

# Was the Belhar Confession a rejection of Modern Protestant Theology? Invoking the past as a shield for the future

## ABSTRACT

The dawn of Modern Protestantism has brought with it innovative ways of thinking and speaking about God. Enveloped in this innovation came a liberal thought and speech about God. The result was the fusion of culture and other human concerns with the Christian faith. In some instances this fusion produced in turn conditions for membership in the church of Christ. This paper attempts to delve into the impetus that was created by Modern Protestantism to reveal that the apartheid ordeal from which the South African community is struggling to recover from should be located within Modern Protestantism, yet it argues that it is impossible to completely chastise Modern Protestantism because of this.

## INTRODUCTION

Modern Protestant theology brought with it innovative ways of speaking about the relationship of God to human beings. While it genuinely wanted to speak about God and at the same time wanted to make room for issues such as culture, identity etc, it discovered later that these issues had made the revealed Word of God as contained in the Bible subsidiary to culture and other issues that concern the way that human beings organise themselves on earth.

The Barmen Theological Declaration remained acutely aware of the dangers that natural theology brought with it into the life of the church. It was for this reason that the authors of the Barmen Declaration challenged not primarily the fusion of culture and theology as was conspicuous in the theology German Christians but fundamentally criticised a manner of doing theology that had been knocking at the door of the church for two hundred years. The Barmen Declaration challenged innocuous petitions that were made by modern protestant theology to help the church to be more relevant in a time when the church wanted to be relevant and wanted to make sense to the world.

The Belhar Confession has been the subject of much debate in contemporary South African reformed circles since its inception in 1986. This confession which remains indebted to the theology that underpinned the Barmen Theological Declaration and which also borrowed the structure of this declaration has nonetheless not been forth coming in transcending its own historical context which was obsessed with the differences between people. While this confession clearly rejects the natural theology which put white people in a category different to black people, its confessors have been mute on whether this confession was essentially a rejection of a theology that allowed some to make culture and other human concerns subsidiary to the revealed Word of God.

This paper is an attempt to answer the question of whether the Belhar Confession was a rejection of Modern Protestant theology. By invoking the history that made the soil fertile for the birth of this confession and outlining the situation of the Afrikaner people which led them to devise a theology that they thought was justified in ignoring the revealed Word of God as they sought to consolidate their grip on power in this country, this paper will argue that the same theology that indirectly produced the German Christians is to be blamed in this regard. The word indirectly is used here because this paper is aware that it is impossible to reject Modern Protestantism in particular; however it admits that it is possible to reject a tendency within this method of doing theology which always threatens the superiority of the Word of God to other issues.

Furthermore this paper acknowledges the many calls for African Christians to redefine their being in this era. Thus a debate concerning an African reformation (which is the need for the African reformed Christian to seriously engage his/her Africanity in his reformed deliberations) comes at a time when Africans within the reformed tradition has to heed the mistakes that were made in the past as the church attempted to become relevant. Yet this concern should not be used as a deterrent for asserting an African reformed identity particularly when African Christians were not allowed the possibility of integrating their Africanity with this faith when they were converted to this faith.

## 1. INVOKING THE PAST: THE EVOLUTION OF THE THEOLOGISED POLITICS OF THE AFRIKANER PEOPLE.

Apartheid as an ideology did not have inherent theological underpinnings until a later stage in its development. Jonker maintains that we should assume that there were historical and social reasons that favoured the adoption of apartheid as a policy by the white Afrikaners, who only subsequently appealed to scripture and Calvinistic views to strengthen their case.<sup>1</sup>

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) made its formal appearance on South African soil after the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652. The DRC synod of 1857 made the decision that churches formed among the indigenous nations, should celebrate the Eucharist in separation from the so-called Europeans. Kinghorn characterises the era following 1857 and lasting until 1927 as the non-doctrinal era.<sup>2</sup> The segregated churches were understood during this period to be nothing more than a practical solution which would accommodate the 'weakness of some' that were not comfortable with the celebration of the Lord's Supper with those whose race, social and economic status they did not share. This took effect because of a deliberate move within Afrikaner reformed circles to read the Bible for socio-economic purposes.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason it is contended that an examination of the evolution of apartheid<sup>4</sup> needs to take into account not only the discomfort that some whites had with blacks, but also the socio-economic

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1 W D Jonker, 'The Gospel and Political Freedom', in: A. van Egmond and D. van Keulen (eds.), 1996. *Studies in Reformed Theology 1: Freedom*. Baarn: Callenbach. 244.

2 J Kinghorn, 'Die teologie van apartheid: Vormende faktore'. In: J Kinghorn (ed.), *Die NG Kerk en Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1986: 57-69.

3 Cf. D J Smit, 'The ethics of interpretation – and South Africa'. In: *Scriptura* 33 (1990), 29-43.

4 Apartheid refers to the idea of separate development. There are numerous authors of this concept, but it is important to note that this concept met its pivotal significance under H F Verwoerd. Although it claimed that its chief objective was to assist all groups to develop to the best of their own potential, it was not as innocuous as it sounded given the fact that the white group always retained its superiority over the other groups. It was this very group which in essence determined the lives and degree of development of the subordinate groups. For detailed exploration of this cf. R S Tshaka, *The URCSA and a renewed public responsibility*. Unpublished MTh thesis. Free University of Amsterdam, 2004.

and political issues which precipitated the theological underpinnings to apartheid. To some degree it can be concluded that the socio-economic, cultural and political aspects are to be sought in the Afrikaner people's search for an identity. Kinghorn has characterised their usage of the Bible as 'in search of an exegesis'.<sup>5</sup>

The evolution of the idea of nationhood amongst the Afrikaner people of South Africa was strengthened after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the subsequent challenges which confronted these people in their search for a place to call their own. It is perhaps fair to maintain that the Afrikaner nationalist ideology developed historically as a response to social change.<sup>6</sup> The Anglo-Boer War is of particular importance, for it illustrates the tension among white people themselves and each group's ambitions to have a monopoly over the political realm of South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

The conventional wisdom of the ruling class concerning South African politics can be summarised as follows: After the defeat of the Boer Republics in 1902 and the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, politics was confined to the predominantly English-speaking and predominantly Afrikaans-speaking groups of whites, irrespective of the classes to which they belonged or aspired to belong.<sup>8</sup> In the struggle between the Afrikaners and the English the position of the black peoples of South Africa was analogous to that of a factor of production – labour.

