

# MEDIATION BY MEANS OF ISOLATION: RESISTANCE AGAINST THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA (DRC) DURING THE 1980s

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**Abstract:**

*The isolation of South Africa on international terrain, especially during the 1980s, contributed to a large extent to the unfeasibility of the policy of apartheid. According to the theologian, Dr Allan Boesak, the role of the Christian society is one of the most underestimated factors in the struggle against apartheid. Churches and theologians worldwide raised their voices in resistance against the apartheid regime. Churches, inside as well as outside South Africa, increasingly criticized the theological justification of apartheid. In the process religion became an important anti-apartheid mechanism for various leaders who resisted apartheid. Although the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC) abandoned the theological justification of the policy of racial segregation by the 1980s, the Church did not hold the point of view that the policy of apartheid was irreconcilable with the will of God. The isolation of the DRC by the international faith based institutions played a significant role on a spiritual level by increasingly discrediting the theological justification of the apartheid policy by the DRC and placing pressure on the Church to reform. The article highlights the role of international bodies like the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, as well as the South African Council of Churches. Against this background the article will debate in which ways, if any, the DRC and its power structures handled the pressure of the international and national religious communities during the 1980s.*

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**Keywords:** Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa; apartheid; isolation; Reformed Churches in the Netherlands; World Council of Churches; World Alliance of Reformed Churches; South African Council of Churches.

**Slutelwoorde:** Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk van Suid-Afrika; apartheid; isolasie; Gereformeerde Kerke in Nederland; Wêreldraad van Kerke; Wêreldbond van Gereformeerde Kerke; Suid-Afrikaanse Raad van Kerke.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC) is a very old and influential church denomination. Although the DRC historically established a special bond with white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, it was especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the DRC evolved into an ethnic people's church (*volkskerk*), by not only theologically justifying the National Party (NP) policy of apartheid, but also by entrenching apartheid through the establishment of separate churches for separate races.

Changes across the world and specifically also in South Africa during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were to place the DRC increasingly in a unique position that would culminate in policy changes during the 1980s. During the last days before the demise of the apartheid regime, Christian-theological trends in South Africa were characterised by deep intellectual discord about the preferred way ahead. This led to interdenominational friction that not merely polarised the people of the country, but also conveyed conflicting messages to Christians concerning God's will for all people.<sup>2</sup> Not only did the DRC come under fire from local and international quarters, but they were also internally confronted with the question whether to uphold or to end the policy of apartheid.

South Africa's isolation at international level during the apartheid era was largely responsible for the fact that the policy of apartheid became unworkable. In a similar fashion, the growing isolation of the DRC at spiritual level served to discredit the DRC's attempts to justify the policy of apartheid theologically. Churches and Christians both inside and outside South Africa slated the attempts at theological justification of apartheid and thus placed the DRC under pressure to reform. Over time, leaders who were critical of the policy of apartheid began to utilise the Christian faith as an important anti-apartheid mechanism. While several churches in South Africa were slow in getting their resistance against the government's policy of racial separation off the ground, non- DRC Christians' denunciation of the policy of apartheid placed the DRC under enormous pressure.

The article highlights how the DRC was pressurised by faith bodies like the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, as well as the South African Council of Churches, to reflect on the DRC's theological justification of the policy of apartheid and whether they should consider abandoning it. Against this background the article will debate in which ways, if any, the DRC and its power structures handled the pressure of the international and national religious communities during the 1980s.

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2 For more detail see B van der Merwe and M Oelofse, "Teologiese twis rondom sinodale koersveranderinge in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), 1982-1990", *Historia* 56(2), November 2011, pp. 154-168.

## 2. SETTING THE STAGE: THE COTTESLOE PRECEDENT

It is important to note that the DRC, despite developing into the most influential church that entrenched the policy of apartheid, was not completely theologically united with regards to the policy of apartheid. A brief overview of the historical Cottesloe Conference illustrates this important factor. In the wake of the shootings at Sharpeville in 1960, the World Council of Churches (WCC)<sup>3</sup> held a conference at the Cottesloe suburb close to Johannesburg. During the conference, generally known as the Cottesloe Conference, delegates from the Transvaal and Cape DRC signed the resolutions, which were later viewed as a direct challenge to the government's policy of apartheid. The resolutions included, among others, that no person should be barred from public worship because of his or her skin colour. However, the four regional synods of the DRC would eventually reject the Cottesloe Conference resolutions, despite the support of DRC representatives who were in favour of the resolutions.<sup>4</sup>

The rejection of the Cottesloe Conference resolutions created a precedent and became a watershed moment for the DRC. In the years following the conference, the DRC progressively came round to supporting the government's policy of racial separation and apartheid, taking the theological justification of the policy of apartheid as a basis for its approach to political governance. Although the DRC had advocated the practice of racial separation long before the Cottesloe Conference, it was only during the 1960s that the DRC developed a unique theology in this respect and thus became the "NP in prayer".

