

## THOUGHTS ON WRITING AFRIKANER CHURCH HISTORY IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

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### *Abstract*

The traditional way of writing Afrikaner church history seems outdated. It tends to be biased, holy, apologetic, imperialistic, sectarian and schismatic; and does not serve the community and the church in the current situation. Pressure from outside, changes from within and the influence of numerous movements in the Afrikaans-speaking churches over the last 20 years have resulted in an identity crisis. The low profile that some church historians maintain contributes to the confusion and insecurity. By rethinking and revitalising the methodology of writing Afrikaner church history, the didactical aim and task of the discipline can once again give perspective and also provide guidelines for decisions and actions. This can be done by removing the boundaries that cause isolation, inviting other groups and historians to participate in the writing process, being actively involved in current issues and debates, and making use of all available sources and continuous evaluation.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Traditional Afrikaner church history seems outdated. Most of the great denominational works, of which some are still used by the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches, were written more than 20 years ago. These trusted histories tend to be biased, apologetic, imperialistic and schismatic - which does not serve Christianity or its calling. The time has come to look for a new way of dealing with writing Afrikaner church history.

One of the major factors that should be considered in seeking a way forward is the unique circumstances in which we currently live. The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of which we ourselves were part, has developed in directions that were not foreseen three generations ago (Lehmann 2002:286). Drastic changes in politics, economics and society (together with the vast development of technology and communication) all had major influences on the Christian church and faith worldwide. It seems as if these phenomena, together with the rapid changes in the lives of people who live in South Africa, culminated in Afrikaans-speaking Christians suffering an identity crisis. It also seems to have forced most denominational church historians (who are supposed to be shepherds, who call and direct the flock) into silence. As can be expected, the result is disastrous: “Without a doubt, the Church has and is failing in the execution of the Great Commission of her Lord” (Staples 1980:35).

In addition, there is a trend to move away from traditional theological disciplines and it seems as if one of the casualties at universities is Church History. However, the task of this discipline is not completed. Southgate (2000:XI) says: “Far from seeing history as coming to an end or as irrelevant, I see it – after being ‘rethought’ no doubt, and revitalised – as having greater importance today than it has ever had.”

“Nothing is more fruitless than a piling up of historical learning which neither serves any practical purpose nor offers anything for the use of others in its presentation” (Wriedt 2004:23). Therefore, when attempting to give new life and direction to the writing of Afrikaner church history, careful attention should be given to both the methodology and subject matter “because conceptualisations of the past bear so directly upon matters of our self-understanding, including our individual, social and ecclesiastical identity” (Bradley & Muller 1995:2). The aim of church history is firmly rooted in the didactical work of the church. It is written to guide and lead all Christians by (1) making them aware of the pitfalls and failures of the past in order to caution them when they make their own decisions, and (2) making them aware of the guidelines and abundance of knowledge and experience that history provides in order to help them to live in accordance with their calling and mission as Christians.

This article contains some introductory thoughts on the possibility of a new perspective on writing Afrikaner church history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After briefly summarising the traditional way of writing Afrikaner church history, I will focus on the current situation in order to explain why a new approach is necessary. Finally, I will give a short proposal to one possible new way of writing Afrikaner church history.

## 2 THE TRADITIONAL WAY

It seems as if the evangelical and/or younger Afrikaans-speaking churches do not care much about the subject of South African church history. Under the heading *History of the church*, the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) presents an article entitled "Birth and history of the church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century" ([www.afm-ags.org/history.asp](http://www.afm-ags.org/history.asp) – 21 February 2007). The origin of the church in South Africa and America is discussed briefly. The Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk makes no reference to the history of the church but do mention that the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday of the church will be celebrated in June 2007 ([www.apk.za.net](http://www.apk.za.net) – 21 February 2007). The Evangelies Gereformeerde Kerk mentions that it broke away from the NG Kerk in 1944 in Durban. Their history is summed up in about 80 words ([www.egkerk.co.za](http://www.egkerk.co.za) – 21 February 2007). The history of the Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk is written in 107 words and states that the founders of the church came to South Africa with the British settlers in 1820 ([www.abk.co.za](http://www.abk.co.za) – 21 February 2007).