The issues that precipitated this ideology need to be taken into account. It has been argued that although the Afrikaans-speaking sector comprised approximately three quarters of the white population of the Cape Province, they did not assert themselves politically until after the granting of a responsible government to the colony in 1872.<sup>9</sup>

No Sizwe refers to some fundamental events that took place around that period, events which in essence changed the South African context. First he refers to the discovery of diamonds in 1886 and the subsequent dispute with the British over the diamond fields. The second important event has to do with the language consciousness, which began to surface among some Afrikaners. No Sizwe continues to assert that the first language movement emerged in the Western Cape in 1876.<sup>10</sup>

He maintains that for many decades a gap of virtual unintelligibility had widened between Afrikaans as spoken by the majority of 'Dutch-speaking' people in South Africa, and Dutch, which remained the written language and therefore the language of the Bible, as well as the language of the courts. It was therefore thought by some that since the direct connection between the Cape and Holland had been severed already in 1806, there was no reason in 1875 to maintain the essence of this language above Afrikaans. A clique of Afrikaans intellectuals under the auspices of Rev. S J du Toit, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, began to advocate the substitution of Dutch for Afrikaans in all spheres of life. No Sizwe argues that the linguistic and historical researchers and the activities of this movement under Du Toit had a profound impact on the cultural and sectional consciousness of the Afrikaner people.<sup>11</sup>

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5 J Kinghorn cited in: D J Smit, 'The ethics of interpretation – and South Africa', 30.

6 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation: The National question in South Africa*. London: Zed Press, 1979, 25.

7 No Sizwe describes the then conventional ruling class wisdom concerning South African politics and its relationship to economy as follows: After the defeat of the Boer Republics in 1902 and the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 politics in South Africa referred essentially to the struggle for parliamentary hegemony between predominantly English-speaking and predominantly Afrikaans-speaking groups of whites, irrespective of the classes to which they belonged or aspired to belong. Cf. No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation*. 11.

8 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation*. 11.

9 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation*. 14.

10 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation*. 15.

11 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation*. 14-15.

Consequently this consciousness became an instrument in the hands of the agrarian capitalists of the Western Cape and thereby a means by which they would gain the allegiance of the Afrikaners as a language group in order to bargain for a share of power and wealth controlled by the British imperialist.<sup>12</sup> De Klerk maintains that although it is true that the Afrikaner Bond (AB) formed in 1882 grew out of the Afrikaans Language Movement, as it grew older it moved strangely nearer to Rhodes.<sup>13</sup>

The AB was in principle a political source of 'Afrikaner Nationalism', being a political association of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois white (predominantly Afrikaans-speaking) farmers across the entire South Africa. Its founders were S J du Toit and J H Hofmeyr, both of whom were part of the intellectual elite of the Afrikaans-speaking whites at the Cape. It is furthermore also worth noting that both these gentlemen were sons of large-scale wine farmers who had begun to see the need and the possibility of capturing parliamentary power in order to control the economic levers.

It was however the relationship of these men with the British, especially Rhodes, that caused a lack of trust in his movement's capacity to further the cause of the Afrikaner people. No Sizwe argues that many Afrikaners became disgruntled with this movement because at a time when most Afrikaners owned land or had a profession, the bond, which was their political voice, was concerned primarily with obtaining for the elite a share of power, i.e. the possibility of being integrated into the ruling class.<sup>14</sup>

The question of the majority of the landless proletarians who congregated in cities was something that could not be avoided by these new rulers. There was serious concern about possible competition for jobs between the black masses and the white proletariat. The Broederbond was to prevent its working class from responding in all matters as a class; it had to abort any class-consciousness from its ranks.<sup>15</sup> Nationalism was to become an important aspect that needed further to be promoted.<sup>16</sup>

The ideological legitimacy that was awarded to the political and organisational mobilisation of the Afrikaans-speaking workers was provided by some of the most noted Broederbond intellectuals. Amongst these may be included the likes of N Diederichs, P J Meyer and G Cronjé. These men toiled zealously to present a theoretical framework of what apartheid was to look like and frequently addressed the white youth at Afrikaans universities.

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12 This movement, which was spearheaded by Du Toit, had established itself as the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (the Association of True Afrikaners).

13 When de Klerk maintains that the AB moved closely to Rhodes's ideals it refers to the following, intimating primarily that Rhodes was a man of many parts: 1. He was a dreamer who had directed his gaze from the eastern slopes of Table Mountain to the far north beyond the Limpopo and the Zambezi. 2. Rhodes was also an apostle of Anglo-Saxonism who saw in his race God's ideal type, serving God's purpose. 3. He had a profound love of the Cape and displayed this love by buying a decaying but yet splendid Cape Dutch manor, which was then renovated. He also had a very good relationship with both Du Toit as well as Hofmeyr. Cf. WA De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa: A story of Afrikanerdom*. England: Penguin. 1975, 71.

14 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One Nation*. 16.

15 T Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975, 159-160.

16 Following D O' Meara, despite sustained attempts at cultural mobilisation, Afrikaans-speaking workers displayed a dangerous tendency to act in terms of class rather than cultural interests, i.e. to respond as workers rather than as Afrikaners. The basis of this tendency was the trade union organisation, led by English-speaking artisans and dominated by the craft unions that clearly had no interest in cultural mobilisation. Afrikaans workers thus belonged to class organisations, had their interests articulated in these terms and voted for the Labour Party. They thus had to be weaned from both. Cf. D. O' Meara, 'White Trade Unionism, Political Power and Afrikaner Nationalism', *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 10, April 1975, p. 44.

Obsessed with the idea of nationhood, each one presented a view of how the *volk* was to take shape. It has been suggested that one of the most influential of all these men was N Diederichs. De Klerk argues that Diederichs, who was professor of political philosophy at Grey University College in the Free State, wrote what was to become the most influential study on nationalism as a worldview in 1936.<sup>17</sup> Diederichs' most important work on the subject of nationhood was enveloped in his book entitled: *Nasionalisme as Lewensbeskouing en sy Verhouding tot Internationalisme*.

De Klerk is of the view that Diederichs' treatise on nationalism as a worldview formed the basis of what was soon to be known as the concept of 'apartheid' or 'separate development', and this, declared De Klerk, was the first systematic statement of theologised politics to come from an Afrikaner.<sup>18</sup> For our interest it has to be noted that although Diederichs had been trained at various European universities, and was obviously influenced by German philosophies, his work mentioned above formed the core of the Afrikaner's new politics which was aligned not to Calvinism as contained in the Institutes, but to its puritan mutations, with later neo-Calvinist accretions.<sup>19</sup> Diederichs' idea of nationhood was that a nation both is, and at the same time is coming into being.<sup>20</sup>

Based on this understanding, Diederichs concluded that the notion of universal humanity was impossible. Self-evidently, Diederichs rejected equality and suggested that the only equality that could be accepted was the equality of opportunity for each to bring that, which was within him to full expression. This could only be achieved when the individual perceived himself as a member of the nation.<sup>21</sup>

Moodie surmised that this work was of a latter neo-Fichtean variety.<sup>22</sup> What is most problematic was of course Diederichs' usage of the concept 'nation'. His idolisation of this concept had elicited some strong responses from some of Kuyperians, especially J du Plessis. Moodie quotes an excerpt of an exchange between Diederichs and Du Plessis that appeared in *Die Volksblad* of 25 April 1936. In that excerpt Du Plessis admitted that 'although Diederichs rightly placed God above nation, he had gone too far with the manner in which he did this. Because above me as an individual is not my nation but God and God alone'.<sup>23</sup>

Another major work concerning the concept 'nation' appeared through the pen of P Meyer and was entitled *Die Afrikaner*. It was written and published in 1941 by a man who was once the head of the *Broederbond*<sup>24</sup> as a summary of the central calling of the Afrikaner

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17 WA De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*. 203f.

