

*The Afrikaner nation's search for a Christian  
identity as a consequence of the Reformed theology  
that was practiced between 1961 and 1990*

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**ABSTRACT**

The role that the traditional Afrikaner churches played together with their way of practicing theology during the years of struggle, contributed to the fact that a large part of the Afrikaner community, which are mostly Christians, currently find themselves in an identity crisis. The triangular Afrikaner identity framework collapsed when it was declared false, hypocritical and sectarian, not only by the international community but also by those who helped to build this identity from inside. Unable to recover from this onslaught on their identity during the crucial years of transformation, the majority of the Afrikaner community is still struggling to give new meaning and content to their identity framework. Cognitive dissonance can help to identify the issues that need to be redressed. Refocusing on the valuable and sustainable content that should constitute the anchors of the Afrikaner identity frame, this group can implement its Christian calling to bring positive change to South Africa.



## INTRODUCTION

“Afrikaners had always been fairly certain of what they were. Nowadays, they are no longer so sure” (Cloete 1992:42). 20 years after South Africa changed to a democratic country, a large portion of the Afrikaner community (white and Afrikaans speaking – Cloete 1992:42) still finds itself amidst a debilitating identity crisis. This crisis started about the same time that the so called ‘struggle for justice’<sup>1</sup> ended, with the reversal of the theological sanctification of apartheid (Steyn 2005:550) which had a huge impact on the lives of Afrikaners who tend to shape their whole worldview and their actions around their interpretation of religious issues. The confession about the error of apartheid split the once large Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) and is currently causing havoc in the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church.

From an Afrikaner point of view, the ‘struggle for justice’ did not end in 1990; in fact it started all over again when apartheid was dismantled. The years since 1961, when South Africa became a republic, until 1990 were in Afrikaner eyes golden years. For the first time since the British rule started in 1795, Afrikaners were free from oppression and relieved from their ‘underdog’ status. For about thirty years the Afrikaners were reaping the fruits of their long ‘struggle for justice’: they saw themselves as victims that rose from poverty, oppression and exploitation to establish an independent nation.

Unfortunately the triangular based identity framework that grew strong before 1961, was abused and misused by both church and state to such an extent that after 1994 many Afrikaners felt that they could no longer identify with it. The content of the three pillars of Reformed religion, historical perception and unique Afrikaner characteristics, were by then questioned by the Afrikaners themselves. After 1994, their changed status in society revived the Afrikaner feeling of being victimised and insecure. Insecurity together with the confrontation of the content of their identity brought a crisis. This crisis provides opportunities for change and development away from the political focus that dictated the history of the Afrikaner nation towards positive individual growth and a paradigm shift in group behaviour.

## THE IDENTITY CRISIS

Being far less self-confident (Patterson 1957:279) and far less principled than what popular scholarship (Venter 1929:9,10; Van Zonneveld 1987:20; Pretorius 1988:165)

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1 A conference was held at the University of Stellenbosch in May 2012 on the theme: “The Reformed Churches in South Africa and the struggle for justice: remembering 1960-1990”.

and the media often portray and Afrikaners like to believe about themselves (Kinghorn 1994:393), a large number of Afrikaners were unable to adjust positively during the transformation period after 1994. General behaviour by this sector of the rainbow nation includes tell-tale signs of an identity crisis such as guilt or shame, fear, a sense of loss, and anger (Jansen 2009) which suggests that there is an urgent need to attend to important issues regarding Afrikaner identity (Verwey & Quayle, 2012).

We are living complex lives and our identities are often shaped by the large array of roles we are playing both in the community and in our private lives, resulting in multifarious identities which are constantly changing and developing. These changes can happen naturally when our roles change or it can be initiated through different stages of development. Identity changes can also be done intentionally. In both these cases, an identity crisis can develop when people are unable to cope with the intensity or direction of the changes.

An identity crisis can be described as a psychosocial state or condition of disorientation and role confusion. It is the result of conflicting experiences, pressures, and expectations and often goes hand in hand with an acute display of emotions (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/identity+crisis> accessed on 16 July 2012).

