

## **Negative impulses in the historical context of reformed spirituality in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa**

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### *Abstract*

This article argues that there are negative strains in the spirituality of black reformed Christians in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), and that these negative strains have their origins in the historical context of the colonial and apartheid times. The article further argues that the negative strains forces in the reformed faith were then transferred to the indigenous people. From the outset, the motives behind missionaries transferring their religion were interwoven with the motives of the economic and political needs of colonisation. These processes, together with the development of apartheid and Afrikaner-Calvinism, the stagnation in reformed spirituality and the influence of Pietism, resulted in a very specific form of the reformed tradition – especially amongst those who were objects of missionary work and who suffered under colonisation and apartheid. Such processes – and the dangers that they pose for the “self” of black reformed Christians – are then described. Lastly, pointers towards a more liberating reformed spirituality are proposed.

### **Introduction**

The aim of the article is to discuss the historical context of reformed spirituality in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) with special reference to the negative impulses arising from the historical context and that influenced spirituality in the URCSA. This is a context in which colonialism and apartheid had devastating effects on the lives of indigenous people. It thus poses the question: what was the effect of the exploits of these systems on the spirituality of black reformed Christians? The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) came into being in 1994 with the unification of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRCMC). This happened simultaneously with the dawn of a new democracy in South Africa. This article thus reflects on the period prior to 1994.

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Understanding of the historical context is important for the understanding of spirituality in that context, since spirituality is always located in a particular time and historical context. Smit (1995:113) observes that all Christians share in some or other expression of spirituality, and that this differs from denomination to denomination, from culture to culture and from place to place. Context and spirituality are in dialectical relationship to each other. Context influences spirituality and, at the same time, spirituality influences context. Anthony Russel (1986:35) notes the importance of the mutual relationship between the changes in society and spirituality. As an example, he refers to the fact that the persecution of the early Christians led to particular forms of spirituality. He cites another example, that of how the Reformation and its challenge to the divine authority of human institutions and traditions led to a more private and interior spirituality. It is therefore important to understand the leading motives in a particular historical time that influence the spirituality of that time. These leading motives comprise the fundamental dynamic through which roles, groups and institutions within one cultural pattern are being motivated and oriented – the power line from which thought and actions in a particular historical period get direction and meaning (Steggink & Waaijman 1985:84). In this article, the negative motives emanating from the context, and having an influence and effect on the spirituality of black reformed Christians, are thus described. The intention, however, is not to describe a particular spirituality, but rather to focus on the leading motives emanating from the context and how these could influence spirituality.

The intent to highlight the negative strains in the spirituality of black reformed Christians in the URCSA should not be misunderstood. It is not meant to suggest that there were no positive and liberating impulses in this history. On the contrary, in the history of the same period many liberating and significant leading motives can be identified. The struggle for freedom was one of the leading motives that had a profound effect on the spirituality of black Christians in South Africa. Another positive leading motive may be the notion of “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (“I belong therefore I am”) – or ubuntu as it is popularly called – whereby it is meant that the individual’s divine nature is activated by the goodness of others (Seoka 1997:8). In the history of the Uniting Reformed Church, positive liberating moments can also be identified. The announcement of a *status confessiones* in 1982 and the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar in 1986 are moments of resistance that stimulated a healthy, liberating spirituality. Other such moments can also be highlighted. One could point to the 1978 decision of the DR Mission Church in which the policy of apartheid was described as being contrary to the gospel because it was based on the fundamental irreconcilability of people. One could also point to the critical voices from the Dutch Reformed

Church in Africa in the seventies (Durand 1984:124–125), as well as to the reunification of the DRMC and the DRCA in 1994. However, it is important to isolate the negative motives and effects so as not to allow such elements to produce a bad spirituality.

