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The GKSA's use of Article 30 CO in the era of apartheid

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the GKSA's (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika) use of article 30 CO during the apartheid era. The central theoretical argument is that the GKSA Synods gave a Kuyperian content to the expression 'ecclesiastical affairs in an ecclesiastical manner' in article 30 CO, and this enabled them to evade sensitive political issues. The article states that the Kuyperian ecclesiology contains serious deficiencies and proposes that the relevant expression must rather be interpreted from the perspective of God's kingdom, because the church is a sign and instrument of God's kingdom on earth that anticipates the kingdom of God. 'Ecclesiastical affairs' ought to refer to all religious-ethical, social-ethical and spiritual issues that pertain to the principles of God's kingdom, while 'ecclesiastical manner' ought to depict the church's unique way of dealing with matters through witness, confession and proclamation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Article 30 of the Church Order of the GKSA (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika) determines the agenda of church assemblies. Whereas article 28 CO is concerned with the prophetic task of the church towards the government, article 30 delineates the kind of issues that a church may address through its church assemblies. The article reads as follows:

> Church assemblies shall deal only with ecclesiastical matters and shall do so in an ecclesiastical manner. Major assemblies shall deal only with matters that could not be finalized in minor assemblies or that concern all the churches in question collectively.

From the above it is clear that article 30 prevents church assemblies from commenting on issues that fall outside the competency of the church. It also ensures that the church acts in an ecclesiastical manner. Obviously, the GKSA's interpretation of art 30 will determine the manner in which the church exercises its prophetic task towards government as demanded by article 28 CO and article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

In what follows I will focus on three issues regarding article 30 CO:

- The historical origin and principal foundation of article 30 CO.
- The GKSA use of the terms 'ecclesiastical issues in an ecclesiastical manner' during the Apartheid era.
- Supplying a proper definition for the term 'ecclesiastical issues in an ecclesiastical manner'.

2. THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND PRINCIPLE FOUNDATION OF ARTICLE 30 CHURCH ORDER

Bouwman (1970:29) states that article 30 originated as a reaction against the Roman Catholic idea of *Corpus Christianum* that asserted the church's authority over all spheres of life. According to this view the church may exert its authority in art, science, the state and culture. Canon law was

used to enact state law (cf Van der Linde, 1983:123). Calvin, in contrast to Rome, distinguished between civil and spiritual government (Inst. 4.20.1). These two forms of government differ in nature and ought not to be confused with each other. The church is a spiritual community of believers and may not be regarded as the patron of the natural spheres of life. Every sphere of life has its own God-given integrity. It would therefore be wrong to typify Calvin's approach to government as theocratic, since he did not propose that the church should govern all spheres of life. Calvin's view might be better circumscribed by the term theocentric. Both the state and church are servants of God and ought to act in obedience to God, but each in their own way according to their own calling.

The Reformed believers of the sixteenth century feared that church assemblies could bring about a new form of papal dominance (cf Spoelstra, 1989:178). The first article of the Church Order of Emden 1571 therefore determined that no church or church office may dictate other churches or offices[1]. The 1578 Synod of Dordrecht stated in art 17 that churches may only deal with ecclesiastical affairs and that the government and church must decide together on issues of mutual concern[2]. The current version of article 30 was drafted by the 1581 Synod of Middelburg as articles 21 and 22[3]. It does not refer to 'issues of mutual concern' but simply states the task of church assemblies to deal only with ecclesiastical matters, and then in an ecclesial manner. The Middelburg articles were combined into one (art 27) by the 1586 Synod of Gravenhage without any change to the wording. The Synod of Dordt placed the wording of Gravenhage's article 27 in article 30 to follow logically upon article 29[4]. Article 29 distinguishes between the various church assemblies, while art 30 determine the agenda of church assemblies. The Dordt version is the version currently used by the GKSA.

