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# Acta Academica

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*Gideon Strauss*

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## Footprints in the dust. Can neocalvinist theory be credible in postcolonial Africa?

### Summary

Can neocalvinist theory be credible in postcolonial Africa? In pursuit of a tentative answer to this question this article considers the contemporary African context and the manner in which intellectual traditions are appropriated. The contours of the neocalvinist intellectual tradition are sketched with a view to its complicity in the emergence and maintenance of apartheid thinking. Neocalvinism is judged complicit in but not seminal to apartheid thinking, with the conclusion that neocalvinist theory might yet be credible in this time and place.

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### Kan neocalvinistiese teorie geloofwaardig wees in postkoloniale Afrika?

Kan neocalvinistiese teorie geloofwaardig wees in postkoloniale Afrika? Op weg na 'n huiwerige antwoord op die vraag oorweeg hierdie artikel die hedendaagse Afrika-konteks en die wyses waarop denktradisies daarbinne toegeëien word. Die profiel van die neocalvinistiese denktradisie word geskets met die oog op die medepligtigheid daarvan in die totstandkoming en onderhoud van apartheid-denke. Neocalvinisme word wel as medepligtig beoordeel, maar nie as aanleidinggewend nie. Die gevolgtrekking word gemaak dat neocalvinistiese teorie tog nog geloofwaardig mag blyk, hier en nou.

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Does it make sense to be Christian and African? [...] why should an African believe in and promote a Christianity that not only has become a product of exportation for Western civilisation but also has come to be used as a means of racial and class exploitation? (Valentin Mudimbe 1988: 172).

What I am [...] is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition (Alisdair MacIntyre 1984: 221).

Calvin Seerveld (1991: 1-34) tells the story of a young angel who once upon a time had a little spare time (very rare for an angel) and noticed a devil doing something very peculiar: sweeping out the footprints of someone walking through freshly fallen snow.<sup>1</sup>

"Ah, stupid!" thought the angel. "Doesn't that devil realise that the cold Canadian wind will blow snow over the tracks anyway? If devils want someone to lose their way, surely they could use their time better?" Noneless, the angel reported the event to Gabriel.

The archangel was not amused. "That devil will go a long way as a troublemaker. People resist believing that they follow in beaten tracks. But they become really insufferably proud when they look around and imagine that they leave no tracks themselves."

Had Seerveld's young angel wandered somewhat southward to our African patch of the planet, he would probably have seen much the same scene played out on some dusty dirt road in the veld, with a cold wind from the distant mountains twisting and twirling the dust up in conical whirls. But there would be one small but significant difference: footprints in our African dust are today most often made in imported shoes. We wear these imported shoes to protect our tender toes against the indigent stones and invasive weeds in the African dust. Sometimes we even wear them as if to avoid touching the African soil itself.

All intellectual work is done in a particular context of time and place, as Jacob Klapwijk (1986: 150-1) has pointed out. The South African scholar cannot and should not attempt to practise scholarship as if

1 An earlier version of this article constituted the first chapter of my unpublished 1995 PhD thesis on *The ethics of public welfare*. The title of this article serves to indicate my debt to Calvin Seerveld's (1991) seminal article on tradition and historiography, "Footprints in the snow", while suggesting the shift of focus to the problem of intellectual work in the post-colonial African context. Seerveld uses a range of metaphors related to walking, footprints and tracking to allude to the historical process and the historiographical task.

working in a dislocated suburb of the Old West. Doing theory in Africa requires a sense of place, of belonging, of scholarly good neighbourliness. But is it possible — in good faith — to remain a neocalvinist in Africa today? Many Christian scholars believe that we should not tie ourselves too tightly to any particular tradition of thought. Most consider neocalvinism a dubious tradition compromised by its alliance with apartheid theorists, while some even consider the notion of tradition itself incompatible with an authentically Biblical Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Can we then walk the theoretical straight and narrow on African soil in imported shoes? Whether we are ironical liberal pragmatists, paramarxists, deconstructive nietzscheans, or neocalvinists, this is one of the hard questions challenging us as we try to make sense of our imported traditions.

## 1. Does Africa exist?

Attempting to situate an African neocalvinist scholarship is complicated by the ambiguity of the notion of 'Africa'. If we recognise with Valentin Mudimbe (1988: 120) that "Africans are not identical, their social organisations are not equal, nor necessarily similar, and, finally, their traditions do not merely reflect each other and are not the same", what significance other than the geographical does the adjective 'African' have? With Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992: 39) we must ask "what, given all the diversity of the pre-colonial histories of the peoples of Africa, and all the complexity of colonial experiences, does it mean to say that someone is African?"

It is of course possible — and common — to root African solidarity in a supposedly shared afrocentric racial heritage. But such a pan-african 'unanimist' identity cannot be more than a ridiculous inversion of eurocentric racism, an affirmation of the western prejudice that race is

2 The careful reader will note that I avoid reference to any theory of ideology throughout, though criticising traditions in terms consonant with a critique of ideology. The state of the art of ideological critique is such that I am uncomfortable using the term 'ideology' without a careful, detailed explication of the manner in which I use it. I do not yet understand the relevant issues well enough to argue such an explication.

the appropriate horizon against which to identify African identity (Appiah 1992: 1-73).

