



Rev. M. Laubscher

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. CHRISTINA LANDMAN



Christina Landman matriculated with five distinctions at the *Hoërskool Lyttelton* (then in Pretoria) in 1973. She was one of the first women locally who studied theology directly after matric, finishing four degrees in Theology and Classical Languages over the next six years, all with distinction. She has occupied teaching and researching positions at the University of South Africa for the past 40 years and became the first South African born woman to become a professor of Theology at a South African university in 1990. She has obtained two doctoral degrees in Church History and Practical Theology, and is the editor of two academic journals, *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae* and *The Oral History Journal of South Africa*. She has published more than 100 academic articles on gender, oral history, and church polity, and an equal number of popular

articles analysing the religious faces of the South African society. She has published books on South African women's piety and edited books on early church history and Albert Schweitzer. She is an ordained minister of the Word in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and Actuaris of the General Synod of this church.

ML: *You once told me that when you were in primary school and the teacher asked the class what they wanted to become one day, you raised your hand and told her (and the rest of the class) that your answer was "nothing." I sense you were right in your answer back then, but you obviously did not stick to it. How did the shift come from "becoming nothing" to "becoming such a significant (academic, public and pastoral) theologian"?*

CL: I grew up in the Afrikaner "Volksmoeder" ideology. It is difficult to translate "Volksmoeder" in English since a literal translation, "Mother of the Nation" has a different connotation for the broader South African public. A "Mother of the Nation" would be a woman who fought in the front lines of a struggle that disadvantaged a majority of the community. However, "Volksmoeder" specifically refers to an Afrikaner woman who must commit herself to a very private and selfless life of child rearing and support to her husband's nationalist ideals. I was, in fact, almost 30 years old when I heard a woman speak in public for the first time. It was Dr Rina Venter, who became the Minister of Health in the late 1980s.

So, then, when I was in Grade 2, and the teacher asked "Who wants to become nothing?", I put up my hand and said that I wanted to become a housewife. In some ironical way it turned out to my benefit later. After I finished matric (with five distinctions) I could proceed to study theology, because I was not supposed to become anything anyway. It was the year 1973 and the hope that women would be ordained in an Afrikaans church, was non-existent. My father was a professor at the University of Pretoria and I could study for free. At school Latin was my favourite subject. We were only four learners in a combined class of Standards 9 and 10 (Grades 11 and 12) of which one was Wessel van Wyk, who later became a famous pianist. So, if I wanted to study Classical Languages as admission for ministry study for no reason at all, it was fine, because no money would be wasted, since I was not supposed to study towards a career anyway.

When I was in Standard 9 (Grade 11) my father one day came into my room and said: "I think you must become a *dominee*". Till his death neither he nor I knew why he said that, but I instantly knew that this was what I wanted to do, although women *dominees* were unthinkable at the time. People smiled when I, who was the dux learner of *Hoërskool Lyttelton* in Pretoria (now Centurion), said I wanted to study theology. However, except for Lynette Reynders, who

became a gynaecologist, none of the other girls in the seven matric classes of that year undertook further studies, while the boys started working on their careers. I think of Reynard Koen who, despite financial restrictions, was able to become a successful radiologist by studying through the army. The girls married as soon as possible after matric and became nothing, or rather they became successful “volksmoeders”.

And I commenced with my theological studies because of the freedom ... to become nothing.

ML: You started straight after matric in 1974 with your theological studies at the University of Pretoria where you were the first and only woman in a very big class full of “men only”. Please reflect a little bit on how you remember those years of theological calling, study, and training.

CL: The moment I stepped into my classes at the University of Pretoria I was captivated by my studies. I was 16 years old, finding myself in classes of at least 200 young men. It was in the years after (later Professor) Malan Nel undertook the “Youth for Christ” tours and many young men were convinced to study theology “to work for the Lord”. During those times it took seven years to study for the ministry. First you had to complete a BA Admission of three years, with at least Greek 2, Hebrew 2, and Basic Latin being compulsory. After that another three years studying for a BD (Baccalaureus Divinitatis) degree followed at the “kweekskool” (Theological Faculty). A final year of practical work in a congregation completed the study.

