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(28) Reformed Churches in Africa

Retief Müller

Introduction

When considering the role of Reformed churches in Africa, one's attention is immediately and inexorably drawn to the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk/Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, and its role within the political history of that country. This is an important story to tell and to remember, but in a contribution such as this, the reader should also be aware of the fact that the Reformed presence and legacy in Africa reach far wider than this otherwise dominant theme. This wider Reformed legacy is in many respects partly the result of missionary efforts instituted by the South African Dutch Reformed Church into wider Africa. But there are also other Reformed presences in Africa that trace their history back to French, Swiss and American Reformed churches and missionary societies, perhaps most notably in what are today Lesotho, Madagascar, Nigeria, Cameroon and elsewhere. One might expand the scope, and one properly should, in order to include also the legacy of Presbyterian missions and churches. However, I leave these out of the present discussion, because I believe they are covered elsewhere in this volume.

Early Reformed History

I begin with the Dutch Reformed presence at the Cape where, with the arrival of the Dutch East India Company/(VOC) in 1652, a long and contentious history of church-state involvement took root on African soil. The VOC considered the Dutch Reformed Church as its official religious body and, controlled by the Classis of Amsterdam[1], it became the established church at the southern tip of Africa. Roman Catholicism was forbidden despite the fact that Portuguese sailors had reached the territory more than a century before the Dutch.[2] All colonists at the Cape were more or less considered to be part of this Dutch Reformed Church, which meant that the Lutheran church, for example, was unable to practise its faith officially until the VOC had granted such permission. Their first congregation in Strand Street, Cape Town, was founded in 1780.[3]

A particular feature of the Dutch Reformed Church as it took root in African soil was its close entanglement with Afrikaner identity and politics. As a result of the contributions of some of its office-bearers who, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented some of the most educated members among the citizenry, the Dutch Reformed Church became involved in the first and second Afrikaans language movements, which successfully codified their local version of simplified Dutch as a literary language. This culminated in the first Afrikaans translation of the Bible in 1933.[4]

Another aspect pertaining to the formation of Afrikaner identity was the Great Trek, starting in the 1830s, which was an expansion of Dutch frontier colonists into the central, northern and eastern interior. In

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[1] The Classis of Amsterdam was the regional assembly for local church boards of the Dutch Reformed Church in the region of Amsterdam

[2] John W. De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Fortress Press, 2005), 1.

[3] See Georg Scriba, "A chronology of the history of the Lutheran Church in South Africa (1652-1928)" in Hanns Lessing, *The German Protestant Church in Colonial Southern Africa: The Impact of Overseas Work from the Beginnings until the 1920s* (Cluster Publications, 2012), 272.

[4] See Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 239.

the preceding decades, the Cape Colony had come under the control of the British Empire after the demise of the Batavian Republic in 1806. Britain sought to extend newly instituted anti-slavery policies to its colonies abroad, an idea which did not sit well with the rural landholding class of mainly Dutch settlers. The Great Trek ensued and although this exodus from the Cape was in contravention of the official stance of the Cape Dutch Reformed Church, the Trek itself, and particularly events surrounding the murder of Trekker leader Piet Retief at the behest of the Zulu king Dingane and the subsequent Battle of Blood River, would later become mythologised in Afrikaner lore and in the popular and official religiosity of the Dutch Reformed Church.[5] This would especially be the case in the areas occupied by the descendants of the Voortrekkers, i.e. Natal, the Orange Free State and Transvaal. For the next century and a half, the battle and ultimate Voortrekker victory would be annually commemorated on the so-called Day of the Vow (*Geloftedag/Dingaansdag*) every 16th of December in the form of church services in remembrance of the promise made by Voortrekker leaders on the eve of the original battle that their descendants would remember the day as a Sabbath.[6]

Through this day and its religious celebration within the Afrikaner Reformed churches, the developing nationalist discourse increasingly became inseparable from Reformed ideas of election and predestination. In this case, the Afrikaner identity was conceived as an elect nation with a special vocation of having been granted the tutelage or trusteeship (v*oogdyskap*) of the indigenous population.[7] In this respect, mission and missionary policies increasingly played an important role in terms of the ways in which policies of supposedly equal separation were instituted on different levels in the South African societal landscape, but starting from a policy of racial segregation within churches, and especially around the Communion table.[8]

