


Hidden healer: Farewell to reformed 'tamed' theism



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This research focuses, firstly, on a farewell from a certain manifestation of traditional, reformed 'tamed' theism (that is in this case, theism which neglects or represses the authentic biblical insight into the triune God, who reveals himself in unfathomable hiddenness or 'masking'). The latter dimension of genuine theism was a central rediscovery of the 16th century Reformation which, however, was widely neglected and even 'nearly totally forgotten', according to H. Bavinck, in post-Reformation scholasticism. Reformed theism thus participated to a large measure, in the general rationalistic climate of the modern paradigm and its dogmatic domestication of the living God, into a cerebrally manageable idea of a God who forms the apex of a world system, constructed by sovereign Western man. The research also focuses, in the second place, on a farewell towards recovering the 'always greater God', who hides himself, as it were behind a mask, in dazzling, impenetrable light. He reveals himself obliquely from the backside, as to Moses, only after he had passed. In the fullness of time, he revealed himself in the hiddenness of Jesus Christ, culminating in the deformed humanity of a wretched criminal dying on a cross. This resurrected and exalted Crucified is now hidden in God. On the way to the final eschaton, he reveals himself in 'the garb' of his Spirit-energised Word and sacraments. Two examples of a tamed theism, possibly neglecting Divine hiddenness, are taken from our Afrikaans-reformed ambience: Afrikaner nationalism, and the sporadic encouragement to erect signs of the kingdom of God in our world.

Contribution: This research, firstly, contributes to the diagnosis and discarding of a kind of distorted reformed theism that has 'domesticated' the inscrutable hiddenness of the living triune God (still so vital to the magisterial Reformers) through a post-Reformation process of recovered scholasticism. In some ways, this frequently blended into rationalism in such a way that it did not escape accommodation to post-Enlightenment *bourgeois* or civil theism. *Bourgeois* theism is currently collapsing rapidly in many Christian theologies and churches of the West. Secondly, it contributes to the quest of many – also reformed – Christians to arrive at a renewed confession and experience in the faith of truly biblical theism. This is theism of the *Deus semper maior*, which gives due honour to the ineffable triune God as *absconditus et revelatus*. Lastly, it contributes to the self-searching of Afrikaans-reformed believers as to the presence, –only traces – of tamed theism in our nationalistic heritage, and in our rightly valued theology of the kingdom of God.

Keywords: *Deus absconditus et revelatus*; domesticated God-talk; reformed neglect; *deus semper maior*; *bourgeois* infectedness.

Epigraph

God makes himself lower on our behalf and 'transforms himself, as it were, assuming *incongruous masks*' [*et transformat se quoddammodo, dum induit alienas personas*] (Calvin, commenting on Zph 3:17; see Shin 2005:87 for the quote).

Introduction

The theme

This investigation articulates and motivates a farewell move from reformed – especially Dutch-influenced Afrikaner reformed – theism, in as far as that theism has been 'tamed' or 'domesticated' through a toxic neglect of the 'hiddenness' and 'masking' of the living God in his revelation. This farewell also entails a move towards re-instilling into reformed theism, a trembling joy (Ps 2:11) before the *deus semper maior* [always greater God] as the 'hidden Healer'. An essential aspect of 16th century Reformation theology might be retrieved in the turmoil and frantic search for real meaning in our times of dramatic transition. The Hungarian pioneer-author, Halik (2019:128),

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with good reason, summarises many persons life quest today as a 'religious experiment'. Indeed, 'God is a hidden God who always again is to be sought, as Scripture says'.¹ Consider this quote from Calvin's (1970a) commentary on Psalm 30 in connection with our theme:

When you hid your face, I was dismayed (Ps 30:7). Now he (the Psalm-poet) confesses that when he was bereft of God's gifts, his spirit was thereby, as if by a medicine, freed from his wrong self-confidence and from his stupor. It surely is a wonderful and incredible [incredibilis] way in which God, by hiding his face, as if bringing on darkness, enlightened the eyes ... which in clear light saw nothing. (pp. 362–363, [author's own emphasis])

This accent in Calvin seems until now, to have been scantily researched. It urgently 'needs to be researched further' (Selderhuis 2000:191, 206).

A relevant but belated thematisation

The situation in Europe and partly in North America more than two decades ago, where classical *bourgeois* theism was said to 'collapse' (Welker 1999:1), seems today also to be infecting significant segments of the traditional Afrikaans-reformed establishment. The number of disillusioned church people questioning their erstwhile faith in 'a personal figure who exists over and above this world' who made everything and controls everything (Welker 1999:1; cf. also Van den Heever 2017:xiii–xvii), seems to be rising in this country. Serious Christians should move beyond 'the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism' (cf. Kearney 2011:166 on the difference between the two poles of the continuum). According to Welker (2012:38, 40), the 'bourgeois and petite-bourgeois religiosity in the West' attempts to cherish the 'nearness of God', by excluding the 'irritation' of the living God (hidden) under the cross and passion of Christ – thus honouring an abstract 'nearness', as mirrored in man's own subjective consciousness. Welker sees in this phenomenon a form of *Transzendentspießfertum* [transcendental philistinism], which is a banalised form of civil religious 'transcendence'. With Barth (cf. Neven 1980:48, [author's own emphasis]) one can speak of a *bourgeois* understanding of the gospel when the latter had morphed from an 'object of faith' [*Glaube*] into an 'object of a believing disposition' [*Gläubigkeit*], when it had changed into an 'element of the life of the people [*Volk*], the commonwealth, the family, the general civilisation'. God's living revelation had then been 'absorbed and domesticated' into the civilised platitudes of a church in which mundane humanity triumphs. Of course, the *bourgeois Christian* does not deny God's grace; 'he affirms it but affirms it cautiously, so affirms it ... that it cannot become dangerous to himself'. One must also remember that there exists an 'extreme fluidity of the bourgeois world' (including the difference between *petty-bourgeois* and *bourgeois*), but with Lancelotti (2019:3), one could surmise in general that 'the bourgeois view erases the Augustinian *inquietum cor meum* – or transposes it "horizontally" into an endless cycle of acquisition and consumption'. 'The sign designating the dollar (\$) was borrowed from the Christian numismatic sign IHS, which

