

AFRIKAANS, REFORMED AND INTERNETTED: SOME OUTLINES OF CURRENT AFRIKAANS-E-SPIRITUALITIES¹

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Abstract

Post-apartheid Afrikaans cultural life has shown unanticipated directions of growth (eg art festivals, 'alternative' music and literature). The once influential Afrikaans community - almost per definition religious, Christian and Reformed/Calvinist - has adapted in a variety of ways to its post-1994 position. One of the unforeseen developments is the reach of Afrikaans speakers' faith into the latest instrument of the mass media, the Internet. This includes the 'e-church', the New Reformation's web service, subscribable e-mail devotionals, a cluster of popular-academic web-based services, and plans for a fully-fledged academic e-journal. Afrikaans speakers seem to find a public outlet in the Internet which furthers at once the religious and cultural aspects of their identity. In this paper, some contours of this dynamic are indicated.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of those who have been described, somewhat inaccurately,² as the 'white tribe of Africa' (Harrison 1981), namely, white Afrikaans first language speakers,³ may from one perspective be described as a history of identity politics. For Afrikaners, identity, language, geography, religion and, until recently, race ideology, have been major constitutive factors. Although it is difficult in practice to separate these aspects of identity, as is shown most plainly by the

associations conjured up by the term 'apartheid', the main focus of this paper is on the religious dimension.

Afrikaners' religion is, historically, Reformed Christianity, mediated most strongly by Dutch theologians such as Abraham Kuyper (cf Kleynhans 1989). Afrikaner Calvinism is a theologically and socially conservative expression of this broader strand of faith, and is often fundamentalist in its interpretation of biblical texts, remaining so to this day, even if official pronouncements confess to the contrary. "Give the Afrikaner a single supporting verse from the Bible," the old adage goes, "and you will have his loyal support".⁴ This Biblicist fundamentalism may, to a large extent, be attributed to the cultural survival project of Afrikaners in the 18th and 19th centuries. While Europe was going through its period of Enlightenment, the Afrikaners were on the Great Trek (cf eg Le Roux 1997:26-27) and, depending on one's perspective, leaving behind British civilisation/oppression in the Cape to either seek their own freedoms, to subjugate others up North. On this mission, the Bible (in the form of the Dutch *Statenvertaling*), transported in the ox wagon, provided what little spiritual and, often, intellectual sustenance there was. This image of the Bible as *the* source of comfort and direction to the Afrikaner en route remains a useful metaphor to describe the way the Bible has been used by many, even most Afrikaners, throughout the almost two centuries since.

During these centuries, Afrikaans developed as a language of the marginalised poor which was first printed in Arabic (i.e. in Muslim prayer books in the 1840s; Giliomee 2004:176; cf Davids 1987:37-59), to a language of resistance, then to the language of the oppressor (1948-1994) and, finally, post 1994, again as a language of resistance.

By the time, this latest phase of the Afrikaans language had arrived in the form of a new medium of mass communication. Because of its characteristics (e.g. low cost, easy accessibility and wide reach; cf Dawson & Cowan 2004:10), the Internet has become a valuable tool for the expression of those identities feeling themselves under pressure. Strongest among these Internetted struggle identities on the African continent, is Afrikaans.

What is more, Afrikaans culture had extant sources on which to draw for its cultural survival. During its half century of hegemony, this language developed into an African voice with a fully modern economic, technological and academic range. This linguistic ripeness was been used by Afrikaans speakers, mostly intellectuals, to criticise the dominant stream of Afrikaner culture of the time, thus preserving,⁵ unwittingly, for their descendants a language of intellectual resistance. More significantly, though, the Afrikaans cultural resistance movements of the *Sestigers* (cf eg Polley 1973; Kannemeyer 1984) in literary circles and, with a wider and more youthful appeal, the *Voëlvy* musical movement in the second half of the 1980s (cf Kombuis 2000), unintentionally created an almost surprising sense that Afrikaans has countercultural abilities. The fact that the Afrikaans arts scene experienced exponential growth from, precisely, 1994, may in substantial part be attributed to these precursors. In a strange twist of history, thus, those who had been branded *volksverraaiers* (traitors to Afrikaans identity) in the old South Africa, have had a major impact on giving a new lease on life to Afrikaans in what has been called 'another country' (Sparks 1994). When Afrikaans culture came into conflict with a national culture (cf Degenaar 1998:21) that was (feared to be) unaccommodating, its reflex strategy of survival was a revival of the arts. How long this approach will succeed, however, remains to be seen.

