

# The Dutch Reformed Church, Beyers Naudé and the ghost of Cottesloe<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article revisits the important and controversial Cottesloe Church Consultation that was held from 7 to 14 December 1960 in South Africa under the auspices of the World Council of Churches. It focuses mainly on events that occurred in the Dutch Reformed Church following the Cottesloe Consultation. Special attention is given to the role of Beyers Naudé by drawing on some of his newspaper articles, speeches and sermons during this time (including some unpublished material). Given this focus, the article describes Cottesloe as a vital historical marker that points to some unfinished business for the Dutch Reformed Church on an ecclesial, ecumenical and theological level. It argues that the general response of the Dutch Reformed Church to the Cottesloe Consultation led to harmful ecumenical isolation and hampered the church from living out its prophetic calling *vis-à-vis* the state.

## The ghost of Cottesloe?

After the shocking events at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960 in which 69 people were killed and 180 wounded by the police during a protest march against the notorious pass laws, the World Council of Churches (WCC) initiated a process that eventually led to the Cottesloe Consultation. This consultation, which was held from 7 to 14 December 1960 at the Cottesloe hostel of the University of the Witwatersrand – was attended by representatives of the eight member churches of the WCC in South Africa. At the end of the conference, the so-called Cottesloe Declaration was released. For many people today, this document might not appear to be that radical. However, it did contain statements such as:

- ... We recognise that all racial groups who permanently inhabit our country are a part of our total population, and we regard them as indigenous ...
- No-one who believes in Jesus Christ may be excluded from any church on the grounds of his colour or race ...
- There are no Scriptural grounds for the prohibition of mixed marriages ...
- We call attention to the disintegrating effects of migrant labour on African life ...
- It is our conviction that the right to own land wherever he is domiciled, and to participate in the government of his country, is part of the dignity of the adult man ...
- It is our conviction that there can be no objection in principle to the direct representation of Coloured people in Parliament ... (WCC 1960:30–32; Hewson 1961:74 & 75).

The Cottesloe Consultation, and the resulting declaration, generated a flood of responses in the media. The consultation and the declaration were rightly perceived as a challenge to the government's policy of apartheid. The Prime Minister (Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd) stepped into the church dispute, saying in his New Year Message:

I do not intend to discuss recent announcements on colour policy by individual churchmen. It is, however, necessary to correct the wholly wrong impression – which has been created by antagonists to the policy of separate development – that certain Afrikaans churches have thereby declared their standpoint ... The churches have, in fact, not yet spoken through their synods, at which the members as well as the whole of the clergy will be represented. The voice of the church has still to be heard ... May I express

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<sup>1</sup> This article was read as a paper at the annual meeting of the Church Historical Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA) in Potchefstroom, 16–18 August 2010.

the hope that the names of our churches will not be dragged in unfairly in a debate which can as yet only be conducted by individuals. (cf. *The Sunday Times*, 1 January 1960)

The Transvaal and Cape Synods of the Dutch Reformed Church (which, as member churches of the WCC, sent delegates to Cottesloe) would in fact reject the Cottesloe Declaration at their respective synods in 1961 and, in the process, cast a shadow on the reputation and integrity of many of the Cottesloe delegates. These synods furthermore took the decision to resign as members of the WCC. Thus the churches in a sense “dealt” with Cottesloe, though we should consider the remark made by the Afrikaans writer WA de Klerk in his book *The Puritans of Africa: a story of Afrikanerdom*:

And yet, the ghost of Cottesloe would return to haunt the Afrikaner’s wayward theologising. There was evidence that, in spite of the silencing, recantation, bowing of heads and deep cogitation, something remained. The Church could never quite be the same again. (De Klerk 1975:255)

These words are often quoted in discussions on the impact of the Cottesloe Church Consultation (cf., for instance, De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:66). Indeed, Cottesloe remains an important historical marker that points to some unfinished business for the Dutch Reformed Church on an ecclesial, ecumenical and theological level.