1. All translations from non-English sources are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

stands for *in hoc signo* [in this sign]' (cf. Ward 2009:93, quoting the theologian Mark Taylor). The European *bourgeois* Christian nearly completely lost the sense of being a *pilgrim on the way*, and also of the remaining *dark, 'underground' underbelly* of his or her materialistic Christianity (cf. Dostoevsky 2011:16, 17). Whether in such a form or another, the question as to a possible infection of our conventional reformed theism by this kind of 'domesticated' (cf. Van der Dussen 2019:15–16) *flattening* of the original Reformation theism, should be faced. One should free oneself from *this mastery of the mystery* with its 'ripple-effects' (see Bavinck 1908:2 on this mystery permeating the whole of dogmatics).

A remarkable recent Kampen dissertation uncovers the *historical neglect* of the 'mystery of divine hiddenness' among reformed scholastics after Calvin (Bintsarovskiy 2021:59–60; cf. also Van der Dussen 2019:15). Such an 'uncovering' cannot, however, merely be taken for notice by Reformed investigators, who 'doesn't want to rock the boat' of a conventional 'easy-to-live-with theism'. The ineluctable tension between the *reformata* [reformed as given] and *reformanda* [to be reformed as a task] that is to be uncovered below, may not be evaded (cf. Van 't Spijker 1974:35). I argue that this tension should today urgently be retrieved – albeit nearly culpably belated against the background of a vociferous narrow-reformed tradition, which eventually paid much attention to the triumph of a 'neo-calvinistic worldview' (cf. Veenhof 1990:45–48), but widely neglected to reform its own placid theism. It was only when 'the unholy alliance between the classical church bodies and abstract bourgeois theism' (Welker & Willis-Watkins 1997:7) were already beginning to lose its overall grip on Western theology, that Bavinck (1908:1–29) reintroduced the theme of God's ineffability and hiddenness into reformational dogmatics. The author realizes that leaving reformed 'tamed' theism behind, includes a critique of that sort of 'small-mindedness [*enghartigheid*] and bigotry [*bekrompenheid*]' which Bavinck (1968:v) already, at the end of the 19th century, observed 'amongst us ... and the worst is that it is even regarded as piety'. Yet, my turning away from this attitude which, in the following discourse, will be compared to a kind of 'petty-bourgeois' mindset, attempts not to be resentful towards a past which formed me theologically. Only as one realises the limited scope of one's own tradition and tries to embrace the *deepest meaning of the church's catholicity* (see Berkouwer 1970:127–160), can a farewell like the present be dared.

Aim and method of the thematisation

This investigation aims at registering and theologically underpinning a farewell move from a certain form of reformed tamed theism, that could inspire a contemporary form of fully retrieving untamed theism into our theology. Our methodology entails:

- A dogma-historical uncovering within 16th century Reformation of the untamed theistic emphasis on the hiddenness and masking of the living triune God in his revealing of himself.

- Historically tracing the process of ‘covering up’ the theistic dimension of the *deus absconditus* [hidden God].
- Concretising our argument for retrieval of the *deus semper maior*, amid traces in Afrikaans-reformed thinking of the indicated tamed theism.

Outline of the thematisation

Following we will treat, firstly, the vital accent on the living triune God’s hiddenness and masking in classic Reformation untamed theism; secondly, this Reformation accent’s far-reaching ‘cover-up’ in the post-Reformation reformed tradition; thirdly, the general dogma-historical background in which this domestication of theism is rooted; fourthly, a brief concretisation within an Afrikaans-reformed horizon of this farewell to tamed theism; and finally, a conclusion.

Untamed theism of the Reformation

Farewell from reformed ‘tamed’ theism, presupposes clarity on what we specifically mean by the *untamed theism* of Reformation times, from which the deviation occurred. Domestication of theism can also take on other forms, like the disappearance of the silent awe before the living God (see Van der Dussen 2019:19). In the framework of this article, however, *untamed theism* refers to the mysterious ‘medicine of divine masking’ (see Calvin 1970a: 362–363), which God employs in the ‘wonderful and incredible’ way in which he works.

