such as we have, the cultural values that will be common to us as South Africans at a higher level are going to build this nation. It is not the culture itself, it is not my being African, my being someone who is white and that is really going to build the nation—it is our acceptance of the fact that the diversity that is there in the cultures of this country is a richness and not a weakness. There is no reason why that person who has written the article can see himself or herself as more African than I am. That I cannot understand. I have lived in Europe for so long, fourteen years already, but I remained an African. And that South African artist who died last year in France, he was writing in France as an African, he lived there as an African. The deputy president Mbeki made a speech on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May when we adopted our new constitution. And the theme of his speech was that he was African. And all the other parties joined him, Mr. De Klerk also declared: I am also an African and with African roots. And members from the Democratic Party also said this and all the other parties as well. And at last the leader of the Pan African Congress stood up and said: All these parties are copying us, we are the ones who have claimed to be Africans.

*Weisse:* Before referring to the theme of multicultural and multireligious education I would like you to sketch the general priorities in the field of education.

*Bengu:* I ought to begin by saying that the education system of this

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country was bad through and through. And when I got into this position I did not even want to keep anything of what was then. We wanted to transform it completely. What we then did was to look at how education was fragmented. There were fifteen different ministries and departments of education in the country, funded differently as if in fifteen different countries.

That is now all gone. Those fifteen departments are now merged into one single department of education. But, of course, the complication was that whilst we were unifying education we were also creating provincial departments of education in the nine provinces. So we were unifying but also provincializing. The interim constitution as well as the new constitution does not give the minister of education executive authority over the schooling, the lower levels of education. The lower levels of education fall under the provinces and I think that is a good thing. But the minister determines national policy, the norms and standards. So we do have concurrent powers. When you have a System that is bad, as bad as apartheid education, what do you do? Do you close it up, work for two years to transform it, close all the schools all institutions and then re-open when it is transformed or do you maintain the continuity of services whilst transforming? This is exactly what we are doing. We have not lost even a month, we have maintained a continuity but transformed the system.

*Weisse:* How would you just characterise the role of education in the transition process of the whole society of South Africa?

*Bengu:* Education is the key. If we don't get our education transformed, so that it becomes quality and if we cannot guarantee the minimum quality for the broadest population, then this country cannot move. And so I sit here knowing what a responsibility there is. That for this country to become competitive and to develop we don't need to educate a few, we need to educate the masses. In fact we have clear objectives. The first is to unite the country. The

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apartheid government used education to divide the country. And we are uniting the country at its roots. We are going to unite this country. The people are being united over sport, as they play together, over other things, but that is not the safest way. It is as we educate them together, as we give them the values of a democratic society, that this could happen.

*Weisse:* I would like to concentrate on one section of education and that is religious education. What approach of religious education in your eyes is appropriate for a new South Africa?

*Bengu:* We are religious people. When I worked for more than 10 years in the offices of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, I became aware that Christianity was but one of the religions of the world. There are other faiths. So we have said religion will be taught at school. It is related to the general morality of the country and I've gone to the churches—my deputy minister is a priest of the Catholic Church—and we have assured the churches that religion will be taught, in an inclusive manner.

*Weisse:* What does that mean?

*Bengu:* That means it is not just Christianity to the exclusion of the Islamic faith, the African religion and so on. What it means is that we are not going to impose a particular religious instruction in order to get students to pursue to follow one or the other faith. Confirmation classes should be done by the churches, not by the school. But we encourage religious education at school that is going to include knowledge about other faiths as well as Christianity.

*Weisse:* So you refer to the different tasks of school and congregations with which I agree. But still—what influence on schools should the different religious bodies have, or is religious education a thing educationalists only should decide upon?

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*Bengu:* I think there we have to strike a balance, because religion is something that is naturally a domain of the parents, and our approach is to allow the parents in the government bodies of the schools to decide. But on the education side we have said that we would maintain that a proper balance at school of religious instruction ought to be given in an objective way so that people will know about the faith, about the religions that are in the country. The question of the faith is the responsibility of the church and the religious communities. So we need to balance up. In fact I would not expect that in a context that is now multiracial, non-racial, and non-sexist you are going to have a class of only Christians and of only Muslims. You can't have it in that way, you have it mixed. In the Bill we say there will be religious assemblies, religious gatherings, but these are not compulsory. But at public schools there will be prayers—like we do in Parliament. In Parliament before we start a few minutes are allowed for meditation. And you either say a prayer if you are a Christian, if you whatever faith you have, you have a meditation in the way you're used to. So that is the kind of approach that we support.

