

HAS THERE BEEN ANY CHANGE? ON THE ROLE OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH 1974-1990

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Abstract

The paper argues that major changes indeed took place in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) during the period 1974-1990, particularly during the last years of apartheid. Because of many and complex factors, members of this church, as integral part of white Afrikanerdom at the time, were being prepared for major social and political transformations. The official Church - although the term 'church' could refer to diverse and complex social forms - in many meaningful and important respects accompanied them on this way, mirroring the changes in society and helping members to adapt themselves, often in remarkable ways, to the dramatically new future, rather than initiating it. In this process, however, the DRC remained the same in its fundamental characteristic of close allegiance with its people. Like Afrikanerdom in general, the DRC therefore never fully dealt with the apartheid past, as remains dramatically clear from the lack of church unity still existing in the DRC family, in spite of it being, according to many, the acid test for fundamental change.

'Has there been any change?' It is a difficult question, difficult to understand, difficult to see why it is still important, and difficult to answer. Presumably, the question was put to Russel Botman and myself to respond to earlier papers, particularly Willem Nicol's analysis, to hear whether we, from our perspective as outsiders, saw any meaningful changes in the DRC during the late apartheid years. Obviously, there were many changes taking place in society, but did they also affect the DRC? And how deeply? And did the DRC perhaps even play a role in bringing about these changes? But why is this, seemingly historical, question still important? Could it serve any purpose, particularly now, thinking back to this period? Does one not run the risk of making people angry or sad with views and comments that are not important any longer? These are difficult questions and I often changed my mind thinking about them.

1. A Story

Let me begin by telling you a story about a moment when I suddenly knew that changes had indeed taken place. During the early 1990s, some of our theological students at the University of the Western Cape approached me. For the first time in about twenty years, a few of them took the initiative together with a few theological students from Stellenbosch University to organise a meeting between students of both faculties. It would take place one evening, at the UWC faculty (see Smit 1999 for comparative information on the two institutions). They were planning it very carefully, because they were really worried that things could go wrong. They did not know one another. They did not know what to talk about. They were afraid that there would be no conversation. So, they organised co-chairpersons, representing both faculties, fairly. And they invited staff members, from both

sides, to give introductions, to in a way explain the rules, the history, the necessity and the expectations of such an encounter.

They invited me to talk about dialogue, about the idea of an '*oop gesprek*'. It was a large group of students, tense, silent. To break the tension, I told them about the painful and difficult struggles for church unity between our churches over decades; of the role of people like Dr Koot Vorster, the chairperson of the Curatorium when we were students; about the history of such meetings between students; of the regular, although controversial, meetings during the late 60s; of the growing opinion on the Stellenbosch campus that any contact with UWC should be avoided, because such open discussions with people with different opinions to your own could only lead to disaster and cause you to doubt your viewpoints; of the campus wide decision to sever all ties and end all meetings with the UWC; of the theological students who continued to meet in spite of this, because we were committed to unity, reconciliation and justice issues; of the last meeting, in the early 70s, in the old Stellenbosch auditorium, when the representative of the UWC students, now a leading theologian in the URCSA, told us that they will never again meet with us until we were willing to share our lives with them, and not merely a cup of tea and a Bible Study once a year. I told them of the historic nature of this first meeting after so many years.

At the end of my talk, a very friendly, obviously very bright, first or second year student, from Stellenbosch - whom I later came to know and like very much - said she had never heard of Koot Vorster and she hoped never to hear of him again. I had just now wasted twenty valuable minutes of their time. They were not interested at all in history. They were there to meet one another, to share with one another, to have fellowship with one another, not to think about the past and about what had happened two decades earlier. That was no longer important, and could they continue with their meeting? I went back to my office that evening, and I knew - suddenly, clearly - that things had changed. That there would come a time when someone would not know who Dr Koot Vorster had been, and would not care to know, I could never have imagined (for information on Dr JD Vorster and other leading figures in the theology of apartheid, see e.g. the authoritative Kinghorn 1986).

There would come a time, Bonhoeffer said, when children would know about the war only by hearsay (Bonhoeffer 1972). And Russel Botman dedicated his doctoral thesis to children who would know of apartheid only by hearsay (Botman 1993). I would never have imagined that those children would be there so soon. That was a change.

2. Thinking about the story

I often thought about that evening. And when the question of this session was put to us, I was again reminded of that incident. There have, obviously, been important changes. But what was really happening during those years? If I may over-interpret that story, I would like to offer *four brief and superficial suggestions*, all of them only rendering further support to remarks already made by Piet Naudé and Willem Nicol (see their papers in this volume).