When, with good reason, Metaxas (2018:v, [*author’s own emphasis*]) can call Luther ‘the man who *rediscovered God* and changed the world’, this very rediscovery by Luther can be linked to a renewed theological accent on the hiddenness of God (cf. Paulson 2014; *passim*). Calvin, also in this regard a pupil of Luther (cf. Selderhuis 2000:191), shared this rediscovery wholeheartedly (see also Koči 2014:53, Shin 2005:2–123; Wallace 1997:2–16). Luther speaks of ‘the crucified and hidden God’ (Ebeling 1965:260). Luther (quoted in Volf 2010) could even say the following:

Thus, God wears the mask of the Devil, and the Devil wears the mask of God; God wants to be recognized under the mask of the Devil, and he wants the Devil to be condemned under the mask of God. (p. 1)

Already in the Old Testament, this hiddenness was demonstrated in an exemplary form by God’s passing of Moses, whilst that friend of God was stuck away under his Friend’s hand in a cleft, as if the Lord hid under a ‘mask of darkness’. After God had passed by, Moses was only allowed to get a faint and unclear glimpse of the Lord’s ‘backside’, the side of his ‘goodness’, as if ‘through a narrow and oblique window’. Thus, even in that glimpse, there was a kind of mask or veil covering God so that Moses:

[M]ay receive some advantage of the light, yet never see the sun itself ... nor enjoy its brightness ... because true acquaintance with God is more by the ears than by the eyes. (Ex 33:21–23)

Indeed, for the natural eyes [*reason*] the glory of Christ is hidden in the gospel. It is only through hearing God’s

calling voice in the promises of the gospel, that faith and hope (not seeing the visible) ‘see’ the invisible glory of God (cf. Calvin commenting on Ex 33:21–23). The glorious Son of God was *concealed* in human flesh under a ‘mass of wounds’. ‘This is how we are healed; here is our true medicine’ (cf. Calvin 1956:75). He is the King, *not absent* but hidden under the figure of a crucified Blasphemer – who in his resurrection glory, still bears the indelible marks of his ignoble wounds. ‘The cross was as if it was engraved into the resurrected body of the Lord Jesus. The cross was his triumphal sign over grave and death and hell’ (Malan 1992:6). This signifies that the darkness of the *via crucis* [way of the cross] is simultaneously faith, hope, and love *via lucis* [way of the light]. The maxim *solī Deo Gloria* refers to *this* hidden Healer, whose glory is manifested in that *grace upon grace*, disguised under his kenotic self-giving unto death, yes, the death on the scandalous cross. ‘We must not hang back within the reach of our own grasp, judging as seems best to us’, as we contemplate ‘the intolerable blasphemy’ that the Son of God (or, we add, as 1 Cor 2:8 says: the Lord of glory himself) was deemed ‘the worst malefactor in the world’ (masked under the cross). ‘All men ... do not judge him worth looking at but turn away their eyes as from something loathesome’ (Calvin 1956:48, 94, 95).

Referring to Romans 12:1, Calvin (1956:95) intimates that in this incredibly ugly, repulsive, ‘worse malefactor’ among criminals on the gallows, it is as if he (the Father) ‘laid bare to us his heart and set before us his inmost feelings’ of unfathomable love for us. *All* ideas associated with worldly glory are excluded from *this hidden* glory. Calvin here uses a very congenial translation of the Greek gut word, *oiktirmoi*, as ‘the *bowels* of the goodness and mercy of God’. Previously he brought out the shocking scandal of the cross by comparing it to the gallows (Calvin 1956:38, [*authors own emphasis*]). God ‘has changed his method and used, as it were, a kind of foolishness to teach us [1 Cor 1:21]’ (Calvin 1956:51). Welker (2012:173, 176–178) admits that the cross is a ‘complex revelation-event’, but rightly finds included therein a revelation of ‘the suffering of the trinitarian God’, of the pain of God and the weakness of God. Berkouwer (1974:375) emphasises that speaking of God, hidden under abject weakness as the revelation of his omnipotence, is not a ‘dialectical game’, but a deep *astonishment* about *this* unfathomable way of God (cf. Col 2:15; 1 Cor 1–4). In short, as formulated by Bakker (1988):

The hiddenness of God ... is so humble that it is the negation of everything that we ever will or can think of [*when hearing*] the word ‘god’. Nietzsche, the clear-sighted, knew it when he wrote: ‘the god whom Paul created [*sic*], is the negation of God’ ... [*He reveals himself in*] the Crucified who also as Resurrected did not leave his cross behind him. (pp. 28, 29)

Post-Reformation gravitation to tamed theism

It is now necessary to investigate in brief the broad sweep of forgetfulness and even neglect of the Reformation emphasis