Ten years after Cottesloe, an editorial in the official Dutch Reformed Church newspaper *Die Kerkbode* (9 September 1970) referred to an upcoming conference of South African member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches under the heading “‘n Tweede Cottesloe?” (“A Second Cottesloe?”). More than 15 years after Cottesloe, shortly after the Soweto riots in 1976, Charles Villa-Vicencio wrote in *South African Outlook* on “The ghost of Cottesloe ... A Soweto theological postscript” that “Verwoerd could not silence the Cottesloe Ghost” (1976:108 & 109).<sup>2</sup> Nearly 30 years after Cottesloe (on 12 September 1990), a conference was held at the University of Pretoria on the theme “Cottesloe after 30 years” (speakers included JW Hofmeyr, CF Beyers Naudé and EPJ Kleynhans). A report on this conference in *Die Kerkbode* (21 September 1990) had as its heading “*Stofstorm rondom Cottesloe lê nog nie heeltemal nie*” (“Cottesloe dust storm has not quite settled”). These three examples (others can be added) underline the perception that Cottesloe is a symbolic historical marker of great importance for (Dutch) Reformed and ecumenical church and theological life in South Africa. Cottesloe has undeniably become a site or place of memory (a *lieu de mémoire*) in the collective memory – to adopt notions from the influential work of theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Cottesloe functions as a significant site of memory suggests that it was often recalled at crucial periods to reconfigure ecclesial and theological identity. In the early 1990s, for instance, parallels were drawn between the Cottesloe Consultation and the Rustenburg Conference.<sup>4</sup> In 2010 the conference themes of both The Church Historical Society of Southern Africa and The Theological Society of South Africa, which met in Potchefstroom and Bloemfontein respectively, brought Cottesloe into conversation with their discussions on ecumenism (given also the centenary celebration of the 1910 Edinburgh World Mission Conference). These meetings created the opportunity to revisit Cottesloe after 50 years – not only to gain more clarity about the events surrounding the 1960 consultation and the declaration, but also to reflect on some of the challenges for church, ecumenical and theological life in South Africa today. In this article, I do not focus on the events leading to the Cottesloe Consultation or on the consultation itself. These have been discussed in great detail, and from various perspectives, elsewhere (cf. Lückhof 1978; Lombard 1974; De Gruchy 2004; Van der Watt

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, Villa-Vicencio strongly challenges the theologised nationalism that he observes in the thinking of people such as Dr AP Treurnicht. For Villa-Vicencio, one alternative to such a national theology is “to give the Cottesloe Ghost new sinews and flesh and to begin to live again in obedience to the one true God” (1976:109). Villa-Vicencio ends his article with the following words: “The Cottesloe Ghost is still with us ... What we need is a new Cottesloe conference and the church to stand up in opposition to the false gospel and the worship of Baal. But this will not happen. The only alternative is the need for confessing communities to be established across our land to worship the God who is one and before whom there is no other” (1976:109).

<sup>3</sup> See Halbwachs (1992) and Nora (1984–1992). For a translated text that gives a good description of Nora’s project, see Nora’s *Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire* (1989). For the use of the notion of sites of memory for church historical reflection, see Harinck, Paul and Wallet (2009) and also Marksches and Wolf (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, John de Gruchy’s article in the *Journal of Theology for South Africa* entitled “From Cottesloe to Rustenburg and beyond: the Rustenburg Conference in historical perspective” (1991). Frits Gaum’s report on the same conference in *Die Kerkbode* (16 November 1990) had as its heading “*Die lang reis van Cottesloe na Rustenburg*”. The fact that Cottesloe was viewed as an important historical marker is further seen in the title of De Gruchy’s article “From Cottesloe to the road to Damascus” (Loots 1990). Also telling is the title of the report that was published after the WCC Cape Town Consultation: *From Cottesloe to Cape Town* (1991).

1987; Hofmeyr 1991; Strauss 1991). Furthermore, from a church historical perspective, we are fortunate to have the autobiographical accounts of influential figures such as Beyers Naudé, Alan Paton, FE O'Brien Geldenhuys and Willie Jonker on their experiences at Cottesloe and the circumstances surrounding the conference. In this article, I instead revisit some of the events that occurred in the Dutch Reformed Church in the aftermath of Cottesloe, with a special focus on the role of Beyers Naudé. In the process, I make reference to some of Naudé's newspaper articles, speeches and sermons (including some unpublished material). In the final section of this article, I return to the question of whether the ghost of Cottesloe is still haunting the Dutch Reformed Church today.

## The aftermath of Cottesloe

### *Reactions to Cottesloe in the media and society*

In a personal letter to AH Lückhoff in 1974, WA Visser t'Hooft (the General Secretary of the WCC who played an important role at Cottesloe) wrote that although the situation at the Cottesloe Consultation was initially very tense, during the course of the conference – through Bible study, humour and eating together – a sense of real brotherhood developed. There was a feeling that something important had happened (cf. Lückhoff 1978:95).<sup>5</sup>

This view that something significant (and controversial) had happened at Cottesloe was definitely shared by the media. The consultation made headlines in newspapers such as *Die Transvaler*, *Die Vaderland*, *Die Burger* and *The Rand Daily Mail*. It is interesting to note that an editorial in *Die Burger* of 19 December 1960 was quite sympathetic to the decisions that had been taken at Cottesloe, saying among other things that the church has the right and responsibility to test from time to time the prevailing political policy according to moral laws and to challenge fearlessly the rulers of this world in the light of the fact that the church represents a higher authority.<sup>6</sup> On the whole, however, Lückhoff is right to conclude that the English newspapers responded mostly positively, while the Afrikaans newspapers (with the exception of the editorials in *Die Burger*) were sharply critical of the consultation and its declaration. In the correspondence columns of the Afrikaans newspapers the tone of the letters was predominantly harsh and critical, challenging (among other things) the delegates' mandate to vote for the Cottesloe resolutions. A cabinet minister's wife even wrote that pastors should keep out of politics and do more house visitations (cf. Lückhoff 1978:105).

