CONFESSING TO REMORSE ABOUT THE EVILS OF APARTHEID: THE DUTCH
REFORMED CHURCH IN THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES

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Abstract: The transition in South Africa from apartheid to a constitutional democracy
with equal rights for all has been described and celebrated in innumerable accounts. The
best overview is probably Patti Waldmeir’s, Anatomy of a Miracle. What is missing from
such stories, however, at least in English, is careful discussion of the role in the
transformation process played by the Dutch Reformed churches (and other Afrikaner
cultural organizations) in preparing Afrikaners for transition to democracy. The purpose
of this paper is to examine theological debates and political struggles within the majority
Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) that led to public confession in 1990 of remorse
about the evils of apartheid. The most fundamental change, however, came earlier, at the
1986 General Synod, well before F.W. de Klerk’s 1989 political leap forward. The paper
seeks to describe personal, intellectual, cultural and political processes within the church
that brought about this institutional transformation.

The best book in English on change through the late 1970s and early 1980s in the NGK
(the majority Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa with around 80% of white Afrikaans-
speaking reformed church-goers) remains Apartheid, Change and the NG Kerk, by J.H.P.
Serfontein. Based on years of extensive interviews with church people, it contains many
appendices with translations of important documents as well as an admirable effort to situate
church debates within political developments from 1978 to 1982.

Despite evidence of critical dissent in the NGK, however, Serfontein (1982:203) ends on
a despondent note:

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1 Bosch, 1985 provides a brief overview in English for the period before 1985. See also Kinghorn, 1997, which
operates, however, with the rather vague notion of “modernization” as a primary explanatory principle. There are
two rather anodyne accounts in Afrikaans, Guarn 1997 and Du Toit, et al 2004, that deal with the entire period from
I have relied heavily for this paper on three Afrikaans sources, Botha 1986, Jonker 1998, and Williams 2006. I am
grateful in turn to Rob Gordon, Alex Mouton and Amie van Wyk respectively, who each suggested one of these
works. The essays in Weisse & Anthonissen 2004 are provocative but somewhat piecemeal.
If the NGK’s Broederbond2 leadership at its general synod in 1982 rejects the ideas expressed in the Open Letter of 123 white ministers, if they reject one non-racial NGK, if they continue unquestioning support for the apartheid policies of the government and if they continue blessing the NP [the dominant National Party] and the CP [the recent breakaway Conservative Party led by NG minister, Andries Treurnicht] as the vehicles of Afrikaner Nationalism, then the chances of a negotiated peaceful settlement in South Africa are nil, and the NGK will have failed in its Biblical mission to reconcile black and white in South Africa.

Professor Johan Heyns, a theologian from Pretoria University, Serfontein added (1982:202), “is probably the most important personality, and the key figure in the NGK, regardless of his official position. He is needed by both the opposing factions… he is a barometer of the chances of reform inside the NGK.”

The 1982 general synod of the white NGK, meeting in October, seemed to confirm Serfontein’s pessimism. It rejected every single one of the reforms listed as essential by Serfontein in the quotation above. Moreover, Johan Heyns was removed from virtually every position of authority within the church. Rampant conservative opinion swept over virtually every vote in the Synod.

Four years later however, at the NGK general synod in 1986, there was an extraordinary turnaround. Heyns was elected moderator of the white church, which adopted a new statement on social policy, Church and Society (C&S), declaring that “membership of the Dutch Reformed Church is open,” and thus “public worship and other gatherings” were “open to all visitors who desire to listen to the Word in fellowship with other believers.” (C&S:273)

A relatively small group of conservative clergy and congregations broke away from the NGK in disgust to form the Afrikaans Protestant Church (APK). In 1990, nonetheless, Church and Society was amended to include a more explicit condemnation of apartheid, stating:

The right and freedom to remain true to one’s own cultural heritage, was extended to become a political ideology of apartheid as a system for the protection of the white minority’s own interests to the detriment of others. Love for one’s own often took the shape of racism…. [T]he church made the error of allowing forced separation and division of peoples in its own circle to be considered a biblical imperative. The Dutch Reformed Church should have distanced itself much earlier from this view and admits and confesses its neglect…. Apartheid began to function in such a way that the largest

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2 The Afrikaner Broederbond was an elite Afrikaner secret society to which virtually all eminent males, churchmen as well as politicians and businessmen, belonged.
part of the population of the country experienced it as an oppressive system which through the forced separation of peoples was in reality favoring one group wrongfully above the others. In this way the human dignity of one’s fellowman became adversely affected and was in conflict with the principles of love and righteousness. Any system which in practice functions in this way, is unacceptable in the light of Scripture and Christian conscience and must be rejected as sinful. (C&S 1990:282-5)

Shortly thereafter, on the basis of this statement, at an ecumenical consultation in Rustenberg, Willie Jonker, a Stellenbosch University theology professor who had been asked to deliver a keynote address, inserted ad lib into his speech the following confession:

I confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you, the results of which you and our whole country are still suffering from, but vicariously I dare also to do that in the name of the DRC [NGK] of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaner people as a whole. I have the liberty to do just that, because the DRC at its latest synod has declared apartheid a sin and confessed its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it and distancing itself from it long ago. (Van der Merwe 2014:95)

In but eight years since Hennie Serfontein’s despondent conclusion, based as it indeed was on solid grounds, the NGK seemed to have come full circle. How had it done so and what were the implications for the South African social and political landscape? This was indeed a period of verligte (enlightened) “reform” in politics. Was the church simply following political trends? What were the theological debates that led to this transformation? And was it indeed as much of a transformation as it needed to be?

Conservative Afrikaners were indeed deeply disturbed by the new developments. The church after all had split. In 1994, Heyns was assassinated, shot through the head with a single shot from a high-powered rifle while playing cards with his grandchildren in his own sitting room. Serfontein’s “barometer” had taken its final horrific read. Accolades flowed in to his wife and family.

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3 I should perhaps note that a similar transformation during the same period had also taken place in the Broederbond. I deal with this aspect in Moodie (2017). The more general point to be taken is simple. It is essential to address cultural and religious as well economic and political factors in order to understand the South African transition to democracy.

4 It is still not clear who killed Heyns, or why. My own very tentative opinion may be found in context at footnote 56.
Nonetheless, a question remains about the NGK in the new South Africa. Have apartheid assumptions indeed been abandoned by the church? That is a more complicated story than can be fully addressed here and the outcome remains ambiguous, but there is no question that the NGK was at the forefront of Afrikaner’s transition from apartheid, even as it had been very much present at its creation. This paper seeks to set out the social and intellectual processes involved.

Origins of racial apartheid in NGK mission policy

Probably the best account in English of the development of apartheid theory is to be found in Hermann Giliomee’s (2003) chapter “The Making of a Radical Survival Plan.” He makes quite clear that the primary principles of separate development practice and theory arose from missionary concerns. The evangelical thrust of NGK missionary zeal was largely aimed outside the borders of South Africa, as far north as Kenya and the Sudan but most powerfully in what became Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia. There was no need to justify separate NG synods in such cases, although some were inclined to cite Warneck, the great German missiologist who insisted that mission work should develop indigenous versions of Christian theology appropriate to the various cultures of the converted.

Matters were however rather more difficult in the Cape, however. where, because of white racial aversion to mixed worship, mission work by the NGK had long established racially separate congregations – and indeed, eventually, a separate “mission” synod – for “coloured” congregants. Similarly, intense missionary activity in the Free State led to a segregated synod for African converts there. In 1935, the NGK Federal Council drafted a statement that eventually became a moral basis for “separate development” policy promulgated by the National Party after 1948. The language of the 1935 statement (Serfontein, 1982:263) rings very familiar to an ear attuned to the language of apartheid:

The traditional fear of the Afrikaner for equal treatment (gelykstelling – social equality) of black and white was born out of his abhorrence of the idea of racial miscegenation. The Church unequivocally declares itself against this miscegenation and everything that follows from it, but on the other hand it does not begrudge the native and coloured a

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5 I rely also, however, on Serfontein’s translation (1982:260-69) of an illuminating 1980 conference paper by D. P. Botha.
6 Largely Afrikaans-speaking mixed-race “coloured” people in South Africa were subject to apartheid segregation, massive removals and racial discrimination despite the common culture they share with “white” Afrikaners.
social status as honourable as they can achieve. Every nation has the right to be itself and to try to develop and uplift itself.

From 1937, frequent deputations of NGK mission clergy (often accompanied by members of the NGK council concerned with poor relief for whites) met with ministers of state to urge a total ban on racially mixed marriages. Legislation to this effect was one of the first actions of the National Party after coming to power in 1948. Indeed, one might argue that the Population Registration and Group Areas Acts, the foundational laws of apartheid, were brought into being to buttress and enable the NGK’s insistent condemnation of miscegenation. Whatever its role in social transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, then, there can be no doubt that the NGK played a foundational role in the establishment of the racial ground for the apartheid system.

