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## CAPE DUTCH CHRISTENDOM AND ITS LEGACY<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

As a general concept, Christendom (*corpus Christianum*) – and particularly the phenomenon of patronage – are useful tools to understand the relationship between churches and cultures, and between political and civil society. This is particularly true of Western churches, but also of former Western colonial possessions and churches within them. In Christendom, patronage is usually associated with privileges bestowed upon a church by the state (political society) – state control over church/es in its realm. However, civil society and a culture, too, can assume patronage over a church, threatening the latter's integrity and prophetic witness. The colonial Cape (Dutch Reformed) Church's character was formed by powerful political patronage to the extent that it found it difficult to live and witness under the sole patronage of its crucified Lord. Ever since, it also continually sought to align itself with one or more of the above mentioned powers in South Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

In October 1991, on the eve of a new, non-racial, democratic South Africa, the late influential South African theologian Willie Jonker addressed the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. He sketched a political and cultural situation in which the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) would experience the diminishing of its traditional influence on both its membership and in public life in South Africa. This came about as a result of a break in the DRC's historical alliance with both political and cultural powers. The long-established position of dignity and honour, even dominion, which the DRC had inherited from the church in Europe, was also drawing to an end. The alliance of the DRC with the old political order was about to be terminated, as the end of the colonial era finally dawned upon South Africa.

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That political and ideological change coincided with broader paradigmatic cultural changes in the West that were also felt in South Africa. Hence Christianity and the church lost their dominant positions in society. This loss was reflected in an enormous shift in values and norms. Thus, the DRC faced a future in which it would have to exert its influence from a new position of which it had little experience, namely that of political and cultural powerlessness. This, however, was an opportune moment for the DRC to be freed from the bondage of political and ideological servitude and to reform to the form of Jesus Christ as servant (Jonker 1991:160).

Christendom – the *corpus Christianum* – as a Christian society in which the church could count on the patronage of the hegemonic political and cultural order to bolster its influence, was facing a major crisis in South Africa – at least from the perspective of the DRC. Nearly two decades after that prophetic speech of Jonker, the age-old ideal of establishing a theocracy in South Africa with the DRC as its main ecclesiastical agent, remains in crisis.

Behind this crisis lies a history of the colonial transplantation of Dutch Reformed Christendom to the Cape of Good Hope. The Dutch Reformed Church was invested with the position and role of established church. This article attempts to follow the trajectory of one specific aspect of this Christendom: patronage. The development of patronage within what I call Cape Dutch Christendom will be traced after general introductory remarks on the notion of Christendom and its relevance for South Africa and the rest of the continent. Dealing with patronage and the DRC will hopefully not only contribute to an understanding of the current context of the DRC in South Africa and where God's missionary calling is leading this denomination, but will also be edifying to other churches in this and other contexts as they search the Scriptures anew to discern God's calling. The lessons of Christendom and particularly the yielding of the Dutch Reformed Church to the temptation of servitude to political, cultural, social and economic patrons, should sound a warning to young non-Western churches. It should also contribute to the ecumenical quest for ways to be faithful participants in the mission of God.

### THE NOTION OF CHRISTENDOM AS THEOLOGICAL TOOL TO DEAL WITH CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN THE POST-CHRISTIAN WEST

The concept "Christendom" has been in use since Ernst Troeltsch used it at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although a relatively recent term, it refers to a reality that originated in the Roman Empire in the early fourth century when Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity, and when Emperor Theodosius declared it the official cult of the Empire later that century. It has even deeper roots in the theocratic polity of Israel of the Old Testament. While Troeltsch still harboured dreams of Christendom for Europe, theologians in different parts of the West, including some former colonies that regarded themselves as Christian, used the concept to deal with a new, post-Christian situation.

There is a common denominator for the use of the concept "Christendom" by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in Nazi Germany), Lesslie Newbigin (in secularised Britain), Douglass John Hall, and authors of the Gospel and Our Culture Series (in North America),

as well as Pablo Richard and Enrique Dussel (in post-Vatican II Latin America), namely that Christendom is constituted by a network of reciprocal relationships among the gospel, church, state, civil society and culture. Within these relationships, the church invariably relies upon the power exerted by any one or more of state, civil society and/or culture – to implement its vision for the public relevance of the gospel, namely, to establish a Christian state, society and culture (Nieder-Heitmann 2007:212-214).

Despite this common denominator in different Christendom settings, it needs to be stressed that Christendom has taken on various shapes in different periods and localities. Even within a particular country, its legacy manifests itself in various ways within different churches and sections of the population. It also continually changes its profile in any given setting (cf. Hall 1999). Therefore, a theological study of Christendom in a particular setting has to be cognisant of historical and sociological factors.