*Weisse:* I see two different opinions in South Africa. One is in favour of granting religious bodies a dominant influence for Religious Education at school, and to teach it separately along the lines of different faith-groups. The other is in favour of a multifaith-approach. You seem to follow the second line. Why this?

*Bengu:* We don't want to divide up the schools, so that there are different kinds of Religious Education at a school and create friction and tensions. I see the danger of isolating people according to their different religions. I think it can surely lead to the situation we have in Ireland and to some extent I am grateful that those tensions don't exist in my country. To this day I cannot rationally explain why people will fight on the basis of their faith, Protestants and Catholics, and they continue to live separately. What actually should be

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uniting them is dividing them.

But we are saying the most important element of learning is to coexist with other faiths. I am grateful for the fact that I have been exposed to other religions. I am a Christian, but I am not an arrogant Christian because there are many things that are weak in Christianity which are strong in the other faiths which have come to assist me. So it is in that spirit of tolerance, understanding, coexisting—in two weeks I am going to be opening an Islamic college, and I can't miss that appointment. Because if I missed it, it would appear I am prejudiced and that is what we must avoid in this country.

*Weisse:* There are people as well in the churches as well as in the field of education who say it is difficult for the children in classroom to have religious education with classmates of different religious background, because they will be confused by that. Do you agree with that opinion?

*Bengu:* I do not agree at all. In fact instead of it weakening their faith it strengthens it because the knowledge of what you may not in the end believe in is going to help you to be stronger in what you believe in.

*Weisse:* So are you in favour of an interreligious dialogue in classroom?

*Bengu:* Of course, yes. Well, I believe that an ecumenical approach is actually the key because the ecumenical discussions and the interreligious dialogue have been confined to the top-leaders of the churches. Now an ecumenical approach at the grass roots level, e. g. an interreligious dialogue at school is necessary. When in a village you have a few Zionists who worship on a Saturday with their drums, it is seen by everyone. It is not hidden. And you have the Seventh Day Adventists and you have the Lutherans there worshipping on a Sunday. That is being exposed and to be true to

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life. We need also to adopt the same methods in education and not try and create enclosures or closets and believe that we will then chain our people to be faithful Christians without knowing what happens outside their own faiths.

*Weisse:* Could such a dialogue at classroom level be the first step for the dialogue in society?

*Bengu:* An interreligious dialogue is in line with the dialogue in society. In fact if we strengthen dialogue at classroom level, this could lead to a better understanding in general. For me it was late when I got to have friends among Muslims and to develop respect for them. But if such a process had started in the classroom, it would have made me a much better person, a much better Christian.

*Weisse:* How will this be possible?

*Bengu:* The greatest challenge that we are facing, is that of re-skilling our teachers, re-training them. Well, we are re-training them in mathematics and in science and technology. But we are also retraining them to handle larger classes. But re-training them in a most important way to handle mixed classes, multireligious, multicultural classes. For 20 years or more teachers have taught only white students, taught only black students. Now you have a situation where there are mixed classes, you have got to be careful of what you say and you don't only come to teach in English, you have to use different languages, to be aware of different religions in one class.

*Weisse:* All those questions of a multicultural education, a dialogical Religious Education and the role of different religions in society are also discussed in Germany. We see an advantage and a necessity to do thorough research-work not isolated in different countries, but to strengthen our research-efforts through co-operation. And we have

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built up such a co-operation between the Universities of Hamburg, Stellenbosch, Cape Town and other Universities within the last years. Do you think it is worthwhile to have such an exchange between our universities, and do you see any possibilities to support that attempt of co-operation?

*Bengu:* Well, I am actually very supportive of this co-operation. In fact, as you may know, I was myself vice-chancellor of a university. The institutions of higher learning in this country had been isolated for quite some time, during the period of apartheid. From that background I would think that this project that ties three universities together is a very good one. But it is also important in the context of the project itself, because such a matter affects not only the religious life of the people and the relations between the different religions but the relations also between the peoples themselves. Because whatever we do is coloured by our religion. So I honestly would say, you have my support.

## Notes

- 1 The interview dates from September 1996 and has been led in the offices of the Minister of Education in Cape Town.

