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THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE IDEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF APARTHEID

by

Dr. J. Verkuyl

Professor of Missionary Theology at
the Free University of Amsterdam and
general secretary of the Missionary
Council for the Netherlands

Tony Seedorf

(This paper was prepared for the Unit on Apartheid by Dr. J. Verkuyl, a prominent Dutch theologian. An article by him on "Christianity and Apartheid", prepared shortly after a visit to South Africa, was published by the Unit in July 1970. Dr. Verkuyl writes:

"In that article I argued that apartheid both as ideology and as body of legislation is a total contradiction of the Christian message. Being a member of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and a professor at the Free (Calvinistic) University of Amsterdam, I felt constrained to give public witness to my convictions on this matter. Prior to writing that article, I had made my feelings on apartheid known at the 1968 Reformed Ecumenical Synod in Lunteren (Netherlands) and during a tour through South Africa in March and April of 1970.

"The present article concentrates upon the influences which have led the Afrikaans-speaking society of South Africa to adopt apartheid as official Government policy and practice. We shall give special attention to the role which the Dutch Reformed Church (D.R.C.) has played - and by and large continues to play - in this process.

"This article proposes to summon all those who are capable to continue and enlarge the dialogue with this church which occupies such a key position in South Africa - before it is too late. This key position is caused by the fact that there is such a deep interrelation between the D.R.C. and the National Party.")

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THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH 1/ IN SOUTH AFRICA AND
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The political scene in South Africa has long been dominated by the National Party under the successive leadership of Malan, Strijdom, Verwoerd and Vorster. Acceding to power in 1948, the Party has kept a tight grip on the reins of government ever since. Most recently its position as ruling party was reconfirmed by the parliamentary elections of 1970, the results of which were as follows:

National Party.....	117 seats
United Party.....	47 seats
Progressive Party.....	1 seat

Non-white groups are simply excluded from the central electorate. Whites hold a monopoly on all power in South Africa, including the executive powers of government, which for more than 20 years now have rested in the hands of a party that has designed the ideology of apartheid as the blueprint for South African society. While the National Party views 1948 (the year of its accession to power) as the beginning of a totally new phase in the development of South Africa, many non-white groups as well as the white opposition see that year as a turning-point which in the long run will lead to fatal results.

How is it that so many political and ecclesiastical leaders allied with the National Party, especially of the Dutch Reformed Church (D.R.C.), the Gereformeerde Kerk and the Hervormde Kerk, can proclaim so rigidly and self-assuredly that they are on the right path? This is made possible, no doubt, by the fact that the policy of apartheid is shored up by an ideological élan which has gradually taken the shape of a pseudo-religion having its own myths, rites, ethos and cult. We shall attempt to point out a few of the more important building-stones which have gone into the construction of this ideology.

A. The ideological influence of the Afrikaner Brotherhood

The Afrikaner Brotherhood (Broederbond), which played such an important behind-the-scenes role in the power build-up of the National Party, was founded in Johannesburg as a secret organization at the end

1/ The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa consists of three separate churches: the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (the largest and usually called the Dutch Reformed Church); the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk; and the Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika.

of the First World War in 1918. It is not my purpose here to delve further into the history of the Brotherhood; I wish only to point out that the gears of this organization are driven by two basic, ideologically-determined motifs or ideas.

The first of these is called by the Brotherhood the Christian-national motif. Analyzed, this motif can be reduced to the notion of "a separate Afrikaans nation" identified with "Western Christian civilization" and appointed by God to play a dominant role in South Africa until the end of time. It is clear from what the Brotherhood says that in this vision ideological and national considerations run roughshod over that which is Christian.

The second motif one finds running throughout all the known views of the Brotherhood is that of white ward- or guardianship of the "non-white categories of the population". According to this notion non-white groups are guaranteed, within certain limits, an "eiesoortige" (i.e. "their own separate kind of") development. In point of actual fact, this motif works out into a racial caste system which secures continued monopoly of power by whites; this white power monopoly, in turn, forms the basis upon which and the pre-supposition whereby all other groups are assigned a subordinate place at all levels of society.

