

The Dutch Reformed Church, Mission Enthusiasts and Push and Pull of Empire

Retief Müller

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9569-9368>

Stellenbosch University

retiefmuller@sun.ac.za

Abstract

The various ways in which the British Empire acted as both a beacon and a repellent for Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) mission enthusiasts in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, are considered here. Focusing especially on Andrew Murray Jr, D.F. Malan and J.G. Strydom, but also with references to Johannes du Plessis and G.B.A. Gerdener, among others, the article illustrates the evolution of Afrikaner attitudes to Empire in this period. The Empire in question is primarily the British Empire, but this paper will make the case that the developing Afrikaner nationalism, in which some of these mission enthusiasts played leading roles, in some ways appropriated imperial aspirations, while simultaneously disavowing Empire in public discourse. The wider and more general relevance of this paper is that it sheds light on the allure of power, and how a minority in opposition to power might become contaminated, even captured, by that very power it seeks to oppose.

Keywords: Dutch Reformed Church (DRC); British Empire; Afrikaner nationalism; colonialism; apartheid; Christian mission

Introduction

This article focuses on the changing positioning within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as an evolving spiritual centre of Afrikaner people in British colonial Africa from the early 19th century until the mid-20th century. The article will demonstrate a complex and changing pattern within the DRC with a number of different nuances as time went by.

The idea of the Afrikaner as a colonised people, as victims of Empire, is of course deeply problematic for many obvious reasons. Assuredly, the Dutch were early colonisers both



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in southern Africa and South-East Asia. Yet, the fact that the Dutch colony at the Cape was in a sense an accidental colony, rather than a planned settlement, the result of the economic interests of the Dutch East India Company, rather than Dutch imperial ambitions from the top down, might have allowed Afrikaner nationalists of later generations to imagine disingenuously a colonial and especially an imperial innocence when it came to the trials and travails of their much maligned *volk*. Such a narrative is, of course, dependent on an ideological revisionist history that fails to account for the existence of an early modern European paradigm, in which the justification and priority of the colonisation and exploitation of Africa and other territories were seen as completely reasonable and self-evident. The Dutch at the Cape and the subsequent Afrikaners were undoubtedly and perhaps inevitably part of a colonising imperial culture. Their general attitudes to people and landownership, regarding which there is no short supply in archival materials, were absolutely in line with what one would expect of such a culture.

No relatively informed analysis of this history could perpetuate the myth of imperial innocence when it came to the Afrikaner. On the other hand, British imperial aggression and ultimate subjection of the Boer Republics meant that with respect to the dominant imperial culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Afrikaners found themselves, at least on the social imaginary level, at the receiving end of this more focused expression of Empire. Within all of this the case of the DRC is somewhat complicated in that it changed over time, from at one point being a fully domesticated body within the British Empire to becoming a resisting force as part of an alternative vision of a counter-Empire. Then, as I shall indicate in this article, there also occurred a further shift that could best be described as anti-Empire. These shifts are particularly and prominently accentuated in the careers of DRC mission enthusiasts, for various reasons that will be touched upon in the following paragraphs. Perhaps paradoxically, the anti-Empire position came closest of all to providing the blueprint for the development of apartheid, which eventually positioned itself as a neo-imperial programme for dividing and ruling the indigenous population of South Africa and Namibia.

Pushed from Empire? The Dutch Colonists, the Imperial DRC, and the Great Trek

The so-called push and pull theory that posits various factors of attraction and repulsion was originally touted in relation to migration (Lee 1966), but since migration is often a response to imperial pressure, the theme of push and pull is appropriate also for the theme of Empire itself (Punt 2016). As is well familiar to historians of South Africa, the first half of the 19th century saw a northerly and easterly migration of Dutch farmers out of the British controlled Cape Colony. This subsequently became known as the Great Trek in Afrikaner history, and although there were a variety of motivating factors, it was by and large a protest against the equalisation policies being instituted not only in the Cape Colony, but in the British Empire at large. Hence Dutch farmers, for economic reasons, but also due to the more basic need to affirm a worldview that

incorporated hierarchical gradations of humanity—now threatened by abolitionist policies—felt pushed out from the imperial orbit. At least that is how it was justified to their own self-satisfaction. It is very well known that the Great Trek became a cornerstone of Afrikaner identity, especially in the way this migrating conquest was subsequently memorialised in the monumental history of 20th century Afrikanerdom (Müller 2015). One curious aspect regarding this was that the DRC, usually such a thoroughgoing and reliable tributary to the plot lines of Afrikaner identity during much of this period, initially had a rather negative judgement on the Great Trek and its stated purposes (Dreyer 1929). This, I argue, is where the pull of the (British) Empire comes into play, and at least where it could be most clearly seen in early Afrikaner religious history.

