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Troublemaker in Israel: Nico Smith and the struggle for justice in apartheid South Africa

ABSTRACT

The author identifies Nico Smith (one-time Professor in Missiology at the University of Stellenbosch and well known Uniting Reformed Church leader) as “troublemaker in Israel” in the fashion of the prophet Elijah. He grew up in an orthodox Afrikaner home in the early twentieth century, studied Theology at the University of Pretoria, and became a leading figure in Dutch Reformed Mission circles. In the 1960s he was appointed at the “Kweekskool” in Stellenbosch and his perspective began to change. He became a fierce critic of the race policy in the DRC, accepted a call to a black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa congregation in Mamelodi (outside Pretoria), and played a prominent role in the church unity process. The author singles out Smith’s involvement with the organization *Koinonia* (which he founded) and his time living in Mamelodi as significant contributions in the struggle for justice.

INTRODUCTION

During the Cold War era (±1946-1990) the main entry point between West and East Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate was named “Checkpoint Charlie”. It gained great recognition, because in a very real sense this was the physical boundary signifying the divisions between the capitalist West (North America and Western Europe, bound together in NATO- the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and the communist East (Russia and its Eastern European allies, bound together in the Warsaw Treaty). Nico Smith once had the privilege during the years of the Cold War to enter East Berlin at this famous checkpoint. Many things obviously caught his attention, but there was one sight that remained with him for the rest of his life. On a plaque on the western side was a quote from the Latin author, Titus Livius (Smith 2010:14). It stated (and I paraphrase more or less in Nico’s words), “There are events and occurrences in history which are so incomprehensible that all we as human beings can do is to record them, and leave judgment to future generations”. The reason why this struck Nico so forcefully, is that he was convinced that this clearly described his task as a protagonist in the struggle for justice in the then apartheid SA. It was not in Nico’s character to silently record events, though¹ – he became an activist through and through, so he was intensely involved in this struggle since around 1974. It is for this reason that I wish to characterise his involvement in the struggle for justice as being a troublemaker in Israel.²

In this paper I wish to provide nothing more than a preliminary stock-taking of Smith’s

1 This is probably one reason why he did not write and publish much – his was an oral, narrative witness.

This article therefore is based on oral discussions, a couple of journal articles, and my biography of Nico Smith. Two books authored by him were published posthumously (see the Bibliography).

2 *Die beroerder Israels: ‘n biografiese waardering van Nico Smith* (Troublemaker in Israel: a biographical appreciation of Nico Smith) is the title of my biography of Smith (Pretoria: Publiseif, 2009). It obviously refers to the characterisation ascribed to Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, which I find a useful metaphor to describe Nico’s involvement in the struggle in SA. I argue that he considered himself as a prophetic disturber of the *status quo*, and that his actions confirmed this.

contribution. In a contribution to the *festchrift* published on Nico's sixtieth birthday, Dirkie Smit (1990:110) stated that his generation of students (in the early 1970s) regarded Nico Smith as "different". They were not quite sure what constituted the difference, but in later years he realised that Smith was in his own way a "narrative theologian".³ I am therefore also going to use a narrative approach in describing and analysing his contribution the struggle for justice in apartheid South Africa. I agree with Dirkie Smit that this is a better way to understand what Nico Smith was trying to do, as he (Smith) himself trusted in the power of narratives to bring about change (:113). Indeed, Smit argued that both the powerful influence Nico Smith exerted (on students and others), as well as the strong reactions his conduct evoked, probably were a result of the fact that Nico told stories in such a way that events and realities which seemed to be completely normal in everyday life in SA which evoked a completely new perspective on what was generally considered to be "normal" (:113).

The way in which he managed to make things which appeared normal to us seem to be incredible, incomprehensible, totally impossible, even ridiculous, was exactly what started us thinking, or which irritated and angered people. (Smit 1990:113; my translation).

