

Church polity in a changing South Africa: a study of two Reformed churches

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Abstract

For both the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) the biggest changes in a changing South Africa have been not so much internally as within the South African society. Officially these changes really started after the first general elections in 1994. In this process a new constitution was adopted and finalised in 1996, a non-racial, non-sexist constitution based on human rights as seen from a “religiously neutral” and humanistic point of view. These changes had a visible effect on the DRC, but less so on the RCSA.

Introduction

The ongoing vitality of a Reformed church polity is accepted by most Reformed scholars and churches. This vitality is often argued for along the following lines:

- A true Reformed church polity is aimed at a meaningful and ongoing changing of church orders and church government (Smit 1984:90). The word “Reformed” does not imply stagnation or use of the same practical measures over and over again. An important insight in Reformed circles is that a true Reformed church polity serves and by doing so helps churches to be churches governed by the Word of God. A true Reformed church polity is by no means an end in itself, but serves to keep Christ and the Word at the head of the church. Some scholars even call it a serving justice (Plomp 1992:38-40). The origin of this viewpoint – probably – lies in Lutheran circles (Barth 1967:679vv; Wolf 1961:8, 24, 73vv). The argument goes on to state that a church polity and order are not meant to provide laws that should be followed strictly or go into the small details of church life. It should rather provide orderly channels through which the Word can flow freely to determine the ordering of church affairs. This by implication means that a Reformed church polity is adaptable to new circumstances and keeps its identity as a polity serving the Word in the process (Strauss 2010:1vv).
- This point of departure implies that a church order provides practical measures or channels to help the church but also stems from constant points of departure that can take on different shapes and forms at different times (Strauss 2010:20). Simplified examples in this regard concern matters of dress code at official church meetings, changes in the tasks of church offices and the tasks allocated to different church assemblies in church (cf the tasks of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in DRC 1986:11 and DRC 2004:18-19). How the guiding principle operates can be seen in the existing order of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The changing *Umwelt* or circumstances of a church involve more than the life and habits of members of the church and encompass all factors of living in the specific society. The church, itself an institution in society, cannot simply be isolated from it. Important factors in this regard are government, the state and trends influencing the social life of citizens. So the state and its constitution, as well as prevailing social norms, are all to be reckoned with.

The South African context after 1994

The context of South African society after the official ending of apartheid with the first fully democratic general election in 1994 differs radically from the context pre-1994. I am referring not only to the new non-racial attitude in society in general – which is, however, not the approach of every citizen, politician or recognised leader, white or coloured or black.¹ For example, government official statistics are still based on race. I am also referring to spiritual trends underlying the new South African society as a whole.

¹ It is a commonly known fact that the former leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, regards all white people in South Africa as bad, immoral and oppressive.

I don't want to create the impression that what I have indicated here reflects all the trends in the South African society with a bearing on church government or polity. I am referring only to some of the more prominent trends in society.

A strong influence in South African society is the new democratic and religiously neutral *state constitution and the philosophy behind it*: the Constitution of 1996 (Vorster 2003:412-414). This constitution forbids any judicial or state differentiation based on race, sex, sexual orientation and religious affiliation, and advocates freedom of speech, religion and association. It is a constitution which endorses human rights in the simple and straightforwardly humanistic sense of the word. In a narrow sense it underlines the freedom of individuals in the broadest sense of the word (Kleyn & Viljoen 1999:267; Constitutional Assembly 1997:5-6).

This approach has an influence on the thinking of the church on ethical and polity issues. It creates questions about the authority of church assemblies and the way in which these assemblies come to decisions. It also underscores the right of individual believers to distance themselves from decisions of the assemblies. It urges the churches to make room in thought and action for the right of the individual's personal views on spiritual issues.

Departing from the right of individuals to their own viewpoints and preferences, a new term has been developed in church circles: diversity (DRC 2011:211vv). This diversity is also used in the context of differences over core issues of church doctrine and polity. As one observer puts it, this diversity creates the problem that a prescribing church order can no longer bind all church members (Prisma 2/2009:17).

This trend fits in with the present approach of post-modernism advocated in some DRC circles. This approach may promote a relativism of convictions.