The main ecclesiological principle underlying article 30 is that every institution in life acts within its own God-given sphere. The church cannot be equated with the kingdom of God, but is an instrument and servant of God's kingdom in a specific sense. It is a communion of believers that proclaim the word of God and administer the sacraments. It cannot exert legal or political executive authority because it is not a civil entity, and ought to refrain from interfering in the duties of government. Instead the church needs to stay true to its calling by dealing with ecclesiastical issues. Government, conversely, is a servant of God's kingdom in the sense that it maintains law and order (Romans 13). It may not claim for itself the right to exercise the spiritual power of the church.

Article 30 also possesses an anti-hierarchical element. It limits the power that major assemblies may exert over local congregations and upholds the principle that the chief

1 Gheen Kercke sal over een ander Kercke, gheen Dienaar des Woorts, gheen Ouderlinck, noch Diaken sal d'een over d'ander heerschappie voeren, maar een yeghelijk sal hen voor alle suspicien, ende aenlockinge om te heershappen wachten (Synode van Emden, 1571: art 1).

2 In deze versamelinghen en sal niet ghehandelt worden, dan van Kerckelijken dingen ende dat na wyse der Kerckenregieringhe. Ende soo vele die dinghen aengaet de welcke eensdeels Kerckelick eensdeels politisch syn, ghelyck somwylen in houwelicksche ende ghelycke saken voorvallen, het verschil dat daerouer ontstaet sal by de Ouericheyt ende Kercken-raet te samen gheeyndicht worden (Synode van Dordt 1578: art 17).

3 XXI: In deze tsamencoemsten sullen gheen andere dan kerckelijke saecken, ende tselue op kerckelijke wijse ghehandelt werden. XXII In meerdere vergaderinghen sal men niet handelen dan tghene in minderen niet heeft connen afghehandelt werden, of dat tot de Kercken der meerdere vergaderinghe int ghemein behoort (Synode der Middelburg, 1581: art 21, 22).

4 In dese t'samen-comsten sullen gheen ander dan Kerckelijke saecken, ende t'selve op Kerckelijke wijse ghehandelt worden. In meerder vergaderinge salmen niet handelen, dan't gene dat in mindere niet heeft afgehandelt konnen worden, ofte dat tot den Kercken der meerder vergaderinghe int ghemeyn behoort (Synode van Dordrecht, 1618-1619: art 30).

responsibility of church government lies with the local church. Major assemblies are not permanent superstructures elevated above minor assemblies, but a temporary assembly of delegates from different churches that assist each other in church government by taking decisions based on Scripture, the church order and the creeds. Article 30 limits the agenda of major assemblies by stating that they can only discuss issues that minor assemblies were not able to solve or issues that belong on the agenda of a major assembly. Such issues are typically appeals and issues of common interest such as theological training, examination of prospective ministers, discussions with government, and visitation (cf Monsma, 1967:122).

Article 30 not only determines the agenda of ecclesiastical assemblies, but also the manner in which ecclesiastical affairs must be dealt with. According to article 30 ecclesiastical affairs ought to be handled in an 'ecclesiastical manner'. This definition has caused much interpretative difficulty in the GKSA and was often misused during the Apartheid era to keep sensitive political issues from the agenda of church assemblies. The tragic result was that the GKSA, in general, stayed silent on issues of power abuse and discrimination during the Apartheid years.

3. THE GKSA'S USE OF THE TERM ECCLESIASTICAL AFFAIRS IN AN ECCLESIASTICAL MANNER.

The definition of 'ecclesiastical affairs in an ecclesiastical manner' received attention during the 1916 and 1942 GKSA Synods. The need to reflect on this expression was caused by the political and social circumstances of these periods (Vorster 1993:224). Both Synods used the 1574 and 1578 Synods of Dordrect's interpretation of 'mixed' issues that pertain to both church and state (cf Strauss, 1994:584)