During the 1960s, the DRC ceased to function as a universal Christian church and made the final leap towards becoming an ethnic church. The first comprehensive report, which attempted to justify the policy of apartheid scripturally, was tabled at the General Synod (GS) in 1966. This report, titled *Ras, volk en nasie en volkeverhouding in die lig van die Skrif* (RVN) [Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture], was revised and carried in

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3 The World Council of Churches is an international community of churches, mainly Reformed and Orthodox, that wishes to promote unity and harmony among Christians. It is also involved with missionary work and the quality of life of all people on earth, but approaches questions from a Christian viewpoint. World Council of Churches, "What is the World Council of Churches?", <<http://www.oikoumene.org/and/who-are-we.html>>, s.a. (accessed 23 October 2010).

4 PB van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, 1905-1975* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1987), pp. 105-106; Anon., "Wat het eintlik daar gebeur?", *Vrye Weekblad*, 14 September 1991, p. 12; Anon., "Van Cottesloe tot Castro ... Die NG kerk en die WRK se veelbewoë strydpad het begin by dr. Verwoerd", *Beeld*, 22 October 1991, p. 13; Anon., "NG kerk se isolasie het by Cottesloe begin", *Die Burger*, 12 September 1990, p. 9; N Steenberg, "Stofstorm rondom Cottesloe lê nog nie heeltemal nie", *Kerkbode*, 21 September 1990, p. 12.

its final form by a majority vote of the delegates to the 1974 General Synod.<sup>5</sup> This publication today serves as a testimony of the DRC's role in the consolidation of the ideology of apartheid.

In view of the DRC's violation of theological truths, the Church became increasingly isolated. The DRC over time found itself on a path of isolation similar to that which had become so distinctive of the South African government. As white Afrikaners' reluctance to bid the policy of apartheid farewell became evident, more and more Christians chose to turn their backs on the DRC. World bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), as well as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), played a major role in fostering an aversion to the DRC policies.

The DRC policy on national governance during the years of apartheid was largely supportive of the NP government. This situation not only isolated the Dutch Reformed Church as well as the NP government, but in the long run also divided the Afrikaners of South Africa. By the 1980s, the DRC was under huge pressure to reform, both from abroad as well as nationally. Activism against the policy of apartheid assumed a variety of forms. Criticism against the DRC's theology was an important way of compelling the DRC as well as the government to reappraise the policy of apartheid. Despite a drawn-out process, the 1980s was characterised by large-scale reform of the policy of apartheid, leaving white Afrikaners divided among themselves and causing the NP to split with the formation of the Conservative Party (CP).

### **3. POLITICAL ACTIVISM AGAINST THE POLICY OF APARTHEID AND THE ISOLATION OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH**

The role that many South Africans, as well as foreigners in their capacity as Christians, played in the struggle against apartheid is a subject that has not been adequately documented. According to the theologian and politician, Allan Boesak, the role of the Christian community is one of the most underrated factors in the struggle against the policy of apartheid. The role of Christians and the church community in South Africa in their resistance to the policy of apartheid, according to Boesak, has been neither sufficiently acknowledged, nor adequately researched.<sup>6</sup> Although change in churches were mostly hesitant and the churches in South Africa often contributed to the racial polarisation of South Africa, it was particularly

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5 JA Loubser, *The apartheid bible. A critical review of racial theology in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1987), pp. 89-100.

6 A Boesak, *The tenderness of conscience. African Renaissance and the spirituality of politics* (Stellenbosch: Wild Goose Publications, 2005), pp. 103-113.

during the 1980s that churches in South Africa played a prominent role in the struggle against racial discrimination and the policy of apartheid. Various church institutions were involved.