One alternative is to claim, with Paulin Hountondji (1983: 33), that 'Africa' is indeed no more than a geographical marker, that "Africa is above all a continent and the concept of Africa is an empirical, geographical concept and not a metaphysical one".

But neither race nor geography explains enough about the 'Africa' in 'African' politics, 'African' literature, 'African' music ... Something of *what more* it is is suggested by Chinua Achebe (quoted in Appiah 1992: 117):

It is, of course, true that the African identity is still in the making. There isn't a final identity that is African. But, at the same time, there is an identity coming into existence. And it has a certain context and a certain meaning [...] a penalty and a responsibility.

African identity is neither racial nor geographical: it is an historical identity in the process of being shaped by Africans in confrontation with a shared complex of contextual challenges (Appiah 1992: 122, also 147, 282). The historicity of 'Africa' allows an openness, an indeterminacy by genetic constitution or absolute environmental constraints: "we can choose, within broad limits set by ecological, political and economic realities, what it will mean to be African in the coming years" (Appiah 1992: 286). As Paul Cardinal Zoungrana (quoted in Appiah 1992: 74) has said,

Beyond the refusal of all exterior domination is the urge to reconnect in a deep way with Africa's cultural heritage [...] constructing a new African society, whose identity is not conferred from outside.

In this historical, contra-unanimist sense Africa does exist, and as a place in which a postmodern neocalvinism can situate itself.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The postcolonial challenge

According to Appiah (1992: 240),

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we may ungenerously call a *comprador* intelligentsia: of a relatively small western-style, western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world

<sup>3</sup> This theme is more elaborately explored in my essay: "Does Africa exist? Racial essentialism and pan-african solidarity in postcolonial cultural politics" (Strauss 1995b) in Zuidervaart & Luttkhuizen (eds), forthcoming conference proceedings.

capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other and for Africa.

Understanding the history — especially the intellectual history — of postcolonial societies (such as South Africa) is perhaps an even more difficult task than understanding the history of the metropolitan centres of imperial Europe.<sup>4</sup> André du Toit (1991: 6) writes that

the intellectual history of colonial and post-colonial societies like South Africa [...] is [...] an underdeveloped and ill-understood area, and the reasons for this problematic neglect are to be found in the history of settlement, conquest, colonialism and dependency characteristic of colonial and post-colonial society [...] imperial conquest and colonial history also has an intellectual dimension: indigenous cultures were uprooted and displaced and metropolitan ideas and values introduced and imposed often in advance of the relevant and corresponding material and social developments in the local society. The legacy of cultural imperialism and of the peculiar uneven development of local intellectual and political traditions may well have a more insidious hold on the minds of post-colonial societies: liberation from the political rule of imperial powers and diminishing of economic dependency on metropolitan centres do not necessarily mean that the problematic intellectual history of postcolonial societies has also been redressed, nor that the problem has even been properly understood.

Finding ways to contribute responsibly and renewingly to the shaping of postcolonial cultures is no less challenging a duty. According to Du Toit (1991: 5-25) the difficulty does not lie in intellectual interaction or the cross-fertilisation of traditions as such — this is a common enough feature of intellectual life, especially today. In colonial societies, however, these linkages are characteristically out of phase: the emergence and development of ideas and theories do not correspond with other developments in the local society. Colonial intellectuals have difficulty understanding the local effects of imported ideas and theories, and local traditions are reproduced without an adequate understanding of their sources or possible resources for their critique. Intellectual traditions emanating from imperial metropolitan centres shaped much of the context within which colonial thinking emerged. As a consequence colonial intellectual history developed in a characteristically combined and uneven way. In the complex interchanges between metropole and

<sup>4</sup> This theme is more elaborately explored in Strauss & Smit 1995.

colony, colonial intellectuals were put in an ambiguous in-between position: on the one hand speaking up for local interests and communities, and on the other hand serving as missionaries for imperial culture. Shaping (post)colonial traditions, they regularly acted as *bricoleurs*,<sup>5</sup> picking up bits and pieces from any available cultural or intellectual source as these proved useful for patching into local projects. According to Du Toit, then, postcolonial history is “deeply marked by a peculiar lack of self-understanding” — especially at its nodes of interaction and confrontation with imperial metropolitan thought.

Whether Du Toit’s image of the colonial and postcolonial intellectual as *bricoleur* is historically reliable or not, he does indicate the essential dilemma facing all scholars in postcolonial Africa. On the one hand, the legitimacy of any intellectual tradition derived from imperial metropolitan sources is dubious. On the other hand, there simply are no alternative sources available. We do not have access to any pristine African intellectual traditions which are both viable and untarnished by European influences. As Appiah (1992: 251) reminds us,

we are all already contaminated by each other, there is no longer a fully autochthonous pure-African culture awaiting salvage [...] the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West [...] is the last of the shibboleths of the modernisers that we must learn to live without (cf also Nauta 1993).

