

Theron, PF  
University of Stellenbosch

# From moral authority to insignificant minority

## The precarious state of the Dutch Reformed Church in a post-apartheid South Africa<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the transformation of the “dearly beloved church” of the Afrikaners from a formerly mighty social institution in the “old” South Africa, to just another minority group in the “new”. It is argued that the reformed tradition is in need of a “political theology” in which the church’s message of the cross is not compromised in search of social glory and political power.

### INTRODUCTION

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) is by and large, the church of the people to whom I belong i.e. the Afrikaners. We have been living for three and a half centuries in Africa. The name we call ourselves implies that we belong to Africa. Our language, although predominantly related to Dutch, is fundamentally different. In the Afrikaans language you can smell the soil of Africa, feel her scorching sun, see her wide open plains and towering mountains, taste her food, savour her wild life. We are sometimes referred to as “the only white tribe” in a primarily black continent. That has always made our situation somewhat precarious.

During the time of the *Dutch East India Company’s* administration (1652-1795) and subsequent British rule, our ancestors, comprising Calvinists from the Netherlands, religious refugees like the French Huguenots, German Protestants, Frisians and Walloons,<sup>2</sup> settled initially at the southern-most tip of Africa, and gradually spread to the east and the north to what is today known as the Republic of South Africa. During the 1948 elections the National Party comprising for the most part Afrikaners, came to power and ruled the country through the policy of apartheid. Being the church of the Afrikaners, the DRC was one of the mightiest institutions of the “old” South Africa.

---

1 Paper read at the conference on the church as a minority (“Strangers in the night”) in the Netherlands, October 2006.

2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrikaner>, 11/9/2006. For a comprehensive study of the history of the Afrikaner people, see the fascinating account of Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*, Cape Town, Charlottesville (Tafelberg, University of Virginia Press) 2003.

In this article I am trying to give a short account of the transformation that took place within the DRC from a previously privileged religious institution to merely another minority group within a secularized state and social order.

Since the DRC provided the theological justification of the discredited policy of apartheid, the Afrikaners' formerly "dearly beloved church", probably more than any other institution, bears the brunt of this public disgrace. Although the two other traditionally reformed "sister" churches of the DRC<sup>3</sup> contributed more than a modest share in justifying Afrikaner political aspirations, they are totally outnumbered by the DRC and accordingly in the post-apartheid period far less under fire. Having been the moral authority of the previous social order, the replacement by the new involved a dwindling of the social clout and a disappearance of the political power the DRC enjoyed since the National Party came to power. This loss of relevance does not sit too well with the DRC.

Because the DRC, in general, consists of Afrikaners, it was difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between DRC and Afrikanerdom.<sup>4</sup> When asked what he would do if he had to choose between the church and Afrikaner aspirations a former moderator, who was at the same time chairman of the influential *Afrikaner Broederbond* (Covenant of Brothers) as well as the *F.A.K.* (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies), replied that he could see no conflict of interest.<sup>5</sup> The well-known distinction of Abraham Kuyper between the church as "institute" and as "organism" coupled with the idea of the "volkskerk" in the sense of a church of the people<sup>6</sup> might have played a role in this regard.

#### FROM "DEARLY BELOVED" TO "VILLAIN OF THE PIECE"

From the very start the history of the DRC is closely connected with the changes and chances, the fortunes and vicissitudes, of the Afrikaner people during the course of their rather fateful history. Consequently, the decline in social sway of the DRC happened as a sequel to, what has been called, the "surrender without defeat"<sup>7</sup> by the Afrikaners of the political power they had wielded for more than 40 years before the advent of the new South Africa in the early parts of the 1990s.

In view of the fact that racial segregation and white supremacy was part and parcel of the South African society long before the National Party came to power, the Afrikaners could hardly be held accountable for introducing apartheid. After 1948 however, apartheid more and more assumed an ideological character. By using legislative means the *National Party* attempted to bring about as clinical a separation as possible.<sup>8</sup> And the DRC was but too willing to provide a theological platform for this superhuman endeavour.