These are the two basic ideas which explain why the Brotherhood-backed National Party enjoys the support of a large part of the white electorate. With these two notions, the National Party attracts, on the one hand, those groups who are motivated by their rudely egoistic wish to keep the "kaffir" or, as he is called today, the "Bantu" in his place. On the other hand, it also attracts those who wish as wardens to do something or even a great deal for the non-white groups but who are not willing to work with these groups in an integrated society.

At present, the Brotherhood is going through a serious crisis. It is being polarized into two opposing camps around the two motifs discussed above. While it is true that the "right-wing extremist approach" ("verkrampte aanslag") of the Re-established National Party (led by Albert Hertzog, son of the famous General Hertzog) did not win any seats in the elections of 1970, the members of this ultra-reactionary group have in fact caused a split in the Afrikaner Brotherhood, which has resulted in a great deal of mutual suspicion and internecine tug-of-war. Further, younger people no longer seek membership in this secret organization. All in all, one gets the impression that the Brotherhood is undermining itself and before long will die a natural death. Then, too, people are beginning to question the so-called Christian-national ideology. Many have come to realize that Western civilization cannot be identified with Christianity and that to sanctify the "Afrikaans nation" as a separate entity is to be guilty of placing strange fires on the altar.

Even so, it cannot be denied that the dreams and expectations which have given birth to the pseudo-religious ideology of the Brotherhood continue to exercise a great deal of influence in South Africa.

B. The ideological influence of the "Ossewabrandwag"

During the Second World War, white Afrikaners were strongly divided among themselves as to whether South Africa ought to take part in the struggle against Hitler or remain neutral. Many of them joined Marshal Jan Smuts in that struggle, often highly distinguishing themselves in battle. Others - among them Dr. Malan - were of the opinion that South Africa should remain neutral. And then there was a third group who belonged to a semi-military organization called the "Ossewabrandwag" which counted among its leaders the present Prime Minister of South Africa, John Vorster. This organization undertook to sabotage the activities of the troops serving under Marshal Smuts in the struggle against National Socialism.

Of course it would be incorrect to assume that all members of the Afrikaner Brotherhood and the nucleus of the National Party swallowed the doctrines of National Socialism. From the very beginning, for example, Dr. Malan, leader of the National Party at that time, rejected and warned against the ideological excesses and the practices of the Nazis. Moreover, now that everyone knows about the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis, it is understandable that no South African finds it desirable or pleasant to be reminded of the "Ossewabrandwag"; still, it cannot be denied that its ideology was national-socialistic. Neither can it be denied that this ideology played a definite role in South Africa at that time - a role accepted and even honoured by many - nor that a ferment of it continues to work in contemporary South African society.

C. Ideological ferment in the policies of the National Party

In our attempt to identify the more important of the building-stones which have gone into the construction of the ideology of apartheid, we shall also have to take account of the speeches and expositions of the architects of that ideology.

As leader of the National Party, it was Dr. Malan who worked out the policy of forced segregation. In April 1938 (ten years before the National Party came into power), at the end of an election evening, he read publicly a document outlining his party platform. This political manifesto envisaged deeply radical changes with regard to the position of the "Natives" (the term which was then applied to

black Africans and which was later officially replaced by the term "Bantus"). That manifesto reads as follows:

(a) The Party aims at the revision of our existing legislation concerning Natives with a view to eliminating their right to vote for members to the national legislature (Volksraad) and the Cape Provincial legislature, at halting the flow of superfluous Natives to urban areas, at effectuating their removal from these areas, and at making the segregation of living quarters in such areas more effective.

(b) The Party will terminate the present extensive purchases of land made for Natives by the State and allow them to acquire land more on their own initiative and in keeping with their actual needs.

(c) Further, the Party aims at the consistent application of the principle of segregation in regard to all non-whites as being in the best interests of the white as well as the non-white races and undertakes, therefore, to introduce legislation providing for:

(1) separate living areas, labour organizations and, insofar as practicable, separate work areas for whites and non-whites;

(2) the reservation of the right to work in certain occupations for white labour and/or in accord with a set and equitable quota for whites and non-whites;

(3) separate legislation in our legislative bodies for the Cape Colony Coloureds who have voting rights; and

(4) the extension of the 1926 Immorality Law to all non-whites, and the prevention of mixed marriages and the hiring of whites by non-whites.