Although the DRC was not directly involved in the struggle against the policy of apartheid, changes in the DRC nevertheless had an important effect on the politics of South Africa, because if the DRC were to oppose the reforms that had already begun during the 1980s, it would have polarised the country even further.<sup>7</sup> Besides the DRC offshoots from the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church (the Dutch Reformed Mission Church - Coloureds and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa - blacks) that played such a prominent role in the struggle against the policy of apartheid, to a larger or lesser extent the majority of other South African churches also supported the freedom struggle. The exceptions were the three Afrikaans reformed churches – the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Church (the so-called *Dopper Church*) and the *Hervormde Kerk in Afrika* (Reformed Church in Africa).<sup>8</sup>

The DRC also experienced tremendous pressure from abroad to change its views. A significant development was when the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN)<sup>9</sup> and the DRC decided to sever all ties between them. For the DRC this was a particularly bitter incident, not only because the ties between the RCN and its offshoot were cut, but also because it signified the end of the unity of doctrine between the churches, since the one denounced the theological justification of the policy of apartheid as fallacy, while the other propagated it as a justified policy.<sup>10</sup>

The relations between the DRC and the RCN deteriorated rapidly during the 1970s. The Soweto uprising of 1976 was particularly damaging to South Africa's image and worldwide people looked forward to an early resolution of the conflict in South Africa. One of the aspects that caused dissension between the leadership of the DRC and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands was the RCN's indirect funding of liberation movements in South Africa as part of the World Council of Churches' programme for combating racism. The DRC insisted that the RCN stop their financial support of the programme. The attack on a minister of the DRC,

7 BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with P Coertzen, Stellenbosch, 4 May 2010; H Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners. 'n Biografie* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2004), p. 575.

8 RW Johnson, *South Africa's brave new world. The beloved country since the end of apartheid* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), p. 309.

9 The doctrines of John Calvin had a marked influence on the RCN, which was established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the Reformation. To understand the doctrinal links between the RCN and the DRC one needs to be reminded that the Cape had for many years been a Dutch colony. For more information about the RCN, see Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, *Ons Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk. Gedenkboek by ons derde eeufees, 1952* (Cape Town: NG Kerk-uitgewers, 1952), pp. 1-23.

10 BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with P Coertzen, Stellenbosch, 4 May 2010.

Rev. H Brand and his wife and their murder by terrorists on 23 August 1977 carried emotions to an extreme.<sup>11</sup>

By 6 April 1978, the DRC had already decided to sever all ties with the RCN after it presented the Dutch churches with an ultimatum to choose between the liberation movements in South Africa and the DRC. The RCN had suspended their funding of the liberation organisations in order to enter into a conversation with the DRC, but the meeting that took place on 16 and 17 January 1978 was unsuccessful. By this time, emotions had soured to such an extent that all mutual relations between the DRC and the RCN were finally broken off in 1979.<sup>12</sup>

Although the DRC regarded the split with the RCN as a setback, some theologians in the DRC still believed that the RCN were not in a position to judge South African matters objectively and that they were too unsympathetic about the situation in the country. Divergent worldviews that prevailed between the Afrikaners and the Dutch in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century precluded any meaningful understanding of the Afrikaner, despite the special bond that had existed between them because of their interlaced colonial past and their common historical link to European Protestantism, which for Afrikaners served as physical proof of their kinship with the European civilisation. Theologians of the DRC, in particular, perceived a certain measure of arrogance in the manner in which the RCN had treated them.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the DRC became even more isolated as notably pressure groups in the international Christian community tried to force the DRC to change course. In 1982 the Christian Reformed Church of the USA, the Swiss Reformed churches and the German Reformed League severed their ties with the DRC in protest against the DRC's theological justification of apartheid. In the same year, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa also broke off all relations with the DRC. Thus, within the short span of a couple of years, the DRC suddenly found itself in total isolation.<sup>14</sup>

In the decades following the Cottesloe Conference, the WCC persistently tried to end the policy of apartheid. Besides the WCC's financial assistance to liberation movements, the organisation was influential in bringing about the isolation of the DRC. Direct confrontation was by the 1980s no longer part of the WCC's tactics.

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11 PJ Strauss, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die Gereformeerde Kerke in Nederland: betrekkinge rondom die Suid-Afrikaanse rassevraagstuk* (Ph.D., University of Pretoria, 1983), pp. 462-480.

12 P Strauss, "Toenemende isolasie deurbreek – die NG Kerk en die ekumene 1974-1998" in P Coertzen (ed.), *350 jaar Gereformeerde, 1652-2002* (Bloemfontein: CLF, 2002), pp. 384-385.