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## Authors

Professor ADAM was born in Germany and received his university education at the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, where Th. W. Adorno and J. Habermas were his thesis supervisors. In 1968, he joined Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, and has also held fellowships at Berkeley, Yale, the American University in Cairo and since 1987, lectures regularly at the University of Cape Town. He is past president of the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Ethnic Minority and Race Relations and specializes in the comparative analysis of ethnonationalism, particularly in South Africa. His most recent book, co-authored with F. van Zyl Slabbert and Kogila Moodley, is *Comrades in Business. Post-Liberation Politics in South Africa* (International Books, 1998). Earlier works include *The Opening of the Apartheid Mind* (California, 1993), *South Africa without Apartheid* (California, 1987), *Ethnic Power Mobilized* (Yale, 1979) and *Modernising Racial Domination* (California, 1971). Adam was awarded the 1998 Konrad Adenauer Research Prize by the Royal Society of Canada and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Prof. Dr. Sibusiso BENGU has worked for more than 10 years in the offices of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and is since 1994 member of the South African Government as Minister of Education.

Dr. James COCHRANE is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town; associate Director of the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa. He serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa*; the *Bulletin for Contextual Theology*, and the ecumenical monthly magazine "Chal-

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lenge." His published works include *Servants of Power, The Three-fold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour* (edited with Gerald West). Forthcoming publications include *Sameness and Difference: Religious and Cultural Resources for Civil Society in South Africa* (ed. with R. Petersen), *Beyond the Present: The Faith Community Hearings and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (ed. with J. de Gruchy & S. Martin), and *Circles of Dignity: Local Wisdom and Theological Hegemony in a Postcolonial Age*.

Phillip David DEXTER is a member of parliament for the African National Congress in South Africa. He has a long history of political and labour struggles in South Africa, and was in exile from 1983 to 1990. Presently, he holds positions in the National executive of the ANC and the South African Communist Party. Dexter is interested in the relationship between local and national identities in South Africa.

Dr. Freimut Duve, publicist and politician, member of the German Parliament from 1980—1997, now responsible for media in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Publications: *Kap ohne Hoffnung oder die Politik der Apartheid* (1965); *Der Rassenkrieg findet nicht statt. Entwicklungspolitik zwischen Angst und Armut* (1970); *Vom Krieg in der Seele* (1994).

Ursula GÜNTHER M. A., is finishing her doctoral thesis in the field of Islamic studies in the end of 1998. Publications: *Die Frau in der Revolte. Fatima Mernissis feministische Gesellschaftskritik*, Hamburg 1993; *Weder Modernismus noch Fundamentalismus*, in: *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 28 (1995), 550–58.

Andreas HEUSER is finishing his doctoral thesis in theology in 1999. He is also a political scientist and has done research-work on AJC in Zimbabwe and Natal. Formerly linked to the Institute for New Religious Movements and Independent Churches (NERMIC) he is

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working at the Mission Academy in Hamburg. Publication: *Wer sind diese mit den weißen Gewändern angetan?*, Berlin 1993

Dr. Erhard KAMPHAUSEN is Director of the Missions Academy, which is linked to the University of Hamburg. Publications: *Anfänge der kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika. Geschichte und Theologie der Äthiopischen Bewegung 1872–1912*. 1976; *Südafrika heute – Hoffnung um welchen Preis? Eine theologische Analyse und Beurteilung*. 1979; *Schwarze Christen im Widerstand. Zur Geschichte der Äthiopischen Bewegung in Südafrika*. (in: Schirmer, D. (ed.), *Kirchenkritische Bewegungen*. 1985 Vol. 2).

Dr. Johann KINGHORN is Professor at the Institute for Contextual Hermeneutics at the University of Stellenbosch and editor of *Scriptura*. Publications: *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*, Johannesburg 1986, and *Human Rights and the contribution of religion in shaping of a new South African Community*, in: *The Contribution of South African Religions to the coming South Africa*, UN: Pietermaritzburg 1991, and *Die Relevanz des Glaubens und die Kosmologie. Die Bedeutung der südafrikanischen Sozialtheologie für die Pluralitätsfrage*, in: J. Mehlhausen (ed.) *Pluralismus und Identität*, Chr. Kaiser, Gütersloh 1995.

Dr. Peter KOERNER is political scientist in Hamburg. Publications: *Südafrika zwischen Isolation und Kooperation*. 1981; *Zaire – Verschuldungskrise und IWF-Intervention in einer afrikanischen Kleptokratie*. 1988; *Rüstungs- und Militärkooperation von Südafrika mit Taiwan und Chile*. 1990.

Dr. Jürgen LÜTHJE is President of the University of Hamburg.

Dr. Gordon MITCHELL (DTh, University of Heidelberg/Germany) is associate director of the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa (University of Cape Town), Director of InterCultural Resources and Co-ordinator for Religious Education at Sacred Heart

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College (Johannesburg). Publications: *Together in the Land. A reading of the book of Joshua*, JSOT Suppl. Series 134, Sheffield Academic Press 1992, and (together with Chidester et al.) *Religion in Public Education. Options for a New South Africa*, UCT Press, Cape Town 1994, and *Grundsätze für den Neuaufbau religioes-ethischer Erziehung in den Schulen Suedafrikas*, in: J. Laehnemann (ed.) *Das Projekt Weltethos in der Erziehung*, Hamburg: EB Verlag Rissen 1995.