The three churches that formed the Uniting Reformed Church, namely the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa, were all products of the mission work of the Dutch Reformed Church. The reformed tradition was transferred by missionaries to the indigenous population – this happened during the time of colonisation. From the outset, the motives behind transferring religion from the missionaries were interwoven with the motives of the economic and political needs of the colonisation. These processes, together with the development of apartheid and Afrikaner-Calvinism, the stagnation in reformed spirituality and the influence of Pietism, resulted in a very specific form of the reformed tradition – especially amongst those who were the objects of the mission and who suffered under colonisation and apartheid. Ntoane (1983:124) describes the Calvinism that black people inherited as a quagmire that caused a lot of problems:

Wallowing in it, as Black [C]hristians in the South African existential reality already do, they are soul defiled, physically raped and dehumanized. In the face of this demonic and inhuman existential reality together with its consequences, Black [C]hristians, especially those that have adopted and embraced the reformed faith tradition, cannot do otherwise but pose some questions.

He questions whether this Calvinism reflects the original intentions of Calvin and the message of Jesus Christ and whether it is still worth it for black people to stay faithful to this tradition. It is therefore important to look at the negative traces within the spirituality during this time as these may still be present today.

### **Colonisation and the spreading of the gospel**

The spreading of the gospel in South Africa is strongly rooted in the social, political and economic history of this country. The gospel arrived with Dutch and British colonisation. It justified and legitimised colonialism and imperialism (Nolan 1988:1).

With the coming of the Dutch East India Company to South Africa, a reformed church was planted. The members of this church were primarily the colonists, however, slaves as well as other black people were also baptised

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and became members of this church. During the time of the Dutch East India Company, no other church was allowed to start a congregation, except for the Lutherans who, in 1778, were allowed to practise religion publicly. The end of Dutch rule in the Cape meant that other churches could be established, especially by missionary societies under the English rule. At the end of the eighteenth century, Europe experienced a growing interest in missionary work and several missionary societies were active in South Africa.

The church cooperated with the motives of colonisation and this was linked to the mission movement. Both Memmi (1965:72) and Adonis (1982:22) emphasise the fact that, during colonisation, missionary zeal and the expansion of the church were influenced by the pursuit of power and wealth. The mission was utilised to lessen resistance amongst the colonised. There was a perception that, if more of the indigenous people accepted the Christian faith, it would be easier to “trade” with them. People were often forced to “swallow” the gospel (Adonis 1982:32). According to Loff (1981:13), the Dutch East India Company was clearly aware of the importance of religion and, therefore, introduced thorough prescriptions and even formulary prayers that had to be followed. The licence granted to the Dutch East India Company by the Dutch government clearly stipulated that the reformed religion must be propagated. In Loff’s (1981:13) analysis of the formulary prayers of Jan van Riebeeck he found that “missionary zeal” was not the strongest motive, but rather profiteering. Regarding the prayer that was said at the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck it is concluded by Loff (1981:13) that the success of the Company was of great importance and that the “conversion” of the indigenous people should be understood as servitude of people, not to the Kingdom of Christ but rather to the Company. Saayman (1991:24) points out that missionaries should carry the blame because “missionaries consciously aimed also at ‘colonising the mind’, at changing whole systems of belief and practice”.

Majeke (cited in Saayman 1991:25) is critical of the role that missionaries played in the economic exploitation: “The missionaries came from a capitalist Christian civilisation that unblushingly found religious sanctions for inequality.” It is also clear that the government of the day planned to use missionaries as political agents to implement their frontier policy (Penn 2005:238). According to Saayman (1991:26) it was primarily the dualism of the pietistic theology, embedded in the Protestant missionary movements, that was to be blamed.

It was the “spiritualisation” and privatisation of religion that enabled the system of exploitation and colonialism to be justified, enabled it to expand through the world and to cause the most barbaric excess of suffering in the history of humankind.

This religion is without a doubt, the opium of the people (Nolan: 1988:110).

It is therefore inevitable that the colonised saw the mission as religious justification of economic exploitation.

Another negative spin-off of the blending between mission and colonialism was the close relationship of colonialism to racism. It is no coincidence that racism is part of colonialism throughout the world: “Racism sums up and symbolises the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized ... Racism appears then, not as an incidental detail but as a consubstantial part of colonialism” (Memmi 1965:69–70, 74). The gist of it was that black people were seen as subordinates and a “stinking nation” (Adonis 1982:30). They were seen as heathens while whites were regarded as Christian. Memmi (1965) describes the fact that, during colonisation, a negative image of the colonised was being developed. He cites the example of the accusation that the colonised were lazy.

