

Liminality: Recent Avatars of this Notion in a South African Context¹

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1. Introduction²

In 1995 the ritual studies expert Ronald Grimes observed: ‘This generation’s intellectual task seems to be that of getting beyond Victor Turner’.³ This was, however, roughly the same time that Victor Turner’s work was being discovered by a few theologians in South Africa who recognized the importance of concepts such as *societas*, *communitas* and liminality; they were also beginning to understand the significance of his notion of so-called social drama for in what was then a dramatically changing South African social context and along with that congregational contexts. Several theologians in general, especially practical theologians working in congregational studies, and some liturgists have since then also explored the value specifically of the concept of liminality for the church in South Africa and for South African society in general. In this article my aim will be to try and trace the path of the concept of liminality and its concomitant concepts in theological discourse in South Africa over the past two decades.

By tracing the use of the concept in theological discourse in South Africa and attempting to show how the South African context has changed rapidly over the past two decades and is still changing, the main question I address is whether liminality is still a helpful concept in 2011 and I ask whether it has in some instances not in fact become a hindrance rather than a help. Has the idea of liminality in theological discourse in South Africa, after its ‘discovery’ in the 1990s and its application in many spheres of academia, now at the beginning of the second decade into the 1st century of the 3rd millennium not become exhausted. It is, however, very important to appreciate the emergence of the concept in theology in South Africa within its very specific historical context and therefore to appreciate the fact that the optimism regarding the concept in my own country was born and grew in a very specific time in the history of South

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³ R.L. GRIMES: *Beginnings in ritual studies* (Columbia 1995; revised edition) XVII.

Africa – roughly from the early 1990s and continuing for a decade after that. The socio-political context before, during and right after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings was especially fertile soil for the concept in the wider South African context, but also in congregations and for worship practices. But the fact that we are no longer in 1991 nor in 2001, but in 2011 prompted me to re-evaluate the concept for the specific South African context of the year 2011, rather than just pointing historically to the potentially positive insights the concept brought to society, the church and liturgy in South Africa during the past two decades. My research question thus pertains to the value of the concept of liminality and its concomitant concepts such as *communitas* for liturgical studies in South Africa in the year 2011 as pertaining to the wider South African social context. I am however to a large extent approaching this topic from the context of a theologian who is a member of a traditional mainline church in South Africa which was historically also the church of the privileged people in the apartheid era. Admittedly a theologian from a different background and approaching the topic from another angle could/would come to different conclusions. The conclusions I draw in this article is thus aimed at the position of traditional mainline churches in South Africa such as the Dutch Reformed Church and the role of the liturgy in such a denomination by the year 2011.

In order to explore this question I will firstly provide a brief general historical overview of the origins of the concept and its avatars. The focus will be only on theological literature – except for the original anthropological literature – because in South Africa the notion of liminality is very popular in many other disciplines too, such as literary studies. Thus after a short introduction and some background on the concept itself, the article will present the functioning of the concept in theological literature during four different periods in recent South African history, namely the pre-TRC, TRC, post-TRC periods as well as present-day South Africa. Throughout the historical survey ritual examples based on my own *ervaringswaarheid* will be used to illustrate the points made,⁴ and the South African poet and author Antjie Krog will be invited to accompany me on this journey spanning two decades of South African history.

2. Origin of the concept of liminality

Between 2001 and 2003 I conducted research on reconciliation rituals in South Africa. For this I made use of Victor Turner's work and included some background on the concept in Turner's work as well as Van Gennep. Here I will

⁴ *Ervaringswaarheid* or 'experienced truth' is a term taken from F. DEIST: *Vergeve en vergeet? Oor waarheid en versoening in Christelike perspektief* (Pretoria 1997) 2. With this term he referred to the kind of truth the TRC dealt with and tried to indicate that it was a different kind of truth to the kind sought in court rooms. *Ervaringswaarheid* is thus different from the kind of juridical truth that can be tested by means of cross-examination.

briefly recap some of the comments I made and complement them with insights from a recent article by Marcel Barnard.⁵

Victor Turner discusses the concepts of *societas*, liminality and *communitas* several times in his work.⁶ It is well known that Turner based many of his ideas on liminality on the work of Arnold van Gennep. Within a transitional ritual or *rite de passage*, as Van Gennep identified it, there are three phases (separation; boundary or *limen*, the Latin for threshold; reintegration).⁷ Turner describes these phases as follows:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual, or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.⁸

The second phase is the period of liminality, a state of transition, through which a situation that could be typified as *communitas* develops. The phases before and after liminality through which *communitas* develops, the phases of the state in which a 'structure of positions' exists, are referred to as *societas* (society).⁹ This *societas* therefore represents a period of structure that is characterized by an ordered situation that functions in a formal way. 'It is a time when a community to a great extent controls its problems, when it is well structured

⁵ This section is largely based on C. WEPENER: *From fast to feast. A ritual-liturgical exploration of reconciliation in South African cultural contexts* (= Liturgia condenda 19) (Leuven 2009) 74-80. For the work of Barnard on liminality cf. M. BARNARD: 'Flows of worship in the network society. Liminality as heuristic concept in practical theology beyond action theory', in *In die Skriflig* 44/1 (2010) 67-84.

⁶ Cf. *inter alia* V.W. TURNER: *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure* (1969), specifically the chapters entitled 'Liminality and communitas' and 'Communitas: model and process' 94-165; IDEM: *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual* (Ithaca, NY 1967), specifically the chapter entitled 'Betwixt and between: the liminal period in *rites de passage*' 93-111; IDEM: 'Passages, margins and poverty: religious symbols of communitas', in *Worship* 46/7 (1972) 390-412; also IDEM: 'Liminality and communitas', in R.L. GRIMES: *Readings in ritual studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ 1996) 511-519.

⁷ TURNER: *The ritual process* 94, as well as VAN GENNEP: 'Territorial passage and the classification of rites', in R.L. GRIMES: *Readings in ritual studies* 529-536.