In 1976 I majored in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin with distinctions in all three majors, as well as in Arabic 1, which I took on the side-line. Only a few of the original 200 men completed the end of the third year. However, when I joined them in applying at the “kweekskool” for admission, one of the professors took the form from my hand with the words: “Women do not study here”. Technically he could not keep me from studying this degree, but I think he had an argument with my father about an unrelated issue. I consequently enrolled for an honours degree in Greek, and was allowed to finish a two year course in one year. I was greatly influenced by Professor Jannie Louw, the professor in Greek language, who taught me the logic and power of language – and that “if you want to say something that is worthwhile, say it in a way that everybody can understand.” Another great influence in my life was Professor Jimmy Loader, who taught Hebrew and who convinced me to enrol at the University of South Africa for my post-graduate theological studies, which I did, simultaneously enrolling for a Master’s degree in Greek.

I was appointed in the Department of Church History at Unisa in 1980. I was 24 and had obtained four degrees: BA Admission, BA Hons in Greek, BD, and MA in Greek – all with distinction. Ten years later, in 1990, I became the first South African born woman to become a professor of Theology at a South African university. By then I had obtained two more degrees, namely a doctorate in Church History, and an honour's degree in Latin.

I taught in the field of the Early Church and the Middle Ages. In 1996 I was seconded to the Research Institute for Theology and Religion – and started specialising in Oral History, with a specific focus on gender issues. I then finished my second doctorate in Practical Theology, which was my seventh degree.

During the BA Admission years my social life centred around the University of Pretoria Choir in which I sang as an alto under Adolf Theron. I also privately studied with Albert Troskie to play the organ, entering competitions and later joining a congregation as their organist, since I could not be their pastor. This delighted my mother who envisaged a “career” in music for me.

But theology is what I wanted to do.

ML: What sort of theologian would you say is Professor Christina Landman? How would you name and describe your theology as such? There are so many disciplines and fields you (either created and) mastered over the years, so that when one looks over your whole career and oeuvre, it is truly a captivating question on how to reflect, summarise, and conclude upon the work done up till now. In short, how do you view, name, and describe your own development and work over the past four decades?

CL: There were three things that distinctively influenced my theological career.

Firstly, when I enrolled at Unisa to do my theological studies after the BA Admission, I studied with the liberation theologians. My lecturers included Proff Adrio König and David Bosch, as well as Simon Maimela, the first black person to become a professor at the University of South Africa outside the Department of African Languages. In 1980 Maimela (with Bonganjalo Goba) returned from America where he had obtained a doctorate at Harvard, bringing with him the liberation theologies of the feminists, the black theologians, and the Latin Americans. My head turned 180 degrees and I could no longer live with white theology.

The first twenty years of my teaching career were spent on liberalism and liberation. On the one hand I had the liberty of entertaining extremely liberal ideas on church and dogma, enjoying the freedom of undermining people's traditional beliefs, especially those of local Calvinists. During this time, I published a book *The piety of Afrikaans women* (Unisa 1994), which

is 25 years old now and in which I indicated that local white Calvinism was as sexist as it was racist. This estranged me from Afrikaner culture forever. On the other hand, the 1980s and 1990s were years of theological struggle against the *apartheid* theology, which ensued in a bitter public word struggle between me and the Dutch Reformed Church – while I still played the organ in one of their congregations.

The second thing that dramatically influenced my theological views was engaging in my second doctorate. When the new millennium started, in 2000, I enrolled for a second doctorate in Practical Theology and did my practical work one day a week (Wednesdays) working as a counsellor at the outpatients of the Kalafong Hospital in Atteridgeville, Pretoria. Here I travelled the therapeutic road with more than a thousand patients over a period of seven years. Here I had a “second conversion” if ever there was a first one. As an academic who had obtained six degrees, I learned the simplicity of expressing myself in sentences of less than eight words. As a liberal theologian I learned to accept that people’s basic belief that they were part of God’s plan and power can heal them from their losses and carry them through their desperate circumstances. I was converted to respect the positive role that church practices, such as prayer, wearing uniforms, and adhering to prophetic healers’ herbs and habits, can play in believers’ mental health. In short, I learned to respect people’s religious experiences even when they differed from mine, and to move from my self-centred liberal and privileged world.

