Church and culture:
A religio-theological perspective

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Abstract

The ethnic church ("volkskerk") is central to the ecclesiology and Church Order of the Reformed Church in Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk). This article questions notions of culture, ethnicity, ethnic people ("volk") and ethnic identity as backdrop for answering the question on the responsibility of the church towards cultural and ethnic identity. It is conceded that civil religion remains an insidious threat to the church, as is also civil ideology. Lastly, it is contended that the main responsibility of the church towards culture, ethnic people, ethnic and social identity is one of apostolic prophetic presence and outreach.

1.   INTRODUCTION

This article was prompted firstly by a project of the now defunct "Section A" of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, on the relation between church and culture, and secondly by the question whether the church has a special cultural responsibility. The question was originally asked during the sixty-fourth General Assembly of the Reformed Church in Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk) (= Hervormde Church) (AKV 1995:62) and later forwarded to "Section A".

At first glance, the question of the General Assembly seems to make no sense. After all, culture is part of being human. The church is involved in the humanity of its members of the church. Seen in this light, that settles the matter; hence the quick reply that came from the assembly itself, namely that the church does indeed have a cultural responsibility (AKV 1995:66). (Later, as it were on second thought, it was decided to forward the question to Section A for more fundamental consideration).

However, it can hardly be accepted that the time of the General Assembly and Section A would be wasted on senseless questions. It must therefore be accepted that there was more to the question than appeared at first glance.

In this article, I therefore want to consider the concept of "culture" and explore further how being church is affected by it, the responsibility of the church to culture and ethnicity, and finally the problem of civil religion within the framework of church and culture.

2. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND RELATED CONCEPTS

The primary meaning of the term culture describes the total complex of language, life view, customs, life values, life patterns, inventions and so on of a certain group of people or at a particular juncture. It follows that a human is a cultural being. The human being creates culture and is a cultural product as well. There is not a single aspect of human life that does not have to do with culture one way or another. To speak of culture is to speak of being human (in the individual and the societal sense).

Several disciplines in the human and social sciences group have a direct interest in the study of culture. The two obvious ones are Anthropology and Sociology. However, all of the others are also involved in it one way or another, even though this is not always realised or taken into account.

When a definition of culture is sought, the disciplinary approach of the respondent should be taken into account. The more the points of departure taken into account, the more the perspectives of culture. The following brief overview of sociological and anthropological positions reflects some of this diversity.

2.1 Brief overview

Sociologists generally tend to have a fairly abstract view of culture. Their attention is focused on cultural patterns that lend structure to individual and social life, and as their reference group they use any grouping that serves the purpose of the study.

- Wuthnow (1984:3) offers the following definition: Culture is human behaviour as expressed in symbols.

- Peter Berger (according to Wuthnow 1984:25) views culture as an all-encompassing, socially composed world of meanings deduced from subjective and intersubjective experiences. It forms a framework of meaning, that is it imparts meaning and sense, but also indicates the boundaries for meaning and sense.

- LeVine (Shweder 1984:67): "Culture (is) a shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of communicative actions".

Geertz (1973:89): "Culture (is) a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."

It is evident from these views that culture always has a social association. The social reference can be to society, a people, community or any social group that is deemed appropriate to the point of view of the researcher.

Anthropologists have their own view of and approach to culture. They include material cultural products, while some also regard a concept such as ethnicity as important. Here we are looking particularly at the views of the well-known anthropologists of Pretoria, P J and R D Coertze (father and son), who exercised considerable influence on the thinking of the Hervormde Church.

- An Anthropology handbook that is well known to many ministers of the Hervormde Church (Coertze 1961:12) made the following statements about Anthropology and culture: Anthropology studies culture as a unitary life pattern, i e as the cultural patterns of peoples/ethnic groups ("volkere"). Such cultural patterns display several facets which are intertwined. The part of Anthropology that focuses on this is Cultural Anthropology. It focuses especially on the following:

  - The diversity of cultures found worldwide.

  - The classification of these cultures according to principles that arise from the study itself.

  - The variety of factors responsible for the existence of cultures that differ from one another.

  - The way in which cultures change and the factors responsible for such change or that can be related to it.

  - The meaning of culture in the life of people and the effect of cultural change on the peoples / ethnic groups ("volkere") in question.

- Man as a product of culture, with regard to both outward and inner life.

- Furthermore, we read in the same book (p 31.): "Culture as an anthropological concept indicates everything that humankind has brought into being in the different ethnic contexts and comprises the result of humankind's creative activity".