Traditionally, Afrikaner identity formed a triangle, with religion at the pinnacle, while perception of history and personal characteristics formed the two base corners. During the apartheid-years, all three of these anchors were used for political, social and economical gain. Violation of the principles of the Christian faith to advance the political agenda of the government and to promote the traditional Reformed churches as institutions (Oliver 2011:73) eroded the integrity of Afrikaner identity. Cognitive dissonance can be used to encourage Afrikaners to fill this existing framework with new content to refocus the identity of the Afrikaner nation to be in line with both its religion and history. In order to actively change the identity of a nation, one needs to understand why the change is necessary (De Villiers 1988). For the Afrikaner nation, the search for a new identity is of the utmost importance because it will secure its existence and survival as a minority group within South Africa. The nation needs to recover its identity through the imperative lens of meta memories from salvation history (cf. Volf 2006). This could result in the Afrikaner nation living and proclaiming its identity in such a way that the Afrikaner nation could have a positive influence in South Africa (Oliver 2011:76).

## TRADITIONAL AFRIKANER IDENTITY

The character of a nation has a sense of permanence and it is traceable from one generation to the next (Wilcocks 1945:287). National identity is formed by the unique characteristics that distinguish one group of people from other groups. It includes matters like language, culture, worldview, and religion. Religion is seen as an important modifier of identity (Riesebrodt 2000:2). This sense of permanence is, however, not hegemonically defined and fixed (Todd 2005:432) as nations develop and their circumstances change constantly. Traditional Afrikaner identity could provide a solid foundation for an identity filled with content that could aid Afrikaners in the current circumstances.

Traditional Afrikaner identity and culture melted into one solid mass, making it nearly impossible to distinguish between its character, religion and worldview (Erlank 1952:12; cf. Sutherland 2013). Afrikaner history is divided into five general periods (Akenson 1992:59,60). The initial establishment of the settlement and Afrikaner identity was done before 1806. By 1795 the Afrikaner identity was strong enough to resist the British attempt to turn Afrikaners into English citizens (Akenson 1992:62; Pont 1970:12). Afrikaner identity grew strong during the British occupation (1806-1870). Between 1870 and 1910 rapid cultural, political and economical developments brought consolidation of Afrikaner identity. Between 1910 and 1961 the Afrikaner identity development gained an aspect of nationality.

Meyer (1940:27) describes the main characteristic of the Afrikaner nation as being Calvinistic, thus putting the Christian faith of this group of people right on top of their identity framework (an identity framework is a cropping tool to identify and protect the most important characteristics of a person or nation - Gardner 2003). Looking at the Afrikaner identity as it functioned during the twentieth century, two other important pillars supported religion to form the anchors to the triangular mass that served as the Afrikaner identity framework. The pinnacle of the triangle (religion) is linked to the Afrikaner way of dealing with history, which forms one of the bottom anchor points. These two pillars are linked with the third and final cornerstone of Afrikaner identity; the shared characteristics of the nation that influence and determine their actions and behaviour.

### Religion

Although South Africa was never officially a Christian country, Protestant religion played a major role in the political, economic and social history and development of the country since the European settlement (Oliver 2008:93-114). Especially during the formation phase (until 1795), religion was not restricted to the walls of the

church but was practised in everyday life, and it even determined the worldview and management of state affairs (Van der Walt 1938:68). The first colonists at the Cape of Good Hope used their religion as a form of identity to distinguish themselves from the local inhabitants and the imported slaves (Giliomee 2009:41).

The Bible was the focus point of Afrikaner life (Wichmann 1941:3). Protestant religion together with the influence of Romanticism with its emphasis on religion, freedom and history (Oliver 2006b:1479) and the unique living conditions during the developing stage of the young nation all work together to structure the Afrikaner identity into a triangle with religion, as the most important part, at the top. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the Afrikaner nation was called ‘unconsciously religious’ (Rose 1902:11) and more than a century later, the majority of the Afrikaners can still be identified by their religion (about 87% of the White population of South Africa are Christians – Statistics South Africa 2004:28).