Presumably to be expected in view of our puritan past,<sup>9</sup> concern for morality has always been a characteristic of the DRC. Some would even be tempted to describe the DRC as traditionally

---

3 Hervormde Kerk (Reformed Church) and Gereformeerde Kerke (Reformed Churches)

4 See T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom. Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1975.

5 Cecile Cilliers, "Nuwe Spiritualiteit" in: *Kerkbode* 8 September 2006, 6.

6 Herman Giliomee, "'The weakness of some': The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy", in: *Scriptura* 83 (2003), p.222 (212-244): "When Britain tried to anglicise the Cape in the nineteenth century those political and church leaders who resisted the attempt warned that the loss of the Dutch language would also lead to a loss of the Reformed faith."

7 Hermann Giliomee, "Surrender without defeat: Afrikaners and the South African 'Miracle,'" in: *Spotlight*, (South African Institute of Race Relations, Number 2/97, October 1997).

8 Etienne de Villiers, "The influence of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) on the public policy during the late 80's and 90's", in: *Scriptura* 76 (2001), 51 (51-61)

9 See W.A. de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*, New York 1975.

tilted towards moralist tendencies.<sup>10</sup> That probably distinguishes us to some extent from the *Hervormde Kerk* on our moral left, and the *Gereformeerde Kerken* on our doctrinal right.

In spite of the fact that we held the Reformed confessions in high esteem, we never were too excessively concerned about doctrinal (im)purity. For sure, we were theologically conservative – even in a fundamentalist sense, but in reality morals were our specialty. As a matter of fact, Biblical fundamentalism and a leaning towards moralising, go happily hand in hand. I recall a Sunday school lesson from my childhood that dealt with the feeding of the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish. Afterwards the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces. The moral of the story? We should not squander!

With regard to doctrine the DRC is therefore rather ambiguous. In many respects we can hardly claim to be a typical Reformed church. Neither the doctrine of election, nor the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, i. e. justification by faith alone, play a decisive role in our preaching and spirituality. In this respect the influence of the Scottish clergy must be mentioned. Due to a dearth of ministers of religion at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English governor, Lord Charles Somerset, imported Scottish ministers to anglicise the Reformed Church.<sup>11</sup> These Scottish Calvinists with their zealous, revivalist tendencies coupled with evangelicalism and Methodists offshoots, deeply influenced the DRC.

While a student at Utrecht in the Netherlands, the internationally renowned Andrew Murray (as well as other South African students) came into contact with the Dutch Reveil. The Reveil's rejection of intellectualistic scholasticism promoted this leaning towards subjective religious experiences. "Nourished by Scottish Calvinism and the Dutch Reveil, the orthodox but evangelically enthusiastic movement in the Cape Reformed church reached its high point in the early 1860s with the Great Revival. Outbreaks of communal ecstasy occurred in village after village throughout the Cape Province. With a new zeal for Christian witness, hundreds were returned to the field of the N.G." (Dutch Reformed)<sup>12</sup> As a boy I was present in prayer meetings, which were held for 10 days between Ascension Day and Pentecost, when adults would burst out in tears confessing their guilt before God and their fellow believers.

Because of the intimate relation between the DRC and the Afrikaner people, moral acceptability of political strategy was of the essence. There can be little doubt that at first the majority of Afrikaners believed that what they were striving to achieve was nothing less than equity for all the peoples of South Africa. They did not consider the millions of black people to be a homogenous group, but as separate "peoples" (Zulus, Xhosa's etc.) each entitled to rule themselves in their own country (the "homelands") just like the various "peoples" in Europe. In other words, South Africa comprised many minorities, whose cultures and existence as different peoples should be safeguarded. Even J.H.P. Serfontein, who was extremely critical of the apartheid policy, warned that opponents, who regarded the system as mere racism, were making a serious blunder.<sup>13</sup>

---

10 For the tendency to transform the Gospel into Law, see Johan Cilliers, *God vir ons. 'n Analise en beoordeling van Nederduitse Gereformeerde volksprediking (1960-1980)*, Chapter 3, Cape Town (Lux Verbi) 1994, 40-55.

11 Cf. Hermann Giliomee, "The weakness of some": The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy", in: *Scriptura* 83 (2003), p.222 (212-244).