### **Christendom and non-Western churches in African states**

Let us return to the question of how a treatise of Christendom, and more specifically a case study of Cape Dutch Christendom and the DRC, can benefit other churches and nations in Africa.

From the perspective of indigenous African churches, one may justifiably question the relevance of such an undertaking, considering the fact that these churches have neither experienced positions of privilege and power in their nations nor cultural congruence with their host societies in ways comparable to the once-established churches of Western Christendom. The churches of Christendom tended to accommodate and reflect the cultures of their societies to the point of being contently domesticated (being in a state of ideological servitude, as Jonker would portray it), while the young indigenous churches of Africa have experienced the opposite. Their problem is one of estrangement from the cultures of their host societies as a result of Western missions that aimed at shaping them into Western cultural moulds. This was done under Christendom's assumption that Western culture was not only permeated by the gospel, but that that culture was indeed part and parcel of the gospel.

This, however, illustrates one of the ways in which Christendom has affected colonised peoples. Subsequently, the quest of African theology has been one of contextually applying the gospel and the shape of the church within the cultures and religions of Africa. Accommodating the traditional cultures of Africa in church and theology became a matter of liberation for African theologians (cf. Richard 1986:153). John Mbiti, a leading voice in this respect, advocated more than the accommodation of those aspects of African culture that are not in conflict with the gospel, by defining African religions as preparations for the gospel.

Colonial Christendom affected indigenous people not only culturally but also politically. Colonial racism, reinforced by a theology that accommodated colonial ideology, affected Africans in all aspects of their lives. Hence, black theology joined the cause of liberation theology in Latin America in a quest for political emancipation from colonial exploitation and repression, by unmasking the culture and theology of colonial Christendom. This culture, they contend, is colonial and racist and marked by capitalist abuse (cf. Kritzing 1990:3-6).

In line with such critique, a growing number of dissident voices amid white South African Dutch Reformed theologians have advocated a recovery of the “strangeness” of the gospel and the church, which does not emulate the scheme of the (Western, colonial) world (cf. Kritzinger 1990).

There is indeed much that can be learnt from Christendom’s experience in the West, both positively and negatively. On the positive side, Christendom represents a willingness by the church to take responsibility for public life (Newbigin 1986:100f.). Furthermore, the way in which European culture came about as a synthesis between the gospel and ancient Roman culture constitutes a classic study of indigenisation. This synthesis was a work of theology – particularly that of Augustine (Newbigin 1995:7-14; cf. Goheen 2000:379; cf. Bonhoeffer 2005:106-109). Nevertheless, the ways in which it aligned itself with secular powers in the process of fulfilling this task is justifiably critiqued.

On the other hand, the post-Enlightenment culture of the West – the so-called culture of modernity – with its insistence on the banning of religion from the public sphere to the private domain, spread throughout the world and has probably become dominant even in many non-Western countries. South Africa is a prime example of this (cf. Nieder-Heitmann 2003). This culture, which fosters secularism and new paganisms in the West, came about as a reaction to European religious wars that followed the Reformation. These conflicts fostered the conviction that religion no longer had a constructive public role to play. Instead, rationalism became the new guiding light (Newbigin 1986:101ff.; 1994:172; 1995:30-40; Bonhoeffer 2005:113ff.). Secularism and new paganisms, coupled with two devastating world wars that were fuelled by “Christian Europe”, have contributed to a realisation among Western theologians that Christendom has indeed failed in the West. This realisation has called for a reassessment of the notions of mission and church. Ecumenical exposure to non-Western churches that bear witness to Christ and exist in a non-Christian world, encouraged Western theologians to revisit many biblical notions, notably that of mission and church.

As a result, Christendom’s understanding of mission – as the “extension of the kingdom of God” by the church from the Christian West to the non-Christian world – was replaced by a new ecumenical consensus. Mission could no longer be regarded as a church venture. In following the lead of pioneer post-Christendom theologian, Karl Barth, mission came to be understood as a function of the trinitarian economy of salvation – the Father’s sending of the Son and their sending of the Holy Spirit (Guder 2002:10, 16). This new understanding of mission has had a profound effect on ecclesiology. God’s mission (the *missio Dei*) that aims at the restoration of all creation, incorporates the church as divinely elected instrument, sign, and foretaste of the coming reign of God (cf. Newbigin 1953:9).

