

B.J. van der Walt

REPORT ON THE
SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF INSTITUTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION
– GRAND RAPIDS, 13-19 AUGUST, 1978*

Three years after the first conference of this nature (Potchefstroom, 9-13 September 1975) the second conference was held at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, USA on 13-19th August, 1978.

The 119 delegates as well as a number of observers, came from, inter alia, the following 20 countries: The Argentine, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chili, England, France, Guatemala, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malawi, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the USA. 62 Different institutions were represented.

It is not possible to give a detailed account of the six crowded days of the conference. The papers presented at the conference will be published by Calvin College at the request of the conference.

Preparation and background

Mr Achineku (Nigeria), Drs Marion Barnes (USA, Chairman), Nicholas Wolterstorff (USA, secretary), Christie Coetzee (South Africa), Jan Dengerink (the Netherlands), Ted Fackerell (Australia), Ryushu Hashimoto (Japan), Sidney Rooy (the Argentina),

* Brief reports about the conference also appeared in *RES News Exchange*, vol. 15, no. 9, September 7, 1978, p. 1389-1391; *Gereformeerde Weekblad*, September 15, 1978 (Prof. Herman Ridderbos); *Centraal Weekblad*, September 23, 1978 (Prof. Klaas Ruhnica); *Nederlands Dagblad*, September 8 and 9, 1978 (Drs. Kars Veling); *Reformatoorsch Dagblad*, September 2, 1978; *Woord en Daad* (Potchefstroom), October 1978; *IBC-Omsendbrief* no. 2., October 1978; *VU Magazine*, October 1978; *Trowel and Sword*, October 1978 (Prof. R.O. Zorn); *Fokus*, November 1978 and some South African newspapers.

Paul Schrottenboer (USA) and Bennie van der Walt (South Africa) were members of the Steering Committee who had four meetings subsequent to the first conference to plan the second conference.

Just prior to the conference the Free University of Amsterdam declared that it would also not be attending this second conference. In spite of the efforts of Calvin College and the Institute for Christian Studies (Toronto) to persuade the Free University to participate, they remained obdurate.

In the event the conference was attended by three observers from the “Vereniging voor Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs op Gereformeerde Grondslag” (the association which founded the Free University and still has some measure of power as far as FU-business is concerned) as well as by three lecturers from the Free University (in unofficial capacity).

At the request of and on the responsibility of Calvin College, Tuesday evening 15 August was set aside to discuss tensions amongst participating members, especially tensions relating to recent decisions by the Council of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education.

It is understandable that many delegates – specifically from South Africa and more specifically from Potchefstroom – approached the conference with mixed feelings. Why should those from Potchefstroom be called to account once again (the first time was at Potchefstroom in 1975)? Are there no other problems needing the urgent attention of reformed scholars in other parts of the world? Why can't *everybody* (like the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Calvin College and the Free University) reveal their problems concerning the Christian approach to scientific practice and academic responsibility to society so that these problems can be discussed frankly and aid mutual understanding?

It is adequate, however, to state that the first two days especially were loaded with apprehensive expectation. Organization, lobbying and planning of strategies were some of the less pleasant features of this period.

Inauguration

The conference was opened on Sunday 13 August with an evening service in the Shawnee Park Christian Reformed Church where Prof. H. Rooy (Buenos Aires) preached. The texts were from Amos 5:24 and Revelations 22:11ff. The theme was *Righteousness and Justice*. As one can expect of Prof. Rooy, it was a clear, powerful biblical word which made a deep impact on everybody. After the sermon somebody reflected that such powerful words had probably never been uttered in that church. It is highly recommended that everyone should try to get hold of the text of the sermon.

The first two days

As you know, the theme of the conference was *Justice in the international economic order*. The first two days, Monday and Tuesday, were set aside to place the whole problem in a wider perspective. Papers dealt with *Kingdom, church, world* (Professors Herman Ridderbos and Edward Clowney), *University and Society* (Professors M. Elaine Botha and Sutarno), *Theory and Praxis* (Professors Nic Wolterstorff, Henk Hart and Jan Dengerink) and *God's call for Justice* (Professors Tjaart van der Walt and Bernard Zijlstra).

For many people attending the conference this first part (the general introductory section) was the most interesting and valuable part of the conference, as the second part was often too technical and theoretical in nature.

The problem is probably to be found in the fact that it was a conference for *institutions* for Christian Education. These various institutions thus delegated their top men — who were often not economists, politicologists or jurists, while the *theme* of the conference (especially the second part) often underlined the need for such experts. The problem becomes even more serious when one realizes that many institutions (such as theological schools) would not be able to send specialists in, say, the economic field, even if they wanted to.