on the mystery of God's hiddenness. Our task here is to 'excavate' from under a thick layer of scholastic repression, traces of theologically 'side-stepping' a 'dark side' of God (cf. Peels 2003:22–40). Among earlier *Dutch epigones* of Calvin, the selling out to a rationalistic philosophy of the autonomous mind, as introduced by Descartes, was pervasive. The lure of a Cartesian mathematics-inspired *clare et distincte*-type of thinking, gradually invaded the lively 'face to face wisdom-theology' of a Calvin (cf. Polman 1950:27). There is good reason to exclaim with Jonker (1987:306): 'Truly, amongst reformed people Descartes has conquered his ten thousands!' Of course, employing the 'immensely fertile' concept of paradigm shifts (cf. Caputo 2013:236), we do not see this as a total break with the Reformation paradigm, but rather as an overlap into the emerging modern and a partial relapse into the older medieval paradigms (cf. Küng 1991:126; 1995:619–620). Yet, even at the Synod of Dordrecht (1618–1619), traces of scholastic, hyper-deductive reasoning already incipiently entrenched itself in much reformational thinking (cf. Van der Woude 1964:18–19). This was particularly prominent in a leading Dort theologian, Maccovius. He regarded anything that could be rationally deduced from Scripture through *bona consequentia* [good consequence], as having equal authority to Scripture itself (cf. Berkouwer 1955:16–18). The intellectual atmosphere among an influential segment of reformed people in the Netherlands around 1900, was such that a leading theologian, the son of the famous Kuypers, could hail Maccovius as the man who sounded the end of the Reformation-style theology around the time of the Dort synod, and – according to Kuypers Jr.: *fortunately!* – became the great inaugurator of reformed scholasticism (and therewith also its negligence of the hidden God) (cf. Veenhof 1959:288–289). Bavinck (1998:17–18; cf. also 1908:57), the great champion of the recovery of mystery and hiddenness in reformed *genuine* theism, however, on solid grounds found that the 17th century scholastic orthodoxy 'among most people', in fact, had 'prepared the way for rationalism ... religion became a matter of reason'. Orthodox faith largely lost its early Reformation *tension* with Aristotelian 'reason', and thus became a '*conceptual* bedrock' – parallel to the Cartesian *cogito* – for the erection of a Protestant-scholastic 'cathedral of systematic theology' (cf. Raschke 2004:115). Important for the present research, is that the highly regarded book, *Redelijke godsdienst* [reasonable religion] of the theologian à Brakel [Father Brakel], trusted nearly blindly by many 18th and 19th century pioneer-Afrikaners as 'orthodox' (see below), was apparently not free from these tendencies. Van Lieburg (2019:352 and 370, [author's own emphasis]) with good reason, finds that although à Brakel did not subsume biblical revelation under reason, his relating of religion to rationality 'denotes the *assent of rational Christians to the truths of biblical revelation*', as formulated in accepted creeds and catechisms but also as 'experienced in the human conscience'. Recognising this widespread but also nuanced 'Cartesian captivity' of reformational God-talk, we should become hesitant to discard, out of hand, Nietzsche's well-known

accusation: 'the churches are the graveyards of God!' A beacon of theistic insight in this overall landscape, however, is presented by Pascal's (1956) famous observation:

Every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden, is not true; and every religion which does not give the reason for it, is not instructive. Our religion does all this: *Vere, tu es Deus absconditus*. (p. 161, *Fr.* 58; quoting *Is* 45:15)

Historical process of 'costuming' canonical God-talk

In the present paragraph, our farewell of reformed tamed theism is given further historical *relief*, by placing it against the foil of a centuries-long drifting process towards the theological neglect of the *deus absconditus* in confessing the *Deus revelatus* [revealed God]. This down-spiralling initially dove-tailed with a preference for academic-acceptable speech-forms above biblically informed theological language. In his costly *Gifford Lectures*, Barth compellingly writes about the 'divine' power that such conceptual 'costumes' gradually come to bestow on the biblical core-insights, which they were meant to make more culturally acceptable. He likens it to the way that different costumes change the actors to different 'persons' in a theatre. In the present discourse, the author thus argues that *bourgeois* theism, in the 'most lively way', took (and takes) part 'in this costume-play' staged by Western people, who deem themselves 'so called Gods' (1 Cor 8:5; as Barth 1983:52–55 puts it). Indeed, as Barth explains further in this context, the moment that 'our Western God' began to be conceived of as a being who thinks and reasons in the way European humans do, his worship became that of 'a being like ourself writ large, an idol that we have constructed like ourself'.

Among its other losses, popular 'theism' was thus gradually emptied of the gospel's inheritance of concrete Old Testament metaphors, at least as far as the attributes of God is concerned; the 'basic concepts' of *Greek* theism originate from their way of describing their gods as beings who display magnified projections of human attributes (cf. Gunton 2002:3, 52, 60–63). It was, to put it mildly, a 'hybrid deity' that dominated Western Christianity 'through most of its history', as Gunton (2002:2) declares:

It is one of the tragedies – one could almost say crimes – of Christian theological history that the Old Testament was effectively displaced by Greek philosophy as the theological basis of the doctrine of God, certainly so far as the doctrine of the divine attributes is concerned. (p. 3)

At least as far back as the 4th century AD, during and after the Constantinian settlement, the 'Hellenisation of Christianity' reached a 'first climax', at the Council of Chalcedon (Küng 1995:182). In considering 'so complex a phenomenon' as the Constantinian epoch, one cannot bypass, according to Pannenberg (1969:62, 72), 'the paradigmatic significance and continuous impact' that this incision had on the history of the church and its entwinement with politics, as it gradually morphed into civil religion