⁸ TURNER: *The ritual process* 94-95.

⁹ TURNER: *The forest of symbols* 93.

and in order, and experiences a growth phase'.¹⁰ 'Uncertainty and transition' characterize a period of *communitas*. Turner typifies this time as anti-structural in contrast to the time of *societas*, which can be described as structured; he describes entities in the liminal phase of *communitas* as follows:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transition.¹¹

Furthermore, Turner describes how liminal entities, such as neophytes, are introduced in many ways into rituals, but always in such a way as to distinguish them from others; for example, they are without any possessions, passive and humble.¹² 'It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new situation in life'.¹³ In this liminal phase there is a mixture of insignificance and sanctity, of homogeneity and camaraderie.¹⁴ In the Western world descriptions like these may quickly sound like dated descriptions, coming from the pens of anthropologists working in the early and mid-twentieth century. For the average South African, however, this is not a strange condition but a living reality, much as Turner writes about it. Even if you are not yourself involved in such transitional rituals, you can still see them being performed everywhere. For example, the Xhosa *amaKwetas* live in a literal liminal state for extended periods next to highways in South Africa, or you may hear about these practices on the news and read about them in newspapers (especially when the circumcision rites go wrong and initiates die as a result).

In the liminal period of a *rite de passage*, this anti-structure of *communitas* can only exist because of the reality or possibility of *societas*, or structure. 'Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is to be low'.¹⁵ Thus Turner concludes that social life is a kind of dialectical process of consecutive experiences of high and low, of *societas* and *communitas*, and the movement of high to low goes through a

¹⁰ C.W. BURGER: *Gemeentes in transitio* (Cape Town 1995) 25.

¹¹ TURNER: *The ritual process* 95.

¹² A secular example of such a ritual is a present-day bachelor's party in the Western world, during which the prospective bridegroom's clothes are often taken from him, and he is ridiculed in many ways and, ultimately, through the consumption of large amounts of alcohol, made to be 'motherless'. In other words, a total stripping of his identity takes place – from his clothes to his mother.

¹³ TURNER: *The ritual process* 95.

¹⁴ TURNER: *The ritual process* 97.

¹⁵ TURNER: *The ritual process* 96.

limbo of statuslessness.¹⁶ And about this process he says: 'What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic'.¹⁷

What is of special importance is the nature of the power of people or groups in a liminal period. According to Turner,¹⁸ the 'weak' who find themselves in a liminal phase have exceptional ritual power; he adds that 'In liminality, the underling becomes uppermost'. Other characteristics of such people are sexlessness, anonymity, submissiveness, quietness, and they become a *tabula rasa* upon which the wisdom of the group can be written. Turner explains the characteristics of liminality in a list of binary oppositions, in contrast to status systems.¹⁹

Turner speaks of the existential quality of *communitas* through its involvement of the whole person in relation to other whole persons, and adds that *communitas* has an aspect of potential.²⁰ So Turner mentions that *communitas* is regarded virtually everywhere as a holy or sacral time, 'possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency'.²¹

He explains this by means of the installation ritual of the chief of the Ndembus. Here one may mention that liminality and *communitas* can also be institutionalized. Turner gives the example of the Benedictines, who are essentially a community with liminal qualities, such as the poverty that always characterizes their order. Chiliastic movements are also a manifestation of *communitas* and have many of the traits of *communitas*, such as equality, anonymity and simplicity.²² However, these movements soon become institutionalized and thus insti-

¹⁶ For this, cf. TURNER: *The ritual process* 97.

¹⁷ TURNER: *The ritual process* 129.

¹⁸ TURNER: *The ritual process* 102.

¹⁹ This list, in TURNER: *The ritual process* 106-107, is as follows: transition/state; totality/partiality; homogeneity/heterogeneity; *communitas*/structure; equality/inequality; anonymity/systems of nomenclature; absence of property/property; absence of status/status; nakedness or uniform clothing/distinctions of clothing; sexual continence/sexuality; minimization of sex distinctions/maximization of sex distinctions; absence of rank/distinctions of rank; humility/just pride of position; disregard for personal appearance/care for personal appearance; no distinctions of wealth/distinctions of wealth; unselfishness/selfishness; total obedience/obedience only to superior rank; sacredness/secularity; sacred instruction/technical knowledge; silence/speech; suspension of kinship rights and obligations/kinship rights and obligations; continuous reference to mystical powers/intermittent reference to mystical powers; foolishness/sagacity; simplicity/complexity; acceptance of pain and suffering/avoidance of pain and suffering; heteronomy/degrees of autonomy.

²⁰ This existential quality he contrasts to the cognitive quality of structure that, in following Lévi-Strauss, he describes as a set of classifications, 'a model of thinking about culture and nature and ordering one's public life'. TURNER: *The ritual process* 127. For more on the problem in defining the concepts, community and social structure, see 125-130.

²¹ TURNER: *The ritual process* 128.

²² TURNER: *The ritual process* 109, 111-112.

tutionalized *communitas*, which are different from *communitas* that remain 'open' and could spread to others and so remain anti-structural as opposed to those types of movements that become structured.

In my research on reconciliation rituals which was conducted between 2001 and 2003, I indicated with respect to liminality and *communitas* that, according to Turner, *communitas* is a necessary phase to be endured, but not a phase in which people must remain. He mentions that it can otherwise develop into the despotism of absolute authority.²³ Turner also alleges that 'hippies' and 'teenyboppers' have *communitas* qualities. This means that liminality and *communitas* are phenomena that appear in all phases and on all levels of cultures and societies, not just in pre-industrial tribes in Africa.

