

*Revisiting “Church and Society” after a quarter of a century – a critical reappraisal*¹

NGTT DEEL 55, NO 1, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Apart from the more immediate catalysts for “Church and Society” such as the Reformation Day Confession, the Open Letter, the suspension of the Dutch Reformed Church from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Confession of Belhar, also the legacy of Cottesloe, the demise of “Ras, Volk en Nasie”, contributions of the Cape Synod, pressure from overseas Reformed institutions and growing internal misgivings about apartheid, should be kept in mind. Two divergent currents met in “Church and Society”, causing it to become a document of compromise. Theologically, it improved on its predecessor, but its ambivalent character subjected it to severe criticism. The most basic strategic mistake in “Church and Society” was the exclusion of the rest of the Dutch Reformed family. The Dutch Reformed Church was not yet ready to confess apartheid unreservedly as sin. Finally, it is suggested that our present situation urgently calls for a new, prophetic ecclesiastic directive, but then one coming from the Dutch Reformed family as a whole; still better: from one united Dutch Reformed Church.

1 Expanded version of a presentation at the Stellenbosch conference on the theme *Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika en die stryd om geregtigheid: 1960-1990 onthou*, 14-16 May 2012.

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1. THE BUILD-UP TO “CHURCH AND SOCIETY”

In his investigation into the apartheid history of the Dutch Reformed Church³ and particularly the two official documents, popularly called “Ras, Volk en Nasie”⁴ and “Kerk en Samelewing”⁵, J.M. van der Merwe (1990) singled out the “Reformation Day Confession” by eight Dutch Reformed theologians,⁶ the “Open Letter”, addressed to the DRC by 123 signatories, the 1982 meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches where the membership of the DRC was suspended, and the Confession of Belhar⁷ as the more immediate “impulses” to the decision by the DRC to review “Ras, Volk en Nasie” (Van der Merwe 1990:216-457). The following complementary remarks to Van der Merwe’s investigation may be in place:

It will be impossible to understand the background of CS, its nature, the synodical decisions around it and the reactions it elicited unless we start with the 1960 Cottesloe conference where representatives of the Dutch Reformed Churches of the Cape and the Transvaal as well as the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika were engaged in serious deliberations with representatives from several (mainly) English speaking churches⁸ and the World Council of Churches regarding racism and ethnicity in South Africa. The vast majority of the members of the DRC, and many other white South Africans were not ready for the outcome of Cottesloe.⁹ To put it mildly: After the publication of the Cottesloe report the white Afrikaans

3 Henceforth abbreviated as DRC.

4 Its full title in Afrikaans is “Ras, Volk en Nasie in die lig van die Skrif”. The English title reads “Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture”. Henceforth abbreviated as HRSAS.

5 The full title is “Kerk en Samelewing. ’n Getuienis van die Ned Geref Kerk”. Its English version is “Church and Society. A Testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church”. Henceforth abbreviated as CS. Where differentiation is necessary, the concept report put before the synod of 1986 will be indicated as CS^{concept}, the report approved by the synod as CS¹⁹⁸⁶, and the revised 1990 report as CS¹⁹⁹⁰.

6 Which he considered “the beginning of a new beginning for the Dutch Reformed Church” (1990:270).

7 The Confession of Belhar and the proclamation of a *status confessionis* by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church were the culmination of a long process of painful wrestling on the part of the Mission Church with the DRC on issues dealing with apartheid. Concomitant with Belhar and the *status confessionis* went the indictment of the DRC of heresy and idolatry.

8 For a full list, see Lückhoff (1978:173-175).

9 Cf the admission of this in the statement by the Algemene Sinodale Kommissie (1997:18)..

speaking ecclesiastical scene was in turmoil. It stirred up deep-seated emotions, prejudices and painful reminiscences which had become engrained in the attitudes and thinking of many. Even the prime minister of the time, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, commented on Cottesloe and rejected it in the strongest terms. The shadow of Cottesloe hovered over the DRC for many decades. Important issues raised by Cottesloe hung in the air. In addition, Cottesloe left a painful scar in the collective memory of many of the church's members, and this scar has yet not fully healed. The rift opened up between the proponents and opponents of Cottesloe cloned itself in later DRC reports. Fortunately, more positive tendencies gradually came to the fore, but even today much persuasive and reconciliatory work remains to be done.