P J Coertze says the following about culture:

> The structural presentation of ... a "volk" (ethnic people[1]) then lies enclosed in its cultural pattern. Therefore, a "volk" and its culture are actually a twofold unit … Culture is therefore ... the external and internal manifestation of a "volk" as it was shaped within a certain environment.

> (Coertze 1961:35)

In a memorandum to a study commission of the Hervormde Church, R D Coertze said the following about culture:

> The cultural pattern referred to comprises a series of at least facets or universal aspects in which each "volk" displays its own particular variations, however small they may be. These fifteen facets are the following: economic organisation, technical creations, propagation system, social organisation, system of government, military system, legal system, judicial system, religion, knowledge system, artistic creations, education system, language, value system, games and recreation ...
>
> The life pattern of a "volk" is acquired by each growing member of a "volk" through a slow process of education. In this process, the value judgments of his "volk" become entrenched in his personality. Each new cultural offering that comes into being through own creation or is adopted from outside becomes a part of the culture of that "volk" only when it is accepted and woven into the existing pattern of life ...

> (Coertze 1980:159)

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[1] "Volk" in the sense it was used by the Coertzes has no equivalent English term. It denotes an ethnic people with a specific ethnic identity and recognised by others as such. In Antropology the technical term is "ethnos".

In 1996, the Coertzes expressed the following opinion about culture:

> All creations which man as a complex living being brings into being in a process of self-maintenance in (adjusting to) a complex environment. It includes: cultivation of man himself and of his environment, as well as the creation of all apparatus, methods and techniques with and by which cultivation takes place. Culture therefore exists as the standardised, coherent life pattern of an ethnos and is transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of enculturation.
>
> Within the American cultural region approach and the German-Austrian cultural circle approach, the concept of culture is area-bound and based on the corresponding spreading of cultural elements and cultural complexes. Within British social anthropology, culture refers to a system of values, ideas and behaviour within a social grouping which the researcher demarcates as such for the purpose of his study.
>
> (Coertze 1996:164ff)

The anthropological viewpoint represented by the Coertzes therefore sees culture as an ethnic phenomenon. This does not mean that culture is only ethnic, but that their methodological approach imposes such a discipline on them. A person who does not understand this, however, can easily get the impression that culture *must* be understood as an ethnic phenomenon and that a reference to culture is inevitably a reference to "volk".

As mentioned earlier, the approach taken makes a substantive difference when culture is deliberated. This brings us back to the attempt to combine the project of the Section A and the question of the General Assembly of the Hervormde Church. The former approached culture as a human phenomenon, with the whole spectrum of possible perspectives on it. The approach of the latter can be ascertained by establishing what the original requesters had in mind.

- **The question of the General Assembly**

Information obtained from professor S J Botha, chairman of the Commission for the Rewriting of the Church Order of the Hervormde Church (1996-05-29), put it beyond any doubt that the above question arose in connection with a relation between culture and "volk". The question came up in the debate about church and education and must be seen in the context of other questions, such as: "Must the Church continue to strive for Christian education identified and identifying with a particular 'volk'"? (Answer: Yes) and: "Should the Church Order deal with education and training that identifies with the

Afrikaner"? (Answer: "The Church Order will have to deal with education and training that identifies with the Afrikaner volk"). "Culture" can therefore in this regard be taken as referring to what is peculiar to a particular people and their identity ("volkseie").

It therefore seems not unreasonable to interpret the question of the General Assembly as a question whether the Hervormde Church, which sees itself as an ethnic church ("volkskerk", German: "Volkskirche"), has a responsibility toward the Afrikaner and to that which is peculiar and dear to this people. To which the question arises: What kind of responsibility? To help maintain the Afrikanervolk and what is dear and peculiar to it *or* to keep Christianising it? These are the kinds of questions that will be deliberated later when the ethnic church is considered in the context of this problem area.

3.   A CLOSER LOOK AT CULTURE

One of the modern savants who has extensively scrutinised the deeper dimensions of culture and may have made the greatest contribution to present-day cultural theory is the American sociologist Peter L Berger (1929-). He is an eclectic thinker who succeeds in presenting a distillate of several predecessors and contemporaries in a convincing, new synthesis (Wuthnow 1984:721)[2].

Like many others before him, Berger holds that people organismically do not have a reality orientation, but have to develop it. Consequently, it is essential for people to pass through a prolonged period of growth and education. However, what at first sight appears to be a disadvantage subsequently proves to be an asset, as it gives people openness to the world. This means that humans are not trapped in a single reality orientation, but constantly need to adjust to reality.

