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The contest for reformed identity in South Africa during the church struggle against apartheid

ABSTRACT

In this essay I examine the way in which reformed identity became a site of struggle in South Africa amongst churches with a reformed ethos during the years following the Cottesloe Conference in 1960, and remained so until the ending of apartheid. The essay is divided into three parts roughly corresponding to the three decades between 1960 and 1990. In the first part the focus is largely on the NGK as it was perceived both from the outside and within its own ranks. In the second part the focus is on the emergence of an alternative, more ecumenical reformed identity which challenged the hegemony of the NGK as representative of the reformed tradition. In the third part the focus is on how this alternative reformed identity consolidated its character and at the same time was increasingly acknowledged within sections of the NGK preparing the way for the changes that would happen in South Africa after 1994.

In the 1960's the acronym DRC in the English press, on the radio, or in conversation meant only one thing: the Dutch Reformed Church. Today, when you read or hear about the DRC in the media it inevitably refers to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This remarkable change in the meaning of an acronym is not only indicative of a major shift in public interest in church affairs in South Africa, but also of the change in status of the Dutch Reformed Church within our ecclesiastical, social and political landscape.

This symbolic indicator of the changing public location of the DRC does not necessarily convey the same message within its own constituency, where the acronym NGK obviously looks and sounds different and might even represent something different to that conveyed by DRC. Within its own ranks certainly the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk has not been replaced by the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Internally, it remains the church of generations of devout members with deep family connections stretching back to the seventeenth century, a reformed church that has made a unique and remarkable contribution to the development of South Africa in many fields of endeavour. It is the church that has given, and continues to give many people their identity as Christians and as members of the wider community, as well as in the now growing Afrikaner diaspora from London to Perth in Australia.

In a rapidly changing South Africa where identities are continually being contested, the NGK is one significant source of identity, and therefore its own identity is a matter of both concern and contestation. There is, as a result, considerable unease about the legacy of the apartheid years and how to understand and appropriate the now more fluid identity that has emerged. But my focus is not on this new emerging identity that is currently being contested; it is on the identity that was formed and contested during the apartheid era, though the two are

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connected and will be so for the foreseeable future. For there is a dark shadow side to the persona of the NGK that derives from its fostering and legitimating apartheid, and its collusion with political power in doing so. And it is this shadow side which came to dominate its identity during the period we have under review.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE NGK DURING THE 1960'S

My focus during this period is specifically on the NGK rather than the other Afrikaans Reformed Churches (for example, the Gereformeerde, Hervormde, or the Christelike Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika²) or the English-speaking churches of reformed character (Presbyterian and Congregational), simply because of its dominant role within South Africa at the time. The NGK Mission Churches were then also very much the foster children of the NGK without their own distinct identity.

Some of what follows may be regarded as part of oral history because I was personally involved in part of what I describe and analyze, and as such is dependent on the vagaries of memory.³ Moreover, not being a member of the NGK I can only do so as an outsider. But I also write as someone who during that period was already a trained theologian and a minister in a denomination which was Reformed in origin and ethos, and therefore able to gain a perspective that was theologically critically informed. I was also someone who had a particular interest in the NGK and the theological struggles taking place within it, and also because during the church struggle against apartheid it was necessary to "know the enemy!" I say that with tongue in cheek, but the truth is most people in the English-speaking churches had little real knowledge of the NGK apart from hearsay or press reports. And, of course, in "getting to know the enemy" I also got to make many friends as well, some of whom are now celebrated and respected as the leaven in the NGK during what many would regard today as its darkest hour.

