

Tranquillity in the face of death: Calvinist spirituality in war

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Abstract

In this essay, I discuss the diary of Rensche van der Walt, which she wrote during the Boer War (15 March 1901 to 31 December 1902) in the Bethulie concentration camp. The essay first of all considers the situation in which the war was waged, and the underlying spirituality of the situation. It then describes the diary and the author's Calvinist background before going on to focus on its spirituality (ie how the author experienced her faith in the direst of circumstances).

Introduction

The diary of Rensche van der Walt about her experiences during the Boer War (1899-1902) in the notorious Bethulie concentration camp graphically illustrates how Van der Walt experienced her Calvinist Reformed faith during this traumatic and harrowing period. In short, the diary reveals how the spirituality of her particular faith tradition inspired her to survive both the war itself and her own, dreadful circumstances.

Spirituality, as a discipline,¹ reflects the layered and multi-dimensional process of transformation that occurs when divine and human realities interact with and shape each other (Waaïjman 2002, vii; 455-82). Within this wider description, "spirituality" can be said to refer to Rensche van der Walt's experience of her Calvinist faith in her situation. Her diary reveals how her relationship with God transformed her over a period of time in her confrontation with an extreme situation created by war. In this focus on the concrete face of faith in everyday life, spirituality differs from the many forms of theology that reflect on themes, topics and doctrine often in a neutral, abstract manner using so-called objective perspectives and methods.

Rensche van der Walt reflects a specific brand of Calvinism in the broader South African Protestant context, as will become clear below. The background to her diary is the local Reformed church context in her home town of Redderburg in the Free State. Rensche's diary also reveals the effects of her socio-political context. She wrote in a time of war, a war that had devastating effects on her personally, but also on her people and on the subsequent history of her country (cf. further below). Her diary gives us information about her experience of faith in a context of violence in its most extreme form and, as such, provides valuable material for the contemporary discussion on violence and peace. Among the various forms of spirituality, a spirituality of peace is particularly relevant in contemporary society, a society that so often experiences its own forms of extreme violence (cf. Waaïjman 2002:966 and De Villiers 2008b for a full discussion).

The essay will, first of all, briefly consider the general experiential reality in which the diary was written. To do this, I shall analyse the context and situation in which the war was waged. I shall then describe the author's religious setting. Finally, I shall focus on the way in which Rensche van der Walt experienced her faith in this situation, and pay particular attention to her use of the Bible.

The diary within its social context

By the time Van der Walt's diary was written, Great Britain was one of the many European colonial powers in Africa (like The Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium and Italy). The British conquered the Dutch colony of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. Many Dutch speaking burghers who felt alienated by the new authorities later on colonised interior parts of the southern African region. They finally established independent Boer Republics in the Free State and Transvaal areas.

At a key moment during the industrialisation process in western Europe, diamonds and gold were discovered in the Boer Republics. The land where the Boers grazed their cattle, cultivated their produce and lived their simple lives became an object of intense desire to the colonial powers. Ransford (1969:7) writes that the Transvaal suddenly became "the most valuable piece of real estate on earth and whoever possessed it was bound sooner or later to dominate the whole of the subcontinent"

and noted that the British attitude to the Boers was “conditioned by fear as well as by greed”. The colonial powers also regarded the interior parts of southern Africa as a key to the further colonisation of the African continent. Suspicion arose that British influence in the form of British rule in the Cape Colony would be threatened by the wealth and political power of the Boers. In one case, a British soldier described the Boer woman as “a persecutor and an assassin of the English” (Giliomee 2004:210; cf. further below).

The British colonial drive and military expedition against the Boers were further undergirded by the dominant religious institutions in Great Britain and its Cape colony. For most of the British and the local churches of British origin in the Cape Colony (including the many Anglo-Saxon mission societies), the British Empire represented the expansion of Christianity and civilisation to primitive peoples of lesser status and education. The war against the burghers of the Boer republics was regarded as a just war that represented a God-given opportunity to establish a Christian commonwealth in the region (Britz 2007:28).

How important the war was for Great Britain is evident from the fact that the British organised “the largest and best equipped military expedition that ever left” England with an army “twice as large as any Marlborough or Wellington had commanded” (Ransford 1969:4). The British army consisted of 250 000 soldiers and Britain was to wage a war that would cost it a staggering 230 million pounds (Giliomee 2004:206).

Against all odds and expectations, the Boer armies, never more than 55 000 soldiers strong, managed to hold back and, at times, even defeat the powerful British forces. The war dragged on far beyond the quick expedition of six months that the British had anticipated. Ransford (1969:4) notes that, by October 1899, it was expected that the war would be over by Christmas of that year. It, in fact, was to drag on until May 1902, largely because regular reinforcements were sent from England in its relentless drive for victory.

Rensche van der Walt’s diary was written by the time the war had escalated to a full assault on soft targets (e.g. family members of Boer soldiers). With mounting desperation caused by the prolonged battles, their losses, and their failure to find answers to the bold guerilla tactics of their Boer opponents, the British began to follow a scorched earth approach. They cut off supplies to the guerillas in the field by destroying the farms and by removing civilians. British soldiers moved from district to district, burned down farm houses, destroyed produce, slaughtered or commandeered the cattle, and moved women and children to concentration camps. Van Reenen (1973:74-75) describes how, on some farms, even the fruit trees were cut down.

