

# PREPARING AND KEEPING THE MIND-SET IN TACT - Reasons and forms of a theology of the status quo

Bernard C Lategan  
University of Stellenbosch

---

## 1. Introduction

The role of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the recent political and social transition in South Africa is a complex one, as is clear from the other contributions to this conference. My brief – if I understand it correctly – is captured by the subtitle of my paper. I am to concentrate on the *reasons and forms* of a theology of the status quo. *Why* was the resistance to the transition so deep-seated in the DRC? How did it *manifest* itself? In the restricted space available, it is hardly possible to do justice to such a vast subject. Consequently, I shall concentrate on some key aspects in the hope that it will stimulate further discussion.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it is important to make two preliminary remarks. Firstly, my presentation is *not* an attempt to analyse and critique the concept of a 'theology of the status quo' or to rehash once again the reasons why an apartheid theology came into being in the first place. Rather, it is an attempt to identify some of the *forces* at work before 1990 that influenced the attitude of the DRC and its role in the process. By trying to understand these forces, we might be in a better position to consider alternatives and I shall end with a few suggestions in this regard.

Secondly, striving to preserve the status quo was not the only (albeit the dominant) force at work in the DRC. Right from its earliest beginnings, there was a tradition of criticism, protest and opposition. In the phase of DRC history we are examining at this conference, the most articulate and most consistent resistance to the status quo came from the younger churches in the DRC family – at first hesitant, but later growing in influence and in the end a crucial site for the mobilisation of opposition to both the theology of the status quo and the political dispensation of the day. It is therefore only fitting to honour these churches, members and theologians for their enormous contribution in breaking the stranglehold and liberating the DRC family *theologically*. Unfortunately, this possibility for theological liberation has still not been fully embraced by the DRC, as a first step to theological reconstruction

But also *within* the DRC there is a long tradition of protest – reaching back as far as Du Plessis and running via Keet, Marais and Naude – to mention but a few of its most prominent exponents.

My account will therefore of necessity be a partial one, concentrating on *one* aspect of a complex and multi-faceted process. It will also be restricted to the DRC and not to other members of the wider family. The interesting question in this context is not *how* the theology of the status quo was overcome in the end – looking backwards now it seems inevitable – but *why* the resistance to transition was so effective and so enduring.

## 2. Internal factors

The role of religion in processes of transition is an ambiguous one – it can both facilitate and restrain change. As we are concentrating on the latter, I would like to single out three factors:

## 2.1 The theological justification of apartheid

The most obvious and perhaps the most powerful force upholding the status quo was the theological justification the DRC provided for the system of apartheid. This justification was both comprehensive and detailed and occupied a prominent place on synodical agendas and other official proceedings of the DRC right through this period. This justification has been analysed and criticised exhaustively and there is no need to cover this ground again. Nonetheless, the conviction that the policy is not in conflict with theological principles and ethically acceptable was a powerful deterrent and prolonged the life of the paradigm long past its natural usefulness. I was struck by a remark of Wolfram Weisse in his contribution that the situation differs radically in this respect between South Africa and Germany. There, no appeal was made to theology; here it was a central issue. How critical this was for upholding the system will become clearer in a quotation that I shall give later. Weisse also suggested that the theological argument could have had a restraining effect on level of violence in the South African transition. This is a suggestion that warrants further investigation. Another interesting question is if an appeal based on theological grounds will have the same effect on the present government of South Africa.

## 2.2 The loss of a critical consciousness

Religious communities and more specifically, Christian communities are *conserving* (not necessarily *conservative*) by nature. They provide a safe haven for members, stability, support and protection. They claim to be (and are expected to be) the moral backbone of society. They give guidance and direction, based on certain values and principles – values and principles that are passed down from generation to generation.

The church certainly also has a prophetic calling and the responsibility to serve its members and the community at large. But in practice, the dominant role has always been that of conserving. In the case of the DRC, the prophetic role was much less prominent in the period before 1990 and became visible only in a time of crisis.