In my book *Liberating Reformed Theology*, I spoke of an "alternative Calvinism" that had existed in South Africa as a result of the labours of the missionaries of the Church of Scotland and London Missionary Society and American Board Mission. Both the latter two, comprised largely of missionaries from the Congregational Churches in Great Britain or the United States, helped prepare the way for the eventual formation of the United Congregational Church of which I am a minister (de Gruchy 1991). Going well back into the nineteenth century there was interaction and co-operation between the Presbyterians, Congregationalists and sections of the NGK based on a similar identity. This was especially the case on what was then referred to as the mission field as can be seen in the pages of G.B.A Gerdener's *Recent Developments in the South African Mission Field* published in 1958. (Gerdener 1958) In addition, during the period up to Cottesloe in the twentieth century, there was also frequent interaction at the various missionary and ecumenical conferences that were convened either by the NGK or the

2 The CGK was founded in 1944 as a break from the NGK led by Dr DJJ de Vos, previously known as the Nuwe Protestantse Kerk in Afrika. A schism in that church in 1949 led one group under Vos eventually to choose the name CRK 1983. The Nuwe Protestantse Kerk in Afrika changed its name in 1986 to the Evangelies- Gereformeerde Kerk.

3 The scientific merits of personal oral history may be challenged and rejected as too subjective or anecdotal for a scholarly article. Yet it is now increasingly acknowledged that this in itself does not necessarily detract from its academic value. I acknowledge that my memory might not always be exact, that is the nature of oral history telling. But I wrote regular reports on my activities for the SACC as well as a variety of articles along with correspondence that can verify what I write today.

Christian Council of South Africa (forerunner of the SACC) to discuss socio-political and racial issues. Speaking more personally, I had contact with NGK students during my own student years, and most memorably was invited to attend the celebration of the centenary of the Kweekskool here in Stellenbosch in 1959. In the years that followed as a minister in Durban my own congregation co-operated with that of the local NGK (Durban-Wes) in a number of ways, and the same was true of other congregations elsewhere.

But it must be said that this contact between the NGK and the English-speaking reformed churches was a largely white and sometimes a coloured affair, and often difficult and uncomfortable. By and large black members within the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches had no real desire to be in any contact. For them, the NGK was simply part of the problem in South Africa. Keep in mind that much of the early leadership of the African National Congress came from the mission churches of the English-speaking churches, including the Congregational, amongst them John Dube and Albert Luthuli, and that many of them were trained at Adams College in Kwa-Zulu Natal. There was also, I must add, a strong feeling in some black congregations that the NGK missionaries were intent on proselytizing their ministers and members with promises of certain benefits – obtaining marriage licenses, a better salary, and so forth.

There were undoubtedly theological and confessional differences between the large and dominant NGK and the much smaller Congregational Church. Most of the leading white Congregational ministers in the first half of the twentieth century were theologically liberal and products of British Nonconformity and the Free Church tradition and, as such, found the DRC far too dogmatically Calvinist (Briggs 1970; S. de Gruchy 1999). But in any case after 1948 Congregationalists did not want to identify themselves as reformed as they might do today not just for theological reasons, but much more because they did not want to be associated with the NGK's support for apartheid or its political status. Although the predominantly white Presbyterian Church of South Africa was historically and theologically more closely related to the NGK, I suspect they also avoided the label Reformed as part of their public and ecumenical identity for the same reason. With respect to the two dominant Presbyterian mission churches, the (formerly Tsonga) Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the (formerly Bantu) Reformed Presbyterian Church, there were undoubtedly differences amongst them, with the Evangelical Church identifying with the Swiss Reformed and the Reformed Presbyterian with the Church of Scotland.

Douglas Bax, a minister of the PCSA, who was one of the most outspoken theological opponents of apartheid, provided a trenchant theological critique on the NGK's support for apartheid in a booklet published by the PCSA in 1979, basing his case not only on the Bible but also on Calvin and the Reformers (Bax 1979). On another occasion he boldly asserted that the NGK had lost its Reformed character and had become authoritarian and hierarchical like the Roman Catholic Church. But as far as the NGK leaders of the time were concerned, we were all liberal, not Reformed, and so theologically suspect. In short, we too had an identity crisis arising out of our antithetical relationship to the NGK – being Reformed, and yet not wanting to be identified as such in public.