The war was no longer an “honourable” one. Giliomee (2004:209-210) notes that almost the whole of the Free State was scorched, evoking the following comments from the later General Smuts, “[Wherever] the enemy appeared, he carries out indescribable destruction. All houses are burned down, all fields and gardens are utterly destroyed, all cattle and foodstuffs are carried off and all males taken prisoner.” A year later he visited the location again and wrote, “The horror passes description ... Surely such outrages on man and nature will lead to certain doom.” The British army deliberately destroyed the livelihood of the “enemy” without any regard for the long-term consequences. Up to 30 000 farms (60%) were destroyed and losses amounted to almost a third of what the war cost the British (Giliomee 2004:211). The war became a relentless, indiscriminate and destructive exercise. It eventually caused widespread poverty that had consequences not only for the war itself, but for South Africa many years afterwards (Pauw 1946:64). In fact, the situation after the war was so desperate that the inhabitants of the camps could not return home (cf. Raath & Louw 1991:64-68). This explains why Rensche van der Walt returned to her farm only long after the end of the war and is, in itself, an indication of the hardships she experienced.

Women and the war

Rensche van der Walt’s diary illustrates the response of many women to the scorched earth policy. In this she reflects the strong role played by women in the history of the Boer Republicsⁱⁱ and in the Boer war. Two months after the the army started burning down farms, a British soldier wrote in a letter how women responded with remarks that this campaign would not make them surrender (Giliomee 2004:21). Boer women sent back their husbands who absconded from battle fields. They scorned joiners and those who refused to fight. Nor did women accept the abusive treatment meted out to them in the camps, and Rensche van der Walt’s diary reflects this very same attitude. She even narrates how women challenged camp authorities who ignored the inmates’ needs for medical and food supplies (cf. further below).

This fortitude is remarkable, given the appalling conditions in the camps. Women and children were isolated in 43 large camps. The death toll illustrates what they endured. Of the 27 927 people who

died, 4 177 were women and 22 074 were children under the age of 16. This number represented fifteen percent of the population of 200 000 in the two republics. Rensche van der Walt experienced the worst of these conditions. Four months after she was interred, the death toll increased dramatically. In August 1901 2 666, in September 2752, and in the so-called Black October 3205 people died in concentration camps – an average of one out of three people.

Women and children died from bad food supplies, from unhygienic conditions, from diseases such as measles and fever, inadequate accommodation and the harsh weather (Jacobs 2003:17; Van Reenen 1973:46). The meagre daily ration placed their lives at risk. This ration included 250 gram meat (often rotten), 375 gram flour (about one and a half cup), 60 gram coffee, 60 gram sugar and 15 gram salt. In some camps, family of soldiers on the battlefield received only half this ration. Whilst some camps were better off, others were simply killing fields. At one stage, 870 out of every thousand people died in the Kroonstad camp. Once again, Rensche van der Walt experienced the worst of the camps. The Bethulie camp, where she wrote her diary, was the most infamous of all (cf. Hamman 1965:ix; Raath & Louw 1991:78-79).

To some extent, the brutal treatment of women and children was not unexpected, given the way in which they were perceived by their enemy. In the political discourse in Great Britain, Boer women were portrayed as backwards, uneducated, sinister and devious. For the British military, its prisoners were not women and children but, as Giliomee (2004:210) notes, the “enemy.” They were, in the words of a British author, seen as a “savage being(s) ... hideous in form, unkempt and unwashed, violent, hypocritical, a persecutor and an assassin of the English” (Giliomee 2004:210; cf. Raath & Louw 1991:60).

Not all British attitudes and responses were so callous. The fate of the women and children shocked some British observers. Among them was Emily Hobhouse, who travelled several times from England to visit camps and Boer communities. Her revelations about the war caused an uproar in England, to the extent that the leader of the Liberal Party, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, remarked that a war “is not a war ... when it is carried on by methods of barbarism as in South Africa” (Giliomee 2004:211). It was because of this opposition that conditions in the camps changed for the better from November 1901 (cf. Van Reenen 1973:68-9; 2; Pakenham 1979: 549, 581; Spies 1977:260-261; Giliomee 2004:211). However, Rensche van der Walt (who, by then, had already been in the concentration camp for eight months) was not spared the worst of the trauma and had already recorded in her diary the inhumane conditions in which she and her family lived. She, in fact, was tested to the fibre of her being by an unnecessary and senseless war, “one of the most unnecessary ever fought” (Ransford 1965:8), and a war that would determine the political course of her country for decades afterwards.

The diary

Rensche van der Walt never knew any fatherland other than the Orange Free State. She was born on 29 June 1878 in Redderburg, one of the better known little towns of the Republic, and she grew up in the rustic surroundings of her parents’ farm. She was the youngest daughter of five children (with two sisters and brothers). Rensche, who never married, nursed her mother until her death at the age of 96 years in 1942. She herself died on 2 November 1948 at the age of 70 (Hamman 1965:ix).

Rensche van der Walt’s diary begins on the day the British forces arrived on their farm in March 2001 to remove her family to the concentration camp, during the period of the scorched earth policy referred to above. She was taken to the concentration camp in Bethulie when she was a mere 23 years old. She continued writing her diary for the next 22 months and only ceased making entries when she arrived back on the farm on 31 December 1902. Her diary relates events in the concentration camp in Bethulie until 17 May 1902 and in the camp of Kabusie until 13 September 1902. Her diary is, therefore, in the true sense of the word, a war diary. It records nothing of her earlier or later life.