during the early Middle Ages. Many Christians began to see Jesus 'as little more than an *abstract symbol of bourgeois complacency*' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:81 [*author's own emphasis*]). Despite countertendencies, including the minimising of Greek influences around the time of St Francis of Assisi in the 12th and 13th centuries (cf. Chesterton 2008:14–21), the general drift towards an abstracted, incipient *bourgeois* conceptuality of God seems to have been greatly reinforced in the late medieval era, when influential voices began to advocate univocal over and above analogical modes of speech in theology. The name of John Duns Scotus, around 1300, is inextricably bound up with this momentous change. He defined 'God' as a being within the same order of being as creatures – albeit in the most abstract, generalised way. There thus cannot be any transcendent and mysterious depths in God – like his hiddenness which surpasses anything that can be predicated on creatures. With good reason then, Gregory (2012:37–38) can claim that John Duns's move was 'the first step towards the eventual domestication of God's transcendence', which culminates in the cerebral manageable, mask-less God of modernity. After centuries it even bolstered a whole 'universalized bourgeois culture', which forms 'part of the very air' Western European and North American citizens inhaled (Dawson 2018:3). These centuries also saw the rise of a form of civil religion which came to be understood as that kind of religion that political leaders keep in place so that *they can give legitimacy and continuity to their own political form of government* (cf. Pannenberg 1969:72). The Constantinian symbiosis between throne and altar, starting in the 4th century, continued in an altered form in the West, until well after the *caesura* of the French Revolution. In the wake of that Revolution, the *bourgeois* class consolidated their position and gradually became the dominant force in colonialism and in empire-building, due mainly to their 'never-ending thrust ... for capitalist profits and accumulation and increased profits' (Terreblanche 2014:129). It was mainly this modern form of civil religion that determined the religious face of the West in its downslide into the ghastliest forms of imperialism, Mammon worship, extermination of indigenous peoples, and ravaging of the ecology. Moreover, 'the *very idea of the Kingdom of God* upon earth, in this three-dimensional material world', says Berdyayev (1917:2 [*author's own emphasis*]), 'is a bourgeois distortion of a true religious expectation'. The 'God' of the highly influential 17th century Calvinistic poet Milton, for example became in his poetry the emaciated 'doctrinal deity', as he was being 'filtered' through post-Reformation orthodoxy, towards merely *a* being like us writ large. Armstrong (2019) concludes:

In *Paradise Lost*, we have, in embryo, the irate 'Old Man in the Sky' that would eventually make religion impossible for many Europeans. There is no sign here of the ineffable God of Denys, Thomas Aquinas or Bonaventure (or of Calvin and Luther, we might add). (pp. 319–320)

This 'God' was regarded as the 'Highest Being' in whose name also the 'death camps' (concentration camps) of the British during the Anglo-Boer War, were blessed. A complex interpenetration of Cartesian philosophy was at

play in this development, including scientific reductionism, capitalist greed, and the isolation of human freedom from heteronomy. The hegemony of the *bourgeois* mind sustained and strengthened the notion of 'God' as a 'Highest Being', a *summum ens* within the universe (cf. Gregory 2012:55 and *passim*), the guardian of 'Christianism's' status quo (cf. Cobb 2020:108, on this insipid, 'bloodless' kind of Christianity). It was the philosopher Hegel's genius to gather, in a nearly unequalled systematic way, the 19th century *bourgeois* mind's Promethean attempts, 'to make a key to every lock' (cf. Barth 1959:291). Thus, his *bourgeois* spirit attempted to unlock every space where 'mystery' or 'darkness' could still hide away from the 'enlightening' rays of modern instrumental reason. The great Russian author, Dostoevsky, senses in this nervous neglect of all things 'tragic', the repressive cover-up of a brooding and seismic nihilism, volcanically lurking under modern Western civilisation (cf. Girard 1997:55, 103–104). He regards Western Europe's mechanistic, Euclidian culture of Newtonian rationality as a 'grey hell' – *inter alia* due to its arrogant, boring, small-horizon lifestyle. 'Theism' has degenerated into the understanding of 'an object of analysis and control' (cf. Tillich 1945:309). This made possible the 'last man', the *bourgeois* conventional Christian, according to Nietzsche (n.d.):

[W]ho makes everything small ... [*who*] left the regions where it was hard ... [*who*] is smart and knows everything ... [*who*] still complains but is easily mollified – else it affects the stomach. (pp. 14–15)

The 'God' of this *arrivé* civil Christian, had become 'a purely notional truth'. He became fully domesticated and as such merely a dead projection of humanitarian virtues. Surely, in some cases perhaps inadvertently, he was still held upright under the façade of a Western, triumphalist political hegemony. *Yet, this notional 'god' inexorably became a national 'god'*.

Exemplified in aspects of Afrikaans reformedness

Introduction

Given the rather slow historical seeping through of modern Western secularisation into South Africa, one might anticipate that the post-second World War disengagement from the default Western *bourgeois* position on the idea of God (see below), also would take longer in South Africa than in many other Western countries. Snyman (2007:16) correctly discerns a racialistic undercurrent in our emerging Afrikaans theology. This could, through lingering colonialism and active apartheid, perhaps have retarded the collapse of *bourgeois* theism for a few decades in South Africa, as compared to Europe. Yet, with good reason Snyman (2007:10–13) contends, that apartheid brought about an 'epistemic break', which made it impossible, specifically for Afrikaner theological thinking, to continue unscathed along its former path. Traditional Afrikaner so-called 'eternal principles', must be shorn of the 'halo' of rational unassailability, that they frequently received in the past. They cannot provide a laager