18 WA De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*. 204.

19 Cf. WA De Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*. 204.

20 Diederichs posited the nation as the essential and necessary unit of social analysis. Individuals have their existence only in so far as they are taken up into the national whole. Cf. T D Moodie, 1975: 158.

21 No Sizwe, *One Azania, One nation*.23.

22 Moodie bases Diederichs' neo-Fichtean nationalism on Johann Fichte's addresses to the German Nation. He uses the term in a slightly broader context to refer to 'nationalism' as described by Kedourie (cf. E Kedourie, *Nationalism*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1961). Moodie nonetheless differs slightly from the view of nationalism as presented by Kedourie: what he understands by neo-Fichtenism includes the views of the German romantics such as Herder and Schleiermacher, as well as Fichte himself. He differs from Kedourie's assertion that all nationalism fits the Fichtean mold (cf. T D Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom*. 152-160).

23 L J du Plessis quoted in T. Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom*. 159-160.

24 Moodie explains the purpose for the founding of this society in the following manner: Founded in 1918, the *Broederbond* (or as Moodie calls it in English, the Afrikaner "Brothers' League", or as De Klerk prefers to call it, the "Afrikaner Band of Brothers") was founded with the explicit purpose of assembling "serious-minded young Afrikaner in Johannesburg and along the Reef in order: a. To accomplish a

nation.<sup>25</sup> The work of G Cronjé is relatively closely related to that of Diederichs and perhaps to an extent to that of Meyer. In its own standing, it was also a significant piece of work, which was to be used by the system that came into place later. For all intents and purposes, it contained everything that was to have consequence to the unravelling of the apartheid ideology. He called his book '*n Tuiste vir die Nageslag*.'<sup>26</sup> It is inevitable that the question of superiority which was manifested in their perception of white culture and civilisation, also contributed to the manner and way in which they interpreted reality. Here Cronjé is clearly not only leaving the ideal that the Afrikaner will prosper to the 'will of God', but continues to argue that this will be feasible because of the obvious fact that the knowledge that they have justifies the means instituted by them to achieve this end.

The ideas concerning apartheid which already had their frame in the works of these intellectuals indicated were legally tested when the National Party (NP) became the official governing party in 1948. It is careless to assume that apartheid was only implemented after the 1948 NP victory. De Gruchy argues that although racial discrimination was entrenched in the Union constitution and determined much of the legislation between 1910 and 1948, it did not have the rigid, ideological character that it began to assume under the apartheid slogan.<sup>27</sup>

It must then be conceded that the legislation devised by the NP was not necessitated by the irritation which some whites might have had with blacks. Instead, this legislation ought to be looked at as a mechanism put into place to systematically mute and prune the development of black people in South Africa.<sup>28</sup> Already in Cronjé we see him at work developing the justification

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healthy and progressive unity amongst all Afrikaners who actively seek the welfare of the Afrikaner. b. To arouse Afrikaner national self-consciousness and to inspire love of the Afrikaans language, religion, traditions, country and people and c. To further every concern of the Afrikaner nation". He maintains that membership was restricted to "Afrikaans-speaking Protestants who accepted South Africa as their fatherland, were of sound moral character and stood firm in the defence of their Afrikaner identity". Cf. T D Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom*. 50; Giliomee seems to be concurring with the restrictedness of the membership to this organisation. He maintains however that the secrecy of this organisation only developed later. While Moodie asserts that this organisation became a clandestine organisation three years after its establishment, Giliomee disputes this and argues that it went underground only after 1929. In an attempt to substantiate this claim, Giliomee refers to a number of branches that existed in 1928. Giliomee also refers to a conference held by this movement in Bloemfontein in 1929. Cf. H Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2004: 352-354.

25 "The person as a faith-unit fulfils its own calling on the one hand by realising the value-whole and on the other the life-order ordained by its faith ... The People is at the same time a social and a cultural community. In the realisation of its unique life form the People creates its culture and in the creation of its culture it realises its own life form. These are the two sides of the fulfilment of its unique calling as given in its faith ... The ethnic calling which is contained in the ethnic faith is the most important and primary community forming and culture-creating factor in the coming-into-being of the People. The realisation of the sense and being of Peoplehood [sic] is the fulfilment of the ethnic calling, which finds its most precipitation in the ethnic language. The fulfilment of a People's calling is a dual process, namely community formation and cultural creation out of the spiritual constitution of the People over against its actuality" Meyer quoted in: T D Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom*. 163.

26 In this work he maintained that, 'the racial policy which we as Afrikaners should promote must be directed to the preservation of racial and cultural variety. This is because it is according to the will of God, and because with the knowledge at our disposal it can be justified on practical grounds'. Cf. G Cronjé, '*n Tuiste vir ons nageslag: Die Blywende oplossing van Suid-Afrika se Rassevraagstukke*, 1945: 168 et seq.