In 1974 the DRC General Synod accepted *Ras, Volk en Nasie* (= HRSAS).¹⁰ It was intended to be the official policy document of the DRC on ethnic relations in South Africa, but, to an important extent, it also represented the reaction of the DRC to Cottesloe. Due to its reactionary nature and its efforts to appease worried church members, it showed radical theological deficiencies, such as its insistence on diversity at the cost of unity, its statement that “the New Testament allows for the possibility that a given country may decide to regulate its inter-people relationships on the basis of separate development” (section 13.6; cf also 49.6),¹¹ and its censure on racially mixed marriages. It became clear that HRSAS could under no circumstance be the DRC's last word on ethnic relations. Its demise called for its revision. To its credit, it was far-sighted enough to claim in its opening statement that the church “can never allow itself the luxury of regarding its consideration of relations between races and peoples completed” and that “it will always be the calling of the church to listen anew to the Word of God.”

Some other contributing factors should also be highlighted here.¹² The Cape Synod made some important positive contributions. At its 1975 session it made efforts to move away from the HRSAS's repudiation of racially mixed marriages and its rigid emphasis on diversity (cf Van der Merwe 1990:136-142). In 1979, it emphasized “that all forms of racial discrimination which conflict with (a) the ethical norm of neighbourly love, which includes justice, and (b) the principle that all people enjoy

10 All official documents quoted in this article are available in the archives of the DRC, situated on the premises of the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch.

11 To be fair, it should be said that the following qualification that a policy of separate development should comply with the norms of love for one's neighbour and social justice, is often overlooked.. This acid test, if critically applied, would have dealt the death blow to ecclesiastically sanctioned apartheid.

12 Van der Merwe carefully treated all of these, but I shall focus on their relevance for the decision to revise HRSAS.

equal status before God clash with the biblical message” (see Algemene Sinodale Kommissie 1997: 27-28). Certainly the qualification that suggests that there may be acceptable forms of discrimination was very misplaced. However, at least some progress was made towards tackling the scourge of racial discrimination and it prepared the way for CS to reject all forms of racial discrimination.

Various painfully honest and theologically penetrating encounters with fellow ministers and theologians of Reformed tradition in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany also contributed significantly towards setting the scene for CS.¹³ Within this context, a 1979 visit of eight Dutch Reformed theologians to Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands for discussions with delegates from Reformed institutions in these countries should be highlighted. The members of this delegation were Professors C.W.H. Boshoff, A.B du Toit, J.A. Heyns, W.D. Jonker, E.P.J. Kleynhans, N.J. Smith, P.A. Verhoef and Dr. F.E. O’Brien Geldenhuys (cf. Van der Merwe 1990: 220-221).¹⁴ On their return the South African delegation made a well-motivated recommendation to the Plenary Moderature of the DRC that a commission of specialists should be appointed to thoroughly revise and rewrite HRSAS. This recommendation made no small contribution to the eventual decision of the 1982 Synod to revise HRSAS (see esp. Algemene Sinodale Kommissie 1997:25-26).

As to the factors building up to the revision of HRSAS, there is one less obvious development which should be mentioned: The fact that many leading white Afrikaans speaking Christians at this time began to realize that apartheid was a mistake, not only on practical grounds, but also from a moral perspective. Telling in this regard is the account of J. Lensink, a former minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, of a visit by himself and three other ministers of the Reformed Church of Africa to Mr B.J. Vorster, then Prime Minister of the Republic of South Africa, shortly after the Soweto uprisings of June 1976. The purpose of this visit was to hand a memorandum to the Prime Minister. The group had severe misgivings about the visit and expected a stern, dominating, and paternalistic figure. Instead the opposite happened. The original fifteen minutes became an hour and a half. The Prime Minister addressed them as fellow brothers in Christ and told them, in essence, and in the highest confidence, that he and his government realized that apartheid was a mistake, but they needed time to persuade white South Africans that change was necessary. According to Lensink, the delegation left the meeting-room, toy toying with joy. The essential authenticity of this account can hardly be