Relationships between the NGK and these two English-speaking Reformed Churches (UCCSA and PCSA) reached a watershed in the aftermath of the Cottesloe Consultation in 1960. Increasingly from then on there was a growing sense of alienation from the NGK, and an emerging solidarity and common identity amongst the so-called English-speaking Churches

within the Council of Churches (de Gruchy 2004:51-143). Instead of asserting their reformed identity they now more consciously identified themselves as part of the so-called English-speaking ecumenical Church finding much more in common with the Anglicans, Methodists and Roman Catholics. The die had been cast for the Church Struggle in South Africa that began, ironically, within the NGK itself when Dr. Beyers Naudé established the Christian Institute in 1963 (Villa-Vicencio et. al. 1958). Naudé's dismissal from the NGK was, for the English-speaking churches, a symbol of all that was wrong with the NGK and a sign of hope amongst some Congregationalists and Presbyterians for renegotiating their Reformed identity. In fact, Naudé's expulsion from the NGK eventually contributed to our rediscovery and affirmation of our Reformed identity, though that did not happen for another decade.

For the moment, some of us within the English-speaking churches identified with the CI, not because it was specifically Reformed in character but because Naudé's vision was the formation of a Confessing Church Movement in South Africa similar to that which had emerged in Nazi Germany. Even so, his main target group was the membership of the NGK, and when I joined the CI in 1964, its staff was mainly comprised of disenchanting NGK ministers. But as Naudé's efforts to gather NGK members into the CI were strongly opposed by the NGK, his main support base changed to people from other Churches, most of whom were also disenchanting with the lack of real opposition to apartheid within the leadership of their own Churches. When I went to work for the SACC in 1968, which was located within the same office block as the CI in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, the CI was thus much more ecumenical in character. Of course, Naudé himself remained a Reformed Christian and theologian and found a home in the black NGK in Africa, and had growing contact with sections of the NG Sendingkerk, the significance of which I will discuss in the next section.

Nonetheless, the CI was for much of the period a largely white organization. This only really changed after the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement in the late nineteen-sixties when Naudé identified himself with Steve Biko and gave his support to Black Theology and eventually to the leaders of the Soweto uprising (de Gruchy 2004:144-183). That commitment contributed largely to both his banning and that of the CI in 1976. But these events also had a decisive and now irrevocable effect on the English-speaking churches and more broadly the ecumenical church, that is, those churches identified with the SACC (Goba 1973:65-73). And this was not least the case within the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches. There were, however, few if any voices in the NGK or its so-called daughter mission churches that were to be heard in the circles of Black Theology at that time. But their time was coming, and coming soon.

ECUMENICAL, BLACK AND REFORMED

If Cottesloe was the watershed event at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties in shaping relations between the NGK and the member Churches of the SACC, of which the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches were active participants, the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism was the event that heralded in the nineteen-seventies, raising the tensions to boiling point between the Government and the SACC member churches, and between the English-speaking churches and the NGK.

One of my responsibilities as a staff member of the SACC was to be, what I can only describe as "the messenger boy" in communicating with the leadership of the NGK at that time. Two experiences immediately come to mind. The first was when I was sent to meet Dr. Gericke,

then Rector of Stellenbosch University but also a member of the NGK Moderature, to try and arrange a meeting between him and Bishop Bill Burnett, who was General Secretary of the SACC. The second was when I accompanied Dr. Eugene Carson Black, General Secretary of the WCC, to Cape Town to meet Dr. Koot Vorster and Dr. Gericke to discuss relations between the NGK and the WCC. This was before the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) was launched (de Gruchy 2004:123-134). But, though the launch was imminent, nothing was said about it at the meeting, a fact which soured relationships even more afterwards. Be that as it may, what I recall vividly from those encounters was that if its current leadership was anything to go by, the NGK was not about to change its views either on apartheid or ecumenism. Its anti ecumenical, anti-liberal identity was rock solid, or so it seemed in the fortress like NGK Sinode-saal offices in Orange Street.