The postcolonial scholar has no other option but to critically appropriate some intellectual tradition ultimately derived from an imperial metropolitan source — and such an appropriation cannot but be affected by the memories of slavery, colonisation, and racism (cf Mudimbe 1988:

5 Jeffrey Stout (1990: 293-4) writes engagingly about the contemporary intellectual as *bricoleur*, and captures the gist of the debate in this regard aptly in the following three playful definitions, which appear in the lexicon concluding his study:  
*Bricoleur* (bad sense): A French term, given currency by Claude Lévi-Strauss, for someone who does odd jobs, drawing on a collection of available odds and ends kept on hand on the chance they might someday prove useful; someone whose mental habits contrast sharply with those of the engineer, thus a symbol of the primitive, as opposed to modern, thought.  
*Bricoleur* (good sense): An engineer without a degree; a term used here, as in the writings of Jacques Derrida, partly to soften up Lévi-Strauss’s contrast between primitives and ourselves; an apt symbol of every moralist’s need to engage in selective retrieval and eclectic reconfiguration of traditional linguistic elements in hope of solving problems at hand.  
*Bricolage*: what bricoleurs do with their collection of assorted odds and ends, namely, put some of them together to serve the purposes of the moment.”

78). This state of affairs prompts at least two further questions: in the first place, how does one decide which tradition to appropriate? and in the second place, how does one accommodate this tradition to a post-colonial African situation?

### 3. Traditions

“Nobody can be born yesterday.” With these words Calvin Seerveld (1991: 8) reminds us that we are equipped for our historical journeys by traditions which serve to undergird our powerfully formative activities. Tradition properly provides us with a range of options: it is the purpose of a tradition to provide the historical context within which we can work in ways which can be enriching and renewing or impoverishing and mortifying.

At creation God folded into reality a great many possibilities. We respond to these possibilities either by unfolding and refolding them in the origami of human culture, or by ripping, tearing and crumpling reality into misshapes fit only for the wastebasket of history. As we unfold and shape and crumple, we begin to settle into patterns of historical practice, which we pass on to our historical heirs. After a while it becomes possible to recognise resemblances among the folds and crumples of a community with a shared heritage of some kind.

Tradition and community are closely linked: “Your tradition [...] identifies your collaborators,” according to Seerveld. “Traditions are human responses to God’s creational call for an earlier generation to covenant with a succeeding generation in the elders’ giving the younger their prized treasures” (Seerveld 1991: 28). Traditions, like habits, save us the waste of having to begin at zero time and again. As J I Packer (1991: 11) wrote in “Fan mail to Calvin”,

I wish people grasped that theologians, like other Christians, learn with the saints in the multigenerational fellowship that is the church [...] Augustine had Ambrose, and [Calvin] had Augustine, Luther, and Bucer, and I had Owen, Warfield, and [Calvin]. We get to where we are by standing on others’ shoulders and benefitting from their brainwork.

Depending on the particular tradition, it may serve as an advantage or a drawback: when patterns of habit are thoughtlessly repeated just because they are at hand, rigidly maintained because of a misunderstanding-

ing of the nature of historical responsibility, or stiflingly enforced by a dominant elite, then tradition degenerates into traditionalism.

Borrowing from Seerveld we can say that *tradition is the structured transaction of passing on habitual ways of doing, from practised to inexperienced hands*. A tradition is not a thing — rather, it is a process, an eventful passing on. Certainly, though, there is a *what* to traditions, a lasting content, since traditions are embodied by people doing something-somewhere-sometime. Traditions are communally shared patterns in passage — *for-the-time-being* ways of doing things, neither set in stone nor handed down from heaven on high. As Valentin Mudimbe (1988: 189) says, “tradition (*traditio*) means discontinuities through a dynamic continuation and possible conversion of *tradita* (legacies).”

No-one is captive in a single, monolithic tradition; we all inhabit a variety of diverse yet related traditions at once: inherited habits of the imagination, for instance, influence one’s life in ways different from habits of justice, love, or faith.

If we are to live with integrity, we must be aware of and knowledgeable about the traditions which we inhabit. Traditions have a certain authority: insofar as they measure up to their God-given meaning and serve as a blessing to those they inhabit, they deserve our conforming yet renewing loyalty.

#### 4. The neocalvinist intellectual tradition

An intellectual tradition suggests a certain knot of shared notions. Accepting the theoretical heritage of an intellectual tradition sets limits and points out possibilities, but does not restrict new explorations. Calvin Seerveld (1982: 1-6) wrote in “Philosophy as schooled memory” that

a philosophy is a categorial framework,<sup>6</sup> that is conceptually in place in someone’s consciousness and acts as a schooled memory in which one’s theoretic activity is embedded. A given person’s philosophy is always becom-

6 [My footnote, GS] D F M Strauss (1993: 103 footnote 1) points out that “The expression *categorial framework* is used by Korner to indicate the way in which the general structure of the world is captured in an ontology or philosophical paradigm [...] Hart explains that to his mind one can use expressions such as ‘ontology, metaphysic, world hypothesis, philosophical paradigm, or model of the general structure of the world’ as synonyms.

ing and begoing, unless one settles into it like a rut. But the philosophy one ‘works’ with is not something you have. The philosophy has you as theorist and scientist. Much as your mother tongue, which you learn even before you can speak, determines your world of conversation, so one’s philosophy, veritably functioning as a schooled memory, becomes the reservoir shaping your idea and conceptual world [...] philosophy is not a tool, it is not an instrument of thought, because philosophy is the fundamental thought-framework within which scientific thinking takes place.