This is accompanied by *reality construction.* Man creates a theoretical model of reality for himself/herself. Man is his own point of orientation in this model, because he/she is an intentional being. Reality construction is also *a building of culture.*

On the other hand, there is also an innate human characteristic that influences human adaptation to reality, namely that man is a social being. Reality construction is therefore also social activity. *Culture is essentially social.*

In Berger's view, the constructed reality represents an inherent and constant dialectic. In fact, there are two dialectical processes: between the self (or identity) and body (or organism) on the one hand and between the self and the socio-cultural world on the other. In the latter he distinguishes three moments, namely externalisation, objectification and internalisation.

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[2] The summary and analysis of Berger's thinking by Wuthnow (1984) is followed.

As mentioned earlier, reality construction and culture building is a continuous process. It continues for as long as there are people or communities. However, it is also a searching for and giving of meaning. Such constructions become frameworks of meaning – understanding is not only deposited in the constructions, but is also derived from them. They become frameworks of understanding for truth and new knowledge. They legitimise values, principles and rules (Wuthnow 1984:25).

While culture gives meaning and sense, it also indicates its boundaries. The individual is allowed to non-conform up to a point, but for the sake of the stability of the community, the consensus about truth that is embodied in culture is protected. The constructed reality is and remains an artificial reality. It is often put under stress by alternative reality experiences or by crisis experiences. When the constructed reality comes under pressure in this way, it means that the truth itself is put under pressure, because man and the community of which he forms part know no other truth than the constructed reality.

Truth is a strategic matter, and therefore an important strategic matter and an instrument of power. It is controlled in the community by institutionalised structures. Insights into aspects of reality may be correct in principle, but are normally not admitted as true before their social impact has been discounted. In case of crises, this system comes under pressure, and the community experiences a sense that not only its understanding of truth is threatened, but is own existence as well.

Naturally, reality can be understood in different ways. This explains the multitude of cultures, as well as their internal plurality.
Nevertheless, it is interesting that Berger works with an *ontological priority*, i.e. that priority is given to the external reality, the 'world of day-to-day practice'. According to Wuthnow (1984:31), Berger follows the interpretative method of Alfred Schutz. He summarises Schutz' model as follows:

- People as individuals live in a *life world.* This is a sphere consisting of experiences of the natural environment, man-made things, events and other individuals. However, as different ways of experiencing are possible (e g dreams, hallucinations and the theatre), it amounts to an *assembly of multiple realities,* although he still gives preference to the day-to-day life reality. Owing to the social nature of the daily life world, it is also an *intersubjective world.* By contrast, the other, single-subjective worlds of experience form limited provinces of meaning.

- In order to make principles and values of the shared, intersubjective, daily life reality socially workable, the principle of abstraction and *typification* is applied. In this way, a common treasury of knowledge and experience is established which is organised on the basis of certain priorities and interests. However, the daily pragmatic motive remains the main factor.

In brief:

- Culture is the total of human products, visible and invisible. It is social and intersubjective. It refers to individuals and to the community of which they are part.

- A cultural community possesses identity, and so do its members. Individual identity is the socialised self. Individual identity consists of personal processing of group values and the identification of an own place and role in the group.

- Symbols and signs are important because they represent objectified meanings and values. In culture they therefore play a fundamental role. Without any doubt, the main cultural element is *language.* It is symbol, sign as well as instrument. Language makes it possible to construct an intersubjective reality, to bridge past and present, to share experiences that can almost not be shared.

- Another fundamental element of culture is institutionalisation. Institutions and objectified systems (visible and invisible) are created or developed by the community on the basis of long experience and are aimed at certain recurrent situations or needs.

- The cultural community is overarched by different layers of theoretical systems and institutions whereby reality (including history) is unlocked and understood. The highest of these is the *symbolic universal reference framework (symbolic universe).* In this layer, all the different systems are brought together and joined together. The symbolic universal reference framework is described by mythology, theology, philosophy and science (Wuthnow 1984:48). The meaning assigned to the elements mentioned varies from one community to the next.

- ▪ *Religion* is a man-made constellation of meanings and values through which the universe is projected as a holy cosmos. It offers the community as a whole a "sacred canopy". It represents the highest form of reality construction. Religion as value system is spelled out in two directions: mythology and theology. The former represents the more naive and popular conceptualisation, while the latter is the product of specialists. It also follows the same path as science.

- ▪ Modern science represents the modern secularisation of the symbolic reference framework. It also represents the de-institutionalisation of symbols.