The seeming anomaly of non-support for what proved to be an ultimate cornerstone in Afrikaner self-understanding might be explained as rooted in especially two factors: the DRC was a state church with ministers appointed and salaried by the British colonial government. Therefore, purely from a position of self-interest they had no motive for supporting rebel causes. Secondly, although some of the Afrikaner ministers in the DRC might have sympathised on the ideological level with the emigrants, the actual situation was that most of the prospective emigrants originated from congregations where Scottish immigrant ministers were serving. This was specifically the case with regards to the presbytery of Graaff Reinet, which comprised the following congregations: Graaff-Reinet, Uitenhage, Cradock, Beaufort West, Somerset East, Colesberg, Balfour, Glen-Lynden and Albanie. These were all in the borderlands and their memberships were the worst affected by the emigration. All of these congregations were served at the time by Scottish ministers (Dreyer 1929, 27).

The Scots did not apparently share the sentiments of the farmers, although they were willing to engage continuously with their recalcitrant members. Two of the presbytery's ministers (Taylor from Cradock and Reid from Colesberg) subsequently asked for and obtained leave from government to visit the emigrants (Dreyer 1929, 29ff). A letter from Taylor to the government requesting that he be allowed to go to them to preach, administer sacraments, and perform ministerial duties is somewhat ambiguous regarding his personal motivations, but he makes it clear that he was in disagreement with the migrants' motivations: "As I have been always strongly opposed to the Emigration, I do not consider it my duty to go and reside among them as their minister, but should Government grant me permission to visit them for the above purposes, which would require three or four months at least, I should willingly comply with their request, as I trust that through the Divine blessing such a visit would be very beneficial to many" (Taylor quoted in Dreyer 1929, 30).

Subsequent visitations came in the form of senior Cape ministers, some of whom yet again of Scottish extraction, such as Andrew Murray of Graaff Reinet (Dreyer 1929, 88ff) and William Robertson of Swellendam (Dreyer 1929, 130–131). The government was amenable to such contacts between DRC ministers and the emigrants, no doubt

hoping to secure their loyalty to the imperial Cape church. Such a strategy was briefly successful to at least draw these Voortrekkers back into the orbit of the Empire, at a spiritual and ecclesiastical, if not at a geographical level, as the next section will show.

The DRC and the Evolution of an Imperial Church

The role of the Cape DRC on the one hand as a tool of the British Empire, but on the other hand perhaps also an imperial entity in itself, should be posited here. In tandem with the expansion of the British Empire and even as prelude to such expansion, the church made sure that it incorporated newly founded congregations to the north under its auspices. This latter move might perhaps be seen in a series of successive delegations of the Cape Synod to the emigrants. With the third delegation Andrew Murray Jr, poised for his fourth tour to the Transvaal, was sent in an official capacity along with J.H. Neethling, between March and June 1852, to the emigrants living in that region. After meetings with all the relevant church councils, the Transvaal congregations all pledged their wish to remain under the Cape DRC. Dreyer mentions the example of Potchefstroom, which declared: “We prevail upon the Synod not to forget us, but that our congregations should always be allowed to stand connected to the Synod; because although we are here outside the border of the Colony, we are staying inside the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, which is without borders” [transl.] (Dreyer 1929, 168). Hence, they seemed to identify the reach of the Cape DRC with the Kingdom of Christ. Of course, the Cape Synod duly incorporated the Transvaal congregations in October 1852 (Dreyer 1929, 168).

