

**THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH:
PRESENT CHALLENGES IN THE LIGHT OF THE PAST**
Response to 'a socio-linguistic and theological analysis of
Die Kerkbode'

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Annette Rosenfeld's 'Report on the State of Emergency (1985-1990) in *Die Kerkbode*' concludes with the finding of Prof Christina Landman 'that the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)-leadership tended to restrict itself to the discussion about principles and viewed black people and women only in their function within the system.' According to Rosenfeld this view of Landman 'proves true in *Die Kerkbode* of that time'.

I wish I could have said that Rosenfeld and Landman had missed the point. I wish I could quickly and without a doubt indicate that the DRC and *Die Kerkbode* viewed black communities in the eighties of the previous century sufficiently as people with aspirations and needs. But I have to admit that the contents of the book, *The story of the Dutch Reformed Church's journey with apartheid* – which I wrote in 1997, and which the General Synod recognised with approval in 1998 - is quite true, also with regard to *Die Kerkbode*. It reads thus: 'For many years, the Dutch Reformed Church continued to view the situation too theoretically. Too often its approach was: 'If a policy of separate development can be implemented with neighbourly love and righteousness, it can be Biblically justified.' The church was not serious enough to establish whether, in practice, this policy complied at all with the stated norms of love and righteousness (p73).'

Journey with apartheid also says: 'It was on account of its profound and justifiable identification with the destiny of the people whom it serves in the first instance – the Afrikaners – that the Dutch Reformed Church often tended to put the interests of its people above those of other people. The church was concerned about the survival of the Afrikaners and did not always pay the same attention to the desperate circumstances endured by other people on a daily basis.'

In the late eighties, during the time of the State of Emergency, while I was already the editor of *Die Kerkbode*, this approach was often also present in this publication. Annette Rosenfeld and Christine Anthonissen pointed this out. I want to state my sincere regret about this.

I could have acknowledged at this stage that Rosenfeld and Anthonissen's evaluation of *Die Kerkbode* was in all other respects also spot on. But this is not the case. In quite a few instances they miss the point.

- *Die Kerkbode* pleaded strongly for change in the previous South African political dispensation – change by means of negotiations, not via the gun. I differ completely from Annette Rosenfeld where she says *Die Kerkbode's* pleas in 1986 - and thereafter - that Parliament and the government should urgently change the system by means of negotiations, are in actual fact what Peter Buckland calls a 'technicist-attitude' and that full support was actually thereby given to the status quo. How one can plead for change by means of negotiations, but be accused of trying to maintain the status quo, I do not understand.

- Rosenfeld quotes my editorial of 21 January 1987 in which I wrote: 'We accept that there is a difference of opinion within the church and will make space for an open, calm and responsible exchange of opinions amongst readers.' I was quite happy now when I read what I had written in *Die Kerkbode* fourteen years ago, because nowadays we place quite a high premium on the 'open discussion' in *Die Kerkbode*. But Rosenfeld places these few words from 1987 under scrutiny and decides it was the viewpoint of myself and of that of my predecessor that 'major critical statements moving beyond official church politics within the DRC cannot be expected to be published in *Die Kerkbode*' (p3). This conclusion is discernibly incorrect. Just two examples. What, for example, about the important *Hervormingsdag-getuienis* of eight theologians in October 1980 - which was prominently displayed in *Die Kerkbode* when my predecessor was editor? This 'Getuienis' was very critical about the DRC's role in the country. And in 1982, when the editor at the time, the Rev Tappies Möller, ceded ample publication-space to the well-known *Open Letter to the DRC* with 123 signatories - a document which commanded much attention in the country as well as abroad. A book, *Perspektief op die Ope Brief*, was even later written on this subject.

The previous editor of *Die Kerkbode* and the official structures of the DRC did not agree with the content of the *Open Letter*. This was mentioned by the editor, but the *Open Letter* was nevertheless published in full in *Die Kerkbode*.

During my own time as editor, I published many letters and articles in *Die Kerkbode*, which were very critical about official viewpoints of the DRC. The very same Christina Landman who was quoted by Rosenfeld, recently wrote a testimonial about this topic to *Die Kerkbode*.

She wrote in *Die Kerkbode* of 6 October 2000: 'During the past ten years *Die Kerkbode* did not refrain from allowing the most important debates which took place in and around the DRC, to be published in that newspaper. I had a good look at *Die Kerkbode's* issues of the past decade, and got to know a newspaper that publishes debates and not only statements. Secondly I got to know a *Kerkbode* which listens with respect to believers and their opinions, and which does not commit character assassination. And, thirdly, I saw a *Kerkbode* which reacted sensitively, never hysterically, to debates.'

- Rosenfeld and Anthonissen looked back on the period 1985-1990 with the insight of 2001, and give very detailed attention to *Die Kerkbode's* editorials of the time. One tends to get the impression, however, that the danger which *Die Kerkbode* of that time saw in a Communist takeover in South Africa, is viewed as exaggerated.

