Death, cremation and columbaria in the culture of Dutch Christian Calvinist South Africa

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From the earliest days of South African colonisation - through the offices of the VOC - there was the hegemony of Calvinist belief as it manifests in Dutch Reformed Protestantism in which death was preordained, inevitable and not treated lightly. At that time the Christian practice was to bury the dead, cremations being seen as doing the Devil’s own work. The practice of cremation came late to the shores of South Africa particularly for Christian burial. One of the first to design for the practice was Gerard Moerdijk. This article presents a concise history of the traditions and practices of South African Dutch Reformed Protestant Calvinists in dealing with mortal remains along with some anomalies and the changes over time.

Key words: burial, Calvinist, campo sancto, columbarium, cremation, mausoleum, Gerard Moerdijk, ossuary

Afsterwe, verassing en columbaria in die kultuur van Nederlands Calvinistiese Christelike Suid-Afrika
Aan die begin van die koloniale tydperk in Suid-Afrika is daar deur die VOC se alleenmag 'n oorheersende eenheid van Clavinistiese geloofsuitdrukking in die vorm van die Nederduits-Hervormde Protestantisme gevestig waardeur die dood as voorafbepaald, onafwendbaar en met die grootste ernst bejeen is. Die stofflike oorskot van Christine is begrawe omdat verassing as duiwels beskou is. Verassing bereik laat aanvaarding binne Nederlandsse samelwening, veral binne die met oorheersend Christelike oortuigings. Gerard Moerdijk was een van die eerste argitektes wat vir die gebruik ontwerp het. In hierdie artikel word 'n oorsigtelike geskiedenis van die dode-praktyke en tradisies van die Nederlands-Calvinistiese Christendom gegee, terwyl die veranderinge sowel as uitsonderlike afwykings bespreek word.

Sleutelwoorde: begrafnis, Calvinisme, campo sancto, columbarium, mausoleum, Gerard Moerdijk, knekelhuis, verassing

The authors, in their travels by road on the backwaters of the South African platteland, when visiting many of the platteland churches along the routes, have observed that there are now, ever more commonly, additions of a wall of remembrance – more accurately – a columbarium. To the authors as architects, this has lead to a certain intrigue. What are the reasons for this? Architectural expression and debate as to the suitability (or not) to the context of location and existing architecture of the church building as well as reasons for the necessity for these within the context of past practices are all cause for reflection.

The tradition of Dutch Protestant burial and the anathema of cremation

The entombment of Christ in a garden was taken by early Christians as model for their own interment. Christianity as part of the Judaic tradition persisted with the practices of the founding religion. Burial was the tradition and cremation was anathema, being associated with the practices of so-called heathens. No direct indictment against cremation can be found in the Bible (the definitive text for Christianity) but certain texts are interpreted as directives for the prohibiting of the practice, for example:

Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime. (Amos 2:1).

In the Bible the consuming of the (living) body by fire is seen as just reckoning for having committed evil, particularly as punishment for direct sinning against God:

And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire (Leviticus 21:9).

Further thereto the promise of the resurrection of the flesh added to the belief that the body be disposed of intact. The Creed of the Apostles (c.390 CE) used in the Afrikaans reformed churches states:

Ek glo aan 'n heilige, algemene Christelike kerk, die gemeenskap van die heiliges; die vergewing van sondes; die opstanding van die vlees en 'n ewige lewe.²

While there was never in the Dutch Protestant churches in South Africa a formal synodal injunction against cremation, neither has the practice ever been officially sanctioned. Cremation thus, with the rare exception, remained anathema amongst predominantly Christian South Africans.

**Cremation in South Africa**

The earliest crematoria built in South Africa were for so-called Indian communities of Hindu faith where the practice formed part of their religious expression. Mahatma (M.K.) Gandhi (1869-1948) was instrumental in affecting the Johannesburg City Council of the time to construct a crematorium for peoples of Hindu faith at the Brixton cemetery. This was finally realized with the construction of a wood burning crematorium there in 1918. This is today a provincial heritage resource (SAHRA). Of the earliest to follow for those of Christian belief was in Johannesburg at the Braamfontein Cemetery, constructed in 1931-32 (Van der Waal 1986: 89). In this example the overt functionality of the flue is disguised by the more traditional steeple of a church of this Anglo-Saxon Revival Arts-and-Crafts chapel.