13 BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with F Wessels, Belville, 16 August 2010; BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with C Burger, Stellenbosch, 19 August 2010.

14 C Boshoff, "Verhoudinge in die Ned. Geref. Kerkfamilie", *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 23(2), June 1983, pp. 81-90.

In 1972, the central committee called on all WCC member churches, as well as individual Christians worldwide, to use their conceivable influence in discouraging investors from investing in South Africa. The WCC was never anything but critical towards the policy of apartheid.<sup>15</sup>

Although the WCC played an important role in effecting the isolation of South Africa in general and of the DRC in particular, it never exercised a decisive influence on the DRC. In fact, the WCC was widely ignored by DRC theologians because of the alliance's ostensibly liberal approach to theological questions. Both the government of the day as well as the DRC regarded the WCC as a threat and an organisation that was ill disposed towards South Africa. It was therefore relatively easy for DRC leaders not to take the activities of the WCC too seriously.<sup>16</sup>

The year 1982 was crucial in many respects with the DRC experiencing several setbacks. In August of that year, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)<sup>17</sup> assembled in Ottawa where the DRC and the issue of apartheid became an important point on the agenda. The theologian, Allan Boesak, a member of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), called on the meeting to declare the policy of apartheid a "heresy".<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the WARC suspended the DRC from membership of the organisation after apartheid had been declared a sin and announced a *status confessionis*, meaning that the stance taken by the conference was essential to the doctrine of the WARC and allowed no latitude for negotiation on this issue.<sup>19</sup>

The WARC's 1982 conference was of such crucial importance to the DRC that it delegated three of its most prominent senior leaders, Kobus Potgieter, Pierre Rossouw and Johan Heyns, to represent the DRC. The assembly wiped the three representatives' defence of the DRC policy off the table. Even before the meeting had come into full swing, a storm broke loose as Dr Boesak and several other South African delegates refused to partake in Communion together with the DRC representatives. In addition, the meeting elected Boesak as leader of the WARC,

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15 Report of the Eminent Church Persons Group, *South Africa: the sanctions mission* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989), pp. 19-20.

16 BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with F Wessels, Belville, 16 August 2010.

17 See World Alliance of Reformed Churches, "What we do", <[http://warc.jalb.de/warcajps/side.jsp?news\\_id=708&part\\_id=0&navi=9](http://warc.jalb.de/warcajps/side.jsp?news_id=708&part_id=0&navi=9)>, 10 April 2006 (accessed 2 November 2010).

18 The term "heresy" refers to a doctrine that is in conflict with Christian faith and contains a serious charge.

19 AJ Botha, *Die evolusie van 'n volksteologie. 'n Historiese en dogmatiese ondersoek na die samehang van kerk en Afrikanervolk in die teologie van die NG Kerk met besondere verwysing na die apartheidsdenke wat daaruit ontwikkel het* (Ph.D., University of the Western Cape, 1984), pp. 568-571.

which vested him with extra power and influence in the worldwide Christian community.<sup>20</sup>

Boesak's principal argument against the DRC did not stem from an analysis of the theology of apartheid, though he did accuse the DRC of acting contrary to the teachings of the Bible. According to Boesak, it was particularly the existence of separate churches for separate races that proved the DRC's endorsement and active promotion of the policy of apartheid through a unique theology that served as an affirmation of the policy.<sup>21</sup> Understandably, this was also the main reason why the DRC fell into disrepute with the WARC.

The Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) was another organisation that also criticised the DRC for its support of the policy of apartheid.<sup>22</sup> During its meeting in Chicago in 1983 the RES requested the DRC to withdraw its support for the policy of apartheid and to report within three years on the progress that had been made in this regard. The DRC thereupon withdrew its membership from the ecumenical synod in reaction to the resolution taken at its meeting.

By the middle of the 1980s, the DRC was fully isolated, having drawn fierce criticism that it had undermined the authority and the credibility of the church in the eyes of the international community.<sup>23</sup> However, it also limited the influence that the international community of Christians could bring to bear on South Africa. Although churches could rely on the support of the international community of believers, they were rarely informed of the debates that took place in South Africa. As trust diminished between white Afrikaners and the international community, opportunities for the international community to become directly involved with religious issues in South Africa likewise declined.