13 Discussed *in extenso* by Van der Merwe (1990:153-197).

14 It is not without importance that three members of this group were also signatories to the “Reformation Day Confession”, viz. Professors Heyns, Jonker and Du Toit.

questioned.¹⁵ To my mind it at least indicates that even in some staunch Nationalist circles some serious rethinking was taking place. This was also increasingly the case among other white Afrikaans intellectuals.

At this stage, a growing number of DRC theologians, ministers and church members were already convinced, or becoming aware, of the wrongs of apartheid, as illustrated by some of the “impulses” and factors mentioned above. As a matter of fact, quite a number of them had a long time previously already embraced the essence of the Cottesloe decisions. They realized that apartheid was wrong and that the increasing violence engendered by it made it even more evil. However, many others still felt the opposite. The scene was thus set for the deliberations finally eventuating in CS.

2. TYPIFYING CHURCH AND SOCIETY

CS was a document of compromise, symptomatic of a watershed period in the thinking of leading white Afrikaans speaking Christians. In the committee entrusted with the task of revising HRSAS two divergent currents converged. Conscious of the fallacy of oversimplification and disregarding the minor differences which existed within each group, we may nevertheless speak of the progressives on the one hand and the status quo on the other.¹⁶

The first group realized the ecclesiastical risks involved, but were convinced that obedience to the will of God, as they understood it, should receive priority – the current church and political policies needed critical re-examination and, in fact, a change of direction. The latter group was deeply conscious of the possibility of a massive rift (*kerkskeuring*) in the Dutch Reformed Church and were therefore bent on minimizing the effects of any radical deviation from former positions.

The fear of losing a substantial number of church members – which afterwards proved to be not wholly unfounded – was already apparent in the letter, which Rev Kobus Potgieter, at the time moderator of the DRC, wrote to the designated members of the commission. After notifying the addressees of their appointment, he cautioned them as follows: “You know yourselves ... how serious this matter is and how very discreet we should deal with it.”

Questions regarding the theory and practice of apartheid on the one hand, and the fear of “kerkskeuring” on the other, seesawed during discussions, created tension and eventually determined the typical ambivalent nature of the final document. No

15 Lensink entered a verbatim account of this meeting into his diary and kindly gave me permission to refer to it here.

16 A third group, for various reasons, preferred not to compromise themselves either way.

wonder that, in a critical evaluation of it, Smit (1989:56) came to the conclusion that this report spoke with two voices. And König (1989) found that in CS two opposing concepts of the church were at work.

3. THE COMPOSITION OF THE COMMISSION

The Executive Members of the Moderature were appointed as the chairpersons of the four sub-commissions tasked with preparing the preliminary reports. The sub-commission on the evidence of Scripture was chaired by the Rev G. S. J. Möller (vice-moderator); the other members of this group were Professors P.A. Verhoef and A.B. du Toit. Dr P. Rossouw (church administrator), together with Professors J.A. Heyns and P.B. van der Watt, were responsible for the study on “Church, Kingdom and Ecumenism”. Dr D.C.G. Fourie (registrar of the DRC), Professors P. Smit and D.A. du Toit, as well as Rev D.J. Viljoen and Dr M.M. Nieuwoudt, were entrusted with investigating the issues of “Church and Justice in Society”, as well as “Marriages and Mixed Marriages”. Rev J.E. Potgieter, Prof C.W. H. Boshoff and Rev D.S. Snyman had to devote their attention to “Church and Mission”. The procedure of appointing so many “conservative” members on the commission eventually backfired since these could later only with difficulty argue against a report to which they themselves were signatories.