This incorporation was, however, extremely short-lived. A few months after the arrival of Ds van der Hoff from the Netherlands in May 1853, the Transvaal Volksraad and the General Assembly of Congregations determined that the ties with the Cape DRC should be broken. This occurred on 8 August 1853 (Du Plessis 1920, 149–150). In this way the increasingly outward reach of Empire through church was evidently resisted, or pushed back if you will, by the Dutch counter culture. Johannes du Plessis suggests that Murray must have been surprised by these developments, even if he could have anticipated some “behind the scenes” dealings (Du Plessis, 1920, 149). Several factors during the latter half of the 19th century turned the tide against the Cape church’s imperial association. One specific event to mention was the occasion when Andrew Murray Jr, at that time minister in Bloemfontein, went as deputised by a colonial committee to London in 1854 to protest the British relinquishment of the Orange River Sovereignty (Du Plessis 1920, 159–162). This action probably generated some resentment among the republican faction in the soon to be Free State and elsewhere.

However, renewed British imperial aggression culminating in the South African War (1899–1902) was a major catalyst to shift the DRC into a republican spiritual orbit. By this point Murray, along with other prominent figures in the Cape DRC, had changed allegiance and started to support the republican cause (Hofmeyr et al. ca. 1899).

Andrew Murray's biographer and successor as leading missionary "statesman," Johannes du Plessis, was a Cape Afrikaner who was thoroughly at home in Anglo-American and ecumenical missionary circles, both before and especially after the South African War. He was an Afrikaner missiologist and theologian who could not at all be described as a nationalist (Elphick 2003, 63). He nevertheless adopted a strong pro-Boer stance during the war, acquiring leave from his congregation in Cape Town to serve for an extended period as a chaplain to both POW camps in the Cape Colony, as well as to concentration camps where Boer women and children were interred in the area of Aliwal North (Erasmus 2009, 98ff.).

Prior to the onset of apartheid, Du Plessis was among the last DRC mission theorists and historians of note to remain relatively free from deep entanglements with Afrikaner identity issues, specifically nationalism. Regarding wider South African politics, Du Plessis was an active participant, representing the DRC in ecumenical forums focusing on the native question, among other things. His feet—or at least one of them—were planted in the English-speaking world and he was primarily interested in the role of the DRC in the evangelisation of Africa (Elphick 2003, 57–64), a fact that in spite of his so-called liberal theological proclivities, made him culturally and ecclesiastically more akin to the prior generation typified by Andrew Murray, than to any of his missiological successors. It is noteworthy that Du Plessis's position shifted over time regarding segregation. Elphick calls his views as expressed in the 1921 document, *The Dutch Reformed Church and the Native Problem* "remarkably progressive for its time" (Elphick 2003, 60). However, by 1926 he argued in contradiction to many of his ecumenical coalition partners against the common franchise, but perhaps somewhat paradoxically also against the introduction of the so-called "Colour Bar" that ensured specific job reservation for whites only. Secure in his belief in white supremacy, Du Plessis felt there was no need to enact unfair laws to artificially ensure whites' superior position in the market place (Elphick 2003, 62). If Du Plessis could be said to have a position regarding Empire, it seems that it came very close to that of Andrew Murray; i.e. the expansion of a paternalist missionary DRC as a kind of alternative Empire.

G.B.A. Gerdener, who followed in his footsteps at Stellenbosch Seminary, similarly positioned himself as an ecumenist in the tradition of Du Plessis. Gerdener, however, became absorbed in political machinations at a time when the Cape DRC, along with all the other regional synods, had for all purposes started to sing to the tune of D.F. Malan's purified National Party's reconstituted counter-Empire. Elphick shows clearly how Gerdener considered his own advocacy for "separate development" to be premised on the "altruistic" predisposition of the white population, but that he also feared that their real reason for supporting the policy was rather grounded in "egotistical" motives (Elphick 2003, 74).

The Afrikaner National Project in the 20th Century in (as) the Shadow of a Dying Empire

A central aspect of the argument in this article is that Afrikaner nationalism was a form of counter-Empire. At root, this is not a novel idea. In an article on the subject, Erna Oliver summarises the point thus: “The moment that the Afrikaners gained political control, they implemented their own empire ...” (Oliver 2010).

If this basic idea is accepted, then it might also be apparent why the transition of the DRC from being a church wedded to the British Empire in the 19th century would become an Afrikaner *volkskerk* once Afrikaner nationalism had replaced the British Empire as its primary background context. The place of mission in all of this becomes further clarified once we realise that, as Brian Stanley puts it: “Christianity is an inherently imperial religion in the sense that it claims that the revealed truth of God was incarnated uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ, that all men and women are called to respond in repentance and faith to that revelation, and that the kingdom of God inaugurated in the coming of Christ makes absolute demands upon all people and all cultures” (Stanley 1990, 184). It is perhaps not difficult to see why missionaries and mission enthusiasts wholeheartedly committed to such a vision, would also be attracted to imperial visions of slightly more limited scope. In some cases they perhaps even conflated visions of a limited Empire with the eternal and universal one.