#### 4. THE ROLE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The organisation that was most closely associated with the freedom struggle is the South African Council of Churches (SACC). The SACC and the leaders of this organisation, among others Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu and Frank Chikane,

20 D Balia, *Christian resistance to apartheid. Ecumenism in South Africa, 1960-1987* (Braamfontein, 1989), pp. 94-97.

21 Botha, pp. 568-571.

22 The RES is an organisation that assembles every four to five years to discuss theological issues that are important to Reformed churches worldwide. The RES was established in 1946 in the USA and mainly consists of conservative Reformed churches. During its existence the RES criticised the DRC on a regular basis because of its support of the government's policy of apartheid. For more information, see for example FEO'B Geldenhuys, *In die stroomversnellings. Vyftig jaar van die NG Kerk* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1982), pp. 96-102.

23 JA Heyns, "Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die ekumene" in PGJ Meiring and SJ Joubert (eds), *Fokus op die kerk* (Vereeniging: CUM, 1992), pp. 66-69.



played a significant role in the SACC's long history of resistance to the policy of apartheid. The SACC became more important as it gravitated towards centre stage in the struggle following President PW Botha's declaration of a state of emergency. The government observed the SACC's growing "black power base" and realising that it could not control the activities of the churches in South Africa, saw it as a threat to government. In particular, the SACC performed certain overhead coordinating functions as a forum for white and black discussions and for organising the churches in a resistance power block. It also had close ties with the WCC.<sup>24</sup>

The SACC was the church leaders' mouthpiece for making political pronouncements on South Africa. One of its leaders was the Anglican Bishop, Desmond Tutu, who served as Secretary General of the SACC from 1978-1984. In 1984, the former DRC leader, Beyers Naudé, who gained prominence with his work in the Christian Institute (CI),<sup>25</sup> succeeded Tutu after the apartheid government banned the latter organisation.<sup>26</sup>

Desmond Tutu's influence on the SACC should not be underestimated. Tutu's criticism against the policy of apartheid and the homeland system, against the use of unnecessary violence by African National Congress (ANC) supporters in the liberation struggle, his demand for more rights to women and his call for more sanctions against South Africa, formed the keystone of the SACC's political activism. Tutu frequently raised these subjects in an attempt to accomplish greater justice for South Africa. The SACC provided him with a platform for his work. Against this background, it was clear that the DRC and the SACC could not sit beside the same fire and in 1982, the SACC broke off all relations with the DRC.<sup>27</sup>

An important attribute of the SACC was its adherence to an official policy of non-violent resistance, as the Eloff Commission could also attest from its official investigation into the SACC in 1983. This attribute was one of the primary

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24 J Kinghorn, "The Churches against apartheid" in I Liebenberg *et al.* (eds), *The long march. The story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa* (Pretoria: HAUM, 1994), pp. 149-153; M Hope and J Young, *The South African churches in a revolutionary situation* (New York: Orbis, 1981), p. 86.

25 The CI was an organisation that provided a platform to young church members of the DRC who became disillusioned with the racial policy of the church. The CI was mostly instrumental in promoting unity among Christians in South Africa. The organisation was denounced by the General Synod of the DRC in Bloemfontein in 1966 for propounding false doctrine. CFB Naudé, *My land van hoop. Die lewe van Beyers Naudé* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1995), pp. 73-82; BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with J Cochrane, Cape Town, 20 August 2010.

26 T Salemink and B van Dijk, *Apartheid en kerkelijk verzet. In de schaduw van Nazi-Duitsland* (Amersfoort: De Horstink, 1989), p. 74.

27 Balia, pp. 90-91; BJ Liebenberg, "Towards the end of apartheid" in BJ Liebenberg and SB Spies (eds), *South Africa in the twentieth century* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Academic, 1993), p. 169.

reasons why the SACC never received banning orders. For the SACC, and Tutu in particular, given his prominent position as an anti-apartheid activist, the violent nature of the freedom struggle was problematic. According to Tutu, the churches and the SACC were compelled to support the freedom struggle because this was the only manner in which the church could retain its legitimacy in the eyes of the masses. The SACC, in contrast to the WCC with which it was affiliated, was not in favour of violence to combat racism.<sup>28</sup> According to Tutu, the longer the struggle against the policy of apartheid prevailed, the more difficult it became for the SACC, to condemn violence against the government. During the 1980s, criticism from impatient anti-apartheid activists against the SACC's policy of non-violence, increased in harshness.<sup>29</sup>