It is for this reason that I opt for a narrative approach in recalling Nico Smith's important contribution to the struggle for justice in apartheid SA in (especially) the 1980s and 1990s. I wish to recall and retell events and influences in his life under three headings: the family background against which his involvement unfolded; the importance of Christians "breaking bread together"; and the story of a white "NG dominee" (Dutch Reformed minister) and his loving and supportive wife going to live in a black township during the hectic 1980s in SA. Then I wish to conclude by drawing some preliminary implications of this story for white South Africans (especially Afrikaans-speaking members of the Dutch Reformed Church [DRC]) in the struggle for justice, in apartheid South Africa *as well as* in democratic South Africa.

FAMILY BACKGROUND: PIETISM AND AFRIKANER NATIONALISM

It is difficult to establish who was responsible for the birth and development of apartheid as state policy in SA between 1948-1994, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) or the National Party (Saayman 2007:69-72). So it is difficult to decide what came first in Nico's family heritage: DRC pietism or Afrikaner nationalism. Perhaps it is best to state that the two lived in a comfortable and mutually advantageous symbiotic relationship and not to attempt to decide which came first. Nico's father was born and bred in Graaff-Reinet, where two remarkable DRC ministers had left an indelible mark on the white community. The first (in the 19th century) was Dr Andrew Murray jr., and the second (early in the 20th century) was Ds J Naudé, father of the well known Dr Beyers Naudé. Andrew Murray jr is the fountainhead of a pietistic trend in the DRC, characterised by Jaap Durand as "Andrew Murray pietism" (Durand 1985:43-44) and left a lasting impression on the white DRC, as well as on many English-speaking white Christians. Ds Naudé was intimately bound with his parishioners, and served throughout the South African War (1899-1902) as chaplain⁴ to the commando of the well known Boer general, C.F. Beyers.⁵

3 I broadly agree with Smit (1990:110) in his definition of narrative theology as "the opposite pole over against rational, logical, timeless, abstract essential ('prinsipiële') thinking" (my translation).

4 One has to remember that not all Cape Afrikaners were in favour of the Boers in the war – many felt that the war was unnecessary (Saayman 2007:53) and Cape citizens who supported the war were considered to be traitors by the colonial government. So the mere fact of his involvement says a lot about Ds Naudé's nationalism.

5 This is where Beyers Naudé's name come from – he was called Christiaan Frederick Beyers Naudé in

He was also one of the founding members of the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB) in 1918 (Smith 2009:1-22). Nico's father experienced a call to become a DRC minister himself, and for this reason started studying at Stellenbosch University. As a result of financial problems he had to discontinue his studies and ended up becoming a teacher instead (Saayman 2009:14). Nico ascribes his own piety and religious commitment to the influence and example of his father, whom he characterises as a "Murray pietist" (:15).

His mother was also a very committed Christian, but Nico does not ascribe his religious experience in terms of his mother's example. What he received from her was rather a personal experience of the history of the very real and tragic experience of Afrikaner suffering as a result of the South African War. Her family was quite well off, and her father owned two farms in the Boshoff district of the Free State. Her father obviously joined the commandos in the field, and his wife and two daughters ended up in a concentration camp. The mother died there, and after the war her father had to collect the two young girls from the camp and make a new beginning on his utterly destroyed farms. This was obviously a cause for many traumatic experiences for Nico's mother, and she remained bitter about the loss throughout her life (Smith 2009:38-39). She was a firm believer that the "Boerevolk" (Boer nation) would one day get their land back which had so brutally and unjustly been taken from them by the "Kakies".⁶ So Nico grew up in a very pious household, where a strong pietistic Christian belief was one of the articles of faith (as it were), while another was the nationalistic (eschatological) expectation of the recovery of their rightful heritage. Whereas Nico considers his father to have had the strongest influence on him in terms of faith commitment, he was very clear that it was his mother's more extreme version of Afrikaner nationalism which formed his own national consciousness (:45).