By his accusation the colonizer establishes the colonized as being lazy. He decides that laziness is constitutional in the very nature of the colonized, whatever he may undertake, whatever zeal he may apply, could never be anything but lazy. This always brings us back to racism, which is the substantive expression, to the accusers benefit, of a real or imaginary trait of the accused (Memmi 1965:81).

Although not all missionaries were guilty of racism, it is clear that a strong relationship between mission and racism existed. Saayman (1991:28) quotes Moorhouse in this regard:

... the racialism which had never been far from the surface whenever a white man contemplated a black one in Africa, was beginning to flow more freely than ever before. Missionaries had generally been no more exempt from this feeling than traders, though their professional ethic had given them a vocabulary and gestures which allowed them to camouflage their racialism with unlimited euphemism.

Racism thus became a constituent feature of the mission and eventually led to separate church formations.

It is however around the issues of land that the motives of mission and colonialism became extremely intertwined. Large tracts of land were alienated from the indigenous people and given to missionary societies or churches. The missionaries, in fact, became settlers (Saayman 1991:29). The expro-

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priation of land fundamentally changed the economic life of the indigenous people. The result of the expropriation was that the indigenous people became dependent on the colonists and the missionaries for their survival. Cheap labour thus became available.

The process of colonisation was accompanied by a process of cultural domination. This happened because missionaries generally tended to have a very negative opinion of African culture (Saayman 1991:31). The colonised were encouraged to accept the “higher” cultural values of the West. Saayman also points out that there is a direct relationship between political and cultural subjugation, and the number of conversions that took place.

The intertwining of the motives of mission and colonialism formed part of the background and context in which the spirituality of the oppressed in South Africa developed. As such it is one of the leading motives that influenced spirituality.

### **Apartheid**

The role of apartheid has been well documented and therefore will not be elaborated on in detail. However, emphasis will be placed on the apartheid system that had such an enormous influence on the lives of so many. There is clearly a relationship between colonialism and apartheid. It was the British colonial policy, settler interest and land hunger that helped lay the foundation for apartheid (De Gruchy 1991:9–10). In addition, there are also religious reasons from the reformed heritage that contributed to the ideological basis of apartheid. De Gruchy (1991:27) is of the opinion that neo-Calvinism was co-opted to justify the separate development of racial groups as “nations”. The mixing of Afrikaner history with the neo-Calvinist “sovereignty of spheres” provided a very strong ideological base for Afrikaner-Nationalism and apartheid. Thus, the theological justification of apartheid started long before the establishment of apartheid as official government policy in 1948. “[N]eo-Calvinism, with its understanding of Calvinism as a total way of life based on a specific worldview, combined with a sense of national calling, sacred destiny, and racial superiority, led to the rationalization of Apartheid as God-willed, and to the implementation of the policy of “separate development” as the only solution to the problems of the country” (De Gruchy 1991:32). Mbali (1987) describes in detail the characteristics of apartheid and concludes that:

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the whole system of apartheid depend[ed] upon classifying people according to their colour and racial features. This classification will determine where they may live, what jobs they may do, whom

they are forbidden to marry or have sex with, and what schools their children may go to. Needless to say, such a system can cause great heartache, especially in families of mixed descent, or where an anomaly occurs (Mbali 1987:13-14).

The system of apartheid did incalculable damage to the lives of people; it deprived them of their humanity. Apartheid was something nobody could escape, it was inherited, and one was born into it. As such, the system had a strong socialisation function. People were socialised into the false values of racism, individualism, selfishness and possessiveness and those served as the predominant values. In this way, people were conditioned in alienation.

Just like during the colonisation period, there was also religious justification for apartheid. In this instance it was especially Afrikaner-Calvinism that was used to justify apartheid. This article will explore this development as part of the leading motives in the context that influenced spirituality in the Uniting Reformed Church.