The SACC was nonetheless one of the many organisations that the government regarded as a threat because of its implacable opposition to the government's policy of racial separation. When the SACC in 1977 fell into financial straits from which it was unable to recover and had to appoint an internal commission to investigate its financial crisis, the government stepped in and in 1982 appointed the Eloff Commission that expanded the investigation to include all of the activities of the SACC.<sup>30</sup> The findings of the commission stated that the SACC supported revolutionary change in South Africa, that it associated itself with institutions that were dedicated to undermining white supremacy in the country, and that it was primarily involved with economic, political and social issues. The latter finding implied that the SACC was not an organisation that merely wished to minister God's Word, but that it also wished to make its influence felt in the sphere of public affairs in South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

In reaction to criticism against the SACC, that it was an organisation with a greater interest in the social and political issues than in religious affairs, Tutu shamed his critics by launching the SACC programme that emphasised purely religious activities such as the study of the Bible and regular prayer by SACC members. These practices not only promoted the SACC's image within the organisation, but also quelled the growing criticism from outside. Tutu was adamant in his conviction that "the Church exists first and foremost to praise God and it cannot be otherwise for the council of churches".<sup>32</sup>

The SACC's activism against apartheid entailed a wide array of activities. It included, among others, attempts to internationalise the issue of apartheid – a tactic also applied by the ANC. Occasionally, the SACC would enter into direct

28 R Crawford, *Journey into the heart of apartheid* (London: De Horstink, 1989), pp. 4-6.

29 *Ibid.*

30 D Tutu, *The rainbow people of God* (London: Bantam, 1995), pp. 53-54.

31 Balia, pp. 90-91.

32 J Allen, *Rabble-rouser for peace. The authorized biography of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 169.

discussions with government officials and politicians to publicise and address the inequalities of the South African society. The SACC also cooperated with other Christian groups in the country to create awareness of the repressive nature of the policy of apartheid.<sup>33</sup> In spite of the peaceful nature of the SACC's anti-apartheid activities, they nevertheless became an irritation and embarrassment to the government during the 1980s because of the wide support that the council enjoyed internationally. In 1988 the head office of the SACC, "Khotso House", was targeted in a bomb explosion. The former Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, in his testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC), disclosed that the Khotso House explosion was under direct instruction of President PW Botha.<sup>34</sup>

The SACC tried to promote a policy of non-violent resistance in contrast to Christians in South Africa, as elsewhere across the world, who have drawn crossfire for instigating violence instead of promoting reconciliation. In South Africa, for example, the Bible has been used both for justifying the policy of apartheid and the violence of freedom fighters. It is therefore important to take note of the SACC's attempts during the 1980s to stem the flood of violence through faith in the spirit of God.<sup>35</sup>

The SACC as an organisation presented greater challenges to the apartheid government and the DRC than was the case with international bodies such as the WCC and the WARC. The fact that the SACC is a representative organisation supporting non-violence, made it difficult to ignore the demands of this organisation.<sup>36</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

The policy of apartheid cannot be characterised as an independent ideology as it differed from generation to generation in their application of it.<sup>37</sup> The DRC was closely involved with the development of the policy of apartheid. The development of a theology that supported the political policy of the NP was an artificial development. It broke a centuries-old tradition within the Church where race did not play a definitive role in determining the way in which the Church functioned in the world. The theological conviction that became established among so many of the white Afrikaner leading figures, namely that races should live separately

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 189-191; Boesak, pp. 110-117; Salemink and Van Dijk, pp. 75-77.

34 M Nuttall, *Number two to Tutu. A memoir* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), p. 37.

35 D Chidester, *Christianity. A global history* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 577.

36 BJ van der Merwe. Private collection, Interview with F Wessels, Belville, 16 August 2010.

37 FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1979), pp. 1-23.

from one another, was based on a combination of factors, among which the poor white problem was probably the most important. South Africa was thus clearly a case where a particular spiritual interpretation of the economic developments in the region was embraced and followed by policy application on the grounds of political decisions rather than Biblical justification.

Christians and theologians worldwide made their voices heard in their struggle against the apartheid government. Although the Church by the 1980s had renounced the theological justification of the policy of racial separation, the DRC did not hold the view that the policy of apartheid diverged from the will of God. This was the reason why the DRC became so isolated. The DRC's influence therefore waned, also among white Afrikaners who became disillusioned with the church, although the church generally still exercised an important influence on them. The DRC largely ignored the pressure of the international community, as well as that from other churches in South Africa. Neither could the WCC repeat the successes that it had achieved after the Cottesloe Conference.

