

**Some Fresh Perspectives on Anticommunism  
and the Dutch Reformed Church**

Ruhan Fourie, *Christian Nationalism and Anticommunism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*

New York: Routledge, 2024

236 pp

ISBN 9781032536187

US\$ 180 if imported (SA price as yet unavailable)

Protestant Christianity, with its doctrine of *sola scriptura* (only the Bible), has a long tradition of nuanced criticism against the political philosophy of Communism. Whereas Protestants hold the Bible as the only authority for the vision of their God for humanity, the ideas of church fathers and philosophers carry with it substantially more weight in alternative Christian traditions, such as for example Catholic Christianity, amongst others. In South Africa, it is a well-established fact that the

anticommunism movement went way above and beyond mere reasonable objections by groups such as Reformed Christians. According to Dubow, 'Fear of Communism, verging on paranoia, was deliberately stoked by politicians, state television, as well as popular magazines.'

Prominent Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) theologians such as B.B. Keet (1885–1974), Willie Jonker (1929–2006), Beyers Naude (1915–2004), who were known critics of the theological justification of apartheid by the DRC, are also known to have promoted theological criticism of Communism from a Protestant perspective. During the 20th century however, the Afrikaans churches in general, and the DRC in particular, developed into a hotbed of fundamentalist anticommunism. The DRC, historically the largest and most influential of the Afrikaner Reformed churches, was abused by some of its members for the promotion of their political philosophy of Afrikaner nationalism and white supremacy. In the book *Christian Nationalism and Anticommunism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, Ruhan Fourie explores the manner in which the DRC's structures were utilised by political groups to promote a popular mythological narrative of Afrikaner nationalism, in which the Afrikaner people had a central and strategic role to play in the international fight against Communism for the preservation of Western civilization and the Christian faith.

It should be noted that similar studies have been undertaken in the past. As an example, there is the MA dissertation by Samuel Longford titled, 'The Suppression of Communism, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Instrumentality of Fear during Apartheid', completed in 2016 at the University of the Western Cape, which is not referenced in Fourie's study. Tellingly, Longford and Fourie arrive at very similar conclusions, despite some differences in methodology. Like Fourie, Longford also traces the foundations of the anticommunism movement within the DRC to the growing urbanisation of Afrikaners in the aftermath of the South African War (1899 – 1902). Longford goes further and explores early interpretations of the famous 'Battle of Blood River' of 1838, which popularised ideas of the Afrikaners having received a sacred calling to spread the Christian faith in Africa, and which is rightly considered as one of the 'foundational myths' of Afrikaner identity, akin to that of Jan van Riebeeck (1619–1677), still annually being celebrated on 6 April by some Afrikaners as the 'founding father' of South Africa in 1652. Whilst there is some overlap between the studies by Longford and that by Fourie, both can be said to provide valuable contributions to the topic.

The history of the DRC will forever be tainted by the story of the theological justification of apartheid, which left many congregants questioning the authority of the church and even the foundations of their faith. According to Fourie, DRC discourse of 2024 is dominated by the Belhar Confession, the position of the DRC on

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1. S. Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948–1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 200.

same-sex relationships as well as the ordination of queer clergy, debates in which ‘a resurgence of anticommunist impulses emerges’ (p. 211). But the DRC is by a long stretch not unique in the way in which it grapples with questions surrounding the LGBTQI+-community. Christians from various different traditions in South Africa and abroad, hold conflicting interpretations of scripture. Critical liberal theology, which is dominant in the DRC leadership structures of 2024, and which effectively, by and large, relegates the Bible to fallible human words about God, as opposed to historical DRC foundational interpretations equating the Bible to ‘the Word of God’, threatens the maintenance of long-held patriarchal beliefs and power relations within Christianity.