One of the delegates of the Transvaal Synod to Cottesloe was Beyers Naudé. As a member of the organising committee, he was closely involved with the planning of the consultation. For him, the aftermath of Cottesloe became an especially trying time. In his autobiography *My land van hoop* ("My land of hope"), he gives an account of what he calls "*die bitter nasleep van Cottesloe*" ("the bitter after-effects of Cottesloe"). Naudé responded within days after the Cottesloe Conference to some of the allegations that had been made against the Cottesloe delegates in an article that was published in the Sunday newspaper *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*. In this article of 18 December 1960 entitled "Afrikaans Churches in danger of confusion",<sup>7</sup> Naudé acknowledges that the discussions of the eight member churches of the WCC caused quite a stir and that they would have consequences. He comments: "It is abundantly clear that the findings of the deliberations are going to have far-reaching results for Church and State, for relationships between Afrikaans and English speaking, as well as the relationship between White and non-White. [They are] going to affect the future of every ecclesiastical, national and racial group most closely" (Naudé 1960a:1).

In the rest of the article, Naudé aims to set straight some of the interpretations regarding Cottesloe. He admits that the discussions did not necessarily reflect the official viewpoints of the churches concerned. Nevertheless, the findings were based on intensive study reports. Naudé further denies the allegations that the leaders of the WCC wished to prescribe terms to the conference or to

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<sup>5</sup> Not everybody, however, shared the feeling that something significant had happened at Cottesloe. Visser t'Hooft refers to the delegates of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK), who ate on their own. It was therefore not that surprising that after the consultation, the NHK released a report in which they distanced themselves from several aspects of the Cottesloe Declaration. For a discussion of the NHK's reaction after Cottesloe, see Lückhoff (1978:97–103). In his autobiography *Journey continued*, Alan Paton writes: "John de Gruchy in his book *The church struggle in South Africa* writes that the members of the N.H.K. delegation 'tended to keep apart'. This is a very kind way of putting it. They did not tend to keep apart, they *did* keep apart" (1988:213).

<sup>6</sup> The Afrikaans text in *Die Burger* (19 December 1960; cf. also Lückhoff 1978:103) reads: "*Maar die kerk het wel die reg en die plig om politieke beleid te toets aan morele wette waarvan die verbreking tot geestelike en stoflike ondergang moet lei. Hy het die reg en die plig om die heersers van hierdie wêreld te vermaan en tereg te wys en om dit onbevrees te doen, omdat hy, indien hy suiwer ingestel is op die Werklikheid agter die werklikheid, 'n Hoër gesag verteenwoordig as regerings, politieke partye of die volkswil*". The article ends with the call not to fear renewed, honest self-assessment.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this article, I use the translated newspaper article as found in the Cottesloe documents of the Dutch Reformed Church Archives, Stellenbosch.

influence it through lectures, addresses and proposals. The report was also not meant as an attack on the government: "If the report of the study contains, or implies criticism, of the policy of the Government, it stemmed from the formulation of Scriptural principle, and is in no way meant as an attack or as uncharitable criticism" (Naudé 1960a:2). Naudé did realise, however, that the discussions and findings at Cottesloe placed the Afrikaner churches at a crossroads and that "the coming months are going to demand study and meditation of every minister of the Gospel as has perhaps never been asked before in our lifetime" (1960a:2).<sup>8</sup>

On 28 December 1960, *Die Kerkbode* (with Andries Treurnicht as editor) joined the discussion on Cottesloe by asking the questions when and on what issues the church had to make its voice heard. After questioning the decision about Coloured representation in Parliament, the article ends with the warning that some church leaders ought to speak in a lower prophetic tone. It warns that responsibility to preach justice to the social and political spheres admittedly belonged to the church, but when the church started to use political formulas, an impermissible *coup d'état* was carried out.<sup>9</sup>