The 1930s and 1940s were, of course, also years for mobilization of Afrikaner commitment to a “civil religion” centered on Afrikaner cultural development and a separate Afrikaner identity. In The Rise of Afrikanerdom (Moodie, 1975a) I deal with the complex political, theological and cultural debates and events that established general understanding by Afrikaners of a sacred history and brought about an Afrikaner “Christian-National” ideology informed both by the theology of Abraham Kuyper and what I called neo-Fichtean nationalist ideas.7 This Christian-National ideology constituted what Willie Jonker (1996:92) disparagingly called *volksteologie* (ethnic theology) “which for so long ran amuck in the Afrikaans churches.”

The 1935 Federal Council statement already contained ethnic overtones, along with its inherently racial assumptions. By the time of the 1949 synod of the Cape NGK, these ideas had been fully incorporated in a manner that ran together the racial assumptions of earlier segregationist notions and the ethnic presuppositions of Afrikaner *volksteologie*. “Holy Scripture nowhere ignores the natural difference between People [volk] and People, race and race…. It is hence clear that the existence of separate races and Peoples are not only permitted by God, but explicitly willed and ordained by Him,” reads their declaration (Kinghorn, 1986:110).

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7 See also Moodie 1975b. In a brief essay, David Bosch (1984) provides a similar reading of these developments. Deist’s (1994) careful review of the contemporary literature reaches similar conclusions by a different route, as, with some variations, does Kinghorn (1986) upon whom I have relied in this article because of his careful account of the literature on missiology which I slighted somewhat in my early work. See also A.J. Botha (1986) for a valuable account of the origins of what he calls *volksdieologie*.
In 1950, the NGK missiologist, G.B.A. Gerdener, organized a massive popular congress (volkskongres) on “the native question.” As Kinghorn points out (1986:98-100), it was here that the full moral and practical implications of a policy of “separate development” were set forth. The missionary notion that we grant to others what we ourselves desire led the congress to recommend the establishment of black ethnic universities, the development of the reserves as ethnic homes for blacks, efficient influx control, black housing in the urban townships and provision of sufficient land to create self-sufficient black economies from which white businesses would be banned.

The National Party Prime Minister, D.F. Malan (who had himself been an NGK pastor), promptly rejected these recommendations as impossible and unfeasible. Nonetheless, the Afrikaner Broederbond established a South African Bureau of Racial Affairs to follow up on the recommendations, the Tomlinson Commission was appointed to look into the possibility of homeland development and, as Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd eventually introduced separate development ideology as National Party policy (without committing to the state and private funding Tomlinson believed essential for its implementation).

One might then indeed argue that NGK missionary ideals, modified as they were by the Afrikaner volksteologie, inspired the ideological core of the policies of the Verwoerdian apartheid state. Early in his tenure as Prime Minister, however, Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd’s vision faced a troubling challenge. 1960 was a turbulent year for South Africa. Harold Macmillan announced to the South African parliament that the country could not avoid the “wind of change” sweeping over Africa. An anti-pass demonstration by the Pan African Congress led to police killing 67 persons at Sharpeville. Although a state of emergency was declared, thousands of Africans in Cape Town marched peacefully to the Houses of Parliament. In April, Verwoerd was shot in the head but survived to declare that he would call a referendum on the establishment of South Africa as a republic.

Meanwhile, D.P. Botha of the NGK coloured “mission” church had published a passionate account of coloured claims to be brown Afrikaners (Botha, 1960). Members of the more liberal Cape Broederbond moved strongly (with some help from the Cape Afrikaans newspaper, Die Burger), to urge full citizenship for coloureds, including representation by their
own people in parliament. Verwoerd used his power in the Party and the Broederbond to clamp down hard on any such idea. It would be, he argued, the thin end of a wedge that would annihilate essential racial aspects of apartheid.\(^8\)

In December 1960, however, representatives of South African churches that were members of the World Council of Churches met in Johannesburg at Cottesloe to discuss the implications of the Sharpeville killings for the churches in South Africa. Their decisions (Kinghorn, 1986:119), largely drafted by the representatives of the Cape and Transvaal NGK, were relatively mild, but nonetheless included the recognition that “there can be no objection to the direct representation of coloured people in Parliament,” that “there are no scriptural grounds for the prohibition of mixed marriages,” that “no-one who believes in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church on the grounds of his colour or race,” and that “the right to own land wherever he is domiciled, and to participate in the government of his country, is part of the dignity of the adult man.” These decisions ran directly against apartheid ideology and state policy.

There was an uproar in the press. Verwoerd announced during his 1961 New Year address that the statement was the work of “individual churchmen” whose opinions would undermine “the moral foundation of South Africa’s policy and, at the same time, the rights and the chance for survival of the White man in Africa.” He pointedly remarked that the synods of the respective white NGK churches had not yet taken decisions on the Cottesloe announcements. The Broederbond intervened vehemently, and in the midst of all the excitement both the Cape and Transvaal NGK synods repudiated the recommendations of their Cottesloe participants (Moodie, 1975b:163).

Frans O’Brien Geldenhuys, who had represented the Transvaal NGK at Cottesloe and was at the time a member of the Broederbond, revealed in 1982 (1982:58) that he had received a letter from the Broederbond head office asking him, as a member of the delegation, to repudiate the decisions taken at Cottesloe. He decided to do so and to work for change within the church. He struggled on for twenty years, achieving high office in various synods. In 1980, however, he resigned in disgust.

\(^8\) For a brief account in English, see Moodie 2009: 188-194.
His brother-in-law, fellow Cottesloe representative Beyers Naude, chose to continue in overt opposition and was eventually unfrocked as an NGK pastor and totally marginalized within the church. He founded the Christian Institute, explicitly critical of church apartheid, and became a major theological voice for change from outside the NGK.\(^9\)

In his 1982 autobiography, Geldenhuys concluded his discussion of the 1960 debacle as follows (1982: 60-61):

I hoped to work within the structure of the church framework to help create a favorable climate for the spirit of the Cottesloe decisions. Twenty years later I resigned as a high executive official of the NGK, with bitter acknowledgement to myself that I could not succeed in moving my church to change in any essential respect its uniquely biased position in favor of apartheid as an ecclesiastical and political model. I thought back [to conversations with Naude in 1960]. Who was right – Bey or me?"

Geldenhuys obviously had doubts about his 1960 decision to work within the church to bring about change. Hennie Serfontein’s pessimism in the early 1980s was not unique. It was shared by at least one of the most effective NGK spokespersons in the 1960s and 1970s.

“Ras, Volk en Nasie” (Race, People and Nation and Group Relations in Light of Scripture)

What exactly was the theological justification for the “uniquely biased position” to which Geldenhuys referred? Before addressing the struggle that turned the NGK almost on its head in the 1980s, an exposition of NGK theological orthodoxy during the height of the apartheid years is in order.

At the General Synod in 1974, the white NGK “mother-church” finally accepted a document, *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, that seemingly settled the question of biblical support for racial and ethnic apartheid as set forth in Verwoerd’s policy for separate development of different “nations” within southern Africa. The clearest doctrinal, bureaucratic and political support for this NGK position was provided by Stellenbosch university theologian, F. J. M. Potgieter, by senior church official, J. D. (Koot) Vorster\(^10\) and by church publicist, Andries Treurnicht.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) For a useful brief account of Naude’s career, see Villa-Vicencio (1985).

\(^10\) By 1974, Koot Vorster’s brother, was at the height of his power as Prime Minister and successor to Verwoerd.

Fundamental was a doctrine of God’s creative activity as manifested in both pluriformity (veelvormigheid) and unity (eenheid). To wit, God’s providential purpose is revealed through Creation (by common grace), although this was sullied by original sin and in need of regeneration (herskepping). His calling of a special People (Israel) was intended to redeem the fallen world through special grace. Eventually this special grace was manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the formation of the Christian church throughout the nations of the world.

Typically in Christian thought, the story of creation and the fall of humankind is contained in the first three chapters of Genesis, with the creation of the universe, of Adam and Eve in the image of God, of their disobedience in exercising freedom, and their being cast forth from Eden to face pain and travail in a world darkened by sin and death. The 1974 Ras, Volk en Nasie reading of this story does take special note of the fact that in the first chapter of Genesis, God’s creative acts involved “separation” of light from darkness, of the waters from the earth, and of living creatures “each according to their own kind.” “Separation (skeiding)” and “multiformity” (veelvormigheid) thus took on ontological significance, even although common descent from Adam implied the “unity” (eenheid) of human beings in creation.

For orthodox NGK theologians of the 1960s and 1970s, however, the creation story did not end with the expulsion from Eden but continued through the story of Noah and the rainbow covenant to the crucial eleventh chapter of Genesis where the people of the earth, having a single language, decide to build a tower to reach up to heaven. For this act of hubris, God chose not to destroy them. Instead, in an act of great mercy, fulfilling his covenant with Noah, he created different languages and “scattered them abroad over the face of the earth.”