The first notable cremation for an Afrikaner of national standing (and still the only for a head of state in South Africa) was that of Field Marshall Jan Christian Smuts (1870-1950). His body had to be transported by train to Johannesburg to this end and his ashes returned to his farm Doornkloof, Irene, Pretoria for scattering by his family on Smuts Koppie. This practice was followed for his wife and children whose ashes are scattered around the granite obelisk erected to mark the spot.

**Enter the Dutch**

The Dutch East India Company (VOC), when establishing in 1652 a revictualing station at the Cape of Good Hope, imposed Company law on both its employees and the citizenry of European extraction. The *de facto* religion of the Nederduits Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) was therefore imposed as the only permissible religious practice allowed at the Cape even to the exclusion of other Reformed Protestant religious such as that of the Lutherans.

From this arose the South African Protestant tradition of the Afrikaner. The inherited monoculture of Dutch Reformed Calvinism gave rise to a particular expression of Christianity in the ideology of Afrikaner Christian Nationalism.

**Burial at the Cape of Good Hope**

The tradition of burial and the eschewing of cremation was exported from the mother country and imposed in the outlying Dutch colonies through the offices of the VOC. The egalitarian basis of the Dutch society did not preclude class distinction in burial and we find a wide range of practices of burial and entombment and the memorialisation of the interred or entombed.

The tombs of early burgers in the graveyard of the Paarl *Strooidakkerk*, 1800-1805 (Coertzen 1987: 112-3) serve as example for the practices of burial of the landed immigrants.
In this instance the landed gentry émigrés provided family tombs, precedent for later mausolea.

Others of high rank were entombed inside the body of the church, but as Count Louis Marie Joseph O’Hier Degrandpré, (1761-1846), French naval officer and slave trader who, in his account of the Cape published in 1801 *Voyage à la côte occidentale d’Afrique* having sojourned at the Cape with a French Governor embargoed at Robben Island for having smallpox-infected slaves on board his ship, noted the affected grandiosities of their ennobled compatriots back in the mother country by installing invented heraldic devices as memorial plaques in the church:

Calvinism is the dominant religion in the Cape, but the Lutherans have a church for the exercise of their cult. The Calvinist church is in the centre of town, a little below the Company gardens, and has long been served by a minister by the name of Serrurier, who is considered a man of merit. The church is a vast square building, quite heavy and massive, not architectural, without ornament and lacking in taste. The pulpit, which the Dutch come to admire, is a heavy mass of wood. The workmanship is good but the design and shape are detestable. Opposite the pulpit one sees quite a bad organ, played by an Alsatian who assured me that it was most incomplete. The interior is decorated with funerary monuments. Several people are buried in vaults under the church, but even those who lacked them did not leave it at that. Although buried elsewhere, they had the walls or columns of the church covered with epitaphs or escutcheons. All the Dutch at the Cape have coats of arms, if not legitimately they appropriate them. One sees nothing but coats of arms loaded with crowns, crests, spurs, swords and ensigns of authority. One of these monuments is nothing but a trumped-up suit of armour. One would say you are in the middle of a tomb of the finest flowers of chivalry. Such individuals as the son of a sailor or a mason’s hodman, dismissed from the service of the Company, did not hesitate to get themselves interred covered by an escutcheon or a pair of spurs, and often they even had the effrontery to add a pompous inscription (Degrandpré 1801: 120-2).

The above quote refers to the *Groote Kerk* in Adderley Street, Cape Town in its previous incarnation (figure 2). In the process of the failed alterations and consequent total rebuilding of the church (1835-41) by and to the design of Herman Schutte (1761-1844) many of the tombs were filled in and tombstones destroyed, some of these being those of the governors of the Colony, for instance that of Rijk Tulbagh (1699-1771).

An instance of a grand funeral at the Cape was recorded in a print issued by Bernardus Mouryk, an Amsterdam bookseller, reproduced in *South African Heritage* (Gordon-Brown 1965: 1-9) is that of Tulbagh’s successor, Baron van Rheeved van Oudtshoorn (1714-73) (figure 3), he having died at sea on board the ship, the *Asia*, on 23 January of that year while sailing to take up appointment of Governor of the Cape, but only formally buried on 17 April in the Groote Kerk, Cape Town.
The procession of this grand ‘state funeral’ seems to have carried more importance than the ceremony itself. Because this reproduction was not issued at the Cape its accuracy is questionable. However it is a good record of what could be expected for a funeral of such an illustrious personage.