In contrast, the more traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches clung to the works of their trusted historians almost to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The more conservative churches are still prescribing these works both at school and university levels. The history of the Dutch Reformed Church (or Hervormde Kerk) was pinned down by Engelbrecht in 1953, Pont in 1966 and in the *Gedenkalbum* (by A D Pont, S J Botha, J M C Storm and A B vN Herbst) in 1986. The history of the other, bigger Dutch Reformed Church (or NG Kerk) was written by McCarter in 1869, Morrees in 1937 and Van der Watt in 1987. The history of the Enkel Gereformeerde Kerk was captured by Postma (O'Kulis) in 1918 and Spoelstra in 1963.

Apart from being outdated, traditional church history according to the Afrikaner way of doing has been called:

- *Denominational bias* (Denis 1997:86). Pont, the church historian of the Hervormde Kerk, serves as an example of this when he wrote:

The NG Churches' Methodist theologians of the previous century were so convinced of their own righteousness that they called everyone who disagreed with them liberalists. The later theologians of the Hervormde Kerk were among the victims. (Pont 1966:179 – my translation and paraphrase)

- *Sacred* (Den Boer 1966:33). The same work by Pont illustrates this:

The church [in South Africa] has a long and respectable history. In Africa, where it was the will of the Lord to call into existence this church and to keep it alive ... Church of Jesus Christ, the Lord, here in this part of Africa ... (Pont 1966:166 – translated verbatim)

- *Apologetic* (Van Jaarsveld 1953:47, 48). The bravest excuses for not being true to their calling can be found in the historical works:

No missionary work was conducted for many years under the black peoples with whom the farmers had contact on the eastern border of the colony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was not done because the church used to do missionary work within the boundaries of the congregation. The farmers also felt strongly against certain methods of missionary work being done by certain missionaries. (Pont 1966: 175 – my translation)

- *Schismatic* (Giliomee 2003:179). The split of the church in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) into three different denominations serves as an example here:

In 1869 the Enkele Gereformeerde Kerk publicly declared that the Hervormde Kerk is a false church. By doing this, the schism of 1859 was legitimised and this declaration has never been withdrawn. (Pont 1966:206 – my translation)

- *Conservative and narrow-minded* (Liebenberg 1966:61). The work of Van der Watt, church historian of the NG Kerk, serves as an example of this:

Those who could not find peace in the dry theology that was preached in the church confined themselves to private conventicles. Rightfully, the church began to caution against these free meetings out of concern for fanaticism that could cause schism and discord. (Van der Watt 1975:11 – paraphrased)

- *Sectarian and imperial*. MacCulloch (1987:3, 5) calls “sectarian” and “imperial” ways of writing church history – which is illustrated by the following words of Van der Watt:

The similarities between the history of Israel and the Afrikaners lead to the fact that the Old Testament texts were interpreted directly into the South African situation. An example is the command by God that the Israelites were not to mix with the heathen, which was used in the South African context between Black and White. The Afrikaners also saw themselves as a people that were put on the Southern point of Africa with the specific goal to bring and cherish the Christian faith in this part of the world. (Van der Watt 1987:75 – my translation)

The result of this way of writing history negatively influenced the relationship between the Afrikaners and their countrymen. It isolated the Afrikaners, who were seen by both themselves and the other peoples as the dominant class, and led to the implementation of apartheid. From a Christian point of view, the most traumatic result of this way of practising church history was the neglect of the missionary command:

The Hervormde Kerk ... firmly opposed all missionary work. The Dopper majority accepted missionary work as long as it avoided common worship ... The pro-British DRC [Dutch Reformed Church or NG Kerk] tended to be much more liberal in their attitudes towards blacks but, while in principle in favour of missionary work, did very little in practice. (Giliomee 2003:179)

### **3 THE CURRENT SITUATION**

#### **3.1 Pressure from outside**

When one looks at the current level of Afrikaner faith, the picture looks complex and confusing. The history of the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has developed in directions that were not foreseen even by us (Lehmann 2002:286). The rapid advances of technology and communication had drastic consequences for the Christian faith. There is a worldwide shift away from Christianity, while other world religions (like Islam) seem to be growing rapidly.

In South Africa the bombardment from the technological world and the developments in communication networks that challenged religious values and practices formed only part of the problem which the Christian church had to face. The church also staggered under rapid political changes. Afrikaners' longstanding active involvement in politics, economics and social issues either came to an abrupt end or was drastically scaled down after 1994. This radical shift after the short period of Afrikaner dominance (1948-1994) back to underdog status (Oliver 2005:14), together with its social and economic consequences, gave the Afrikaner community a huge shock. It seems that the church was either unable or without the means to provide answers and effective guidance to those whose faith and lives were affected.