The third major influence on my theological career was being ordained as a minister of the Word in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, a 1994 unification between the brown Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. One day, Prof Klippies Kritzinger walked into my office at Unisa and asked why I were not applying to be licenced in the URCSA, since I were already heavily engaged in preaching in URCSA congregations such as the Pretoria congregation in Eersterust. I was 15 when my father walked into my room to encourage me to become a *dominee*. Now I was 50. I was licenced on 18 November 2006 and ordained in Sakhelwe, a rural township in Dullstroom in Mpumalanga, on 18 May 2008. It was 28 years after I had finished my initial six years’ theological training. Suddenly I found myself in the midst of grassroots theology in practice. In this township, 82% of the inhabitants are not married because they are simply too poor to marry, marriage being a middle-class privilege. The township community has a 47,2% HIV infection rate, and 89% unemployment.

From these people I learned a Theology of Vulnerability. I retained my quest for new interpretations of faith and credo, but nothing was of interest to me if it could not be preached, if it could not heal, and if it could not be

used as a category in academic enquiry into faith patterns. I never bonded with a Theology of Blood. I feel closer to a Theology of the Empty Cross, of every believer's potential to be resurrected to life and hope. Here, and in the brown congregation of Rustenburg-Karlienkamp to which I was called in 2018, theology needed to be put into practice.

ML: There is to my mind not many theologians who succeeded in their work to authoritatively address all three publics of theological work, namely academia, church, and society. How important would you say is it for academic theologians to serve all three these publics in their work? What have you learned over the years as you succeeded in moving between these different publics? Lastly, focussing especially on your role and contribution within society, and particularly your presence, voice, and contribution within the media – either through columns in the newspaper, discussions on national radio and television, or other more popular and accessible spiritual writings/literature – what have you learned from this particular way of doing theology?

CL: Coming from a culture where women did not speak in public, I at first found it difficult to find a public voice. I had no role models. Sometimes I was reckless in the things I said; my mind was still colonised by the “Volksmoeder” discourse – to such an extent that I did not plan to have a career, but lived for the excitement of the moment, taunting (white) society and testing its borders. Also, during the 1980s and 1990s the aim of public speaking was to undermine and criticise public narratives and discourses which were fed by *apartheid*. In that, if I may say, I was rather good, making people angry but also making them think.

However, a completely different public voice was needed in the new millennium after *apartheid*. I had to learn a totally new way of expressing myself publicly. Finding words to heal society came from engaging with vulnerable societies and individuals who allowed me into their worlds.

Since then, for me, the integration of academic research and voicing the voice of the voiceless have become paramount, even non-negotiable. An example is an article I published in 2011 with the title “A public theology for intimate spaces”¹, which is based on scientific research amongst farm workers in Hoedspruit, Mpumalanga, on the religious discourses that make them more, or less, vulnerable to HIV infection. Here the voices of marginalised and voiceless people are published internationally, with a popular article in a local newspaper following later. The beliefs of the interviewees in the treatment of Christian traditional healers (sic) were

1 *International Journal of Public Theology* 2011: 63-77.

respectfully dealt with within the reconstruction of alternative discourses and the presentation of alternative stories. This is the type of integrated theologising I hope to continue to engage in.