The paradigm shift that allowed the DRC to transform itself into a *volkskerk* (an ethnic national or people’s church) is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the person of Daniel Francois Malan, who evolved from being an evangelical minister with mission interests into becoming a powerful political figure riding a rising tide of Afrikaner nationalism into the office of elected Prime Minister in 1948 (Koorts 2014). One document that captures the developing Afrikaner theological sentiments very well during the First World War years is Malan’s farewell address to his congregation of Graaff Reinet. Here Malan offers an apologia for his decision to exchange his clerical calling for a life of politics. He pleads for a unity of church and *volk*, even mentions the term “*Volkskerk*” and makes it clear that he considers the Afrikaner to be a divinely elected and led group of people. Malan emphasises for example that “not only the churchly religious life of a *volk*, but also the wider national and political life should be subjected to the reign of God” [transl.]. And he issues a warning: “Although we are a Christian *volk*, there has been in the past, and there still is today, for us no greater danger than that we, similar to some Christians in the days of Paul, draw too sharp a dividing line between religion and politics, between the church and the broader life of the *volk*” [transl.] (Malan 1915, 3). To the contrary: “The *volk* should stand in other words in its whole national life in all its branches in front of the face of God” [transl.] (Malan 1915, 4).

Malan’s providential view of the trials and travails of the *volk* is shown in the following quotation: “Every well-meaning attempt to repair the unity of our *volk* is therefore an

attempt not only in the interest of our *volk* but also in the interest of the Gospel and the Church of our fathers ...” [transl.] (Malan 1915, 6). It is further captured in a number of rhetorical questions: “Do we acknowledge in the history of our *volk* the hand of God? The fact that we exist as a *volk*, that we became a *volk* through the course of years, is that God’s work or is it the work of people?” [transl.] (Malan 1915, 6–7). With such a godly vision of Afrikanerdom, it is hardly strange that Malan would have no theological qualms about giving up his pulpit in favour of leading the Afrikaner to political dominance, and together with that the indigenous populace into positions of subjection. Apartheid, as envisioned by Malan was, I suggest, in some sense a rather peculiar reinvention of imperialist paternalism at a time when the British Empire itself was beginning to falter. With my interpretation of Malan as engaging in a degree of mimicry with respect to the British Empire, I admittedly go somewhat against the grain of authoritative and informed opinion regarding Malan’s sensibilities, as particularly seen in the work of Lindie Koorts. Koorts, in her extensive and impressive biography, states that Malan’s “Afrikaner nationalism was shaped by nineteenth-century European nationalism” (Koorts 2014, 52). Regarding his British sentiments, she writes: “To Malan, British imperialism represented all that was detestable. It was the opposite of cultural pluralism, which he regarded as the ideal” (Koorts 2014, 45). This commentary, however, especially concerns his early 20th century views, and although I do not suggest that his ideological positioning in these respects changed much as time went by, I do suggest a person might inadvertently come to represent a version of that which one despises, especially if its despicability is a central driving force in one’s life and career. I argue that for Malan this was true to a degree.

It would be important to note as an aside, although I cannot elaborate on this here, that Andrew Murray, whom I take to be representative of the older more conventionally imperial Cape DRC, in a published pamphlet disagreed sharply with Malan’s stated reasons for quitting the ministry in favour of politics (Murray 1915). According to Murray, the religious and secular life remained clearly distinct, with the former accorded undoubted priority over the latter. Underlying Murray’s objections was perhaps a particular uneasiness regarding Afrikaner nationalist enmeshment of Reformed Christianity with the secular affairs of the Afrikaner people. As indicated above, Murray had no qualms about involving himself in the secular affairs of the British Empire, particularly in opposing its withdrawal from the Orange River Sovereignty.