I have already mentioned Hendrik Verwoerd's New Year address, in which he said that the churches had not yet spoken on Cottesloe through their synods. Naudé comments in *My land van hoop* (1995) that after this statement, few members of the church (especially in the Transvaal) dared to defend the Cottesloe decisions. Those who did write in favour of Cottesloe in the media for the most part used pseudonyms. The Afrikaner Broederbond also took a firm stand against the Cottesloe decisions in its circular letter (cf. Wilkins and Strydom 1980:296). Naudé, who was the chairperson of the Broederbond cell in his area, was very upset by this interference. His comment on this matter is revealing: "It created a very serious crisis of conscience on the whole question of ultimate loyalty and ultimate disobedience. The authority of Scripture and the demands of the gospel were in conflict with my own nation and their political aspirations ... although not the final straw, unconsciously I was at the point where I said, 'If this is what the Broederbond can do, then it has become a very dangerous influence in my life'" (Ryan 1990:64).

During the heated discussions in the media after the Cottesloe Consultation, a number of protest meetings were held – to the dismay of many of the Cottesloe delegates. One of the targets during the storm that erupted after Cottesloe was the book *Vertraagde aksie* (*Delayed action*), which was published before Cottesloe in Afrikaans and English and contained essays by Professors AS Geyer, BJ Marais, BB Keet and others. This controversial book dealt with church and race relationships in South Africa and was intended as an ecumenical witness. In his important essay "*Die klok het al gelui*" ("The bell has already tolled"), Bennie Keet focuses on the question of the calling of the church in the light of the policy of apartheid, stating clearly his conviction that the time has come that the Afrikaner churches give notice to the government that they can no longer accept the policy of apartheid. Keet asked that discussions be organised between white people and black people on the highest level, with the aim of finding the best solution in striving for a multiracial South Africa. If this option was not pursued, the church had to do what the state was unwilling to do, namely to initiate mutual discussions. This raised the objection that the church was acting outside of its sphere, but desperate times called for desperate measures. The church has a prophetic calling towards the whole of life, including the political realm. According to Keet, the Afrikaner churches had rightly been accused of neglecting their prophetic task regarding the policy of apartheid and its bitter fruits (cf. Geysler *et al* 1960:10).

Given this sort of criticism from Keet, it is understandable that *Delayed action* became a target in the aftermath of Cottesloe. At a meeting of 2 000 people in the Brits Town Hall in early January 1961, a motion was accepted to condemn the book. Speakers at the event included Dr. FG van de Walt

<sup>8</sup> Naudé also wrote that ministers and spiritual leaders have to inform their members about the principles of the Bible regarding race relationships, for example, through congregational discussion and Bible groups. In addition, he pointed to the fact that the consultation had great importance for inter-church relationships and even for the witness of the churches throughout the whole of Africa. Naudé was aware of possible dangers, such as serious division within the Afrikaner churches or that Christians could cast doubt on one another's sincerity. He said that Christians had to guard against over-hasty conclusions and added that what was needed was honest, courageous and open-hearted discussion that was not merely confined to their own denomination. Naudé concluded his article on a trusting note: "Personally I believe that God is busy allowing great and good things to be born out of all the tension and confusion of the present to the benefit of His church. We as believers must continue in that belief. He that obeys God and His word need have no fear" (1960a:5). This theme of obedience to God would continue to be a central theological notion for Naudé in the stormy years to come.

<sup>9</sup> In Afrikaans the text reads: "*Daar is sommige kerkmanne wat gerus juis hierin 'n laer profetiese toon kan aanslaan. Die prediking van die geregtigheid op maatskaplike en politieke terrein bly die verantwoordelikheid van die Kerk, maar wanneer hy hom met politieke formules inlaat, is dit 'n ontoelaatbare 'staatsgreep'*" (*Die Kerkbode*, 28 December 1960). In the editorial of 8 February 1961, Treurnicht again wrote on Cottesloe and said that members who were confused in light of the decisions of Cottesloe should know that the church still stood precisely where it stood in the past ("*die kerk staan presies waar hy was*"). He reminded church council members that they had to claim their maturity and act accordingly. This is of course a valid point, although one can ask if the timing of this remark was not aimed at gaining the support of church council members against Cottesloe for the upcoming synod meetings. Cf. also Treurnicht's essays on Cottesloe in his book *Op die keper* (1965:27–54).

of the Gereformeerde Kerk, Prof. AD Pont (Nederduitsch Hevormde Kerk), and Prof. AB du Preez and Dr. JD (Koot) Vorster of the Dutch Reformed Church. According to newspaper reports, Dr. Vorster said that because ideas could spread like measles, he was glad about these kinds of meetings, “which showed what the true policy of the church was” (cf. *The Rand Daily Mail*, 7 January 1961). Dr. Vorster became one of the most outspoken critics of Cottesloe, later describing the Cottesloe Consultation as “the sharpest attack by the liberalistic element to destroy Afrikaner politics” (cf. Langner 2004:114).