This is a revealing manifesto; its dependence upon a nationalistic and chauvinistic ideology is clearly evident. Its language leaves no doubt that the goal of National Party policy is the protection and strengthening of the "white race" and that the means to this end will consist of the curtailment of the existing rights of non-whites. Further, it is clear from this manifesto that the National Party desires to develop a racial caste system in which each non-white

is granted limited freedom of movement - but only on the basis of a white monopoly of power and subordinated to the interests of the whites.

A decade would pass before the National Party was in a position to translate its manifesto into political practice. When the Party did come to power in 1948, it began forthwith to apply the programme set forth in this document. A change was introduced at one point, namely, in regard to the purchase of lands on behalf of the Bantus. Otherwise, the essential ideological pattern has been carried out relentlessly, especially after the appearance of the Tomlinson Report.

The well-known Tomlinson Commission (named for its Chairman, the agricultural expert, Professor T.L. Tomlinson, and appointed by the South African Government in 1950) was given the task of developing a blueprint for the policy of forced segregation on the basis of the ideology of apartheid. The Commission's report was submitted in 1954 as an eighteen-part series of publications. Not all of its recommendations were adopted, but its basic lines were appropriated by the Government.

It was especially Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd who, during his political career, worked out the notion of "eiesoortige" (separate or different kinds of) development in greater detail. 1/

The first thing with which one is struck when analyzing Verwoerd's views is the extent to which he proceeds from a nationalistic interpretation of history. "Why and for what purpose", he asked, "were whites led to the southern part of Africa 300 years ago? Why have these small groups increased so in number and spread over South Africa? Why have they passed through such a difficult struggle and survived as a people? I believe that all of this has had a purpose, namely, that we should become the anchor of Western civilization in Africa". Everywhere in his speeches one finds this pseudo-dogma of white supremacy and this smug faith that the maintenance of a white monopolistic superstructure is a divine calling. Recently Professors Wilson and Thompson have shown convincingly that this view of history is full of myth and is unfit to prepare people for responsible participation in political life in co-operation with others. 2/

1/ Some important elements of the ideological materials contained in his speeches can be found in the work by the Rev. W.A. Landman, A Plea for Understanding, (Cape Town, 1968). Also part of this material has been translated into German and may be found in the book, Rasse, Kirche und Humanum (pp. 150-158).

2/ Oxford History of South Africa, Part I (Oxford, 1969).

The second striking thing about Verwoerd's ideas is that he propagates the policy of separate development as a kind of gospel. "The purpose", he said, "must be clearly stated. The policy of separate development is the basis of the happiness, security and stability which are maintained by means of a homeland, a language and a government peculiar to each people - Bantu as well as white. I desire apartheid not only for whites and blacks but also for Coloureds, for Indians, for Chinese and Malaysians. And I desire to extend apartheid even further, along the various tribal lines." Over and over again in his expositions he identifies this vision, this ideology of separate development, with the will of God.

D. Attempts at theological justification of the ideology of apartheid

A few theologians from the three church communions which support apartheid have put forth a great deal of effort to legitimize this ideology via theology. It is often thought that this attempt at theological justification still rests on the idea that the Afrikaners as a people fill a role similar to that of the people of Israel in Old Testament times. Although this notion was undoubtedly very much alive at the time of the great trek to the North and among the founders of the farmers' republics, there is to my knowledge not a single theologian who still defends it (even though it continues to exert some influence here and there in the churches). Neither does the so-called "Ham theology" find any defenders today.

This does not mean, however, that there are no longer any attempts to construct a theological bulwark for the defence of the racial caste system which the policy of apartheid represents. The building-stones of this bulwark are the following:

(1) Certain D.R.C. theologians maintain - even in official reports - that in the Biblical message there is an emphasis upon the differences between the races which is equally as important as what Scripture proclaims concerning the unity of the human race, reconciliation in Christ, and restoration of human fellowship. This theory is a serious form of pseudo-theology. The concept of "race" in the modern sense occurs nowhere in the Bible. Racial and ethnic differences are not "creation ordinances". They are phenomena which come into being, develop, change and shift in the course of history; and in no way whatever do they destroy the unity of the human race. One who takes his departure from the position that differences between the "races" are "just as important" as human unity and the restoration of that unity will end up with a race-ideology which leads to a separate cult and a racist ethic and creed.