12 T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom. Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1975, 58. Cf. W.D. Jonker, "Suid-Afrika se verbondenheid met Europa: Die teologie", in *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 29 (1989), 149-158.

13 J.H.P. Serfontein, *Apartheid Change and the NG Kerk*, Emmerentia (Taurus) 1982, 9.

In the course of time however, it became clear that the policy would be immensely unfavourable for the black peoples, and the costs involved would be enormous to the whites. This necessitated a more ideological justification and rationalisation. Time does not allow going into the intricacies of the argumentation. Suffice to say that where the defence of apartheid was initially merely exculpatory – the Bible is not against it – it later was considered to be a positive Scriptural demand.<sup>14</sup> Racial integration would boil down to disobedience to divine “creation ordinance”. Ironically, “the weakness of some” as the Synod of 1857 called the unwillingness of people to take part in integrated worship, now became an attribute of the “strong”.<sup>15</sup> The rest were branded as liberals.

The breakdown of apartheid as practical policy and the deconstruction of its justification as mere ideology caused the DRC to share the shame associated with this ill-fated experiment. Moreover, many of her faithful children have become disillusioned with their formerly “dearly beloved church”. They blame her, sometimes vociferously, for the present dilemma of the Afrikaner. On an Afrikaans radio programme broadcast during the General Synod of 2004, people were invited to phone in and give their opinion of the DRC. The response of many can only be described as “venomous”. Their disenchantment with their formerly spiritual mother often culminates in leaving her residence in search of a new spiritual dwelling.

Previously the moral authority of the DRC was such that the powers that be could ill afford to ignore her. Some would argue it was the other way round. Conceivably one could say that the DRC all too willingly danced to the tune dictated by the Afrikaner civil society. In that case the DRC did not lead but rather followed the people providing the moral authority Afrikanerdom needed. The critical distance between church as an institute and the Afrikaner people disappeared with the result that the DRC could function as the bastion of Afrikaner civil religion. As Willem Nicol<sup>16</sup> eloquently puts it: “It seems to me that the developments in the DRC were a reflection of the movement in the heart of Afrikanerdom, a mirror of its fear, an accompaniment of the flock.”

Since moral impeccability in contrast to a liberal disposition is extremely important in moralist preaching, the revelations of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* came as a tremendous shock to the Afrikaners. Instead of the epitome of respectability, we were exposed as being very much like the rest of world, prone to sinful self-seeking at the expense of others. And when push comes to shove we were not at a loss to do what it takes to acquire our goals. What’s more, many DRC members believe our “dearly beloved Church” was in on the deal. Statistics indicate that at present they are leaving the sinking ship fast and furiously.

“BETWEEN A RAINBOW AND A HARD PLACE”<sup>17</sup>

The response of the Afrikaners to the new South Africa is ambiguous. It took us a long time to appreciate that there “is something rotten in the state of Denmark” (William Shakespeare). Since

---

14 See P.F.(Flip) Theron: “Kerklike Eenheid en Natuurlike Verskeidenheid” in: Johann Kinghorn (ed.) *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid, Johannesburg*, (Macmillan), 1986, 195.

15 Hermann Giliomee argued that the unwillingness to worship with people of colour was initially not a matter of race but of class although status and colour largely coincided. “During the 1830s when the government indentured white servants brought from Britain with western Cape farmers, the latter refused to take them along to church.” “‘The weakness of some’: The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy”, 217. The London Missionary Society with Dr. John Philips as superintendent also organize its converts its converts among the slaves into a separate parish. Hermann Giliomee, “The weakness of some”, 218.

16 Willem Nicol, “Accompanying the flock – The development of the Dutch Reformed Church 1974-1990” in: *Scriptura* 76 (2001) 134 (133-138)

17 Lawrence Schlemmer, “Between a rainbow and a hard place: Threads and opportunities in racial reconciliation in South Africa” in: *Fast Facts*, 2001/no 9 (September).

recognising our illusions for what they are, we are deeply grateful for the relative peaceful transition of power that took place. It is a tremendous relief to be rid of the impossible responsibility and unbearable burden<sup>18</sup> to rule as a white minority (9.6% all whites included) the overwhelming black majority (79%, coloureds and Indians excluded) of this country.<sup>19</sup> At the same time the Afrikaners feel extremely vulnerable. The Afrikaner “laager” that previously provided shelter, had broken down and was replaced by the symbol of the South African “rainbow nation”.<sup>20</sup> It seems, however, that this rainbow is quickly disappearing under the searing African sun.