But those experiences stand in stark contrast to other experiences. In 1971 I completed my doctoral dissertation at UNISA where, amongst other dissident NGK theologians, I came to know Professor Ben Marais. I also joined two theological societies, both of which were dominated by Dutch Reformed theologians: *Die Dogmatologiese Werkgemeenskap*, in which Johan Heyns was the most prominent theologian, and the Missiological Society, led by David Bosch. I was one of a handful of English-speaking theologians involved in these societies, and regularly attended meetings mainly in Pretoria, but also on occasion in Potchefstroom where I confessed, probably for the first time, that I too was a Calvinist, but of a different variety. On some occasions I was even invited to present papers. My experiences were far from negative. I also gained much greater insight into what was happening within the NGK than if I had only been looking in from the outside. At the very least, this was a different Reformed world in many ways to what I had encountered in Cape Town in the offices of the NGK located in the Sinode Saal.

There was nothing radical about these organizations, but at least there was a willingness to discuss issues, especially within the Missiological Society, where I began to detect a growing ferment talking place amongst some NGK theologians that could not be ignored within the NGK more widely. (Bosch 1985:61-73) When I moved to Cape Town and UCT I immediately made contact with the *Dogmatologiese Werkgemeenskap* that met in Stellenbosch and came to know Willie Jonker and others who were increasingly concerned about apartheid. I also came to know Jaap Durand and Bernard Lategan, whose friendship over the years ever since has been so enriching for me. But these were minority voices within the NGK and its so-called "daughter churches", though their influence amongst the generations of theological students they taught, both in the NGK and the Sendingkerk, was increasingly significant. There was still a long way to go as the incident I will now tell indicates.

In 1980 the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and the UCCSA synods resolved to ask the government to scrap the Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act. As President of the UCCSA at the time, I joined the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, the Methodist President, and the Presbyterian Moderator in seeking and being granted an interview with President P.W. Botha. The meeting, held in the Cabinet Room adjacent Parliament, was attended also by several Cabinet ministers and Departmental officials. Botha told us that he wanted to hear what we had to say, but that first he wanted to remind us about some facts of South African history. This he did, his peculiarly potted version of history ended with some comments that took us all by surprise. He said that he actually agreed that the Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts should be scrapped and he was willing to do that. But the biggest obstacle facing him was that he did not have the support of his church, the NGK, to do so. So he challenged us. If

we could persuade the NGK to change its attitude, he would repeal those bits of legislation. We asked him if he would allow us to inform the NGK about what he had said and he gave us permission to do so. This led to some discussion with the NGK leadership, and it might have contributed to the scrapping of those pieces of legislation in due course. But the point of my story is simply this: even if the government wanted to change, it needed the support of the NGK to do so. But the NGK was not yet ready to support any move away from apartheid even though the pressure within its ranks was beginning to mount.

How far the NGK still had to go became apparent to me when I attended a session of the NGK General Synod held in Cape Town to discuss the Report *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. Although there were a growing number of dissident voices trying to go further than the recommendations of the Report, they were overwhelmed by the majority whose commitment to the status quo was palpable. Nonetheless pressure was beginning to mount, both within the wider Reformed ecumenical world, and within the NGK itself. During the latter part of the seventies and the early eighties, several conferences were held, some initiated by the NGK, others by the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches or the SACC to debate the issues. But there was little shifting of positions, only a growing defensiveness and insistence that apartheid had been misunderstood and badly implemented. But this neither satisfied those of us who were at these conferences, or a growing number of NGK theologians who had become frustrated at the unwillingness of their Church to change direction. This can be seen, inter alia, in the many publications that now began to appear, such as *Storm-Kompas* (Nico Smith et. al. 1981), and then perhaps most significantly in the "Open Letter" ("Ope Brief") to the NGK published in (Bosch et. al, 1982). The voice of Beyers Naudé, which had long been silenced, was being heard again, and the church struggle against apartheid, profoundly affected by the impact of the black renaissance sparked off by the Black Consciousness Movement, was being raised to a new level within the SACC under the leadership of Bishop Desmond Tutu and more widely within its member churches.