Sadly, the Afrikaner emphasis on religion was also responsible for negative developments in South Africa. There are three major problems that emerged from the focus on Afrikaner religion. In the first place, the schismatic tendency (Steyn 2006:674) and power struggles (Schutte 1943:30) resulted in three different Calvinistic churches formed in less than three decades within one country and one nation (Oliver 2005:41). These strives never stopped (Oliver 2011) and splintering within the traditional churches is still happening (Beukes 2012). Secondly, the selective theology that was preached and practised led to the development of the theological justification of apartheid which in its turn led to the third problem where the church became the handmaid of the a political power.

Afrikaners never were a unified nation and the wide variety of religious influences such as Pietism, Methodism, Neo-Calvinism and Liberal Theology (Oliver 2006b:1473-1475), led to individual conclusions and severe conflict on issues such as doctrine, morals and the interpretation of the Biblical message. Afrikaners tend to see themselves as ‘owners’ of a certain church or tradition (Oliver 2007:34) and disregard others who do not share their beliefs.

In general, traditional Afrikaner theology that formed the backbone of early twentieth century Afrikaner identity centred on the Old Testament covenant. As a result, they saw themselves as a modern counterpart of an Old Testament Tribe (Calpin 1944:17; Mackenzie 1899:158). This emphasis on OT religion in conjunction with the Calvinistic predestination doctrine later developed into heresy (Oliver 2011:78): After the second Anglo-Boer War the unique syncretistic civil religion with the shell of Puritanism and an idealistic concept of theocracy developed which

later provided a Biblical founding for apartheid (Hanekom 1948) and managed to trap Afrikaner religion to become the slave of politics (Oliver 2010).

The Afrikaner churches became involved in politics, which diverted the focus away from the core principles of the Christian religion. A too strong tie to tradition and a dependency paradigm (Oliver 2009b:180) led to further deviation from the Gospel message. In society, the Afrikaner churches gained enormous political, social and economic powers. This led to the adulteration of Afrikaner religion and Afrikaner identity.

When Apartheid was finally exposed, it caused a huge loss in credibility, status and power within the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches. The traumatic result was paralysing to the churches that seemed to lose their voices and ability to act positively (Steyn 2005:551). The pinnacle of Afrikaner identity; the strong reliance on religion; crumbled under the word 'sectarian' that was stick to it first by the international community and in the last years of the 'struggle' also by its own leaders and members. A sharp decrease in membership followed (Oliver 2006a:118). The exodus from the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches cannot be seen as only a result of the disappointment and shock regarding the fall of apartheid. Various other contributions such as secularisation and a search for Spiritual growth and renewal are also among the contributing factors. However, the fact remain that the traditional Afrikaans speaking churches suffered a huge setback. The lack of sufficient dynamic leadership during these crucial events resulted in the churches losing their credibility not only in society but also in the eyes of church members and former church members.

## History

Vosloo (2013) refers to the close relationship between memory and identity. He also refers to Sabbagh (2009:194) who indicates that identity is intertwined with memories and that our memories are often sculpt to fit in with who we are or who we want to be. History forms a very important part of the Afrikaner identity (both of who we are and who we want to be). The remark made by Volf (2006:24) that we are because of what we remember about ourselves and also because of what other people remember about us, also seems to be true of the Afrikaner identity cornerstone of historical perception. As memory tends to play parts with the minds of individuals (Bjorklund 2000), the history of a nation can also be shaped to focus on things, as we would like them to have happened or remembered. There are several ways in which this can be traced in Afrikaner history.

Firstly, as has been already said, Afrikaners never formed a unified nation. Dualisms within their identity framework always existed (Coetzee 1977:154 – hero's and cowards, fighters and joiners, believers and unbelievers) and therefore, there is usually more than one account of events recorded depending on the bias and intentions of the historians. Up to this day there is not a single work written about the history of Christianity in South Africa or the general history of the country that comply with or accommodate the diverse opinions of the Afrikaners (cf. Oliver 2011:74).