In a persuasive article Barnard combines liminality with theories on our globalizing network society and shows how liminality has become the dominant state in present-day society.²⁴ According to Barnard, structure has moved to the margins in modern network societies in which everything flows.²⁵ 'In the network society of the 21st century liminality has accomplished its journey by moving to the centre of society, pushing structured human interrelatedness to the 'margin'.²⁶ This he relates to new world-wide worship practices and, on the basis of observations in this regard, can state about the concept of liminality that 'the old semantic potential of the concept no longer fits societal and ecclesial reality in which people also through their worship want to be both rooted and connected also through their worship'.²⁷ In the conclusion of the article Barnard writes: 'I offer this article as my contribution to the discussions with my colleagues and friends in South Africa'.²⁸ With gratitude I accept his offer, which also helped me to look critically at the concept of liminality once again, specifically in my South African context, from my specific contextual point of view as explained earlier, and compare it to Barnard's observations.

With this background and development of the concept in mind, I will now turn to South Africa and a period extending over roughly 20 years.

3. Liminality in South Africa since the 1990s

3.1. The pre-TRC period

It is 1993. I am part of a small group of students in a large group of people gathering in Khayamandi, outside Stellenbosch. As we are standing and waiting

²³ TURNER: *The ritual process* 129.

²⁴ BARNARD: 'Flows of worship' 67-84.

²⁵ BARNARD: 'Flows of worship' 72.

²⁶ BARNARD: 'Flows of worship' 73.

²⁷ BARNARD: 'Flows of worship' 74.

²⁸ BARNARD: 'Flows of worship' 81.

for the start of the march which will take us into town, the thousands of people start to sing *Nkosi sikilel' iAfrika*. After that we march to the town center and past hundreds of bystanders and many television and newspaper cameras. The reason for the march was to protest against the murder of Chris Hani, an anti-apartheid activist and the then leader of the South African Communist Party. To quote Antjie Krog's own experience whilst participating in such a march:

We linked arms. We stood arm in arm. Suddenly it was as if the whole landscape stopped breathing. Then we started walking. It was a march in complete stillness. Your heart started to spin dully inside you like an overripe pear. But after a few steps, we felt the power flowing through us. We marched, therefore we were.²⁹

My first encounter with the concepts of liminality and *communitas* was also during my studies at Stellenbosch University, when I read a book by the South African Dutch Reformed theologian and specialist in congregational studies, Coenie Burger. Burger's book was entitled *Gemeentes in transitio. Vernuwingsgeleentehede in 'n oorgangstyd*. This book was published in 1995, just a year after 1994, the watershed year in South Africa's history and the transition from apartheid to democracy. In this book Burger basically used Turner's insights on *societas*, *communitas*, liminality and social drama in order to explain to his reader how the South African context of the time can be better understood. Along with this, it was his aim to indicate to faith communities that such a transitional time – although the experience of it is often not good – can potentially be a creative time and an opportunity. As I traced the steps of the incorporation of the concept of liminality into theological literature in South Africa for this paper, I became more and more convinced that Burger's book was indeed the 'Q source' with regards to the introduction of the concept in theological discourse in mainline churches in South Africa.

In Coenie Burger's book *Gemeentes in transitio* the main influence for the development of the theory came from Victor Turner, but also and importantly much inspiration was derived from Gerald Arbuckle and his 1991 book entitled *Grieving for change*. The title of Arbuckle's book already implies the importance of lament and therefore also liturgy and ritual in general for the larger process of change. When I asked Burger which other scholars had inspired his thinking for this book, he immediately said Walter Brueggemann's work on the *Psalms* (orientation, disorientation, re-orientation) and also – via the work of other American colleagues – the work of De Tocqueville. A little book by Alan Roxburgh³⁰

²⁹ A. KROG: *A change of tongue* (Johannesburg 2003) 114, as well as C.J. WEPENER: 'Versoeningsrituele: tipologicë en prosesse. Insigte vanuit 'n beskrywende verkenning van die rituele mark', in *Neederduitse gereformeerde teologiese tydskrif* 45/3 & 4 (2004) 763-773.

³⁰ It can be mentioned here that at this time Hanekom also completed a doctoral dissertation in theology which was based on the work of Victor Turner. For his discussion of the concepts of liminality, *societas* and *communitas*, see A.R. HANEKOM: *Simbool en ritueel as instrumente vir geloofsvorming* (Stellenbosch 1995) 94-100. Whilst Burger's work focused

published in 1997 provides helpful insight in how these notions were appropriated in fields such as congregational studies and missiology, the latter especially as pertaining to the recent missional church movement as it emerged in North America and spread to a country such as South Africa.

The year that Burger's book was published (1995) was also the year in which we worked in our Afrikaans poetry course on the then most recent collection of poetry by Antjie Krog, entitled *Lady Anne* (1989).³¹ Similar to the way in which DJ Opperman used Marco Polo as an objective correlative in *Komas uit 'n bamboesstok*, Krog used Lady Anne Barnard as her objective correlative. What is important for us here is that in that collection Krog for the first time used the sole (*tongvis* in Afrikaans) as metaphor – a fish which is in the process of adapting to a new context (shallow sandy water) and in which the process refers to a comprehensive bodily adaptation, including language. At this stage in her oeuvre, however, this metaphor is still mostly used from a gender-based perspective for Krog, but as we shall see, this metaphor occurs again in her writings in years to come. At that time the dominant discourse was still protest and resistance, although in these turbulent times that Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, but a person like Chris Hani murdered, it was a discourse that hovered between resistance and emancipation. These were (un)certain times and Krog opens her book of poetry with a statement by Bram Fischer to the court in Pretoria in 1966 in which Fischer quoted Paul Kruger:³²

Met vertrouwen leggen wij onze zaak open voor de geheele wereld. Hetzij wij overwinnen, hetzij wij sterven: de vrijheid zal in Afrika rijzen als de zon uit de morgenwolken.