At the same time, a different, more vibrant and demanding drum was beating within the NGK mission churches. A new generation of theologians and ministers was beginning to take a leading role within ecumenical circles, seeking also to express their Reformed theology and identity in a way that embodied the insights of Black Theology. The key figure and catalyst in this new initiative was Allan Boesak whose book *Farewell to Innocence* had been published in 1976 shortly after his return to South Africa from his studies in the Netherlands (Boesak 1976).

Farewell to Innocence was seminal, but it was not specifically reformed in orientation. The majority of references in its pages are to Martin Luther King jnr., to James Cone, Manas Buthelezi, there is no reference at all to John Calvin, only some scattered references to contemporary Dutch theologians of the reformed tradition. Compare that with Boesak's next publication *Black and Reformed* that was published in 1984, with the subtitle "Apartheid, Liberation and the Reformed Tradition" (Boesak 1984). This comprised a number of lectures which Boesak had given during the preceding years from 1976 onwards, including that which gives the book its title. This was a lecture that he gave in 1981 at the first conference of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa (ABRECSA) which he had initiated. In his lecture Boesak explored both the contradictions in the Reformed tradition as experienced in South Africa and the promise and challenge of the tradition in the struggle against apartheid. Boesak did not arrive at this position unaided. He could draw on the teaching he had received in the theological faculty at UWC which provided an alternative reading of Calvinism, and he was also in touch with the wider literature in Reformed theology which was very different to

that maintained within the NGK, and which was strongly anti-apartheid in its contemporary expressions. But Boesak had the gift of giving expression to this Reformed legacy in a way that struck a decisive cord within the NG Sendingkerk.

ABRECSA also attracted a great deal of attention from black ministers and theologians in the other reformed churches, like the Presbyterian and my own, several of whom were there at that first meeting (de Gruchy 1983:161-168). Now all of a sudden, to be black and Reformed was not an oxymoron but a badge of honour. This Reformed ecumenical organization was paralleled in the NGK mission churches by *Die Belydende Kring* which was flexing its muscles within the NGK family of churches. By this time these mission churches had all obtained a new identity as reformed churches in their own right, no longer in a state of dependency on the mother NGK. In addition, a new generation of ministers trained at UWC was beginning to make their presence felt well beyond their own ranks. The way was being prepared for the Belhar Confession which was adopted in 1982 (Cloete, et. al. 1984). The reformed label was being wrenched from being monopolized by the NGK, and was rapidly becoming an identity that black ministers and theologians in the UCCSA and Presbyterians Churches were also happy to embrace. This was reinforced by the fact that in the United Kingdom the Congregational and Presbyterians Churches had united to become the United Reformed Church in England and Wales.

In reflecting back on this process mention must also be made of the important role in this process by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). WARC by this stage had become the world ecumenical body bringing together both Presbyterian and Congregational Churches from across the world. WARC was very supportive of the struggle against apartheid and especially of the role that black Reformed ministers, theologians and churches were playing. It was at a meeting of the General Council WARC in Ottawa in 1982 that apartheid was rejected as a heresy, (de Gruchy 1983:168-173) and Allan Boesak was elected President. The NGK was now virtually isolated, and even under growing opposition within the ranks of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod of which it had been a very influential member in past years. A new image of what it meant to be Reformed had emerged in South Africa fulfilling Beyers Naudé's original vision when he formed the CI twenty years previously. We were now proud to be Reformed.

TOWARDS A REFORMED PROPHETIC IDENTITY

If Cottesloe was the watershed event that shaped the nineteen sixties, and the rise of the Black Conscious Movement and the PRC did the same for the nineteen seventies and into the 1980's, then the States of Emergency declared in 1985-6 was the catalyst for what turned out to be both the final push in the struggle against apartheid and, alongside that, in the Church Struggle, both of which were part of the same movement. This was symbolized and given practical effect by the joint leadership of Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, notably in the formation of the United Democratic Front. Theologically, this was also the moment of truth that led to the Belhar Confession and the *Kairos Document*, the first Reformed in character and the second more ecumenical but also the expression of a new way of doing "prophetic theology" in South Africa which continues to be developed. Both documents are uniquely South African and in some ways complement each other.