#### **3.2 Changes from within**

The Afrikaner church itself experienced major changes and developments during the same period, for example: the more prominent role of women; changes in the presentation and

participation of the Lord's Supper due to health risks; the schism by the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk away from the NG Kerk; backtracking on condoning the apartheid policy; the forming of macro congregations; and even the deaths of prominent theologians such as Proff Heyns, Deist and Bosch. As a result of these pressure and changes, and the lack of competent leadership to carry the Afrikaner community through all of it, the Afrikaans-speaking churches are currently experiencing a major identity crisis – seemingly without even knowing it.

In the second part of his article on the identity crisis of the church, Steyn (2006:661-676) identifies at least five major movements within the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk). These movements and their hybrids can probably also be found in the other Afrikaans-speaking churches, although to a lesser extent. When one reads this article, a picture comes to one's mind of Christians standing in front of a shelf in a supermarket, each one deciding on the product that will best suit his/her needs and preferences. Thus Christianity becomes a popular consumer article.

This identity crisis also has theological faculties in its grip. W A Dreyer, the previous chairperson of the Workgroup for Church History and Church Law at the University of Pretoria, says that the approach to theological training changed drastically during the last five years. There is a strong tendency to move away from the traditional disciplines of theology (Dreyer 2006). If we keep in mind that the church is alive and therefore always transforming, this might not be a negative move. However, one cannot help to notice that the theological faculties that were once the very source and lifeblood of the universities have lost their prominent place in both the academic world and the secular world (*Christian History Today* 2001).

To make things even worse: in the midst of these changes and crises, the voice of most of the denominational church historians became silent. The focus of church history shifted from being denominational to the broader field of the history of missiology (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994); oral history under the influence of government policy and the leadership of scholars like Denis (1997), histories of previously disadvantaged communities (Adonis 2002:20)

and the AICs (Denis 1997:93). Although this shift was positive and necessary, it left the traditional churches stranded in strange and hostile circumstances.

### 3.3 Conclusion

From this, one can come to the conclusion that there is a need for a fresh approach to writing Afrikaner church history. Afrikaner church historians should acknowledge the vast quantity of history that was made in the last 20 years in South Africa, and turn their attention to this rich source of unexplored information. This means that the source material which we use should no longer only be the safe and “official” written archival resources, but also the wide variety of products of the technological era and the rich emotionally laden sources that live in the hearts of South African Christians.

The recent past is always difficult to write about because there is a lack of perspective on events which have not yet shown all their consequences. Inevitably, different interpretations are given to explain certain developments (Comby & MacCulloch 1989:224). The task of the church historian becomes even more difficult when one realises that the history of the past 20 years is history which all of us experienced first hand. Personal experience and bias can make the words that were used earlier to describe traditional church history look like a fairy tale compared to the monsters that can be created in a study of recent history. One only has to look at some of the Afrikaner websites and newspapers to know that there is a real danger in discarding the safety which the cocoon of time and distance provide for historians. However, according to Wriedt (2004:7) “church history has its function in supporting a vision about the future of Christianity”. Southgate (2000:X) says that postmodernism itself imposes an ultimate moral role on history and that history is needed to underpin our future. The definition of that future therefore becomes the responsibility of individual historians.

I regard the task and aim of church history as didactical. Church history records what happened, and has a special educational purpose to teach and guide. It is anchored in the catechesis, and aims to help and guide the church in times of crisis and uncertainty



(cf. Oliver 1993:892). Therefore, I believe that we have to discard the safety of time and distance, and face the risk of working with dangerous (but challenging) history in the making. In the light of this, I would like to propose a possible new way to write Afrikaner church history.

## **4 A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD**

### **4.1 Remove the boundaries**

First and foremost, church historians should address the basic issues of faith on all levels of society with the Bible as law and the church's 2000 years of experience and witnessing as a guideline; thereby keeping in line with the didactical aim of the discipline.