- Piet Naudé stressed the fact that the changes that took place should be seen as local manifestations of broader processes of cultural, social, political, economic and technological transformations that were at work in the world at large. I think that is extremely important.

Apartheid, in many ways, as many have demonstrated in the past, was a form of resistance against forces of modernisation at work elsewhere on the globe. And the transformations that ultimately came in our society were all part of much larger

movements. This is not the time or place to construct such an argument, but the fall of apartheid was not the most fundamental change to take place amongst us, affecting our consciousness, our identities, our mentalities, our lives. It was certainly the most dramatic and visible symptom, yes, but hidden underneath were more fundamental, more lasting, more dramatic processes of transformation at work. We were becoming part, almost overnight, of the kind of typically modernist, democratic, secular, free-market, pluralist societies that elsewhere took several centuries to be born and to take historical shape.

To put it bluntly, things were changing, yes, but the most important changes were not merely the demise of apartheid, but the birth of a new kind of society with new kinds of people. *Modernity*, and Piet Naudé correctly spoke about that, transformed the identity of people, almost overnight, through a multiplicity of institutional, structural, systematic changes to our society. This changed the kind of people that we were and are, also the members of the DRC, and one could sense it already that evening at UWC in the early 90s (see for fuller descriptions of these processes, Smit 1996 a and 1996b, 1997).

The students were there as individuals, interested in fellowship with one another, in sharing, in communion, in friendship, in meeting one another, and being with one another - for a nice evening and a new and exciting experience. They were not primarily interested in institutional or structural issues. They were certainly not going to talk about politics or economic justice. The politicians were doing that at the time, and that was probably fine, perhaps not, who cared? They were not interested in history, even in their own histories, and in the strenuous relationships between their respective communities. They were celebrating being together as people, as individuals, their newly found friendships, precisely those things which the UWC students way back in 1974 told us were not enough and in itself unacceptable. Compared with us, back in the 70s, things had changed dramatically. When I started teaching part-time in the faculty of Stellenbosch and met more students from the DRC, this impression was confirmed. The passion that at least some of us had during the 70s for issues of social ethics, was almost absent, it was replaced with new interests, with new concerns and fears, almost with a new kind of person, a modern individual.

- This leads to my second comment. Willem Nicol, in his excellent analysis, with which I can only agree in every single respect, stresses the close relationship between the DRC and the (white) *Afrikaners*. The DRC was 'following the flock,' he argues. Even the changes, sometimes really dramatic, to be seen in the DRC during those years, simply mirrored the same changes taking place in the heart and mind of the (white) *Afrikaners*. That, I believe, is true.

I remember one particular incident where this strong link between the DRC and the *volk* became painfully obvious to me. At the 1986 Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, a so-called *gesprekskommissie* was appointed 'to take up discussions with the other churches in the family on the basis of the *Confession of Belhar*' (for *Belhar* see Cloete & Smit 1984, Smit 1998, Botha & Naudé 1989). Preparing our suggestions for a first agenda for our discussions with the delegation of the DRC, in May 1987, we very deliberately decided to try to make it as easy as possible for them to find common ground with us. We therefore proposed the three themes of *Belhar* - church unity, reconciliation and justice - as the formal structure for our common agenda, in order to respect our Synod's wishes of 'on the basis of *Belhar*,' but took the content itself, the formulations of possible joint decisions, mainly from the then newly

accepted *Kerk en Samelewing* (see *Kerk en Samelewing* 1986). We even included the specific references to the respective *Kerk en Samelewing* paragraphs where we found the expressions, to make it still easier for the DRC delegation. We explained in the accompanying letter that we deliberately excluded those parts of *Kerk en Samelewing* which we still regarded as controversial, in order to establish some common ground first, some commitment to the truth of the gospel which we actually shared, and which we could use as a common witness.

When we met in Belhar on 18 May 1987, we were optimistic, confident of the fact that for the first time in many years actual progress towards accepting one another was at hand. Before the meeting even started, the DRC delegation said they had to share something with us. They held a crisis meeting over that weekend because a large group of their members had left the DRC. They therefore pleaded with us to have more patience with them, and to understand that it was impossible for them to join us in any public declaration, even, and in fact especially, if it was done on the basis of *Kerk en Samelewing*, which had supposedly been the cause of the split in their ranks. It was a remarkable experience. Most of the discussion that day took place between members of the DRC themselves. Several pleaded with the majority, movingly and often moved, that they should affirm the decisions of their own Synod and their own document, but to no avail. The majority simply said that, although they themselves obviously agreed with their own document, there was no way that they could go back to their congregations and regions and explain that to 'their people'. We simply had to trust them, and to wait for them, still longer. At the end of the day, we did not have a single sentence to give to the media, only that we met and had discussions in a good spirit (*Skema van Werksaamhede* 1990, A2 24-27).