- • Knowledge and truth also have a *legitimising function* – at both the cognitive and normative level. According to Berger, this can be said of all knowledge, but it is particularly true of institutionalised knowledge and of the symbolic reference framework. There is also an individual legitimisation. Individuals find their place in terms of the symbolic reference framework.

  - ▪ Ideology represents a specialised case. It is, according to Berger (in Wuthnow 1984:50), a set of ideas that legitimises the hidden interests of certain groups in the community. It usually also tries to fit into the larger symbolic reference framework.

  - ▪ Religious legitimisation is its clearest and most effective form. Legitimisation takes place through sacralisation or an appeal to revealed values. Theodicy represents a specialised legitimisation function. According to Berger (in Wuthnow 1984:51), theodicy is nothing else than the explanation of crises and the processing and legitimisation of experiences that accompany it.

  - ▪ Yet another interesting element of legitimisation is the so-called *plausibility structure.* This refers to the boundaries set in daily life for probability and acceptability.

Berger wrote a good deal about religion as well, especially about religion in the modern context. Although religion is a highly effective form of institutionalisation and legitimisation, it has been exposed to the ravages of *de-institutionalisation* in modern times. In the course of the past century,

religion has been driven from several important institutionalised areas of life to the private domain. There are many reasons for this, including religious plurality, the impact of critical science and secularisation (being the desacralisation of areas of life). Only within the private domain are *plausibility structures* still found that provide for truths of faith, and even these are under pressure. The *sacred canopy* has a good many tears in it.

On the other hand, this does not mean that religious faith and practice are threatened as such. Modernity may even prove conducive to religion, as the modern way of legitimisation (being an appeal to specialised expertise) is in essence elitist and does not address ordinary people. Berger's principle that daily pragmatic intercourse with reality takes precedence in reality construction implies that the future of religion is not in the hands of theologians who carry on discussions with representatives of philosophy and science on an elevated plane, but rests with ordinary religious people.

Lastly, it is interesting that he draws a clear distinction between the scientific and the private domain. In the latter, choices are made that are not allowed in the former. He does not view this as schizophrenia, but as the inevitable result of the discipline and asceticism that must be accepted in science, but which must also be transcended in everyday, practical life (Wuthnow 1984:33-34).

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a French philosopher and author in the postmodern style, examines the strategic and power implications of *knowledge* and how it is handled in culture. His Marxist background makes him acutely aware of *power*. The transfer of knowledge is always accompanied, whether consciously or not, with implications for and considerations of power.

The student uprisings of 1968 reinforced Foucault's view of knowledge and power (see Wuthnow 1984:152). He came to the conclusion that the revolts were the consequence of the frustrations of the masses with a social system that blocked their inputs to and participation in the intellectual discourse and in the knowledge community, because the latter was bent on the protection of vested interests. He became convinced that knowledge and truth were social factors with important implications for power, and that control over these was part of the power play within each community and culture.

Foucault examines, among others, the science movement of the past few centuries in Western society and culture. It is analysed and described as an ordinary sociocultural phenomenon alongside others. Its ideological backgrounds and effects are also weighed. He shows how the different specialist directions not only serve science, but to the extent that they are organised as specialist communities and develop their own technical jargon,

can also be regarded as exclusive interest groups that give new contours to the power play in society.

The conclusion can be drawn that scientists and experts must be seen as a new class, an intellectual class that has taken over the role of the clerical class (in Marx's analysis). Their role and motives must therefore be subjected to the same critical approach, and many of the same arguments that Marx used against the clergy can be applied to them as well. Ironically, Marx and Foucault belonged to this new class themselves.

4.   CHURCH AS CULTURAL PHENOMENON AND AS BODY OF CHRIST

Knowledge sociologists, such as Berger, opened our eyes in the Feuerbach tradition for the humanity of our reality, being a socially construed reality. A much more incisive insight is that truth depends to a high degree on social consensus. Truth is what is allowed, by the community or even dominant interest groups, to be true. Knowledge is power. This means that the image of knowledge and scientific development as the result of free intellectual curiosity is relativised to a high degree. Truth and knowledge must also be considered as cultural, social and even political phenomena.

That the church is subject to social and cultural forces has been understood for a long time already. It is expressed in the indigenisation of the gospel, church and theology. Knowledge sociology takes this insight much further, however: the church lives in a socially construed reality – even the most basic concepts used in thinking must be deemed subject to social and cultural forces, even to group interests. Then it is no longer any use arguing that the church has played a major part in the construction of reality, as the church must also be viewed as a social and cultural entity.