### **Development of Afrikaner-Calvinism**

The Dutch Reformed Church was the only church in the country until the Cape became a British colony. This church was under the supervision of the Dutch church until 1924 when the first synod of the Dutch Reformed Church was held. Although there were at that time considerable liberal views under the influence of the French Revolution, the Dutch Reformed Church was negative towards liberal theological beliefs (De Gruchy 1991:22). The church anchored itself rather in the reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. There were also strong influences from Dutch Pietism as well as from Scottish evangelicals because of the Scottish Presbyterian ministers who served the Cape church at the time. The result of this was that two traditions developed in the Dutch Reformed Church. Jonker (1989:291) calls these the evangelical-Methodist and the reformed traditions. The evangelicals tried to remain politically neutral, yet under the dominance of this thinking it was decided in 1857 to split the church on the basis of race (De Gruchy 1991:23). It is from these two streams that Afrikaner-Calvinism developed.

De Gruchy (1991:29) defined Afrikaner-Calvinism as follows: "It is the product of an uneasy amalgam of nineteenth-century evangelical piety and an adapted Kuyperian neo-Calvinism forged in the fire of the struggle for cultural identity and political and economic power."

Afrikaner history was reinterpreted as "salvation history". In a similar vein, it was proposed that the Afrikaner people were the chosen ones. The Afrikaner *volk* was elevated to a separate "sphere". Although Kuyper's

theology shunned any idea of a *volkskerk*, the notion of the “sovereignty of spheres” was adapted to give the Afrikaner nation an independent status under God with a special calling (De Gruchy 1991:27). Apartheid can be seen as the concrete manifestation of this calling. Calling is linked to creation and thereby apartheid gained a soteriological value (Ntoane 1983:63). It thus followed that the racial policy of the National Party was theologically justified.

According to Ntoane (1983:56) it is clear that, with this justification, Afrikaner-Calvinism manifested itself as a creation theology. Accordingly, ethnicity was seen not only as a historical fact but as a reality that agreed with God’s plans for this world. Ethnicity, therefore, could not be excluded from God’s creation work. Because cultural diversity was brought down to the order of creation, that meant there was no place for unity (Ntoane 1983:58). This creation thinking led to a twisted understanding of sin where blacks were automatically presented as sinful, while whites were presented as relatively without sin. The relationship between creation and re-creation as was developed in Afrikaner-Calvinism led to a weak Trinitarian doctrine: “The predominance accorded to creation for qualifying the relationship between creation and re-creation tends to focus all attention on God, the Creator. Because of this concentration on God the Creator, the Trinitarian distinctions are underplayed or watered down” (Ntoane 1983:61).

The theological justification for Apartheid thus became one of the strong leading motives in the context which influenced the “self” of black reformed Christians. It will thus become important to understand what the effect could be on spirituality.

### **Stagnation in reformed spirituality**

An important contextual factor that needs to be taken into account in reformed spirituality in South Africa is the fact that the tradition received from the missionaries and colonists itself experienced stagnation and became rigid. It was no longer the original inspiration of the Reformation, but through the history it underwent several changes.

Within the original inspiration of the Reformation polar tensions developed, in which one movement called the other into being. Emphasis on the objective truth changed into emphasis on the subjective experience. Emphasis on internalisation called the antithesis of action and engagement into being. This process led to a large variety of faith experiences. The faith was a gift of God – but a gift that was threatened because the creative tension between the objective and the subjective was not maintained.

From the later history it appears as if people could not cope with the freedom in Christ. This is explained from a more psychological perspective:

Once the primary bonds which gave security to the individual are severed, once the individual faces the world outside himself as a completely separate entity, two courses are open to him since he has to overcome the unbearable state of powerlessness and aloneness. By one course he can progress to "positive freedom"; he can relate himself spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities; he can thus become one again with man, nature, and himself, without giving up the independence and integrity of his individual self. The other course open to him is to fall back, to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world (Fromm, 1942: 120-121).