## CAPE DUTCH CHRISTENDOM AND PATRONAGE

Cape Dutch Christendom and particularly its dependence on the patronage of its established church, the DRC, developed the Cape of Good Hope during the almost 150 years of colonial rule of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) (1652-1795). During this period, patronage was mainly political and judicial in nature. Patronage has its roots in the Constantine practice

of political society, offering protection and bestowing privilege upon the church. More often than not this came at a price for the church, the political patron demanding some degree of control over it. This pattern persisted during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when Protestant princes would offer patronage to a Protestant church. In the United Netherlands, the Reformed Church became the privileged church. Much was sacrificed for this status in terms of the freedom that the Reformed movement viewed fitting for the church.

At the Cape, this situation was even more pronounced. Here the Dutch Reformed Church emerged as the chaplain service of the VOC – the latter being a corporate mercantile venture of capitalist, upper-middle-class Dutch Reformed merchants of the free cities of the Republic of the United Netherlands. The VOC monopolised trade in the East Indies as such, as well as between the latter and Europe. Ordained Dutch Reformed ministers of religion and non-ordained spiritual workers (the so-called sick-comforters) were employed as chaplains on its ships and at its refreshment posts. The Cape of Good Hope was such a post established to supply fresh produce to the VOC's passing merchant fleets. Soon thereafter the VOC began encouraging the settlement of colonists at the Cape. Congregations that were founded at the Cape virtually became extensions of the VOC's "chaplain service".

This particular way in which the church at the Cape was established, namely as "department of religion" of the VOC, constituted a novel kind of patronage. No longer was patronage merely a function of political society, whether of imperial or feudal kind, nor even the republican kind of the United Netherlands. Political society at the Cape consisted of the colonial governing body (called the Council of Policy) of the managing board of the VOC as mercantile corporation (the Council of Seventeen). While the United Netherlands, with its republican form of governance, already heralded the dawn of modern *Europe*, the Cape served as a precursor of a modern *world*. It was part of the modern colonial project – not as regal expansionism (as in the case of Latin America), but rather as global, corporate and monopolising capitalism (cf. Moltmann 1998:3-4). Mercantile capitalism was the undisputed reason for the establishment of Cape Dutch Christendom and it remained the reigning ideology. The VOC, as institutional embodiment of this ideology, gained full control of the DRC at the Cape by assuming patronage over it.

Why would the VOC establish a chaplain service and by so doing become patron of the established church in its domains? This question can be answered in a functionalist manner. It was probably expedient for the Company to co-opt the church into its organisation. The church expounded a gospel that was favourably disposed towards capitalism, recognised rulers and the rule of law, and promoted "tranquillity and peace" in church and society. In its conflict with the Anabaptists, the Dutch Reformed Church had pronounced an anathema against those who rejected governmental authority and governors, disobeyed the rule of law and imported communal ownership (*Confessio Belgica*, Article 36). By contrast, the church at the Cape was itself loyal and preached civil loyalty to the VOC patron's colonial government, administration of justice and capitalistic ideology.

This raises a further question: how could political society and the church in the Netherlands allow a company like the VOC to assume political patronage of the church? Part

of the answer is that the VOC pre-empted this formal arrangement by taking the initiative and employing chaplains. Another side of the story is that mercantile capitalism was held in high esteem as it had come to the rescue of the Reformation in the Netherlands and of the Dutch people per se. This ideology and the body of functionaries (VOC) that put it into economic and political practice at the Cape therefore enjoyed the status of patron not only of the Dutch Reformed faith, but indeed of the Republic of the United Netherlands. Criticism of the VOC and its economic principles and practices would be unpatriotic and in conflict with popular sentiments in a tiny, beleaguered Protestant republic that braved the wrath of the Spanish crown and Inquisition. Moreover, it would border on being unfaithful to the theocratic ideal of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Yet another side to the story is that chaplains – and the church at the Cape as “chaplain” – benefited in many respects from the patronage of the VOC. Chaplains were high-ranking, paid officials of the Company. Church amenities were provided by the patron. Public education, which the church claimed as part of its cultural mandate, was also sponsored by the Company.

As was referred to above, these privileges, however, came at a price. The Company assumed stricter control over its chaplain church than the government of the Netherlands did, with regard to the mother church. In their instructions, VOC chaplains were restricted to their “profession and vocation” – religion (1696 Instructions for Predicants and Sick-comforters, Article 5, in Spoelstra 1907:544-557). Even though they were not forbidden to reproach “vain or sacrilegious utterances” or “immoral and improper actions” (1696 Instructions, Article 11), they were prohibited from becoming involved in any matters of Company governance (1696 Instructions, Article 5) and from admonishing government and government officials in public (1617 Instructions, Article 2; 1695 Instructions, Article 10). Members of consistories needed Company approbation. Church councils were monitored and advised by political commissioners. This contradiction caused chaplains to be very cautious in taking any action that could be conceived as criticism of its patron. Chaplains and councils made pronouncements of an economic nature only once the patron had paved the way. Hence criticism against the excesses of a capitalist lifestyle at the Cape reflected in the official documents of the church was expressed, only once Governor Rijk Tulbagh had promulgated laws against “pomp and circumstance”. By doing so the church merely echoed its master’s voice.