All of which merely shows once again the extent to which man is a prisoner of his own humanity. It reminds one of the recurrent theme of the force of destiny in the Greek tragedies – the more elevated people's thoughts, the more clearly their humanity emerges. The opposite is also true, however: inside people's awareness of their limitations, a realisation of transcendence hides. The more refined and profound the realisation of creatureliness and limitation, the stronger the need and urge to surmount it often is.

The gospel that inspires and motivates the church makes much of the relation between humanity and transcendental divinity. Falling into sin is when man tries to surpass his/her creatureliness. Redemption is when he/she realises how much he/she is dependent on God and acknowledges his/her limited humanity. The divinity of Jesus Christ appears precisely in his obeying God in everything and fulfilling his calling as the Son of Man. When Karl Barth

speaks of the total differentness of God, he does not thereby mean to argue that God has no relevance for sinful people.

It is known that Barth held Feuerbach in high esteem. In 1922, for instance, he advised ministers he was addressing to drop pastoral-theological journals and rather to immerse themselves in Feuerbach's writings (Vlijm 1956:115). Feuerbach made him realise how human man and the world of man are. The human nature of religion and sacral institutions and structures were revealed. Many of them proved to be towers of Babel. This put the miracle of divine intervention and redemption in that much sharper relief.

Likewise, the realisation of the profound humanity of the church, its religiosity and theology does not lead to despondency or a collapse of faith, but to the realisation that faith cannot be anything else than childlike. Ultimately, there are very few, if any, sacral institutions or structures that can serve as systems to bolster or uphold faith. Therefore all glory is due to God and his spirit, who turned Scripture into Word and generates children for himself from sinful human beings. Paul can be quoted in another context: the language, concepts, ideas and structures with which the gospel was received and is borne and transmitted are but fragile earthen vessels. What matters is the content, not so much the container. This difference must always be borne in mind, even if it is not always easy to understand what the point is.

Although Barth handles religion as a cultural phenomenon, calls it a spiritual tower of Babel and rejects the idea that it can be a *praeparatio evangelica*, it is significant that his statement that religion was abrogated ("aufgehoben") by revelation can be understood in more than one sense:

> We found, after all, that religion can also be "aufgehoben" in the sense of "wohlaufgehoben" (uplifted[3]), that the revelation does not pass around religion, but enters into the human religion. We found the idea that religion is a reaction to an act of God, indeed, that religion is a consequence of the wrath of God, which hands man over to himself. We heard Barth speak about religion as if it were that empty shell of the covenant.

(Vlijm 1956:116ff)

Vlijm (1956) already showed in the fifties that people like H Kraemer and M Schlunk gave a one-sided, negative representation of Barth's view of religion. Bonhoeffer's view of an a-religious Christianity was probably also based on a one-sided understanding of Barth.

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[3] "Aufhebung" means "abrogation" and "upliftment".

We start with a sentence that shows a very great similarity with a sentence from the KD I, 2. It says there: "The revelation is the abrogation of religion, like religion is the abrogation of the revelation" (KD I, 2:331). In the letter to the Romans, we read: "The gospel is the 'Aufhebung' of the church, like the church is the 'Aufhebung' of the gospel" (Rbr 317). For correct understanding, it must be noted that with "church" Barth does not refer to the body of Christ, but the visible church, which in its externally visible appearance does not differ much from all sorts of other religious communities. "Church" can be rendered as "the world of religion, as it manifests itself in history" (Rbr 316).

This church is wherever the gospel is. "There is in the human mouth no pure, no truly unecclesiastical proclamation of the gospel". This impurity, this "religious contamination" of the gospel, occurs because "nobody can speak about God seriously without at the same time most forcefully communicating himself und imposing his will" (Rbr 317). There is no way of avoiding this nuisance. Those who proclaim the gospel cannot but act in solidarity with the world of religion, in solidarity with sin. They cannot do otherwise.

> ... In any case, one can understand from the above that according to Barth a relation exists between religion and the gospel and vice versa. Religion cannot exist without revelation, and revelation does not exist without religion.
>
> (Vlijm 1956:95)

The church therefore also has a double nature: on the one hand as religion or cultural phenomenon and on the other as body of Christ. This is just another way of saying that the church is in the world, but not of the world. Continued faith and the acceptance of the church as body of Christ, and the simultaneous acceptance of the profoundly human aspects thereof, is possible only through a post-critical naivety. Post-critical does not in this case mean the elimination of criticism, but criticism in another way – more compassionate, though not less incisive.