A personal diary

The diary, 40 pages long in printed format, was edited and published by her sister’s daughter, Kezia Hamman, in 1965 under the title *Diary of a daughter from the Bethulie Camp* (Dagboek van ‘n Bethulie-Kampdogter).ⁱⁱⁱ The publication comprises both the original Dutch form and an Afrikaans translation by Hamman.

The diary is not a propagandist text. It contains personal memoirs written expressly for her own purposes. It begins with the unassuming and simple remark: “Now I want to write down what I should never forget for the rest of my life” (“Nu wil ik hier schrijven die ik nooit moet vergeten zoo lang ik leef”). It thus was written for her own purposes – rather than, for example, the diary of the Reverend

Luckhoff, who wrote in order to be published (cf. Britz 2007:203). Van der Walt wanted to remember what happened to her at a crucial point of her life, because she was aware that these events were transformative and life-changing. As will become clear later on, these events made her realise how precious life is and how thankful one should be for the small, everyday gift of a normal existence. Thus she admonishes herself at the end of the diary to be satisfied with what she has, not to desire luxuries and to shun greed (Hamman 1965:97). The diary thus gives us an insight into her spirituality as a process of growth.

The religious context

Rensche van der Walt's diary reveals her strong feelings for her country, her family, and other people. However, it is the diary's religious expression that strikes one the most. Rensche van der Walt belonged to the Reformed (Gereformeerde) Church, which was established on 11 February 1859 in Rustenburg, of which her mother was a founder member (Hamman 1965:ix).^{iv} There was also a school for the children of the congregation. Within four years, a building for worship services was inaugurated (2 January 1863), fifteen years before Rensche van der Walt was born (later on, she became its librarian). She was thus born and bred in this church community. By the time she was forced to move to the camp, the church in Reddersburg was 42 years old.

There are several indications that the church consciously followed a strict form of Calvinism. It split from the larger Dutch Reformed Church because its members questioned certain aspects of the Reverend Andrew Murray's work in Bloemfontein as pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Reformed Church was distinguished from other churches because the congregation sang Psalms and explicitly rejected hymns. In this, the congregation displayed its conservative Calvinist tradition, with its focus on the Bible as the exclusive norm for liturgy, thus reflecting a seminal perspective of what we can now call "Calvinist spirituality". In her diary, Rensche van der Walt repeatedly quotes the Psalms to express her religious experiences, as will be discussed below.

There is another indication of the church's traditional Calvinist character. Luckhoff, who mentions the fact that there were Reformed members in the camp who only sang Psalms, also refers in his diary to their "unwavering faith" (cf. Raath & Louw 1991:57, 61; also Britz 2007:115). These people stood out from other members of the camp because of their strong beliefs and their stoical perseverance (see below). Members of the Reformed Church were less pietistic than those of the Dutch Reformed Church. The latter is clear from Luckhoff's diary, which reveals a Calvinist tradition mixed with a revivalist pietism (as was also evident in the ministry of Andrew Murray).

Van der Walt's diary further reveals the strict puritan form of Calvinism that characterised Reformed spirituality at the time.^v As she is taken, by train, from her farm to the camp in Bethulie, she writes with indignation, for example, that this is happening to her on a Sunday of all days (Hamman 1965:9). "We depart on the 19th April from Springfontein and hear that we are heading for Bethulie. And this on the dear Sunday" ("En dit op die lieue Sondag"). She then recalls how her family was used to spending Sundays on the farm reading and singing. For Van der Walt, Sunday, as the Day of the Lord, was a day of rest and silence. "Everything was so quiet on the farm on a Sunday" (Hamman 1965:9).^{vi}

Her diary makes it clear that her spirituality was decisively formed by her involvement in worship services. She regularly attended church services, even though they were not always organised by her own church. Early on in her diary she notes how regularly she participated in the weekly Sunday service, prayer meetings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and in the Christmas service (Hamman 1965:11, 79).

Political involvement

Rensche van der Walt and her family strongly supported the Boer cause; in fact, her youngest brother joined the war at the age of 13. Some time after the war, in 1924, her other brother, Petrus, who could not accept the loss of his country's independence, emigrated with a large group of Afrikaners to Argentina, where they eventually settled.

As a result of her patriotism, she, like many of her compatriots, heavily criticised those who were too willing to give up the cause. She wrote scornfully about the traitors who collaborated with the enemy, the so-called "hensoppers" ("Literally the 'hands-uppers'"; Hamman 1965:7), the joiners, the jingoes and women who dared to socialise with the soldiers. Though the language is never vile or abusive and no violence against them is ever suggested, she makes her feelings abundantly clear. The joiner, she writes, "Jan Nell is a big nail in our eyes" ("Nou is Jan Nell 'n groot spyker in ons oë"; Hamman 1965:20; cf. also 82-83).

She is not easily intimidated by the enemy and, indeed, openly defies them. When taken into custody by the soldiers, she writes that she refused to answer the soldiers when they asked her family to what camps they wanted to go. She motivates her defiance with the remark, "They caught us, let them look after us" (Hamman 1965:8). Later on she fearlessly confronts the camp authorities by returning the rotten or decayed meat which was given to them as rations with the remark, "You took 100 fat sheep from me, you can look better after me" (Hamman 1965:16).