Nokuzola MNDENDE is presently engaged in doctoral studies at the University of Cape Town, where she teaches courses in African religion. She is a well-known face on South African television, and an even better-known voice on radio. She has co-authored three books on religion, culture and education, including *African religion and culture alive* with Chirevo Kwenda and Janet Stonier (Cape Town: Via Africa, 1997). She also has a number of contributions in books and journals.

Dr. Jürgen OSSENBRÜGGE is Professor for geography at the University of Hamburg. Publications: *Ökologische Regionalentwicklung für die Metropolen und die Peripherien*. (in: *Stadt & Land: Ökologische Regionalentwicklung. Theoretische und pragmatische Beiträge*. 1986).

Dr. Azila Talit REISENBERGER is senior lecturer at the department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, in the University of Cape Town. Well known as a fighter for Women's Equality in South African Society and in Judaism. A popular lecturer in both academic and inter-faith circles in South Africa, Israel, and the United States. Her publications are concentrating on three fields: on Literary analysis of the Bible especially in issues of Gender and Religion; i. e.: *The Rhetorical Power of Literary Conventions*, in: *KOERS* 61(2) 1996, 203—212; *The Creation of Adam as Hermaphrodite, and ist implications for Feminist Theology*, in: *Judaism* 42 (40) 1993, 447—452 etc. On Jewish Tradition: i. e. *Jewish Festivals* in: *Festivals and Celebrations*, Cape Town, Juta 1996, 92—106; *The Status of Jewish Women*, a

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Brief Polemic, in: *Jewish Affairs*, Dec 1998, 50.51 etc. Creative writings: 2 poetry books: *Nekuda Umabat*, Eked, Tel Aviv 1986, and *Kisses through a Veil*, Green Sea Publishers, Cape Town 1994. In 1993 she won a literary prize in Israel.

Dr. Cornelia ROUX is a senior lecturer in Religious Studies at the Department of Didactics in the Faculty of Education at the University of Stellenbosch. She has wide experience in teaching religious education and studies at tertiary level, and has presented numerous guest lectures on invitations at universities and Colleges of Education in South African, Britain and Germany. She is the author/co-author of three books in the field of multi-religious education, and her research output furthermore includes international workshops, articles in national and international journals and research projects on multi-religious education in a multi-cultural school environment. She is actively involved in assisting teachers to redefine the role of religious education in South Africa.

Dr. Abdulkader TAYOB is professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. He is the author of *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995) and the *Mosques, Imams and Sermons in South Africa* (forthcoming, Florida Univ. Press, 1999). His extensive research in journal articles and book chapters covers the study of religion in contemporary Africa, Islam in Africa and classical Islamic thought.

Ezra Vuyisile TISANI is an ordained priest in the Church of the Province of South Africa. He has worked as a priest in various communities in the Eastern Cape. He is a graduate of Nottingham, UK, as well as the University of Cape Town. As director of Eyethu Imbali Trust. He is engaged in research on oral history as well as Africa theology. He has recently been appointed chairperson of the National Commission on Archives.

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Dr. Wolfram WEISSE is Professor for Religious Education and Ecumenical Theology, and Dean of the Faculty of Education, at the University of Hamburg. Publications: *Südafrika und das Anti-Rassismus-Programm. Kirchen im Spannungsfeld einer Rassengesellschaft*, Frankfurt/Main, Bern 1975; *Dialog zwischen den Kulturen. Erziehungshistorische und religionspädagogische Gesichtspunkte interkultureller Bildung* (ed. with J. Lohmann, 1994); "Religionspädagogik im Umbruch Südafrikas. Eine Skizze". (in: U. Becker/Ch. Scheilke: *Aneignung und Vermittlung. Beiträge zu Theorie und Praxis einer religionspädagogischen Hermeneutik*. 1995); "Christianity and its Neighbour Religions—a Question of Tolerance? Impulses for the Education of Religion from the Experiences of ecumenical Dialogue", in: *Scriptura. International Journal of Bible and Theology in Southern Africa*, 55 (1995), 263—276; *Interreligious and Intercultural Education. Methodologies, Conceptions and Pilot Projects in South Africa, Namibia, Great-Britain, The Netherlands, and Germany*, Comenius Institut, Münster, (Ed.) 1996.

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