Nico's experiences of the entanglement of religious and national commitment are not really in any way unique for an Afrikaner child of the 1930s-1940s. This was why he could join a majority of University of Pretoria (UP) students in a victory march on 31 May 1948 to celebrate the National Party (NP) victory in the all-white elections. By that time he was a theological student at UP, and he describes the tremendous joy among the students, also among the theological students.⁷ One therefore has to conclude that there was nothing in his heritage or background which set him apart as someone who would later in life become deeply involved in the struggle *against* apartheid in SA. On the contrary, Nico is convinced that it is his mother's rather extreme version of Afrikaner nationalism which prepared the way for him to become a firm supporter of Afrikaner nationalism, going so far as to become a member of the AB himself (Smith 2009:37). So Nico's family heritage and his experiences of growing up as an Afrikaner boy in a rural community (his father taught at farm schools in the Free State) rather paved the way for him to become a "pillar of the Afrikaner community": pioneer missionary in Vendaland,⁸ Mission Secretary of the DRC Northern Transvaal, member of the elite Afrikaner Broederbond, Professor of Missiology at the academic heartland of the Afrikaners and the DRC, the theological faculty of the University of Stellenbosch. It is indeed difficult to explain

honour of the famous Boer general.

6 A derogatory Afrikaans description of British soldiers, based on the colour (khaki) of their uniforms.

7 He mentions by name the enthusiastic participation of (among others) three students, Dirk Oosthuizen, David Bosch and Carel Boshoff, who were destined to become prominent DRC "dominees" (Smith 2009:35; Saayman 2009:34).

8 Smith was one of the pioneer DRC missionaries who started new mission stations as a result of the influence exerted by the Tomlinson Report of 1954 (cf Saayman 2007:69-78). His pioneering effort in Vendaland caught the attention of many DRC members and served to inspire mission enthusiasm (cf. Hofmeyr 1990).

how someone with such religious and political credentials could one day be characterised as “troublemaker in Israel”. I will come back to this point later on.

BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER: THE STORY OF KOINONIA

In Nico Smith’s biography I remarked that Koinonia probably grabbed the attention of the church-going South African public, especially the white public, more than any other para-church or social organisation that he was involved with (Saayman 2009:186). The story of Koinonia still must be fully told and analysed, but at the time it caught the attention and soon grew rapidly not only in Pretoria but also in other parts of the country⁹. Eventually it could arrange national gatherings which received much media publicity. Since the whole movement was based on the very simple human event of having a meal together, this public attention seems out of proportion. It becomes even stranger when one takes into account that Koinonia eventually came to be seen as a threat to the maintenance of the established order, which resulted in an assassination attempt on its full-time organiser, Ivor Jenkins (:121-125; Pauw 1997:138-141). In terms of the struggle against injustice and for justice under the old regime, one has to conclude that Koinonia was doing something right if it attracted the attention even of the Vlakplaas assassins.

The story becomes even more intriguing when one considers the origins of the idea of white and black (Dutch Reformed) Christians “breaking bread together”. The origins can be found in an event which took place soon after Smith had started his pioneer mission in Vendaland (cf. Saayman 2009:59-60). The most significant Protestant mission in Venda was that of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The missionary in charge, Rev Fobbe, invited Nico to a gathering of Lutheran mission workers (black and white). The meeting would include lunch, and to Smith’s dismay he found that all the workers, black and white, would sit down for lunch together. This went totally against his grain as nationalistic Afrikaner. Mrs Fobbe was aware of his unease, though, and set a place for him to have his lunch separately in Rev Fobbe’s study. So there Nico sat, in splendid isolation, quite convinced that he was “doing the right thing”. Nico experienced this event as so disturbing that he wrote a letter to “Die Kerkbode”, attacking foreign missionaries who treated Afrikaner Christian customs with disdain in their urge to propagate racial integration.¹⁰ Soon afterwards Rev and Mrs Fobbe were deported from SA, and Nico later found out that the information which was used to justify their deportation was provided by another DRC missionary. This event later placed a heavy burden on Nico’s conscience, and it is quite clear that his idea to bring about reconciliation between black and white DRC members by having them share meals in each others’ homes, had its origin in his unhappy memories of what he considered to be a failure in his Christian conviction. I will argue this point further in my conclusions.