More to the point, regarding Malan’s perhaps inadvertent and counterintuitive attraction to imperial strategising, I suggest his concluding remarks, in a 1913 travelogue detailing his experiences of a journey through southern and central Africa, are of interest, since they contain at least a partial vision of counter-empire. The concluding section is entitled “The value of the Afrikaners in Rhodesia for our *volk* and our church” [transl.] (Malan 1913, 84–86). Here Malan argued that there was as of yet no clarity whether Rhodesia would in future become part of the Union of South Africa, or not, but whether that were to become the case, or not, the region was inevitably tied up with the fortunes of South Africa. That meant that particular care had to be taken that Afrikaners residing in

Rhodesia would not become disconnected from their heritage and connection to the wider *volk*. Malan concluded the book with a paragraph on the potentially important role of Dutch in wider Africa:

Dutch is, alongside English, the official language of the country in the Union of South Africa. It also occupies that position next to French in the Congo. Should the Afrikaners in both Rhodesias, with our powerful support, acquire the rights to which they aspire, then the language of our *volk* and our Church would be the official language of the land stretching from Cape Town to the Ubangi, that is to say a distance of 3 000 miles right through the heart of Africa up to the borders of the Sudan. [transl.] (Malan 1913, 86)

This is, I suggest, an unambiguous vision of counter-Empire, perhaps even to be considered in terms of mimicry within the scope of the British Empire in Africa.

Afrikaner Religiosity Meets Free State Politics

A more explicitly antagonistic view of even the idea of Empire would develop over time, especially in the former Boer Republics.

This section presents a couple of figures who were especially active in the 1930s and 1940s in the Orange Free State, when Afrikaner nationalism was in the ascendancy. For this purpose it might be useful to mention a collection of sermons by an influential DRC minister who began his ministry in Salisbury but spent his final years in Bloemfontein. C.R. Kotzé, similar to some other characters about whom I wrote in a previous article (Müller 2018), spent time in St. Helena as a POW during the South African War. There he followed a well-established pattern among his peers of being converted and resolving to enter the ministry. Like many of the others mentioned in my previous article, Kotzé ended up north of the South African borders, but unlike those who became missionaries to black Africans, Kotzé went to serve a DRC congregation of Afrikaner expats in Rhodesia. From there he proceeded to become minister in a number of South African congregations, and finally he ended up in Bloemfontein.

Although it might be argued that DRC missionaries in Rhodesia, Nyasaland and elsewhere were in a sense pulled into the British Empire—in the case of Malawi they were even mentored by Scottish missionaries and otherwise very well adapted to imperial norms and programmes—Kotzé was very much pushed, even repulsed by Empire. That at least would seem to be the case if his collection of sermons between 1930 and 1946 on “the Bible and our *volk*’s struggle” is anything to go by. Included are sermons by such catchy titles as: “God makes the nations and the Devil makes the Empire”; “The Walls of our *Volk*”; “Christian Hatred” [transl.], etcetera. Although this is primarily in support of Afrikaner nationalism, the sermons also exhibit a pro-German, anti-Semitic, anti-black, and above all, of course, anti-British stance. Kotzé pronounces God’s judgment over the Empire and the Empire’s agents. Regarding the Empire’s methods, Kotzé writes that they include the following:

Extinguish the borders which God had erected between nations, allow nations to mix, become bastardised, degenerate. Mix the nations, mix the colours and the churches. The empire creates questions. Our coloured question is a creation of the empire. The Indian question is a creation of the empire. The Jewish question is a creation of the empire. The native question is a creation of the empire. The poor white question is a creation of the empire ... *Religion and nationalism kill an empire; but mixing, degeneration, confusion strengthen an empire!* [transl., emphasis in original] (Kotzé 1955, 8–9)

Although Kotzé cannot be considered part of the DRC mission enterprise, I find it is useful to have his narrow *volk*-centric views as prelude for illuminating the context in which a prominent DRC mission enthusiast operated. This is the controversial J.G. (Valie) Strydom.

Johannes Gerhardus Strydom, not to be confused with the politician and future prime minister, Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom, was a missionary turned administrator when he became mission secretary of the Orange Free State DRC. He is particularly notable for, when occupying the latter position, advocating mission to blacks as a means of safeguarding white interests in South Africa (Elphick 2012, 227).

Strydom became interested in mission work during his student days in Stellenbosch after listening to the German missionary, Dr Karl Kumm, who visited South Africa in 1907 on the invitation of Andrew Murray Jr (Badenhorst 1981, 15). Kumm inspired his audiences with the vision of the Sudan United Mission, of which he was a founder. The ideal was to have a chain of Protestant mission stations from west to east, from the Niger to the Nile, to serve as bulwark against Islamic influence from the north.