(2) A certain interpretation of the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 represents a second building-stone of the bulwark mentioned above. This interpretation is complete nonsense. Moreover, it overlooks the fact that the Babel episode does not contain the last word concerning God's intentions with men and peoples. God's real intention appears in the vision of the oecumenopolis, the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21, and in His command to begin to build here and now along the lines of this new world-city.

(3) The third building-stone is a certain interpretation of a statement in the Apostle Paul's Areopagus speech that God has "determined the boundaries of the habitations of men" (Acts 17:26). If one tries to understand it correctly, however, it will become obvious that the Speech on the Areopagus is a powerful attack on the racial rites, myths and ethos of the Greeks. To use it as the foundation of a new racial myth is certainly one of the crassest specimens of pseudo-theology. Moreover, the attempt to justify the arbitrary decisions of white Afrikaners regarding the division of land and the determination of living areas for non-whites with an appeal to this text would be a riddle if the Afrikaners' game were not so transparent.

Systems like the one developed in South Africa, that is to say racial caste systems, are not strange to the history of the world; but it is strange that the South African caste system is defended by some Afrikaners in the name of Jesus Christ and that in this way the integrity is at stake of He who came to break down the walls between the races and reintegrate humanity into one body. This pseudo-theology profanes the name of Christ.

New developments in the Dutch Reformed Church

In October 1970 the General Synod of the white D.R.C. held its Synod in Pretoria. This gathering was attended by two representatives of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands: Dr. P.G. Kunst and Dr. A. Kruyswijk. Both these men, each in his own way, rejected the foundation of the ideology of apartheid as un-Christian. They expressed the hope that their presence in Pretoria might nurture the discussion on race relations begun at the 1968 Reformed Ecumenical Synod and continued at the 1970 Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

This hope proved vain. The committee report on race, drawn up by the ultra-conservatively chaired Commission on Topical Questions and issued only after the departure of the Dutch representatives, was extremely brief. Moreover, since it re-introduced hackneyed arguments dating from the 1950's to prop up the ideology of apartheid, it was in fact retrogressive.

This report was the straw that broke the camel's back. It was especially Professor B. Marais from Pretoria and Dr. W.A. Landman who took advantage of this occasion to air their strong disapproval of apartheid in all its forms.

The executive committee of the Synod headed off a spirited opposition debate by hastily calling a "broad commission" into being, composed of both "conservatives" and "progressives", "verkrampes en verligtes". This commission has been given one year to supply the executive with a report on the principles and attitudes of the white D.R.C. respecting racial matters. Whatever else one might wish to say about it, this decision does point to new stirrings within the old static point of view.

One can ascertain a similar development in the D.R.C.'s attitude toward membership in the Christian Institute (whose director is the Rev. Beyers Naudé). The decision to begin church discipline proceedings against D.R.C. members who belong to this institute was postponed for at least four years since the committee responsible for dealing with the matter has that amount of time to submit its report. It is expected, however, that this threat of ecclesiastical censure will have been lifted long before the four years have elapsed.

Meanwhile the so-called daughter churches are beginning to assume a much more independent stance against the "mother church". At its October 1970 gathering in Worcester, Cape Province, the Synod of the so-called Dutch Reformed Coloured Mission Church adopted all of the resolutions of the 1968 Reformed Ecumenical Synod, which implicitly condemn the ideology and practice of apartheid. It also voiced emphatic agreement with the vision of Dutch theologian, Dr. A. Kruyswijk, who rejected as a pseudo-theological bulwark the manner in which apartheid is defended.

A few weeks later, Dr. J.D. Vorster, newly-chosen Moderator of the white D.R.C. Synod and brother of the Prime Minister of South Africa, was interviewed by the Sunday Times. On that occasion he announced that "on Scriptural grounds" the D.R.C. would not "budge one inch" from its position on apartheid. Whereupon, for the first time in memory, many influential D.R.C. theologians raised voices of protest; they condemned this dictatorial attempt to clothe apartheid with the authority of God Himself, this attempt on the part of Vorster to absolutize his own personal opinion. Thus, this time, the protest originated not in foreign countries but from within the circles of the D.R.C. itself; and it came not only from the lips of Beyers Naudé but also from figures such as the Rev. D.P. Botha, the Rev. W.T. Landman, Professor André Hugo and others.