LGBTQI+-relations also remain a burning issue in Anglican and Catholic churches. Can it be said that these churches also act out of anticommunist sentiments? Whilst the DRC continues with its rather unpleasant conversations surrounding LGBTQI+ relationships, other popular Christian denominations such as the Baptist, Charismatic, Pentecostal and even the former ‘daughter’-churches of the DRC, such as the Uniting Reformed Church (URC), are not even debating these matters, and continue on a strict heteronormative path. (This is not to mention the African independent churches, which happen to be the largest Christian denominations in South Africa). An interesting possible question for future historians of religion to ponder, is whether or not the URC do justice to the Belhar Confession, considering their approach to LGBTQI+-relations. With regard to the DRC, it should be noted that the Cape Synod, the oldest and most influential regional synod of the DRC, has already adopted the Belhar Confession fully, and Belhar is nowhere near as contested an issue in the DRC as it was 15 years ago.

Some inconsistencies emerged from a reading of Fourie’s text. According to Fourie, the 1987 DRC breakaway group, known as the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK), only constituted some 8 000 individuals (p. 179). With reference to this passage, there are two sources cited, the one being by a certain Van der Merwe, simply titled ‘Ras, Volk en Nasie’. This source by Van der Merwe is not reflected in the final list of references and seemingly refers to a 1990 PhD thesis in Theology by one Johan Matthys van der Merwe from the University of Pretoria, with the complete title being: ‘Ras, Volk en Nasie’ en ‘Kerk en Samelewing’ as Beleidstukke van die Ned. Geref. Kerk: ’n Historiese Studie (this source does feature elsewhere in Fourie’s book). The second source cited is that of Hermann Giliomee’s *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*. However, in Giliomee’s *Die Afrikaners: ’n Biografie* (2004), the number of DRC members defecting to the APK is clearly noted as being 30 000 members in 1987, with some 70 000 more who joined the APK in the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> (around 100 000 in total). The establishment of the APK seemingly did inflict substantial damage to Afrikaner nationalism and the DRC, and amounted to significantly more

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2. H. Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: ’n Biografie* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2004), 576.

than 0.44 % of former DRC members. The source of the 0.44 % is unclear, and appears to be Fourie's own miscalculation. Elsewhere, Fourie notes 'At the 1986 General Synod, the internal battle between the DRC's *verligtes* and *verkramptes* was won by the latter' (p. 168). Since it was the so-called *verkramptes* who broke away and established the ultra-conservative APK, it was probably supposed to read the 'former', not the 'latter'.

Despite some drawbacks, Ruhan Fourie's *Christian Nationalism and Anticommunism in Twentieth-Century South Africa* can be considered a useful contribution to the scholarship on anti-Communist politics and the 20th century history of the DRC. While not being original in every respect, the author went to great lengths to cover archival material and provides some fresh insights and perspectives. The book is divided into five chapters, of which the first four stands out. As the book sets out to explore 'overt opposition' to Communism within the DRC, it can be concluded that the text does achieve its aims. Whether the book is 'the first systematic approach to Afrikaner anticommunism, tracing its origins and developments over time' (p. 3), as noted in the introduction, is a whole different question, on which I cast some doubt.

While the historiography is saturated with studies on Afrikaners, apartheid, the DRC and anticommunism, the issues discussed in Fourie's book are not matters completely relegated to bygone days. More than three decades since the end of apartheid rule, Afrikaner identity continues to be hotly debated, and grandiose ideas regarding the global influence of Afrikaners persist. Writing for the online Afrikaans news publication *Netwerk24*, political scientist Alida Kok cautions against 'woke left liberalism', and argues that Afrikaners in 2024 are perfectly positioned to formulate a new political order for Western civilisation.<sup>3</sup> These ideas echo some of the sentiments of the anticommunism movement, which also allocated a central position on the global stage to Afrikaners as 'gatekeepers' of Western civilisation, culture and Christianity. This despite the fact that no clear and widely accepted definition of the concept 'Afrikaner' exists. Given these realities, Fourie's publication is a welcome addition, and will be a useful source to a wide range of scholars. The underestimation of the full impact of the APK, does unfortunately cast some doubt on the author's grasp of all the intricacies of Afrikaner politics of the 1980s.

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3. 'Alida Kok: Afrikaner het 'n unieke kans hier', *Netwerk24*, accessed 26 May 2024, at [https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/stemme/menings/alida\\_kok\\_afrikaner\\_het\\_n\\_unieke\\_kans\\_hier\\_20240522](https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/stemme/menings/alida_kok_afrikaner_het_n_unieke_kans_hier_20240522).