Although a new climate is created by the people who speak out against racial prejudice in any sense of the word, there is a tendency to be more sympathetic towards black people as *the underprivileged of the past* than towards believers of other races in South Africa. Thus the views of the formerly disadvantaged on church affairs and church polity are often more carefully considered than those of others.

This approach also tends to neglect things in South Africa's apartheid past which had nothing to do with apartheid, and some were in fact challenges to the ideology of separate development.

An example here is the approach of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) to possible major assemblies in a new united Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). According to their own thinking and understanding of the Belhar Confession dating from the 1980s (Cloete & Smit 1984:7-10), one federal council for this family of churches is not a structure of unity, but of apartheid or segregation. Not that it is such from a church political point of view, but simply because it was used in a time when the General Synod of the DRC supported apartheid (DRC 1978:68-71). For the URCSA and their understanding of Belhar on the separation of churches this fits into the picture Belhar draws on church separation (URCSA 2008:208vv).

A third trend in South Africa after 1994 is that the *values of the Constitution are seen as not only normative for the state but for non-state structures as well*. A simple way for the government and their supporters to right past wrongs is to force an equal representation of groups, sexes and gender on all state and non-state governing structures in society, whether or not those appointed are equipped to do the job at hand. This is part of the official government policy of affirmative action, a policy also imposed on non-state institutions (Strauss 2010:3).

In some Reformed church assemblies this has moved the church to save a certain number of positions for women, young, black and coloured people. Thus in certain positions they do not elect the best-qualified people for the job in the assembly, but simply a certain number of women, young or coloured people, as represented in the specific assembly.

Core elements of a Reformed church polity

With these trends and background in mind, we can now approach some core elements of a Reformed church polity as well as the way in which the DRC and the Gereformeerde (Reformed) Kerke (Churches) in South Africa (RCSA) function in a changing South Africa. The adjective "changing" indicates that the South African society, after two decades of total democracy, is still changing. The buzzwords used in South Africa are *transformation* (and the need for it): transformation in this context is neither a Reformed word nor a Reformed principle. This transformation often simply means a transformation in the composition of the groups or individuals in control of institutions, in which the number of people chosen from each racial group reflects the diverse composition of the South African population. According to this way of reasoning, the majority of the people in control or present in these institutions or groups should reflect the racial majority in South Africa. Therefore the formerly underprivileged races or disadvantaged groups – who are a majority in South Africa – should take control. As a result other important criteria are often overlooked, such as suitability for the task at hand or experience in the field. The view of thinking people is that if this race-based approach is maintained and remains government policy, a new racism will have been created and officially sanctioned in South Africa.

The first Reformed principle for church government is the *principle of an anti-hierarchy* in both church offices and assemblies (Engelhard & Hofman 2001:147). These assemblies govern the church. Trends in the new South African society tend to move away from the supreme powers invested in synods and give local authorities a say as well. This helps to restore the rightful place of the congregation and its consistory as a fully fledged church, but also stimulates a new congregational independentism in the churches (Strauss 1997:172; 2008:242). What is more, it tends to minimise the impact and relevance of major assemblies. This impact is not always visible in church orders, but certainly is in the daily life of churches. This goes for the DRC as well as the RCSA. Examples are the reaction of a presbytery in the DRC Northern Synod to the effect: this is that the recent DRC General Synod held in October 2011 is for this church what Polokwane was for president Zuma and the ANC before his election as president (*Volksblad* 20:10:2011, 5). It is also known that RCSA consistories openly disobey the decisions of Synod about women in office and defy other decisions, calling themselves “*dolerend*” when they do so (*Volksblad* 24:01:2012, 2).

The second principle for a Reformed church government is that obeying the *authority of the Word* is obeying the *authority of Christ* as head of the church (Jonker 1965:12) – which may sound simple and easy, put this way, but which is not so easy in churches where people differ on the authority and impact of Scripture. In both the DRC and the RCSA the Bible is accepted and recognised as normative for life as a whole, but people differ about how the Scriptures is interpreted on certain core issues.

A recent point was made in the DRC that church unity should not apply for every detail of church life, but should rather be about agreement on the main points of the Christian faith (DRC 2007:220vv). These main points should be considered and formulated in the confessions of the church. The problem is that the points of difference or diversity had now been shifted by some to confessional issues like the covenant and baptism, which was also reflected in the agenda of the General Synod in October 2011 (DRC 2011:291).