It is a moot question whether the attempts by the international community of Christians to isolate the DRC in the hope that they would discard their views regarding racial separation was the logical approach. By this action, the international community of Christians vented their dissatisfaction with the DRC. By severing all ties with the DRC, they wished the Church to rethink the implementation of apartheid in the church. Although the international community lent a degree of credibility to the churches' struggle in South Africa against the policy of racial separation and apartheid, the international community's influence in South Africa was mostly limited. Churches from inside the borders of South Africa exerted a much bigger influence on the politics of the country. It therefore appears that isolation initially did not substantially affect the DRC.

The Cottesloe Conference and subsequent events laid the foundation for the way in which the DRC dealt with international pressure. The fact that white Afrikaners were politically united was a contributing factor. White Afrikaners, especially under Prime Minister Verwoerd, were optimistic about the feasibility of the policy of apartheid. The government inspired confidence and the country was stable despite the Sharpeville shootings. It was only during the 1980s that the feeling of unity vanished and that Afrikaners became divided over the question whether apartheid, as it was implemented during the Verwoerd administration, was viable or not.

Leaders of the DRC could still largely ignore the pressure that the WCC sought to exert on the DRC because of widespread mistrust in the international body among white Afrikaners, as well as by government. The liberal character of the WCC further strengthened the suspicion of white Afrikaner leaders in the organisation. With the WARC's classification of the policy of apartheid as "heresy"

in 1982, the international campaign against the policy of apartheid nevertheless regained a short-lived momentum. In the same year, the WARC elected Allan Boesak, the well-known theologian and later leader of the United Democratic Front (UDF) – a front organisation of the ANC during the 1980s – as president of the WARC. The WARC's decision to elect Allan Boesak as president of the organisation, bestowed a large degree of legitimacy on the DRC Church family's own struggle against the policy of apartheid.

South African Christians, who revolted against the policy of apartheid during the 1980s and used the Church as platform to vent their dissatisfaction, were divided about what would constitute as preferred or acceptable means of action. Some felt comfortable in supporting the violent efforts of the military cadres of the freedom movements such as those of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN), for example, had no qualms in supporting the freedom movements financially. This was one of the reasons which led to relations being broken off between the DRC and RCN. Others felt that the use of violence could not be sanctioned under any circumstances. One of the organisations that was critical about the use of violence and rejected it as a modus of operation was the South African Council of Churches.

The path of isolation had a negative impact on the DRC. Cross-fertilisation of ideas seldom took place and the DRC became an institution that too often echoed the views of the government. Pressure from national organisations had a greater influence on the views and actions of the DRC than international pressure. In this regard, the SACC became one of the strongest voices of protest against the policy of apartheid. Although the government carefully monitored the SACC, it remained independent and continued to provide leaders with a platform from where they could challenge the government in a peaceful manner.

The DRC found it more difficult than the government to detach itself from the policy of apartheid. Many within the DRC truly believed that the policy of apartheid was morally just and based on Biblical principles which have God's blessing. However, enlightened voices increasingly went up in the DRC during the early 1980s. Although several ministers openly used the pulpit to preach against the policy of apartheid, the DRC formally renounced the theological justification of apartheid only in September 1986. In the same year, the DRC published a revised copy of its policy document, *Ras, volk en nasie in die lig van die Skrif*, under the title *Kerk en samelewing – 'n Getuienis van die Ned. Geref. Kerk [Church and society – A testimony of the Dutch Reformed Church]*. This publication unleashed a storm of protest from conservative DRC members who eventually established the Afrikaans Protestant Church (APK).

Although the DRC discarded the theological justification of the policy of apartheid, the Church remained hesitant to proclaim it as "sin", and therefore a

breach of God's will. Instead, the emphasis was shifted to the *application* of the policy of apartheid, which the Church conceded, could be a contravention of the Bible, but not necessarily the policy as such. The DRC's prevarication on this issue left a bitter taste in the mouths of the DRC's fiercest critics who wanted the Church to acknowledge that its policy of apartheid was a sin that ran counter to God's will for all humankind. The DRC has since then been readmitted into the inter-church bodies of the international communities. The Church no longer supports the theological justification of apartheid, but debates surrounding its legacy continue to flourish inside its structures and remain a challenge to Afrikaner identity.