The *Afrikanerkring* (an Afrikaner cultural organisation) organised a protest meeting that was held on 24 January 1961 in a packed Silverton Town Hall. At this meeting, which was attended by about 1 500 people, a motion was accepted which stated the meeting’s unwavering trust in the church of the Afrikaner and their confidence that when the respective synods of the Afrikaans churches would discuss the Cottesloe decisions, they would unequivocally maintain the traditional policy of apartheid – a policy that was not viewed as contrary to the Word of God.<sup>10</sup> Mass meetings were also organised on university campuses.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The motion accepted by the meeting (and proposed by Ds BJK Anderssen of the Dutch Reformed congregation Silverton) reads in Afrikaans: “Hierdie vergadering spreek sy onwrikbare vertroue uit in die Kerk van die Afrikaner. Ook spreek hy die vertroue uit dat, wanneer die onderskeie sinodes van die Afrikaanse Kerke die besluite van die Wêreldraad van Kerke in oënskou gaan neem, hulle ondubbelsinnig hul tradisionele beleid van rasse-apartheid sal bly handhaaf, wat hierdie vergadering glo nie strydig met God se Woord is nie” (cf. *Die Transvaler* 26 January 1961; see also *The Star* 25 January 1961).

<sup>11</sup> About 1 000 students met at the University of Pretoria, for instance, to discuss the political implications of the Cottesloe decisions. Here, too, a motion was accepted to reject the Cottesloe findings (cf. *Die Transvaler* 10 March 1961).

### *Cottesloe and the official Dutch Reformed Church meetings*

In addition to these protest meetings, several church councils took a stand against Cottesloe – often including a call that the Dutch Reformed Church withdraw from the WCC. Beyers Naudé’s own Aasvoëlkop congregation recommended withdrawal from the WCC, although they did state that despite their disagreement with their minister, they expressed their gratitude for his Christian example, integrity and sincerity (cf. Ryan 1990:65).

Influential church leaders such as JD Vorster and JS Gericke were especially vocal in the general critique of the Cottesloe decisions. The biannual meeting of the Federal Council of the Dutch Reformed Churches met from 22 to 24 March 1961 and also rejected the statements that lay at the heart of the Cottesloe declaration. A lengthy three-part proposal, tabled by JD Vorster, can be seen as a recommitment to the policy of separate development and the view that this policy was based on Scripture. The proposal stated that separate development provided the only realistic solution for racial problems in South Africa. The motion further stated that integration on church level was not a demonstration of a belief in the community of saints and expressed its disappointment that the delegates made the decisions public before the churches could discuss them (cf. *Handelinge van die Raad van Kerke* 1961:50 & 51). Beyers Naudé and Frans Geldenhuys voted against parts of the proposal; however, although it is probably correct to say that at this stage, Naudé did not defend a full-scale rejection of apartheid.<sup>12</sup> At the same meeting of the Federal Council, a motion (proposed by JS Gericke and IJ Viljoen) was accepted that the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) resign as a member church of the WCC.

Before the Transvaal Synod meeting, an *ad hoc* committee was appointed to study the findings of Cottesloe and to reflect on the decision to withdraw from the WCC. Men with strong anti-Cottesloe sentiments played a dominant role in the committee. With this kind of build up to the Transvaal Synod, it certainly seemed unlikely that the synod would not reject the Cottesloe Declaration and that a decision would be taken to resign from the WCC. The election to the moderation already indicated the direction the synod would take. Although the Cottesloe delegate Ds. AM Meiring retained his position by a narrow margin, both Beyers Naudé and Frans Geldenhuys were ousted. Willie Jonker, who had just returned from theological studies in the Netherlands, replaced Frans Geldenhuys as actarius. When Jonker seconded a motion for continued membership of the WCC, there was (according to one observer) whispering from a certain corner: “We have chosen the wrong actarius!” (cf. Naudé 1995:57).

For two and a half days, the synod discussed the Cottesloe decisions and most of the speakers condemned the findings. On 10 April, the delegates were called upon to respond. In reflecting on these events, Willie Jonker mentioned how painful it was for him to see not only Naudé and Geldenhuys, but also those who were critical of Cottesloe (such as Ds. Brink and Professors EP Groenewald and AB du Preez) sitting in the front of the hall like people accused of committing a crime.