A decade down the line since the “Mandela miracle”, the initial euphoria has died down.<sup>21</sup> The “tripartite alliance” between the ANC, Cosatu, and the South African Communist Party, has progressively become more and more acrimonious. The split between supporters of president Mbeki and the followers of former vice-president (and still vice-president of the ANC) Mr. Jacob Zuma, gives cause for concern. On the one hand the tendency of the ANC towards attaining control over the army, police, bureaucracy, public broadcaster, central bank and judiciary, is disturbing. In their latest annual report the *South African Institute of Race Relations* concludes that the South African judicial independence, as one of the pillars on which our constitutional democracy rests, is in jeopardy.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand a break-up of the ruling party may issue in populace government, a possibility that one does not care to think about.

Lawrence Schlemmer<sup>23</sup> fears that in spite of great strides forward with regard to racial reconciliation, social stress and material frustration may result in a search for scapegoats with “racial blaming” as an ever-present possibility. He notes since 1997 an inclination amongst political leadership “to put racism back on the popular agenda by labelling more and more of what it does not like as ‘racism’.”<sup>24</sup> All in all one is tempted to repeat the platitude that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

In spite of the present economic boom and the fact that black multi-millionaires have increased at a terrific rate, the position of the poor has not improved but apparently worsened. Some suggest that what is happening in South Africa is a reconciliation between the black and white select elite.<sup>25</sup> At the same time unemployment has soared by between 30% and 40% the past decade.<sup>26</sup> Much money is entering our country, but according to the experts this is predominantly “hot money” that could be transferred to other shores by pushing a button, whilst what we need is investment in enterprises of a more permanent nature.

---

18 See the title of Boris Asoyan, *Apartheid “The White Man’s Burden”*, Moskou (Progress Publishers) 1988.

19 Jurgens Hendriks, *Die Toekoms van die Kerk, Die Kerk van die Toekoms*, University of Stellenbosch, November 2003, 9f.

20 H. J. Hendriks, “A rainbow over the laager. The Dutch Reformed Church crossing the Apartheid Boundary”, in: *Missionalia* 27 (1999), 330-341.

21 See P.F. Theron, “Blooming or bleeding? The ‘South African Dream’ in the Light of Eschatological Peace”, in: A van Egmond, D. van Keulen (eds.) *Christian Hope in Context II, Studies in Reformed Theology* 5, Zoetermeer (Meinema), 73-94.

22 South African Institute of Race Relations. *75 Annual Report 1st April 2004 to 31 March 2005*, 27. Cf. Koos Malan, “Die onafhanklikheid van die regbank: Die regbank: hoe onafhanklik en doeltreffend?”, in: *Die Vrye Afrikaan*, Julie 2006 (Jaargang 3 no 11)

23 Lawrence Schlemmer, “Between a rainbow and a hard place”, in: *Fast Facts* No 9/2001, 3

24 L. Schlemmer, “Between a rainbow and a hard place”, 12.

25 Hermann Giliomee, .” “The weakness of some’: The Dutch Reformed Church and White Supremacy”, 239: “The legitimate black drive for racial justice has become a headlong rush to empower the black elite.”

26 South African Institute of Race Relations, *Annual Report 2005*, 20.

We are in desperate need of skilled labour in many fields but because of affirmative action<sup>27</sup>, a horrifying violent crime rate, a “criminal justice system in crisis”<sup>28</sup>, and the fear that the same fate as the Zimbabwean people may befall us, droves of highly trained people are leaving the country. There is even talk of an Afrikaner diaspora abroad especially in English speaking countries. This “brain-drain” we can ill afford in view of the lack of capacity to deliver social services like, for instance, medical care. Due to aids the death rate has according to press reports rocketed over the past year.