In this version, then, creation was not complete until God had formed, out of one human race descended from Adam, different nations each speaking their own language. The sin of Babel’s tower was met by God’s final merciful creative act. He established separate Peoples (volke), speaking different languages and living in their own places. Only then, says this interpretation of the Bible, did God call out Abraham to form His own People and begin a salvation history (herskepping) providentially culminating in Christ and the Christian church, called to take the message of the Gospel to all the nations “each in their own language” (Acts 2:8).
F. J. M. Potgieter (1982:107) provides a summary of this doctrinal position as follows:

The works of God are fully in harmony with one another. That applies to creation, providence and regeneration. There can be no doubt that creation was pluriform (veelvormig) and not just diverse. According to Genesis 11:1 & 6, ethnicity (volkskap) was given in creation: families and generations spontaneously developed into a People. Since Babel, according to the providential dispensation of God, ethnic multiformity arose. The immediate cause was the appalling wickedness of the human race (Gen.6:5). In his great mercy, God nonetheless decided not to destroy humanity, but rather to confuse their language. That is to say: God “made the nations” (Acts 17:26). For them to speak different languages, He manifestly had to allow multiformity to take root and impregnate their psyches. But humans are psycho-physical beings and consequently bodily changes also intervened. Each group thus received a separate ethnic consciousness (volksbewussyn) and became a separate People. This merciful act of God must be accepted and honored by us.

Potgieter and his fellows claimed Kuyper as a predecessor. They were following the course set out in the white NGK Synod’s acceptance of *Ras, Volk en Nasie* in 1974. Indeed, Potgieter was one of the authors of that report.

Potgieter’s exegesis conformed to a standard neo-Kuyperian theological reading of H. G. Stoker’s metaphysics of separate creation spheres. Moreover, even as Stoker had eventually\(^\text{12}\) privileged the sphere of the People by declaring the creation of Afrikanerdom as a fulfillment of God’s purpose in history (Moodie, 1975a:67), Potgieter raised ethnicity (volkskap) to an ontological level that set it off from other social bonds. Little wonder, then, that Willie Jonker (*Kerkbode*, June 22, 1983) accused him of engaging in “natural theology.”\(^\text{13}\)

As Jaap Durand once argued (1982:22-23), critics of apartheid found themselves “drawn into the kind of debate they could never win, especially within the white Dutch Reformed Church, seeing that they made use of the same hermeneutic method as their opponents. If one has accepted diversity as a ‘biblical principle’ alongside the ‘principle’ of unity, no matter how these notions are qualified, the debate becomes sterile.” Thus, the main body of NGK doctrine

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\(^{12}\) Initially, Stoker did protest philosophical “idolization of the nation.” See Moodie, 1975a:159

\(^{13}\) Potgieter vehemently rejected the charge (*Kerkbode*, September 21, 1983), arguing that “the existence of different ethnic groups was not simply an ‘historical fact’ but a truth revealed to us by God, by which He had and still has a specific goal, namely the preservation, survival and well-being of the human race.” Of course, it is a sociological truism that human life is sustained in social groups. The question remains: Why privilege racial and ethnic groups over other types of social groups? In this regard, see the brilliant early critical essay by Lex van Wyk (1976).
seemed insulated from critique by its stress on ethnic diversity as a matter of theological principle and by an Afrikaner volksteologie housed comfortably within it.

I interviewed Potgieter in 1968. I recall a soft-spoken, gracious and gentle man patiently trying to explain his theological position. Nonetheless, the implications of his theology are clear. If indeed God graciously created nations (with racial aspects) to prevent sinfulness and spread them across the globe to prevent strife, then not only was Afrikanerdom justified in its struggle to maintain itself as a separate cultural People, but National Party efforts to create separate Bantu-speaking Peoples with their own territories were also doing God’s work. Whatever its faults might be in practice, in principle apartheid revealed God’s will. Moreover, those who pressed for unity at the cost of diversity in human affairs failed to recognize that unity is an ideal that can be realized only eschatologically, in the last days.

Human attempts to transcend ethnic boundaries and eliminate cultural differences risked re-creating Babel and needed to be confronted with the wrath of God. Hence NGK opposition to “liberalism” and “communism” proclaimed them to be more than merely secular ideologies. They were held to be demonic forces, diabolical enemies of the kingdom of God. After Cottesloe, the NGK would have no truck with the World Council of Churches. Note, for instance, Koot Vorster’s insistence (Nasionale Raad teen Kommunisme, 1967:19) that “communism has received much comfort and help from liberal-modernist churches, persons and organizations, but communism stands helpless before the genuine believer…. Blessed is the People whose God is the Lord.” Separate development thus completed Afrikaner theology’s hermeneutic circle. One should not be surprised that the South African state’s appeal for support against the “total onslaught” of liberalism and communism both within its borders and without should have had general support from the NGK.

Nor should one be surprised at Afrikaner support for missionary efforts within the future “homelands.” In 1956, for instance, Nico Smith and his wife accompanied his friend, Carel

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14 I was less impressed with Koot Vorster, who seemed to trade in nasty ad hominem asides rather than honest debate. For further insight into the modus operandi of Vorster, see Jonker (1998:114-117 & 133-138).
15 Racial exclusion of South African coloured people, who are culturally Afrikaans, is of course the Achilles heal of this particular argument.
16 The biblical passage used to justify eventual unity in the last days is Rev. 7:9: “I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no-one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb…”
Boshoff, married to Verwoerd’s daughter, into Vendaland to establish NGK mission efforts there\(^1\) (Smith, 2004:82). They were not alone, as Kinghorn (1997:146-8) points out:

The missionary upsurge coincided with the optimistic moment when apartheid was being redefined as separate development…. The various synods appointed full-time mission secretaries. Money started to pour in. By 1974 the NGK spent 6.6 million rands per year on internal missions, an amount equal to three percent of the average gross monthly income of all its members…. They established schools and hospitals even before they built churches; they started handiwork classes for women and craft schools for men; they organized youth clubs…. Probably the most enduring consequence of this church-sponsored spurt in development was the concerted drive to translate the Bible into a variety of African languages.

By 1978, Kinghorn (1997:197) notes, “the white NGK had 1,531,000 members and the various black churches born from their missionary work had grown to 1,892,000.”

Eventually, in the late 1970s and 1980s, it was from these “mission” (often called “daughter”) churches, whose members were not insulated from the harsh practical effects of apartheid, that opposition to the white NGK church’s support for separate development would grow. Meanwhile, in keeping with the theology of “pluriformity,” the daughter churches were organized into separate synodical structures for “Coloureds,” for “Bantu”\(^2\) and for so-called “Asians” (referring largely to South Africans of Indian descent in Natal province). Indeed, despite the *Church and Society* report’s 1990 condemnation of apartheid and Willy Jonker’s confession noted above, these racially and “culturally” divided synods continue to exist to this day.

**Opposition**

We shall turn in a moment to the development of opposition from the “daughter” churches and their synods to apartheid. Perhaps it is worth noting now that three of the most cogent early critics of Afrikaner ethnic theology, David Bosch, Lex van Wyk and Jaap Durand,

\(^1\) Both were to become professors of missiology. Smith notes (2004:82): “I believe Verwoerd played a major role in Boshoff’s decision to start DRC mission stations in the homelands in order to win the consent of the blacks in the homelands to the concept of separate development.” Nico Smith himself eventually resigned his membership in the Broederbond and his professorship at Stellenbosch University to become a minister in the “Bantu” NG mission church.

\(^2\) One should note the implicitly racial basis of this arrangement. The “Bantu” synod incorporated many different African groups with supposedly different ethnic cultural characteristics but they were not “separated” from each other.
were all white ministers in the “daughter” churches. Durand, who wrote his PhD on ecclesiology under J.H. Bavinck at the Free University in Amsterdam, learned to speak Xhosa and, while he was a pastor at New Brighton township in Port Elizabeth, wrote a revealing book (1970) on the miseries of African township life. Soon after, he was appointed professor of theology at the “coloured” University of the Western Cape.

At the NGK General Synod in 1974, he was asked to provide a report on the situation of urban Africans to supplement the synod’s approval of the *Ras, Volk en Nasie* report. Durand’s analysis of the extreme hardships of black urban life, however, was ignominiously scrapped by a virtually unanimous vote of the synod. Durand was present but not permitted to speak since he was merely a member of the synod of one of the “daughter” churches. I shall let him take up the story (Durand, n.d.):

The synod began to dismantle the report. This dismantling process was almost without rival in the history of the General Synod. At least so it seemed to me. One after another the speakers stood up to make known their displeasure with this Marxist analysis of the situation. [Dr. Vorster was one of the first speakers.] What certainly struck me most dumb was the sanctimoniousness that went with it. It was charged that my sketch of the miserable situation in which black people found themselves in the cities was an insult to black people themselves. I was not only figuratively dumbfounded by the arguments of the litany of annihilators of my report, I was also literally mute. I was not given an opportunity to speak…. One member stood up: “Brother Chairman, I propose that we not accept this part of the report but simply take note of it.” But a second…objected: “Brother Chairman, if we take note of this, it will remain in the report, even if we say we do not accept it. I propose that we not take notice of it, but remove it completely from the report.” [So it was done.] Not one of the so-called verligtes [supposedly liberal churchmen] objected. Not one….! I returned to my seat.