Added to this there is the difficulty that some delegates are not yet fully conversant with the basic principles of Christian scholarship and that they were sometimes “intimidated” by the high-altitude theories of some of the speakers – whose papers were often oriented too strongly to the West. In future this problem will have to be carefully considered.

Potchefstroom under the microscope

Tuesday 15 August, from 19h30 onwards, was set aside at the request and responsibility of Calvin College (not part of the official programme) for “Discussions on issues of tension among conference institutions”. It was already clear, prior to the meeting, that it would specifically concern the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education.

The auditorium was filled to capacity. Often it was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. It became three of the most intense hours of the whole conference.

Under the capable chairmanship of Prof. Howard Rienstra (Calvin College), brief introductions were delivered by Professors Bob Goudzwaard (the Netherlands), Sutarno (University Kristen, Salatiga, Indonesia), Richard Mouw (Calvin College) and W.M. Kgware (University of the North, South Africa). Prof. J. Hennie Coetzee (Potchefstroom University) replied briefly to points they raised.

After these introductions the whole meeting could participate in the discussion and ask questions. It is impossible to convey a full impression of three such packed hours.

An evening like this confirmed that true communication between brothers and sisters in Christ can establish a great deal of understanding, especially if the conversation is between equally sinful mortals, and not between sinful mortals and righteous individuals! It was not in the first place an academic discussion between learned professors but a frank, heart-searching encounter between people of the same faith. Those who were worried about recent events at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (viz. decisions regarding the

Koinonia Declaration, and the admission of Black and Coloured students only at post-graduate level) expressed concern not out of arrogance or because they were trying to impose their own solutions on Potchefstroom. On the part of the Potchefstroom delegates too there was a readiness to pay heed to the well-meant warnings. They openly conceded that there were still challenges calling for reformation.

It was amongst others as a result of this discussion that a decision was made on the last day of the conference to send letters to the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the Free University of Amsterdam.

Worldwide problems and challenges

On Thursday evening some institutions were given the opportunity to talk to all the delegates about the ideals they hold and the problems attendant upon these.

The Dooyeweerd Translation Society submitted a memorandum on their plans to make available in English the *Opera Dooyeweerdiana*.

The three observers of the "Vereniging voor Wetenschappelijke Onderwijs op Gereformeerd Grondslag" made known some details regarding the state of affairs at the Free University through their deputy chairman.

Prof. B. Jacobs (Guatemala) outlined the progress made at his theological seminary after the introduction of a Theological Education by Extension programme. In Latin America and other Third World countries this correspondence method offers special advantages over and above the ordinary way of theological training at residential theological schools.

The Rev. Mr S. Nyirenda (from Zomba, Malawi) gave a short survey of the history and work of his church (Church of Central Afrika Presbyterian) as well as their theological training. They have been able to find only half of the estimated sum of \$600 000 needed for the construction of the new college at Zomba.

Prof. R.O. Zorn of Geelong, Australia, then spoke of the pro-

blems of his college, asking for help in stocking their library (through donation of duplicates of books and magazines or the bequest of private libraries); aid in the form of bursaries to poor students especially those from the Third World; the provision of visiting lecturers (for example during sabbaticals) or help from emeritus professors.

Mr Perry Recker of Christian Educational Services gave an enthusiastic account of their work among students on campuses in a radius of 200 miles around Pittsburgh, USA. The CES is also involved in compiling a bibliography which will include details on all books, articles and tapes in English dealing with material of a reformed nature.

Prof. Sidney de Waal announced that as a result of the dedicated work of the Christian College Association of Canada the newly founded King's College (Edmonton, Canada) will be able to start lectures in 1979. The eleven lecturers who have been appointed in nine departments are already hard at work.

Finally Mr Richard Willis had the opportunity to talk about the activities of the Foundation for Christian Studies in New Zealand. This institution also cherishes the ideal of one day being able to establish a truly Christian University in their country.

Important resolutions

It was a great improvement on the Potchefstroom conference that business meetings were spread over the entire week so that everything did not have to be done on Saturday afternoon. The first meeting, dealing mainly with conference organization, was held on Monday evening.

On Thursday evening important decisions were taken. One of these was that while the conference was convinced that one or other form of official co-operation would benefit all the institutions, an alliance would not be created at the moment.

The business meeting was continued on Saturday.

Various invitations were extended for the presentation of the next conference. (Amongst others from Moore College, Sydney, Australia; the Universitas Kristen, Salatiga, Indonesia, and Dordt

College, Sioux Center, Iowa, USA.) After serious consideration the conference decided that first choice would fall on the Netherlands. The Free University, the theological schools of Kampen and Apeldoorn and the “Stichting bijzondere leerstoelen voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte” are asked to act as hosts. The second choice is a venue somewhere in the Third World.