⁹ In today’s SA many people probably wonder why such a simple act as having a meal together could generate so much attention. At the time Koinonia was started, black people still needed permits to enter white suburbs on a regular basis, and whites needed permission from officials from Bantu Affairs to enter a black township. For white and black to share a meal at a restaurant or hotel, one had to get official permission beforehand, and also find a restaurant willing to accommodate “inter-racial” social gatherings. What seems of very little importance today, was actually quite radical in the contemporary context.

¹⁰ Dr AP Treurnicht, who was then editor of “Die Kerkbode”, placed the letter and then wrote a note of thanks to Nico, congratulating him for his strong defence of Afrikaner customs and racial segregation.

GOING TO LIVE IN A LOCATION: THE TIME IN MAMELODI¹¹

When Nico and Mrs Smith went to live in Mamelodi in 1986 (a black township east of Pretoria, where he served as a congregational minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa – DRCA – at the time) very, very few whites lived in black townships. Those few who did were mainly Roman Catholic priests and sisters who worked there in parishes. The Smiths took the decision to move to live in Mamelodi as a result of a talk of the well known Roman Catholic spiritual and academic, Henry Nouwen.¹² They interpreted this drastic decision as a positive response from their side to the voice of the Holy Spirit calling them to solidarity with their parishioners (Saayman 2009:190-192). What makes their decision to make this move in 1985-1986 even more remarkable is the reality that the liberation struggle had entered its final, fiery and bloody phase in 1985 with the declaration of a successive set of states of emergency by the Botha regime. The conscripts of the SA Defence Force were no longer deployed only “on the border” (wherever that might have been), but right here in urban SA, in the townships, also in Mamelodi. There were violent clashes of one kind or the other nearly on a daily basis, and the general opinion among most white South Africans was probably that the Smiths were mad to move into a township at that specific time. I think that one is justified to claim that a general perception among whites at the time was that they were either pathological trouble seekers or weaklings seeking the favour of black radicals (:195).

What is especially notable, though, is that in these totally unsettled circumstances Nico won the trust of a majority of Mamelodi’s residents (Smith 2010). Such an outcome was everything but self-evident, as many radical black residents regarded his move to Mamelodi with great distrust (cf. Saayman 2009:120). Revenge against those who were distrusted as agents of the hated regime was swift and brutal, often by way of the brutal and inhuman “necklace” method (an old tire soaked in petrol and forced over the head and shoulders of the victim before being set alight). Proof of the degree of trust that Nico enjoyed in the black community is actually that he was able to stop a process of “necklacing” after the tire had already been thrust over the victim’s head. Anybody with any awareness of the degree of anger and hatred alive in the urban black townships of Gauteng in those years will know that for a white man to step into such a situation was as close to suicidal as can be. Because he had won the confidence of even the radical black youth through his sincerity and commitment to their humanity, Nico could do it and survive (:127-128; as far as I know, he was the only white man who ever did this. Leading black struggle icons such as Bishop Tutu and Dr Boesak also did it on a few occasions).

So far I have told only three segments of Nico Smith’s very complicated life story. I have done so while I am of the opinion that they are most relevant in a process of remembering the struggle for justice between 1960 and 1990. If one now analyses these parts in order to remember the struggle for justice, what implications can one possibly draw? I would like to indicate the following, based on the discrete parts, but as if weaving continuous strands throughout Nico’s life story. In the process I also highlight some personal differences with Nico’s approach. I raise them here, as part of my general evaluation, for a specific reason. Hope would be that we do not simply remember them in order to highlight the contribution of a few white DRCA

11 In the pre-1994 dispensation black townships outside white towns and cities were called “locations”.

Racial separation was very strictly observed, especially at night. Late in the 20th century there was still a general curfew in place which stipulated that all black people without the necessary permits had to leave white residential areas before 9:00 pm every night. In small rural towns a bell was actually rung at the market place to announce the curfew.