The opposing positions are more or less reflected by the two minority stances towards §319, as eventually put before the synod. This paragraph stated as follows: “The conviction grew gradually that a policy of separation could not be supported and applied unless it could be justified from Scripture. This led some to the conviction that the separate development of peoples is a biblical requirement and that the church should prescribe it to the political authorities as a biblical demand.” This was then followed by the corrective in §320 that the DRC wants to unequivocally distance itself from the view that the church is called to prescribe any political model or policy to the state. However, it should insist that the demands of love, justice and human dignity must be incorporated in society. The first minority report endorsed §320, but proposed that §319 should be extended by the following: “The elevation of apartheid to a religiously coloured ideology, which undeniably also occurred in the Dutch Reformed Church, is a serious fallacy (*dwaling*) which, though unintentional, especially in its practical application, contributed to much pain, suffering and bitterness. This should be confessed in all sincerity before God and men.” This amendment was underwritten, in alphabetical order, by Professors A.B. and D.A. du Toit, J.A. Heyns and P.A. Verhoef. Had this amendment gone through it would have been the first time in the history of the DRC that she confessed apartheid as a sin. The second amendment to §319, which was endorsed by Professors C.W.H.

Boshoff, Drs D.C.G. Fourie and M.M. Nieuwoudt, and Reverends D.S. Snyman and D.J. Viljoen, stated: “The debate regarding the fundamental and scriptural basis of a policy of segregation continued through the years, inter alia in the DRC, in ecclesiastical journals, conferences, commissions and synods. Although some advocated it at certain stages, the conviction grew with time that the forced segregation and separation of peoples cannot be deduced, as a demand, from the Bible.” The difference between these two amendments tells its own story. Whereas the first amendment proposed that the ideology and practical application of apartheid should be confessed as a sin, the second one avoided it.

4. COMPARING “HUMAN RELATIONS AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCENE IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE” AND “CHURCH AND SOCIETY. A TESTIMONY OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH”¹⁷

Compared with HRSAS (1974), CS, as approved by the 1986 Synod of the DRC,¹⁸ certainly reflects a positive development, be it with some important qualifications:

1. Whereas the Afrikaans title of HRSAS (*Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudings in die lig van die Skrif*), and also its content, cantered around race and ethnicity, CS focused on the church and its responsibilities within society. This departure from an obsession with race and *ethnos* is significant. A theology of blood and soil gave way to a theology of the church.
2. The recognition of CS¹⁹⁸⁶ that the biblical justification of apartheid was a mistake¹⁹ was a step in the right direction, although as yet disappointingly insipid. However, CS¹⁹⁹⁰ §283 improved on this: “While the Dutch Reformed Church over the years seriously and persistently sought the will of God and his Word for our society, the church made the error of allowing forced separation and division of peoples in its own circle to be considered a biblical imperative.

17 CS was amended in several respects by the 1990 Synod. I shall focus primarily on CS as approved by the 1986 Synod (CS¹⁹⁸⁶), but occasionally I shall refer to its 1990 version (CS¹⁹⁹⁰).

18 The original submission of the commission (CS^{concept}) was amended in several instances. It important to note that the much disputed §§305-307 (CS¹⁹⁸⁶) were amendments accepted during the session of the synod.

19 CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §305 only called it “an error”. Cf, however, CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §43 which states that this reading into the Bible “of a particular social or political policy, whether it be ‘apartheid’ or separate development or integration, must be emphatically rejected”.

The Dutch Reformed Church should have distanced itself much earlier from this view and admits and confesses its neglect.”