My theoretical memory has been schooled in an intellectual tradition shaped by contributions inherited from John Calvin (1509-1564), Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), and their collaborators. Seerveld (1991: 7) suggests with regard to this inheritance that

if the thought tradition of Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd, and the circle of *de Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* [...] prompts your thinking [...] your analysis inherits a wealth of Kuyperian-Calvinian-Reformation insights and post-Neoidealist phenomenological baggage which situates your analysis very precisely, and relates your probable concept-formation and decisions on judgment-priorities to a definite, long-standing way of thinking, however you presently, personally modify it.

Neocalvinism was first given an extensive and convincing philosophical expression by Herman Dooyeweerd. According to Albert M Wolters (McIntyre 1985: 16-7),

the underlying worldview of Dooyeweerd’s thought stands in essential continuity with the vision of neo-Calvinism, while the philosophical elaboration of that vision is basically constructed with conceptual tools drawn from German philosophy — chiefly neo-Kantianism, secondarily phenomenology [...]

The uniqueness of Dooyeweerd among twentieth-century philosophers lies in the vigor and persistence with which he carried out the neo-Calvinist program in philosophy [...] Dooyeweerd’s philosophical significance is strictly proportionate to his success in carrying out Kuyper’s program of a Christian reformation of scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

7 D H Th Vollenhoven (Tol & Bril 1992: 112) has suggested that it becomes clear, if we pay attention to the prehistory of this intellectual tradition, that its progenitors were deeply influenced by thinkers like Husserl and the Marburg neoKantians. According to Vollenhoven, this influence continued to have some effect, even though it had been subjected to a fundamental critique. As one of the founding fathers of neocalvinist philosophy, Vollenhoven’s testimony in this regard authoritatively supports the contentions of Seerveld and Wolters.

## 5. What is neocalvinism?

During the last half of the 19th century, the Reformed churches in the Netherlands experienced a revival. This took the form, not only of large numbers of personal commitments to Christ, but also of a vigorous social movement intent on proclaiming and advancing the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. Participants in this movement believed it to be a faithful revival of authentic Calvinism, and easily appropriated the label applied to their movement by its enemies: neocalvinism. Neocalvinism has its prehistory in the Augustinian Christian tradition and initially received its distinctive shape under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. It continues to be a thriving Christian movement around the globe (cf Kromminga 1982: 182-9).

Neocalvinism refuses to limit Christianity to personal piety, sound theology, and the activities of the institutional church. Certainly these aspects of Christian faith and life are not neglected by neocalvinists.<sup>8</sup> But piety, theology and church are not enough. For neocalvinists, Christianity provides a worldview: a way of understanding all of reality, with radical consequences for every part of our lives. The broad outlines of neocalvinism are clearly set out in Kuyper's 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton University, *Lectures on Calvinism*<sup>9</sup> — the manifesto of early neocalvinism. On the eve of the third millennium, neocalvinism is becoming increasingly influential among evangelical Christians. George Marsden (quoted in Henderson 1992: 23) speaks of "the triumph — or nearly so — of what may be loosely called Kuyperian presuppositionalism in the evangelical community".

Wolters (McIntyre 1985: 4-10) identifies the following four key characteristics of neocalvinism.<sup>10</sup>

8 Kuyper himself was an exceptionally productive theologian (enriching theology with standard works such as *Principles of sacred theology* — English edition 1983 — and *The work of the Holy Spirit* — English edition 1941), a very popular preacher, and the writer of many volumes of warmly evangelical daily devotions.

9 First published 1899, fifth edition 1961, twelfth edition 1982.

10 Cf also Wolters 1992. There are of course many ways of outlining the contours of neocalvinism. One further example is Mouw's sketch (1989) of the key emphases of neocalvinism as being divine sovereignty, human sin, and divine law.

## 5.1 An understanding of creation, fall, and redemption as the basic thrust of Christianity

Neocalvinists believe that Christianity is not alien to life in this world. The whole world belongs to the Lord. There is a good creational structure for everything. In creation God has laid down his law, making possible among other things all human shaping of artefacts, events and interpersonal relationships. But after the fall the direction towards creation order in reality is opposed by a direction away from it. All of reality is under the curse of sin — and all of reality lies within range of redemption in and through Jesus Christ. Christians should contribute to the renewal of life in this world from within so that it conforms to its created purpose.

Neocalvinism does not recognise any conflict between gospel and creation. Gospel and creation are not parallel or supplementary to each other, and the gospel is not an evolutionary extension of creation. Rather, neocalvinists understand the gospel to be the healing power which restores creation, in line with God's original design, and towards its originally intended consummation. This emphasis on reality as creation, sin as the misdirection of creation, and redemption as the restoration of creation suggests that the neocalvinist understanding of the basic thrust of Christianity is rooted in the motive of creation, exalting God in the first place as the sovereign Creator. This creation motive, with its emphasis on the sovereign rule of God in Christ, can also be considered a kingdom motive.

## 5.2 An emphasis on creation law and created diversity

If redemption is the restoration of creation, there must be a God-ordained standard or principle for every kind of thing, to which it must be restored, and by which it can be distinguished from other kinds of things. God is sovereign (perhaps the central tenet of Calvinism in all its varieties). His Word is law for all creatures. His Law-Word establishes the possibility structure and distinctive identity of every created thing.