That Sunday, the brilliant Afrikaans newspaper columnist Rykie van Reenen wrote wryly in *Die Beeld* of “a revered church meeting that reckoned that if you removed an account of the miseries of black people in the city from a report and took no notice of it, then you had removed the problem.”

During a sabbatical in Utrecht soon after, Durand reflected hard on his experience. What was striking to him was that theologians seemed able to justify biblically a sort of “ideal” apartheid, though they might sometimes offer a moral critique of the application of the policy. He began to wrestle with the question: “What is *theologically* wrong with the very idea of
apartheid?” In a breakthrough article, Durand (1978:5-6) argued: “It is true that Scripture indeed acknowledges and accepts the fact of human diversity, but it makes no “theological” problem of it, nor does it relate to salvation history in such a way that it becomes a constitutive part of this history.”

The Bible is of course written and read as salvation-history. This hermeneutic point Ras, Volk en Nasie, despite whatever one believed about the tower of Babel, had in fact conceded. Durand went on to draw what seems like an obvious implication. Matters of ethnic diversity may provide context for the story, but the story itself is one of salvation – and of salvation that transcends (and indeed challenges) ethnic differences (and indeed racial and gender differences) again and again and again – especially where the unity of the Christian church as a community of the saved is concerned. Essentially, diversity was transformed in the early church into visible unity.

By the latter half of 1978, however, Durand had moved on to even bigger things theologically and ecumenically speaking, than biblical hermeneutics. Apartheid, as he saw it, was directly at odds with the possibility of reconciliation, the core Christian doctrine at the heart of the salvation-history. In his own words (1982:22): “I became convinced that reconciliation had become the most crucial issue for South Africa but that all talk of reconciliation was empty and futile in an apartheid setting, because basically the concept of apartheid excluded the notion of reconciliation.” Forced separation along lines of race or culture in principle denied the core Christian message.

Durand thus proposed the doctrine of reconciliation as the theme of his senior seminar for theological students at the University of the Western Cape in 1978. They included Russel Botman19 among other very bright and committed Coloured students. Durand first asked them to discuss what they saw to be primary theological objections to apartheid. They came back with standard arguments about social justice. He reminded them that the class was about the doctrine of the reconciliation. “Gradually it began to dawn on them what I had in mind,” he writes (Durand, n.d.:26ff):

19 Botman eventually became Rector of Stellenbosch University.
I remember to this day their enthusiasm when the light came on for them. Now there was no holding them back. The message must be taken to the church. The synod of the NG [coloured] Mission Church was on hand nearby in Belhar, the obvious place to take this ‘new-found’ insight. The class, not I, decided on the spot to submit it as an agenda item at the Synod.

They decided to approach two rather conservative but theologically rigorous members of the synod to bring forward their motion, reckoning that if it were submitted by Allan Boesak\textsuperscript{20} or others committed to a liberation theology it might not pass. The motion they proposed read as follows:

The church wishes to announce as its conviction that the apartheid policy and/or separate development as upheld by the government, is in conflict with the gospel:

1. because, over against the gospel of Christ’s proclamation of reconciliation of human beings with God and with their fellows, forced separation on the basis of race and color is fundamentally based on irreconcilability between persons separated in this manner;

2. because the system which emerges from such a policy must lead and has led to increasing polarization between persons, particularly because practice has indisputably shown that within the system one section of the population, namely the whites, are privileged and as a result do not meet the gospel demand that justice be granted to everyone, and

3. because, as a result, not only the human dignity of the underprivileged but also the human dignity of everyone involved, is injured (Durand, n.d.:27).

The 1978 synod of the coloured “mission” church accepted the motion. To Durand’s astonishment, the “white” NGK, tightly insulated within its own hermeneutic circle, simply ignored this theological attack on the fundamental principles of racial volkstheologie.

Neither Durand nor any other early theological critics of Afrikaner volkstheologie taught at the major NGK theological schools of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Bloemfontein. Mainstream white NGK churchgoers (and even most of their pastors) thus seemed to be insulated from such arguments. Indeed, at this stage, it seemed that even the “daughter” synod of the Coloured church could be safely ignored. How then did things begin to change in the “mother church” itself?

\textsuperscript{20} Allan Boesak, of course, was a famous coloured liberation theologian and eventually in 1983, founder of the massive democratic United Democratic Front movement, one of the most important political mobilizers of opposition to apartheid.
Two outside pressures were fundamental. Firstly, two years after the *Kerk, Volk en Nasie* synod, Soweto had exploded. Reports on the dire condition of urban African life might be silenced by synodical maneuvering, but the people themselves rose up in protest. Furthermore, colonial African states to the north of South Africa were falling like proverbial dominoes. The National Party and the South African state was forced to adjust to both internal and external crises.

The Afrikaner Broederbond elite was itself ahead of the church it was supposed by some to control. Willie Esterhuyse (1979), a verligte (enlightened reform) Stellenbosch philosopher, at the time a Broederbonder and an eminent NGK layman, wrote a book *Afskeid van Apartheid* (Farewell to Apartheid) that firmly rejected the overt racism of petty apartheid without eschewing ethnic pluriformity in principle. Afrikaners could maintain their cultural integrity, he seemed to be saying, only by rejecting racial elements of their cultural identity.22

Such a position was implied in South African President P.W. Botha’s constitutional reform proposals, which set out to create a tri-cameral parliament with separate houses for “coloureds” and “Indians” who obviously had no separate “homelands.” Efforts were also made to fund enhanced homeland development for Africans, and indeed concessions allowing some local government were made to urban Africans also. In 1982, the National Party itself split over the strains imposed by such changes. The volk was divided, as was the Broederbond. The NGK was in a dilemma.

Secondly, ecumenical pressures mounted on the church.23 The World Council of Churches (WCC) could easily be ignored, especially when its Program to Combat Racism created a special fund to support the freedom struggle in southern Africa. NGK charges of communism filled the air. More complicated was the NGK’s relationship with the World

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21 The Soweto uprising in June 1976 was originally occasioned by urban black schoolchildren demonstrating against Broederbond insistence (implemented by Andries Treurnicht who was the state minister in charge) that Afrikaans be used as a language of instruction in urban black schools. After 1976, periodic mass uprisings, often involving the youth, ensued (see for example Bozzoli, 2004). For a more extensive discussion of the impact of the Soweto uprising on Afrikaner thought, see my discussion of the reaction of Broederbond Chairman Gerrit Viljoen in Moodie, 2009:204-8.

22 As noted earlier, this had long been a position taken by Cape Afrikaner intellectuals. See Moodie, 2009:187-94.

23 For an authoritative account of the NGK’s increasing ecumenical isolation during this period, see the essay by Piet Strauss in du Toit, et al, 2002: fourth chapter. See also, Reamonn, 1994, for alternative points of view on ecumenical politics and theology.
Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the more conservative and smaller Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) both of which were fairly close theologically to the NGK.

Closest of all, perhaps, was the relationship between the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (GKN) and the NGK. This was the church whose seminary at Kampen (linked as it was to the Free University of Amsterdam) most overseas South African doctoral students in theology attended. But the Netherlands was also home to some of the strongest elements of the anti-apartheid movement. Dutch experience of the Second World War had institutionalized strong opposition to all forms of racism. Moreover, Beyers Naude and the Christian Institute he had founded were lionized in the Netherlands. Thus, the GKN in 1974 voted to support the WCC’s Program to Combat Racism.

At the NGK 1974 General Synod (the same one which endorsed the Ras, Volk en Nasie report and had treated Durand so cavalierly), representatives of the Dutch GKN attended but were given next to no time to explain their decision. Koot Vorster had already announced that the GKN must choose between “terrorists” and their “sisterly relationship” with the NGK. He moved that the GKN drop their support of the Program to Combat Racism or else the NGK would break off relations with them at the 1978 synod. The decision to break ties with the GKN was a fraught one, but the ultimatum passed with only 12 negative votes. The GKN refused to bow to NGK pressure and, in 1978, ties between the churches were broken, although it was never very clear what this actually meant in practice.

In 1982, Allan Boesak took the message of the “mission church” (worked out by Durand and his students) that apartheid was “irreconcilable with the gospel of Christ,” combined with his own astringent liberation theology (worked out in the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians) to the Ottawa meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). They elected him president of the Alliance and declared a status confessionis on the grounds that apartheid was a

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24 Those who argue that Beyers Naude’s insistence on confronting the NGK “from the outside” was rather ineffectual tend to overlook his enormous influence on opposition to apartheid in ecumenical circles overseas. As we have already seen, his brother-in-law, Frans Geldenhuys, who was ecumenical secretary of the NGK between 1974 and 1980 and was obliged to represent the church of Kerk, Volk en Nasie, completely comprehended the effectiveness Naude’s prophetic effect overseas.