However, there was more at hand than just the natural inclination of a religious community to provide stability and to protect the status quo. There were additional factors – both external and internal - that reinforced this trend. Johann Kinghorn (1986: 47-69) has provided us with an incisive analysis of these factors, especially of the external influences that shaped the thinking of the DRC in an extraordinary demanding time in its history. He also shows that the choices that were made in the twenties and thirties had a decisive effect on the role on the DRC during the apartheid era itself and during the subsequent transition to democracy. He correctly points out the existence of a hermeneutical vacuum that finally resulted in a structural deficit in the theology of the DRC.

I would like to place these processes in a wider context and focus not so much on the conceptual aspects, but rather on the *mindset* and *attitude* that resulted from these developments. I believe that these subsequently affected the very way theology was done in the DRC and goes a long way in explaining its conforming role.

In order to do this, we have to return to the famous (or infamous) Du Plessis case of the early thirties. My intention is not to review the case as such (a fascinating story in itself, described by inter alia Deist 1994, Kinghorn 1986, Nash 1997 and Rossouw 2000), but to trace a very specific trend within these developments that can be best described as the *loss of a critical consciousness*.

For those not familiar with the details, just a brief summary. Johannes du Plessis was one of the most gifted sons of the DRC. After studying at Cape Town,

Stellenbosch and Edinburgh and serving in the church, he became the editor of *Die Kerkbode* (official mouthpiece of the DRC), criss-crossed Africa, wrote important works and was appointed as professor of New Testament and Missiology at Stellenbosch in 1916. His enthusiastic support for Enlightenment ideas soon brought him in conflict with church authorities. After a long, drawn-out battle between Curatorium, Presbytery and Synod, he was removed from his post by Synod in 1930. Du Plessis took the case to the Supreme Court (with the young Eben Dönges as one of his advocates), who promptly overturned the decision of the church. Synod was forced to withdraw all charges against Du Plessis, but still prevented him from teaching theology students. He remained professor of Hebrew at the University until his death in 1935.

What makes Du Plessis important for our discussion, is not his views on science or higher criticism. (Today, there are serious questions about the adequacy of his optimistic positivism). His real significance lies in the *spirit of intellectual inquiry and open debate* that characterised his whole academic enterprise and that permeated all his writings. He was a child of his day and personified the optimism of the Enlightenment, its faith in reason and rational thought. His spiritual predecessor at Stellenbosch was Tobie Muller – another brilliant young philosopher/theologian who preferred to serve the congregation of Philippolis after having being offered the chair in philosophy at Stellenbosch. The underlying motive for this choice was his conviction that the problems of life could not be solved in theoretical discussions in the classroom, but only in direct interaction with real people in their daily lives.

In contrast, Du Plessis chose academe as platform from where to address life's challenges. Muller's historical optimism in the congregation became the basis of Du Plessis's philosophical optimism in the classroom. The latter established the journal *Het Zoeklicht* in 1923, and this 'search-light' was intended to probe the dark areas of politics, society and church. 'It will be the aim of this journal to spread the day light of reason and to subject current views and prejudices to an impartial examination' (Du Plessis 1923:2, quoted by Nash 1997:59).

Du Plessis philosophical optimism was based on the firm belief in the unity of all knowledge and therefore on the complementary relationship between faith and reason. 'How then are faith and reason to be reconciled? Our answer must be: there is no need for reconciliation, because there is no conflict. And the conflict is avoided not through a delimitation of separate territories for faith and reason - which is impossible to carry out - but by regarding faith and reason as capacities which supplement each other. Reason paves the way for faith; faith completes and perfects the work of reason' (Du Plessis 1933:115, quoted by Nash 1997:60).

Du Plessis therefore opposed the separation of science and religious truth and consequently, the separation of Christian science from the science of non-believers. On the social level - remarkable, but quite consistent with his main premise - he criticised the separation of the interests of poor whites and from that of Africans, as they do not conflict with each other. All are needed to complete the whole. 'If we regard the natives as inferior, then we become inferior ourselves. We cannot hold them at a lower level, without remaining at a lower level ourselves. Therefore then upliftment, both neutral and economic also means our own upliftment and ennoblement.' (1933a: 67, quoted by Nash 1997:60).