Secondly, history is too often employed to focus on past grievances, resulting in identity frames conceived in terms of a culture of grievance. The most important characteristic of the group is their status as historical victims (Black 2008). Afrikaner identity was for a long time just that – the remembrance and cherishing of a selected number of grievances, such as the injustice suffered at Slagtersnek, the bloodshed prior to the events at Blood River and the devastating events that took place during the Second Anglo-Boer War (Oliver 2011:83). Maybe because it is still too fresh in the memory of those affected by the Bush War, the impact and trauma that this war had on Afrikaner minds is not yet fully understood and explained (Oliver 2011:83). The political changes that were implemented since 1994, once again put the spotlight on the Afrikaners as victims and underdogs (Oliver 2011:83), taking them back to focusing on grievances, both past and present.

It is clear that history to the Afrikaners is filled with emotion and religious interpretations. Therefore, Afrikaner history is called sacred (Den Boer 1966:33; Van Jaarsveld 1961:228), bias (Denis 1997:86), apologetic (Van Jaarsveld 1958:47,8), schismatic (Gilliomee 2009:179), conservative and narrow-minded (Liebenberg 1966:61), sectarian and imperial (MacCulloch 1987:3,5). The task of historians is to explain and prepare people to consider alternatives (Gilliomee 2003:35). The time is ripe to view the South African history and church history from a new perspective, leading Afrikaners to cherish their remarkable history and unique way of linking history to faith and religion in such a way that it can once again form a cornerstone to their identity.

## Character

There is a distinction between the actual (not always so heroic and principled) identity of the Afrikaner nation and the prototype heroic example of the Afrikaner that was developed for later generations to follow (Coetzee 1977:152,153). Focusing on what Afrikaners ought to be, and illustrating it with an incomplete and fictitious picture of Afrikaner characteristics (Booyens 1970:30), did much harm to the identity of Afrikaners who through the years tried, but more often than not failed to

live up to the high standards and expectations painted by historians and educators. Afrikaners themselves tend to evaluate these characteristics as positive but they are currently constantly confronted with the negative aspects resulting in role confusion and disorientation – the symptoms of an identity crisis.

Afrikaners used to see themselves as religious but were labelled as sectarians due to their apartheid-theology (Oliver 2011:77). Afrikaners used to be conservative but were accused of being narrow-minded (Oliver 2011:79). They see themselves as individualistic but others saw them as stubborn (Oliver 2011:79). To themselves they are cunning but to others they are arrogant and dishonest (Oliver 2011:82). The ever-present sense of humour of the Afrikaner is frowned upon as hempen humour by outsiders (Oliver 2011:76). Of course, it should be kept in mind that the degree in which these characteristics can be detected in individuals and groups vary to a large extent, as can be expected.

Just as the only difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist is in the eye of the beholder, so the Afrikaner characteristics can be viewed from either the positive or the negative side. An evaluation of the value and worth and need for nurturing certain Afrikaner characteristics can and should help the confused people to regain a strong sense of identity.

Historians have the goal to clarify the foundations of contemporary society and to identify remedial actions necessary for enhancing a collective awareness of society as a moral community (Nytagodien & Neal 2004:381). Therefore historians and church historians, researching the Reformed theology (and how it functioned in Afrikaner history) and its consequences for Afrikaner identity, could assist in providing content and perspective to rebuild the identity frame of the Afrikaner nation.

## **A POSSIBLE NEW IDENTITY FOR THE AFRIKANERS**

Traditional Afrikaner identity was focused on religion. However, Afrikaners (nor anybody else) cannot claim to be Christians when the basic Christian principles of faith are violated (Oliver 2009a:77). The lesson to be learned is never to let religion become an instrument of ideology. The first step on the way to transforming their religion to faith would be to face and acknowledge the mistakes made in the past. Christian faith should not be characterised by selective theology, schism or ideology dressed as theology. Religion should not be made a handmaid or a hostage of political powers.