or citadel to protect *bourgeois* security (see the etymological link between Afrikaans 'burger' and 'burg'). Although there exist reliable *preliminary* gospel-oriented truth claims there is no 'definitive last judgment in theology' (cf. Thiselton 2017:134–139). 'We need to cope with uncertainty' (McGrath 2016:47). Snyman (2007:58–59) rightly points to a never-ending 'search' for still hidden treasures of the kingdom in Scripture (cf. Mt 13:54), specifically in view of a stream of newer discoveries in and around the historical text. Such discoveries in *newer contexts*, might indeed sometimes render older, time-bound 'objective' truth claims (like 'objective' truth about the difference of 'races'!) at least, as obsolete, or even misleading as much 'objective' *scientific* truth claims of the past, for example the geocentric view of the cosmos. The epistemic break among Afrikaner reformed people (cf. Hofmeyr 2020:489–429), with its disenchantment concerning the *finality* of some conventional truth claims also impinged on the *civil view of God* (cf. Snyman 2007:31–33). After seeing the loss of vital dimensions in our traditional faith in God, can we glibly return to 'normal' Afrikaner theology, placidly satisfied with *the loss of our loss* (Scruton 2019:183)?

Tamed theism in Afrikaans nationalism and in kingdom-sign-erecting?

Two aspects

There could be a number of tamed divine attributes to consider in this connection (cf. Barrett 2019:55–286). Here, I only attend to Western-instigated Afrikaans-reformed *nationalism*, and to 'sign-erecting' in the Afrikaans *kingdom of God theology*.

Influence on Western-instigated Nationalism

According to Terreblanche (2014:79), the European *nation-states* that emerged during the 17th century, 'became the human incarnation of the Leviathan'. In accordance with the views of the English philosopher Hobbes, in some way echoed by Locke, gradually became adherents of such a 'mortal god' who required a 'congregation of worshippers', the 'one dimensional' *bourgeois*, self-satisfied 'believers' with their civil religion (cf. Malan 2011:75–97, 127–136). Pertinent to our inquiry, is what Rousseau confesses through his novelistic mouthpiece, the *Vicar of Savoy*: 'The God whom I worship *does not dwell in the shadows*; he has not given me understanding to forbid me to use it' (cf. Barth 1959:86, [author's own emphasis]). This Enlightenment-tamed 'god' (without any shadows which make it impenetrable to reason), later became the Highest National Defender of separate individual Western Christian *nations*, in their internecine conflicts. 'For God and country!', was many a battle cry – suggesting the 'Christian' Highest Being is on *our* side, not on *theirs*. One would perhaps not go as far as Tillich (1965:155), who opines that in 'modern nationalism' it is evident that 'polytheism is a daily experience'. Yet, the claiming of this kind of manageable 'god' for '*our*' exclusive nationalistic survival and progress, forgets that the *triune* living God might *hide* from 'us' in order to fulfil his own holy purpose with 'them', perhaps – and then 'not by might

nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty' (Zch 4:6). A particularly telling way in which 'theism' was made subservient to national, colonialist and even racial interests, can be observed in the well-known hymns and poetical Psalm-renderings of the English Dissenter, Isaac Watts. Among a number of examples that Jennings (2010:210–220) gives, are these: 'The British islands are the Lord's / There Abraham's God is known' (from Ps 47); 'Our God will crown his chosen isle / With fruitfulness and peace' (from Ps. 67). 'Watts is attempting to more precisely vernacularize the Psalms for the daily spiritual edification of common people'. This engenders an 'incredible power to bind people together as one nation under God' (Jennings 2010:214, 219).

With good reason, Cobb (2015:39) avers that 'the most important factor in the erosion of Christendom was the renewal of nationalism'. In South Africa, the transplanting of this (mainly 'romantic') nationalism into the emerging Afrikaner people [*volk*], likewise seems to have played a significant role in the domestication of classical theism (cf. O'Donovan 2002:379–384, on the relative differentiation between 'romantic, civil and functional nationalisms'). Of course, there is some 'truth' in a nationalistic mindset, provided its adherents have learnt, as Scruton (2019:400) says, 'to put God in the place where he belongs', that is, in the place of the sovereign Lord who transcends all nationalistic causes. In the context of the present essay, this requirement should be extended to refer to the sovereign living God, *who hides* from all 'manipulation' by nations and individuals.

It seems to me that the observation of Giliomee (2003:221) still has validity, namely that although Afrikaner nationalism and religion were surely 'interrelated', the 'exact relation' between the two is not yet 'analysed properly'. Whilst there are many elements of truth, which should bring Afrikaners to *serious* self-reflection and repentance, discernible in some recent research, for example the role that the 'typical obstinacy' and the 'God-is-on-our-side' syndrome played in many Afrikaner ecclesiastical and 'tribal' conflicts (cf. Oliver 2019:7, 10), a truly nuanced view of Christian civil religion's relationship to nationalism, is still lacking. One would be hesitant to affirm with Tamarkin (2020:1) that, 'until 1948 ... the struggle of the Afrikaners for national self-assertion did not contradict God's design or Christian values'. This could only be true, if the taming of God's hiddenness in discerning 'God's historical design', is ignored. The argument of this article, however, is that due to *inter alia*, the civil-tamed dogmatic thinking on which even the Doppe-nationalists of the 19th and early 20th century were fed, their nationalism 'harboured elements of an ideological distortion' (cf. Botha 1983:251). The very popular book on doctrine, which many Afrikaans-reformed people before, during and after the Great Trek read, was that of à Brakel [*Onze redelijke godsdienst*]. Remarkably, this book (à Brakel 1999:3–22) maintains the general post-Reformation silence on the mystery of hiddenness in the living God, a deficiency that Bavinck

pointed out clearly (see above). This *truncated theism* in the spirit of à Brakel, apparently also formed the bulk of the dogmatic curriculum during the first 30 years after the founding of the theological School of the Reformed Churches at Burgersdorp in 1869 (cf. Van der Vyver 1969:133)