Her defiance of soldiers is motivated by her political convictions. She writes that the British have their own land. They need to return there and let her return to her land. Without any British to disturb her rest, she adds, she will be happy and at peace (Hamman 1965:78). When certain facilities are installed to make camp life better, she observes, "I say, thank you for all the convenience, but, uncle yellow suit, let me go home and you go back to your land, stay there and never come back to our land, then I shall live happy and peaceful to be able to say now we are all here in our own land. This is all I want to hear. In camps and through disasters we have to go and as destitutes we have to mourn in order to stand for our land" (Hamman 1965:78). In this way her strong desire for freedom and land gives meaning to her suffering. It is necessary to suffer in order to defend and retain her land.

In contrast to her scorn for the enemy, she spells out her admiration and prayers for the political leaders (especially the Transvaal leader, President Kruger, and the Free State leader, President Steyn). The Boer prisoners celebrate Steyn's birthday on 2 October, she writes, grateful that they have been spared, but also praying that they may receive power to do their heavy task faithfully and for the benefit of the nation and state (Hamman 1965:21).

When she and the group with her were told, on 8 June 1902, that President Steyn had signed a peace treaty and pledged allegiance to the King of England, they realised (with deep shock) that they had lost their independence. For the only time in her diary she records how she lost all sense of where she was. When she recovered, she was standing with her back to the house. In a daze, she felt as if she was dreaming. Though her religion provides her with comfort ("But we soon found comfort for it all in God's dear Scripture"; Hamman 1965:90), she was ill for the next few days. This political disaster also influenced her experience of religion. On the following Sunday, she tells us that she found nothing edifying in the worship service because she was so sad.

These remarks show how deeply the diary of Rensche van der Walt is determined by her socio-political sensitivities and setting. Her religion certainly gave her fortitude, but nonetheless was severely tested by the political situation. Her faith was not only affected by the loss of her farm, the terrible conditions in the camp and her struggle with the trauma and deaths of her people, but also by the loss of her country and its independence. She was deeply challenged by events that impacted on the most precious part of her life.

Inner strength and care

The diary of Rensche van der Walt is also striking because of how minutely she recounts the detail of the appalling conditions in the camp and the dignity and inner strength that enabled her to overcome her circumstances. There were the small worries (e.g. when she frets about the pending train journey to the camp, especially since she had never seen a train before (Hamman 1965:8)). She also shows her distress (e.g. Hamman 1965:5) when the children of the African labourers are taken away from their parents by the British soldiers. She understood how dehumanising such actions were and how such cruel behaviour disregarded the dignity of these people.

There are many other examples of the inner strength she brought to her care of others. On their way to the camp in Bethulie, for example, she is dismayed to see how her uncle and his wife, both elderly, sit on their wagon in the hot sun. "Oh, I shall never forget that – it is as if I can still picture that" (Hamman 1965:7). She is also distressed about such simple and concrete matters like the physical challenges that people had to face in the camp. She notes how they had to walk behind the wagons in the hot sun (Hamman 1965:9), how they had to remain dirty and unwashed, (Hamman 1965:8, 10), how their tent was flooded by water (Hamman 1965:12) and how humiliated they were when they had to beg for food (Hamman 1965:12). She writes about the bitter cold (Hamman 1965:12), how they had to sleep on a wet floor and how hungry they were (Hamman 1965:12).

Often and unpretentiously Rensche portrays her own care for, and support of, others. According to her, it was typical of her circle of relatives and friends to reach out to others. "Many others are there to help out", she remarks about a family who receives help because almost all its members are ill (Hamman 1965:16). They look after others in simple, concrete ways. They bake bread (Hamman 1965:13), care for the sick and bury the dead. It is, however, more than mere physical care. She is upset when so many people die that she cannot visit and comfort all the bereaved (Hamman 1965:15). She reaches out to others even when she does not feel well herself. She notes her need to do so because she

says she feels privileged, simply because her situation is not nearly as hopeless as theirs (Hamman 1965:17).

She cares for others in the most extreme conditions. Death is an ever-present reality in the camp and is mentioned on almost every page of the diary. She repeatedly uses the phrase: "Death beckons every hour" ("Die dood wink ieder uur"; e.g. Hamman 1965:15, 21, 23). Life in the camp is a life in the face of death, almost from the very beginning of her stay. The first death, a three year-old boy, happens 15 days after their arrival in the camp (Hamman 1965:10), followed five days later by a child of 12. Thereafter two or three children die every week (Hamman 1965:10). Later on the numbers are overwhelming. On 23 August she writes, "How sad was it to see that 16 bodies were buried today!" People visit the graveyard daily for funerals and see the burial place expanding at an alarming rate. On 22 September she mentions that, by then, already 461 people had died. Even worse, she writes, whole families are wiped out, or small children are left behind as orphans (cf. e.g. Hamman 1986:75-6). On 22 January, for example, she writes that only the wife of Staevanis Venter remains alive after losing her husband, three children, her parents-in-law and all their children within a space of only five months (Hamman 1965:31; 81).

The diary reveals her deep sadness about all the deaths in the camp. She mentions names, describes the deceased as "dear friends" or "family" and often records the extent of their suffering and their last words (Hamman 1965:19). Repeatedly she mourns the fact that close relatives of the deceased are not even aware that they have lost loved ones (Hamman 1965:10). She writes about her helplessness before these deaths. She does not have medicine or even a lamp to nurse people during the nights. When six women visit and tell her that they have been given free lights, wine and brandy, she writes, "It is little, but we are grateful nevertheless to receive it" (Hamman 1965:19).