In his response at the synod meeting, Beyers Naudé said that if any synod member could convince him that the decisions that had been taken at Cottesloe were against the Word of God or the demands of the gospel, he would admit that they were misguided. Without such evidence, he stood by his conviction to support the Cottesloe recommendations. Naudé later wrote that he realised that his statement would probably place his career as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church under serious suspicion, but that he was filled with a deep sense of calmness and peace at the same time. In the end, the synod accepted a motion that rejected the decisions which had been taken at Cottesloe and reaffirmed support for what was called a policy of “differentiation”. Shortly afterwards, the recommendation of the *ad hoc* commission that the Transvaal synod of the Dutch Reformed Church withdraw from the WCC was accepted.

By the time the Cape Synod convened on 19 October 1961, emotions were already less intense than in the months immediately following Cottesloe. However, the Cape Synod also adopted the Federal Council’s rejection of Cottesloe as its own decision. With a resounding majority, the Cape Synod also accepted the motion to resign from the WCC. Even a proposal that they maintain correspondence with the WCC was rejected. Thus both the Transvaal and the Cape synods rejected the findings of Cottesloe and recommended withdrawal from the WCC.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> After Cottesloe, the delegates of the Transvaal Synod released a declaration (after consultation with the Cape Synod) that to some extent defended the idea of differentiation. The statement said, among other things, “*dat die afgevaardigdes van die NG Kerke van Transvaal en Kaapland hulle gestel het op die standpunt dat ’n beleid van differensiasie uit ’n Christelike oogpunt verdedigbaar is, dat dit die enigste realistiese oplossing vir die vraagstukke van rasseverhoudinge bied, en daarom die belange van die verskillende bevolkingsgroepe die beste dien*” (*Inligtingsburo van die Ned. Geref. Kerk* 17/12/60, Dutch Reformed Church Archives, Stellenbosch).

<sup>13</sup> For more extensive discussions of the Cape and Transvaal Synods, see Lombard (1974:336–343), Lückhoff (1978:133–151), Groenewald (1961:131–142) and Heyns (1961:310–320).

## Cottesloe and Beyers Naudé's decision

In the year following Cottesloe, several synods, synodical commissions and church councils categorically rejected the findings of Cottesloe. It was indeed, as Lückhoff has noted, a devastating defeat for the ecumenically-minded (1978:128). For Beyers Naudé, Cottesloe and its aftermath represented – according to his own admission – a turning point that eventually led to his decision to resign as minister of the Dutch Reformed congregation Aasvoëlkop in 1963 and to head the ecumenical Christian Institute thereafter. In Alan Paton's reflections on Cottesloe in his autobiography, he recalls an incident at the consultation when Beyers Naudé invited him for a private talk and told him not to give up because a great change would come in the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), especially among younger people. Paton adds: "Well, a great change did come about, but not in the N.G.K. It came about in the life of Beyers Naudé" (1988:215).<sup>14</sup>

Much has been written on the life of Beyers Naudé, including his decision to resign as minister and his farewell sermon on "Obedience to God" – a sermon in which he used Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than men") as his text. For the purposes of this article, I consider briefly an unpublished sermon by Naudé where he also used Acts 5:29 as his text. Among the sermons and speeches donated by Beyers's wife, Ilse Naudé, to the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch, there is a typed sermon entitled "Obedience: to whom?" ("*Gehoorsaam: aan wie?*"). The scripture reading for this sermon is given as Acts 5:17–42 and the inscription on the front page reads: Linden 27 November 1960/Piet Retief 16 December 1960. Thus Naudé most probably preached this sermon just before and just after Cottesloe.

In this sermon, Naudé interprets the struggle between Peter (along with the apostles) and the religious authorities as a situation in which the apostles' highest loyalty was tested to the utmost. He says that obedience means submission to the highest authority. Furthermore, such obedience to God touches all aspects of life and requires holy respect for his Word. Naudé then turns to the topic of God's Word and race relations, with reference to some books that are critical of the current policy on race relations (although *Delayed action* is not mentioned by name, its views are clearly implied). Naudé makes a plea that people should not dismiss these books out of hand, but should judge them in the light of God's Word. He says that the time has come for the whole Christian church in South Africa to ask: "What is God's Word saying, and what does obedience to that Word demand? If the church comes to the conclusion that any of its views are not in accordance with Scripture, then the church does not only have the right but also the *duty* [this word is double underlined in the original text] to state it honestly and courageously" (Naudé 1960b, my translation). In the final part of the sermon, Naudé refers explicitly to the Cottesloe Conference. He comments: "If the delegates ... seek no other truth than that of the Word, then we can expect that God will do great things for his church and our country. But then we must also trust God when his guidance goes against our human viewpoints" (Naudé 1960b). Naudé ends the sermon on a personal note with reference to the fact that his father taught them as children that one's highest obedience is always owed to God, an obedience that must be shown towards his Word. Therefore, his prayer is: "May we as church and *volk* take this word to heart during this time: those who are obedient to God's Word do not have anything to fear" (Naudé 1960b).