The argument of Fromm, regarding the coming to grips with freedom, sheds light on the problems regarding stagnation in the reformed faith experience. It seems that the latter course described by Fromm is chosen by a particular thinking within reformed circles that freedom is relinquished and certainty is sought by enslaving themselves again. This enslavement takes place by seeking certainty in authoritarian power outside themselves. With this tendency within the reformed tradition, faith content and faith experience grew apart from each other. New certainties were sought, either objectively in pure doctrine or subjectively in the regenerated heart. Berkhof (1985:461) points to the shift in reformed thinking, especially as seen in Answer 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism that "true faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit". According to Berkhof (1985:461) the two moments are separated to the point that one can speak of a twofold faith, on the one hand there is a deep affinity for the whole Bible content and on the other hand a personal conviction awakened by the Spirit. This separation paved the way for the fatal split between "objective" and "subjective" that dominated the protestant Scholasticism, the Further Reformation and Pietism in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Life by the justification through faith in Christ was soon displaced by a general notion of God in which the doctrines of predestination and providence are good examples. By "a general notion of God" is meant the more Aristotelian image of God espoused by the philosophers. The Trinitarian character disappeared and God is viewed apart from the Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Behind Christ, an image of a foreign, unapproachable, stark and grim God arose – one who demands obedience in all things and also through his caretakers in govern-

ment and church (Heitink 1989:59). The powerful God of the Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the old god of the philosophers seems to be quite different from the God that is confessed in Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, namely the Father of Jesus Christ. The image of God reflects a strong focus on calling and conscientiousness. The whole life is under the discipline of the Word and, where people or doctrine stray from the right way, it leads to disciplinary steps with the first step the withdrawal of the right to participate at the Lord's Table.

This general notion of God increasingly became the authoritarian face of the new orthodoxy. The emancipation and empowerment of the sinner that was justified by God was now threatened. Contextual factors also played a role in this development. The bourgeoisie, the new class, now had the control and would not let it go. They benefited from the notions of gratitude and obedience which gave peace and order and made people submissive and humble (Heitink 1989:60).

Stagnation in the tradition developed where there was a strong focus on a more objective experience of faith. In other words, faith was intellectually accepted and transmitted in a cognitive way; there was no internalisation and no experience of the heart. The objectification of the faith led to a doctrinal orthodoxy where the purity of the faith was predominant. In such instances, people tend to think systematically and focus on an authority from outside. Heitink (1993:254) mentioned that such an experience displays characteristics of extrinsic religiousness. Extrinsic religion is associated with prejudices. In this case, it is a matter of an objective, doctrinal, often authoritarian faith; however, when religion is internalised to a personal living conviction, then one grows towards a living faith.

Wherever internalisation of faith is neglected, it is filled with authority, withdrawal, isolation, blaming others as the guilty party. This goes hand-in-hand with a strict, increasingly puritan lifestyle marked by obligation rather than the enjoyment of life.

In the development of the Reformed faith, knowledge soon lost the element of being a means for emancipation, and stagnation occurred when only the cognitive was emphasised. There was a lot of emphasis on the fixation of true doctrine, especially by way of scriptural evidence which provided a high level of certainty and which led to a strong doctrinal way of dealing with the Bible. Deviation from the doctrine was not tolerated and frequently led to discipline. The reformed history is riddled with doctrinal differences and schisms based on the different interpretations of Scripture and confessions. Heitink (1989:59–60) points out that this stagnation belongs to the darker side of reformed experience. That which could be presupposed with the first generations, namely an emotional experience of the faith, became more and more absent. Experience, together with thinking and doing,

is an important aspect of faith. Emphasis on doctrine was often at the expense of faith experience, the personal relationship with God. The strong emphasis was on faith “as truth”, the right doctrine and living “according to the rules” through the formalisation of the commandments as legalistic rules (Heitink 1989:60).

### **The emergence of reformed pietism**

A backlash could obviously not be avoided. The emphasis on the objectivity of the content of faith – the true doctrine, called forth the antithesis of a subjective faith experience based on an inner deepening of the faith.

In the Netherlands this movement was called the *Nadere Reformatie* or Further Reformation and is historically situated at the end of the sixteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth century. According to Brienen (1993:199) the English/Scottish Puritanism is seen as part of this movement. Pietism had a profound influence on reformed spirituality in South Africa. This is not only true for South Africa, but it is a worldwide occurrence.