As far as the theme is concerned, various suggestions came from the conference and were given for consideration to the Steering Committee: “Scholarship and Christian Faith”, “Christian Scholarship in principle and practice”, “The crisis of Christian Scholarship today”, “Science and Revelation” and “Syncretism/Synthesis in the world of Scholarship”.

A last convivial meeting

Friday evening was a memorable one. It was now possible to forget for a while the formidable spiritual banquet and to enjoy the dinner laid on in the Atop Union Bank Building of Grand Rapids. Prof. Howard Rienstra (a member of the City Council) delivered a witty opening word. Prof. John Kromminga (rector of Calvin Theological Seminary) did a most appropriate reading from the Scriptures. Prof. Carl Kaiser delivered some singing solos and the speaker was the honourable judge John Feikens (Judge in the Fifth District Court of the USA).

The most memorable part of the conference, however, will remain the personal contacts established between people of similar persuasion. Apart from formal meetings, papers and so forth the greatest value of such an international conference is to be found in the personal links created.

The rôle of our institutions

Saturday 19 August – the last day of the meeting – accorded an opportunity to four principals from four different parts of the world to focus the attention of the institutions for Christian Higher Education on their contemporary vocation.

Dr Sutarno (from Salatiga, Indonesia) addressed the meeting

on "How to promote the consciousness of justice and stewardship on the national level". Dr P.S. Oh (Pusan, Korea) spoke on "Service in Society". Dr A. Diekema (Grand Rapids, USA) spoke on "Dialogue between the leaders of the multinationals and the academics". Dr T. van der Walt (Potchefstroom, South Africa) spoke the concluding word on "Exchange between the institutions (staff, students, materials) with a view to the third conference".

Concluding ceremony

After the last business meeting proceedings were concluded by Prof. J. Christie Coetzee (South Africa) who read from Romans 8, Prof. R. R. Hashimoto (Japan) and S. Nyirenda (Malawi) each of whom said a prayer in his own language and a hymn of praise to God to whom all thanks are due.

Evaluation

In the course of this report mention has already been made of several matters which should receive attention at future conferences. This conference has been an improvement on the first one in several respects. The ten discussion groups, for instance, contributed greatly to the papers being discussed more adequately. The conference was well organized and the papers of a high standard.

The organizing committee and the two evaluation committees (appointed at the beginning of the conference) indicated some weaknesses of which a few will be mentioned here.

An essential problem was that the programme was too crowded with the result that subjects could not be discussed fully and there was not enough time for conference delegates to establish personal links – at least during normal hours!

The only solution for the future might be to extend the period to ten days or two weeks. That would allow the programme to be structured as follows:

Mornings: Bible studies (possibly in groups) which are directly

relevant to the subject for the day. This will be followed by one paper only (plus possibly a respondent) of a general nature dealing with fundamental aspects of the central theme followed by a brief plenary discussion.

Afternoons: Workshops for the various subjects in which the theme is applied to specific subjects as regards research and teaching. (These groups can then report back to the general meeting on the results of their discussions.)

Evenings: These are kept open for business meetings, the dissemination of information pertaining to the various institutions, discussion of problems, etc..

Evaluation has further indicated that papers were too theoretical, too general — it was not always clear what speakers wanted conferees to *do* with information, and they gave too little concrete information as to solving specific needs of various institutions. (The relationship between the rôle of institutions for Christian Higher Education and justice in the international economic order did not emerge clearly.) Furthermore, no clear link could be discerned between papers delivered during the first two days and those of the second part of the conference.

The respondents (second papers): their replies to the main papers were sometimes too long, they were often not written in deliberation with the main speakers and sometimes degenerated into second lectures instead of exploring weaknesses in the main lectures. It is essential that in future care should be taken to choose respondents from a different society or part of the world than that of the main speaker. His/her task would then especially be to focus the attention of the conference on the practical implications of the paper read by the main speaker.

The discussion groups were often dominated by representatives from the First World, so that there wasn't sufficient input from the Third World. Participants often gave fresh lectures instead of discussing the papers. The atmosphere was often forced and the discussion period might in future be combined with the tea/coffee break to make it more relaxed. Chairmen will have to be experts who will really be able to give guidance.

Lastly, and this is not the least important condition for a suc-

successful conference, is that each delegate should receive copies of all the papers *at least* a month in advance of the conference so that they will be able to study them properly.

This brief report is concluded, then, with the above suggestions for an even better planned and more successful conference in three years' time.

**