What strikes one about Rensche's narrative is how she remembers the dignity of those who suffered and died in the camps. Her descriptions of the last moments of the sick often reflects the quiet, dignified manner in which they face death. Even the young die movingly. "The child (10 years?) called all her loved ones to greet them by hand and kiss for the last time in this sad camp" (Hamman 1965:17).

In all these experiences her religion plays a seminal part. She repeatedly mentions how angels carried away the dead ones (cf. further below). At some stage she writes how a dying woman exclaims, "How glorious is it! See the many angels." Then the woman continued repeated the words of the dying Christ on the cross: "it is done" (1965:16).

The intensity of her experiences and her compassion come to the fore when she mentions the ages of those who died. It was the most vulnerable, the small children, who tended to be the victims of conditions in the camp. The infant deaths evoked in her special religious feelings. She writes on 24 May 1902: "O, we shall never forget how we arrived at tents where the corpses were held. In them there were ten to fifteen corpses, especially those of small children. Then I always thought of what the Lord Jesus said about the children ("O, ons sal nooit vergeet as ons by die tente kom waarin die lyke gehou was, dat daar van tien tot vyftien lyke gelê het nie, veral dié van klein kindertjies. Dan het ek altyd gedink aan wat die Here Jesus van die kindertjies gesê het;" Hamman 1965:45). She could not fail to see this tragedy from a religious point of view. For her it was important to note the words of Scripture, particularly the words of Christ Himself, in her recording of these dreadful events.

These are the notes of someone who is deeply involved in relationships with others, who seeks to transform dire conditions and who approaches the devastating situation with extraordinary sensitivity and care. Her spirituality involves reaching out to others, even at her own cost.

Theological reflection on death

The description above reveals how Rensche van der Walt consciously experienced her life in the light of God's relationship with humanity. Her faith reflected the Calvinistic emphasis on works of gratitude: she is, as was said above, privileged and therefore felt the need to reach out to improve the conditions of those she saw suffering around her.

Of seminal importance and an outstanding characteristic of her faith is her belief in God's providence. It is on this point that Rensche van der Walt's spirituality reveals its Calvinistic nature most clearly. Everything that she experiences she integrates within the framework of God's plan for humanity and the divine council. God plays a loving, protective and directive role in the relationship with humanity ... God steers the life of the faithful. The challenge of faith and the human response to God is to recognise the divine hand in all that one experiences.

To understand this, it is helpful to compare Rensche van der Walt's diary, once again, with that of the Reverend Luckhoff's. Luckhoff also experienced deep anguish in the face of the horrible suffering and deaths. He notes, for example, in his diary,

For the very essence of sorrow and misery, come here! For weeping, wailing mothers, come here! For broken hearts, come here! For desperate misery and hopelessness, come here! What would become of us if we had not our Religion to fall back upon! What, if we had not the assurance that a Good and Merciful God reigns above! What if there was no Love! What if there was no hope of the Resurrection and Life Everlasting! What, if there was nothing beyond the grave! (Britz 2007:28).

Luckhoff did not always display the same unconditional trust as Rensche van der Walt in divine providence. At one devastating moment, he suggests in his diary that he found himself in the same position as the husband who had rushed in tears out of the tent where his wife was dying shouting, "Is there no pity sitting in the clouds that can see into the bottom of our grief?" (Britz 2007:39). He writes on 31 August,

Desperate; just returned from dying boy, Herklaas; young, strong; father Ceylon, visited him yesterday; said he did not want to die because his father was away, and he had to care for the mother. Returned late last night and found him very bad [...] this morning he was better, but this afternoon worse, and now (10 p m) I find him dying. I am very very downhearted tonight, and am tempted to think that, after all, God – No, I won't write it, because I believe this is a temptation of Satan! But, oh, we did pray so fervently that God should spare his life; he still is so young and so strong.

One will not find anything like Luckhoff's questioning of God in Rensche van der Walt's diary, as the following short survey of her particular brand of Calvinistic spirituality shows.

The divine will

In Rensche van der Walt's spirituality, the divine-human relationship is strongly determined by God's will and actions. God acts sovereignly and knows what is best for humanity. It is here that her heavy, traditional Calvinist spirituality reveals itself. Almost every page of Rensche van der Walt's diary contains a reference to her belief that nothing happens outside the will of God. Whatever crosses one's path, must be accepted.

When the British soldiers took away their cattle and threw the wheat (which the women themselves had harvested over many hot days) in the dung, Van der Walt writes about the onlooking women, "What does one hear from them as they look on: nothing special, only sighs." Yet, she continues, the family remains grateful, believing that the Lord "has another purpose with them that they are unaware of." "We plan our way, but God directs our life" (Hamman 1965:78). This is how she experiences her faith. She ultimately copes with her traumatic situation because she adopts this perspective of God's plan for humanity and the world.

Even death is an instrument in God's hands. It is God's will that people die (Hamman 1965:10, 13). She writes that when people are shot in battle, God is the One who allowed the bullets to hit them (Hamman 1965:14; 1965:15). Having spoken of the many deaths in a specific week, she singles out how two men each lost their wives and daughters on one day. Then she comments, "How sad to lose them, but we do not complain. It is the will of the Lord and the Lord does it in his delight" (Hamman 1965:17).