It is within this broader set of circumstances that Afrikaners religion too has found its way onto the Internet. This is not altogether out of line with the origins of the Internet in South Africa. In the USA, the Internet was born in military and academic circles (cf Berners-Lee 2000; Leiner et al, 2000), and its local incarnation was at once subversive and religious. The first Internet activity in South Africa, late in 1987 or early in 1988, was an underground e-mail network between Southern African Anglican bishops, designed to undermine the information control of the state (Lombaard 2003b:16-27; Kraft 1999:379-392; cf Lombaard 2003a:44). This tradition of the Internet locally being both religious and seditious,⁶ the nature of the Internet itself (cf Dawson & Cowan 2004:10), the relative economic wellbeing and technological literacy of Afrikaner society, and this community's strong inclination towards religiosity, combine to create a set of

circumstances in which Afrikaners' faith is set to flourish electronically.⁷ For this community, then, the observation by Haas (1997:303) that the current growth in Western(ised) societies' interest in faith/religion/spirituality/mysticism may be regarded as something of a reaction to "der sozialtechnologischen Orientierung der siebziger und achtiger Jahre" (the social-technological orientation of the 1970s and 1980s) of the previous century, is proving to be too narrow. The distinction between faith and technology that such an analysis employs, cannot be drawn as strictly in at least this case. To be Afrikaans, religious and Internetted is a configuration of traits in cooperation, rather than in competition.

2 THREE INTERNETTED AFRIKAANS RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Among the host of religiously oriented Afrikaans websites,⁸ three have risen to prominence in Afrikaans public discourse, because of the attention given them in the Afrikaans press and in other publications. These are the *e-kerk* (e-church), the *Nuwe Hervorming* (New Reformation) and what may, after their originator, be called the *Le Roux cluster of web services*. Each of these services will now be described and characterised briefly.⁹

2.1 The *e-kerk* (e-church)

The *e-kerk* (www.ekerk.co.za, with a smaller English parallel, www.echurch.co.za, established in 2004) has a short history of exponential growth. Started and now run full time by a former University of Pretoria New Testament scholar who had, apart from his academic works, also become famous for his Afrikaans popular religious publications (eg Joubert 1999), it is particularly the latter that has been extended by changed means via the *e-kerk*. Most popular of the services provided by the *e-kerk*, is a twice weekly devotional (established in 2002) e-mailed to, at present, 26 000 Afrikaans-speaking direct subscribers.¹⁰ This free service is supported financially by voluntary sponsorships.

Although the *e-kerk* website offers a range of electronic services, even beyond what is available at traditional congregations, it is in the

e-mail devotionals that its spirituality¹¹ shows most clearly. Similar to most of the highly popular Afrikaans religious booklets, here too every message is linked to a text from the Bible. Called *Kernkrag* - an ingenious wordplay combining associations of nuclear power and getting to the heart of the matter, thus alluding at once to both power and piety - and *Goeie nuus* (Good News), and written in an informal, intensely private style, these messages offer first and foremost emotional support. (The *Goeie nuus* edition usually includes some initial announcements, and concludes with a prayer.)