25 For a thoughtful discussion of this “ultimatum decision,” see Strauss, 1992.

26 For a copy of Boesak’s speech at the WARC, see Boesak, 1984:108-119.

27 Meaning a doctrine essential to the faith of the church.
heresy. NGK membership of the WARC was suspended until the church could prove its opposition to apartheid. Boesak returned to the 1982 synod of his own church (again at Belhar), which agreed that apartheid was a heresy and also declared a *status confessionis*.

The mission church synod went a step farther, however. They set up a committee to compose a formal Confession on the matter. The committee met during the tea break and instructed Durand and Dirkie Smit, his younger colleague at the theological school of the University of the Western Cape, to develop a draft (Durand, n.d.:29-31). The two of them withdrew and decided then and there that the confession would be made up of three parts, dealing in turn with the unity of the church, the message of reconciliation, and the righteousness of the God who brings justice and peace to the poor and the oppressed. Having laid out this framework for the draft, they went home exhausted. Next morning, to Durand’s astonishment, Dirkie Smit showed up with a complete draft of what became, with one or two additions from Boesak, the Belhar Confession.  

The text soars effortlessly above theological bickering in a biblical language that affirms with authority unity in the church of Christ and then declares (Cloete & Smit, 1984:2):

> That this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God; that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church. Therefore, we reject as sin any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people.

With these words, FJM Potgieter’s cramped “natural theology” simply shatters on Dirkie Smit’s soaring Pauline theological message and Durand and his students’ understanding of the message of the New Testament.

The Confession continues:

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28 The great Confessions of the sixteenth century were foundational for the establishment of Calvinist Reformed Churches during the Reformation. Similarly, the Barmen Declaration pronounced the rejection of Nazism to be fundamental to the integrity of the Christian church. In the reformed tradition, then, composing and accepting a Confession pronounces upon that without which a church has no right to call itself Christian or Reformed.

29 For the full text, in English, with explanatory essays, see Cloete & Smit, 1984.
That any teaching which attempts to legitimate...forced separation by appeal to the
gospel and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but
rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness, and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling
power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

The Confession then turns to a final section insisting that

the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice
may flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the
Church as the possession of God must stand where He stands, namely against injustice
and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the
powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm
others.

This text was unanimously accepted as a statutory Confession by the “mission church” synod.

In this Belhar Confession, drafted by one born and raised “white” in the NGK, the
“mission church” threw down the gauntlet to the “mother church”, which had already decided,
under the pressure of its increasing ecumenical isolation, that Ras, Volk en Nasie would have to
be revised. As we saw at the outset of this paper, however, the NGK Synod in 1982 had seemed
almost as defiant as that of 1974. Part of the problem was political. A. P. Treurnicht had recently
led his Conservative Party out of P. W. Botha’s National Party. White Afrikaners were seriously
divided – as was their church and the Afrikaner Broederbond itself.

More important, I suspect, was that theological attacks on the NGK had struck home to
its best and brightest minds, but local churches, headed by elders who had grown up with the
“old ways,” would need time to adjust to changes. The church had to find a way to a new
theology without abandoning its faithful congregants in pews across the country. Such
transformation could come only with time and effort devoted by insiders to institutional and
theological reform. We may thus turn finally to those working for “change from within.”

**Change from Within**

Sociologically speaking, Afrikanerdom itself, and especially the National Party, had
become more middle class in the 1970s (Charney, 1984). To get at the theological origins of the
change from within, however, one needs to go back to a group of students who had completed
their ministerial training at the University of Pretoria in 1951 (Landman 1996). Of the fifteen of
them, nine became professors of theology. We have already mentioned two, Nico Smith and
Carel Boshoff, who went off to become missionaries in the north. The two who stood out as truly exceptional, however, were the stars of the class, Willie Jonker, whom we also met earlier, and Johan Heyns, Serfontein’s “barometer” for measuring change in the NGK.\textsuperscript{30} Both went immediately from the University of Pretoria to the Netherlands for doctoral study at the Free University under Berkhouwer. Both received their PhD’s \textit{cum laude}.

On their return to South Africa, both accepted jobs in working-class Afrikaner congregations, Heyns at Ysterplaat near Cape Town and Jonker in the western suburbs of Johannesburg. From there they both received calls to elite congregations; for Heyns, Rondebosch (the congregation of the political elite where he would be preaching to Verwoerd, Vorster and P.W. Botha when Parliament was in session) and for Jonker, Braamfontein (which included the university suburb of Parkview, whence the brilliant Afrikaner poet and polemicist Van Wyk Louw\textsuperscript{31} would come to his church). Both were promptly elected to synodical duties in their respective Cape and Transvaal provincial white synods.

In 1966, Heyns was invited to join the faculty at the Stellenbosch seminary, but, in 1971 he moved to Pretoria to take up the chair in Dogmatics and Jonker succeeded him at Stellenbosch. They both remained in those positions for the next twenty turbulent years. By all accounts they were inspiring teachers. Although an additional program for ministerial training was established at the University of the Orange Free State in 1980, virtually all the younger NGK clergy in the 1970s and 1980s had been exposed to instruction from one or the other of them.

Despite their similar trajectories (although, as we shall see, Jonker’s path to Stellenbosch was much more fraught than Heyns’ had been to Pretoria), they differed theologically and in their backgrounds and personal dispositions. While both had been nurtured in the deep personal piety typical of the NGK, Heyns had been to high school in Potchefstroom during the war years and proceeded to the local university for his initial studies. There he would have been exposed


\textsuperscript{31} For an analysis in English of the later work of Van Wyk Louw, see, for example, Moodie 2009.
to the conservative Calvinist theology of the small *Gereformeerde* church. As a youngster he was an active member of the wartime pro-German Ossewa Brandwag movement. H. G. Stoker, the most brilliant of the neo-Kuyperian Calvinists, became his mentor and Heyns was steeped in the Calvinist philosophy of creation espoused by Stoker. Indeed, on his return from doctoral studies in the Netherlands, Heyns completed a second doctorate in philosophy under Stoker at Potchefstroom.

Both Heyns and Jonker were persuaded by Berkouwer to take Karl Barth seriously and both of them attended Barth’s lectures in Switzerland and admired him enormously, but both took a critical stance towards Barth’s triumphalist Christological theology. It was surely no accident that Heyns’ dissertation dealt with the Trinity, where differentiation and unity are held to coincide in the very Godhead itself, whereas Jonker eventually wrote on the church as the communion of saints.

From early in his postdoctoral career, Heyns settled on the Kingdom of God as his central theme in a theology of righteous order – both political and cosmic order. When he arrived at Stellenbosch in 1966, Heyns could not have been too much at odds with Potgieter. He certainly shared the latter’s vehement abjuration of communism. Heyns indeed served as a junior member of the synodical commission that drew up *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. By that time, also, he was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. Williams’ accounts of Heyn’s *Geloftedag* sermons from

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32 For an account of Gereformeerde influence on the development of the 1994 South African constitution, see Moodie, 2017.
33 For a brief account of intense Potchefstroom-based debates during the second world war years, including the important contribution of Stoker, see Moodie 1975a, chapter 11.
34 In regard to Barth’s theology, Heyns no doubt disagreed with him because of Heyns’ commitment to a theology of common as well as particular grace and Jonker perhaps because his deep consciousness of sin and suffering in human existence was neglected in Barth’s work. In his memoir, Jonker writes (1998:22) that he had told Barth that he intended to write his dissertation on “the doctrine of sanctification and specifically the question of the lasting sinfulness of believers.” Apparently, Barth threw back his head and laughed. “How can one write a dissertation about sin?” he asked. It is perhaps worth noting here, by the way, that there seems now to be a tendency to pronounce NGK “dissidents” in the 1980s as “Barthian” (Botman in Weisse & Anthonissen, 2004:124-33 and Strauss in Du Toit, *et al*, 2002:221-5). For whatever reason this assertion is made, I think it a serious mistake, apparently based on misreading an article by Durand (1988), that ends up imposing a label on what was in fact a much more interesting theological trend. I can do no more than mention this in passing.
35 As late as 1994, Heyns was insisting, in separate publications, on his theology of the Kingdom of God as a concept both deeply biblical (1994a) and also indebted to Stoker’s “philosophy of the creation-idea” (1994c).
36 His approach to “creation,” however, was deeper and more rigorous than that of his more senior colleague -- or Koot Vorster for that matter.
37 *Geloftedag*, the Day of the Covenant, celebrated annually in South Africa as a public holiday on December 16, commemorated the day in 1838 when the Afrikaner Voortrekkers had sought their God’s assistance in a battle with Zulu impis who vastly outnumbered them. Their success eventually became a foundational tenet of Afrikaner sacred
his early years indicate cautious (and eloquent) endorsement of Afrikaner volksteologie. For all his intellectual rigor and a certain narrowness of vision, however, Heyns was an open-hearted individual, free of pettiness and thoughtful, intelligent and reflective. He was also phenomenally hard-working. He eventually became a close confidant of P. W. Botha.