Strydom, having been admitted to the DRC ministry in the previous year, joined the SUM as missionary in 1911, after having received ordination at the hands of the abovementioned D.F. Malan at the DRC in Montagu (Badenhorst 1981, 5). As was typical for South African missionaries at the time, Strydom first went to London for a medical course in tropical diseases at Livingstone College (Badenhorst 1981, 16). During this time, Strydom, along with other South Africans, attended the Keswick Convention where he was greatly impressed by the addresses of speakers such as the Scottish Presbyterian missionary, Donald Fraser, who articulated the missionary need in Africa (Badenhorst 1981, 20).

From there Strydom and his wife, Kate, journeyed to what is today north-central Nigeria to join the South African branch of SUM missionaries working among the Tiv people. The area was of course under British imperial control, and it is interesting to read Strydom's recollections of especially the First World War years when the relationship between government officials and missionaries see-sawed somewhat between friendliness and distrust. On one occasion the missionaries were forced to leave the station for several months in 1914–1915 when German forces were approaching the area (Badenhorst 1981, 50).

Already at this stage, Strydom seems to have had Afrikaner nationalist sympathies. On leave in 1915, and visiting the parsonage of his in-laws in the Karoo town of Hofmeyr where English was the spoken language, Strydom wanted to know why there was no *Burger* to be found in the house (Badenhorst 1981, 13–14). *De Burger* was the recently founded Afrikaner nationalist newspaper of which D.F. Malan was the first editor. The connection between Malan and Strydom has already been mentioned with respect to the biographically significant moment of Strydom’s ordination, and it could be added here that the DRC in Montagu supported missionary Strydom financially (Koorts 2014, 78).

It is, however, interesting to also note that Strydom’s wife, Kate, emerged out of this English-leaning milieu of Hofmeyr, and attended the Murray-founded Huguenot College in Wellington. Regarding this alma mater of his wife, Strydom had apparently once complained: “Our *volk* has been anglicised through the Huguenot College. If the mother is English, the child is too” [transl.] (Badenhorst 1981, 11).

Strydom resigned from the mission and left West Africa due to medical reasons in 1920. From there he served as DRC minister in the Free State Town of Excelsior, and in 1926 he took up the position of general mission secretary of the Free State DRC (Badenhorst 1981, 84). In this capacity he became both influential and controversial with a steadily deteriorating relationship with the Cape DRC. A particular sticking point concerned a territorial dispute in areas of South Rhodesia between Free State and Cape DRC missions, and moreover tensions between the two bodies came to a particular climax when, under Strydom’s influence, the Free State mission in North Rhodesia refused to join the newly founded Church of Central Africa Presbyterian; a church which had been jointly founded by the Cape DRC’s Nkhoma Synod in Malawi alongside churches affiliated with two Scottish Presbyterian missions. Regarding this, Elphick quotes Strydom as stating: “The idea of unity ... is just a camouflage for absorbing our work and to promote Empire, and not to evangelize the African but to make him a black Englishman” (Elphick 2012, 228).

This stance of the Free State DRC pitted Strydom against his Cape colleague Gerdener, who was also chair of the DRC’s federal mission council (Badenhorst 1981, 110–111). Strydom had by this time a much more Afrikaans-centred, anti-ecumenical stance than Gerdener. In this respect Elphick writes that Gerdener had accused Strydom of “chaotic thinking, exaggeration, and an ‘obsession against English church bodies’” (Elphick 2003, 70).

The Free State mission enterprise, in line with the dominant political sentiments in that region, was a deeply nationalistic one, even more so than the general direction of the DRC at the time. Hence “separate development” where each so-called tribe were supposed to go their own proverbial way in every facet of life, was a natural development out of this type of mindset, and Strydom played a crucial part in framing some of the early policy in this regard.

I have maintained that the position represented by D.F. Malan was in fact geared towards the construction of a kind of counter-Empire. In other words, apartheid might be seen as a way of dividing and ruling; and, of course, the way apartheid was implemented over time did indeed bear the marks of this kind of approach. D.F. Malan seemed to favour a kind of infinite paternalist rule of white over black in South Africa (see below).