27 J W De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979: 53-54.

28 The legislation, which we have in mind here, refers to the numerous acts passed by Parliament. The main accomplishment of these acts facilitated the classification of South African people into racial categories; hence the four racial groups in South Africa viz. Black, Coloured, Indian and White. Among the acts

of the Bantustans, of cheap black labour that was imperative for the prosperity of the white economy, and the control of the movement of blacks in urban areas.<sup>29</sup>

All these statements were not only viewed from a socio-economic and political perspective, but contained an intrinsic divine element that ostensibly enlightened the views of these advocates. Cronjé later wrote another book, this time in collaboration with two prominent theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church entitled, *Regverdige Rasse-Apartheid*. One of the two prominent theologians was Dr W Nicol who was moderator of the DRC; the other was Dr E P Groenewald.<sup>30</sup> Nicol argued that ‘whites could be good Christians, and at the same time watch over the survival of their race with holy gravity’.<sup>31</sup> Groenewald declared that he wished this separation to be complete. He maintained that the fact that God had given the various nations their separate existences, implied that they should remain separate. Israel itself was the proof of how God had willed national separateness.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from all these devious contortions, some black theologians believed that it was even more important to look at the issue of land and how the seizure of land acted as an impulse to cripple the black race in South Africa. Tlhagale traces the white obsession for monopoly over black land and labour to the infamous 1913 Natives Land Act, which sought to lay down ‘permanent lines of territorial segregation’ between blacks and whites. In his opinion, this was one of the factors coupled with the growing demand for labour by the mining, industrial and agricultural sectors, which accelerated the process of proletarianisation.<sup>33</sup>

In essence one can detect some sort of pseudo-concern in most of the ‘liberties’ that were afforded to the black population of South Africa. This pseudo-concern remains evident in the speeches of Hendrik Verwoerd. When he was still Minister of Education, Verwoerd remarked that ‘education must train and teach in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live ... Education should have roots entirely in the Native areas and in the Native environment and Native community in all aspects. There is no place for him in the

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which were made law by parliament can be included the Immorality Act which inhibited whites to have relations with blacks, the Group Areas Act, Influx Control Act which restricted the movement of black people in urban areas, press censorship, etc. As a means of avoiding opposition from black radicals the Communism Act of 1950 was enacted. Another piece of notorious law was encapsulated in the Bantu Education Act. Cf. Z Mbali. *The Churches and Racism*. Great Britain: SCM Press, 1987: 11f.

29 Cronjé maintained that we should remember that the black man [sic] and in general cheap black labour are part of our current economic structure. The latter is based to a great extent on that cheap labour which is easily available. The total racial segregation will suggest that the black labour power will be excluded from the economic life of the white man. It will only be feasible [for whites to maintain economic power while still commanding the cheap black labour] if an economic structure was designed that addressed this issue; a structure that would be able to confirm the number of blacks in white communities and to which branches they affiliated for labour. All those blacks that are not useful and have no business being in white communities will then be repatriated to their reserves”. Cf. G Cronjé, 1945: 128.

30 Cf. G Cronjé (red.), *Regverdige Rasse-Apartheid*. Stellenbosch: CSV maatskappy van Suid-Afrika. 1947, 147.

31 “*Ons kan goeie Christene wees en tog met ’n heilige erns vir die voortbestaan van ons ras waak*”. W Nicol, ‘’n Grootse roeping’ in G Cronjé (ed.), *Regverdige Rasse-Apartheid*. 21-22.

32 In order to substantiate his claim that what they were doing with apartheid had divine sanction, Groenewald pointed to scripture. The texts to which he made particular reference to substantiate his viewpoint were among others the building of the tower of Babel which is found in Gen. 11. Cf. E P Groenewald, ‘Apartheid en Voogdyskap in die lig van die heilige skrif’ in: G Cronjé (red.), *Regverdige Rasse-Apartheid*. 43ff.

33 B Tlhagale, ‘Towards a Black theology of Labour’ in: J Cochrane and G West (eds.) *The Three-Fold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour*. Cape Town: Cluster Publishers, 1991: 145.

European community above the level of certain forms of labour'.<sup>34</sup> It can furthermore be argued that this pseudo-concern had its roots deeply vested in the paternalism that was evident already in missionaries to Africa.<sup>35</sup> It was therefore necessary to alert white people to the potential danger of allowing black people to develop fully. It is known that once someone becomes fearful, he or she tends to fall back on his or her stereotypical assumptions.

This fear cannot be confined to Afrikaners alone. Some black consciousness leaders believe that the white Afrikaner regime was quite successful in establishing fear of black people even among white liberals who claimed to be sympathetic to the cause of black people in liberating themselves from the pangs of apartheid. By dexterously instilling into the consciousness of the country the notion of the "*swart gevaar*",<sup>36</sup> they managed to convince even some of the most familiar liberal voices that 'perhaps apartheid is worth a try'.<sup>37</sup>

At one of the synods where the DRC discussed separate development, it was admitted that the traditional fear of the Afrikaner of equality of treatment between black and white had its origin in his antipathy to the idea of racial fusion.<sup>38</sup> Kinghorn refers to a publication by the Broederbond on racial studies that is fundamental for a comprehension of the deliberate fear that was instilled in the moral fibre of the general Afrikaner populace.<sup>39</sup> Suffice it to say that this view still has implications for the way black and white as well as black and coloured perceive each other today.

It was this stereotype, which would later substantiate the DRC's stance concerning mixed marriages. Consequently, it would be easy for the church to underpin government legislation, which prohibited these types of marriages. This purported superiority forced many blacks to accept their status as being inferior to whites. It is for this reason that Goba maintains that the apartheid regime managed to instil in black people a sense of self hatred and self denial which is currently displayed in the violence that characterises the way of living of many black people today.<sup>40</sup>

To compound the chaotic political situation of theology in South Africa, biblical hermeneutics were designed with the specific purpose of justifying the then South African politics. Biblical texts

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34 Cf. C Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: a socio-theological history of the English-speaking churches*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988: 95.

35 Cf. the Three-self policy of the missionaries Venn and Anderson adopted by the DRC synodical commission in 1935, quoted in: J W Hofmeyr and G J Pillay (eds.), *A history of Christianity in South Africa. Vol 1*. Pretoria: Haum Tertiary Publishers, 1994: 253.

36 *Swart gevaar* – Black danger. This is a notion developed by the apartheid regime to instil fear for black people into white people. The reaction of this was that black people because of their dependence on white people also began to fear white people. Significantly this initiative served the purpose of calling on all whites to unite against blacks ostensibly because there was something to be feared in the event that black people assumed their rightful places in South Africa.

37 The most familiar liberal white voice that is referred to here is that of Dr Alan Paton who made this statement in an interview in London. See S Biko, 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity', in: M Motlhabi (ed.), *Essays on Black theology*, Johannesburg: The Black Theology Project, 1972: 18.

38 J W Hofmeyr *et al.* (eds.), *A history of Christianity*. 253.

39 Parts of that study reads: "*Nou as ons aanneem dat die eienskappe van die blanke in die algemeen te verkies is bo die van die kaffer (intellektueel, esteties en moreel) dan sal dus in al die gevalle waar die eienskap van die kaffer dominant is, agterruigang plaasvind. In plaas van 'n suiwer blanke tipe kry ons 'n individu met swart of donker vel, verlies van liggaamlike skoonheid mag nie so swaar weeg as die intellektuele en morele agterruigang nie, ofskoon geen blanke wat sy raseienskappe op prys stel graag soos 'n kaffer sal lyk nie*". Cf. J. Kinghorn, 'Vormende Faktore', 54.