ML: In a 2008 article with the appealing title of “Hi/stories of gender in/justice”, you gave a very good description of the way you see and want to do church history “not as a series of dates, but as a series of stories. Traditionally the business of church historiography in South Africa focused not only exclusively on men, but also mainly on the dates of their achievements. However, this article sees church history as the stories of people, and specifically the stories of women.”² First of all, would you say this is fair and a good way of capturing your (current) take on the craft of being a church historian? Is there anything in particular that lies beneath the surface or between the lines that is often missed, not heard, or misunderstood, even misused within this description? Secondly, does this kind of perspective and approach also apply to your earlier work, or is it rather the influence and eventual result of work you did in the 1990s within feminist and (African) womanist theology? Who is to credit seeing the task of the church historian in such a clear and potent manner? Lastly, how do you think this approach of yours compare to the way church history is told in South Africa currently? How much of this is complemented and regenerated by what is currently evolving in the discipline itself?

CL: I have completely moved away from “desk research”, that is, writing and researching from already published articles and books. My first doctorate was on church polity and I read 125 documents in Latin for which there were no translations. My second doctorate was based on therapeutic discussions with 1 000 people that were much more difficult to “academise” than the Latin texts. This directed me towards the future of research, as well as the need that research should be about publishing the unpublished. Publishing the walking voice has of course methodological challenges of its own, since existing people’s stories change all the time. But this is the future of religious research: voicing and revoicing the voiceless.

I joined the Oral History Association of Southern Africa in 2004, and started an academic journal “The Oral History Journal of South Africa” in 2014, of which I am still the editor. This encounter with academic oral historians (most of whom are not theologians) convinced me that oral history can not only involve retrieving people’s stories. Oral history should engage in the healing of memories. In this my two areas of specialisation – history and counselling – meet each other. Because of our traumatic histories – both political and private

2 Landman, C. 2008. Hi/stories of gender in/justice. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol. XXXIV, pp. 161-180, especially pp. 161-162.

– oral historians need to be trained in counselling to assist an interviewee who becomes retraumatised while telling his or her story.

Much of my work at the moment uses the methodologies of (1) narrative enquiry that is based on the subjective relation of equity between researcher and interviewee(s), and (2) ethno-auto-biography in which the story of the researcher focuses on co-journeying with the interviewee(s).

And yes, most of my interviews to date were with women, where both the interviewee schedules and the healing of memories aspects were informed by the insights of African women theologians.

ML: In an article entitled “Ten Years of Feminist Theology in South Africa” published in 1994, you conclude with these pressing words: “Feminist theology was not introduced by South African feminists. Neither was the ordination movement led by feminists. At present, men with political goals in the New South Africa are taking up the feminist cause in order to improve their public image and to keep watch over the political side of feminism. The time has come for South African women to take control over feminism and over their own lives.”³ Again, I have more than one question. Firstly, how do you reflect upon these words when seen within its context? Stated differently: What would you add and elaborate on so that the next/younger/emerging generation theologians could truly hear and make sense of what is said here? Secondly, whereas we first tried to make sense of it in its original and historical context, how should we then interpret those demanding words today, twenty-five years later, within our current South(ern) African context? Assuming there has been some form of change in the past 25 years, how to phrase (“conclude”) another 25 years of feminist theology in South Africa? Has there been any change whatsoever?

CL: There may be one or two white women in South Africa who (still) call themselves feminist theologians. However, most of us (I do not consider myself to be white) call ourselves African women theologians when we exclusively group around gender issues. And most of us are members of the Circle of African Women Theologians that celebrates its 30th anniversary this year.

In fact, I prefer not to refer to myself in gendered terms such as being a woman theologian. Gender is one identity from which theology is done, but for me not the only or defining one. So-called women’s theology should have already moved to the core of theologising. Also, when planning and executing a research project, gender is indeed a variable – and an important one. But so is age, income, and social status, as well as access to health care.

3 Landman, C. 1994. Ten years of feminist theology in South Africa. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11/1: 143-148, especially pp. 148.