The rejection of the theological justification of apartheid as a heresy in the Belhar Confession was affirmed not only by the NG Sendingkerk, but also by both the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches (de Gruchy 1983:168). In fact, I would argue that Belhar represents

a “church prophetic theology” in the contrast to a perceived “church theology” of cheap reconciliation advocated by some churches which, together with the “state theology” of the NGK was rejected by the *Kairos Document* (Kairos 1986). In many ways the Belhar Declaration snatched the carpet from under the feet the NGK just as the *Kairos Document* challenged the failure of other churches to actively engage in the struggle against apartheid. But whereas previously, the NGK had regarded itself as the custodian of the true reformed faith, now it was being accused not just of supporting injustice, but also of having become heretical in the process. Suddenly, the true reformed faith was being upheld outside the NGK and in opposition to the NGK. Of course, there were also those within the NGK who affirmed the Belhar Confession already at that time, but the official church was certainly alarmed by this development.

Yet things were rapidly moving beyond Belhar, and the *Kairos Document* was clear evidence that this was so. I recall well how on the day that the *Kairos Document* was made public in 1986 that I received a phone call from Willie Jonker, a leading NGK theologian in Stellenbosch and a good friend, who supported the Belhar Confession but was deeply upset that I had endorsed the *Kairos Document*. This, he felt, was moving beyond where a good reformed theologian should venture. I appreciated his call just as I respected his theology and his opposition to apartheid. Yes, the *Kairos Document* was not Reformed in its orientation, but it was indicative of a new theological development that was responding to the critical situation in the country at the time. (de Gruchy 1990:1-18) Now the issue was no longer whether you were reformed or not, but whether you were willing as a Christian to participate in the struggle against apartheid in order to bring it to an end. The slogan “black and reformed” had been superseded by a non-racial Kairos Theology of non-violent resistance to apartheid, and to a costly reconciliation that could only be achieved through restoring justice.

What had happened to Beyers Naudé and the CI in the 1970's with his turn towards supporting Biko and Black Consciousness in the struggle against apartheid irrespective of whether that was Reformed or not, was recurring. But this time the writing was on the wall for apartheid, even though we did not fully recognise that at the time. There was no longer much point in trying to convince the NGK of its errors and its departure from the Reformed tradition. Those days were numbered, as were the days of its ecclesiastical hegemony. A new day was being born, though through much travail and suffering. The full recovery of Reformed theology, and a new Reformed identity and sense of unity, had to wait until that day. That day has come, but the task of journeying together along that road has only begun. How the churches of the Reformed tradition express their identity both separately and hopefully much more in tandem with each other will determine the future of being Reformed in South Africa in the twenty-first century.

To return to the change in signification of the acronym DRC with which I began, let me add a footnote to my essay. Many within the ecumenical church in South Africa, which now includes the NGK, have been bothered by the lack of its prophetic witness in the public arena since 1994. There are many reasons for this lack, some real and some only perceived, I suggest, because of a lack of media interest. The rebirth of the Kairos “prophetic theology” movement in recent times is indicative that there is now a concerted ecumenical attempt to overcome this silence both in South Africa and, through its influence, globally. This is not an “anti-government” or “anti-ANC” movement. In fact, it is largely comprised of individuals who were engaged in the church struggle against apartheid in solidarity with the liberation movements. It is my contention that the future of the reformed churches in South Africa as a collective will

be determined by the extent to which they participate in this prophetic task as something inherent to their identity as Reformed Churches. But it is of great importance that they do so not simply through individuals as in the Kairos Movement, but as churches. In this way they will be true to the legacy of the Belhar Confession and the *Kairos Document* in providing a genuinely “church” and a truly “prophetic” theology and witness, a liberating reformed witness.

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