These tendencies weaken the strength of the church as a DRC denomination, creating the feeling among congregations that they should concentrate on their own concerns and close their eyes to the problems of the denomination.

The question that remains is what visible impact a socially and politically changing South Africa has already made on the DRC and RCSA church orders. How is the changing South Africa reflected in their church orders? The DRC church order (DRC-CO) dates from 1962 and their first general synod. As far as its chapters are concerned, the DRC-CO follows the example of the Church Order of Dordt (DCO), and has remained unchanged since 1962. With regard to its content the DRC-CO used the Church Order of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands of 1959 as a temporary example of the DCO (Vorster 1960:13). Since 1962 the DRC-CO has undergone more changes than the church order of the RCSA (RSCA-CO). The RCSA tends to be more adapted to the DCO with fewer changes in recent times and therefore shows fewer signs of influence from its *Umwelt*. It will also be correct to say that over the years the RCSA seems to have taken a more independent stance towards influences from the outside world than the DRC (cf DRC 1978, 2004; Van der Linde 1983; Visser 1999).

The DRC-CO and RCSA-CO in a changing South Africa

Most changes in the DRC-CO since 1994 in connection with the social and political changes in South Africa reflect changes with regard to the new political dispensation.

This is already clear in chapter 1. In article 2.3 it is stated that the DRC controls and decides on its own internal order because it has the right to do so as a church and takes up its constitutional right, according to article 15 of the South African Constitution 1996, to freedom of religion. Before 1994 the DRC felt no need to say this. Now however it has seemed necessary in the climate created by the Constitution promoting the acceptance of internationally recognised rights and because of fears that the South African government may overstep the mark and try to force the DRC to take certain measures. In this environment the Constitution has helped the church hold onto its identity and religious freedom.

The second change in the DRC-CO was made to article 67 (DRC 2007:30). This article concentrates on the DRC's relationship with the state. This article was article 65 in DRC-CO 1962 (DRC 1962:14-15).

In 1962, and since most of the government of the day belonged to the DRC, the DRC-CO expressed its gratitude for government protection and noted the recognition of its right to freedom of religion by the state. What is more, it promised openly and solemnly not to misuse this freedom by promoting civic disorder or undermining government authority. These sentiments were unique to Reformed church orders and exemplified the close ties between the DRC and the pro-apartheid government. They were also a response to the public resistance of the ANC and PAC against the National Party government in the 1960s: a resistance not popular in the DRC. After the change in government in 1994, the article was reworded to include any government – Christian or non-Christian – according to Romans 13 and to be much more precise about church-state relations.

The South African labour laws of 1995 also had an influence on the DRC-CO. This was seen in the changes to article 12 concerning the church and ministers in its service. Although formulated as a church document, this article reflects these laws in spirit (DRC 1998:7).

In contrast to the DRC-CO the RCSA-CO does not follow the mode of changes on issues which could be connected to changes in the South African state. Their ways of formulating church-state relationships before and after 1994 have remained the same. The RCSA-CO was changed in 1967 based on a comparison between the tasks of the church and the state: as the agent able to enforce its will on all, the state should protect the church in its actions as the agent for justice in society; the church in turn should strive towards a good relationship with the government, to maintain contact with the government and to witness to the government when necessary. This formulation makes provision for any government, Christian or non-Christian. In this sense it obeys Romans 13 (Visser 1999:121:vv).

The labour laws did not stimulate change in the RCSA-CO (Visser 1999:3vv). The RCSA is of the opinion that the state should respect and stay out of the internal relations of the church. A true church, is the argument, will handle people in its service with justice and therefore cannot be compared to other social institutions. This remains a point of debate in modern South Africa: how to be Reformed and stay a church in one's own right in changed circumstances.

Conclusion

For both the DRC and the RCSA the biggest change in their *Umwelt* since 1994 has not been in internal changes but from without, in a society based on a humanistic bill of rights. The aim of both is to remain true to their Reformed calling in new circumstances. In its church order the DRC has shown more response to the issues of a changing South African society than the RCSA. The latter, however, has probably been more independent on these issues from the outset.

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