Often linked to personal needs, experiences and sensations, these are then immediately (the messages are very brief, leaving no space for argumented development) related to Jesus and more specifically to respectively, God. Jesus/God offers the comfort, hope and power for the weak. Broader societal issues may be touched upon as they negatively impact on the readers' lives (eg crime), but a social conscience does not feature strongly. Morality is replaced by personal ethos, rather than ethics - a common tendency among local New Testament scholars (cf Smit 1992:303-325). The readers of these e-mailed devotionals are not offered any intellectual or existential challenges. Rather, in undemanding terms, a personal piety of trusting God in the face of the plight of everyday life is encouraged. In the still valid distinctions drawn by Niebuhr (1975), this is the spirituality of 'Christ against culture' or 'Christ and culture in paradox'.¹²

Pietism - as an individualistic, intensely emotional, unintellectual form of piety - a characteristic of mainstream Afrikaner spirituality, lies at the core of the religiosity reflected here. In its uncritical approach to both faith and society, this spirituality may be characterised as, at the very least, aligned to premodernist belief.

2.2 The *Nuwe Hervorming* (New Reformation)

Decidedly modernist, on the other hand, is the *Nuwe Hervorming*. Led most prominently since 2000 by the University of South Africa's Old Testament scholar Sakkie Spangenberg, and attended by people from mostly an Afrikaans intellectual background (cf Jordaan 2004:101), this 'church' is for the critically inclined (cf e.g. the essays

gathered in Muller et al 2002). Though its primary location is not on the internet, as is the case with the preceding and following groups, its web presence (www.nuwe-hervorming.org.za) is an important part of its self-identification and gives a good indication of its piety. It also offers the usual church-related activities, support groups, marriage and funeral services, books by its intellectual leadership, and the like.

If for the previous group the heart was everything, for this network (their designation), the mind is prime. Natural science is 'integrated' with religious science, and though the point of religious orientation for most involved with this 'network' would be Christian and Reformed, inclusivity extends to people of all faiths and none. The mystery of the religious is appreciated and no questions are barred. A sense of spirituality is cultivated within an atmosphere of debate, but without a liturgy in any traditional ecclesial sense.

If the previous group has not arrived at making sense of a naturalistic (i.e. a-religious) world view, this group is more typical of such modernism. The mind, informed by science and philosophy, is applied ruthlessly; rationality rules. Biblical texts are subjected to the same historical questions they were during and after the European Enlightenment, to the extent that individuals informed about this history have asked the question: "What is so new about *this* Reformation?" This sense of slight despair about the *Nuwe Hervorming* is fed not as much by the questions asked by the *Nuwe Hervormers*, as by their answers.¹³ The problems posed and solutions proposed stand in the tradition of rationalism. Because God is a mystery, and the Bible wholly human, the latter may be subjected to any kind of question as a way of seeking, or serving, the former. This approach has left the mainline Afrikaans churches at a loss as to how to interact with this group, to the point that some *Nuwe Hervorming* leaders have eventually had to resign their membership of these churches.¹⁴

The *Nuwe Hervormers* thus show a critical inclination towards received conceptions of God, the Bible and faith. Many of those inclined to questioning or interested in alternatives have not found the established churches supportive of such personal and often existential 'journeys' (cf Jordaan 2004:101-102). The Internet has

proved to be a valuable tool in furthering their quests. The *Nuwe Hervormers* may also be characterised as highly individualistic and often pious, though certainly not pietistic. Jesus features prominently here too; this, though, is the historical Jesus of Nazareth, discovered through reading the New Testament gospels and their contemporary documents historically-critically. Theirs is not traditional Christian theology's risen Christ. The latter can hardly be conceived of in this group, since neither the mind nor nature allow for it. In science we trust, to the point that postmodernism's scepticism of any too firm a frame of reference becomes uncomfortable with the kinds of answers provided from within this paradigm.

2.3 The *Le Roux cluster of web services*

With academic backgrounds in Sociology, Church History, Old Testament exegesis and Philosophy, University of Pretoria's Old Testament scholar Jurie le Roux's theology is nothing if not intellectual. It is strongly influenced by postmodernism, and the philosophy of science and the philosophy of history, though, his use of particularly the German historical-critical theological research of the past two centuries is informed by both French existentialism and the writings of the early church fathers. Within this frame of reference, science and faith are not at odds. This is something quite different to the previous two groups.