In relation to the pre-TRC South African context, I believe Burger's introduction of the concept of liminality into especially congregational studies was a timely contribution. Building on both Turner's work regarding liminality and other scholars' appropriation and use of the concept as well as biblical images such as the desert time of the exodus, the aim was to provide insights to people into their specific changing context and to convey the point that, no matter how people and church members might feel, there is hope for (white) people

on the liminal situation in which the traditionally white mainline churches found themselves, L.E. Thomas focused in her work on the liminality that traditionally black African Independent Churches experienced in the same period. See L.E. THOMAS: 'African indigenous churches as a source of socio-political transformation in South Africa', in *Africa today* 41/1 (1994) 39-56. And in this same period the theory of Van Gennep and Turner was also used by other authors globally to study immigrant churches, for example the study by Ter Haar in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam. See G. TER HAAR: 'Ritual as communication. A study of African Christian communities in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam', in J. PLATVOET & K. VAN DER TOORN: *Pluralism & identity. Studies in ritual behaviour* (Leiden 1995) 115-142.

³¹ A. KROG: *Lady Ann* (Bramley 1989).

³² KROG: *Lady Ann* 8.

and (Afrikaans) churches in South Africa. Burger referred to this as *Die anatomie van 'n oorgangstyd*. In many churches ministers and members realized that all is not lost, but that we were moving into a specific kind of time with specific challenges. How to meet this different kind of future as faith communities was still an open question. Burger focused on models for ministry, on congregational leadership, a deepened spirituality and a few brief remarks on the place and importance of the worship service in this overarching transitional time.³³ However, as this transitional time advanced, the need for adequate symbols and rituals in this process became more and more apparent. There was indeed a need to 'grieve for change', but the urgency of this need only became acutely apparent during the hearings of the TRC.

3.2. The TRC period

It is 1997 and I am driving from Stellenbosch to the neighboring town of Paarl in the Boland. I attend a hearing of the TRC chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Representatives from the *Ring/Classis* of the Dutch Reformed Church of Stellenbosch are bringing a confession to the commission. The representatives include Hannes Koornhof, Frederick Marais and Bethel Müller.³⁴ After the confession was read, Archbishop Tutu stood up, walked to professor Müller and they met each other in a reconciling embrace, a symbolic action which in my view was representative of the times. South Africa had had its first free and fair election. The ANC is the ruling party. Nelson Mandela is president and the dominant discourse was that of the so-called 'Rainbow Nation'. And within this still constantly changing context there was a real need to express what we experienced in a variety of ways, especially a need for symbolic actions such as a black Anglican priest embracing a white Dutch Reformed *dominee* that could capture the sense of both remorse and forgiveness. And to a certain extent the TRC hearings themselves could be seen as a ritual which to a certain degree performed this function.³⁵

Besides Burger's work, a more focused study and application of the work of Turner came from the pen of Mark Hay (1997) in his doctoral dissertation entitled *Ukubuyisana*,³⁶ a Zulu word which means 'to turn to each other'. Hay conducted his research during the TRC period and applied Turner's concept of social drama to the South African context. He did not explicitly work with the

³³ BURGER: *Gemeentes in transitio*.

³⁴ 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission day 2 – Tuesday 15 October 1996. Submissions by Dr. Hannes Koornhof, Dr. Bethel Müller & Frederick Marais'. <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/Wineland/ngk.htm> (accessed April 14, 2011).

³⁵ A. KROG: 'The truth and Reconciliation Commission - A national ritual?', in *Missionaria* 26/1 (1998) 5-16.

³⁶ M. HAY: *Ukubuyisana. Reconciliation in South Africa* (= Doctoral dissertation Catholic Theological Union of Chicago) (Chicago 1997).

notion of liminality as such, but when you read his application of the concept of social drama to the South African context of roughly 1997 (the TRC period), it is indeed present. In this work he focuses on how Turner in *The ritual process* shows the particular dynamics of a society when it experiences conflict, the so-called social dramas with their phases of breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration/schism;³⁷ according to Hay, this process is revealing in better understanding the process of reconciliation in a society. What is important from Hay's research is firstly the fact that reconciliation in a society is processual in nature and that at different stages of the social drama different kinds of rituals are needed. At the end of his discussion of Turner's work he points to Turner's emphasis on the importance of so-called 'plural reflexivity' in which there is 'intense communal reflection, both in affirmation and critique, leading to evaluation and subsequent decisions'.³⁸ This so-called plural reflexivity allows for a 'soul researching' within a community.³⁹

In the same year Cas Vos and Hennie Pieterse published a book on the liturgy called *Hoe lieflik is U woning*⁴⁰ with chapter 4 entitled 'Die funksie van simbole, rituele en liggaamlikheid in die liturgie', in which a sub-section is devoted to 'Die rol van die rituele proses in 'n oorgangstyd', in which they worked with the concepts of *societas*, *communitas* and liminality.⁴¹ The opening sentences of this chapter describes the South African context of 1997, during which time it was written:⁴²

Ons skryf hierdie hoofstuk in 'n besonder moeilike tydsgewrig in die geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse reformatoriese kerke in Suid-Afrika. Dit is die konteks waarin hierdie kerke van 'n situasie waarin hulle 'n groot invloed vir eeue lank in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing gehad het, nou traumaties binne enkele jare in 'n minderheisposisie geplaas is met haas geen invloed meer nie.

This time during which Hay completed his dissertation and Vos and Pieterse wrote about the role of liturgy in a transitional period, was also the time in which someone like Antjie Krog first published *Country of my skull* (1998), in which she captured much of her experience as a journalist during the TRC hearings. I have in the past quoted a line from this book on the process of reconciliation in South Africa that struck me deeply: 'Yes, bit by bit we die into reconciliation'.⁴³ This was an observation from Krog whilst she was listening to the horror stories being told during the TRC hearings, which was for her a

³⁷ HAY: *Ukubuyisana* 150-155.

³⁸ HAY: *Ukubuyisana* 156.

³⁹ HAY: *Ukubuyisana* 157.

⁴⁰ C. VOS & H. PIETERSE: *Hoe lieflik is U woning* (Pretoria 1997).

⁴¹ VOS & PIETERSE: *Hoe lieflik is U woning* 131-134. The section devoted to Turner and liminality is fairly brief and less than three pages long.

⁴² VOS & PIETERSE: *Hoe lieflik is U woning* 107.