This faith is spelled out in detail after she comments how a twelve year-old daughter was left an orphan after her father's death. The child lives through this harrowing loss without a word of complaint. Rensche van der Walt comments on this by quoting Psalm 95:2, a Psalm that focuses on the divine council and sovereignty. This Psalm speaks about the Lord as a great, glorious God, a King, who grants a blessed fate. Nature, that is, the earth and the highest mountain, are in God's hands. They obey his commands. What is happening to the child, she observes after quoting this Psalm, reflects God's will (Hamman 1965: 80). She adds that when life is shortened through suffering, it is in accordance with God's will. In a Calvinistic sense, she also underlines the divine sovereignty over creation. God's will is to be seen in events in the camp, but is also visible in the whole of creation. "The Lord calls the high mountains out of their locations, so the Lord calls people to their eternal home." One accepts this divine will without any complaint because God's will is good. The proper response is not to complain –

what God does is best, she reiterates. One can therefore trust in the Lord who will intervene for humanity (Hamman 1965:58)

Rensche van der Walt believes, unreservedly, in God's plan for creation and humanity. Faith is, in the first instance, trust in God, the God who directs people's lives. God's will for people is, in her mind, linked with the fact that the God who wills death also empowers believers to carry the burden of their suffering and who protects them even as they suffer.

God chastises

Closely connected with this perspective of God's will is the conviction that God's actions should lead to self-examination. Faith brings one to see events as a divine test ... one should be silent over those who have died and rather cry for oneself. Since we do not know where our journey takes us, we need to watch and pray. One should not harden one's heart, but follow God. "Our life is being chastised in a wonderful manner" (Hamman 1965:76). The Lord she says, alluding to Hebrews, chastises those whom God loves. On 5 October she notes that it is the saddest day she ever experienced in the camp and that she would never forget it. She had to recite Psalm 118:9 which speaks of the Lord who strongly "chastises me, but does not cast me in death". Believers must be patient under this chastising hand (Hamman 1965:77).

Yet faith does not only accept suffering as divine chastisement. On 21 November she writes about the wife of Aderjan Venter, who lost three children in nine days who "kisses" the chastising hand of the Lord despite the bitter loss (Hamman 1965:79; cf. 85). One can even be grateful about suffering. Towards the end of her diary, when she describes their return to the farm and hears that her oldest brother, along with his wife and children, survived the war, she exclaims, "Praise God's mercy" and quotes Psalm 66:10. "I can now, after everything, cry out: It was good to have been oppressed!" "It was if all the sorrow that we had to undergo was to test our faith, hope and love and to learn how trifling and insignificant earthly things were!" (Hamman 1965:55). With this her spirituality reveals its mystical qualities. In her darkest night she was led to see that material things no longer mattered; what is more, she still experienced the presence of God during this period of testing. It is the deeper things, faith, hope and love, that really matter.

Suffering thus transforms Rensche's values and, more importantly, her understanding of what is important. Five months after being brought to the camp, she reflects with sadness on her previous life when she recalls how they complained whilst, in fact, enjoying abundance. It is striking to see what she mentions: her family had a home where they could spend their days in comfort, where they could go to a room and rest whenever they wanted to do so, with enough to eat (tasty bread, fat meat, an abundance of milk, butter). Once she had to live in tents, in the cold and heat, often sick, without light and almost never healthy, she realised that she and her family should never have complained about their life on the farm (Hamman 1965:19-20).

In a particularly moving remark, at one stage she writes about the times when they were told that their houses had been burned down by the military and that their harvests and cattle had been destroyed. "But it is not sad for us." What she does find sad at that stage is to hear that their burghers have been killed or imprisoned (Hamman 1965:22-23). She then quotes a Psalm: But we wait on the Lord, He rescues us (Hamman 1965:73). Then follows, "We do not ask riches, we seek no glory, but we only want to serve the Lord in silence. I do not care why I suffer, because we have freedom and will never let it go. Otherwise they can rather carry me to the grave" (Hamman 1965:23).

On the last page of her diary, she notes that she comes from a poor family. She remembers how they understood that one should never forget to thank one's Creator for food and drink and that one should always honour God as the One who gives out of great love. She prays to receive her due part, but not to allow greed to take hold of her, "because it is only a corruption on earth". She concludes this self-taught lesson with the call, "Use everything with measure, be careful for abundance, because greed brings adversity" (Hamman 1965:56).

Rensche van der Walt's Calvinistic spirituality brought her to a point where she could look beyond suffering and divine chastisement to God's plan for humanity. God purifies one through the darkest night, and this darkest night can even include the extremities of suffering caused by war. This gives her peace of mind and provides her with inner strength and comfort. At the same time it leads her to understand what really matters.

Spirituality as a process

The human response to God's initiative and action also brings about a life-long process of sanctification. In her remarks on a righteous lifestyle, Rensche van der Walt reveals her understanding

of sanctification as a process. The believer has to live closer to God and become more righteous. The saint will enter eternal life as a “pure” soul (Hamman 1965:19) if he or she seeks to do what is right and good. At some stage she reflects on the death of someone who told her daughter: “A day will come that the body will be resurrected holy according to her deeds on earth.” The resurrection is granted to the person who has been “righteous” (Hamman 1965:17).

Closely linked to this is the understanding that one needs to realise and confess one’s transgressions. On this point Rensche van der Walt sees the lack of sanctification as a reason for punishment. At one particular low point in her camp experience, Rensche searches Scripture for comfort. Part of her comfort is the discovery that she is guilty of transgression (Hamman 1965:21). People have sinned. And yet, even if they do not know where they are being taken they can say, “our trust is in God alone” (Ps.165:5).