There are many signs pointing to the fact that there is a growing minority in the D.R.C. which is not only full of discontent with the existing ideology and practice but also is looking for alternatives. In addition to this, the so-called Bantu Sister Church will hold its synodical gathering next year. Although this "sister church" is directed in a paternalistic way by white missionaries and is to a large extent financially dependent on the "mother church", there are reasons to hope that the former will take up a much more independent position and in their own way take part in ecumenical activities and in the struggle against apartheid. Moreover, a remarkable rapprochement is growing between the "sister churches" and the so-called separatist churches or independent church movements, which, potentially, are very important in connection with the structural changes so necessary in South Africa.

Meanwhile, in December 1970, there was an incident in the church service of a white D.R.C. congregation in Pretoria which suddenly came to the attention of the public and led not only to a hardening of some hearts but also to deep feelings of shame on the part of many members of the D.R.C. A German theologian-sociologist working on a joint research project in Soweto attended a "white church service" with his black colleague. He was requested by the officiating minister, the Rev. P.J.N. Smal, to leave the service along with his colleague. This incident continues in discussion and has filled many pastors with deep shame. Even the rector of Stellenbosch Theological Seminary gave expression to his feelings of shame. It seems that the conscience of many has been awakened and that the realization is growing that apartheid should be done away with for good.

Final observations

In regard to South Africa, it is proper to speak of the necessity of a multiple approach. It is necessary to awaken the public conscience and press for change from every possible platform and by means of every possible course of action. Certainly this must be done on the floor of the United Nations General Assembly and by means of the documentation materials prepared by the Unit on Apartheid; it can also be accomplished via public demonstrations such as the one which occurred last year in the United Kingdom when a visiting South African cricket team was boycotted and picketed; and it can be done from the forum of gatherings such as those of the non-committed countries and the Organization of African Unity. But one of the important means of awakening public conscience is the continuation of the dialogue with the D.R.C. (which has its centre at Stellenbosch) and with the Reformed Church (which has its centre at Potchefstroom).

In my opinion, the South African Council of Churches' "Message to the People of South Africa" must be implemented by means of alternative proposals (and forms) in the social and political arenas. But, in any case, dialogue with the D.R.C. and the Reformed Church must be continued and pursued - even if only on a basis of "hope against hope". One ought not to forget in this regard that there are those among the members of the D.R.C. who oppose all forms of apartheid with great spiritual force and from the depth of their hearts.

I think of D.R.C. members such as the Rev. Beyers Naudé, Professor André Hugo, Professor Ben Marais, Dr. Ben Engelbrechts and Dr. Fred van Wijk, the director of the Institute of Race Relations, with respect. Such men are living proof that it would be wrong simply to write these churches off. We must strengthen the dialogue with them - with humility (because all churches both in South Africa and over the whole world are guilty of racism) but also with complete honesty and without fear.

Time is running out. Let us use the time we still have to exploit to the limits the methods of non-violence. What James Baldwin said at the last World Council of Churches gathering in Uppsala is in many regards true; the D.R.C. in South Africa does have in its hands the keys which will open the doors of structural change in that country. If this church changes, the basis of the practice of apartheid will fall away and work can begin on the road which will lead to the building of a society in which all groups participate in the central exercise of power.

Every responsible person knows that the use of force in the attempt to pave the way to such a society will lead to much bloodshed and tremendous chaos. Let those who are able to exercise influence on the churches we have been discussing do so before it is too late. The D.R.C. faces the same dilemma with which the German churches were confronted in 1933: the dilemma of obedience to God or to certain influential men; the dilemma of the loss of its members, support and money or the "loss of its identity as church".

What will happen in South Africa? Will a schism occur, as it did in Germany in 1933? And if so, will it lead to the rise of something resembling the German Confessing Church? Or will the D.R.C. proceed from compromise to compromise?

There are many in South Africa who have dared to stand up to the thunder of those who hold the reins of power but have no support in Scripture. Let us support those men and women who have shown that they would rather obey God than men - even powerful men!