In the illustration the procession is described as follows:


Additional to the above the processions of the time included so-called huilebalken (paid mourners) and tropsluiters (attendants paid to augment the funeral procession) (Gordon-Brown 1965: 10).

Traditions of burial were introduced to the interior of southern Africa by transhumant Trekboers in the 17th Century CE and 18th Century CE and later the itinerant Boers in the 19th Century CE, peoples of predominantly Dutch decent, chiefly Christian adherents of Dutch Reformed Protestantism, the latter later to be known as the Voortrekkers.

Moerdijk and the Afrikaner Nationalist project

The authors (Fisher & Clarke 2010) have addressed the important role played by Moerdijk in creating a concretized expression in built form for death in the Afrikaner Nationalist project.

The memorialisation of the deeds and trials of these peoples lent opportunity for the most ambitious of Gerard Leendert Pieter Moerdijk (4 March 1890-29 March 1958) architectural projects, the Voortrekker Monument (1938-49).
The executed design had been preceded by a design touted by Moerdijk, his idea being that for of an ossuary for the re-interment of the mortal remains of Piet Retief (1781-1837) and his company. This first design was in the form of an Egyptianate hypostyle hall-like structure (figure 4). His proposal to relocate the remains caused public outcry and heated debate and lead to the conception of the monument being reconsidered as cenotaph (Ferreira, 2009) he then proposing a monument along the lines of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.

Moerdijk and his youthful plea for crematoria

As the architect Gerard Moerdijk so rightly points out in his article on crematoria: “Life must end, and of course arrangements must be made in this relation” (Moerdijk 1918: 211). What is done with our earthly remains is, however, a consequence of cultural precepts. At the time Moerdijk spent on the Rand and an association with Frank Emley (1868-1938) (Fisher 2003: 30, 33), he published in English and in the English architectural press. One such published essay was his final design done at the Architectural Association (AA) in London for a Crematorium or Campo Sancto (figure 5).

Cremation is nothing new under the sun, and as far as history will take us back we find it in common use either alone or side by side with burial...

Looked at from a purely sanitary point of view cremation is undoubtedly the most perfect system of the disposal of the dead... As our population increases very rapidly and is concentrated around centers of industry, it becomes imperative to consider the question of public health...
Research has shown that churchyards are centers from which disease spreads to the surrounding dwellings. There is only one remedy and that remedy is found in cremation, by which a human body is reduced in the space of half an hour into harmless gasses and a small amount of clean white ash (Moerdijk 1918: 211).

Here Moerdijk argues for the practice as being hygienic followed by reasons of aesthetics. He addresses the spiritual by stating that:

Cremation in no way interferes with the feeling of sanctity which attaches to the remains of the dead. An urn, to begin with is a far more beautiful thing that a coffin, and is capable of a great variety of artistic treatment... For those who prefer it columbaria can be provided for reception of urns which can either be seen or hermetically sealed up in a niche to rest there in perpetuity (Moerdijk 1918: 212).

Moerdijk (1918: 212) pre-empt possible religious objections by stating that his proposals interfere with no religious rites and admits the same ceremony as ordinary burial. Further he draws attention to the fact that cremation had been provided for in legislation which regulates for the maintenance and inspection of crematoria and prescribed in which cases cremation may take place as well as the forms of notices, certificates and declarations which shall be made before cremation is permitted (1918: 212).

The legal sanctioning of cremation came late to Western society. Only in 1902 did the British Parliament pass an act ‘for the Regulation of burning of human remains, and to enable burial authorities to established crematoria’ (Durham University Library collections). It thus should come as no surprise that Moerdijk should in 1912 choose the design of a crematorium for his final project at the AA, the topic being then current and probably widely discussed and debated.

Monuments, memorials and novelty

However, certain architectural responses for memorializing are novel within the context of Afrikaner culture.

Mrs Hendriena (HSJ) Joubert (1830-1916) instructed that a mausoleum be constructed to house the mortal remains of her husband, Boer hero of Majuba (1881), Commandant General Piet (P.J.) Joubert (1831-1900) on his farm, Rustfontein in the Volksrust district. His body was brought to Volksrust by train form his Pretoria in a lead coffin at his widow’s insistence. This simple sandstone structure was described by her when asked once by a visitor if a monument should not be erected to her late husband. Her answer to this was:

The general already has his monument. It’s twenty feet long [6 meters], four foot wide [1.2 meters] and five foot high [1.5 meters], with a ring-wall around it. One passes through the gate into the tomb. Therein is the coffin. I have draped it in black. We need no other monument. (Meintjies 1971: 200).