3. Positive was also the admission that “the application of apartheid as a political and social system by which human dignity is adversely affected, and whereby one particular group is detrimentally suppressed by another, cannot be accepted on Christian-ethical grounds because it contravenes the very essence of neighbourly love and righteousness and inevitably the human dignity of all involved” (CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §306). Also, in CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §307, the Synod declared, “To the extent that the church and its members are involved in this (that is, *in causing the suffering of people* – AdT), it confesses its participation with humility and sorrow.” However, the majority of the commission and the synod of 1986 were still not prepared to summarily denounce apartheid as sin. It was only in November 1990 that Prof W.D. Jonker, followed by the DRC delegation to the Rustenburg meeting, and confessed apartheid without reservation as sin. The editor of “Die Kerkbode” of November 16, 1990, justifiably described this occasion as a “moment of liberation” for the DRC.
4. Compared with HRSAS, CS shows a greater sensitivity for the fate of the poor and the fragile of society, as well as a greater consciousness of the suffering caused by apartheid. Unfortunately, this was spoilt by many qualifications and reservations (cf CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §307).
5. Positive points were also the condemnation of racism (CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §§112, 114; cf CS¹⁹⁹⁰ §§110-114), the emphasis on biblical justice, compassion, service, human dignity and rights (CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §§135-199) and the concomitant statement that the withholding of political emancipation is a serious impairment of human dignity (CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §338). However, the latter paragraph was still much too theoretical and academic. It should have identified and denounced the injustice endemic in the existing system in a concrete manner.
6. Whereas HRSAS came to the conclusion that racially mixed marriages are “physically possible” – what an unbelievable banality! – and that such marriage are “extremely undesirable” (section 65, as amended²⁰), CS refrained from a moral censure of mixed marriages, simply stating that Scripture condemns marriages in cases of consanguinity and strong religious differences (CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §221).
7. An important progressive step was the recognition that faith was the only condition for belonging to the church of Jesus Christ and that church

20 However, the Afrikaans original adds the word “ontoelaatbaar” = “impermissible”.

attendance and church membership should be open to all (CS¹⁹⁸⁶ §§62, 265, 270, 273). It were primarily these decisions which led to the much feared rift in the DRC and the founding of the *Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk* which currently has roundabout 40 000 members. But also within the DRC, negative undercurrents came into being²¹ and these remain active to this day. Typically, they are presently lobbying against the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar within the DRC. Synodical decisions are one thing. To change hearts and minds is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Despite its deficiencies it would nevertheless be incorrect to conclude that CS was a futile exercise. To the contrary, it certainly was a step forward. Although it did not as yet signify the end of the DRC's journey away from apartheid, it marked a significant turning point and had a positive impact on the thinking and attitude of the DRC as an institution and also on many, if not the majority, of its members.

5. SOME REACTIONS TO “CHURCH AND SOCIETY”

As we have indicated, CS was a compromise. Reactions varied according to the point of departure of its reviewers. Many were positive, sometimes enthusiastically positive. Reactions from the “right” as well as from the “left” were strongly negative.

Some conservative groups within the DRC were extremely alarmed and reacted vigorously. In just eight days after the adjournment of the 1986 Synod some 200 church members from 80 congregations convened in Verwoerdburg. On November 28, more than 3000 gathered in Pretoria. A continuation committee was formed to rally all “alarmed” DRC members, to compile a memorandum of objections and to appeal to the General Synod to reverse certain decisions. This committee was responsible for the booklet *Geloof en Protes* (“Faith and Protest”). According to this document the “God-given” cultural pluriformity of nations and the preservation of a nation's cultural and national identity (“volkseie”) should be the hermeneutical key towards church formation. Church unity is an attribute of the invisible church and should therefore not be enforced. This implies that the DRC should be a church reserved for white Christian Afrikaners and all tendencies towards the opposite should be rejected. Since the DRC was not prepared to comply with these objections, the *Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk* was formed in 1987.²²

21 See also further below.

22 Professor C.W.H. Boshoff also reacted against certain synodical decisions in his booklet “Kerk en Samelewing in Oënskou. Kommentaar en Kritiek”, in which he criticized the downplay of diversity in CS, warned against politicizing, and emphasized that the DRC is the “church of Jesus Christ for the Afrikaner nation” (1987:30).

From the opposite side of the spectrum objections were *inter alia* that CS did not go far enough and was too ambivalent. Kinghorn (1989:42) labelled it “a tragic document” and “a symbol of dishonesty”. Theologians from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church also rejected it, not only in its 1986 wording, but later also in its 1990 rendering. Boesak (1989:96), for instance, declared: “It boggles one’s mind that a church which is so full of competent theologians can really believe that something which is so inherently evil, so clearly anti-Christian, can be implemented in a fair and just way. And to speak objectively of admitting a mistake instead of confessing it as sin, is really not consistent with normal ecclesiastical pronouncements and once again indicates that the DRC has not rejected the policy of apartheid as such” (my translation). This was also the dominant evaluation of CS in *Farewell to Apartheid?* – a collection of contributions presented to the 1993 session of the World Alliance of Churches. Botman (1994) deplored the fact that CS still did not admit that apartheid was inherently sinful, that it overemphasised cultural diversity and tends towards a-political escapism. However, he conceded that CS might perform an educational function within the DRC itself.