⁴³ A. KROG: *Country of my skull* (London 1998) 196.

story-telling process that can only be truly captured by making use of metaphors related to death and dying. In this she also related to the work of a certain Dr. Kaliski, according to whom the denial that was apparent at that time in South African society regarding the atrocities of apartheid was a good sign, since it could be compared to the first phase in the process of terminally ill patients which is needed to ultimately reach a time of acceptance.⁴⁴

If the marches of the pre-TRC period were a ritual building up to and approaching the threshold of a transitional time, then the scene in which a professor of Reformed theology such as Müller partook in a confession followed by a concomitant symbolic gesture of reconciliation from a black Archbishop was a clear ritual signal that the country was no longer on the threshold of a transitional time – we were in it. The stories we heard at the TRC hearings at that time and the images we saw in the newspapers and on television confirmed this reality. And in this time the notion of liminality as presented to us by theologians such as Burger, Hay, Vos and Pieterse was a helpful compass in attempting to understand an unsettling time, and the place of the church and individuals in such a time, as well as a further hint after Burger that the liturgy has no small role to play in this time. The fact is that dying has traditionally been seen as the last phase of human life, which is also accompanied by certain rituals in order to also be able to make this painful but unavoidable passage; however, dying must also be viewed as a prerequisite for resurrection.

3.3. The post-TRC period

I am sitting on the grass of the rugby field of the neighborhood that was geographically reserved for colored people during apartheid times; it was called Bergsig, just outside the town of Calitzdorp in the Little Karoo. It is 16 December 2000. For many years 16 December was celebrated as the Day of the Vow, commemorating the *Voortrekkers'* victory over the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River, but since 1994 this is the so-called Day of Reconciliation. Since the vow was made in 1838 and celebrated under the liturgical leadership of Sarel Cilliers, it has been celebrated in all Dutch Reformed Churches (and other Afrikaans churches) by means of a church service on the day, a so-called *Gelofstedagdiens* (Day of Commemoration Service) during which the vow was also affirmed once again.⁴⁵ But it is the year 2000 and not 1838, and we are not celebrating a *Gelofstedagdiens* in the DR Church, but a Reconciliation Day service on the rugby field in which all the local churches are participating, transcending all denominational, racial and even old apartheid geographical lines. The preacher is a colored charismatic pastor who is assuring us – in a theatrical style

⁴⁴ KROG: *Country of my skull* 54.

⁴⁵ C.J. WEPENER: 'Liturgy on the edge of tradition', in *Practical theology in South Africa* 23/2 (2008) 313-335, in which I referred to Karel Schoeman, who showed how the vow actually fell into disuse for decades and was rediscovered for the purposes of Afrikaner nationalism in roughly 1938.

and with many gestures – that although this time is for some of us comparable to Daniel’s experience in the lion’s den, we have nothing to fear. We should grab those lions and use them to sleep comfortably – three lions we should position under us as a nice soft mattress and a fourth we can use as a pillow. If we do this, each one of us can sleep every night on a Sealy Posturepedic (a well-known mattress brand in South Africa). This message was beautiful and encouraging, but to end the scene here would not convey the whole picture to you. Only some (then still mostly white) members of the DR Church where I served in Calitzdorp were present at this multicultural open-air service; the rest were longing for the good old days and a *Gelofedagdiens*. As a leader in a church at that time, I had my own liminal experience of being betwixt and between, neither here nor there. I will borrow an expression from a somewhat more liberal South African Old Testament scholar upon visiting the conservative ‘Dopper’ town and university of Potchefstroom to explain the way I felt as a young minister in the town of Calitzdorp: ‘Like a lion in a cage full of Daniels’.

After Hay published his dissertation in 1997, I conducted research on ritual and reconciliation in a post-TRC period and still found the work of Turner to be helpful in that period. There was still a need for the church and society to ‘die into reconciliation’, to ‘grieve for change’, to engage in a process ‘from fast to feast’.⁴⁶ Hay emphasized in his work the fact that the process of reconciliation needs enough time and my own qualitative research confirmed this fact over and over again. I think what my own research at the time added to the work of some of my predecessors was just a very explicit focus on liturgical rituals. Let me quote myself here:

Regarding the concept of liminality, this means that the *societas* before the breach will be different in South Africa to the *societas* after the breach, and the nature of the *societas* after the breach will depend greatly on the experiences and events in the liminal phase of *communitas*. The rituals, more precisely reconciliation rituals, which thus are performed in the *communitas* period are of crucial importance as they help to form the new relationship. Therefore, the quality of reconciliation rituals that are performed in this phase becomes extremely important.⁴⁷

According to Turner, not only do societies continually experience processes, such as social drama, but the rituals that accompany these processes also have a processual structure. ‘Not only is ritual situated within a process of social drama; ritual itself is processual in form’.⁴⁸ This research was done in the years

⁴⁶ C.J. WEPENER: *Van vas tot fees. 'n Ritueel-liturgiese ondersoek na versoening binne Suid-Afrikaanse kultuurkontekste* (= DTH-dissertation University of Stellenbosch) (Stellenbosch 2004).

⁴⁷ WEPENER: *From fast to feast* 79.

⁴⁸ M. DEFLEM: ‘Ritual, anti-structure, and religion: a discussion of Victor Turner’s processual symbolic analysis’, in *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 30/1 (1991) 5.

2001-2003, but even then already I indicated that we could not continue forever to sing the praises of liminality in the Turnerian sense of the word in South Africa with reference to reconciliation and transition, because there could come a time in the history of South Africa and its social drama of reconciliation that our Archbishop's rainbow might start to fade. But let me not jump the gun; it is, of course, time to first turn to the poet again.