She was later to join her husband here.

An unusual example of a mausoleum is that of the Mostert Family mausoleum at Welgelegen,1 Balfour (then Transvaal, now in Mpumalanga Province) (see figures 7 & 8). At this juncture it is of interest that this structure is an adjunct to a homestead (1912) he had had designed by Herbert Baker (later Sir) (1862-1946).

Andries (also known as Andrew) Mauritz Mostert (1868-1939)11 had made his fortune out of prospecting, transport and civil engineering. Among his commissions was the construction of the Church Square project (1910) (Allen, 1971: 37) in Pretoria and he was also involved in the construction of the railway line from Johannesburg to Maputo. He was the founding chairman of Iscor (SA Iron and Steel Corporation, the 1927 bill enacted in parliament in 1928, but production delayed by the depression, only starting in 1932), also of the first South African
directors of Barclays Bank and counted amongst his circle of friends leading politicians, including General Jan Smuts.

Figure 6
Inscription above the entrance to the Joubert mausoleum on the farm Rustfontein, Volksrust district (adapted from Piet Retief Branch of the Four Wheel Drive Club of South Africa).

For his burial Mostert left somewhat unorthodox instructions, in keeping with the peculiar circumstance of having had his mausoleum constructed before the time of his death. In his will of 1925 Mostert stipulates that he should be buried in a vault on the farm “... capable of holding not less than 100 bodies at a cost of £5000 Sterling” (Pretorius 2004: 24).

It is my wish and desire that on my death my body shall be embalmed and enclosed in a Teak coffin (with inner steel cover) and that I be buried in the said vault by a Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (2004: 24).

Figures 7 & 8
Mostert mausoleum, Welgelegen, District Balfour. Exterior and interior (Clarke 2008).

Moerdijk visited Mostert in March 1933 with preliminary sketches of the planned mausoleum (Pretorius 2004: 24). After that Moerdijk sought tenders for the masonry and suggested the tender from one W.F. Barker:

I can say without reserve that he is the best stone mason in the Union. He has done different large stone works for me and his work is masterful (2004: 24).

The sarcophagus in which the embalmed body of Mostert was to be preserved was obtained from P. Ley & Co who sourced the requisite size block of granite in Parys in the Free State (Pretorius 2004: 24). Mostert’s ultimate last will and testament was dated 6 February 1937. By this time the mausoleum must have been completed because he explicitly stipulates:
All bodies buried in the said Mausoleum shall be embalmed and placed in suitable coffins and no cremation ashes may be placed in the Mausoleum (Pretorius 2004: 25).

The mausoleum, built of sandstone acquired from the local Rietbult quarries, is situated about 200 metres from the main Cape Dutch Revival farmstead of Baker’s design. The mausoleum has clerestory strip windows with imported deep-blue glazing. The roof is slated in blue-grey stone. The floor is laid of black marble. Located on the axis of the far end of the sight-line of the mausoleum lies Mostert’s sarcophagus.

The mausoleum, in section, that of a basilica church, once entered, presents a single Soanian groin vaulted volume lined by niches and lit by the cold blue light of the clerestory above through a central rectangular oculus placed in a ceiling forming a secondary roof structure, a device much like that of the Voortrekker Monument. The side isles are designed to house the coffins of future Mosterts, an eventuality that will never be realized as the estate has by now passed into the hands of foreigners and the facilities closed to the Mostert family.

The mausoleum was consecrated so that it might also serve as a chapel (Pretorius 2004: 24). Although remotely located and well secured, the mausoleum, at the time of the visit of the authors, had been broken into; even the heavily sealed stone sarcophagus had its lid disturbed and moved and some of the flanking sealed niches violated by opportunist treasure seekers.