ML: *Only a few years after you wrote the above, Tinyiko Maluleke read the situation at the time with the following prediction: “Whereas Black and African theologies have for the past half-century argued for the validity of African Christianities and the legitimacy of African culture, African feminist/womanist theology is charting a new way. This theology is mounting a critique of both African culture and African Christianity in ways that previous African theologies have not been able to do. From these theologies, we may learn how to be truly African and yet critical of aspects of African culture. African womanist theologians are teaching us how to criticise African culture without denigrating it, showing us that the one does and should not necessarily lead to the other. My prediction is that the twenty-first century is going to produce an even more gendered African theology. All theologians and African churches will be well advised to begin to take heed.”⁴ Your comments and reflection on his take and prediction of African womanist theology’s contribution and role since then?*

CL: African women theologians have addressed a variety of social issues, ranging from the financial exploitation of women by religious leaders to women’s vulnerability in their intimate spaces. They have made amazing progress in the reinterpretation of the Bible and in cultural hermeneutics. However, in South Africa, a few individual women theologians have claimed copyright to the struggle to such an extent that it has become impossible for women to speak in a strong, communal, and representative voice on societal and political issues.

However, I feel compelled to give credit to and admit being influenced by African women theologians, such as Sarojini Nadar, Rethie van Niekerk, Mary-Ann Plaatjies van Huffel, and Purity Malinga, if not (only) by their work and thinking, then by their example.

ML: *In some of your most recent work you (and Hannelie Yates) emphasise the importance of “Africanity”, and defines it as follows: “Africanity refers to the values indigenous to a group which identifies with African ways of being and thinking.”⁵ In the end you conclude with “Africanity research does not mean normalising research in African contexts but decolonising the norms of traditional research to open spaces for indigenous voices to move from the margins to the centre.” How does this antenna for “Africanity” relate and differ from what we have learned from the previous*

4 Maluleke, T.S. 1997. Half a century of African Christian Theologies – Elements of the emerging agenda for the 21st century. *JTSA* 99: 4-23.

5 Landman, C. & Yates, H. 2017. Africanity and research: A case study in rural South Africa. *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 73(4), a4775. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4775>; see pp.2 and 9.

two questions, namely the contributions of South African feminist theology and African womanist theology over the past two to three decades? Moreover, are these important coordinates for going further with the embrace of “Africanity”, or should we rather introduce, (re)discover, or seek other key concepts and terminology for doing a very specific kind of theology in South Africa in the next few years to come?

CL: Feminist theology refers to European and American theologies, and womanist to black American theologies. African women’s theologies are the theologies that are contextual to Africa. However, the term “Africanity”, as used in the said article, was not primarily informed by African women theologians, but by endeavours to address the “position” of the researcher in post-colonialist terms where the gender, race, and epistemological privilege of the researcher are suspended in an equal relationship with the interviewee(s). Africanity allows both researcher and interviewee(s), who identify with African ways of being and thinking, to meet each other in research where the binaries of especially race and academic status are bracketed. This, I believe, is the future of research in Africa where researcher and interviewees blend together in one expression of one another’s experiences, independent of their race, gender, and academic-social privilege.

ML: *You were only legitimised for ministry many years later, at the age of fifty (that is such a rich symbolic and eschatological number!) on 18 November 2006 as a candidate for ministry in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Since then you served for many years and did some significant research and work in Sakhelwe, Dullstroom, a Zulu-speaking community. What change would you say this (late) development meant for your own career and theology?*

CL: As was said before, becoming a minister of the Word was a defining moment in my career as a theologian. I discovered that neither seven degrees in theology nor 30 years in academic theology could prepare me for the challenges of the ministry. I was never taught how to build a church, how to negotiate land ownership with the municipality, how to deal with conflicts between families that spilt over into the church, or what to do when the stipulations of the Church Order did not acknowledge the living realities of the congregants. I was never trained not to cry when conducting a funeral, or while holding the hand of a child dying of AIDS. At school I was never taught a black language; and eventually I learned to respect culture through my mistakes.

Liberation theologies taught me respect and equality; and that we need not to be saved from our personal sins (only), but from sinful systems, structures, and discourses.