With Afrikaner hegemony clearly passed and motivated by strong concern for the Afrikaans language (in clear preference over Afrikaner culture), Le Roux found in the new phenomenon of the Internet the possibility of *Deus ex machina* - to salvage, before it sank, the intellectual yet confessional tradition of Afrikaans Theology (Le Roux 1997:87-102). From 1999 onwards, he launched four initiatives along these lines: telematicising (i.e. putting on the Internet) the Theology modules and programmes of the University of Pretoria (1999-2004; see Lombaard & Le Roux 2002:12-15; De Villiers & Lombaard 2004:68-80); a web service dedicated to popularising Old Testament science (www.otnet.net; launched in 2002); e-mail devotionals (launched in 2002; 80 direct subscribers; see Rabe & Lombaard 2005:412-431 for an evaluation); and a web service intended to encourage, through *akademiese kleinkuns* (small

academic artworks), intellectual theological and cultural reflection (www.teo.co.za; launched 2005; 250 direct subscribers). Also being planned is a fully-fledged academic journal for the biblical and related sciences, entitled e-BJ (*Elektroniese Bybeljoernaal*/ Electronic Bible Journal).

The three current public initiatives - www.otnet.net, www.teo.co.za and the e-mailed devotionals - share the trait that scholarly activity undergirds the popularised presentation. Most articles on www.otnet.net and www.teo.co.za have brief bibliographies. The devotionals combine science and piety in that the socio-historical background to the chosen biblical text is given en route to seeking modern parallels with which the ancient text may be brought into discussion. This is concluded with a line of prayer. On the two web services, www.otnet.net and www.teo.co.za, good, creative writing by a range of contributors is encouraged, on anything from ancient mythological texts to modern movies. In all three these initiatives, gaining of different perspectives is the aim, rather than the provision of answers.

3 CONCLUSION

It might be worth noting some phenomenological parallels between being in a relationship with a deity and being active on the Internet. In both cases, a relationship is constructed with another that is larger than oneself, and in fact, larger than one could comprehend. Nevertheless, one finds oneself 'nurtured' in some way through this relationship, and even though the other may be non-personal, one finds oneself personally informed/transformed by this relationship. What is more, in whichever way one relates to it (including *not* relating to it), this other has a substantial impact on the way one keeps reconstructing/constructing one's identity.

These parallels suggest some overlapping characteristics - I would put forward definitive existential dimensions here - between Afrikaners' relation with God and their relationship with the Internet. Practising faith by e-means is, therefore, neither unnatural, nor - given the history of the relationship between Christianity and the

mass media in general (cf Lombaard 1999a: 24-26, 29-33) - wholly unexpected. This is even more so the case with Calvinism, where experiencing mystical unity with God is not a purpose (cf Haas 1997:304-308), but where the kingdom of God should be facilitated in all areas of life (an unacceptable claim when related to control of the Internet, as was objected to in the proposal of Britz & De Villiers 2003:333-358 in Lombaard 2004/2005). Rather, the Internet becomes an instrument to be used in the service of God.

Except for the small number among the *Litnet* group who are sceptical of religion per se, the last sentence would be an accurate characterisation of the intent of the three web services described above. In this respect they concur; in the execution of this project, they differ. Pietism, rationalism and postmodernism give expression to the forms of Calvinism current among Internetted Afrikaners,¹⁵ and find expression in the three web services. Here too, no romantic notions should be held on the possibility of some sort of unity of faith. The 'community' in 'Internet community', even with a shared cultural, social and religious background, does not imply harmony (Dawson 2004:82-85). The ecumenical¹⁶ character of the faith found here will subsist in its diversity (cf Lombaard 1999b:26-41).

There are Euro-Afrikaners who, parallel to African Americans, find their identities on two continents (cf Geldenhuis 2004; Degenaar 1998:20) or, for emigrants, on more. Though many of them find common cause in the practice of their faith online (on these and other web sites) the divisions are, after only a brief history of time, already clear. If Ellis (2004) is correct, the next decades will see the divisions between religions and the division between fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist adherents of these faiths losing importance. This will certainly be the case among Afrikaans believers online too.