Jonker had a much harder time adjusting to the NGK status quo. Deeply committed to pastoral work and the renewal of local church discipline and active in a circle of like-minded clergy in the Transvaal, he had settled more comfortably into being a pastor than Heyns (who was very caring but so profoundly intellectual that he constantly preached over the heads of his original working-class congregation). At this stage in his career in the late 1950s, Jonker was approached about joining the Broederbond. He spoke to Beyers Naude, who recommended that he do so because it would further his career in the church. Jonker decided to decline the offer.

He was away on a study tour when the Cottesloe affair broke. When Beyers Naude was removed as actuarius of the Transvaal synod, Jonker was appointed to succeed him. It was clear to Jonker that he was under surveillance and he was obliged to immerse himself in church law. For all his gentleness, Jonker had a stubborn streak when it came to matters of principle, however. He quietly removed a clause stating that only “whites” could be members of the Transvaal church. A turning point for him came in 1962, however, when he wrote a short study of the missionary policy of the NGK in which he declared that, in principle, the church could not be closed to people of color. Indeed, there should be but one church connection (verband).

The reaction from the reigning NGK arbiters of acceptable doctrine, fellow-ministers, in the NG journal, Die Kerbode, and even from his own family and other friends and acquaintances, was swift and deeply unpleasant. Several church councils (often manned by Broederbond elders) forbade his preaching in their churches (even, as it turned out, at the weddings of friends). Many Afrikaners cut him and his family out of their social circles almost overnight. Again and again he was urged to retract his “liberal” opinions.

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38 Naude was actually, despite his refusal to abjure the Cottesloe declaration, initially advanced to be Moderator of the Transvaal synod. Only when he refused to resign as editor of the anti-apartheid Pro Veritate, three years later, was he expelled from his NGK ministry.
Deeply depressed and isolated from relationships that meant much to him, Jonker accepted a lectureship at the University of South Africa and withdrew from active ministry. This only increased his isolation. Providentially, he was then called to become pastor of the rather down-at-heel “Irene” NG church in downtown eastern Johannesburg near Joubert Park. Jonker jumped at the task and embraced pastoral work yet again.

Soon, however, he received an offer from Kampen, the reformed theological school in the Netherlands. At first he demurred, but eventually he and his family moved to Europe. During his time there he recommended that Allan Boesak be accepted for doctoral studies, with far-reaching consequences. When Koot Vorster and his wife visited the Netherlands to attend the synod of the GKN, Jonker offered him quiet advice. Indeed, when the Vorsters came to Kampen they stayed with the Jonkers. For all his doubts about Jonker’s politics, Vorster was clearly impressed by the person.

When Heyns moved from Stellenbosch to Pretoria a year later, an offer from Stellenbosch came to Jonker and he returned to South Africa. Willie Jonker would find his niche at Stellenbosch. He soon became dean of the theological faculty. Even those who disagreed with him found him to be a man of honor. Heyns once described him as “called to serve God… equipped with exquisite intellectual gifts, with a sensitivity that borders on fragility, and with a candidness that robs all resistance of power and sharpness and obliges one to deep self-examination, in short, an individual with spiritual integrity” (1994b:167). Heyns continued: “He is a citizen of the kingdom and a member of the church who through his passion for the Word, his persistent obedience to the Word and his conscientious interpretation of the Word – even if he stands alone – is an example worthy for us all to follow.” Willie Jonker also wrote beautifully in clear, precise and elegant Afrikaans, free of embellishment and always on target.39

Nonetheless, it was Heyns, the quintessential insider, who was primarily responsible for bringing the church around from commitment to apartheid. It is difficult to exaggerate the enormity of this task. Although Ras, Volk en Nasie had moved away from crude Biblical justifications for apartheid, racialized ethnic categories were still hypostatized as “separate

39 For what it is worth, it perhaps appropriate to mention that Dirkie Smit is Jonker’s son-in-law.
spheres.” The third chapter of Williams’ exhaustive study of Heyns’ life and thought demonstrates convincingly that Heyns himself initially shared such tendencies.

Before he could commit himself to turning the NGK around, Heyns had to convince himself. In this sense, at the early stages he was not ahead of the struggle. Instead, he was himself part of the pack, identifying closely with ordinary Afrikaner church-goers, sharing their dilemmas as he himself initially wrestled with the fact that separate development, however idealistic in concept, was brutal and morally bankrupt in practice.

Klaus Runia, who had succeeded Jonker at Kampen, visited South Africa in 1969 and noted that Heyns took contradictory positions. Runia did not hold that against him. He believed it revealed genuine personal tensions in the man himself, as he struggled with implications for his Christianity of commitment to his People and the apartheid myth (Williams 2006:113). By the later 1970s, however, we find Heyns distinguishing between apartheid, which he still espoused as an ideal, and the practices of “apartism” which he now condemned (Williams 2006:145-6). Heyns’ passionate commitment to Afrikanerdom, nurtured in his youth as an Ossewa Bandwag activist and as a student in Potchefstroom under Stoker (and indeed against his own father who had joined the army during the Second World War), continued unabated, but now increasingly deeply at odds with his powerful sense of justice.

By this time, Heyns was serving on the Broad Moderature, the executive council of the NGK General Synod, which met only every four years. He was a figure to be reckoned with nationally, and he travelled abroad with representatives of the NGK to ecumenical meetings in Europe and around the world.

As we have already noted, for the Afrikaner Broederbond and other verligte Afrikaner intellectuals the Soweto uprising in 1976 was a major turning point. Heyns identified with them. By an extraordinary coincidence, I purchased a copy of Broederbond chairman, Gerrit Viljoen’s, collection of essays and lectures, Ideaal en Werklikheid, written between 1972 and

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1978, secondhand from Protea bookshop in Pretoria. On getting it home, I discovered that it had been Heyns’ personal copy, inscribed by Viljoen “to Johan Heyns with thanks for your word of encouragement.” Heyns’ marginal notes are fascinating. He was clearly tortured by the ethical dilemmas Viljoen presented, especially in pieces written after the Soweto uprising in 1976. At one point Heyns scrawled: “What value is higher – justice or survival, ideal or reality.” At another, he wrote: “The value of justice higher than survival”, adding “do we really display these values in our contemporary dealings with racial others.”

For Heyns, however, I think an earlier turning point had come at a major consultation with the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches which he attended late in 1976 in Europe along with a delegation of NGK theologians, including Carel Boshoff, Nico Smith, Willie Jonker, Frans Geldenhuys and others. By then the 1974 NGK General Synod had broken ties with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, and the South Africans were feeling increasingly isolated.

The Swiss, however, sought to engage seriously with the theology rather than the politics of the Ras, Volk en Nasie report. They pointed out that ties with ‘population group’ seemed stronger in the report than the obligation to church fellowship in Christ” (Williams 2006:153-5). The Swiss critique also picked up Jaap Durand’s point that without reconciliation in Christ there could be no peace. What of love, they asked, in the sense of genuine Christian fellowship across cultural lines? Heyns had no answer to any of these questions. The eminent NGK delegation to this Swiss consultation in fact decided that the NG Ecumenical Commission recommend revision of Ras, Volk en Nasie at the 1982 General Synod.

Heyns felt moved to act. State President P. W. Botha, for instance, was asking for advice from the churches on whether or not to do away with the Immorality Act, but the NGK Moderature seemed completely unable to move on the matter. In early 1980, the moderatures of the four “mother-and-daughter” NG churches met and decided it should be left to the government to reconsider the Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts. An announcement was

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43 For a discussion of longstanding policies of the NGK on mixed marriages and immoral miscegenation see our earlier discussion of the origins of apartheid policy and Serfontein 1982:144-8. See also De Villiers & Kinghorn 1984.
made that the churches would have no objection in principle to repeal. They had agreed among themselves that no further announcement would be made.

Professor E.P.J. Kleyhans (from the “white” NGK Moderature) nonetheless issued a statement saying that he did not think that the NGK should ask the government to repeal the laws. The three NG “daughter churches” were understandably furious. Heyns was disgusted. He had the Ecumenical Commission of the NGK request an urgent meeting of the Broad Moderature. When that was refused, he wrote in a newspaper column that there was a “striking lack of positive leadership from the church” (Williams 2006:162-3).

In March 1980, a member of the NGK in Mooi River in Natal had to be buried from the Methodist Church because the local NGK church council point-blank refused permission for his black servants and farm employees to attend a service in the local NG church. This was in direct defiance of 1974 and 1978 rulings of the General Synod. Nothing was done. Heyns wrote to fellow theologian Ben Engelbrecht (Williams, 2006:163): “Ben we live (yet again) in a crisis; most of all in a leadership crisis, and my question is: how and what must be done? I have been considering this seriously of late. The church of Christ is in the fire; it must give leadership and yet literally nothing emerges. How should one give witness in such a situation?”