5.   CULTURE, ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CHURCH

Coertze (1980:159) defines "volk" (or *ethnos)* as follows:

> A "volk" is a group of people who form a unit on the basis of the possession of a homogeneous culture or lifestyle that has been acquired through a long process of living together, intermarriage and cultural transmission to successive generations.

He comments as follows on his definition:

> (a) A "volk" is a group of people who on their own form a unit with a particular *identity.* A "volk" is aware of its own identity. The fact that a "volk" displays a separate identity is also acknowledged by other peoples ("volke") with whom they have contact.

> (b) It is therefore clear that the mere living together of people in the same area is not in itself sufficient to bring about the special bond that is necessary for belonging to the same "volk". Those who live together must also intermarry because they share the same destiny, and the bond must be of a permanent nature owing to the education of successive generations.

> (Coertze 1980:159)

Coertze (1980:162) again:

> Contact between two cultures in any case also means contact between the people who bear these cultures. When people make long-term and direct contact with one another, it is no longer a matter of cultural influencing and possible growing together, but also the growing together of the bearers of these cultures.

Ethnos is explained as follows in a later work:

> An ontic human unit of existence; a group of people forming a unit on the basis of a real or imagined sense of common identity and lifestyle that has developed over a long period of cohabitation and is acknowledged by others.

> (Coertze 1996:75)

The following remark is made about *sense of identity*:

> (Awareness of own identity) is usually accompanied by the indication of an own name, emphasis on communal cultural characteristics (for instance, language and religion), historical formation and even racial characteristics.

> (Coertze 1996:76)

Berger and his associate, Thomas Luckmann, see identity as something that originates in the dialectical relation between individual and community and is constantly shaped anew (Berger 1967:174). They therefore think in terms of

individual identity. However, they also mention a super-identity that is rooted in a cosmic reality that transcends the daily variables and marginal experiences (Berger 1967:118). The cosmic reality is expressed in a symbolic universal framework of reference.

Identity is not a firm given, but must be constantly extended, defended or bolstered against onslaughts or adapted in view of changing circumstances or new challenges. Identity can disappear – gradually, as in the case of an immigrant community that assimilates across generations, or fairly rapidly, as in the case of several Central American peoples or communities that collapsed before the onslaughts of the Conquistadores.

The sociologist Hans Mol wrote about identity at length. In a ground-breaking work in which he explored the relation between identity and religion (Mol 1976), he repeatedly underlines that communities or groups with strong religious roots succeeded much better in preserving their identity (communal and individual) than secularised groups.

> Sacralization is the inevitable process that safeguards identity when it is endangered by the disadvantages of the infinite adaptability of symbol systems. Sacralization protects identity, a system of meaning or a definition of reality and modifies, obstructs or (if necessary) legitimates change. The widespread conclusion has been drawn that the sacred is on its way out. I do not think this is so. Sacralization processes may be interrupted and prevented from maturing, but they are not disappearing: they appear to be as viable as ever.

> (Mol 1976:6, 7)

In a study by Lewins (1978), the relation between religion and ethnic identity is traced. He shows how the Roman Catholic Church helped ethnic minorities in Australia who were descended from immigrants to maintain their ethnic identity or even to develop a new identity. In the case of Italian immigrants, the church assisted them by instituting special masses in Italian in order to consolidate them into a single Italian group, although in their country of origin they were not inclined to see themselves in this way. For this group, the church therefore created a bridge to the plural Australian society without sacrificing everything they used to be.

In the case of people of Ukrainian descent, another phenomenon was observed. Owing to their long history of oppression by the Turks and negation by the Russian authorities, a strong ethnic consciousness exists among Ukrainians all over the world. To them, church is an important symbol of ethnicity, but church membership is always subordinate to ethnic

connectedness. This can be inferred from the fact that Ukrainian Roman Catholics admitted that they had less in common with Australian Roman Catholics than with Ukrainians belonging to the Orthodox Church: "This relationship of national and religious elements in Ukrainian ethnic identity has been described as the "sanctification of ethnicity" and the "ethnization *of* religion" (Lewins 1978:29). What made them different from the Italian group was that most Ukrainians still nurtured the dream of returning to their home country and did not really intend to become part of Australian society.

The connection between ethnic identity and church has long been acknowledged in the ethnic church ("volkskerk") concept of the Hervormde Church. Proceeding from the covenant, the church grows into the "volk" via families.