During the same time I was conducting and completing my own research, Antjie Krog published a book entitled *A change of tongue* (2003). On the front cover of the book is a picture of the sole, while the metaphor that was present in *Lady Anne* in 1989 is now the dominant motif. South Africans were in this period all busy acquiring new language skills and learning to speak a new language in a new context, whether we liked it or not. We were completely in a process of 'a change of tongue', and the people and the changes they experienced as featured in the book vary from interracial relationships that were increasingly occurring to conversations with ex-soldiers who fought in the war in Namibia and who had to work through their own unique processes in a new dispensation. I will refer to just one other metaphor that is present in the book, namely that of sewerage. In large parts of the book the context in which the conversations take place is the sewerage works of the town of Kroonstad in the Free State. And the point made by the metaphorical context is messy but clear: we have to get rid of a lot of things in our society that will eventually lead to great relief. In this post-TRC period liminality as concept was still important and helpful, although most people had already started to realize that the usefulness of the concept cannot be overstretched.

3.4. Today

It is Sunday the 1st of February 2011. My youngest daughter Adriana, who is turning 6, is having her birthday party at our home in Pretoria. Three generations are present, my wife and I and some other parents, our parents, and also our children and their friends. The guests who are arriving represent all the colors of the rainbow and a fair number of the nations of the world (Pretoria is home to most diplomats working in South Africa). My mother whispers in my ear: *'Hier is dan amper niks witmense nie!* My wife and I are enjoying ourselves, although to be honest are still adapting to some cultural customs regarding the arrival and departure times for children's parties in which 3 o'clock in the afternoon can be interpreted in many ways. We know we must just relax, we are trying, it is difficult. And the children? Well, to quote a question my daughter put to her grandmother: *'Wat bedoel jy met 'n swart dogtertjie, wat is 'n swart dogtertjie?'* Three generations, three positions regarding where we are currently positioned in our country with respect to the process of social transformation. And if we look around us, we notice that the ritual landscape in South Africa pertaining to the process is also varied.

Outside Polokwane in the province of Limpopo, there is a so-called Boer Genocide Memorial consisting of thousands of white crosses commemorating all the (white) farmers who have been murdered on their farms since 1994.⁴⁹ At the worship services of the Corinthian Church (AIC) in the rural town of Phepheni in the Eastern Cape they sing the national anthem every week as part of the service, a custom that was not practiced a decade or two ago.⁵⁰ In KwaZulu-Natal there is an annual Mighty Men pilgrimage on the farm of the evangelist Angus Buchan, which is attended by 90.000 predominantly white males for a weekend, focusing on bringing back traditional values such as men being the head of the family, etc. As you drive through the South African landscape, apart from the roadside shrines marking motor car accidents, there is a cross on almost every hill.⁵¹ In local congregations such as the DRC Maitland in Cape Town volunteers from the local communities started an initiative called Cross-Cultural Conversations, in which people from different backgrounds (race, income, denomination, faith, etc.) come together for conversations, workshops and a communal meal with the explicit aim of moving towards reconciliation. And yes, let's be honest, *Gelofte dag* is also still being celebrated in many Afrikaans religious communities throughout South Africa.

Is this new or was the ritual landscape always like this? I believe much of this is new and I am convinced that studies such as *Liturgie voorbij de Liturgische Beweging*, *Liturgische bewegingen* and *Rituals in abundance* and other research by liturgists such as Barnard, Post and Lukken have helped me to be able to observe these movements.⁵² And with regards to the Sunday worship service in a denomination such as the Dutch Reformed Church, it will come as no surprise to you if I tell you that you can also expect to encounter a varied liturgical scene in the church buildings: from praise and worship services, traditional Reformed services, higher liturgical services to what is often in South African called blended worship. So yes, in this sense there is indeed a liminal flow visible in the ritual landscape, both inside and outside the church building, but I would like to stay with my theme and look at the particulars of the ritual action. And I will con-

⁴⁹ C.J. WEPENER: 'Nuwe tendense buite-om die erediens van die 21ste eeu. 'n Beskrywende liturgie-historiese en hedendaagse verkenning', in *Vir die musiekleier* 30/37 (2010) 3-19.

⁵⁰ B.A. MÜLLER & C.J. WEPENER: 'A comparative study of applying grounded theory to data collected through participatory research involving AIC liturgical rituals', in *Hervormde teologiese studies/Theological studies* accepted (2011) 67/2, Art. #1034, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.1034>

⁵¹ WEPENER: 'Nuwe tendense buite-om die erediens van die 21ste eeu'.

⁵² M. BARNARD: *Liturgie voorbij de liturgische beweging: over 'praise and worship'*, *Thomasvieringen, kerkdiensten in migrantenkerken en ritualiteit op het internet* (Zoetermeer 2006); P. POST: *Liturgische bewegingen: thema's, trends en perspectieven in tien jaar liturgiestudie. Een literatuurverkenning 1995-2005* (Zoetermeer 2006); G. LUKKEN: *Rituals in abundance: critical reflections on the place, form and identity of Christian ritual in our culture* (= *Liturgia condenda* 17) (Leuven/Dudley, MA 2005).

clude that an argument for liminality as a necessary phase in a transitional period in South Africa was valid in a TRC and post-TRC period, but is no longer applicable to the South African context of mainline churches. When I am trying to argue that we should move beyond a focus on and promotion of liminality in liturgical studies, I am specifically addressing South African theologians as well as theologians writing about South Africa who are still promoting the current relevance of liminality in their scholarly endeavors.⁵³ So, for example, in a 2010 article Danahar lists criticism of the TRC process mostly using sources from 2000/2001 in order to argue that South Africa today has not yet achieved a state of reconciliation; on the basis of this criticism he then argues that the ongoing process of reconciliation in South Africa is still in a liminal state. Such a line of argumentation and use of source is, I believe, anachronistic. It is also noticeable how the use of the concept in theological literature has moved in some cases to an inner ecclesial domain, where it is now applied to the importance of liminality in, for example, congregational leadership.⁵⁴ I believe that in our current socio-political context the hymn books singing the praises of liminality – of course always in the form a lament Psalm in the classical Genevan style – should be closed. This argument naturally has to be based to a great extent on a contextual analysis, so it is important to have a closer look at the South Africa of 2011.