It comes as no surprise that Du Plessis was receptive to developments in natural sciences and in other disciplines. He noticed that since Darwin's time, there was a growing acceptance among natural scientists of the purposeful design in natural

processes. Evolution as a creative process is therefore quite reconcilable with the Old Testament account of creation. He was also open to the results achieved by the so-called 'higher criticism'.

Very important for our analysis is his recognition of the limits and relativity of human knowledge. In his view, only the Absolute can have absolute knowledge. We achieve no more than an approximation of the truth, but never the full truth (1933b: 148, quoted by Nash 1997:60).

The consequence of the position of Du Plessis was that he stimulated scientific inquiry and intellectual debate at Stellenbosch and in Afrikaner circles to an extraordinary degree. Ever more remarkable, theology was respected as an equal partner in this process and became an active participant in the intellectual ferment of the time.

A whole series of theological, moral and legal questions became the topic of lively intellectual debate: 'Was it possible for Christians to accept the findings of modern science? Did these findings conflict with the Bible? Was the Bible literally true in all its details, or were parts of it to be understood allegorically? Had Jesus laid aside his divinity in becoming human to such a degree that he was capable of error and ignorance (the so-called *kenosis* question)? Was it possible to gain a better understanding of the Bible through reconstruction of its historical context, or did this merely impose human ideas on a divine message? Could more than one view of these matters be tolerated within the Church? And within the Theological Seminary in which future ministers were to be trained? What would be the consequences if the 'seeds of doubt' were not eradicated? Did the Church have the right to impose additional requirements on its ministers apart from adherence to its confessions?' (Nash 1997:59-60).

The reaction to Du Plessis did not stay out. His optimistic expectation that change within church and society would come about through harmonious and cumulative growth and the assimilation of human knowledge, was soon to be dashed. After a long, painful and unedifying process, he was barred from teaching at the Theological Seminary.

It is not my intention to defend or to evaluate Du Plessis's views at this point (by all accounts he was indeed a controversial figure), but to focus on his intellectual legacy and on the consequences this had for the DRC's attitude towards critical inquiry.

The most direct consequence was a *structural deficit* in DRC hermeneutics, manifesting itself in the inability to deal with the issue of history and consequently to participate in the enfolding hermeneutical debate within theology (cf. Kinghorn 1986: 56). But the more enduring and long-term legacy was the *loss of a critical consciousness*. Theology at Stellenbosch no longer functioned as the conduit for scientific inquiry and intellectual ferment - elements so characteristic of Du Plessis's tenure at the Theological Seminary. More than anything else, this shaped the attitude of the DRC towards change and prepared a mentality that instinctively sided with the status quo.

But the need for such inquiry and for fundamental intellectual discourse was all but extinguished by sidelining Du Plessis. To the contrary - it was now only properly aroused and was calling for alternative outlets. This became evident not only in actions such as the commissioning of a statute for 'Pink Piet' by a group of admirers, but also in the broadening of intellectual discourse at the University. It was especially the Department of Philosophy that was to gain from the clamp down on intellectual enquiry and debate. As Nash points out: 'The defeat of Du Plessis ensured that, for the

first time, a steady stream of Stellenbosch students would gravitate towards the academic study of philosophy, and invest that study with an unprecedented significance and intensity' (Nash 1997:61).

When a river is diverted from its original streambed, the force of the water soon finds alternative routes. At Stellenbosch in the post Du Plessis era, one of the most important alternative streambeds was that of philosophy. The relationship between philosophy and theology at Stellenbosch is no doubt unique. A large number of the most prominent students and most of the lecturers in the department since the time of Tobie Muller were also trained theologians: Kirsten, Oglethorpe, Oosthuizen, Degenaar, Rossouw, Esterhuysen, Van Niekerk, Hattingh, van der Merwe, Verwoerd - the same applies to Stellenbosch graduates who took up teaching positions elsewhere - Brümmer, Van Huyssteen, Kirsten, Naude, Lötter, Rossouw - to mention just a few. Kirsten set the tone by establishing a remarkable synthesis in his own thinking. He was able to combine an 'epistemology of flux' with an 'anthropology of stasis' (Nash 1997a:132). This provided him with the platform and the scope for intellectual inquiry and innovation, while leaving the (ecclesial and political) status quo in tact (Nash 1997a:130). This enabled Kirsten to survive in the Stellenbosch context, but to retain the link with theological orthodoxy. This was also the link that enabled his students to continue their theological studies. However, their post-graduate and doctoral work was done in philosophy and it was here that intellectual ferment and critical inquiry were stimulated - especially under the (later) influence of Degenaar as *agent provocateur*. With Potgieter as the counter-part at the Theological Seminary, systematic theology did not experience a similar creative phase.