The divine presence

It is worthy of special attention that Rensche van der Walt does not portray God in deistic or abstract terms. Her diary reflects a simple awareness of God’s presence in the midst of unimaginable suffering. God remains with those who are tested and who suffer. This means that God, or an angel of God, is with those who die in the camp. On 10 August she writes, “What are we experiencing here! On our farms we may have buried one or two people in a month, but here three or four people die every day.” She then notes, “So we can see clearly that the Lord is in our midst every day to test us (beproof ons) because we read in God’s Word that, where God separates the body from the spirit, an angel is sent to take up the spirit. How often does the angel come in our midst! It is sad to lose our loved ones, four or five every day, but we accept it, it is the will of the Lord” (Hamman 1965:15). She records the last words of a dying person, “How glorious is it! See the many angels” (Hamman 1965:16). In other words, even as she is dying, this woman can experience peace because of the presence of the Lord and His holy angels.

Those who die, Van der Walt writes, enter into eternal rest, which means that they enter into the presence of God. On 22 September she visits the camp’s graveyard. She speaks of the departed in their “resting places”, who are gathered as a “holy choir of pure souls” before God’s high throne. She quotes a hymn: “Holy choir of pure souls gathered before the throne of God” (Hamman 1965:19 – an allusion to the scenes of the church in Revelation). To enter death is to pass into the eternal presence of God.

Eternal life and peace

Rensche van der Walt also copes with death theologically – simply because of her firm belief in eternal life. Eternal life means to be with God, to enter into peace. Though she finds the dying of people sad and shocking, death itself is not a threat because what awaits us beyond the grave is never a matter of uncertainty. Death, for Van der Walt, is the passage to eternal life, where one is with God, released from this life and the camp with all its suffering. Even the act of dying is peaceful. “Gideon Joubert is taken softly from us and went in peace into his glorious rest” (Hamman 1965:15). Later on she writes about the death of an elderly woman and mentions that she could not be buried in a coffin: “Her body is buried in a blanket. We find comfort because the body does not remain in the grave forever. A day will come that it will be resurrected holy ... When she last visited her the woman had told her daughter that the death of a righteous one is not death, just a passage to eternal life. She waits impatiently for her hour of death. On 30 August she went to her eternal peace” (Hamman 1965:17).

In contrast with the war around her and its terrible consequences, her faith in eternal life sustains her. Eternal life also means being reunited with loved ones. A twenty year-old woman, three years younger than Rensche van der Walt, and a “dear friend”, dies in the prime of her life “to enter the glory.” She comforts those next to her death bed and asks them not to mourn her. “Twenty years the Lord gave me to you. Now he takes me to glorify Him in heaven. Now I shall soon meet my younger brother and niece that died recently” (Hamman 1965:21; Cf. also Raath & Louw 1991:61.).

The Bible and the Psalms

In Rensche van der Walt’s Calvinist spirituality, Scripture plays a decisive role, as can be expected. It is the reading and reciting of Scripture that sustains her and guides her through the miserable life in the camp. Time and again she refers in general to the fact that she is comforted by her reading of the Bible. When plagued by times of uncertainty about the future, she repeatedly writes, “We search Scriptures to find comfort” (e.g. Hamman 1965:21; 84, 90). On receiving the traumatic news about the peace agree-

ment, she ultimately finds consolation in Scripture, as was explained above. "But we soon found comfort for it all in God's dear Scripture" (Hamman 1965:90).

She does not always say which parts of Scripture sustained her. In one case, the figure of Christ is associated with Christ's care for children. In another instance she describes how they stayed over on an unknown farm and had to sleep on the stoep, outside under the trees and all over the place. They do not complain, though previously they were used to having their own rooms, she writes. She then explains this attitude with a reference to the earthly life of Christ. "The Lord Jesus was thirty years a stranger on earth and said: 'who wants to be a disciple of mine, must take up his cross and follow me'" (Hamman 1965:6). In this sense it is not only Scripture, but Scripture as it relates Christ's life and teaching, which sustains her. But it is her experience of events that determines her choice of Scriptural passages.

That said, the diary is full of references to the Psalms. Early on in her diary, she quotes them in their musical version from the hymn book. When she realised that they had to leave the farm, she struggles with the bitter thought of the pending farewell. She finally finds comfort in Psalm 25:6: "God will be their guide, and teach them how to walk." ... after the meal she notes, she played a few Psalms "for the last time".

In her use of the Psalms, Rensche van der Walt reflected a major feature of the spirituality of the day. It is clear from other reports that singing was heard every day throughout the camp, because many people still kept to the tradition of reading the Bible every evening and singing hymns (Raath & Louw 1991:57). When the women hear the news about the peace treaty, the first response is to sing the Psalms (cf. above and also Hamman 1965:134:3; 100:4; 46:13 and 84). Later on, she again writes how the people sang psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Hamman 1965:89-90). The returning group sings Psalm 91:1-5 as they approach their home town (Hamman 1965:93) and Psalm 146:1 and 5 on the train (Hamman 1965:94).