That day, I knew that things had *not* changed, and probably never would; that the tired and cynical members of our own delegation, who had seen this so often before, were right after all; that the deepest commitment of the nation-wide leadership of the DRC was, ultimately, when tested, to their own people, to the volk, and not to us, their brothers and sisters in faith, or to theological convictions, or Reformed theology, not even the content of their own synodical documents. In Willem Nicol's words, they were following their flock. If and when the flock would change, they would therefore also follow and change, but would that really be change at all?

One of the many ironies of the history of the Christian church is that, only a few days later, we also met the delegation of the then Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, in Braamfontein. We did not have time to work on a new agenda, so that we proposed the same one. We only deleted the explicit references to *Kerk en Samelewing* paragraphs in brackets, and before lunch that day we committed ourselves to work towards unification, on the basis of theology from *Kerk en Samelewing* (*Skema van Werksaamhede* 1990, A2 36-38).

When the students met that evening at UWC, what I saw clearly for the first time, was not primarily a new kind of DRC member, but rather a new kind of white Afrikaner, an Afrikaner becoming ready for a new society, a new reality, a new modern world, someone for whom skin colour and race were no longer important, but neither questions of structure, institutional life, history or public responsibility.

- This leads to my third comment. The DRC, like white Afrikaners in general, never really came to grips with *apartheid*. In fact, looking back now, I think any attempt to reconstruct those years of preparation for radical social and personal transformation - which most certainly took place - primarily in terms of *apartheid*, misses the real social

forces that were at work. At that time, apartheid, as a powerful ideology, as a form of racist nationalism, had probably long lost its hold on the minds and lives of the majority of white Afrikaners and therefore of Dutch Reformed Church members.

I am sure it was much different during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, but looking back at my own youth in the DRC, I cannot really remember any emphasis on apartheid or politics in the church itself, in preaching or teaching. Obviously, that was only possible, as other analysts have convincingly argued in the past, because it was no longer necessary, because it had become an all-pervasive reality in South African society and the church, because the oppressive laws were in place, because everything was apartheid. But still, this meant that the consciousness of the people and the rhetoric of the church were no longer determined by apartheid. When the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, in its well-known decision of 1978, rejected apartheid as in contradiction with the gospel of reconciliation, many white DRC members thought that the Mission Church was now introducing politics in the church for the first time.

During the late 70s, and increasingly during the 80s, the self-same fears and the urge for survival, that had much earlier legitimised apartheid, now took on new, different forms. It became the ideology of national security, cast in terms of the total onslaught against Christian civilisation, and when the advent of a secular, democratic dispensation loomed inevitably on the horizon, it became the urge for individual survival, the struggle to retain a measure of personal happiness, success and prosperity of the 'liberated Afrikaners,' - as a good friend of mine describes the white Afrikaners of today. By this time, interest in privacy and own careers, family and friends, small groups and voluntary *omgeegroep* - which may all, as a DRC ethicist said, very easily become nothing more than 'overweight individuals'- had long ago already replaced any earlier passion for '*ras, volk en nasie*' (a reference to the document and the rhetoric with which the period 1974 started for the DRC, see *Ras, volk en nasie* 1974). Human rights language, absolutely unheard of, almost socially forbidden during the apartheid years, had by now already become the talk of the day and a powerful instrument to fulfil the need for survival and to still the fears for personal safety and security.

In this process, white Afrikaners never really got to grips with their own apartheid history. For quite some time, they no longer interpreted their own identities in terms of apartheid. When their leaders initiated and motivated the change to democracy, the popular rhetoric they used in order to persuade their followers was not a moral rhetoric, saying that it had been wrong or sinful or unjust or inhuman, but a common sense logic of political and economic survival, saying that it was clear that it could not work, that it had become too expensive, that we had to find a new way to survive.

The DRC obviously helped their members, their flock, to prepare and be ready for this radical transformation that lay ahead at the time. Theologically, pastorally, spiritually, in terms of styles of worship, forms of congregational life, new visions of calling, vocation and mission, members were helped not only to survive, but in fact to adapt in miraculous ways to the new society that lay ahead. There can be no doubt that the DRC, in this way, played - and still plays, although it is unfortunately not part of my task to talk about the present South Africa - a remarkable role in making the smooth transition to a new dispensation possible. One can only marvel at the incredible ways in which white Afrikaners adapted to the new realities and that generally with a remarkable lack of racism and prejudice, in spite of what many may claim.