[It] had forced a restructuring of Protestant social, intellectual, and ecclesiastical institutions, private and public attitudes to personal redemption, worship, devotion, missionary work, the concept of the responsibility of church to society, church and state relations, and the significance of denominational positions (Erb 1984:249).

As with the orthodoxy, this movement also sought more certainty than the Reformed spirituality could offer. However, this was not sought in outward authority, but rather in the deepening of the inner life. We find in Reformed Pietism an intense and active interest in interiority, the deeper struggles of the soul and subjective experience (Brienen 1993:199). While the salvation through Christ is still of primary importance, the appropriation of the salvation, however, is more strongly emphasised. A process of appropriation is emphasised and terms such as calling, rebirth, conversion, justification, sanctification and perseverance play an important role. These terms were seen as stadia in the Christian life and one could examine oneself as to where one was on the way. Questions like “Am I reborn?”, “Am I converted?” played an important role in the introspection. Whenever the subjective is not balanced with the objective, it leads to a brooding faith, anxieties and guilt. There is thus a strong emphasis on the emotional aspect, as well as on sin and guilt (Heitink 1989:61).

There is a variant of this movement in Methodism which, when dealing with conversion, grants a strong role to the human decision. Another

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form of this movement is found in the Radical Pietism which, as a reaction to the rationalist faith, promoted the life of victory on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so, the original Calvinism led on the one hand to a more objective, confessional trend and on the other hand to a more subjective, experiential trend, one the other's counterpart. The first has a strong emphasis on the rational side of the faith. Without piety, it easily degenerated to dogmatism and compliance. The second trend strongly emphasised the experiential side of faith. However, when the joy of faith disappears, people can easily become trapped in anxiety and guilt (Heitink 1994:22).

The reformed faith that Christians in the Uniting Reformed Church inherited was thus heavily tainted. It was transmitted in a context of colonialism and Apartheid. It had lost the original sparkle of the Calvinist tradition as was experienced by the reformers and became stale, reflecting on the one hand an objective dogmatic faith and on the other hand a subjective faith.

The question therefore is: "What is the possible reaction of oppressed Christians to these powerful forces from their context and religious history? What are the dangers that could lead to a bad spirituality? How could the fundamental identity (Steggink and Waaijman 1985:90-93) be influenced in a negative way?

### **Dangers and negative strains in the spirituality**

#### *Paralysis because of alienation and rejection*

One of the biggest dangers that lurk within the spirituality that was transmitted to oppressed people is paralysis – the inability to act. Alienation takes place when people are treated as objects rather than subjects. According to Takatso Mofokeng (1983:21–23), writing on the Southern African context, this alienation took place in a threefold manner.

- Alienation from their history

The history was presented as a history of suffering, submission and humiliation. Black Christians were presented as heathens who, justifiably, lost the struggle against Christianity. They were presented as evil and their history was minimised to the defeats by the invaders. They were seen as thieves that had to be taught a lesson. History was interpreted in the light of and by means of white values and standards. One could say that they were removed as subjects from their own history (see also Memmi: 1965:91, 92). This "loss"

of history had a paralysing effect on the will of black people (Mofokeng 1983:22).

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- Alienation from culture

The culture of black people was deemed as inferior by the conquerors and this was sometimes accepted to be so by black people – and in this regard the missionaries played a major role. They were intent on destroying and overturning the whole cultural system. The system of values that connected members of the community with each other was destroyed in the process. “The sense of solidarity in suffering and in joy, in work and in celebration, the centrality of human life [has] been eroded and assailed” (Mofokeng 1983:23). Mbambo (2000:116) alludes to the fact that the alienation from the culture led to a kind of schizophrenia in black Christians. He puts it poignantly: “But what the missionaries didn’t realise was that they were busy removing the fertile soil from the fields where they intended to sow. The end result was cultural deforestation and spiritual erosion which produced schizophrenic Christians”. This schizophrenia contributed to paralysis – the inability to act.