In order to reach all of humankind, the church enters into each aspect and segment of humankind. The segmentation of humankind into ethnic peoples results in organic and comprehensive life units, nurtured and built by families within which children, because of their parents' bond with Christ, are also included in the covenant (Ac 2:39; 1 Cor 7:12-14). For this reason, the children should be baptised within the covenant.

A church of the covenant which therefore is aware of families within the covenant, of families which basically constitute an ethnic people ("volk"), is to that extent already an ethnic church ("volkskerk").[4]

> ... Although the ethnic church does not discount the Biblical predestination and conversion, it is nevertheless in this respect the third option as opposed to historical methodism and neo-Calvinism.
>
> (Van der Westhuizen 1990:65ff)

Extensive ecclesiological thinking has been devoted in the Hervormde Church to the covenant based ethnic church. It has repeatedly been contrasted with the perception that such a church is a national or public institution, the property of a people, dependent on ethnicity, fully identifiable with an ethnic people's interest and the like. Van der Westhuizen (1990:77) says the following in this regard:

> There is one true church, the body of Christ, the people of the eternal King. But there are many national peoples and kings and authorities. The single church people is therefore spread in the manifestations of many people's churches.

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[4] In G Warneck's vocabulary: "Volkskirche". In Church Growth vocabulary: Homogeneous Unit Church.

> The church of the Lord is the people of the Lord. The church is people ("volk"). Hence people's church ("volkskerk"). In our broken dispensation, Church and national people therefore never coincide. By "volkskerk" we mean that the church as people of God must live in a people ("volk").
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> The covenant-based ethnic church ("volkskerk") only makes sense if it implies a christianising presence within a people.
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> The intra-national ethnic church wants to enter into the ethnic consciousness through Christianisation. The ethnic church wants the church to penetrate into the deepest fibres of each people. Every member of the ethnic people ("volk") must be reached. Everybody's whole life must be Christianised. What will the church do in the ethnic consciousness if it does not confess Jesus Christ there, i.e. Christianise? If the church wants to do anything else, it is no longer church.

Nevertheless, some discomfort seems to persist about the relation between ethnic church and ethnic identity. In this regard, Botha (1989:44) writes:

> These characteristics (of the Afrikaner people) thus form the environment of which the Hervormde Church assumes the colour, because as ethnic church ("volkskerk") it was, is and wishes to remain so closely bound to it. These characteristics also codetermine the Hervormde Church. The Church therefore does not regard it as unbiblical either "if it wishes to conserve, protect and maintain that which God has given to the people, externally and internally" (Pastoral Letter 1973:4).

To speak of characteristics God has given to the Afrikaner people is to proceed from a principle of historical revelation. Despite the defence the Pastoral Letter puts up, it also runs the serious risk of natural theology. In any case, who will today decide what must be regarded as God-given characteristics? Van der Westhuizen (in Botha 1989:74) writes as follows in this regard:

> The task of the ethnic church ("volkskerk") is more difficult, but safer than that of a free or unaffiliated church. It is more difficult because its task as an instrument of predestination must remain rooted in pure Biblical soil. It is not permissible to replace the Biblical content of its task with ethnic or national content. This risk exists precisely because existing and functioning within an ethnic framework it may be ethnicised. It is the same risk as that the church in the world may become worldly. But the church cannot withdraw from the world or from ethnic peoples for this reason.

> The church has to take his risk and has to conquer the difficulties of proclaiming to one's own people, one's own world, the critical, recreating, reforming and Christianising Word of God. This is what the prophets and apostles did – even in the face of persecution, imprisonment, crucifixion, decapitation, stoning et cetera.

What it comes down to is that the ethnic church must accept a pastoral and prophetic role within and toward the specific ethnic people. The church must always be on its guard against being captured and carried away by the feelings and sentiments of any group, including ethnic groups. As we saw above, however, it is not only the ethnic church that runs this risk.

To return to the question of the sixty-fourth General Assembly: The church then has a pastoral and prophetic task toward ethnic groups, peoples, culture and what is unique to such groups or peoples. This means that the Hervormde Church, if it wants to be church of Christ, should not only guide, but must also be prepared to take a stand toward the (Afrikaner) people, especially if it becomes clear that certain sentiments originate in selfishness or when truth and justice are threatened. Like individuals, peoples are sinful entities and tend to put their own interests first. It may occasionally even be difficult for the church to distinguish truth and justice because it is drawn into the reality construction and the truth consensus of the people. That is why it is important for the ethnic church always to remember that it is actually Catholic Church. The testimony of the larger ecclesiastical community that spans the world and centuries must also be heard and taken into account.