Durand (1994:62-63) perceptively put his finger on the inhibiting role of fear in the proposals of CS (cf. also Holtrop 1994:59) – others would call it caution or even ecclesiastical realism. It cannot be denied that apprehension about the dire consequences which drastic proposals and decisions could have for the DRC constituency, played a significant role in the preparation of CS, as later at the sessions of the Synod. Allow me to affirm this diagnosis in the instance of one preparatory document, which was not incorporated by the commission. Under the title “The Unity of the Church”, the sub-commission on the evidence of Scripture concluded: “Due to the New Testament demand that the empirical aspect of the church’s existence should increasingly reflect the fact of her being in Christ, it is necessary that the family of Dutch Reformed churches should reflect their unity also in their ecclesiastical structuring. This means quite concretely that this unity should become visible in one church formation (*een kerkverband*)” (my translation). All that eventually survived of this statement was a minority proposal that served before the Synod.²³

6. CONCLUSION

The most basic strategic mistake of CS should be traced back to the composition of the Commission for Revision. In retrospect it is almost incomprehensible that the rest of the Dutch Reformed family was not invited to take part in or at least

23 Cf. the minority proposal to CS^{concept} §270.

contribute to this report (see also Nicol 1989:28). Had this happened, CS would have moved much closer to the harsh South African reality. Also, the dehumanising effects of apartheid and the political system upholding it would have received much more prominence. This could have made CS a genuinely prophetic document.

However, the DRC was not yet ready for that. Unfortunately, even after the 1986 synod, certain DRC ministers devoted more time to appeasing and reassuring church members than to align themselves with the letter and spirit of the synodical decisions and to explain and implement them. These ministers, often together with their church councils, thus significantly neutralised the positive effect that CS could have had. Even more sadly, others, instead of guiding their congregations towards understanding and accepting CS, did exactly the opposite. No wonder that more or less 100 ministers, most of them from the DRC, eventually joined the *Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk*.

The critical question is whether we, at this stage, do need a new, more prophetic and down to earth ecclesiastical analysis of our situation. In my opinion this is absolutely necessary. Understandably, with its past in mind, the voice of the DRC has become not more than a whisper. The same is true – for other reasons – of the other members of the Dutch Reformed family and many other churches. Many church members are confused and uncertain. Partly due to the existing vacuum, civil organisations and individuals have to a large extent taken over the responsibility of acting as moral monitor to our country and authorities. Our present political, social and religious situation, with all the red lights that are showing: impoverishment, criminality, corruption, nepotism, deterioration of moral standards and values, lack of service delivery and quality education, a renewed hardening of attitudes etc. is crying out for spiritual guidance. To make matters worse, South African Christians are increasingly retreating from the public domain, seeking refuge in political escapism and pietism. Reformed churches should rediscover the Calvinistic-Reformed refusal to surrender this world and its structures to the evil powers. Christians of various denominations should no longer shirk their duties. Also the member churches of the Dutch Reformed family have an undeniable responsibility in this regard. But then it should be the concerted voice of this whole family – still better: the voice of one, unified church.

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KEY WORDS

Apartheid
 "Church and Society"
 "The Confession of Belhar"

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Cottesloe
Dutch Reformed Church
“The Open Letter”
“Ras, Volk en Nasie”
“The Reformation Day Confession”

TREFWOORDE

Apartheid
“Kerk en Samelewing”
“Die Belydenis van Belhar”
Cottesloe
Ned Geref Kerk
“Die Ope Brief”
“Ras, Volk en Nasie”
“Die Hervormingsdaggetuienis”

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