- Alienation from the land

Losing the wars against the conquerors also meant losing the land. For the indigenous people land was the basis for self-respect and creativity. Land was regarded as the mother of all creatures, a mother that was caring for and feeding them. The loss of land meant the enslavement of black people. Alienation from the land resulted in poverty and the loss of dignity. This loss of dignity later manifested itself in symptoms of alcohol abuse and violence.

Nolan (1988:83) described it as follows: “Our society is falling apart, it has already fallen apart. It is no longer a human society of human beings with human relationships. Apartheid has brought us nothing but alienation, inhumanity, suffering, violence, death. The wages of the system is death”.

This alienation was reinforced by the power structures in state and church and was experienced as oppressive. The churches that grew from the missionary work sometimes reflected that very same oppression. The same tendency of overwhelming power that rendered people as objects rather than subjects was experienced. People were made to be receivers of the gospel rather than people proclaiming the gospel. In order to break this cycle of alienation, people needed to become subjects of their own history.

### **Internalisation of oppression**

The fact that the oppressed people were continuously confronted with this wilfully created negative, mythical and degrading image of themselves, led sometimes to the acceptance of this image (Memmi 1965:87). Christians, too,

experienced such low opinions of themselves. From the reformed context the *Belydende Kring* in its Occasional Bulletin remarked as follows:

It is the traditional Pietism, fundamentalism, Biblicalism and fundamental moralism which the white missionaries bequeathed to the black Christians, and which black Christians took over uncritically. Black preachers preached the old style faith ad nauseum thinking that it is the equivalent to "sola Scriptura" reformed theology. The spirit of the Belhar Confession, that God struggles on the side of all those who struggle against apartheid, is still foreign to the very church which produced the Confession (cited in De Gruchy 1991:217-218).

The *Belydende Kring* confirms the possibility that negative spirituality could exist deeply in the psyche of the oppressed Christians. The *Belydende Kring* comprised ministers and members of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa who reflected critically on the situation of division and oppression in the Dutch Reformed family.

#### **Dependency and subservience**

The "self" in the spirituality of black Christians, conditioned by colonisation, Apartheid and a stagnant reformed faith, could also reflect subservience and dependence. The dependency relationship was created in the time of colonisation by alienating the land and thus forcing people to become dependent on the colonists for their livelihood. The colonised were presented as weaklings who needed the protection of the colonists. Thus a dependency relationship was created – that of a parent to a child. Therefore they were also kept from any position of responsibility (Memmi 1965:95).

The "mother-daughter" relationship between the Dutch Reformed Church and the black reformed churches reinforced the dependency relationship. Adonis (1982:62) noted the difference between congregations that developed through the work of the missionary societies and those that were developed by the Dutch Reformed Church. The missionary societies affirmed the freedom, independence and equal dignity of the indigenous congregations while the DRC continued to act as guardian over these congregations. There was also economic dependence created by the funding of the work in black churches.

Looff (1981:18) emphasises the subservience by pointing out the fact that the office of "missionary" created by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1924 was deemed to be inferior. While they were not considered to be fully

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fledged ministers, they were ministering to the mission churches – thus reinforcing the idea that those in the mission churches were subservient.

### **The wrong understanding of the concept of self-denial can lead to the loss of dignity and self-esteem**

One of the worst crises that black people experienced because of oppression was the loss of dignity and self-esteem. The worth of black personhood was almost completely broken down by the realities of discrimination, being denied the sense of belonging, slavery, domination and injustice (Boesak 1977:28). An even deeper crisis was experienced by black reformed Christians when the concept of self-denial was wrongly applied and misused to reinforce the loss of dignity and self-esteem. According to De Gruchy (1991:171), Calvinism tended to denigrate the body and self-esteem. Velema (1993:380) concurs by explaining that many in the reformed circle experienced problems with self-acceptance. Therefore they found it difficult to speak positively about themselves. It is the view of De Gruchy (1991:171) that a more positive meaning of self-denial is advocated by Calvin, namely that of a response to gratitude, discipleship, putting the interests of others before oneself. However, when the deviation in Calvinism is combined with the impulses from the colonial and Apartheid context it can have a devastating impact. “People’s personhood can be so effectively undermined, even destroyed, that in time they learn to despise themselves and regard themselves as incapable of leading a normal, human life” (Boesak 1977:28).