At Princeton, Kuyper (1961: 53) worded the neocalvinist understanding of the close link between creation and law as follows:

Everything that has been created was, in its creation, furnished by God with an unchangeable law of its existence. And because God has fully ordained such

laws and ordinances for all life, therefore the Calvinist demands that all life be consecrated to His service, in strict obedience.

The order of creation is unchanging, a constancy grounded in the covenantal faithfulness of God. Neocalvinism is able, out of this conviction, to forcefully counter the seductions of the encompassing relativism and historicism of the modern age.<sup>11</sup>

For neocalvinists, there is a close connection between creation and the rich diversity of things in this world. Different things derive their meaning and distinct identity from distinct God-given principles. God not only brought reality into existence, but brought it into existence as a richly diverse order of distinct kinds of things. Paying attention to Genesis 1, neocalvinists noted several separations in the process of creation, and the creation of living things after their kinds. It is this biblical given which motivates the neocalvinist emphasis on creational diversity, an emphasis well-wordsed by Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) — after Kuyper the most influential neocalvinist of their time — who wrote that:

the world is a unity, but that unity manifests itself in the most magnificent and beautiful diversity. Heaven and earth were distinct from the very beginning; sun and moon and stars each received their own task; plant and animal and man each have their own nature. Everything is created by God with a nature of its own, and exists and lives according to a law of its own (Wolters 1992: 14).

In human society, a family is not a church is not an army is not a business is not a social club. This view does not deny historical changes

11 A similar conviction is expressed by Thomas Oden (Wall & Heim 1992: 133-4) when he writes that “the only thing that has changed from the old me is my steady growth toward orthodoxy and consensual, ancient classic Christianity, with its proximate continuity, catholicity and apostolicity. This implies my growing resistance to faddism, novelty, heresy, anarchism, antinomianism, pretensions of discontinuity, revolutionary talk and non-historical idealism. “When the Lord tore the kingdom of Israel from Saul, Samuel declared: ‘He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he would change his mind’ (1 Sam 15: 29). God’s constant, attentive, holy love is eternally unchanging. Awakening gradually to the bright immutability of God’s responsive covenant love is precisely what has changed for me. Yahweh must have laughed in addressing the heirs of the old rascal Jacob with this ironic word: ‘I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed’ (Mal 3: 6). Still it is so: ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows’ (James 1: 17).”

in society, but rather emphasises the possibilities given in creation which provides room and sets limits for the emergence of a wide range of different relationships in society. This emphasis is normally referred to by Kuyper’s term of sphere sovereignty (“sovereiniteit in eigen kring”), although many contemporary neocalvinists prefer the term structural pluralism.<sup>12</sup>

For neocalvinists, sphere sovereignty implies that a key task of Christian cultural activism should be to respect and affirm the created boundaries of human relationships while working hard to realise their distinctive internal possibilities. In Dutch politics this conviction has often found expression in the struggle to defend the Christian family, church, and school against the encroaching excesses of the secularising liberal state.

### 5.3 An affirmation of the historical development of creation

Neocalvinism has a deep appreciation of the historical progress of human cultures and societies. Undergirding all human historical activity are the enabling structural givens and benchmarks enfolded into reality at creation. There is therefore no inherent conflict between the constant order of created reality and historical development. The progressive opening of creational possibilities in history through human cultural action deserves at least two cheers in the neocalvinist view — taking into account the unavoidable impact of sin. The development of technology, the advance of the sciences, the building of cities, and the disentanglement of various distinct relationships in society — these are all fundamentally appropriate human responses to God’s command to realise the possibilities of creation. It is the responsibility of Christians to affirm and advocate such advances in the context of the coming of the kingdom of God, while opposing their misdirection away from the glory of God. The historical opening of creation is possible because its structural givens and bench-

12 The historical tracks of structural pluralism through the work of, e.g., Calvin, Althusius, Groen van Prinsterer, and on through Kuyper and Dooyeweerd have been roughly traced by Spykman (Holwerda 1976).

marks are accessible to human understanding. God reveals in and through a created and orderly reality.

While neocalvinists do not claim that creation is only scientifically knowable — it is directly open to the non-scientific knowing of everybody, including the intuitive knowing of children and the imaginative knowing of artists — Abraham Kuyper (quoted in Wolters 1992: 10-1) emphasises that the academic community, too, is in the first place bound to the Word of God in creation:

it is undeniable that a word of God also comes to us in that which God created [...] it is apparent that to say without further qualification, 'I am bound to Scripture,' is a highly incomplete formula [...] The university too must be bound to the word of God, in every way in which God makes known to us his word: in nature, in history, in our own heart, and in his Scriptural revelation [...] the university must be bound to God and to God alone, whenever and wherever God makes manifest his Wisdom, his Will, and his Ordinance, or renders them knowable through investigation and research.

And in the words of Herman Bavinck (1929: 22, my translation, GS):

To acquire knowledge, the Scriptures refer people not to their own reason, but to the revelation of God in all his works [...] God's thoughts and works speak to us out of the whole world, even out of the world of plants and animals. When botany and zoology trace out these thoughts, these sciences, as indeed the natural sciences in general, are glorious sciences, which no man, certainly no Christian, may despise.