12 The circumstances are set out in Saayman 2009:115-121; Smith 2002:15-17.

members to the struggle, but also to inspire and empower present day members of the DRC to be involved with the struggle for justice which is an ongoing concern even in a present-day South Africa.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Pietistic background

As indicated above, Smith came from a decidedly pietistic background, called the “[Andrew] Murray evangelical and pietist tradition” in the DRC by Durand (1985:43-44). It is generally known that pietists¹³ were mainly concerned with evangelization, understood as “winning souls for the Lamb” (Von Zinzendorf). Because of this preoccupation pietists are often regarded as strongly apolitical, preferring not to become too involved with “worldly” matters.¹⁴ Yet I have argued elsewhere (Saayman 1996) that a group of DRC missionaries who can be broadly characterised as pietists in SA developed a different approach (cf. also Durand 1985). The evangelistic zeal which characterised pietism in general brought these South African missionaries uncomfortably close to “their [black] people” in the oppressive racist context of SA. In general the racist South African society was carefully constructed to separate the “white world” from the “black world”, so that the majority of white South Africans were indeed ignorant of what was going on in everyday black life in the “locations” and mining compounds (Saayman 1996:208). The reality that pietist missionaries entered the hidden “black world” brought along the possibility of growth in human understanding, which was a crucial precondition for awareness (conscientisation) of the structural injustices which constituted racist SA. The pietist evangelistic ministry among black South Africans thus brought these white missionaries face to face with the horrors of apartheid, often perpetrated by committed white Christians (:208-209). And it was also their pietist concern for their “charges” which awakened in them the awareness that this situation could not be justified in God’s name (as the apartheid policy was – cf. Saayman 2007: 69-72). So in a paradoxical way their pietistic convictions (apolitical in nature) prepared the way for sociopolitical involvement in searching for justice. I would therefore argue that Nico Smith’s pietistic background and upbringing played an important role in any account of his contribution in the struggle for justice. It may be necessary, therefore, that we re-evaluate our theological classifications such as “liberal”, “pietist”, etc. (cf. Saayman 1996). It is quite possible that a well-considered pietist faith approach to social involvement may be very helpful in facing problems such as senseless violence, corruption and decay of social institutions in SA today.

2. Koinonia and the stay in Mamelodi

It is possible to argue that Nico and Ellen Smith attempted to erect road signs on the way for white South Africans to find a new inclusive African identity. In his foreword for the *feestschrift* presented to them on the occasion of Smith’s sixtieth birthday in 1990, Beyers Naudé (1990:9; my translation) stated: “...the witness of Nico Smith and Ellen Faul will remain to exist as a symbol of a new vision, a new brother- and sisterhood, a new society built on the

13 I am referring here specifically to the Continental European (especially German) pietist tradition – cf. Saayman 1996. This tradition differs in important respects from contemporary Evangelicals, who can also be called pietists.

14 This was indeed the case in later Moravian tradition, which held that “where the execution of the spiritual mission had become impossible because of sociopolitical impediments, it was better that missionaries withdraw rather than become involved in ‘worldly’ matters” (Saayman 1996:206).

acknowledgement and acceptance of the image of God in each South African with whom we coexist from day to day while we enter into a new South Africa". I would argue that one can find evidence of this attempt to bring about a new community especially in the idea and formation of Koinonia, and in their stay in Mamelodi. In both these instances they were attempting to bring into being new ways of being together for black and white South Africans, living an example of being human together in SA (Saayman 2011). For today's generation I guess it may sound very strange, if not quite incomprehensible, that such a simple act as having a meal together can even be counted as a worthwhile way of contesting racial injustice in SA. One has to develop an awareness and understanding of how successfully apartheid had succeeded in separating South Africans into a white and a black world in the same country in order to understand this. So the simple idea of white people sharing a meal with black acquaintances was practically unthinkable in the early 1980s, and indeed illegal in restaurants, hotels and other public places of entertainment. So in the contemporary context it was actually quite a radical idea. Yet it was based on a simple, everyday human event. I think Nico and Ellen's lives teach us that it is important to remember that injustice can also be opposed through very simple human actions, *learning to be human together in everyday life*. The simple gesture (like sharing a meal) in order to acknowledge the "other's" humanity, is sometimes worth more than radical violent resistance. It is also important to keep in mind that extreme poverty continues to exist next to great wealth in SA. The simple human and Christian action of "breaking bread together" between rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged is therefore as important as in the 1980s.