Can one predict, though, directions in which this will develop? Nyamnjoh's words can be taken as a warning in this regard: "... if one takes the reality of individuals and groups as melting pots for various identities, and as capable of straddling different margins in often creative and fascinating ways, one is bound to wonder if identity can in fact be anything other than a *process* of identification" (Nyamnjoh 2001:25, italics added; cf pp. 27-32; Ward 2002:56). Given the history and current state of Afrikaner piety, however, I would

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nevertheless wager that it will not be the rationalist or postmodernist frames of reference that will come to characterise most strongly broader Afrikaner Christendom, both on and offline. Those will remain, to a large extent, the domain of a section of the Afrikaner intelligentsia.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Paper read at the 'Reasons of faith: Religion in modern public life' seminar, Wits Institute for Socio-Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 17th - 20th October 2005.
- 2 Afrikaans has never been a language limited to one race group in South Africa.
- 3 To describe this group, I will use the term 'Afrikaners'; some however now prefer the term 'Afrikaanses', since it is said to have fewer negative connotations.
- 4 To gender-neutralise this sentence would be quite foreign to traditional Afrikaner views on the relationship between the sexes, most particularly when religion enters into the picture.
- 5 Preserving, as opposed to creating, since they too were drawing on earlier examples as sources.
- 6 Cowan (2004:256) points out that the Internet is the most productive medium ever for countermovement.
- 7 The distinction between *religion online* - web-based services are used in support of a traditionally instituted and organised faith community - and *online religion* - the web-based service is the prime point of orientation for the expression of faith - (cf Dawson & Cowan 2004:7; Young 2004:93-94, 100-105), as far they may practically be distinguished, is as yet unresearched in the Afrikaans community.
- 8 *Die Knoop*, a site dedicated to linking Afrikaans websites, lists just over 650 such websites, almost exclusively Christian, and showing very clearly the strongly Reformed and often conservative nature of Afrikaans internetted religiosity - see www.dieknoop.co.za/skakels_godsdiens.htm.
- 9 In the original paper, a brief overview of the 'God debate' on the highly successful and influential literary website, *Litnet* (www.litnet.co.za), was included. However, it would be more valuable to analyse religion on that website in a separate study which also includes, for instance, religion on *Die Vrye Afrikaan* (www.vryeafrikaan.co.za).
- 10 The number of readers is impossible to determine precisely: many subscribers forward some/all messages to a few/many "secondary" readers, with whom the process may be repeated ...
- 11 By spirituality is meant here the ways in which faith is given expression; (cf eg Lombaard 2003c:43-45).
- 12 These other distinctions in the ways Christians relate to their environment are 'the Christ of culture', 'Christ above culture', and 'Christ the Transformer of culture'.
- 13 Or in my case, by the fact that they believe firm answers can indeed be found to such questions.
- 14 A question from the floor after the presentation of this article remarked on the fact that all three web services discussed here had been started from within universities, rather than the church itself. In the case of the *e-kerk's* e-mail devotionals, that is not entirely correct: its originator had just left the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria to serve in a congregation in New Zealand, when he started this service. The two more intellectually oriented web services, on the other hand, could never have been started from within the church structures of congregations: as has been mentioned, some leaders of the *Nuwe Hervorming* have had to resign their church membership, including their ordination status, after intense pressure from within the Afrikaans churches. In the case of Le Roux, whose web services are discussed below, he - along with two University of Pretoria colleagues - is at present being pursued via church channels on the suspicion of heresy. The persecution is by a minority of students and church ministers working - in terms of the characterisation offered in this article - from within a premodernist frame of reference, which simply cannot bare postmodernism's alternate configuration of values and beliefs. (The fact that all three originators of these websites are white males in their 40s and 50s is probably best ascribed to socio-historical circumstances. The fact that all three have strong ties with Pretoria opens sociologically interesting avenues of analysis.)
- 15 An analysis that, it turns out, runs parallel to that of Degenaar (1998:16).
- 16 'Ecumenical' is meant here not in the sense of inter-religious dialogue, but as referring to inner-religious relations, that is, for the purposes here, within the boundaries of Afrikaans Calvinism.