When one looks at the controversies surrounding current issues such as same-sex marriages and the unification of the NG Kerk family, it seems as if there is always something (and normally more than one thing) that grips the church to divert its attention and to prevent it from doing its job of focussing on the Great Command (Matt 22:35-40) and the Great Commission (Matt 28:19, 20). Therefore, the basics should be spelled out and the lines should be drawn firmly. Christian boundaries are those that are set by the Bible and not the man-made traditional walls which we tend to build around ourselves. Due to their vulnerable and insecure circumstances, a large group of Afrikaners (including some church historians) find comfort in doing what their forefathers did under the same conditions: they withdraw into a laager, building secure and high walls around themselves.

This isolation can only end when the boundaries are removed. It is the task of the church to inform the people of what is going on outside the laager. Theologians and church historians can turn the focus away from the walls to the gate and the view beyond. This will divert attention from the thickening wall to the Commandment and the Commission to which the church and each of its members should be true.

One of the ways to build higher and thicker walls is to dig up old bones to keep traditions alive. The new approach to Afrikaner church

history should proclaim outright that digging up the bones of long dead cows is no longer acceptable. The ancient controversies (regarding which church was first in South Africa, what the correct name of the church is, the name tags of who is “liberal” and who is “orthodox”, and whether or not the Belhar Confession is acceptable, etc) should be buried and left in the grave. Experience has taught us that it is not possible to change Afrikaners’ minds on such matters because not even the hard evidence can impress them. These controversies have been the cause of division and tension (as well as a lack of tolerance), and I do not know of one soul who was won over and saved for Christ by any of these arguments.

A method of widening the perspective of the Afrikaners will be to allow and invite other groups to participate in writing recent history. In her book on the piety of Afrikaans-speaking women, Landman (1994) effectively shows that women are capable of writing history and that Afrikaner history needs a feminine perspective. Furthermore, political, sociological and even economical historians can contribute to the writing of church history. Their “objective” or different points of view can caution and help the church. Historians who do not share the same religious or denominational faith can take the opportunity to understand the Afrikaner nation better by getting involved with Afrikaner church history. However, the didactical aim of church history should never be lost. Other perspectives will provide a broader view on events and will challenge the church to test whether it remains true to its Biblical calling to steer all the Christians who are living in South Africa to actively live their faith.

#### **4.2 Move forward**

The next step is to climb over the fence (or walk through the gate) into the chaotic stampede of modern-day life. Of course, this will bring us (the church historians) in from the deserted graveyards (where the bones should be left buried!) to the extremely busy and dangerous kraal of life. The focus will shift to the modern-day history of the last 20 years and history in the making. We will have two options: One is to run on the wall of the kraal, screaming and pointing at everyone inside in an effort to direct them. The other is to walk through the gate and join the chaos at ground level. This will be

difficult and dangerous. There will be no time to get an overview or to comment on the situation from a safe distance. We will be part of the battle; near enough to actively explore sources and gather information – and hopefully the results of our research will not be academic biltong, but will be used to inform and actively direct the church and its members who are trying to survive the chaos and at the same time remain true to their faith. Lehmann (2002:591) is correct when he says that church historians should not restrict their studies to “middle of the road” churchgoing Christians or the history of the ideas of fellow theologians. Church historians and the church should not be afraid to tackle controversial or sensitive issues. This should, however, always be done in line with the Command and the Commission that were received from the Lord; it should not be influenced by world trends and fashion, or politics.

Some of the issues that require immediate attention from Afrikaner church historians are (in no particular order):

- The worldwide shift away from the Christian faith, together with the onslaught from other world religions that has caught the church off-guard. The church will have to stand up and give the answers that God expects from them. The question is: To whom are we faithful - to the Lord or to the “sensitive” global society?
- The failure of the Afrikaans-speaking churches to be relevant in the daily lives of both Christians and non-Christians. One could ask: Why is this happening to a people that was always known for their characteristic Christian faith which had influenced the history and nature of the country? (cf. Oliver 2006) What can and should be done about it?
- Current burning issues such as same-sex marriages, HIV/Aids, the unification of the churches, unemployment, poverty and the educational crisis. Does matters like these fall under obedience of the Great Command and the Great Commission? What can and should the church and its members do in order to act in accordance with their faith?