The move to Mamelodi was of a different order.¹⁵ The apartheid regime used the introduction of the Group Areas Act in the 1950s in order to declare any interracial living areas illegal, and so to clear up all "black spots" in white areas (where black, white and brown often lived peacefully together). By the 1980s this had been successfully completed, and races lived apart in their "own" areas.¹⁶ Basically the only white residents in urban black townships were Roman Catholic missionaries who received special dispensation to stay in the areas where they were ministering. So the idea of moving to Mamelodi was not based on a simple everyday human custom. And the fact that it happened in the mid-1980s, when the resistance against apartheid reached a high point in the Gauteng and Vaal townships, with bombings, necklacing and murders nearly a daily occurrence, made it even more radical. Yet the Smiths decided to go as a result of their understanding of solidarity with their fellow Christians among whom they were ministering (Saayman 2009:115-117). Eventually this move proved so important that Nico could write a book (Smith 2010) to explain that this brought about a complete change to his theology (understanding of God). It was so important that Nico could articulate this change as "the death of the god of my fathers". The full extent of the impact of this unexpected move by a "boer", a previous member of the AB, a respected professor at the prestigious University of Stellenbosch, became clearer in the tributes paid to Nico and Ellen at his official burial in 2010 from the Bosman street DRC building (an Afrikaner historical monument).¹⁷ Speaker after speaker representing black communities, including the Mayor of Tshwane, mentioned

15 The full story of Nico and Ellen's time in Mamelodi is told in a book which he completed before his death, but was published posthumously (Smith 2010).

16 The effect of this Afrikaner custom and government policy was so pervasive that it was prevalent even on DRC mission stations in independent African countries such as Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe (personal observation of the author).

17 This historical church building in the heart of Pretoria/Tshwane is today the house of worship of the Uniting Reformed Church in SA's congregation of Melodi ya Tshwane (a congregation which Nico cofounded) – Saayman 2010.

their time in Mamelodi as definitive for the appreciation they expressed for Nico and Ellen. So whereas Koinonia was structured around an unspectacular, everyday occurrence, the time in Mamelodi was spectacular and eye-catching. So Nico's life history also reminds us that sometimes the achievement of justice-righteousness is so important that we have to risk undertaking something truly remarkable and extraordinary, threatening and uncomfortable. There are times when we can do nothing else but to go outside the camp to join Jesus in his humiliation and rejection by his own people in our search for justice (Heb 13:13).

CONCLUSION

I think it is clear that Nico Smith (together with Ellen) made a significant contribution to the struggle for justice in apartheid SA between 1980 and 1990. In what I have presented above, I tried to indicate what I consider to be important contributions. In our struggle for justice, it is, however, also important to remember that we are fallible human beings. I do not want to leave the impression that his contribution was faultless – there were dimensions which invite criticism. This is so because even in our struggle for the great virtue of justice we can make mistakes. If we wish to remember Nico, it is important to remember that he also was mistaken in some instances. In concluding my paper, I wish to briefly point out two areas where I think he was mistaken. Nico very often expressed his expectation that the injustice in SA could only end in an apocalyptic conflagration – what he called a “catharsis of bloodletting” (Saayman 2009:195-197). I differed from him in this expectation, and the so-called “little miracle” of the 1994 settlement seems to have proved him wrong. Let us hope, and also work for justice, so that this catharsis does not explode unexpectedly in future. The second issue where I think Nico was mistaken was in the way he generally attempted to convince Afrikaners of the evil of their support for an unjust racist dispensation, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In my opinion he decided to try and shock them into awareness of their complicity by sometimes using intemperate language in his public comments. In a sense this was understandable, as Nico felt that Afrikaners (especially members of the DRC) had become deaf and blind in their support of an unjust ideology. Personally I do not think this is the best way to go about convincing people of the errors of their ways.

Still, on balance, I have to conclude that Nico Smith made an important and lasting contribution to the struggle for justice in SA pre-1994. I have to concur with Beyers Naudé that he and Ellen left a lasting legacy for us all to treasure.

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KEY WORDS

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TREFWOORDE

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