The 1916 GKSA Synod took place shortly after the Afrikaner Rebellion against British rule. Synod was obliged to give advice on whether believers have a right to resist authorities under certain circumstances. In its consideration of the issue the Synod called on article 30 CO and stated that 'mixed' issues that pertain to both church and state fall under the category of 'ecclesiastical affairs' (GKSA, Acta, 1916:93-96). The 1942 Synod dealt with article 30 in relation to the church's calling in community life. The issue was regarded as important because the Afrikaner community experienced extreme poverty and social problems after the Great Depression and during the Second World War. The Synod stated that article 30 ought not to be interpreted in an absolute sense, because Church Order 28 allows the church to correspond with the government, while article 21 expects the church to supervise the education that its members receive at schools. According to Synod 1942 the church had expressed itself on various issues in times leading up to the assembly such as welfare, legal issues pertaining to marriage and the prevention of promiscuity (GKSA, Acta, 1942:25). The term 'ecclesiastical affairs in an ecclesiastical manner' must, according Synod 1942, be understood within its historical context. It is not the intention of the article to renounce the calling of the church with regard to political, scientific and social issues (GKSA, Acta, 1942:25). In fact, the church has a unique calling to shed the light of God's Word on all spheres of life, especially through preaching. The Synod felt that there are spheres where church, government and social institutions share mutual interests (GKSA, Acta, 1942:26). Every Church Assembly must decide for itself when such issues of mutual interest are at stake and when the Church's opinion should be voiced (GKSA, Acta, 1942:26).

It is clear from the above-mentioned that the GKSA Synods of 1916 and 1942 did not interpret the terms 'ecclesiastical issues in an ecclesiastical manner' in a legalistic or narrow ecclesiocentric sense. They recognized that issues might arise that are of common interest to both state and church. However, during the Apartheid era this nuanced and balanced approach gave way to a rigid ecclesiocentric approach that decisively influenced the GKSA's approach to political ethical issues. This shift was largely due to the rise of Kuyperian and Neo-Calvinist

thought in the South African Reformed tradition, as well as political motives.

Abraham Kuyper's distinction between the church as organism and institute had a profound influence on the GKSA from the 1940's onwards (cf Van Wyk 1991:181). At the heart of his theology lies the differentiation between God's common grace and particular grace. The state originates from God's common grace and is an instrument that God uses to resist sin and maintain law and order in society. The church, conversely, originates from God's particular grace and is concerned with administering God's word (Kuyper, 1932 ii:664). Kuyper explained his definition of the church as *organism* and *institute* through the words *geworteld* (rootedness) and *gegrond* (location). *Geworteld* depicts the organic nature of the lives of Christians that emanates from their relationship with Christ. *Gegrond* presents the principle that the faithful must organize in an institute that is based on the foundation of God's Word (cf Kuyper 1870:13). According to Kuyper the church in the form of organism precedes the church in its manifestation as institute. The organism forms the heart of the church and is the life-giving power from which the church as institute arises (cf Kuyper, 1870:15). Though the institute is born from the organism, the organism is simultaneously invigorated by the institute's administering of the Word (cf Kuyper, 1870:15).

The institute is the official formation of the church, and therefore its calling is the official proclamation of the Word and sacraments (cf Kuyper, 1932 II:272). It cannot influence society directly, because its calling is limited to the community of the faithful. Any direct involvement of the institute in society would amount to a breach of the principle of sovereignty in own sphere (cf Kuyper 1909 III:204). With the principle of sovereignty in own sphere Kuyper attempts to express the idea that every sphere of life is governed by its own unique principles and possesses its own God-given integrity. Whereas the principle of sovereignty in own sphere limits the Church as institute to focussing on 'ecclesiastical affairs', the church as organism may influence society in a secondary sense through the faithful who obey their calling as Christians in the various spheres of society (cf Kuyper, 1909 III:204). Kuyper, therefore, did not allow much room for church assemblies to make official pronouncements on societal issues. He was, however, a strong proponent of the participation of Christian organizations in public life through political parties, schools and universities, which would represent the prophetic voice of Christianity in the public realm (cf Strauss, 1993:12). Kuyper's emphasis on the need for Christian organizations was based on his anti-thetical notion that Christians and non-Christians, faith and unbelief, cannot function within the same institutions. Christians have to organize their force within their own isolated circle (cf Kuyper, 1885:5, 13-15).