Philosophy was not the only alternative conduit for scientific inquiry. Semitic Languages and (to a lesser extent) Classics played a similar role. In the case of the former, it was especially Charles Fensham who stimulated critical research and Ferdinand Deist is a good example of this trend.

The remarkable consequence for our subject is that although surrogate channels for intellectual inquiry opened up, *these did not challenge the status quo the domain of the DRC*. We have seen how Kirsten combined an epistemology of flux with an anthropology of stasis to create an intellectual space for experimental thinking, without disturbing anything in the realm of the church. This was left to philosophers without theological training or ties. It would seem that the trauma of the Du Plessis experience affected attitudes in the DRC on a much deeper and more fundamental level. Even though the urge for intellectual inquiry was satisfied in other ways, the mind-set of supporting the status quo in the DRC remained intact.

### 3. The effect of para-theological influences

The hegemony of church (DRC), party (National Party) and economic interests (Afrikaner business) in the establishment and maintenance of Afrikaner political power has often been analysed. The mutually reinforcing (and mutually inhibiting) influence they had on each other can hardly be underestimated. For the purposes of our discussion, I will highlight only two of these influences - one conceptual and one of a more organisational nature:

#### 3.1 The ideal of freedom

It is ironic that the main forces bolstering the regime were the anti-colonial history of the Afrikaner, a fierce independence and a deep-seated democratic value system. I am fully aware that this is a controversial statement, so let me hurry to give my reasons

for doing so: Afrikaner history has always been portrayed by its chief (internal) exponents as part of a freedom struggle and firmly placed within the framework of a liberation paradigm. According to this interpretation the emigration of Afrikaners from the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century was motivated by a deep longing for freedom – freedom from (colonial) British rule and freedom for self-determination.

The next important phase of this history was – for Afrikaners at least - again couched in liberationist terms. The wars against Britain at the turn of the century were consistently portrayed as wars of liberation – the first and the second *Vryheidsoorlog*. While English and international historians preferred to write about the Anglo-Boer war or the South African war, it was terminology that never caught on in the Afrikaans community. These were wars of liberation in their understanding, or at worst the ‘English war’ with England as the aggressor. When the military struggle was lost in 1902, the ideal of freedom did not die, but remained the impetus behind the struggle for independence from British rule which was achieved in 1930. The victory of the Nationalist Party in 1948 was understood as the culmination of this long march to freedom and the final vindication of the Afrikaner cause.

The persistence of the *apartheid* state will not be understood properly without taking into account this wider riverbed in which it flowed. It lent an aura of respectability and moral justification to the Afrikaner cause which justified its defence and prolongation, even with the most questionable means.

### 3.2 Democratic ideals

The freedom drive was closely tied to democratic ideals. In fact, when the ideal was translated into constitutional terms, it without exception appeared in republican form. Wherever the Voortrekkers went after leaving the borders of the Cape Colony behind them, they were in a hurry to establish republics, even if some were short-lived. The Transvaal and Free State were the two more enduring examples, with the latter praised in its prime – not without reason – as a model republic. Democratic rule, based on democratic values and democratic institutions formed the bedrock of the state. It is interesting how these instincts prevailed in later years. In the election of leaders for the party or the Broederbond, the will of the majority carried the day and was accepted without question. There was no thought of challenging the result of provincial or national elections. The authority of the courts was never questioned (but deftly circumnavigated in the infamous case of the enlargement of the Senate by the National Party). The possibility of a dictatorship or one party state never entertained.