What this sermon makes clear – apart from opening a window onto Naudé's own piety – is that already before Cottesloe, Naudé was having serious doubts about whether South African racial policies were in accordance with Scripture. When Naudé returns to this text in his farewell sermon in 1963, he returns to ideas that were not only central to the ecumenical climate of the day, but that he had also already internalised earlier, before and during the time of Cottesloe.

An unpublished speech entitled "The prophetic calling of the church in our day" ("*Die profetiese roeping van die kerk in hierdie tyd*"), which was delivered on 11 May 1961 (just weeks after the Transvaal synod) to pastors in Pretoria, also makes for interesting reading. "What strikes me", Naudé's states, "is that the general approach of the man on the street ("*die gewone man*") is derived not from the perspective of Christianity, but from [the perspective] of the future of white people ("*blankedom*"), not so much to determine the prophetic calling of the church but to determine the

<sup>14</sup> 24 years later, Paton interviewed Naudé for *Leadership S.A.* He reminded Naudé of this statement and asked whether he still stood by his view regarding change in the NGK. Naudé's response is revealing: "I think we have to accept the fact that the present official, appointed leadership of the N.G. Kerk will not change. The majority of these men are diehard, conservative and political figures ... Where our hope lies is among a small and influential number of theologians within the N.G.K. who are working very hard behind the scenes to bring new theological insight and perspective to the theological students – the Dawid Bosches, Willie Jonkers and others – but they are doing it quietly behind the scenes for reasons which I can understand ... There is going to be a split in the N.G.K., a tremendous battle ... my feelings is that 24 years after Cottesloe there are at last deep stirrings within the hearts and the consciences of a number of theologians, theological students and lay people, who are saying that they cannot remain silent any longer" (quoted in Paton 1988:216 & 217).

political calling of the *volk*” (Naudé 1961, my translation). Naudé sees this as a grave danger. He is deeply aware of the importance of this moment for the church, hence his observation: “Never before in history was there a more urgent need for serious reflection on the nature, calling and future of the church as today” (Naudé 1961). In this regard, Naudé emphasises two aspects about race relations. The first aspect relates to the question of how the unity of the church finds expression in society. Naudé says that the churches have to take seriously the questions addressed to the (Dutch Reformed) church regarding membership, joint worship and mixed marriages. Shying away from these challenges is fatal for the prophetic calling of the church. A second aspect that calls for reflection relates to the “apartheid” of which Scripture speaks and does not speak. In the New Testament eschatology the lines of separation are not between East or West (or white or black), but between faith and unbelief, church and world, God and Satan, Christ and the Antichrist. God does not guarantee the survival of a *volk* because it is white or black, but in as far as it serves the purposes of the Kingdom of God. In a spirit of serious reflection, Naudé continues, the church should preach in a clear manner about Christian justice, responsibility and love with regard to race relations. This task calls for study and prayer. Naudé is furthermore in favour of study circles, also with brothers from other Christian churches, to seek greater clarity in the light of God’s Word. These words of Naudé ran directly counter to the mentality that supported the termination of the Dutch Reformed Church’s membership of the WCC. Naudé emphasises that the prophetic calling of the church is not limited to reflection and preaching, but also requires embodiment (“*beleving*”). The church has to let its voice be heard against all forms of social injustice and oppression. In words that have the same tenor as the Belhar Confession, Naudé states: “As Christian church, the church must be an advocate for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the voiceless, the unjustly treated – notwithstanding whether they are white or black” (Naudé 1961). Moreover, to do this the church should be able to have empathy with the needs of people and should not just talk about them, but with them. Naudé ends his speech with the prayer that South Africans will have a clear vision of their prophetic calling and live it out without fear.

This speech by Naudé provides an important glimpse into his growing commitments after Cottesloe. In his autobiography *My land van hoop*, Naudé writes in a similar fashion that he realised two things in the aftermath of Cottesloe. Firstly, the Dutch Reformed Church placed itself on a path towards complete isolation as a church and ecumenically – in South Africa and abroad. Secondly, the decisions of the Dutch Reformed Church would result in this church not being able to perform its prophetic calling towards government, because of the influence of hidden powers (Naudé 1995:59). It is my view that it is indeed on these two issues that the ghost of Cottesloe would continue to haunt the Dutch Reformed Church, even to this day.

### **The return of the ghost?**

Naudé rightly observed that Cottesloe placed the Dutch Reformed Church on a road of isolation as a church and ecumenically, and that this would hamper this church in living out its prophetic calling *vis-à-vis* the state. In this respect the ghost of Cottesloe often returned to haunt the Dutch Reformed Church in the ensuing decades. Some theologians have argued that Cottesloe did not bring an end to the Dutch Reformed Church’s ecumenical relations, since the church remained a part of Reformed ecumenical bodies such as the Reformed Ecumenical Synod and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (see Strauss 1991:440). However, the decision after Cottesloe to withdraw from the WCC did insulate the church from important voices in the ecumenical community.