Yet, one surely finds the strictly-reformed traditional Afrikaner nationalism epitomised (cf. Strauss 2020:1–2) in the personal story and world-and-life view of President Kruger of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. Despite Kruger's *rightly* celebrated Calvinistic virtues, he was not an unblemished 'hero,' as proven by some one-sided, but not baseless, allegations hurled against him, including nepotism and corruption (cf. Van der Merwe 2015:37–38). Nevertheless, some observations in the context of this inquiry are validated in the light of his stature as an unquestionably Calvinistic statesman.

Did he truly examine his God-talk in the light of authentic Calvinism when, for example President Kruger claimed triumphantly that the 'voice of the people is the voice of God', or (at the start of and during the war against Britain in 1899–1902) that 'the Lord will lead us and if he is with us, who will be against us'? We agree with Goosen (2015:361), that Kruger's following of a revolutionary freedom ideal (including that of the United States of America), places him 'squarely into a framework within the influence-sphere of the modernistic subjectivism', leading to 'absolutised nationalism'. This ideal undoubtedly also filtered through to 'the rural bourgeoisie', as Grundlingh and Swart (2009:68) characterise it, from whose ranks Kruger's government was recruited. To be fair, a thorough research as to the influence of this framework on Kruger's interpretation of the Bible *vis-à-vis* his '[Boere- Afrikaner- volk]', is apparently still outstanding. Yet, undoubtedly, it is true that 'not the cause of God but the cause of the volk receives the main accent' in much of our traditional reformed 'folk religion', or *bourgeois* Christianity (cf. Jonker 1993:1 for an urgent warning against this type of 'faith'; cf. also Giliomee 2003:221–226, on a continuing form of [volksteologie]).

Kruger indeed likened himself to Moses and attached a strange exclusivity to his own people [volk]: they were 'God's [volk]' who, like Israel, also experienced a kind of 'exodus' (cf. Krüger 2009:373, 532). With the benefit of hindsight, one could ask: if he had learnt his doctrinal wisdom more from the original Reformers than from an epigone like à Brakel, would he have realised that even Moses could not gain insight into God's way of leading his people, Israel, through the desert? God's ultimate purpose was hidden from him (see above). One cannot but agree with the compelling conclusion of Goosen (2015:368–369) that, *at least*, Kruger's frequent appeal to the democratic platitude, *vox populi* as the *vox Dei*, was permeated by modernistic, Lockean views of freedom, and could lead to an idolatrous form of nationalism – as we notice in its development by the later apartheid-ideology.

Remarkably, it seems as if Kruger had no antenna for the idea that the voice of God could *then also* come through the voice of an *electorate that is wider* than his own ['volk'] (that is, including later immigrants and indigenous black people (cf. Krüger 2009:515). There indeed appears to be a strange intertwinement between Kruger's idea of his [Voortrekker-volk] [Voortrekker] people and the people of God, especially Old Testament Israel. Of course, in this 'mixture' the people of God were understood wider than Dopper-exclusivity (cf. Laband 2023:77). This parallelism with Israel (cf. also Strauss 2020:13), smacks of Constantinian domesticating influences. With Goosen (2015:366), we *must not fail to point out that* there existed a 'tension' in Kruger between a certain autonomy of the *will of the people* and the *will of God*. This discovery is part of our farewell to civil-tamed theism. Where did the Reformation's emphasis on God's revelation in the scant light surrounding the Lord's 'backside', that is, in the darkness of the cross, get lost in a war cry like that of the Boer General Viljoen: '*God and the Mauser*' (cf. Krüger 2009:529)? Were attitudes like these not echoing – albeit mixed with some strong Calvinistic resonances – the most ideologically distorted *bourgeois* tamed theisms of European modernism? Such echoes were magnified, for example also in one of the sacred spaces of Afrikaner nationalism: the Voortrekker Monument, including the upsurge of nationalism around the laying of its cornerstone (1938) and its inauguration (1949). Here it would suffice to refer to the thorough research of Britz (2018a; 2018b). The 'central text of the Monument' is formed by the last line of the former national anthem inscribed on the 'altar of sacrifice' on which a sun ray falls every year on 16 December: 'Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika' [We for thee, South Africa]. Undoubtedly, it is true that 'in this song was carved out a *people's or folk (Christian) theology*'. Yet, 'in actual fact, it contradicts' the *Heidelberg Catechism*, where we as reformed Christians confess that in life and in death we do not belong to ourselves (nor to the Afrikaner-volk or to our country) but to our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Britz 2018b:10). The inscription in this Afrikaner 'temple' encourages *idolatry*. On behalf of our selfish nationalism, it claims to itself an allegiance, which is due solely to the living God, who hides *under the garb* of the gospel (including the sacraments) in which the crucified and exalted Lord comes to us through his Spirit (cf. Wallace 1997:1–26).