Where are we in South Africa today? We have come a long way.
 We have protested and marched.
 We have grieved and embraced.
 We have joined gatherings on rugby fields and started to adapt, although we have often felt like fish whose eyes and fins have moved sideways.
 And we are currently all part of the constant ritual-liturgical flow, reminiscent of the tides of the ocean.
 But I believe it is time to catch those soles that are still swimming in this ocean, skin them, fry them and serve them with a glass of Cape Chardonnay.

Liminality has served us well. There were as many interpretations of the South African context as there were researchers, we got and are still getting and concomitantly the usefulness of liminality in that context. I believe, however, that with regards to reconciliation and transformation in a post-apartheid South Africa ritual-liturgically we have moved beyond liminality as a country, and so we as scholars or liturgists should too. This also holds true for the socio-

⁵³ For one example cf. W.J. DANAHER JR: 'Music that will bring back the dead? Resurrection, reconciliation, and restorative justice in post-apartheid South Africa', in *Journal of religious ethics* 38/1 (2010) 115-141.

⁵⁴ For example, H. DELPORT & J.C. MÜLLER: 'Die liminale ruimte vir inkongruensie tussen predikant en lidmaat: 'n Narratief gebaseerde prakties-teologiese ondersoek in gemeentes van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika', in *Hervormde teologiese studies/Theological studies* 66/2 (2010), Art. #852, 6 pages DOI: 10.4102/hts.v66i2.852.

political context of South Africa in the year 2011. Looking at data obtained from the SA Reconciliation Barometer of 2010, which ‘measures citizen’s attitudes to political and social-economic transformation and how these impact on national unity and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa’,⁵⁵ the following highlights and points for improvement regarding the current South African context with regard to reconciliation can be listed.

Highlights:

- a majority of South African still believe that a unified country is a desirable goal;
- there is an overall increase in support for racial integration within families, neighborhoods and schools;
- there is an increase in positive evaluations of the legal system and police, and more South Africans are beginning to feel physically secure;
- although religious institutions still rate the highest as institutions garnering most trust, there is also a recovery in trust with regards to governance.

Points for improvement:

- socio-economic inequality is the biggest source of division in South Africa;
- many people still believe that political leaders are not much interested in what happens to ordinary people;
- perpetrators of apartheid have not yet been dealt with sufficiently;
- contact between historically-defined race groups have been relatively slow, mainly because of socio-economic inequality.⁵⁶

Of course, it is once again time for the poet to speak. In 2009 Antjie Krog published her latest book entitled *Begging to be black*, which was preceded by *Country of my skull* and *A change of tongue*.⁵⁷ Throughout this book Krog struggles with the idea of the African interconnectedness of black people and how this differs from that of white people. I want to quote her here when she refers to the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation:

So what would be the difference? Christian forgiveness says: I forgive you because Jesus has forgiven me. The reward will be in heaven. ‘African’ forgiveness says: I forgive you so that you can change and I can begin to heal and all of us can become the selves that we were meant to be. The reward is here on earth. In the year 2011 what is needed is what Krog also longs for: ‘I am trying to become others, plural, interconnected-towards-caringness’.⁵⁸ I believe this is somewhat different from being betwixt and between, neither here nor there,

⁵⁵ K. LEFKO-EVERETT, R. LEKALAKE, E. PENFOLD & S. RAIS: *2010 reconciliation barometer survey report* 5.

⁵⁶ LEFKO-EVERETT, LEKALAKE, PENFOLD & RAIS: *2010 reconciliation barometer* 5-8.

⁵⁷ A. KROG: *Begging to be black* (Cape Town 2009) 212.

⁵⁸ KROG: *Begging to be black* 200.

but building on the experience and lessons learnt in liminality rather entails a concerted effort to move forward.

4. Beyond liminality

Grimes makes the important observation that processes must not be viewed as unchangeable structures. When scientists refer to processes, they often produce a handy triple beat, for example, the three phases in *rites de passage* (transitional rituals) comprising separation, transition and incorporation.⁵⁹ Grimes points out rightly that such a scheme is based on generalization and is a reproduction of an invented scheme based on existing rituals rather than on the discovery of these patterns within the rituals.⁶⁰ He believes that a scholar such as Mircea Eliade was a mythmaker rather than an interpreter or discoverer of myths. Van Gennep's scheme derives from male initiation rituals, which then served as a prototype for all other rituals in order to indicate the movement from one social space to another.⁶¹ However, Van Gennep's scheme is 'discovered' in rituals and later imposed onto other rituals and thus has served as a formula that prescribes how for example rites of passage should look like.⁶² The result is a 'how-to' manual for rituals.

According to Grimes, this is a total oversimplification and a typically Western philosophical approach that derives from the Hegelian dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), which ultimately imposes these logo centric patterns on ritual traditions where they do not fit. 'In short, *invented* patterns, treated as if they were *discovered*, came to be *prescribed* as if they were laws determining how rites should be structured'.⁶³ Also Caroline Walker Bynum,⁶⁴ in a critique of

⁵⁹ A. VAN GENNEP: *The rites of passage* (Chicago 1960) or IDEM: 'Territorial passages and the classification of rites' 529-536.

⁶⁰ R.L. GRIMES: *Deeply into the bone. Re-inventing rites of passage* (Berkeley 2000) 100-125; G. ARBUCKLE: *Grieving for change* (London 1991) 20, also warns in respect of models with reference to grief, i.e. '... no one model of stages can positively grasp this complexity; a model merely helps us to understand in a very general way what *may* happen to people or organizations in grief'.

⁶¹ GRIMES: *Deeply into the bone* 105.

⁶² GRIMES: *Deeply into the bone* 105. Grimes also considers Joseph Campbell's myth of the hero, in which Campbell discovered a so-called pattern (or rather, according to Grimes, upon which Campbell impressed a pattern!) of separation, initiation and return.