In an article entitled “*Cottesloe, Wêreldraad van Kerke en ekumeniese sending*” (which was published in the *Ned. Geref. Teologiese Tydskrif* in June 1961), Jaap Durand notes that a true ecumenical vision should not be associated simply with the question of membership of the WCC. The important question is whether the Dutch Reformed Church is willing to live out its missional calling in ecumenical relations and, concomitantly, whether the Dutch Reformed Church is willing to approach the question of race relations from an ecumenical perspective (Durand 1961:152).<sup>15</sup> Durand acknowledges the argument that withdrawal from the WCC was motivated by the concern about the organisational unity of the various Dutch Reformed synods. The question for Durand, however, is whether ulterior motives did not come into play as well – motives that unmistakably showed a movement towards isolation. Durand ends his article by expressing the hope that if organisational unity on a synodical level was to materialise (which did happen in 1962), the church would receive with it an ecumenical vision in the sense that the problems which the church was facing – also in terms of race

<sup>15</sup> In Durand’s words: “*Die belangrike vraag is of die N.G. Kerk bereid is om sending binne ekumeniese verbande te dryf, en daarmee samehangend, of die N.G. Kerk bereid is om die vraag na rasseverhoudinge, ’n vraag wat diep sny na die wese van die kerk – die rassevraagstuk is immer ’n vraag na gemeenskap of nie en die kerk is juis ’n gemeenskap van heiliges – vanuit ekumeniese verbande te benader*” (1961:152).



relations – would not just be viewed as an issue for this church alone, but for the whole universal church of which it was a part. These prophetic words by Durand were not heeded by the church. In the decades to come an isolation-orientated mentality grew stronger, robbing the church in the process of important resources to confront the challenges it faced. The limits of such an isolationist mentality point to the continual need for what can be called an ethics of hospitality.<sup>16</sup> Hospitality, one can argue partly in conversation with Jacques Derrida, is not only about receiving angels but also about facing ghosts.

Together with its tendency towards ecumenical isolation, the Dutch Reformed Church's response to Cottesloe put a question mark behind the church's ability to fulfil its prophetic role towards the state. Beyers Naudé saw this matter as a question of one's ultimate loyalty and obedience. It is not surprising that some discussions in the early 1960s revolved around the question of loyalty. One is reminded here of AB du Preez's two-part article in *Die Kerkbode* (12 and 19 September 1962) on "Lojaliteit – 'n verdwynende deug" ("Loyalty – a disappearing virtue"). This article evoked several sharp responses, including a long letter from Ben Marais in which he faulted Du Preez for explaining loyalty in the light of natural relationships. In the following decades, the Dutch Reformed Church indeed had to come to terms with the accusation that loyalty to the *volk* had clouded its prophetic judgment. One is reminded here of the following remark of Alan Paton (1988:217): "If ever a church failed in its duty towards its country, it was the NGK. That was because it saw its prime duty, after devotion to God, not as devotion to the country, but to the *volk*". And one should also consider De Gruchy's (1991:24) words: "How different it might have been if Cottesloe had resulted in a united Christian witness. Years lost in the wilderness of repression and resistance, injustice, anger and frustration, might have been used to transform South Africa ...".

Beyers Naudé observed that it would take many years for the church to work through the shock of Cottesloe. It did not take 10 or 15 years as he silently hoped, but more than 30 bitter years (cf. Naudé 1995:60). But has the ghost of Cottesloe been put to rest? In some ways there were some telling encounters with the ghost, for instance, through the *Church and Society* documents (1986, 1990) and through Willie Jonker's confession of guilt at the Rustenburg Conference (1990); however, given the fact that reunification has still not come to the Dutch Reformed family of churches and that the church is probably still struggling to speak in a clear prophetic voice, one cannot but say that the spectre of Cottesloe is still a haunting presence today.

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<sup>16</sup> In his study on Cottesloe, Lückhoff refers to Robert Bilheimer's visit to South Africa in September 1961 (Bilheimer played a vital role in making the consultation possible in the first place and visited South Africa several times). From correspondence between Bilheimer and Rev. AJ van Wijk, Lückhoff concludes that Bilheimer was invited to speak to students at the Stellenbosch Theological Seminary, but that this invitation was withdrawn. Van Wijk apologised to Bilheimer for this "lack of hospitality and Christian charity" (Lückhoff 1978:151).

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