40 Cf. B Goba, 'Choosing who we are, a Christian perspective on the moral crisis confronting the South African society' in: M. Guma and L. Milton (eds.), *An African Challenge to the Church in the 21st century*. Cape Town: Salty Print. 1997, 67.



read selectively and in a fundamentalist way acted as intermediaries in justifying apartheid.

A great deal of consideration was given to Old Testament texts; however some New Testament passages that insisted on the distinctions between nations were also consulted.<sup>41</sup> The debate was expanded – from history to creation – to new creation. The unity in Christ was a spiritual unity and not a challenge to the elemental truth of racial discrimination. Because it was believed that re-creation was based on creation, the church as sign of the Kingdom was also marked in its identity by these divisions and had a calling to maintain the orders between nations.

The conclusion was that, not only was a Christian society called upon to honour racial segregation, but also the church as instrument of God's design had to especially obey apartheid and had therefore to fiercely oppose the occurrence of racially mixed congregations. Many Afrikaner theologians found an ally in the theology of the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). The result was that the Neo-Calvinism of Kuyper was used to provide the impetus for theologised politics in South Africa.

## 2. THE ABUSE OF NEO-CALVINISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR SOUTH AFRICA

The Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper is particularly important if we want to understand the origin of theologised politics in South Africa. The Calvinist revivals of Kuyper as well as Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1976) had made a considerable impact on the South Africans who went to study in the Netherlands. Dutch Neo-Calvinism was an attempt to unite and strengthen the scattered Calvinist communities in order to rebuild the Calvinism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that, they claimed, was the force behind Dutch power during Holland's 'Golden Century'.

For Kuyper the ideal was to spread Calvinism. He even once stated that he had no particular problem with the 'mixing of blood' in the process – the aim was the 'development of *mankind* (sic) taken as a whole'.<sup>42</sup> In South Africa the call to unite the Calvinist forces was translated into a call to unite Afrikaners. Where Neo-Calvinism sought a type of Christian nationalism that encompassed all nations, Christian nationalism in South Africa meant Afrikaner nationalism that precisely sought a segregation of nations.

Kuyper had become famous for his concept of autonomous spheres of existence. The title *Soevereiniteit in eigen kring* was the very title of his address at the inauguration of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) of Amsterdam. The guiding principle of his address was that he would find a university that, under the legal guardianship of the state, would be free of both state and church.<sup>43</sup> When he later delivered a lecture to the student body at the VU, Kuyper uttered the phrase for which he was to become most famous with: 'There is not a single inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine'.<sup>44</sup> Although the idea of autonomous spheres of sovereignty is somewhat related to *Ordnungstheologie* which was particularly famous in the time of the Third Reich in Germany, many apartheid theologians did not use this idea as such but instead found an ally in Kuyper and his views with regard to the spheres of sovereignty.

De Klerk refers to the work of J Stellingwerf who posed the question whether the idea of sovereignty in a particular sphere could be used to validate the idea of separate development, and

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41 C J S Lombaard, 'The Bible in the Apartheid debate' in: J W Hofmeyr *et al.* (eds.), *1948 Plus 50 years. Theology, apartheid and church: past, present and future*. Pretoria, 2001: 72-3

42 Cf. J Bratt (ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A centennial reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998: 450.

43 Cf. WA de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa*. 257.

44 Cf. J Bratt (ed.), *Abraham Kuyper*: 488.

concluded that it could not.<sup>45</sup> The ostensible ambiguity around the question of how Kuyper was interpreted and used to justify the apartheid ideology therefore makes it impossible to speak about apartheid ideology without referring to Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism. It is for this reason that a number of theologians blame the apartheid ideology on the Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper.<sup>46</sup>

Although De Gruchy is aware that Kuyper must to an extent have been misused in South Africa, he appears to be affirming the view that some parts of Kuyper's theology does leave a number of loopholes which enable such misuse. This is most probably the more conservative side of Kuyper that was particularly illustrated in his lectures on Calvinism that was delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898. Kuyper's conservatism is encapsulated in the lecture on Calvinism as a life system. He had the following to say with regard to the relationship of man to man [sic]:

“... the second condition, with which, for the sake of creating a life system every profound movement has to comply viz., a fundamental interpretation of its own touching the relation of man to man ... there is no uniformity among men, but endless multiformity. In creation itself the difference has been established between woman and man. Physical and spiritual gifts and talents cause one person to differ from the other ... The social position of the rich and poor differs widely. Now these differences are in a special way weakened or accentuated by every consistent life system, and paganism, Islamism, Romanism as well as Modernism, and so also Calvinism have accordance with their primordial principle. If Paganism contends God dwells in the creature, a divine superiority is exhibited in whatever is high among men [sic] ... On the other hand whatever is lower is considered as godless, and therefore give rise to systems of caste in India and Egypt, and to slavery everywhere else, thereby placing one man under a base subjection of his fellowman.”<sup>47</sup>

Although Kuyper recognised the differences between human beings, his distinctions are so simplistic that they are susceptible to misappropriation. In congruence with De Gruchy, Moodie holds that Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism has been distorted by the South African interpretation to such a degree that the positive contribution he could have made (perhaps in avoiding the realisation of the theological justification of apartheid) was overshadowed.<sup>48</sup> Thus not only was a critical contribution that Kuyper could have made lost, but it had become necessary for some to distinguish between Calvinism and *Afrikaner* Calvinism.<sup>49</sup>

When looking at *Afrikaner* nationalism, De Gruchy concludes that the reason for this misuse of Kuyper was ideological. He comes to this conclusion because of the fact that Neo-Calvinism in South Africa was wedded to the German Romantic view of history and the German organic view of the state.<sup>50</sup>

As far as Moodie is concerned, according to Kuyper, because family, business, science, art, etc. are all social spheres which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the

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45 Cf. J Stellingwerf, *Gezag en Vrijheid in het licht van Gods Woord*. Johannesburg, 1971: 83.

46 Cf. J W De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984: 107ff.

47 Cf. A Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six stone-lectures*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931: 51-52.

48 Cf. Moodie's comment on Kuyper's independent sphere of social life. T D Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*. 55.

49 J W De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991: 11ff.

50 J W De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*. 110.

law of their life from the superiority of the state, but ‘obey a high authority within their own bosom’, the State cannot dictate to either of these for they are subject only to God.<sup>51</sup> Given this, Moodie argues that a case could therefore be made against a number of laws that encroached on this independence, i.e. the state can have no right in determining who should get married to whom.