### 3.3 The spirit of independence

The democratic instincts and the love of freedom found a third partner in a fierce sense of independence. The pioneering existence relied on self-sufficiency and the ability to endure hardship. A rugged independence and a ‘can do’ attitude developed as a consequence, which in the end turned to defiance. Taking on the world was not a new experience for Afrikaners. At the turn of the century the David of the Boer republics faced up to the Goliath of the British Empire. Enjoying the support of the rest of the free world in word and deed (many volunteers from all over the world, including Germany, joined the Boer cause and fought side by side with the *burghers*), the republics not only felt vindicated by world opinion, but were convinced that they occupied the moral high ground.

The ideal of freedom, the democratic instincts and the defiance against the world must not be underestimated when trying to answer our initial question. The aura

lingered on and this legacy lent to *apartheid* respectability in the eyes of Afrikaners that it did not deserve, exactly because of the strange mixture of noble ideals and ignoble desires.

That the *apartheid* state could result from this proud heritage is one of the tragic realities of South African history. But it carried the seeds of its own destruction from the start and in the end went horribly wrong. Stilted democracy, artificial independence and tainted freedom enjoyed at the cost of other's freedom had no chance of surviving in the long run.

### 3.4 Group hegemony and the Afrikaner Broederbond

The solidarity of a group under threat, especially when it is a minority, is well-known. This solidarity can be reinforced by the centrifugal power of a strong nationalism. Under these circumstances, the pressure on the individual to conform and to remain loyal to the group can be enormous.

In the case of Afrikaner group solidarity, there was an additional factor, namely the role of the Afrikaner Broederbond. Much has been written about this secret organisation (cf. Wilkins & Strydom 1978, Schoeman 1982 and Pelzer 1979). There can be little doubt about its power and influence during the *apartheid* years. It still exists as an organisation, albeit in a more open form and it still exerts influence. But that is a story in its own right.

In this presentation, the focus will be on one specific issue, namely the effective way in which the Broederbond achieved group cohesion among Afrikaners. In doing so, it not only shaped public opinion, but created the conditions for the *apartheid* paradigm to survive long beyond its natural usefulness.

At the height of its power in the late seventies, the Broederbond had only 12 000 members, but wielded an influence that was unprecedented in political, economic and social life of South Africa. There were several reasons for its success. One was the careful selection of these members – not only with regard to personal attributes, but especially with regard to the strategic positions they occupied within their local communities. Another was the extremely effective mechanisms the organisation used for mind-set conditioning – first of all of members, and through them public opinion.

The organisation had branches all over the country that met every month (usually the first Monday). At these meetings, the main item on the agenda was the *omsendskrywe* or circular prepared by head office. The letter was read in full to all members and each item was duly discussed. It dealt with all possible issues, but in essence it was an analysis of current events and the articulation of head office's perspective on these events. It communicated inside information, expressed value judgements and gave explicit instructions to members – how they should think about issues, what attitudes they should adopt and what line of argument they should follow, what causes they must support and what action they should take in the following month.

The effect was that after every monthly meeting, individuals in key positions all over the country were conditioned to think in a certain way, to express certain positions and to propagate a certain course of action. The newsletter and meetings acted as a hermeneutical filter with two important results. In the first place, it imposed a framework on current events, assigned meaning to a confusing diversity of facts and thereby created a reality that made sense in terms of Afrikaner ideals and interests. Secondly, it created and reinforced a mind-set that is congenial to and that will act in terms of this view of reality. The result was an unusual single-mindedness of purpose

and high degree of group cohesion and group pressure. In many instances this came down to the binding of individual consciences.

Conformity was further enforced by a unique watchdog system. On the individual level, it was the Executive Committee who supervised the conduct of members through a set of strict prescriptions. Persistent transgressions were viewed in a serious light and could lead to the termination of membership. It is interesting to read the grounds for termination (Wilkins and Strydom 1978: 398). These could vary from divorce under unacceptable circumstances, membership of the Herstigte Nasionale Party, conviction of a criminal offence, alcohol abuse, regular participation in Sunday sport or the joining a church other than the three Afrikaans churches.