## ADAPT OR DIE?

How is the DRC adapting to the new South Africa? On the evidence of statistical data Jurgens Hendriks contends that the indications are manifestly clear that the Reformed Church group as a whole (including all ethnic groups), although not realising its seriousness, is (to put it mildly) in a spot of bother. I quote: “To my mind the core of their problems is the world-wide church shift, the aftermath of the era of apartheid, the internal struggle for unity, and the inability of older members to adapt to a new situation.”<sup>29</sup> He detects over the past 20 years a major shift mainly to Pentecostal and Independent Churches.

One gets the impression that quite a number of people are also abandoning ship in more or less the opposite direction. They are drifting away from the Christian faith without any intention to seek another spiritual shelter. During November 2002 a debate exploded on religious issues on an Internet journal (*Litnet*) that was totally unheard of in South Africa. This heated discussion was later made available on hard copy under the title, *The contentious God (Die omstrede God)*. Some of those participating made no bones about it that they rejected the essential substance of the Christian faith sometimes not shying away from using crude language.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, people who previously would have been hesitant to express convictions and feelings that did not tally with the teaching of the DRC, have no longer any scruples whatsoever.

One can hardly say that the DRC is doing her utmost trying to defend the tenets of truth of our reformed and ecumenical confessions. Certainly, there are those who try to explain the hermeneutical character of the Christian confessions, and to clear up many caricatures in this regard. Others like the self-styled “New Reformers” seem intent on joining the fray against the discredited church and her tradition. They sometimes seem bent on saving the Christian faith by abolishing it.<sup>31</sup> Parading as postmodernists they have swallowed the tenets of what has been termed “the late-modern West”,<sup>32</sup> hook, line and sinker. Unfortunately the debate rarely rises above the

---

27 In a highly critical analysis of “affirmative action” Jannie Gagiano, who was outspoken in his criticism of the old South Africa (see his, “Meanwhile back at the ‘Boereplaas’” in: *Politikon* 14 (1987), 3-23), describes the South African brand of affirmative action as totally different from the American form. According to him the former “has its foundations in the influence that Bolshevism exercised over liberation ideology during the extended period that the ANC and the SADC conjoined in a war for liberation under the tutelage of the Soviet Union.” See Jannie Gagiano, “What is transformation? Party loyalty and the spoils of “liberation”” in: *Die Vrye Afrikaan*, 3 no 13 (Augustus 2006)

28 South African Institute of Race Relations, *Annual Report 2005*, 26.

29 Jurgens Hendriks, *Die Toekoms van die Kerk*, 10.

30 Jaap Durand, *Doodloopstrate van die geloof. 'n Perspektief op die Nuwe Hervorming*, University of Stellenbosch (Rapid Access Publishers) 2005, 9f.

31 For a discussion of the so-called “New Reformation”, see Jaap Durand, *Doodloopstrate van die Geloof*.

32 Oliver O'Donovan, *The desire of the nations. Rediscovering the roots of political theology*, Cambridge (University Press) 1996, 226.

level of platitudes as the philosopher, Andreas Kinneging<sup>33</sup> describes the present public discussions in the Western world.

As regards the flaking off of membership in the direction of the charismatic movement, the DRC seems again determined to follow the flock and to go with the flow. In accordance with the spiritual trend, the traditional tension between an Arminian and a reformed spirituality is resolved in favour of the former which seems to be hi-jacking the DRC. Entering a Sunday service you often will be hard pressed to recognise it as the gathering of a reformed congregation. Pandering to the whims of the people is apparently a priority.

That is also the reason why many members of the church are so sceptical about the efforts of the church leaders to move towards forming one church with the rest of the DRC family of churches that came about through the missionary work of the DRC amongst the indigenous peoples.<sup>34</sup> Is it motivated by theological conviction or political expediency? After all, also the Afrikaans newspapers are strongly advocating a move to greater church unity. This suspicion is the more prevalent since political correctness within Afrikaner ranks seems at present to be at a premium and rather painful to observe.