### **Inappropriate guilt feelings**

As was pointed out in the discussion on reformed Pietism, when reformed spirituality is experienced more subjectively, it can lead to deep anxieties and guilt feelings, especially when one does not hold on to the objective side of the faith. A strong emphasis is placed on sin and guilt. When this kind of spirituality was transferred to the oppressed in South Africa, it contributed to ensure that people censored themselves. People were made to feel guilty about any form of disobedience, pride, doubt, criticism and anger. The result was that people became passive and submissive. “We have been conditioned to feel that we are holier, more spiritual and closer to God when we are submissive” (Nolan 1988:101).

### **Legalism**

One of the more problematic aspects within reformed spirituality is an authoritarian, over-disciplined, anxiety-ridden and almost joyless ethos (De Gruchy 1991:139). According to De Gruchy (1991:138-139), a “coloured”

playwright, Adam Small, brought up in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, as well as the philosopher David Hume, brought up under eighteenth-century Scottish-Calvinism, are both critical of the self-righteous legalism within reformed spirituality. Hume even “turned away from Christianity and described Calvinism as a form of idolatry whose deity was understood in terms of “wrath, fury, vengeance, and all the blackest vices” (cited in De Gruchy 1991:139). This is the hard, cold and censorious face of the reformed faith. Although this legalism is not limited to Calvinism, the existence thereof within Calvinism cannot be disputed. See in this regard De Gruchy (1991:138–188). It is not surprising that many reformed Christians, in reaction to the legalism with which they have grown up, decide to migrate to charismatic churches.

### **Conclusion**

When a twisted understanding of reformed spirituality colluded with the elements of oppression from the context, then strains of a negative spirituality developed which is characterised by alienation, the loss of self-esteem and identity, dependency, submissiveness, and inappropriate guilt-feelings. This spirituality is supported by a strict image of God and a thread of legalism is woven within it.

If these negative elements within the spirituality are not consciously addressed, the omission could easily be exploited by utilising such elements to keep the poor submissive, dependent and alienated. Therefore it is necessary to revitalise the liberating aspects in the history of the spirituality of black reformed Christians. The following pointers are proposed in respect of a revitalisation of a liberating spirituality:

#### *Resistance and breaking out*

The “self” should resist the social and ecclesiastical fixation of the dependency relationship and alienation. One could speak of a kind of exodus, life in the Spirit of Christ, urging us never again to allow the yoke of bondage to be imposed on us. The celebration of those moments of liberation in the history can assist the “self” to stand on its own feet and break free from the alienation. The Confession of Belhar expresses one point of resistance and breaking out that can stimulate a liberating spirituality.

#### *A process of awareness*

By “a conscious process of awareness” is meant that black Christians should become more and more aware that they are the subjects of their own history.

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They are not there for others, they are simply there. It is necessary to realise that God takes people and their experiences seriously and that they should, therefore, take their own experiences seriously and affirm these.

### *Reclaiming the liberating side of the reformed tradition*

For reformed Christians it will be important to critically understand and appreciate the original inspiration of the reformed faith. This faith originated at a time of deep social upheaval and transformation. As such, it should be able to assist us towards a more liberating spirituality. For instance, a proper understanding of Calvin's emphasis on the work of the Spirit should prevent that Christian obedience degenerates into legalism and will assist to discern the liberating power of the gospel.

### *Empowerment*

To escape from the oppression and dependence it will be necessary to empower the "self". Therefore, all spiritual practices should enable people to affirm themselves. The image of God in people – which was broken down by oppression – should be restored. Structures and practices that are disempowering should be discarded. A spirituality that is healthy and liberating must cultivate practices that are empowering.

Confronted, as we are today, with a disoriented society where the forces of neo-liberal capitalism plays havoc with the lives of people, and where the awareness of human solidarity and the sense of social responsibility grow ever weaker, there seems to be a greater need to reconsider the history, reclaim the liberating and life-giving aspects in our spirituality, isolate the negative elements and consciously strive to develop a transforming spirituality.

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