Heyns phoned Willie Jonker early in October 1980, suggesting that they and a group of other theologians from Pretoria and Stellenbosch issue a “Statement of Witness” on Reformation Day (October 31). This was following up their conversations in Switzerland, but Heyns was also becoming desperate. Each of them recruited colleagues (Jonker included Esterhuyse, the philosopher). The eventual “Witness” statement (Serfontein, 1982:270) specifically addressed:

The apparent powerlessness of the institutionalized church in South Africa to carry out its divine calling of reconciliation…to give spiritual leadership to the authorities and community by a clear and consistent witness to the promises and demands of God’s Kingdom as far as social reality is concerned…[and] to resist mutual estrangement and exclusivity among Christians and so work against divisions of the church which shame the communion of saints. 44

The writers pleaded with those “charged with oversight of church policy and action to strive for the elimination of loveless and racist attitudes and actions which cause hurtful incidents”. They

44 This part of the “witness” included many themes we have already noted; reconciliation (Durand), the Kingdom of God (Heyns) and the communion of saints (Jonker).
insisted on “the solidarity of Christian love with all those placed in positions of helpless suffering and need by social practice, economic oppression and political policy” and urged “a form of church unity in which the oneness of believers adhering to the same confession can take visible form.”

Finally, the Witness affirmed its writers’ conviction that the NGK could make a contribution to “the advance of mutual trust and acceptance among the different population groups” and could make “a concrete witness that existing group differences between people need not be a source of friction because of prejudice, self-interest and defensiveness, but can, through the power of God’s renewing grace, be developed into something that provides for mutual enrichment and the upholding of each other in the one body of Christ.”

A storm broke out, especially over the head of Heyns, who was the only member of the Broad Moderature to sign the Witness (Williams 2006:169-71). A more pressing problem with such pronouncements, however, was that they dealt in theological generalities, no doubt very important within informed theological circles but irrelevant for ordinary lay people who largely failed to pick up on the nuances.

In a 1981 book collection, Stormkompass, critical of the NGK, Durand zeroed in on a rather bland little essay on the church by Heyns, stating: “I have a problem with the contribution of Professor Heyns. With minor changes it could just as well have been written about the church in…say, Lapland.” Durand himself made a strong plea for an admission of guilt, which was certainly absent from Heyns’ article (Smith, et al 1981:21-3). Heyns’ essay, nonetheless, was critical of “the silence of the church” and the lack of leadership which he bemoaned again and again in those years.

In 1982, a group of 123 NG clergy and ordinands published an “Open Letter” in Die Kerkbode that represented a more explicit and concrete condemnation of apartheid and called for the visible unity of the church. It condemned “a social order which elevates irreconcilability to a principle of societal living” as “unacceptable,” called for “justice and not simply law and order,” and acknowledged guilt (Serfontein 1982:275-8). It was a direct and outspoken attack on Ras, Volk en Nasie.
Durand was one of the signatories, as were many theologians from the University of South Africa, but no member of the theological faculties at any of the three NGK theological schools signed the letter. Jonker, however, was delighted and said so. Heyns also praised the letter. The rest of the Broad Moderature fell back on legalistic arguments and ruled it out of order. They also condemned *Die Kerkbode* for publishing it. Potgieter and others rose up in defence of *Ras, Volk en Nasie* and for more than a year a fascinating debate ensued in *Die Kerkbode.*

This debate about the Open Letter bracketed the deliberations of the 1982 General Synod, which was, wrote Jonker (1998:166), “one of the worst experiences in my whole history in the NGK.” Barely months before, the new Conservative Party had broken away from the National Party under leadership of Treurnicht on the basis of racial “thin edge of the wedge” arguments and the political atmosphere was highly charged. “Generally,” Jonker averred (1998:164), “the synod was bitterly unpleasant…. A group of ministers regularly gathered in the corridors and sometimes boisterously gave tongue to their repugnance about what they perceived to be leftwing elements in the synod…. This had an intimidating influence.” Treurnicht attended the synod and was received with acclaim. Jonker, meanwhile, along with Heyns and Willem Nicol, had the effrontery to propose that the church ask the state to abolish the Immorality and Mixed Marriages Acts. Their proposal was dismissed with scorn.

The only encouraging thing about the whole affair, wrote Jonker, was that he and Heyns saw eye to eye on issues far more than ever before. Before the synod, Jonker stayed at the Heyns household and they talked late into the night. “For the first time,” wrote Jonker (1998:164), “I really felt that we had found one another and that he was determined to take a clear stand against the rightwing politicizing of the church. We promised one another to stand together and do everything in our power to make a clear witness to try to move the synod to a new dispensation.” Jonker found comfort in the fact that Heyns never hesitated to be seen in his company and provided support wherever he could. Heyns himself was duly voted off the Broad Moderature.

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45 See also Bosch, *et al* 1982. There is no space to summarize this debate, which focused largely on the unity of the church in the face of arguments for multiformity.

46 Nicol, who came from a family deeply committed to Afrikaner concerns (his father, William, ministered for many years to working class Afrikaners in Johannesburg, advocating ardently for mother tongue education in Afrikaans before being appointed Administrator of the Transvaal) was at the time the NGK chaplain to students at the University of Pretoria.
There was one bright lining to this cloudy event. Jan Hanekom, the minister in Stellenbosch, and the most moderate member of the new Broad Moderature, approached Jonker about the decision to revise *Ras, Volk en Nasie*. The suggestion, he said, was that the job be left to members of the new Broad Moderature. Jonker urged that experts in various theological fields be included also. Asked for names, he put Heyns at the top of the list. When Jonker was nominated from the floor he was shouted down and decisively voted out. He felt belittled and humiliated. His ex-students from Stellenbosch expressed their sympathy in the corridors. They must have been shocked at this treatment of their revered professor.47

Heyns, however, was appointed to the revision commission. For the next four years he devoted himself to the re-writing of *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, with skill and zeal. His strategic intellectual and interpersonal gifts and all those many years of debate representing the NGK at ecumenical conferences now stood him in good stead. He skillfully steered the NGK away from *Ras, Volk en Nasie*, with its distinct overtones of *volksteologie*, toward the more irenic *Church and Society*.

Williams (2006:190-198) provides a meticulous account of the process of writing *Church and Society* that confirms Heyns’ leadership in formulating the document. Consensus was impossible, especially in the third (applied) section of the document and there were a number of conservative minority opinions.48 Eventually, all of them were rejected by the 1986 synod. Even the finally accepted version was cautiously worded, however. There was no admission of guilt nor was the good intent of the authors of separate development theory questioned, but apartheid practices were firmly condemned and regret was expressed for the suffering they had caused. Certainly, the church had changed tack. Later years would reveal if this indicated a change of course. In 1990, as we have seen, *Church and Society* was indeed revised to include an admission of guilt, enabling Jonker’s Rustenburg confession.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of a changed tack was Heyns’ election as Moderator at the outset of the 1986 synod. The clearest evidence of a changed course in the new text itself came, appropriately enough, in the debate on church membership. Paragraph 269 of the *Church and Society*

47 They probably also felt a little guilty for not having stood up for him publically.
48 Many of them were associated with Carel Boshoff and J.E. Potgieter, elected moderator of the NGK in the 1982 conservative backlash. To the best of my knowledge, although they objected to *Church and Society*, neither of them joined the breakaway church.
Society report reads: “In the local congregation, the normal pattern is for believers to worship the Lord and to be received as members where provision has been made for their pastoral needs.” In the draft before the synod, paragraph 270 read as follows: “Should members (baptized or confessing) of other member churches of the family of NG Churches apply for membership of a Dutch Reformed congregation, such an application and possible transfer of membership are dealt with responsibly in terms of agreed church polity.” In the course of the debate, Pieter Potgieter proposed an additional sentence to be added to the beginning of paragraph 270. It read simply: “The membership of the NGK is open.” Potgieter was sitting with Willie Jonker at the time. He quickly ran his suggestion past Jonker before standing up. Jonker urged him to go ahead and, lo and behold, the synod accepted it. For Jonker (1998:189) this was the crucial turning point.

Carel Boshoff, recently chairman of the Broederbond and, as noted earlier, Verwoerd’s son-in-law, was appalled. He promptly wrote a letter to the commission, asserting (1987:18): “Our members place a high value on their ethnic identity (volksidentiteit), unique character (eiesoortigheid), values and traditions, and wish to protect these and hand them on to their children. As a result, they will resist a process of morally coercive integration, which is being imposed on them by the present situation.” He affirmed the intent of the Group Areas Act and warned that Potgieter’s additional sentence might lead to a breakaway from the NGK. He added (1987:20): “The questions facing the church now lie in the problems of a mixed society in which the Whites are woven in as a threatened minority.” For Boshoff, as for the theologians of Ras, Volk en Nasie, race and culture were inextricably linked.