Due to her track record the DRC is at a disadvantage when it comes to social relevance in the new South Africa. The present powers that be are not likely to pay overly much attention to her. On the other hand, our traditional preference for morality at the expense of doctrine suits the late-modern emphasis on ethics and the aversion against dogmatics just fine. At the moment there is an emphasis on (social) ethics in theological circles perhaps unequalled in our history. One has difficulty in suppressing the suspicion that this might be an effort to make us acceptable and, maybe, reclaim some of our previous social splendour.

The difficulty, however, is that the ethical issues we are facing, are far more complicated than the often petty problems (dancing for instance) of our puritan past. At the moment homosexuality that has been intensely debated abroad, has become a burning issue in the DRC. Our past strategy to postpone serious problems by passing the buck from one synod to the next, exploded in our faces when a minister's secret homosexual partner committed suicide. Answers were immediately demanded, which we were unable to provide. The understandable hesitancy to take a decisive stand because of uncertainty but also for fear that this may tear the DRC in two, is often met with mockery by DRC members seeing it as just another instance of our unwillingness to be unpopular with the people, be it one way or the other.

## FROM REFORMED THEOCRACY TO SECULAR DEMOCRACY

In the new South Africa theocracy (cf. Article 36 of *Confessio Belgica*) has been replaced by a liberal democracy of majority rule, with a secular constitution in which all religions are in principle treated as equal, guaranteeing individual freedoms based on a bill of rights.<sup>35</sup> Former proponents of a Reformed theocracy tried in vain to include a reference to the Triune God and the maintenance of "Christian values".<sup>36</sup> In a country where almost 80% of the population claim to be

---

33 Andreas Kinneging, *Geografie van goed en kwaad. Filosofische Essays*, Utrecht (Uitgeverij het Spectrum) 2005.

34 At the moment there are hopeful signs that real progress is being made in this regard.

35 Cf. Etienne de Villiers, "The influence of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) on Public Policy", 51f. Jaap Durand, *Ontluisterde Wêreld. Die Afrikaner en sy kerk in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika*, Wellington (Lux Verbi) 2002, Chapters 1 and 2.

36 Etienne de Villiers, "The influence of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) on Public Policy", 55f.

Christians,<sup>37</sup> coming to terms with a “neutral” state, is most certainly not a matter of course. It is in any case impossible to accommodate every religion with regard to, for instance, weekly (Sunday) and public religious holidays (Easter weekend, Christmas, etc).

Also opponents of apartheid belonging to the reformed flock, sometimes with a strong leaning towards “liberation theology”, previously discarded neutrality in political matters emphatically appealing to the well-known reformed adage claiming that every inch of reality belongs to Christ. Nowadays, however, theocracy in whatever form seems as dead as the proverbial doornail. “Neutral” (whatever that may mean) politics has won the day. As could be expected, all forms of authority, and therefore society as such, is in jeopardy.

Across the globe the reformed family is in desperate need to rethink our “political theology”. Resistance against apartheid was to a large extent informed by Barth’s well-known essay, *The Christian Community and the Civil Community*. The way in which he sees church and state as concentric circles reflecting the Kingdom of God, is obviously flawed as convincingly argued by a number of critics.<sup>38</sup> The concept used in the *Open Letter (Ope Brief)* of 1982 to describe the church as an *experimental garden (proeftuin)* for the world, is at the very least confusing if not misleading.

At the same time it is impossible to separate church and state completely. Referring to 1 Samuel 3: 1 (“In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions”) and Judges 17:6; 21:25 (“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit”), Noordmans maintains a close connection between the two statements and continues: “Church and state can never be totally separated. Whatever the form, in essence the government of this world remains a theocracy.”<sup>39</sup>

O’Donovan cautions that civil religion is not only a corruption when the church is in cahoots with government, because civil religion can also prosper in opposition. That happens for instance when it serves the interest of the political constitution of society by fostering virtues which may be useful for the state but autonomous because cut loose from evangelical authority.<sup>40</sup> Jacques Maritain’s proposal of a “democratic secular faith” is a case in point. That implies that “the democratic ‘creed’, not the Gospel, becomes the heart of the church’s message to the state”. O’Donovan grants that “the church may always make the best of any coincidence of political doctrine between Christians and non-Christians that it lights upon; but ‘making the best’ means making the evangelical content of the doctrine clear, not veiling it in embarrassment.”<sup>41</sup>