On the level of policy, a system of watch dog committees kept a close watch on almost every aspect of national policy. There were at least twelve of these committees, ranging from racial affairs to science and technology, economy, agriculture, youth, education, planning, Africa, media, international relations and sport (cf. Wilkins and Strydom 1978: 401-407). These committees supervised the implementation of policy by their own members and by government. They also pro-actively researched and formulated policy. They were composed of highly competent people and experts in their specific fields and functioned as think-tanks for the movement. Virtually all important legislation in the sixties and seventies were prepared in this way before it entered the parliamentary system.

In national, provincial and local politics, in business, education, the police, armed forces, public service, state radio and television, the Afrikaans press, Afrikaans churches and Afrikaans cultural organisations and the public service, members occupied key positions, often on the highest level. During John Vorster's term of office (1966 - 1978), the relationship between the Broederbond and the government was especially close. With one or two exceptions, his whole cabinet consisted of members.

The views expressed in the monthly newsletter were reinforced by the Afrikaans press and the South African Broadcasting Corporation, which soon came under Broederbond control. In this regard the Afrikaans daily press, in particular Nasionale Pers with the three sister papers *Die Burger*, *Beeld* and *Volksblad* played a crucial role to condition the mind-sets of non-members. *Die Burger* perhaps more than any other publication succeeded in reinforcing a particular viewpoint by analysing events and placing them in the framework of the party. On a daily basis, it provided the ordinary reader with a coherent view of reality and with a ready response to the events of the day. In this respect, the *Kerkbode* fulfilled a similar function, as will be pointed out later.

The overt discipline of the watchdog committees and the executive was only one way in which alignment was achieved. There were other more subtle and perhaps much more effective ways to deal with internal opposition. One was to encourage open discussion within the organisation and the airing of alternative and even radical views. In this way, an internal escape valve was created for those with dissenting views. This served not only as an early warning system for leadership, but also as a conduit to deal with divergent views and to defuse it before it has gone too far. But once an issue was thrashed out and an official position taken, members were obliged (in true cabinet style) to abide by and defend this position.

Finally, the enjoyment of long denied privileges by Afrikaners and experience of real power should not be underestimated. In themselves, they were powerful retainers of the status quo. The group pressure was enormous and life outside the *laager* was unthinkable for most Afrikaners. Theoretically such a possibility may be entertained,



but the social network created by the Broederbond ensured that people leaving the fold (and their families) were personally and socially ostracised.

The result was that the reigning paradigm remained unchallenged, creating an almost impregnable fortress.

The legacy of Du Plessis in the form of a hermeneutical deficit came back with a vengeance. Not only was there a lack of holistic hermeneutical skills, but also the absence of a critical hermeneutical consciousness. Furthermore, this vacuum left the door open for the uncritical and mechanistic acceptance of the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture and the overawed respect for the authority of the Bible, rendering the church defenceless against the biblical justification of the ideology. Firstly, it lacked the hermeneutical skills to unmask the shallowness of the pro-apartheid arguments and secondly, the awe of Scripture was transferred to the awe of whatever argument was offered in the name of the Bible, however dubious these claims to scriptural authority might be. It is ironic that it was the very reverence of Scripture, combined with the lack of a hermeneutical consciousness, that opened the door for the spurious theological justification of the ideology to take root.

In the propagation of *apartheid* thinking, weekly church services and official publications like *Die Kerkbode* fulfilled a similar role as the monthly Broederbond meetings and newsletter and the daily commentary of the secular Afrikaans press. Weekly sermons to a captive audience and weekly leader and other articles assured members who might have doubts that the ideology was scripturally sound and that the government was on the right track. The examples we will be discussing in our seminar clearly bear testimony to this solidarity. Nothing illustrates the close bond between church and state, between the spiritual and secular better than the fact that *Die Kerkbode* at one stage was distributed to church members in the form of a supplement to *Die Burger*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The *apartheid* paradigm was therefore not sustained by a single force. What appears to be theological untenable from the outset was held in tact by other powerful psychological, social and theological forces. These forces colluded and reinforced each other to keep the reigning paradigm in place. That is why change was delayed for so long and why NGK remained in captivity all this time.