- The influence of the mass media on the different movements and ideologies within Christianity. Lehmann (2002:591) asks:

How do mobility and transformations in communications influence people? How many of their religious views, and which parts of those views, are still being shaped by the sermons they are hearing on Sunday mornings, and in what way are those who craft and deliver those sermons themselves being influenced by the new media of mass communications?
- One of the biggest challenges will be to get Afrikaners (who see themselves as the “owners” of a certain church or tradition [Calvinistic], and even the faculties of theology at certain universities) to look and listen past the church and the tradition. For most of them, this will be a new and frightening experience; and they will probably feel like traitors.
- By the year 2000, the Bible was translated into only 19 of the 32 languages spoken in South Africa (Johnstone, Johnstone & Mandryk 2001:577). Why are Afrikaners ignorant of this fact and what should be done about it?
- Looking inward, the unwritten traditions, laws and red tape that dominate and restrain congregations and denominations – and, in my view, also the work of the Holy Spirit – should receive attention.

This list can be extended and will probably change from day to day. Every church historian will add or delete issues that urgently require attention and guidelines. The bottom line is that the silence should be broken and the church should be provided with answers and guidelines in order to change the lives of its members so that they can live more and more in accordance with the will of God.

I admit that there is no easy way from the traditional approach to this new approach. And even if there was, I doubt that many would make the effort to take the new path. Therefore, the first step is to make sure that church members understand the need for a new approach

to writing Afrikaner church history. The methodology and aims of the new approach have to be spelled out carefully over a period of time and to as many people as possible (from academics to church members in the isolated rural districts of the country). People should be kept well informed and should be allowed to participate in the process. I am sure that when issues like these are addressed with Biblical and historical foundations (and presented with sensitivity and genuine compassion), the historians of Afrikaner church history will be able to fulfil their didactical calling and serve both the church and the community.

#### **4.3 Use all available resources**

In order to accomplish a new direction that can influence the community, Church historians have to use the full spectrum of modern communication and mass media as sources to gather information and trends and as platforms for making the results of their research known. Research that is published in academic journals and is read most of the time only by other researchers do not inform or guide pastors and congregations. Findings should be made public by using the opportunities that the mass media provide. Church historians have to play an active role in the life in the kraal and “Christian history in the making” in this country by using the same vast network of communication that are eroding Christian faith and confusing Christians.

#### **4.4 Continuous evaluation**

Finally, because of the sensitivity of the issues and the many dangers that working with resent history involve, Afrikaner church historians should constantly evaluate their position and work. Questions that require answers are:

- Are we serving the didactical purpose of the discipline or are we playing academic football?
- Are we part of the solution or part of the problem?
- Where am I? In the old graveyard digging or on the kraal wall giving live commentary? Or am I inside the kraal?

These questions are important because, from where I stand, my practise of church history makes a difference in the lives of people around me: It affects my husband and children, my parents and family, the people who are driving in front of me in peak hour traffic and the way in which I complete my income tax form. If it does not influence these things, how will it ever have an influence on the church or on society?

#### **4.5 Reaching the goals**

Wriedt (2004:2) says that the greatest contribution theology can make is to give people back their sense of human dignity. Whitelaw (in Adonis 2002:16) says that South African society has an enormous task to rebuild the structure and character of communities after the period of constant and intense violence. After looking at the world around us, I would like to alter his words to the following: The South African church (and this includes Afrikaner church historians) has an enormous task to rebuild the structure and character of communities in the midst of constant and intense violence and chaos on all levels of society. And this cannot be done by staying on the traditional road and clinging to outdated sources. Like the Afrikaner forefathers, we should not be afraid to try a new and unknown path. Let the scouts go to explore, and then we should choose the way forward in accordance with our faith (Matt 22:35-40) and in line with our calling (Matt 28:19, 20).

### **5 CONCLUSION**

Despite questioning and calling the traditional way of writing church history and the churches' fondness of these works names, the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches seem to hang on to the works of their trusted and outdated church historians. The unique living conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century necessitates that we rethink and rework the traditional methods and works.

The words of MacCulloch (1987:11) can also be applied to the South African situation: "The miracle of the church's story is that after all its mistakes, bewildering transformations and entanglements in human bitterness, it is still there." Therefore, in the midst of the turbulent

situation in which Afrikaans-speaking Christians currently find themselves, it is necessary for the church historians of the Afrikaner churches to once again take up their calling to educate and teach by spelling out the boundaries by means of the Word of God. A new approach to writing Afrikaner church history has to be sought. A possible path is highlighted here, which is meant to stimulate thoughts in order to find a road that will become a highway for Afrikaans-speaking Christians who want to stay true to their calling.

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