Once these errors are addressed, attention would also spread to the supporting pillars of history and behaviour. In the past, Afrikaner historians and church historians



determined what ought to be remembered and how it should be remembered with chosen traumas and glories (cf. Volkan 1994). Painting the picture from a different perspective, cognitive dissonance would become inevitable, opening possibilities for a paradigm shift in both worldview and behaviour.

Leon Festinger (1957) describes cognitive dissonance as the feeling of tension that most people experience when they recognise that they hold two ‘cognitions’ – ideas, beliefs, opinions – that contradict each other. Cognitive dissonance is used as a tool by educators to indicate contradictions between beliefs and actions in order to bring about positive change in both attitude and behaviour, to align beliefs and actions with each other. There are several ways in which people try to avoid this confrontation in order to steer clear of the challenge (Travis and Aronson 2008). Most importantly the dissonance can be ignored or blocked and the importance and impact of the issue can also be down scaled.

It is difficult to change the perceptions of people who choose to believe their own interpretation of events (MacMillan 2009:87). Afrikaners who are now middle-aged (who went to school during the high days of apartheid and were forced to do national service in the South African Defence Force for two years) are perhaps the group that is most intensely affected by the rapidly changing world around them. It is also this group that is affected by affirmative action (Gilliomee 2009:688) and drastic role changes within the household and traditional worldview (Oliver 2011:81). Therefore it is not strange that confrontation with members of this group often results in negation when challenged about the need to redress their identity framework (cf. Verwey and Quayle 2012).

Cooper (2007:74) suggests that dissonance should begin with focusing on the actions of people. Rick Warren (2005) says that the first Reformation was about creeds. The second reformation needs to focus on deeds. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his address at the conference held at Stellenbosch on the struggle for justice, said that we as South Africans are in desperate need of a transformation from words to deeds. In practical terms and regarding the building of Afrikaner identity, this would mean the following: The fact that other Christians were able to label Afrikaner religion (including the religious coloured perception of history and the self-perception of the Afrikaner) as sectarian, schismatic, selective and false because of the theological justification of apartheid, should activate cognitive dissonance. This, in turn should open opportunities for positive change. Intensive self-evaluation and testing against Christian principles would bring changes to the way theology is practised. Christianity is not an ideology but a religion. Faith does not change institutions; it changes people - both in what they believe and what they do. If Christianity is used as framework to focus on history, and Christian principles are implemented for all

sides of the story, Afrikaner history can once again become usable and a positive encouragement to stay true to the Christian faith and act as example for others. The same religious foundation that served as an identity for the first settlers in the Cape, and later on guarded the young nation against British imperialism and became the capstone of Afrikaner identity, could serve this nation again to rebuild a positive identity. This could be a starting point to bring about positive change and fresh content to the Afrikaner identity framework. The biggest influence would be on the behaviour of Afrikaners that should constantly be adjusted according to Christian values.

## CONCLUSION

Afrikaner identity forms a triangle with religion at the pinnacle, while the two base corners are anchored in perception of history and personal characteristics. Afrikaners themselves are often not aware of the influence that these three concepts have on their identity and actions as well as on the way other people judge them. Although all three of these corners have strong and positive aspects, a crisis developed because of confrontation with the negative aspects. These weak points disintegrated during the 1990s and the crippled structure is in urgent need of repair to once again serve as the pillars around which the Afrikaner nation can build its identity as part of the South African rainbow nation.

Religious revivalism is a powerful tool to provide a new self-esteem and a Christian identity with an eschatological perspective. Cognitive dissonance could act as a vehicle to activate the process. The more Afrikaners are made aware of the discrepancies that existed between their faith and their behaviour, the more likely the possibility of change would become.

By focusing on the positive aspects of these pillars and rebuilding it with strong positive content, the focus could shift to once again make the Afrikaner nation a key role player in the development and progress of South Africa. By concentrating on the main point that most Afrikaners share, namely their Christian faith, it is possible to rebuild the Afrikaner identity frame into a strong national asset.

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## **KEY WORDS**

Afrikaner Identity framework  
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Characteristics

## **TREFWOORDE**

Afrikaner identiteitsraamwerk  
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