But in the final instance I think that “theology” – and us theologians in general – have failed the people of South Africa. We are unable to assist them in surviving and expressing themselves as religious people in a secular state. We are unable to guide them in integrating their religious, human rights, and gender identities, thereby forcing them to assume shifting identities. We are unable to help them to make healthy religious choices on their own health when they have no access to health care, to name but a few.

ML: From your work it is also clear that “healing” is a significant factor in why people go to church and worship in Southern Africa. “Healing services” and “Healing liturgies” has indeed become crucial in our context. Moving from simplistic, flat and binary understanding of healing as we seek a more wholesome (broken) body and embodiment, navigating ourselves between “caring and curing liturgies”, or “curing and healing” liturgies, has indeed become important for the way we ritualised and reflect upon faith and knowledge. What are your thoughts and comments on how we can explore this further in years to come? Any specific coordinates, key concepts, and distinctions, to take note of in this regard?

CL: You and I do not know what it is like not to have access to health care when we or our children are ill. We do not live in a compound on a farm, or an informal settlement without transport, or in a rural township far from a clinic. We may never be in a situation where religious healing is our only option. However, we all are often in situations where we have to give meaning to what has happened to us when we suffer losses. However, a majority of religious people in South Africa expect healing from their churches because of the fact that they do not have access to a clinic, have no transport, or are guided by cultural practices that attribute physical health and good fortune to religious commitment.

In South Africa, we have more than 10 000 churches and more are established every day. One can of course not establish a new church if you have not proved yourself to be a healer. And South Africans flock to these healers for physical healing and to find meaning in their misfortune. The state is trying to regulate them, but in fact during the past five years 26% of South Africans have left mainline churches to join these healing churches, some of them even maintaining dual membership to a mainline and a healing church simultaneously.

Healing is a very personal thing. One person can be healed when the pastor reminds him or her that the misfortune that befell him or her is all part of God's plan for him or her. Another will start hating the God that plans misfortune for him or her. Healing also depends on what you believe makes you ill. If it is a curse that makes you ill, no medicine will help before the curse is lifted.

Theology of Healing should take the religious and cultural discourses that rule people's lives seriously. And by retelling the stories of people in the Bible who suffered losses but overcame them on their journey with God, religious people can acquire skills in making healthy choices about their health. One can also engage in alternative liturgies, although my experience in the church is that change traumatises people if they do not feel in control of the change.

ML: We are almost at the end of the interview, and I am curious to know about specific books, people, and events that had a significant influence on you as a theologian. (You are welcome to either reiterate again some of what was probably already said or implied in some of the previous questions, or actually add and name those crucial texts, books, people, and events that were all crucial in who you are today.)

CL: Strangely enough, I remember two books that I had read when I was studying in the Netherlands in the early 1990s. I remember only the titles: "*Onschuldphantasieën*" (Fantasies of innocence) by Grietjie Dresen, and "*Verlangen naar de val*" of which I truly cannot remember the author. The first used the ego-texts of women to see how they used religion to become innocent again. This influenced me in writing the book "The piety of Afrikaans women" from the women's ego-texts (diaries) where they confessed that they, even in the concentration camps of the English-Boer Wars, were made to believe that everything was to be blamed on women's personal sins. The latter book (*Longing to fall*) informed me how to lose control, a skill that suited me well in both my academic and ministry lives.

As far as lecturers are concerned, I acknowledge the influence – albeit each in a different way – of Proff Jannie Louw, David Bosch, Simon Maimela, and Brian Gaybba, the co-supervisor of my first doctorate.

For the rest it was the stories of people, and their sheer narrative presence, which made me believe in resurrection again. Especially the patients at Kalafong, who, by retelling their problem stories as stories of new hope, stood up from wheel chairs and ash heaps ... and walked again.

ML: Lastly, drawing from your years of experience and words of wisdom, what do you expect from the younger and upcoming generation of academic theologians in South Africa today? How do you see their challenge, role, and contributions in years to come?

CL: I simply expect from them to Africanise theology. However, it is a tall order. It includes dealing with gender, identity, healing, poverty, and politics. There is a lot of work to do.