In all fairness, it must be stated that *apartheid* theology was not restricted to the Afrikaans churches. Villa-Vicencio (1988) and De Gruchy (1979) show how prevalent it was also in the English-speaking churches. Nonetheless, it did not have the closeness of the collusion between the Afrikaans churches and the Nationalist government.

A Broederbond document succinctly and blandly states the collusion as follows:

The pattern is clear: for the Christian Afrikaner, the voice of the Church of Christ carries great weight. The Church is associated with the words: So speaks the Lord. The enemies of the Afrikaner realise this. Therefore, ecclesial declarations whereby multi-racialism is presented as the real life pattern and separate freedoms and independent development is branded as immoral and anti-Christian are welcomed and exploited, even by the non-ecclesial opponents of the Afrikaner. The intention is to make as many churches as possible declare themselves against *apartheid* to make the Christian Afrikaner doubt the honesty and scriptural basis and Christ-obedience of his own church. And if the Afrikaner should begin to feel that his church is presenting him with a false moral standard, by approving of independent

development or separate freedom for the nation – while this is actually un-Christian and immoral – then to remain as a separate nation with separate freedom would be like Ichabod with his struggle and strife. If the Christian Afrikaner had to believe that his striving for a separate freedom for himself, as distinct from that of the non-white, was immoral, the politicians could just as well drop *apartheid*; they would not be able to maintain it (Wilkins & Strydom 1978, 296).

## 5. Desiderata for the future

What are the lessons to be learned from this complex history and what would be important when reflecting on the future role of the DRC?

The single most important issue in this regard is the regaining of a critical consciousness – a kind of consciousness that characterised the DRC for a brief period of time in the twenties and early thirties of the previous century. I am not suggesting a return necessarily to the *views* of Du Plessis. As we have seen, he was also a child of his time and developments have long since overhauled much of what was topical in his time. But the *spirit* in which he conducted his enterprise is sorely lacking at present and will be even more important for the future.

I conclude therefore with a list of five *desiderata* for the future, that is, five possible ways to regain a critical consciousness.

### 5.1 Stimulating intellectual inquiry as such

The quest for new insight and understanding, for pushing back the horizons of existing knowledge, is a basic human need and essential for the health of believing communities. Even if this is not the first priority in the daily lives of members and even if it is obscured or suppressed at times, the need remains and will return with a vengeance is not taken seriously. We have seen how this need will in the end find alternative conduits if theology does not provide this. Placing oneself deliberately at the edge of the unknown, venturing into uncharted terrain is not alien to the nature of faith, but in a certain sense can best be undertaken by those who have a sense of direction and for whom the unknown is not a threatening concept. Intellectual inquiry is not a goal in itself, but an important antidote against complacency, shallowness and mediocrity.

### 5.2 Promoting interdisciplinary dialogue

The fact that theology cannot be done in isolation is generally acknowledged, but too little serious interdisciplinary research is being done in practice. There are many (often subconscious) factors that inhibit this. One is the (assumed) superiority of theological knowledge that makes for an unequal partnerships, others are the fear of the loss of identity or spirituality or the need to be 'neutral' in doing such work. It is exactly the different perspective that theology can bring to the discourse that is important, provided it is brought in a spirit of equal partnership and not in a prescriptive mode. These things often have to do with physical aspects. The *location* of faculties of theology is often far too isolated on campuses. The *Kweekskool* in Stellenbosch for example is a magnificent building, but is too far from the core. Special efforts should be made to have lectures in buildings of other faculties on the campus where both lecturers and students meet with colleagues of other disciplines on a daily basis. (The issue of location does not only affect theology – engineering and the

medical school suffer from the same isolation. Similar problems may exist on other campuses).

One of the specific goals of the Institute for Advanced Study now being developed at Stellenbosch is to promote interdisciplinary research, but also to question the established ways of doing research. By changing the *location* where research is done (from the North to the South, and hopefully also bringing into play the West-East axis), it becomes possible to de-centre the enterprise, leading to new questions and new perspectives.