Kuyper's understanding of the Church as institute with the limited task of administering of Word and sacraments influenced the GKSA profoundly. The *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* with whom the GKSA had strong relations made extensive use of the Kuyperian distinction between *organism* and *institute* (cf Buys 1970:171). The Kuyperian views of Dutch church polity theologians such as Bouwman, Jansen and Rutgers also had a significant influence on the GKSA (cf Vorster 1997:190). Jansen (1952:143) for instance states that Church assemblies may not deal with any social, political, military or scientific issues, while Bouwman (1970:30) remarks that the task of the church pertains to the sacral realm. The church must call on its adherents to shed the light of God's word on natural life, but it may not make pronouncements on issues pertaining to the state, society, arts or science. Herman Dooyeweerd also utilized the ecclesiology of Kuyper in his Neo-Calvinist societal doctrine, while the Reformed South African philosopher Henk Stoker incorporated it in his version of Neo-Calvinism. The result was that 'ecclesiastical matters in an ecclesiastical manner' was now understood as issues that pertain exclusively to the community of faithful. Ethical issues raised by Apartheid were henceforth classified as non-ecclesial matters that pertain to the civil realm and have no relevance for church assemblies. The General Synod

of 1984 (GKSA, Acta:46) for instance stated:

> It is not the task of the church as institute to attempt to influence government on issues pertaining to national and social reform. [own translation]

After a 1984 resolution of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) meeting held in Chicago reproached the GKSA for its passive stance towards Apartheid, the GKSA responded in a similar fashion:

> In viewing the political situation in South Africa as an absolute and holding the GKSA responsible for a political situation the RES Chicago 1984 transgressed the principle which implies that ecclesiastical matters must be decided on ecclesiastical grounds. The GKSA express their deepest concern in connection with the non-Scriptural and ideological norms, e.g. "territorial state" by which the RES violated its task as an ecclesiastical body in passing judgment on the GKSA and South African political and economical issues (GKSA, Acta, 1988:236).

The above-mentioned quotations are only a few examples of incidents where the GKSA utilized a Kuyperian definition of article 30 CO to evade sensitive political-ethical issues. Numerous quotations of a similar kind are documented in Synodal Acta. The approach of Synods of the GKSA towards Apartheid can be stated as follows:They refrained in terms of art 30 to grant Apartheid theological legitimacy, but they also refused on the basis of art 30 CO to reject Apartheid outright as unethical in terms of art 30 CO. The Christian Reformed Church rightly accused the GKSA of abstraction and 'sins of omission' (GKSA, Acta 1988:861-862, 870).

However, the GKSA's use of art 30 CO was not consistently Kuyperian in nature in all social matters. This begs the question whether the GKSA's Kuyperian interpretation of art 30 was really based on theological premises or whether Kuyper's ecclesiology was utilized as a convenient theological tool so that the church could remain silent regarding Apartheid. GKSA Synods seem to have taken refuge in a Kuyperian definition of article 30 when sensitive political issues were at stake, but they were not reluctant to address micro-ethical social issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, Sunday labour, educational issues, immigration, promiscuity, gambling, censorship and abortion in terms of article 28 CO. A consistent Kuyperian application of article 30 would have prevented the GKSA from commenting publicly on these issues.

For the sake of balance, it needs to be noted that were some odd occasions on which the GKSA questioned Apartheid practices, though in a vague manner. The problems arising from migrant labour, the rights of aliens and minorities, the Law on Mixed Marriages, the Immorality Act and the Group Areas Act were addressed (cf Vorster 1988:4-5). The GKSA's critical responses to Apartheid were mostly stimulated by the RES's decisions on Apartheid and received official status through the GKSA's membership of the RES. Two of the most important decisions that had their origins in RES resolutions are the 1985 GKSA decision on the moral acceptability of a Bill of Human Rights (GKSA, Acta, 1985:651) and the 1991 Synod's rejection of Apartheid as a sin (GKSA, Acta, 1991:87). In general however, the GKSA's stance during the heyday of Apartheid on sensitive political issues were vague and elusive.