However, I am very sure that, if the 'new dispensation' in South Africa had come into being in, say, 1985, it could have been very different than was the case in 1994. The fact is that between 1985 and 1994 we had the watershed years - 1989 and 1990. On 9 February 1990 *Die Kerkbode* wrote in an editorial: 'Before our very eyes a world order of longer than forty years - of a Western Block versus an Eastern Block, of Capitalism versus Communism, of the United States of America versus the Soviet Union - is disintegrating. Everyone who knows what had happened in the world this past half year, realizes that things have changed radically and irreversibly... Communism with world dominance as its greatest ambition, crumbled in a puzzlingly short period of time.'

Mr FW de Klerk, the then state president, said in an interview with *Die Kerkbode* on 23 February 1990 that the 'fall' of Eastern European Communism had in no uncertain

terms made it possible for him to make his important speech in Parliament earlier that month.

The very strong Communist influences in the ANC in the years before 1990 cannot be discounted. It was wrong to have ascribed justifiable black grievances/demands only to Communist influences. But those who look back at editorials in *Die Kerkbode* between 1985-1990, without understanding that the Communism before 1990, which the publication had mentioned, was indeed a very real threat to the church and the country, also still don't understand the significance of the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

Annette Rosenfeld of the University of Hamburg, however, should be able to understand this very well!

- In *Reis met apartheid* it is said: 'With hindsight, it is clear that the Dutch Reformed Church should have made more urgent and penetrating enquiries about the various activities of the Security Forces,' and: 'Similarly, the Dutch Reformed Church should have made more serious enquiries about what was happening and what was permitted in South Africa under the blanket of the various states of emergency.' (p76).

André Olivier writes in his book about *Die Kerkbode, Bode op die spoor van die Woord* (1999), that *Die Kerkbode* did not voice strong enough concern during the state of emergency, 'and it was too easily misled' (p 204).

As Rosenfeld and Anthonissen indicated, the publication was, however, perturbed by the state of emergency and did from time to time raise serious questions about it in editorials.

Again, I agree that the questions which *Die Kerkbode* did ask, were not and this is said with hindsight in 2001 - penetrating enough. However, *Die Kerkbode* is the official newspaper of the DRC, and the editor always had to bear in mind the church's official viewpoint about different matters. The editor did from time to time put forward non-conforming viewpoints, which resulted in internal tension.

Rosenfeld mentions such an instance in a footnote: On 8 July 1988 *Die Kerkbode* asked whether it was justifiable that South African troops are more or less 'permanently' in Angola. This leading article caused an uproar. Front page reports and leading articles in Afrikaans and English newspapers were the order of the day. It was seen as the first 'official' critical sound from within the Dutch Reformed Church about the war in Angola. Prof Johan Heyns, moderator of the General Synod, was asked by the press for his opinion. His reaction was seen as a repudiation of *Die Kerkbode*. To make matters worse – and typically of the situation in those years – his statement was issued by the then Ministry of Defence! The editor of *Die Kerkbode* also received several calls from distressed people in government.

Later Heyns made it clear that the questions by *Die Kerkbode* were quite valid, and the Sunday newspaper, Rapport, wrote on 10 July 1988: '*Die Kerkbode* reminded us of questions which we too easily sideline.'

This incident enables one to understand how difficult it was to be the editor of *Die Kerkbode* in those days. The Dutch Reformed Church and the government were working too closely together. The fact that *Die Kerkbode* continued to ask critical questions – Christina Landman writes: '*Die Kerkbode* was not afraid of debate' – does say something and must not be belittled.

- One cannot talk about the role of the Dutch Reformed Church and *Die Kerkbode* between 1985-1990 without saying something about the Rustenburg Churches Conference of November 1990. It was at that conference that Prof Willie Jonker, with

reference to the decisions of the General Synod of 1990, declared: 'I confess before you and before God not only my own sin and debt, as well as my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural injustices from which you and our whole country still suffer, but substitutionary I also dare to do this on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church, of which I am a member.' The next day the Dutch Reformed Church's four official delegates to the conference (the editor of *Die Kerkbode* was one of them) issued a statement that read as follows: 'The representatives of the Dutch Reformed Church want to state categorically that we fully identify with the declaration of Prof Jonker about the position of this church...' And on 16 November 1990 *Die Kerkbode* wrote in a leading article as follows about apartheid and confession of guilt: 'Now everyone who has to know, knows that officially the Dutch Reformed Church admits that apartheid is sin and it confesses its participation in the application and vindication thereof as wrong.'

- With the passing of years one tends to forget that the Dutch Reformed Church played an important and constructive role during the time of transition to a new dispensation in South Africa (1990-1994). *Die Kerkbode* also tried to make a contribution. Rosenfeld and Anthonissen's review of *Die Kerkbode*'s role during the state of emergency unfortunately disregards the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in the process of reconciliation in South Africa.

Therefore I want to conclude by pointing out that the only president of South Africa who ever attended and spoke at a General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church was not John Vorster, PW Botha or FW de Klerk, but Nelson Mandela. In his speech on 23 October 1994 Mr Mandela mentioned the constructive role which the leadership of the Dutch Reformed Church had played during the transitional period: 'Your rejection of racism and violence and positive support of a just and equitable dispensation has made an important contribution to make the wonder of South Africa's peaceful transition to democracy possible,' he said to the General Synod, according to *Die Kerkbode* of 21 October 1994.

In the years following 1990 the Dutch Reformed Church and its official publication has continued trying to build bridges and promote reconciliation in our country.

About this further research should indeed be done.