Tamed kingdom signs?

The trailblazing theological work on the coming of the kingdom of God by Snyman (1977:139–283), lays the solid foundation for many of his students' thinking (also myself) and provides a costly legacy for the future of reformed theology in South Africa (cf. Van Wyk 1985: *passim*). Being a prominent and very congenial admirer of this pioneer, Van Wyk, who in fact gathers the gist of his own work under the title: 'A theology of the kingdom of God', respectfully *criticises* a view of Snyman (1977:170), that the kingdom of God is not about 'a transformation of life-forms', or the 'changing of systems and external circumstances but a change of heart [*metanoia*]'. Whilst Van Wyk (1985:46) acknowledges that the expression 'building up' of the kingdom is unbiblical, he

nevertheless, finds it a *deficiency* in Snyman's thinking, that the human being's 'engagement' [*betrokkenheid*] in such an activity does not become more transparent. Referring to Paul's description of believers as 'co-workers' [*sunergoi*] of God in his visible church ('you are God's field, God's building'), Van Wyk *illegitimately* draws a direct line from this concept to *apply it also to human work in the kingdom*. Paul applies it, however, *explicitly* to leaders in the visible, instituted church (cf. Pop 1974:73, on 1 Cor 3:9). Van Wyk contends for 'Christian organizations ... (in which) *signs* of the kingdom are present, because also there the royal reign of Christ is acknowledged and confessed' (cf. Van Wyk 2015:219; [*original emphasis*]). A well-meant instance of such usage is, when Van Wyk (2020:311–321; [*author's own emphasis*]), specifically addresses the issue of 'reformation and education'. In a context which includes biblically founded appeals to do education before the face of God, he unfortunately also views 'the *Christian academy* as a sign of the kingdom of God in this world'. He advocates that 'small signs of the kingdom' can be erected in the form of such academies, and also in the wider society, to 'construct water pans in a great desert' (cf. Van Wyk 2020:314, 315). Yet, 'extensively and intensively the Kingdom is a hidden power' (Ridderbos 1958:47). This is true, even when Van Wyk (2020:376) sees in the giving of a cup of cold water to one of these little ones', the *erecting* of 'a small sign of the coming kingdom' (Mt 10:42). However, we should compare this statement with the much more extensive treatment of this point in Matthew 25:31–46 (cf. Ridderbos 1958:78–79, on the centrality of this passage in understanding Jesus' whole preaching about the kingdom). Here, those who at the final judgement heard from the King that they truly *gave to himself* a cup of cold water, when they gave it to a little one, were *totally surprised; they did not know it*. They asked: 'When ...?'. Thus, this giving of a cup of cold water to a little one (with all the other deeds of mercy named in Mt. 25), cannot be regarded as the *erecting* of a sign of the kingdom. In sync with the tendency noted in this paragraph, Grové (2022:20, 30) inserts in his good handbook for the Reformed congregation of Wapadrant's theme for 2022/2023 ('City builders' [*Stadbouers*]), a sentence like the following: 'as city-builders, we must *make God's kingdom visible*' (Grové 2022:20, 30). Can one do that, when the kingdom in this age is only *invisibly* present in the crucified King, working in hiddenness through his Word and Spirit, and only having as visible signs the sacraments? (cf. especially Noordmans 1980:338–340).

The following words of a Dutch theologian and the famous Barth (1981), are relevant for all of us who seek to erect kingdom signs:

They themselves try to erect signs of the kingdom. But they forget that the kingdom is in the midst of us. They only not see it, because they do not look where they must look: to the Crucified. (Van de Beek 2006:34; cf. also 2008:256)

All errors at this point have their source in a failure to see that the kingdom is inconceivable and incomprehensible to us, or, as we may freely say, it is an unthinkable thought, higher than all our thoughts as heaven is higher than earth [Is 55:9]. (p. 237)

Conclusion

The main thrust of the above argument can be summarised, with reference to Calvin's sublime commentary on 1 Timothy 5 verse 17, where Scripture says that God inhabits an 'unapproachable light' (see Calvin 1970b:2220; [*author's own emphasis*]).

Firstly, he comments that 'while we are surrounded by this mortal flesh we *never* penetrate into the *hidden depths of God* as to have nothing hidden from us'. We analysed how this accent has historically been widely forgotten, mainly through domestication, also under growing *bourgeois* influence in reformed scholasticism until about 1900. A resolute – though not resentful – plea is made to say farewell to this type of tamed theism (two Afrikaans-reformed examples are given).

Secondly, Calvin further comments that 'by faith we enter into the light of God *but only in part*'. Through the Holy Spirit, we thus participate in faith's partial entry and seek some understanding of this light, whom we, paradoxically, can *never approach, even with our most understanding theology* (theology as *fides quarens intellectum*). As Calvin finally confesses about our seeking of this divine Healer, who reveals himself under the cruciform, scandalous masking of his opposite (*revelatio sub contrariis* – Luther): 'Still it is true that it is a "light unapproachable" by man'.

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