Before proceeding further, the year 1857 should be mentioned because this was the year when the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church adopted the motion that, in spite of the fact that it was scriptural and desirable to include black converts into existing congregations, the 'weakness of some' bigoted white Christians made it necessary to institute segregated communities of worship. This was the first step towards the eventual institution of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1881, as a so-called 'daughter' church of the Dutch Reformed Church for congregants of colour.[9] As the racial categorisation developed under apartheid, more daughter churches were spawned: i.e. the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa for black Africans, and the Reformed Church in Africa for those of Asian background. Meanwhile, the DRMC became a church exclusively for so-called 'Coloureds' (those of mixed racial background who spoke either Afrikaans or English as their language of preference).

Although the Dutch Reformed Church itself is often described in fairly monolithic cultural and ethnic terms, mostly as a result of its own self-identification over a period of time, it is important to point out the fact that this church had already, from early on in its existence at the Cape, received an impetus from the side of French Huguenots who had arrived at the Cape via the VOC as refugees from Europe. Yet more significant, in terms of their religious influence, would be the inclusion of a group of influential Scottish clergymen into the Dutch Reformed Church from the 1920s onwards. The best-known of this group was Andrew Murray Senior, originally from Aberdeen, who would be superseded in terms of personal

[5]June Goodwin and Ben Schiff, *Heart of Whiteness: Afrikaners Face Black Rule In the New South Africa* (Scribner, 1995), 22.
[6] See Christoph Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the "Ossewabrandwag"* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2009).
[7] See T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (University of California Press, 1975).
[8] Elphick, *The Equality of Believers,* 39ff.
[9] See Plaatjies-van Huffel, "Reading the *Belhar Confession* as a Historical Text", in Mary-Anne Plaatjies and Robert Vosloo, eds., *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*, First edition (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013), 329-345.

influence by two of his sons, Andrew Junior, who would become a world-renowned author of evangelical revivalist literature, and John who, together with a couple of other Dutch Reformed Church ministers, founded the Dutch Reformed Church theological seminary in Stellenbosch, and who became one of the first professors to teach there. The Scottish ministers had a profound influence, not only on theological education but also in consideration of the budding foreign missionary enterprise, which the Dutch Reformed Church would launch in the latter part of the twentieth century.[10]

Dutch and American Reformed Missionary Enterprises

The Dutch Reformed Church sent missionaries to several different parts of Africa, most notably to what today are Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Botswana.[11] Additionally, many Afrikaans people settled over time in what was declared the protectorate of South West Africa, after the defeat of the former colonisers, the German empire, in World War I. Consequently, there is a strong Dutch Reformed Church presence also in contemporary Namibia. Similarly, one should mention the Reformed Church of East Africa, which was founded in 1944 partly as a result of a Dutch Reformed Church presence in Kenya. The Dutch Reformed Church also made a small-scale attempt, against much adversity, to establish a mission in Portuguese East Africa in the early twentieth century. The Reformed Church in Mozambique is the continuing result of this work.

The most extensive missionary projects of the Dutch Reformed Church occurred in Malawi, where close co-operation with Scottish Presbyterians eventually resulted in the formation of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in 1924.[12] The CCAP also has a synod in Zambia and another in Zimbabwe, but in terms of Malawi it was constituted on the basis of the three synods of Blantyre, Nkhoma and Livingstonia. This sub-division is in reference to the original mission stations that served as centres for the Southern, Central and Northern regions of Malawi. It is noteworthy that the CCAP (Nkhoma Synod) retained a distinct 'Dutch' identity in terms of theology and forms of worship. In different respects, it appears more conservative than brethren to the North and South –for example, in not ordaining women to the ministry in contradistinction to the other two synods.

The Dutch Reformed Church missionary project among the Tiv people in Nigeria also resulted in ecumenical co-operation with another missionary church from abroad, in this case with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) from the USA. Dutch Reformed Church missionaries had been active in the area from about 1912, serving as the only Protestant group among the Tiv, but from 1950 they transferred parts of their missionary enterprise to the CRC.[13] The Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria would emerge out of these activities, after changing its name on a couple of occasions.