De Gruchy is correct in asserting that the idea of national sovereignty and the sovereignty of each nation that has its particular historical calling, destiny and cultural mandate, suited not only the Germans and the Dutch national character, but also a number of nations outside Europe, including the Afrikaner nation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>52</sup>

He believes that within the South African context, the main exponent of Kuyper along this nationalistic line was the philosopher H G Stoker, for whom ‘the People’ (*volk*) was a separate sphere with its own structure and purpose, grounded in the ordinances of God’s creation.<sup>53</sup> The fundamental point that De Gruchy is trying to make here was that Kuyper’s Neo-Calvinism provided one point of departure for this development, but the end product was not only a contradiction of Kuyper’s doctrine of the spheres, but the creation of an Afrikaner civil religion that had too often been mistaken for Calvinism.

This religion fulfilled a central role both in the Afrikaner’s struggle for identity, and would subsequently provide a theological base upon which nationalism could flourish. Moodie asserts that Stoker’s Neo-Calvinism was able to accommodate the Afrikaner civil religion and could sustain it, because in his view, the Afrikaner people were sovereign in their own circle, acknowledging no other Lord than God, and their purpose was seen in their structures and calling, as well as their historical destiny.<sup>54</sup> Even their usage and interpretation of scripture illustrated their sovereignty. Jonker argues that in the interpretation of their own history, they equated the Great Trek from the Cape Colony to the northern parts of the country with the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt, and their military clashes with the people of Africa with the wars of Israel against the Canaanites and the Philistines.<sup>55</sup>

Essentially the Afrikaner *volk* religion that emerged with the South African Neo-Calvinism had succeeded in instilling in its adherents a contorted view that the differences between human beings justified the different treatment of the different races. The theological justification of apartheid had plunged theology in South Africa into a quagmire. This theological quagmire elicited a number of theological responses, among them black theology.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE THEOLOGISED POLITICS OF SOUTH AFRICA

A number of theologies were designed to dispute the theological and biblical underpinnings that were given to the ideology of apartheid. Among them must be counted Black theology. Black theology emerged in South Africa during the late 1960s. As a project, the civil rights movement in the USA, the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King Jr, as well as the pioneering work of James Cone inspired it. It was transported from the shores of the United States of America to South Africa as an intellectual project that was made possible by the University Christian Movement (UCM) in 1971.

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51 T D Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*. 55.

52 J W De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*. 110.

53 Cf. J W De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*. 110; T D Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*. 66.

54 T D Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*. 66.

55 W D Jonker, ‘The Gospel and Political Freedom’ in: A van Egmond and D van Keulen (eds.), *Studies in Reformed Theology 1*: Baarn: Callenbach, 1996: 248.

All this occurred under the directorship of Basil Moore and was first spearheaded in South Africa by Sabelo Ntwasa. Black theology was expressed under the banner of the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa which owes its being to students such as Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Harry Nengwenkulu and others who were galvanised by the then political situation into organising themselves into being a vanguard for the black peoples' total emancipation from the political pangs into which they were plunged by white racism in South Africa. Although Black theology propagated itself chiefly by means of seminars and ministers' caucuses, it produced some significant publications and continued into the *Kairos* period. A number of the first-generation black theologians endeavoured to develop Black theology in relation to their confessional traditions. Among these theologians were Manas Buthelezi, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak. This project was carried on by theologians such as Buti Tlhagale, Takatso Mofokeng, Bongajalo Goba and Itumeleng Mosala, to mention but a few.<sup>56</sup>

While many theologians who were on the receiving end of apartheid were greatly influenced by black theology, it must be pointed out that the different ecclesiastical background that informed their theologising rendered black theology in South Africa a divided front. It is true that those who aligned themselves with it did more than enough to register the fallacies of a theology that supported apartheid. The South African Council of Churches produced numerous statements that questioned the theological and biblical legitimacy of apartheid.

Theologians who propagated Black theology from within the confines of the Reformed church also challenged the theological legitimacy of apartheid theology. One such statement that called apartheid theology heretical is of course the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.<sup>57</sup> Although the status confessionis which later made way for the Belhar Confession was called into existence by the theological legitimacy given to apartheid, this confession and those who wrote about this confession have yet to probe the very theology that granted apartheid theology its place in the church. In an attempt to entertain this challenge we ask the following question;

#### 4. WAS THE BELHAR CONFESSION A REJECTION OF MODERN PROTESTANT THEOLOGY?

Two decades after the Belhar Confession was adopted it remains still one of the most talked about subjects in South African Reformed theological circles and perhaps in many other theological circles around the world. These conversations about the Belhar Confession today are undertaken during a period when many have started to critically assess the Barmen Theological Declaration from which the Belhar Confession had borrowed its structure. It goes without saying that it remains to be asked whether the Belhar Confession was a rejection of modern Protestant theology since this question has received little if any attention in reflections pertaining to the Belhar Confession.

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56 Cf. RS Tshaka, *Confessional theology? A critical analysis of the theology of Karl Barth and its significance for the Belhar Confession*. D Th dissertation. University of Stellenbosch. 2005, 232.

57 A lot has been written about this subject to date. For this reason we shall not reiterate the history of this confession hoping that the reader can already deduce that it was fundamentally precipitated by the theological and biblical legitimacy that was given to apartheid. Suffice it to say that this confession was adopted in 1986 by the then coloured Dutch Reformed Mission of South Africa (DRMC) which later united with the reformed church that was reserved for black people called the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRC/A) in 1994 to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

The authors of the Belhar Confession must have been aware that the theology that underpinned the Barmen Theological Declaration, which in turn greatly influenced Belhar, was seriously thinking about the ramifications that were brought about by ‘natural theology’ in the life of the church. It cannot be denied that the notion ‘natural theology’ evoked emotions in the different camps at Barmen. The Belhar Confession on its part can also not ignore the tremendous ramifications that ‘natural theology’ had on the church during the apartheid era because the theological situation to which it responded to was fundamentally precipitated by natural theology although this fact does not appear as conspicuous in commentaries on the Belhar Confession as it does in commentaries on the Barmen Theological Declaration.