Examples of additions of columbaria, some to buildings of Moerdijk’s design

With the recent changes in the political circumstances and dispensations, urbanisation, mobility, and relaxation of doctrinal prescripts, the practice of cremation is becoming ever more prevalent in white Afrikaner Calvinist society. This has necessitated the addition of columbaria to places of worship such as, for example, Moerdijk’s Ooskerk in Clydesdale, Pretoria constructed in 1927 (Oxley 1927: 142) (figure 9). The Ooskerk is one of Moerdijk’s more striking and successful designs, in its Byzantine Revival form with the configuration of the seating across the diagonal as befits a preaching church, one argued by Moerdijk as well suited to the Calvinist traditions. The landscape and placing of the columbaria (1999, see ‘Garden of remembrance’ 1999: 2-5), by Maarten Venter, landscape architect, resonates with the geometries of the architecture in setting up axes, forming a focus and protective barrier to Kirkness Street. While post-modern in styling, this is sympathetic to the style and scaling of the body of the church. The positive architectural and landscape contribution this addition makes is here highlighted since it is seldom the case in the many examples discovered by the authors across the platteland.

Figure 9
Garden of remembrance and columbarium, Ooskerk, Pretoria (Clarke 2009).
The most interesting example of a columbarium added to a church complex is to be observed in the Eastern Cape town of Elliot which lies nestled at the feet of the spectacular Winterberge. This intriguing recent construction of a columbarium at the Dutch Reformed Church in this town (Louw14 and Louw15 architects dated 1930) mimics the original allowing for the bodies of the deceased to rest in the simulacra of the body of the church (figure 10). One can well imagine the relief of a building commission when it hit upon the idea of duplicating, at reduced scale, their beloved church building to house the ashes of their deceased.

The most apt example of the acceptance of the practice amongst this grouping of peoples is the provision of a memorial wall and columbarium at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria (2009 by Maree Els Architects, Johan Els project architect) (figure 11), a fitting postscript to Moerdijks injunction of 1918 and the original idea of housing the remains of Afrikaners in this edifice. Ironically enough Moerdijk himself was never cremated but lies buried on the family farm Modderpoort, district Modimole (previously Nylstroom), Limpopo Province.

It should be noted that many of the churches to which columbaria have been added are protected by the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999) as being either structures older than sixty years or previously declared Monuments (now Heritage Resources). It could also be argued that as structures built through public subscription even those younger than the sixty years are covered by the Act. Yet few if any of these additions of columbaria are served before the permit committees of the relevant Heritage Agencies for approval.

Conclusion

In conclusion we need to ask ourselves why the practice of cremation has gained social acceptance amongst what might be perceived as a culturally conservative community. Some reasons have already been posited in this article but one cannot exclude the current insecurities of cultural fit and longer term sustainability in maintaining the memorials of the practices of the past. With most cemeteries being under the control of local authorities it is thought that churches, as private property, offer a more secure environment for mortal remains. Also reports of grave robbing in search of treasure or worse, driven by superstitious belief in the magical properties of human remains, do not offer comfort when deciding how to deal with the mortal remains of the departed. These and contemporary threat to the bodily safety of visitors to cemeteries by miscreants, all fuel the drive to have loved ones cremated rather than buried, so that their mortal remains may be kept in the private domain of the church they have worshipped or served.
Notes

1. The structure takes its name from the niches in a dovecot for the laying and nesting activities of doves, *columba* in Latin. (See Morris, 1969).

2. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. (Ecumenical Version of the English Language Liturgical Consultation).

3. Translated from the French into the English by Carl Gerneke. Degrandpré, Count Louis Marie Joseph O’Hier (1761-1846) French naval officer and slave trader who, in his account of the Cape published in 1801 *Voyage à la côte occidentale d’Afrique* when spending a sojourn with a French Governor embargoed at Robben Island for having smallpoxed slaves on board his ship.


5. The Trekker leader Retief and his men were assassinated by the impi of the Zulu king uDingane (Dingaan) (c.1795-1840) on Babanango Hill on 6 Feb 1838 outside uDingane’s capital Ungungundlovu.

6. A monument erected to a dead person whose remains lie elsewhere (from the Greek *kenos* = empty + *taphos* = tomb, literally ‘an empty tomb’. See Morris 1969).

7. Earliest known use in English, 1546, from the Latin *mausoleum* ‘magnificent tomb’, from the Greek *Mausoleion*, a massive marble tomb built 353 B.C.E. at Halicarnassus (a Greek city in Asia Minor) for Mausolos, Persian satrap who made himself king of Caria. It was built by his wife (and sister), Artemisia. It was counted among the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Destroyed by an earthquake in the Middle Ages. General sense of ‘any stately burial-place’ is from 1600.

8. See ‘Gedenkteken vir Voortrekkers.’

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