The church at the Cape placed such a high premium on “tranquillity and peace” (*rust en vrede*) that it virtually became a hallmark of the true church. The value ascribed to “tranquillity and peace” also applied to society at large. Law and order were important. Such a church, firmly under Company control, was an asset to a refreshment and military post and young colony populated by diverse and displaced people, where mutiny and revolt could readily find fertile breeding ground.

Thus, when civil resistance to public maladministration surfaced, the church loyally supported its patron, albeit by quiescence. No sign can be found in church documents of any official support from the side of the church during the civil opposition to the rule of Governor W.A. van der Stel. When Rev. Le Boucq criticised Governor Van der Stel’s acting successor,

the church joined the Company government in condemning Le Boucq's actions (Nieder-Heitmann 2007:181-182).

When civil resistance resurfaced during the last sixteen years of VOC rule, nothing was again reflected in the official documents of the church. However, it can be assumed that most – if not all – Cape Patriots were members of the church. The church stayed loyal to the VOC as patron, however much the latter was guilty of corruption (Hofmeyr 2002:71).

### Cape Dutch Christendom and patronage in crisis

When the British took over the Cape Colony in 1795, Cape Dutch Christendom and its established church faced a crisis. In the first place, the VOC patron was replaced by British colonial masters. This also meant the loss of its privilege of being the only established church in the colony. However, it did still receive government funding.

The short-lived return of Dutch colonial rule did not resolve this crisis, but rather added another layer of political control to it. The administration of the Batavian Republic, as the Netherlands was then called, was deeply influenced by the French Revolution and the resulting new views regarding state, nation and church.

The Cape Church<sup>3</sup> knew no other way of relating to political society than being dependent and subservient. Hence it obligingly conformed to these regime changes. Loyalty to the British crown, for instance, was reflected in its disapproval of the so-called “Great Trek” – the emigration of some of its members from the Cape Colony to the hinterland with a view to escaping British rule. By withholding ministry to the Trekkers, the Cape Church in effect censured its own members who took part in the Trek.

The crisis of Cape Dutch Christendom and its church deepened with the promulgation of the “voluntary principle” by the Cape Parliament in 1875. The passing of this act was the result of a rigorous campaign by an influential Reformed minister of British nonconformist persuasion. He could rightfully appeal to Calvin's tradition for disestablishment. This act meant the end of material provision by the state. The Cape Church, however, had no lived experience of being disestablished – of being “a church under the cross”, as churches that did not enjoy political patronage were called.

So deeply ingrained was political patronage in the identity of the Cape Church and its theocratic ideal for society, that it was argued that the retraction of material provision by the state was tantamount to disavowal of the Christian character of the state. The theocratic ideal of the church, namely that of a *corpus Christianum* – Christian state and society – was therefore at stake (Hanekom 1951:326).

Furthermore, it was argued, “the voluntary principle” would render preachers dependent upon the voluntary support of members and, therefore, jeopardise the freedom of the former to preach the gospel in an uncompromising manner, as church members would then be in a position to pressurise preachers to say what they wanted to hear (Hanekom 1951:329). In this manner, a new centre of privilege and control – a new patron – would be established.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “church at the Cape” is now exchanged for “Cape Church”, since the Dutch Reformed congregations in the Cape Colony had meanwhile formed a synod in 1824.

This fear was not completely unfounded. At the Cape Church Synod of 1857 (where “the voluntary principle” was vehemently opposed), “weaker brothers” among the flock had already managed to pressure the Cape Church into compromising its official non-racial stance by condoning the segregation of converts from “heathendom” and those who claimed biological descent from (Western) Christendom. Therefore, the “voluntary principle” had the potential to allow wealthy church members to impose their will on the church.

The crisis of legal disestablishment led to a new development. The vacuum left by the retraction of the privileges associated with state patronage was filled by the middle-class members of this church. These members constituted the bulk of “white” Cape Dutch colonists. White, Dutch-speaking landowners were set to become the new patrons of the Cape Church as they thenceforth provided for the sustenance of the institutional church. As reflected in the above-mentioned synodal decision, they had also already staked their claim regarding control of the Cape Church. This bolstered their influence significantly.