#### 5.4 The recognition of an ultimate religious conflict

According to neocalvinists, there is a radical opposition between obedience to God and disobedience to God. There is a struggle in this world between people who recognise the Lordship of Christ over all of life and try to honour him throughout their lives, and people who deny or oppose his Lordship. At the same time there is also a war raging within every Christian believer between obedience and disobedience. This personal and public war between the kingdoms of light and darkness neocalvinists call the antithesis.

This religious struggle is not to be found in some spiritual realm above or alongside everyday life: it is a spiritual struggle for everyday life itself. The fact of the antithesis issues forth a clarion call for Christian cultural activism in opposition to every manner of idolatry — including the pervasive secularisation of late modernity.

#### 6. The neocalvinist ethos

These distinctive convictions — that the basic thrust of Christianity can be summarised as the story of creation, fall, and redemption; that God set up an order of standards for every created thing, which has given rise to a wonderfully rich diversity in reality; that human beings are responsible for culturally opening the possibilities of creation, and that there is a struggle in reality between love for God in submission to his law and rebellion against God in disobedience to his law — shaped a distinctive neocalvinist ethos.

With regard to Christian engagement in culture and society, a belief in the created goodness of diverse relationships in society (as voiced in Kuyper's theme of sphere sovereignty) and in human responsibility for historical development brought about a neocalvinist emphasis on relational differentiation. Relational differentiation is the historical process in which people disengage human relationships with creationally distinct possibility structures in the course of time, as part of the overall opening of the possibilities enfolded into reality at creation. These convictions also provided sturdy foundations for principled opposition to totalitarianisms in interpersonal relationships and reductionisms in scholarship (cf Wolters 1992: 14-7).

Herman Dooyeweerd (1979: 43) expresses this position forcefully:

The creation motive of the Christian religion is engaged in an irreconcilable conflict with the apostate tendency of the human heart to eradicate, level, and erase the boundaries between the peculiar and intrinsic natures that God established in each of the many aspects of reality. For this reason the principle of sphere sovereignty is of powerful, universal significance for one's view of the relation of temporal life to the Christian religion.

The neocalvinist ethos has opened its adherents to a positive appreciation of and active engagement in the advancement of cultural and societal progress to a greater extent than any other confessionally orthodox Christian tradition in recent centuries. This is not an uncritical openness, since it is precisely the convictions which dispose neocalvinists positively towards historical progress that provide coherent criteria in terms of which developments in every sphere of human activity may be critically evaluated in the light of the Scriptures.

According to neocalvinism, Christians are called to oppose secularisation and every form of idolatry in all of life — including but not limited

to the media, the arts, health care, education, politics, and family life. Neocalvinism requires cultural action.

## 7. Discussion partners and scholarly jargon

As a scholar whose theoretical understanding of the world in which we live has been decisively shaped by the influence of Herman Dooyeweerd, it is not enough for me to be aware of the heritage of Kuyperian neocalvinism. As Seerveld (1991: 7) has suggested, analyses like mine have also inherited some "post-Neoidealist phenomenological baggage". Dooyeweerd (1984, 1: v) himself writes in the introduction to his *New Critique*: "Originally I was strongly under the influence first of the Neo-Kantian philosophy, later on of Husserl's phenomenology". It should come as no surprise that these thinkers had some influence on Dooyeweerd. Any responsible scholar must stand in discussion with other scholars working at the same time. For the sake of communication, it is necessary for discussion partners to talk to one another in mutually intelligible ways. This need for communication over the theoretical issues which most challenge the discussion partners at a given time both reinforces and rests upon the *Zeitgeist* of the particular historical period.<sup>13</sup> Such period-spirited talk becomes a shared jargon or slang, which itself narrows down what can possibly be said or thought — without the liberating work of the timeless Spirit — in a particular time. This scholarly slang of a particular time unavoidably leaves a residue in the work of any scholar — this is the state of our straying world until the end of time.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the twentieth century, the leading voices in German intellectual life were neokantian. The great cultural influence of Germany on the Netherlands at the time had as a consequence the acceptance of neokantian philosophy at all four major Dutch universities, and a warily friendly attitude towards this philosophy at the neocalvinist Free University of Amsterdam. This was the case because neokantians allowed some legitimacy to faith and religion, and were as opposed to positivism as the neocalvinists.

13 See in this regard, e.g., Bril 1986: 11-52, 200-86; Seerveld 1984: 51-62; and Seerveld 1973: 130-2, 141-3.

It is in this intellectual atmosphere that Dooyeweerd developed as a philosopher. During his formative years, Dooyeweerd made an intensive study of the works of at least two contemporary philosophers who also passed through neokantian and phenomenological phases: Nicolai Hartmann (1882-1950) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). As a responsible philosopher, Dooyeweerd addressed the burning philosophical questions of his time (cf Klapwijk 1986: 150-1 for the importance of such philosophical contextualisation). As a neocalvinist Christian, he allowed the light of Scripture to shine on these questions, and brought about a significant twentieth-century renewal in the discipline through dialogue with some of its most significant voices. At the same time, the scholarly jargon of these discussion partners doubtlessly narrowed and distorted what Dooyeweerd could and did say.