Owing to the natural force of attraction between community, cultural group or ethnic people on the one hand and religion or church on the other, ecclesiastical involvement in what is peculiar to an ethnic people or ethnic identity contains risks that cannot be taken lightly. Sounds of ethnic or nationalistic theology which were heard from time to time, and of which there are in any case many examples in the history of the Afrikaner, are warnings that this is no idle fear. Must the Hervormde Church assume responsibility for maintaining an ethnic people's identity, for instance by sacralising and legitimising certain ideals? It cannot. Such action puts the church on skids down the dangerous road to civil religion.

6.   CIVIL RELIGION AND CIVIL IDEOLOGY

Civil religion as a concept made its appearance in the sixties following a plea by Robert Bellah for an "American civil religion" to bind the American public together. The term itself goes back as far as J J Rousseau, but in the modern sense it assumes the whole development of religious sociology since E Durkheim (cf Van der Merwe 1982).

Several studies then followed that described the phenomenon in different contexts (cf for example Cuddihy 1978 and Moodie 1978). It was shown how a consensus arises in the public domain about how certain historical events are to be understood and how current symbols can be taken as symbols of unity. It thus forms the symbolic reference framework of a general, publicly accepted reality construction. In the case of the U S A it was underpinned by a nebulous conglomerate of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish religious sentiments. In South Africa it was, according to Moodie (1978), the churches of the Afrikaner, as represented by its ministers and theologians in the *Broederbond*, which backed it up.

Several studies on civil religion in South Africa erred in finding this phenomenon only in the Afrikaner people, probably because the political dispensation of the time was under Afrikaner control. But in fact it is a phenomenon that occurs to a greater or lesser extent in all communities and societies.

On the other hand, no church can afford to take the accusation of civil religion lightly, especially when Moodie (1978:204) calls Afrikaans civil religion a "Calvinist heresy" and shows how it is based on ethnic theology ("volksteologie"), being a variant of natural theology. These were accusations that hurt, as it could not be denied that despite all the exaggeration and distortion they contained a great deal of truth. It is hoped that we are today more sensitive to the danger of civil religion.

However, there is a related phenomenon that should also be noted, namely civil *ideology*.

In every society and culture, truth and knowledge are controlled by what Berger calls a "plausibility structure". Newbigin described it as follows:

> ..."Plausibility structures", patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not … Thus when, in any society a belief is held to be "reasonable", this is a judgment made on the basis of the reigning plausibility structure.
>
> (Newbigin 1991:8)

He then proceeded to show how this applies even to the scientific community. He described how this community freely submits to an authority that is related to the prevailing paradigm of science and scholarship:

> The authority of the tradition is maintained by the community of scientists as a whole. This community is held together by the free assent of its members. But it is, nonetheless, a powerful authority. It is exercised in practice by those who determine which articles will be accepted for publication in scientific journals and which rejected, and by those who determine appointments to teaching and research posts in universities and other institutions. There is no appeal within the scientific community against this authority, and any appeal outside falls on deaf ears.

(Newbigin 1991:46)

Exactly what such a paradigm consists of is not easy to say. It is a vague consensus about how reality must be understood and approached. Despite the vagueness, scientists are prepared to submit to the "plausibility structure" derived from it because they believe in its validity. The conviction and certainty that scientists often project is therefore in the final analysis based on a form of faith.

Similar plausibility structures operate in the South African secularised society and culture of which the whites form part. The structures deny the plausibility of certain Christian assumptions of faith, but are themselves harking back to a vague "scientifically construed", anti-supranaturalistic reality.

The basic "myth" of this culture is "science". Legitimisation does not take place through religion or sacralisation., Ideology must be suspected – an ideology that also legitimises the secular structures of plausibility – hence civil ideology.

Newbigin appealed to Western Christians to think critically about the foundations and nature of the culture of their time and to demythologise them as and where necessary. He challenges Christians to live and proclaim the gospel with greater self-confidence and not to allow themselves to be inhibited by assumptions underlying the contemporary culture of social consensus and which hark back to a form of alternative faith.

7.   CONCLUSION

The church is intimately interwoven with culture, from which it is as impossible to disentangle as it is for people to escape from their own shadow. Following Barth, the divine nature of the calling of the church must be confessed, even if it is acknowledged that the church is both a religious and a cultural phenomenon.

The calling of the church *vis à vis* people and culture is apostolic and prophetic, however difficult this may be.

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