According to online sources, the American CRC also has connections with the Christian Reformed Church in Eastern Africa, which is a denomination that seceded from the above-mentioned Reformed Church of East Africa with a presence in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, as well as more recently the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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[10] See Retief Muller, "Evangelicalism and Racial Exclusivism in Afrikaner History: An Ambiguous Relationship," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 204-32, doi:10.1163/15697312-12341296.

[11] See H. T. Gonin, "Missions of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa," *International Review of Mission* 42, no. 2 (April 1, 1953): 172-77, doi:10.1111/j.1758-6631.1953.tb03731.x.

[12] C. M. Pauw (Christoff Martin), *Mission and Church in Malawi : The History of the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian* (Thesis DTh – University of Stellenbosch, 1980).
June Goodwin and Ben Schiff, *Heart of Whiteness: Afrikaners Face Black Rule In the New South Africa* (Scribner, 1995).

[13] Edgar H. Smith, *Nigerian Harvest* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 159.

Church and State in South African Reformed Christianity

Before making a few comments on developments between Reformed Christianity and politics in South Africa during the mid to late twentieth century, it will be necessary to give some commentary on a couple of schisms occurring among the all-white sectors of Reformed Christianity in Southern Africa. The first occurred in 1853 in the Transvaal when the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk (NHK) broke away from the Cape-controlled Dutch Reformed Church. The NHK had aspirations of becoming the state church of the Transvaal, but its reasons for breaking away from the mainstream Dutch Reformed Church included an objection to mission work among black people, and also in dissatisfaction against the British influence executed through imperial control of the Cape Colony on the Cape-based church.[14] A second schism occurred when the ultra-Calvinist Gereformeerde Kerk (GK) seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1859.[15] One of the reasons for the schism was that these 'Doppers', as they became popularly known, objected to the singing of evangelical hymns as introduced by the increasingly revivalist Cape Dutch Reformed Church. Despite some internal differences on matters relating to mission, politics and doctrine among these three so-called 'sister churches', as they now increasingly referred to themselves, they were united in their adherence to the Canons of Dort, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession.

They were furthermore united in their near-universal adherence to notions of white supremacy, and all three churches contributed to the core support base of the National Party and its policy of apartheid that defined South Africa for much of the twentieth century. When the National Party came to power in 1948, it was under the leadership of Daniel Francois Malan, a former minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, who had also, subsequent to his departure from his position in the church, served as editor of the Afrikaans daily, *Die Burger*.

The policy of apartheid itself had in fact had its genesis as a mission policy of the Dutch Reformed Church in the 1930s, which politicians such as Malan then adapted to fit the secular and national discourse.[16] All the National Party leaders, prime ministers and state presidents in subsequent decades were members of the 'sister churches', and in most cases of the Dutch Reformed Church, often with close ties to its top ecclesiastical structure. This was most notably observable during the term of B.J. Vorster who was Prime Minister of South Africa 1966-1978. His brother, Koot Vorster, was a formidably conservative Dutch Reformed Church clergyman who served as moderator of the church 1970-1974 with a strong hand in terms of overseeing the theological education on offer at the seminary in Stellenbosch.[17] The final apartheid-era State President, F.W. de Klerk, as a member of the Gereformeerde Kerk, was something of an anomaly. This church has typically been understood to be even more conservative than the larger Dutch Reformed Church, and this is partly the reason why de Klerk's about-turn regarding apartheid shortly after his elevation to the seat of power in 1990 came as such a shock and surprise to insider and outside observers alike.

It is important to describe also the other side of the story, which concerns the fact that not only support for apartheid, but also some of the most vehement opposition to this policy and its dehumanising tendencies came from Reformed circles. The name of Beyers Naudé is well known as an anti-apartheid activist. After he was forced out of his pastoral position within the Dutch Reformed Church because of his anti-apartheid ideas in 1963, he increasingly continued his political and social activities within the ecumenical Christian Institute. However, he simultaneously remained anchored within the Reformed

[14] Robert Benedetto and Donald K. McKim, *Historical Dictionary of the Reformed Churches*, Second Edition (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 283.
[15] Ibid.
[16] See Elphick, *Equality of Believers,* 222ff.
[17] See Abdulkader Tayob, Wolfram Weisse, Carel Aaron Anthonissen, Wolfram Weie, *Maintaining Apartheid or Promoting Change?* (Waxmann Verlag, 2004), 156.