That natural theology was a chief concern for the Barmen Declaration and later for the Belhar Confession is not secret. In his lecture introducing the Barmen Theological Declaration – a lecture that was explicitly adopted by the synod at Barmen together with the Declaration – Asmussen explained the first section of this Declaration as such:

‘For the sake of our Lord we may not become weary of stressing repeatedly that it is all false doctrine when other authorities are set up for the Church beside the incarnate Word in Christ and the word proclaimed in him. That is what is happening today. The demand is constantly and everlastingly being made upon the church and its members to acknowledge the events of the year 1933 as binding for its proclamation and exposition of scripture, and as demanding obedience alongside Holy Scripture and over and beyond its claim. When we protest against this, we do not do so as members of our people in opposition to the recent history of the nation, not as citizens against the new State, nor as subjects against the civil magistrate. We are raising a protest against the same phenomenon that has been slowly preparing for the devastation of the Church for more than two hundred years. For it is only a relative difference whether beside Holy Scripture in the Church historical events or reason, culture, aesthetic feelings, progress or other powers and figures are said to be binding upon the church’.<sup>58</sup>

Karl Barth echoed this sentiment adding that what happened with the German Christians is not to be confined to Germany. He writes:

‘What the ‘German Christians’ wanted and did was obviously a long line which had for long enough been acknowledged and trodden by the Church of the whole world: the line of the Enlightenment and Pietism, of Schleiermacher, Richard Rothe and Ritschl. And there were so many parallels to it in England and America, in Holland and Switzerland, in Denmark and the Scandinavian countries, that no one outside really had the right to cast a stone at Germany because the new combination of Christian and natural theology affected there involved the combination with a race nationalism which happened to be rather uncongenial to the rest of the world, and because this combination was now carried through with a thoroughness which was so astonishing to other nations’.<sup>59</sup>

Barth continues to remind us that when Asmussen in his explanatory lecture to the synod upon its adoption of the Barmen Declaration ‘protested against the same phenomenon that has been slowly preparing for the devastation of the church for more than two hundred years’ it was clear that the

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58 Cf. H Asmussen in A. Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession under Hitler*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962. 254-255.

59 Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics. II/1*. New York: T&T Clark international. 2004, 174.

protest was no doubt directed against Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Fundamentally it was a protest directed against the basic tendencies of the whole 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and therefore against the hollowed traditions of all other churches as well.<sup>60</sup>

If we are not willing to adopt the historical perspective of Asmussen and Barth, the meaning of the Barmen Theological Declaration is therefore reduced to the rejection of the German Christians of that time. It must equally be said about the Belhar Confession that until we are able to understand that above the propagandists of apartheid theology stood a liberal theology that was introduced by the likes of Schleiermacher, Ritschl and others, that sanctioned a natural theology that is fused with race, we shall forever only confine the Belhar Confession to the history of apartheid to which it was responding to.

On closer consideration the question needs to be compounded by being rephrased. Thus we ask was Barth opposed to Modern Protestant theology especially as dealt with by Schleiermacher and others which seemed to open the church to a natural theology that was not critically scrutinised by those who allowed into the church and therefore made the biblical revelation of Christ subsidiary to cultural, aesthetic and other aspects. What can now already be said about Barth and his relation to Protestantism is that it would have been impossible for him to reject this entire theology because he stood proudly in it.<sup>61</sup>

Karl Barth had observed how the accommodation of innocuous petitions for the church to comply with culture and other features culminated in the theological and ethical endorsement of WWI. In addition to this, he had seen how the very same means of theologising had created the German Christians under the Hitler regime. For him therefore appeared to be no choice but to bid farewell to modern Protestantism because he thought that it had set a precedent of allowing ills into the church which it in turn could not dissect from the life of the church. Therefore the only good thing that could save the credibility of the church would be that it denounce and discourage such a theological enterprise.

Barth's justified concern for a church that seem to condone petitions for it to be more relevant in society is encapsulated in this following statement: 'the logic of the matter demands that, even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. A natural theology that does not strive to the only master is not a natural theology. And to give it place at all is to put oneself, even if unwittingly, on the way which leads to this sole sovereignty'.<sup>62</sup>

It is often ignored that Barth thought that the same is possible with conservative theological methods. He argues that 'Neo-Protestantism in its beginnings (JF Buddeus and C.M Pfaff among the Lutherans; S Warefels, JF Osterwald, JA Turrentini among the Reformers, and in C Wolff and the theologians of his school also in its later forms) could deal with the Bible and dogma in a

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60 Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics. II/1*. 175.

61 With Barth's discovery of the strange new world in the Bible which indicated his departure from a theology that he supported but which had discouraged him because of how easily it traded the revelation of Christ as documented in the Bible for cultural and political interests, it can hardly be said that Barth rejected the entire tradition of Modern Protestantism. This view is easily observed when one takes into account how he dealt with issues relating to politics, culture, ethics and other issues that primarily concerned humanity. Views that portray Barth as one who rejected the entire theological tradition in question fails to see Barth as one who seriously engages ethical and issues relating to the organization of human beings on earth in his theological reflections. This inability to see his confessional approach of the relationship of God to humanity is to be located in Barth's refusal to deal with these issues in a manner that renders the biblical revelation subsidiary to them.

62 Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics. II/1*. 173.

thoroughly conservative way. Nevertheless even in these conservative forms it means misconception, nay, denial of revelation.<sup>63</sup>

Those who are familiar with the theology of the German Christians as well as the situation in South Africa that led to apartheid and gave theological legitimacy to this ideology will agree with Barth that the petitions that are sometimes innocently made for entry into the church turn out to be only petitions that demand the obedience of the church. It is equally true that reactionary theologies in South Africa which took the situation of black people in South Africa during apartheid seriously as their theological point of departure also had the possibility of turning out to be like the very theologies to which they reacted to. It was among other things for this reason that many were not content with these reactionary theologies hence some resorted to a confessional theology which culminated in the Belhar Confession in acknowledgement of the inherent danger of speaking about God as if God is known in his entirety to us.

To say that the Belhar Confession was aware of the possibility that black theology as a reactionary theology against the dominant Afrikaner theology was likely to commit the same mistakes as committed by a theology to which it reacted against, should not be taken to imply that the confessional theology that underpinned the Belhar Confession was ahistorical, apolitical and discouraged an affirmation of one's culture. However the theology of Belhar placed these issues subsidiary to the revealed Word of God because it wanted to avoid a scenario where these issues dictate to the revealed word of God. It has been argued elsewhere that the only way of avoiding that natural theology becomes a master and treats the revelation of Christ through Holy Scripture in a subsidiary manner; theology should be dealt with in a confessional manner. This confessional manner of doing theology refers to a theological undertaking that is upholding the biblical revelation as our primary theological tool and at the same time conceding to the socio-economic, cultural and political reality in which we attempt to speak about God. This then enables us not to speak about God in a manner that renders him entirely known to us – it is this that we call a confessional manner of speaking about God.<sup>64</sup>

The Belhar Confession therefore does not reject Modern Protestant theology but instead rejects attempts to speak about God in a conclusive manner – as was clearly the case with Afrikaner Neo-Calvinism. What is clear from the confession itself is that it opposed tendencies that were reminiscent of Nazi Germany where the church was compelled to hook its agenda to the agenda of the state. Of paramount importance is that it rejected the combination of Christian and natural theology, but it cannot be said that it rejected one's assertion of one identity. The second article of the Belhar Confession makes this crystal clear when it speaks about the essence of reconciliation and unity among people.<sup>65</sup> This statement ought to be understood against the backdrop of apartheid and how it was given theological legitimacy by a church that found solace in the liberty that Modern Protestant Theology granted them to make the revelation of Christ subsidiary to culture

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63 Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. 1/2*. T&T Clark International: New York. 2004, 4.