4. REDEFINING THE TERM 'ECCLESIASTICAL AFFAIRS IN AN ECCLESIASTICAL MANNER'

Though article 30 CO was abused during the Apartheid era, it is important to acknowledge that the article serves an important theological principle namely that the calling of the church is

not all-encompassing but specific in nature and therefore limited. The church ought to refrain from interfering in non-ecclesiastical issues that fall outside of its competence and jurisdiction. Instead the God-given integrity of every sphere of life ought to be respected.

However, the experience of Apartheid has shown that ecclesiocentric interpretations of article 30 could produce disturbing results. The problem with the Kuyperian ecclesiology and, for that matter, a Kuyperian interpretation of article 30 CO, is that it separates the institutional and organic dimensions of the church community in a dualist sense. The church is allowed to preach to the faithful on certain issues, but may not deal officially in church assemblies with the same issues. The institutional church is thus reduced to an otherworldly spiritual community who may preach the Word of God to the faithful, but who possesses no prophetic duty towards the state and public life itself. It functions as a voiceless observer of public affairs. But can the official organs of a church be silent when crimes against humanity and other atrocities are committed? Is the Church as institution not also supposed to be a visible sign of God's kingdom in the world? Why should the official church only proclaim the Word of God to the community of the faithful and not to the world outside the official church? Is the church as institution not also an important component of civil society? Is it not the task of the institutional church to profess its faith to the world? Surely, the Afrikaans speaking churches could have changed the political landscape in South Africa drastically if they were prepared to issue official statements rejecting Apartheid as a sin.

The root problem in Kuyper's ecclesiology lies in his use of the terms common and particular grace. Calvin did not employ the notions of common grace and particular grace in a mutually exclusive way. He rather viewed common grace as an important introduction to God's particular grace. Kuyper, however, utilizes the notion of common grace to develop a comprehensive doctrine on culture. He gives an independent content to the realm of common grace and casts it off from the realm of particular grace. But can common grace function independently and separately from particular grace? Kuyper's exclusion of the institutional church from the sphere of God's common grace is, in my view, an impediment to a truly Christian view on society. He addresses the vacuum that the Church's absence leaves in society by proposing that Christian organizations represent the Christian community in public life. However, this notion could result in precisely the opposite effect of what Kuyper desires. Kuyper wants to preserve the spiritual nature of the church, but experience teaches us that Christian parties often tend to use churches for their political efforts to attain power, while clerics inevitably become involved in or are associated with such parties. Stated differently: the danger in relying on Christian political parties to represent Christianity in the public realm lies in the fact that a church can become an extension of a political party or a political party an extension of a church. In my view, it is far more desirable that the Church speaks in a churchly manner as Church in the name of the Church. The question is of course: How should we then define the terms 'ecclesiastical affairs in an ecclesiastical manner'?

Theologically and biblically speaking the church ought to be regarded as a visible sign and instrument of God's kingdom on earth. The Gospels not only describe the coming of the kingdom as the central message in Jesus' preaching, but also relates the purpose of the *ecclesia* directly to the kingdom of God (cf Mark 1:15,Mat 16:18-19). The term kingdom (βασιλεία) is a dynamic expression that refers to God's reign, kingship and absolute dominion over all things and denotes the fact, terrain and manner of God's reign (cf Van der Walt, 1969:99, Louw & Nida 1989:16, 478). Its significance for social ethics and ecclesiology lies therein that it relates God's reign to the whole of creation, all spheres of human life, to the world and history.

The Kingdom of God penetrates the world through the coming of Christ. Christ establishes God's βασιλεία on earth through his victory over sin. The Kingdom of God is therefore a present