tradition where he continued to serve within the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, which later in 1994 joined with the Dutch Reformed Mission Church to form the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA).[18] Another influential figure to be mentioned within this latter church formation would be Allan Aubrey Boesak who, along with the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu and a few others, were among the leading anti-apartheid voices in the 1970s and 1980s.[19] From the ranks of the URCSA also emerged the 'Belhar Confession' that rejected apartheid as a heresy. Boesak played a pivotal role in the theological formation of this confession of faith, which has subsequently been adopted by different Reformed and Presbyterian churches around the world, but not yet by the Dutch Reformed Church. The URCSA has constantly insisted on the Dutch Reformed Church's acceptance of Belhar as a precondition for reunification to occur within these formerly racially divided churches. Although much has changed in terms of the Dutch Reformed Church's leadership and its official perspectives on race and ecumenical matters, its leadership has not yet been able to convince the majority of its members and regional synods of the need to adopt Belhar officially as actual evidence that they have rejected their racist past and, as such, to show themselves ready to meet sisters and brothers within their wider Reformed confession in a non-racial, united church body.

Brief References to Other Reformed Churches in Africa

Elsewhere on the continent, Reformed churches and missions played influential roles although it is in some cases difficult to extrapolate a distinctly Reformed impetus within plural ecumenical and inter-church ventures. A case in point is the Basel Mission which was jointly staffed by Lutheran and Reformed missionaries and which contributed much to the evangelisation of the Ga and Twi people of what is today Ghana.[20] Their first missionaries arrived there in 1828. They prioritised education as of primary concern. After World War I, the Basel missionaries left and were replaced by Scottish Presbyterians. The church that emerged out of these ventures is now known as the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.

The Basel Mission was similarly active in Cameroon from the 1880s onwards.[21] The work these missionaries had started there was taken over and continued by the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Swiss Reformed missionaries were also responsible for the founding of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Angola.

The Lesotho Evangelical Church is a Reformed church that traces its history to the Paris Evangelical Mission which commenced work among the Southern Sotho in 1833.[22] The steady progress and missionary success they achieved may in large part be ascribed to the personal friendship established between one of the French missionaries, Eugène Casalis, and the Basotho king, Moshoeshoe. Over time, Casalis became something of an unofficial minister of foreign affairs to the king.[23]

The Paris Evangelical Missionary Society also contributed to the formation of the Evangelical Church of Gabon which achieved independence in 1961.[24] Furthermore, Togo, Senegambia and Madagascar were evangelised by missionaries representing this society.

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[18] Mary Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, "The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa's Enactment on Church Judicial and Legal Issues", *NGTT* 54, no. 0 (July 20, 2013): 101-13: 102.
[19] See Eugene Fortuin, "Allan Boesak and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church between 1976-1990", in Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Robert Vosloo (eds) *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960-1990*(Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2013), 303-315.
[20] Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[21] Ibid., 263ff.
[22] Ibid., 375ff.
[23] Ibid., 376.
[24] Ibid., 964.

Conclusion

To conclude, it should be obvious that this is a very brief overview of the Reformed churches in Africa. As expected, the major focus, especially in terms of the narrative thread, concerns South Africa. This is not only because of the disproportionately large influence this country has had on world and African affairs, nor is it entirely due to the fact that Reformed churches have been fairly large and influential in South Africa, but also because of the interesting, problematic, and even prophetic, public roles assumed by individuals associated with the Reformed tradition in that country over the course of time.

Of course, this contribution is nowhere near exhaustive, nor is it representative of every Reformed church on the continent. Historical denominational identities have certainly been in flux, and African realities have resulted in diverse syntheses as a result of various ecumenical, cultural and doctrinal factors. This means that indigenous churches of Reformed extraction might, as a result of contextualisation, have very little to differentiate them from Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists and others. Reformed identity with respect to Africa is therefore, I suggest, very much a historical designation, and this is how I have attempted to present the case here.

Finally, I offer the explanation that I have purposefully avoided referencing numbers in terms of membership of the churches described here, because, in my opinion, head-counting is fundamentally foreign to classical Reformed epistemology. The Reformed Confession is however a tradition that takes its public role and history seriously. For better or for worse, this contribution will hopefully do a measure of justice to the aspects of that history discussed here.

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