64 Cf. RS Tshaka, *Confessional theology?*242ff.

65 The second article reads as follows: "We believe, that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another [Eph 2:11-22]; that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain [Eph 4:1-16]; that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted [Jn 17:20, 23]"

and other human concerns has had become common practice among many communities in the world.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly Barth thought that Modern Protestantism was problematic precisely because it made plenty of room for one to subject the Word to other means. Yet Barth was not as determined in his conclusion as some of his colleagues were that Schleiermacher's theology should totally be rejected. When most of his teachers endorsed Kaiser Wilhelm's war (WWI) Barth remained convinced that although they thought that their action stood in line with what Schleiermacher taught, Schleiermacher would not have endorsed that war. This in itself is a clear indication that Barth did not think that there was a straight line from modern Protestantism to the acts of the German Christians, but he knew that the precedent that the church sets of opening the door to petitions can bring within the church a number of difficulties. Those in South Africa, who opposed the theological legitimacy given to apartheid within Reformed theological circles, whether those who were influenced by black theology or other liberal theologies were opposing apartheid within the confines of Modern Protestantism.

The lectures given by theologians such as Asmussen, Barth and others at the Barmen synod with the adoption of the Barmen Theological Declaration protested against an entire method of theologising that had become oblivious to its humanness because of its obsession to accommodate human feelings and sentiments. The lecture given by Asmussen should serve the purpose of encouraging commentators on Belhar to deal more critically with the theology that supported Belhar, which in turn provided foreside for questioning the legitimacy of apartheid.

## 5. ... AS A SHIELD FOR THE FUTURE – SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Numerous challenges face current Protestant theology. The situation in Africa and in South Africa in particular is even more precarious than it was a few decades ago. It should initially be said that although the struggle of the church against the theological legitimacy of apartheid is officially laid to rest, theology is confronted with more problems than it was in its past. Issues such as HIV/AIDS, poverty, the growing gap between rich and poor as well as the many initiatives put in place by the current government to correct the injustices are all emotive issues which nonetheless warrants the church's view.

The recent calls made by many African leaders in different spheres have galvanised many individuals, institutions as well as some theologians within the mainline ecclesiastical traditions to heed the call of the African reawakening. Mainline ecclesiastical traditions and specifically reformed theology in South Africa have been severely criticised for not doing enough to address the African situation in which this faith also exist. In response to this criticism some have argued that reformed faith ought to set up for its self the basis and space of deliberating how our Africaness must be integrated with our reformedness.<sup>67</sup>

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66 In my dissertation I have attempted to trace the evolution of the Afrikaner volk. I discovered that there were a number of facets that galvanized the Afrikaner people to organize themselves as a nation. More importantly he discovered that the leaders of this nation who frequented Europe for study and other matters were not oblivious to tendencies of appealing to natural theology as a means of justifying discrepancies in society although they were artificially made. I refer to the theologized politics of the Afrikaner volk that is on close scrutiny no more different than what Barth speaks of as the combination of natural theology and a race nationalism that had become very common in many parts around the world. cf. RS Tshaka, *Confessional theology?* 214ff.

67 Cf. RS Tshaka, 'African you are on your own! - The need for the African reformed Christian to seriously engage his Africaness in his reformed theological reflections'. Article submitted for publication.



For many the need for African Reformed Christians to seriously engage their Africanity in their reformed theological reflections can also spell out disaster particular when one takes into account how petitions such as this one turnout once they were allowed into the church. Karl Barth refers us to the church that stood entirely defenceless before 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theology that allowed the German Christians to use aspects of culture in interpreting the gospel.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise those who are advocating for a reformation in Africa that calls on reformed theology to take its African context seriously are simply asking that African ideas and ideals should be allowed in the church like those of earlier times and phases. The advantage that this petition has is that it is preceded by a huge history that bears testimony to how dangerous this might turn out to be if everything is allowed into the church without critically and biblically scrutinising them thoroughly.

The African reformation is here faced with a question of identity, something which it was unable to pay much attention to in the past because many who were converted to this faith were assimilated into it, leaving no space to speak about a possibility integrating African ways of living with reformed faith. In seeking ways of dealing with this challenge, the African reformation must be strongly advised to heed the history that witnessed to how innocuously petitions percolated the church only to be monsters to the very same church that allowed them in. However the African reformation remains pivotal and unavoidable given the history of the transportation of this faith to its shores.

What has been said so far about Barth and his concern about the danger of natural theology should be interpreted to mean that Barth was not fundamentally opposed to identity. Barth bemoans the human tendency of plating the human being mid way between the supposedly God given fact (*that is the revelation of Christ in the Bible and which in turn identify us as sons and daughters of this Christ*) and the result of our own deliberations on the other (*that is the position that our identities bestows upon us and how we relate own positions to others*). He thus asserts that no matter whether a theology claims to be liberal or orthodox, it is not a theology of revelation in so far as its rests openly or secretly upon this reversal, in so far as it asks first what is possible in God's freedom, in order afterwards to investigate God's real freedom.<sup>69</sup>

Barth has rightly observed that 'Christianity was moulded according to a definite universal, intellectual – moral – aesthetic form, which made possible and inevitable the complementary formation of all kinds of particular national Christianities, each with its own particular national – religious self-consciousness'.<sup>70</sup> The result however is that it is impossible for African Reformed Christians to be exact replicas of Euro–American reformed Christians. It therefore goes without saying that the African reformation is confronted with a monumental task of exfoliating these definite universal, intellectual – moral – aesthetic formations which had come to characterise Christianity. Fundamentally this can only be achieved when African Reformed Christians embark upon an iconoclasm and begin to seriously ponder how to be a Reformed Church in Africa.

Being aware of how Christianity was repack to suit a particular nation over others, it would be very presumptuous for Barth to maintain that African Reformed Christians cannot and must not embark on this process for fear that the past will rear its ugly head again. Our thinking and speaking about the church must not come to an abrupt halt because it has been proven that our past speech about God was fraught with mistakes. Barth know more than any other Protestant

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68 Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. II/2*. T&T Clark International: New York. 2004, 174.

69 Cf. K Barth, . T&T Clark International: New York. 2004, 4. My emphasis.

70. Cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Vol. I/2*. 334.

theologian that as Christians we are impelled to speak about God but as human beings we are unable to do so, thus we must concede to this charge and inability to execute it, we are called to constantly invoke the past as a shield for the future.

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**KEYWORDS**

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**TREFWOORDE**

Moderne Protestantisme  
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