Not too long after legal disestablishment, the First Boer War of independence against British imperialism sparked the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. The Cape Church found itself in a situation of having to side either with its former patron, the state, or with its flock – “*die volk*”. This was a choice that had never been necessary in either Dutch or Cape Dutch “Christendom”. Political society in both these forms of “Christendom” was in alliance with the Dutch national sentiments that followed in the wake of the Reformation and the Eighty Years’ War. At the Cape there were also indications of the fostering of sentiments of Dutch supremacy (Nieder-Heitmann 2007:183-186). The educational policy of Governor De Mist of the second Dutch (Batavian) colonial rule was also geared towards the promotion of Dutch civility (De Mist 1920:201). Protestant England, however, had up to that point been regarded as a kindred kingdom, which initially resulted in a smooth change of political patronage (cf. Nieder-Heitmann 2007:177). This war brought about a clear break, as it led to the emergence of an Afrikaner nationalism poised against England and all things English.

Once the Cape Church had lost state privilege and had subsequently become dependent upon the voluntary offerings of its flock, its members and their nascent ideology of Afrikaner nationalism commanded the loyalty of the Church. Here we witness the dramatic shift away from Thomas Hobbes’s seventeenth-century work *Leviathan*, which portrays an era when the power of modern states was still absolute, when rulers could impose their will on the people, and order society according to their likes and dislikes. Now “Leviathan” had to make way for “Lilliput”, which exemplifies the manifold threads of popular opinion that had come to dominate post-French-Revolution society.

A new type of quasi-church establishment had come into being: patronage was now located in the *volk*. This shift became evident in the response of the Council of the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa to the foiled 1914 rebellion by Afrikaners against the British take-over of German South West Africa. The Council virtually sided with the new patron (the *volk*) by justifying the rebellion against its former (British) state patron.

This development culminated in the establishment of a new Christendom in the form of the apartheid state in 1948, with the DRC as the main theological apologist. For Afrikaners



it resolved the crisis of estrangement between political society and the *volk* that had been their experience after the formal termination of Cape Dutch Christendom in 1795. The DRC espoused an interpretation of the gospel that legitimated an Afrikaner Christian-national regime. As Willem Nicol argued convincingly, church leadership had learnt to “accompany the flock” (2004:115-121).

Within the new Christendom of the apartheid state, where Afrikaner nationalism reigned supreme, the DRC could once again revert to the old quietist position of Cape Dutch Christendom: championing “tranquillity and peace” in church and society.

Loyalty to the new ideological patron offered many benefits for the DRC. Its members benefited economically from the apartheid state, which resulted in booming voluntary offerings that were reflected in the many new grandiose church buildings that shot up during that period.

However, the advent of the new South Africa in 1994 signalled the defeat and shaming of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism. The DRC currently finds itself amid a renewed crisis due to its Christendom heritage. The critical question is whether this heritage will undergo a new metamorphosis whereby a new worldly patron will be acknowledged. New ideological patrons indeed present themselves. The current hegemonic ideology among many Dutch Reformed is that of the new-liberal market (cf. Van der Westhuizen 2007). Hence congregations that befriend this patron by buying into its consumerism and individualism seem to flourish financially while others suffer or even have to close their doors. Churches of the former kind tend to find their identity in being vendors of religious goods and services (cf. Hunsberger 1993/4:17-18) in order to win and retain the patronage of their clients.

Meanwhile, there are also signs of a new surge of Afrikaner nationalism. Nationalism and capitalism, however, have a history as aligning forces in Dutch Reformed Christendom. National-capitalism was a formula that formed a cornerstone both in Cape Dutch Christendom and in the new Christendom of the apartheid era. It might just be that new liberalism and nationalism join forces once more.

The critical question the DRC now has to answer is whether it will seize this *kairos* – this opportune moment of truth – and finally break with its Christendom habit of paying homage to the crown of political and/or ideological patrons, and rather live under the cross of its only true patron – Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

“Christendom” as a general concept, and particularly the aspect of patronage, are indeed helpful tools to understand Cape Dutch society and the Cape Church. Cape Dutch Christendom, with all its resemblances to other colonial Christendoms, distinguished itself. VOC patronage was essentially not political but economic in nature. Its capitalist ideology served as “patron” not only of the Cape Church, but also of the Cape Colony as well as the United Netherlands and its privileged Dutch Reformed Church. This trajectory helps one understand the later developments in the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape, first as privileged church controlled

by the British colonial administration, then as church of Afrikaner nationalism, and now as a church seeking refuge under the patronage of new liberal capitalism. The perennial challenge to this church remains to reform and (re)gain its integrity as church under (the patronage of) the cross.

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