In my opinion neither the possible influence of neokantians like Hartmann, nor the evident residue of the thinking of his phenomenological discussion partners should be given too much emphasis — Dooyeweerd's Christian renewal of the philosophical debate of his day is what should be decisive in any just evaluation of his work.<sup>14</sup> Such an evaluation is that of Calvin Seerveld (1982: 1-6), who writes:

14 Seerveld comments that "because Dooyeweerd's scholarly orientation was biblically directed, in the neighborhood of Kuyper, and because Kuyper's philosophical problematics is quite close to that of Nicolai Hartmann [...] Dooyeweerd may have found his renovation of whatever he learned from Hartmann to be but a tributary flowing into his own river [...] a Christian reformation sets Dooyeweerd's theory of modal law-spheres off from Nicolai Hartmann and the received tradition of Western cosmology and metaphysics [...] An altogether singular idea, in my judgment, which marks the theory of modal law-spheres in its Christian wisdom drawn from a Reformed tradition is the pivotal thought that the distinguishable, cosmic goings-on at large are to be understood as the gentle law of the Lord God [...] If there is any one matter central to this whole Christian philosophical endeavor, it is the rejection of Kantian and neo-Kantian rationalistic idealism which allows a person to rest his or her conceptual burden in theoretical ideas [...] the scandal of Dooyeweerd's philosophy — its dangerous, confrontational, and exciting thesis — is that this philosophical theory witnesses within theorizing to the truth of Jesus Christ as the alpha and omega of thinking and the only guarantee for the very meaning of things at large, and appeals in its theory of modal law-spheres to the truth of the Word of God visible in creation to which the Scriptures lead one whose heart has been opened [...] Let there be no mistake: Dooyeweerd clearly affirms that his theory of modal law-spheres is a historically unfinished theory that is not infallible [...] Dooyeweerd develops his method for discerning the specific structure of a given modal law-aspect of a thing in polemic with Edmund Husserl [...] and with Max Scheler [...] He probably wants to dissociate his own method of 'insight' from their positions because he is aware that he does take his cue from phenomenology [...]" (Seerveld 1985: 55-64).

When one believes philosophy acts like a schooled memory, one will be less ready to turn it in for a new model to cut one's conceptual grass. Teachers and students of philosophy of different fields will be extremely wary of the traditional philosophies of men come down to us from unbiblical sources, as living options today. And Christians will be more thankful for the categorial framework formed in the generation of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, Zuidema, Mekkes, K J Popma, van Riessen and sundry other saints. A reformation in cultural direction did happen historically once upon a time; Luther and Calvin were not just reformist. The same is true in philosophy, it seems to me: the neck of 'reason' was radically broken, at heart, in the philosophy of the cosmogenic idea. Its categorial framework is biblically directed, humbled enough to be rich in philosophical blessing, breathing a Reformed christian tradition that is still too little known in scholarly circles.<sup>15</sup>

Following in Dooyeweerd's footsteps, or perhaps rather walking on foreign soil in his well-worn, hand-me-down theoretical shoes, "we can [best] keep this schooled memory a diaconal ministry by continuing reform of its Neo-idealist, phenomenological setting, and by giving away, in translation, its wisdom to our neighbour, recalling its key insights for giving conceptual direction that honours the Lord in issues of our day" (Seerveld 1982: 1-6 & 1991: 28-9).

The particularly neokantian and phenomenological residues in Dooyeweerd's thinking, problematic as these might be, are however less of an impediment to an acceptance of its legitimacy in Africa than its essential neocalvinist roots in European colonialist soil.

## 8. Neocalvinism and apartheid

Having identified the intellectual tradition within which I work, I am faced with a challenge: is it possible, in good conscience, to be a neocalvinist in Africa around the turn of the millenium? Neocalvinism has been widely accused of being complicit in the development and maintenance of apartheid in South Africa. This is a very serious charge, so serious that it must at least be provisionally overcome before one may continue with work in this tradition.

It is a widely popular notion — equally so among Afrikaners and non-Afrikaners, supporters and opponents of apartheid — that apartheid

15 Valuable discussions of early history of neocalvinist philosophy are to be found in Stellingwerff 1992 and Verburg 1989.

is rooted in the calvinist heritage of the Afrikaner people.<sup>16</sup> In a few influential studies — especially those of T Dunbar Moodie (1975) and Irving Hexham (1981) — it is claimed more particularly that it is not simply some primitive volksalvinisme which should receive the blame for the emergence of apartheid among the Afrikaner, but specifically the neocalvinism of Abraham Kuyper. Moodie's study allows for a somewhat more complex, multi-sourced apartheid genesis than Hexham's, since the latter exaggerates the influence of neocalvinism among (even Reformed) Afrikaners — ironically perhaps, because of his apparent sympathy for neocalvinism. Moodie, on the other hand, holds a mistaken — though popular — view of Calvin and calvinism (cf Moodie 1975: 22-38), in which anxious believers quiver before a wrathful God, making it "both theologically and psychologically necessary that [the calvinist] join a Christian community in which he is subject to strict disciplinary control". According to Moodie, calvinists see such a community in the "intermediate election of an ethnic group called by God to fulfil his special purposes" — a view he claims to find in Calvin's own work!