He advocates a “political theology”, as prerequisite for political ethics that cuts short the suspicion that its participants have grown tired of talking about God. According to this form of “political theology” all the passing powers and rulers of this world are signs of the coming Kingship of God, and therefore of their impending disappearance. It draws on the Christian tradition and does not shy away from topics like repentance, forgiveness, creation, Incarnation, justification, judgment, original sin even if liberal modernism has no use for these concepts.<sup>42</sup>

---

37 Jurgens Hendriks, *Die Toekoms van die Kerk*, 6f.

38 Amongst many reactions see Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 213f. For a South African reaction, cf. P.F. Theron, “Die vreemdheid van die kerk. ’n Reaksie op die Ope Brief”, in: David J. Bosch, Adrio König, Willem D. Nicol, *Perspektief op die Ope Brief*, Kaapstad, Pretoria, Johannesburg, (Human and Rousseau) 1982, 123-133.

39 O. Noordmans, “Gestalte en Gees”, in: *Verzamelde Werken* 1980, Kampen (Kok), 205.

40 O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 225.

41 O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 219.

42 O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 3.

In spite of the perennial temptation to blur the distinction between political authorities and God's divine rule, "secular" and "sacred" must not be separated. After all, the judicial idea is central to the "political" idea of God's Kingship.<sup>43</sup> O'Donovan maintains that *secular* should be understood in the same sense as *saeculum*, referring to this passing age. This duality of state and church is destined to disappear in the definitive, eschatological disclosure of God's hidden Rule in the Crucified Christ. "The peril of the Christendom idea – precisely the same peril that attends upon the post-Christendom idea of the religiously neutral state – was that of negative collusion: the pretence that there was now no further challenge to be issued to the rulers in the name of the ruling Christ". The church should always be on the alert, because wherever the Spirit of Christ is at work the spirit of the Antichrist is lurking.<sup>44</sup> Therefore the church should guard against selling our soul to the modern ideology of progress that is always doomed to disappear in the face of the crisis created by the coming of God's Kingdom.

## STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

The theme of this conference, "Strangers in the night", strikes me as extremely appropriate to describe the present position of the Afrikaners in general, and the DRC in particular. It reminds me of the patriarch Jacob in Genesis 28. There we encounter him outside the land of his ancestors reclining with his head on a stone under an alien night sky on unfriendly foreign soil.

God and land were closely connected in the widely held belief of the prevailing "civil religion" of the time. Also much later (2Ki 5:13) Naaman requested to take as much earth as a pair of mules could carry from the land of Israel to Aram in order to be able to sacrifice to the God of Israel. When David was driven from his country his enemies snarled at him: "Go, serve other gods" (1Sa 26: 19).<sup>45</sup>

The moment Jacob crossed the boundary at Beersheba, he also left behind the God of his fathers. Having done his elder brother, Esau, out of his blessing by cleverly pinching it from their faltering father, this arrant cheat is now a fugitive fleeing from his guilty past into an uncertain and apparently God-forsaken future. That night however, he made a staggering discovery: "'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place!'" (Ge 28: 16f.).

Could it be that God in his mercy is, albeit painful, revealing Himself to us? Could it be that the Crucified Christ is teaching us the true meaning of election and justification by telling us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"? (2Co12: 9). Could it be that we are about to learn with Paul to boast and delight "in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"? (2Co12: 10).

In the British museum is a map dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century with all sorts of frightening comments written all over it like, "Here are giants", "here are dragons", "here are fiery scorpions". For a time this chart belonged to the scientist, sir John Franklin. He scratched out these terrifying remarks and wrote across the map: "Here is God!"

### KEY WORDS

Afrikanerdom  
Apartheid

---

43 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 36.

44 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 213

45 O. Noordmans, *Verzamelde Werken VII*, Kampen (Kok) 1990, 18.

Moralism  
Political theology  
Puritanism  
Secular, sacred

**TREFWOORDE**

Afrikanerdom  
Apartheid  
Moralisme  
Politieke teologie  
Puritanisme  
Sekulêr, heilig