⁶³ GRIMES: *Deeply into the Bone* 107. By means of comparative verification of various ritual traditions from all over the world, Grimes arrives at these conclusions in respect of generalizing theories. Grimes then uses ethnographic data in a comparative way to disprove these generalizations and to confirm his suspicion about models. Furthermore, the way in which these Western patterns are forced onto rituals is also related to the processes that preceded inculturation and imposed Western values onto other parts of the world in an uncritical way.

Turner's theory of liminality based on the stories of saints in the late Middle Ages, comes to the conclusions that Turner looked at women and not with them. According to Bynum Turner's ideas better fits the stories of men than those of women, and in the cases where they do fit the stories of women, the particular story was without exception written by a man and not the woman herself. Her conclusion is that liminality may be less of a universal phenomenon than Turner suggests.

Grimes's warning does not mean that all theorizing is valueless and that it is unnecessary to indicate the processes. And Bynum's critique is helpful in assisting the researcher with the question whether he or she is looking at people or with people. Insights into the functioning of the comprehensive processes in societies and of rituals can be extremely useful, provided these reservations are taken into account. Liminality and *communitas* as well as social drama were helpful concepts for South Africans to understand the fact that individuals and societies go through processes. The question whether these processes can so neatly be packaged and applied to a given situation as is often implied in some of the theological literature in our country remains. During the pre-TRC, TRC and post-TRC periods these scholarly inventions helped us a lot; they acted in a comforting way at the time to realize that we were not the first people to travel this particular route and that there were peoples and societies who had gone there long before us – unlike Lady Anne Barnard, who thought she was the first white woman who climbed Table Mountain, while numerous Dutch women had in fact done so long before her. I am convinced, however, that we should be careful at this particular time in the history of South Africa about continuing to sing the praises of liminality in relation to the processes of transformation and reconciliation that our church and society are in. Large portions of our society are part of the continuous liminal flow, whilst some are at this moment in the bushes with painted faces awaiting circumcision. This is also true with regards to the ritual-liturgical movements in relation to the on-going process of reconciliation.

The discourse in theological literature on reconciliation, justice and reparation should move beyond the notion of liminality, because a liminal stage can become a hiding place and an excuse for not engaging any longer with the on-going process of what I will call reconciliation in South Africa. Grimes correctly showed how processes and even notions such as liminality can actually be invented notions that were prescribed rather than discovered; according to Gold⁶⁵, a notion such as liminality is indeed helpful but reductive. Similarly, I believe that the concept of liminality as applied to the South African process of

⁶⁴ C.W. BYNUM: 'Women's stories, women's symbols: a critique of Victor Turner's theory of liminality', in R.L. GRIMES: *Readings in ritual studies* 71-86.

⁶⁵ A.G. GOLD: 'Still liminal after all these years: teaching ordeals and peregrinations', in C. BELL (ed.): *Teaching ritual* (= American Association of Religion Teaching religious studies series) (Oxford/New York 2007) 39.

transition is also a construct. We can indeed be grateful to those, such as Burger, who first applied the concept in the 1990s. But we should also urge those who are still using the concept sixteen years after Burger to rather start with a thorough contextual analysis and in so doing not unnecessarily prolong the painful deathbed of reconciliation in our country. Here the debate regarding the African concept of time will of course once again surface,⁶⁶ but even an appreciation of so-called 'African time' can become an excuse. The data obtained from the SA Reconciliation Barometer also show that there is still a good foundation for reconciliation that can be utilized and built upon; however, the points for improvement relate to issues of, for example, socio-economic upliftment. There is a need to move beyond the use of the concept of liminality in the sense of a liminal state of becoming in which the liturgy can play an important role by helping people to lament and grieve for change. It is time to grieve about those who are still grieving for change, because the change has come and we have entered a new *societas*, a new structure in which work must be done on poverty alleviation, job creation and crime prevention, to name but a few pressing issues.

What will the implications be for the liturgy? Perhaps to actively strive towards finding liturgical rituals promoting social capital formation and social cohesion? Perhaps seeking for ways in which the discourse of protest in our pulpits can be enriched with a new prophetic discourse of engaging with issues of poverty and crime?⁶⁷ Now I believe is the time to bury the corpse of apartheid in the coffin of liminality and to enter the promised *societas* in which our past can be lived right. And as in the past, the liturgy has an important role to play here.

5. Conclusion

You have traveled with me as I shared my own life experiences through a ritual lens and the work of Antjie Krog as documented in her books in order to show how the concept of liminality went through a process of discovery and application in a specific place and time. The journey prompted me to come to the conclusion that it is time in South Africa and within our unique (mainline church) context to move beyond liminality, specifically an exclusively positive appreciation of the concept in the present South African context. Although we will all continue to drift in the continuous liminal flow of our time, as far as reconciliation in our country is concerned, the time has come to live up to the

⁶⁶ WEPENER: *From fast to feast* 206-208.

⁶⁷ H. PIETERSE: *Preaching in a context of poverty* (Pretoria 2001); B.J. DE KLERK: 'Liturgiese antwoorde op geweld – 'n verkenning', in *In die Skriflig* 38/1 (2004) 145-166; IDEM: 'Die Nagmaal en broodgebrek', in *Hervormde teologiese studies/Theological studies* 63/2 (2007) 605-624.

new identities we have acquired by living through the previous two decades and to become fully initiated into a new dispensation. One of my Zulu-speaking students several weeks ago quoted a Zulu proverb which related to initiation rites and applied to the importance of the season of Lent in his class sermon: 'You do not learn during, you learn before. Then comes the time of doing'. The boys of apartheid who have been in the bushes for the past two decades must step forward and act as men in South Africa in 2011. Antjie Krog will probably have serious problems with this very male analogy of mine, so I will give the poet the last word. If my observations and interpretations are correct, then this exploration was important. As Krog also puts it at the end of *Lady Anne*.⁶⁸

Die leuse van my vader wil ek herhaal:
 hy wat versuim om sy lewe
 en dié se plek noukeurig te ondersoek,
 het die Skrywer van sy verhaal gefaal.

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⁶⁸ KROG: *Lady Anne* 107.