Conclusion

Rensche van der Walt's diary reflects the spirituality of someone with a deep commitment to her faith, someone who was brought up in a traditional Calvinistic setting and who, now, in an extreme situation brought about by war, has the essence of her faith sorely tested. It is intriguing to see how someone can live so close to God and experience God's mystical presence so directly in her life that the harshest conditions cannot extinguish the flame of faith as trust in God's providence and goodness. Hers is a simple, concrete faith, nurtured by Scripture and characterised by unconditional trust in the Creator who lovingly and benignly leads the flock to their eternal home where they will be delivered from their suffering and find peace. She lives out her faith in her continuing and devout study of God's Word, in her attendance of worship services and prayer meetings and in caring for others. In the camp she is led, first and foremost, to see material and earthly possessions in the light of eternity, but she is also transformed to thank God, inexplicably, for the suffering that she has experienced.

In her faith we discover spirituality in the true sense of the word: it is about the divine relationship with humanity. She is firmly convinced that God reaches out to protect her even in the "dark night" of her soul. God's providence transforms her to experience her situation in terms of her faith. Over many months her faith purifies her from what she considers her impure and frivolous earlier existence. It empowers her to see death, not as the last word, but as the gently transfer into the peace of God. Faith, we learn from her diary, can provide sustenance and especially peace even in the darkest times during the inhumane, cruel and traumatic experience of war.

In this diary, written during one of the most devastating wars of modern times, a woman reveals her inner spiritual strength. Whatever others may think of her simple, concrete trust in the divine providence, it is clear that it was this simple trust that sustained her in her darkest hour. This traditional interpretation of Calvinist thought is what empowered Van der Walt to survive the appalling conditions of a concentration camp in South Africa at the end of the 19th century. It was this spirituality that gave her peace in a time of war.

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Endnotes

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- 1 The term “spirituality” needs clarification. Several authors have drawn attention to the different interpretations of spirituality (cf. Eire 1990:53 and Roten 1994:102), In this essay I have used the insights of Waaajman (2002:305-591; also esp. 2006:1-18 with as summary 13-4); cf. further Schneiders (2005:15-32; 2006:202). The various interpretations of spirituality are not always the result of misunderstandings. The differences in spirituality can also be linked with many confessional traditions – among which Calvinist spirituality would be one tradition. But even within Calvinist spirituality one should distinguish various forms (e.g. within South Africa between a Dutch Reformed and a Reformed Spirituality). The latter would be less pietistic than the former. Cf. e.g. Holder (2008) and Sheldrake (2006) for many examples of such confessional spiritualities. There are also other forms of spirituality such as lay spirituality, the spirituality of marriage, wisdom spirituality and spirituality of kings, as pointed out by Waaajman (2006:20; 48-51; 72-85; 199-200)..
 - 2 Giliomee (2004:190-191; 211) ascribes this special role to their education, their equal sharing of inheritances, their role as educators of their children and the fact that they fought alongside men in battles during the long trek to the interior of the country. Britz (2007:23) records that Luckhoff who ministered to Boer women and children in the concentration camps published his moving diary under the title “Women’s Endurance.” Hobhouse (1923) dedicated her first book to the women of South Africa “whose endurance of hardship, resignation in loss, independence under coercion, dignity in humiliation, patience through pain and tranquility amidst death

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- kindled the reverent appreciation of the writer, and has excited the sympathy of the world.” Their role was considered to have been so special that it was commemorated by both the Womens’ Monument in Bloemfontein and the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.
- 3 The diary is now in the War Museum in Bloemfontein. I would like to thank Ms. Elria Wessels, Senior Researcher at the War Museum, for kindly making available to me a copy of this rare publication for the purposes of writing this article.
- 4 The role of the church is illustrated by the fact that children of the congregation attended the school run by the church until a state school was established in 1878 (Hamman 1965:ix).
- 5 There is a remarkable photograph taken at the fiftieth anniversary of the Reformed Church in South Africa on which founding members are present. They are all dressed in black. The photo is accompanied by a remark that it excels “through the simplicity and moral soberness of the clothing and attitude.” (“... en op het portret uitmunten door eenvoudigheid en zedigheid van kleederdracht en houding”). Cf. <http://www.gksa.org.za/150/1909.html>. Cf. also Moorrees (1937:812-816) for the history of the Reformed Church and (1937:312) on the characteristic clothing of the strongly conservative group who opposed the singing of hymns.
- 6 Having written about Rensche van der Walt’s diary on my blog, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a response from Ester Laubscher, of whom Rensche was a great-aunt, about my blog entry. In the ensuing personal correspondence she noted how Rensche’s sister (Hester van der Walt) with her husband and ten children attended services every Sunday for many years after the war. She elaborates on the very strict nature of the Van der Walt family’s religion. She had the impression that they considered themselves on a “higher” religious level than members of the Dutch Reformed Church. They had a strong moral approach to religion. Vile language was out of the question. They also lived in fear for punishment and judgment. (“Hulle was sterk Gereformeerd, ek dink hul self op ’n Godsdienstegebied hoër geag as die “Gatjieponders.” Ek kan onthou dat ek as kind gedeeltelik opgevoed is in hul geloof. Baie streng. Geen Godslastertaal nie, die straf of tugting was oorweldigend, al die wette, die vrees wat hierdie wette ingeboesem het. Jy sal boet vir jou dade, vir een en elk van hulle ...”). Her observations about the family’s strict observance of the Sunday (no work, only reading of religious literature) confirm remarks Rensche van der Walt made in her diary. At the time this article was submitted for publication, I also determined that the editor of the diary, Kezia Hamman, is presently in a home for retirees in Reddersburg.