It is an important advantage of the present DFG *Sonderforschungsbereich 520* research project that it promotes both these aims. In conceptualising it as North-South undertaking, it has already changed perspectives and broken new ground. It is at the same time a serious interdisciplinary venture, both in planning and execution. This makes the management of such a project very demanding (as any one who has been engaged in such an undertaking will know), but the benefits are incomparable.

### 5.3 Encouraging innovative and experimental thinking

In the history of theology, real advances were often made in situations of crisis where creative thinking became a matter of survival, but at the same time opened up new possibilities which led to unexpected breakthroughs. One example is the era of the Reformation that was an extraordinary time of experimentation and new insights (one only has to read Luther's treatises and sermons on the monastic system to get a glimpse of this). In recent history of the DRC family, the birth of Belhar marks such a time, but as Russel Botman has pointed out, that was only possible because an alternative theological universe has already been developed. The inability to respond adequately to these developments within the DRC itself, is directly related to the absence of such an alternative universe. The theological ferment and creativity that accompanied the emergence of Belhar was missed, due to a large measure of unwillingness to engage in innovative and experimental thinking. The resistance to such thinking is often based on the shallow argument that this will mean surrender to relativity and the acceptance of post-modern presuppositions. In fact, these developments make it once again possible to celebrate diversity and to bring to the table an alternative understanding and perspective in line with one's own tradition.

### 5.4 Taking dissenters seriously

The urge to deal with dissenters in a way that removes the irritation they cause as soon and as effectively as possible is only human. But theology and the church will do well to take time to listen and learn before they take action.

### 5.5 Making a *constructive* contribution to deepening democracy and rebuilding the country

Inquiry and innovation in itself will be pointless if this is not channelled into constructive action. One such a priority would be to strengthen and deepen the new democratic dispensation in the country – not in the mode of (again) following a political agenda, but as a critical and imaginative participation in the public sphere and as a constructive contribution with other players to shape a society for the future. But this will be only possible if certain pre-conditions are met. Just as a theological universe is needed as framework before substantial changes on specific issues can be achieved, so the fundamental acceptance of the transition to democracy would be the

first requirement. There are still clear signs in the DRC that although the transformation in the country is formally accepted and even supported in word, there remains with some an undigested and suppressed resentment at the loss of power and influence. It is manifested most clearly in the expectation (if not the hope) of failure of the new rulers, of expecting the worst and in concentrating on the negative aspects of the change. There can be no doubt about the difficulties of transition and the reality of deterioration in certain areas. But the gains are fundamental and irreversible. Without the positive identification with the intention and values underlying the transition, individual initiatives to make a constructive contribution are also bound to fail in the end. The scope and need for contributions in the right spirit and based on a positive motivation are enormous.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- De Gruchy, JW 1979. *The church struggle in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans
- Deist, FE 1994. *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg. 'n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Ned. Geref. Kerk 1840-1990*. Pretoria: RGN
- Kinghorn, J (ed) 1986. *Die NG kerk en apartheid*. Johannesburg: Macmillan
- Nash, A 1997. Wine-farming, heresy trials and the 'whole personality': the emergency of the Stellenbosch philosophical tradition, 1916-40. *South African Journal for Philosophy* 16, 55-69.
- Nash, A 1997a. How Kierkegaard came to Stellenbosch: the transformation of the Stellenbosch philosophical tradition, 1947-50. *South African Journal for Philosophy* 16, 129-139.
- Pelzer, AN 1979. *Die Afrikaner-Broederbond: Eerste 50 jaar*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.
- Rossouw, HW 2000. *Die Du Plessis-saak*. Paper read at the Degenaar Discussion Group at Stellenbosch on November 3, 2000.
- Schoeman, BM 1982. *Die Broederbond in die Afrikaner-politiek*. Pretoria: Aktuele Publikasies.
- Villa-Vicencio, C 1988. *Trapped in apartheid*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Wilkins, I & Strydom, H 1978. *The Super Afrikaners*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.