In June 1987, as already noted, a gathering of disaffected NG people did decide to break away and form their own, explicitly “white” and Afrikaner church, the Afrikaanse Protestante Kerk (APK). A pamphlet (Voorsettingskomitee) published in May firmly and explicitly declared their commitment to a volksteologie. Boshoff was not in their number, although he did form a pressure group within the NGK to turn the church around again. He had been obliged to resign his chairmanship of the Broederbond in the political turmoil of the early 1980s.

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49 “Other members of the family”, of course, included the mission churches. The possibility for mixed race worship was being very tentatively proposed.
50 He was to succeed Heyns as moderator of the General Synod in 1990.
51 For a useful brief account of this event, see Van der Merwe 2002.
The APK initially constituted less than one percent (three percent at the time of its peak in 1998\textsuperscript{52}) of total NGK membership (and about 150 ministers) but Heyns took it very hard that the breakaway had taken place on his watch. While during his time as NGK moderator Heyns’ comments on church affairs were much more explicit than some of his earlier theology had been, many thought that he spoke out of two sides of his mouth; in English to the outside world and in Afrikaans to church members and other Afrikaners. I am reminded of Klaus Runia’s earlier observation about Heyns’ internal conflicts. In his effort to be a bridge-builder, Heyns carried within himself and in his consciousness the wounds of a church torn within itself by its troubled history, seeking to hold onto its ordinary members with their particularly ethnic sense of history and at the same time be reconciled with other Reformed Christians within the country and across the globe.\textsuperscript{53}

It is not clear to me that Heyns ever resolved this dilemma, especially because he refused a strict separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{54} He tried as moderator to provide the national leadership through the NGK that he had believed was so lacking from his predecessors. He continued to advise P. W. Botha\textsuperscript{55} and was active as a chaplain to the defense force\textsuperscript{56} in its “struggle against communism” at the same time that he stood firm on the principles set forth in \textit{Church and Society}, meeting several times with leaders of the other South African members of the “Reformed Church family.”\textsuperscript{57}

Although he came to see the destructive effects of apartheid practice on so many lives (and I think his empathy for the suffering that it caused was genuine), Heyns remained unwilling to confess to Durand’s theological insight that “separate development” was \textit{in principle} sinful.

\textsuperscript{52} See Adendorff, 2002.

\textsuperscript{53} See Dirkie Smit’s account of a meeting with the “mission church” to discuss unity immediately after the APK breakaway (Weisse & Anthonissen, 2004:137-8).

\textsuperscript{54} See Williams 2006:187-8. Jonker felt uncomfortable acting as a consultant to P.W. Botha and dropped out after one meeting. Heyns remained, deeply committed to “national security.”

\textsuperscript{55} His nephew, Danie Veldsman, who was staying with the family at the time, told me that often when he came home late, Heyns would be deep in conversation with Botha. Mrs. Heyns told me Botha would shout at her husband.

\textsuperscript{56} There were among those to whom I spoke who suggested that it was his closeness to the SA security forces (and his apparent willingness to testify to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) that ultimately led to his assassination. He knew too much, it was said. Certainly his murder was a professional operation and certainly the military came away virtually unscathed from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission despite the horrors of the border war in Namibia and Angola.

\textsuperscript{57} See Bax 1989, for example, for an account of a contentious consultation in Vereeniging.
This, I think, stemmed from his commitment to Afrikaner culture, to Afrikaner (sacred) history, and to H G Stoker’s eventually favoring *ethnic* pluriformity over other types of social diversity.

In the end, when the political transformation was over and Heyns had been assassinated, Jonker saluted him as a companion in the struggle for a single NGK. In his final work, wrote Jonker (1996:94), “he pleaded that diversity be accommodated in the same church. He no longer saw differences of faith experience and faith understandings, or differences in origins, race and culture, as adequate reasons for separate churches.” Jonker added on a personal note after Heyn’s untimely death: “His willingness to reach out to others, his burning passion to break down divisions of prejudice and misunderstanding, his zeal for the cause of God’s kingdom and his compelling enthusiasm for life itself, humanly speaking, called out for more time to give it concrete expression. But it was not to be.” Jonker clearly deeply regretted the loss of the lifelong foil who had become such a close comrade by the end.

**Conclusion**

I believe that this account of change in the NGK is interesting in its own right. In focusing on F.J.M. Potgieter and Koot Vorster, on Heyns and Jonker, on Durand, Dirkie Smit and Boesak, I have neglected the contribution of many others to the debates and struggles of the time. The movement in the church was much larger than individuals, but so too was inertia and overt opposition, and that is much more difficult to capture.

Change came because of social and political (and economic) forces that held the churches too in their grip. Afrikaners had become largely middle class. Working class Afrikaners either vanished into the bureaucracy or became irrelevant. Jonathan Hyslop (2000) argues that individualist and consumerist self-identities were on the rise. Nonetheless, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a fear that right-wing Afrikaners might unite behind the Conservatives and take a potentially violent stand.

In a fascinating essay, Willem Nicol (Weisse & Anthonissen, 2004:116-9) notes that initiatives for change were not led by the “mother” church. NGK leaders “accompanied the flock” on their social and political journey. Without specific empirical detail, he argues that

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58 See the remarkable work of Jonathan Hyslop (2003) for example. The NP (and the NGK?) basically dropped working class Afrikaners – to the extent that they still existed.
“Afrikanerdom developed a bad conscience about apartheid…. [and at least] the DRC was not a braking mechanism…. The church was not the first to experience the absurdity of apartheid, but when Afrikanerdom felt it, there was a fruitful interaction with the church…. A circular movement took place in which the negative experience of apartheid motivated its theological critique and the latter in its turn strengthened the former.”

It is this “circular movement” that I have sought to grasp in this paper. I argue that it was by no means an inevitable achievement. It was, of course, less than was called for in the Belhar Confession. The NGK reaction to Belhar was, in fact, a tragically lost opportunity. It continues to be so. Unity continues to elude the Dutch Reformed Church family – at least as far as the white church is concerned.

Precisely because unification failed, Nicol asserts (Weisse & Anthonissen, 2004:120), “the ethnic character of the church has not been broken in reality.” In a separate paper in the same volume, Dirkie Smit, by now in occupying his father-in-law’s position as theology professor at Stellenbosch University, disagrees on completely different grounds. He argues (Wiesse & Anthonissen, 2004:139-141) that, in the new South Africa, ethnicity is no longer relevant at all. Nor are other wider social bonds or struggles for social justice. In abandoning its ethnic character, the NGK has failed to recover a commitment to social reconciliation:

So, has there been any change? Yes, indeed, so much and so quickly that many people can hardly remember what apartheid was, and why it ever was so important. Who cares about Dr Koot Vorster or any other ooms and whatever they might have done? And about structural and institutional issues? About our past, and dealing with its legacies? We were facing a brave new world, on our own, colour blind, free at last, walking tall, boetmanne without much boete, in short, as self-sufficient individuals, sometimes with families, a few friends, and perhaps a few fellow taalstryders, at the most.

This bleak vision of moral secularization should appall those committed to Afrikaner cultural aspirations as well as those like Smit who continue to seek social justice

59 For more general accounts in English of Smit’s positions on social ethics, see Smit (2007)

60 The Afrikaans in this passage is almost untranslatable. It is also wry and very clever. Ooms, might be rendered “patriarchs;” boetmanne, “pals” or “chums” (this is a reference to a cross-generational dispute between Chris Louw and Wimpie de Klerk, Louw, 2001); and boete, “penance” or “penalty.” Taalstryders refers to those who continue to struggle for Afrikaans language instruction in schools and universities.

61 See Hyslop 2000 and De Vries 2012 for similar conclusions.
If Smit is correct, and he by no means describes all Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, then the great theological divides of the 1980s have simply become irrelevant. The question of the unity of the church no longer matters because from the point of view of struggles for social justice the NGK has become an empty shell. There has indeed been wide scale migration of Afrikaners from the NGK to charismatic churches. Smit seems to be arguing that the churches have become spaces for individual comfort and self-gratification – and perhaps for some, especially women, a certain kindly ordentlikheid (decency, propriety, gentility) (Teppo, 2015). Perhaps the divisions within the NGK “church family” no longer matter.

If Smit is wrong, however, that throws us back on the argument of Nicol and his explanation for the collapse of the movement for church unity. The “ethnic character of the church” and its white Afrikaner congregations rises like the ghost of the ooms and their opponents briefly described in this paper. Nicol insists there is a way out. “Apartheid,” he writes (121), “was a movement away from and against the real South African society. It was an unwillingness to accept our situation of being in and part of it and the responsibility this entailed. We now need to move towards this society in the sense that as Christians we must play the role of servants and builders of it…. Can the church become part of this movement and lead many others in this direction?” That is the fundamental question. The jury is still out on the future of the NGK and its racially segregated “sister” churches. For all his doubts and a certain sociological realism inherent in his position, Dirkie Smit should sympathize. He did, after all, originally draft the Belhar Confession.62

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62 For a recent article pointing out that, technically, the status of the Belhar Confession is the foremost stumbling block in the way of unification, see Modise 2016.


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