Strydom himself, on the other hand, might perhaps better be described as an anti-imperialist. In a 1937 speech he delivered at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Strydom argued that Afrikaner whites in South Africa—after the loss of the South African War—had understood too dearly what it meant to be uprooted from their own language and traditions by a foreign authority, for them to ever consider enforcing a policy of assimilation on the many races of South Africa (Badenhorst 1981, 142). To the contrary, segregation and differentiation were the only workable approaches. In this sense he was echoing what any other apartheid ideologue was saying; but there is something different to take note of. Although he was among the first “theological” writers to use the word apartheid, Strydom had a rather unambitious vision of apartheid, imperially speaking, as also seen in a 1947 article he wrote on the subject for publication in several of the national newspapers.

Referring to an infamous strategic error committed by a Free State Boer general during the war, Strydom wrote:

General Cronjé could have saved his *laager* if he retreated, but he refused to retreat in order to take up a better position with the consequence that he had to surrender his whole army to the enemy. In the race struggle it has now come so far that we have to retreat in order to occupy a better position ... I have come to the conclusion that the time has come for whites to retreat in order to occupy a better position and consequently to give to the black man what he deserves.” [transl.] (Badenhorst 1981, 146)

Strydom’s plan for doing this was the creation of “black provinces.” “These provinces should have more or less the same rights as an American state. Later they may receive their own national council. The Union government still controls and manages them, but as they become capable to fill the posts, they receive preference and eventually they govern themselves” (Badenhorst 1981, 147).

Strydom sent copies of this article also to the Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, and to D.F. Malan as leader of the opposition. From Malan he received a personal reply, which indicated broad agreement with Strydom’s proposal, but with an important caveat. Malan wrote regarding his commission, which was working on the foundations of apartheid: “As far as I can see they will search for a solution along similar lines, although I would question the wisdom of already envisioning full independence, while the non-white races would apparently not be ready for this for many years to come. If we say

two hundred years, then they would maybe say five years and then we have agitation and chaos” (D.F. Malan 1947 quoted in Badenhorst 1981, 150).

Strydom’s daughter, Lala Badenhorst, concludes in her 1981 biography that her father was a man ahead of his time. Not because of the fact that he apparently had a more optimistic view of black capabilities than did D.F. Malan, but because he had envisioned homelands 20 years before the National Party had started to implement them. She professed that had Smuts acted on Strydom’s proposal immediately and without delay, then white South Africa would have been seen as liberators, leaders and policy shapers in Africa rather than as the scapegoat for everything that went wrong (Badenhorst 1981, 150).

Conclusion

This latter perspective, as articulated by a descendent of Strydom, is of course a 1980s white pipe dream. However, it is important to note that Strydom himself did not, at least in this proposal, make any claims to the Afrikaner, or whites in general, as a beacon of light for blacks to follow. That would have been the imperial or counter-imperial vision. To the contrary, the whole point of his version of separateness was that each should go their own way and excel within their own sphere as far as possible. This was an anti-imperial vision, perhaps in direct resonance with the specific version of Afrikaner identity emerging out of the former Boer Republics, which was somewhat different from the Cape Afrikaner nationalist view in the DRC, particularly of Malan. This latter view might be seen as mimicry of Empire in the sense that it contains within itself a broader vision of moral leadership beyond its own self-conception and geographical borders.

The point of making these distinctions is primarily to show the evolution within DRC and Afrikaner discourse over time, but moreover to indicate how DRC mission, the British Empire, and ultimately apartheid discourses were all intertwined. In hindsight it seems inconceivable that apartheid could have become a reality without the existence of both the DRC and the British Empire. Within that wider framework I have posited two distinct Afrikaner responses to Empire, that I call counter-Empire and anti-Empire. These two perspectives have worked together as a duel force, perhaps even a dialectic in Afrikaner Christian nationalist discourse to further the causes of apartheid doctrine during the 20th century. This doctrine could, if one wishes to go along with the logic of dialectics in this case, even be termed a neo-imperialist position, synthesising the anti-Empire and counter-Empire positions over time.

If there is a lesson to be learnt, it is perhaps simply that to oppose something might mean actually becoming complicit in a variation of it by inadvertently perpetuating its legacy, especially if you are dealing with a powerful force with universal aspirations—like Empire.

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