In this process, quite obviously, they never got to grips with apartheid and its legacies, as so many instances show, including the history around the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission. This is, quite understandably, therefore also true of the DRC (see Cochrane et al 1999).

The most dramatic illustration of this, in fact, much more, the final test case, is the growing and finally the utter lack of interest in DRC circles in the issue of *church unity* in the family. It is no longer necessary to argue the case that - in the words of JJF (Jaap) Durand - the acid test for the question whether the DRC got away from its own involvement was, is and will be its actual commitment to this unity. Apartheid was - at least also - the result of the ecclesiology, the practices and the church order of the DRC. The final proof that the DRC wanted or wants to move away from apartheid will be church unity; and no commitment to any other ideal will ever be able to replace this acid test.

The confession of guilt from within the ranks of the DRC not only came from the ranks of what Willem Nicol calls the dissenters, those who probably had the least reason to confess, but it came as a surprise even to many of those who had a part in the original words of confession in the revised *Kerk en Samelewing*, to which Willie Jonker appealed (see Alberts & Chikane 1991), which demonstrated that it had not been that seriously intended. And although it must be acknowledged that the leadership of the church immediately had the courage and the wisdom to stand by this confession, it also became gradually clear, through a widespread lack of reception and implementation on local levels, not to mention the official response to the TRC, that the confession, for understandable reasons, when seen in the context of the flock at large, was not that seriously meant and experienced.

Already by the time of the transition, it was obvious, to those of us with a kind of outsider perspective, from the lack of any serious interest in church unity, that white Afrikaners and the DRC were certainly changing rapidly and dramatically, but that dealing with apartheid and its legacies did not play a major role in these changes. Even many members, ministers and theologians who before had been enthusiastic supporters of church unity could no longer generate much enthusiasm for it any longer. It was not as if they no longer believed in church unity, it was simply that it was not important any longer, it became a non-issue, uninteresting, compared to the many new and urgent opportunities and challenges that were suddenly facing them. Many of these ministers were now facing a ministry to a new kind of flock, often not even any longer interested in the local congregation, not to speak of the *kerkverband*, the denomination, the ecumenical church and the public church.

On this agenda, church unity was not even low down on the list, but simply absent, and that in spite of the fact that many people would probably no longer have any serious objections against such unity. It was just not important. The new theological and ecclesiological framework at work did not regard it as a priority. All the so-called reasons given - important as they may be in themselves, of court cases, and confessional bases, and pension funds, and salary scales, and language differences - cannot hide the simple fact that the passion, the conviction, the faith, the will, the theology, is no longer there. This is what Russel Botman spelled out in his narrative and argument (see his contribution in this volume), also referring to Willie Jonker's insightful analysis of powers at work in DRC (Jonker 1998).

So, has there been any change? Yes, indeed, so much and so quickly that many people could hardly remember what apartheid had been, and why it ever had been so important. Who cared about Dr Koot Vorster or any other *ooms* and whatever they might have done? And about structural and institutional issues? About the past, and dealing with its legacies? We were facing a brave new world, on our own, colour blind,

free at last, walking tall, *boetmanne*-without-much-*boete*, in short, as self-sufficient individuals, sometimes with families, a few friends, and perhaps a few fellow *taalstryders*, at the most.

- I conclude, with a fourth comment, drawing some of these ideas together. The term 'church' refers to many realities, to many forms of the church, from worship and congregational life, to denominations and ecumenical endeavours, to believers in their everyday lives and in their diverse forms of involvement in civil society.

The answer to the question whether anything has changed during the last years of the resistance against and the dismantling of apartheid, is therefore a complex question, and probably needs several, sometimes even contradicting answers. It was wise of this research project, I think, not to generalise, but to focus on specific forms of the DRC, like scholarly theology (Piet Naudé), the leadership of the Church (Willem Nicol), the official journal (Annette Rosenfeld and Christine Anthonissen), and the public statements and policies of the Church (Etienne de Villiers). It could have been useful to consider even more forms or aspects of the church's life, in order to understand where changes really took place, and why.

There is no denying that the DRC changed radically during the late years of apartheid. It took place in tandem with changes in white *Afrikanerdom*, as Willem Nicol described. It was not so much caused by the DRC, but much rather accompanied by the Church in very meaningful and important ways, that benefited all of us in this country to a very large extent, perhaps more than we know, and through many new initiatives and opportunities much more blessings to all of us together will still take place, I think, because of this remarkable adaptability on the part of the DRC.

For those of us interested in apartheid and its legacies, which do remember Dr Vorster and who long for a credible, lasting and public witness by our churches to what we believe to be the truth and the power of the gospel, however, the fundamental changes have not taken place and seemingly never will.

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