reality. The gospels talk about the Kingdom as being 'at hand' (Mk 1:15) and 'among you (Lk 17:21). However, the βασιλεία is also a future reality in the sense that God's kingdom will only be fully established at the end of times (Lk 13:29, Mt 8:11). The church is not the kingdom of God, but anticipates the kingdom of God by reminding the political order of its provisional nature in contrast to the ultimacy of God's eschatological future (Pannenberg, 1977:101). Barth (1935:21) rightly states that the existence of the state is not separate from the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Its foundations and its influence are not autonomous. It is outside the church, but not outside the range of Christ's dominion. Christians therefore have the continuous calling to critically assess human structures and to renew them. This does not mean that Christians can expect the state or civil society to gradually become the kingdom of God. The task of the church is rather to anticipate the kingdom of God (cf Pannenberg, 1977:37, Barth 1935:31). Colossians 2:15 relates Christ's reign directly to the disarming (άπεκδσάμεος) of the powers and authorities (τάς άρχας καί τάς έξουσίας) of this world and to make a public spectacle of them (Col 2:15). The τάς άρχας καί τάς έξουσίας refer to the powers that reign the world and bind the souls of men, such as the powers of unbelief, injustice, suppression of the poor, materialism, selfishness, discrimination etc (Ridderbos, 1979:5). The sanctifying role of the Church in the world therefore includes obeying the will of God and disarming the oppressive powers of this world by using the keys of the Kingdom, namely preaching the Word of God.

Applied to art 30 CO we can state that 'ecclesiastical affairs' ought to refer to all religious-ethical, social-ethical and spiritual issues that are relevant to the principles of the kingdom of God namely justice, freedom, reconciliation, love, peace and joy (Cf Mt 22:37-39, Rom 14:17, 2 Cor 5:18-20, Rom 13, Col 1:20). The church's task is not limited to the community of the faithful, but it has a prophetic task towards all spheres and institutions of life, because all spheres of life fall under the reign of God. This, however, does not mean that the church has the right to rule or control other spheres of life. This is where the term 'ecclesiastical manner' is applicable.

The term 'ecclesiastical manner' ought to refer, in my view, to the fact that the power of the church is spiritual in nature and not coercive. The central task of the Church is to proclaim the Word of God and to apply the principles of God's Word within a certain context. It uses the typical biblical and Christian discourses of preaching (κήρυγμα), proclamation (κηρυσσω), confession (όμολογεω) and witness (μαρτυρια); and refrains from violence, activism, lobbying, the mustering of power and civil disobedience. Though civil society might be entitled to use activism, lobbying or strikes to resist power abuse, the church in its institutional organized form cannot engage in such activities because these methods do not pass the test of handling issues in an 'ecclesiastical manner'. Of course the ecclesiastical discourses of proclamation, witness and confession do not always need to be dogmatic or theological in nature. At times, the church will have to translate Christian values into practical or secular language to make an effective contribution to a public debate.

The terms 'ecclesiastical matters' and 'ecclesiastical manner', should inform each other. A matter that cannot be dealt with in an 'ecclesiastical manner' is probably from the outset not an 'ecclesiastical matter'. For instance, the fact that the typical ecclesiastical discourses of preaching, witness, proclamation and confession are not at stake in public debates about issues such as the development of sport infrastructure, practical methods of crime prevention, town planning, naming streets or in scientific debates about the interpretation of empirical data, is an indication that these issues fall outside the church's domain of influence. A further caveat needs to be considered. An issue could be ethical in nature, but the church could lack the competence and knowledge to comment on the issue. In such cases, the church's inability to employ ecclesiastical forms of discourse effectively and authoritatively, is an indication that the issue should, for the time being, not be dealt with as an 'ecclesiastical matter'.

5. CONCLUSION

The GKSA did not support the Apartheid policy officially and publicly. It rather evaded sensitive political issues by utilizing Kuyper and Neo-Calvinist philosophy's distinction between the church as institute and organism to provide the term 'ecclesiastical matters' in article 30 CO with a narrow content. To rectify this misuse of article 30 CO, this article proposes that the terms 'ecclesiastical matters in an ecclesiastical manner' should be understood from the perspective of the kingdom of God, because the church is an instrument of God's kingdom that anticipates the kingdom of God. All religious-ethical, social-ethical and spiritual issues that pertain to the principles of God's kingdom should be considered as 'ecclesiastical matters'. The term 'ecclesiastical manner' ought to refer to the spiritual power of the church and entails the discourses of proclamation, witness and confession.

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