Certainly leading South African neocalvinists did, at various stages in their careers, attempt to justify ethnic and racial apartheid by means of the neocalvinist principle of 'sphere sovereignty'. This cannot be denied. Furthermore, until recently South African neocalvinists explicitly supported the policies of the apartheid regime — even if with some qualifications.<sup>17</sup>

An example would be the poet Totius, who addressed a volkskongres on the religious foundations of Afrikaner racial attitudes in Bloemfontein in 1944, with explicit reference to Kuyper (cf Die Volksblad, 30 September 1944; Totius 1977: 330-43). At this conference Totius, referring to Africa as the "part of the world where the most general barbarism achieved its highest triumph", claimed that races differ not only with regard to skin colour, but also with regard to "spiritual aptitude". On this foundation, and with a typically neocalvinist reference to the creation by God of all things according to their kinds, Totius rejected all

16 For a detailed and valuable critical study of this 'calvinist paradigm' of Afrikaner history, see André du Toit 1983 & 1984.

17 Cf the extensive evidence presented in this regard in Du Toit 1985, Moodie 1975, Hexham 1981 & Schutte 1987.

racial "equalisation and bastardisation": "Slavery, thank God, is abolished [...] but still there remains a certain subordination, a social authority, a difference in [...] status".

Similar sentiments were expressed by some of the authors of the three-volume collection *Koers in die krisis*, a significant statement of South African neocalvinism, published by the Federation of Calvinist Student Associations in South Africa (FCSSA 1935). J V Coetzee proclaimed the "great commandment" gained by Afrikaner calvinist experiential wisdom to be "no equality: recognise the ordinances of God and do not attempt to make equal what God did not make equal" (FCSSA 1935, 1: 59-60: my translation, GS). J G Strydom (FCSSA 1935: 246) confirmed that "as a Calvinist people we Afrikaners have, in accordance with our faith in the Word of God, developed a policy condemning all equality and mongrelisation between White and Black. God's Word teaches us, after all, that He willed into being separate nations, colours, and languages."

## 9. Dutch neocalvinism and eurocentric racism

In trying to understand the relationship between neocalvinism and apartheid, it makes sense to pay attention to the views of early Dutch neocalvinists on race.

Dutch neocalvinism emerged out of the Réveil, a European Protestant religious and social movement which took shape in the last decades of the 18th century and was most influential in the first half of the 19th century. The Réveil protested against the dead orthodoxy and deistic rationalism which had become dominant in Protestant churches, and the atheism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. As an alternative, Réveil enthusiasts advocated and practised an energetically pious Christianity, confessing the reality of creation, fall, and redemption.

During its first phase (1815-40) on the European continent the Reveil took on an emphatically conservative stance, mainly because of an immediate experience of the French Revolution and its consequences. An example of this stance would be the initial opposition of leading early Dutch Réveil figures like Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1832) and Isaac da Costa (1798-1860) to the abolition of slavery.

During its second phase (1840-60) the Dutch Réveil came to hold a much more progressive stance, which was expressed in the work of the Christian Friends — the leading Dutch Réveil group at the time — in church, politics, education, and charity. A more mature Da Costa wrote in 1848 (quoted in Kluit 1970: 316, my translation, GS) that

certainly faith asks in our day, in our fatherland, extensions of freedom: freedom of religion, freedom of education, emancipation of slaves [...] and the extension of political freedom.

The leaders of the Dutch Réveil in this second phase were Jan Willem Gefken (1807-87), who became a member of the Dutch parliament and a colonial official, and Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-76), also a parliamentarian, leader of the emerging Christian political movement in the Netherlands, and official historian of the Dutch royal family. These were the immediate spiritual forebears of the neocalvinist movement.

Gefken clearly took a position on race in an open letter of 1838 (quoted in Kuiper 1986: 56):

The essence of slavery exists in the fact that man is brought into a state in which he ceases to be a person, and on the contrary fits into the category of things; and in that way becomes the property of one of his fellow men. So the personality of man, which according to the teachings of Christianity has its foundation and origin in the image of God, after whom man is created, is lost by slavery.

In his early writings Groen suggested that, while slavery does not lie in the original created nature of the human person, it may well come into existence historically in a lawful way. By 1840, however, he came to believe very strongly that the thrust of the gospel directs us against inhuman practices such as slavery. In the conclusion to a volume of studies on the French Revolution and constitutional law (quoted in Kuiper 1986: 57) Groen wrote that:

in Christian love lies true humanity — recognition of the human rights of the common people, without discrimination of race or colour or descent or social status. From this follows [...] abolition of slavery and bondage, elevating of the lower estates to citizenship, manifold endeavours in philanthropy, and striving to assure to all an adequate existence.

Motivated by these convictions, Groen worked energetically for the abolition of slavery in and outside the Dutch parliament, and criticised European colonists such as the Afrikaners in South Africa for their unworthy treatment of indigenous peoples.

In 1853 Groen became president and Gefken secretary of the Dutch Society for Abolition, which aimed at the complete abolition of slavery as "irreconcilable with the prescriptions, the spirit and the tenor of God's holy Word". They argued that "a real beneficial emancipation should take place following Christian principles and ought to involve a Christian education", since they wished for the slaves "above all things to bring them to the knowledge of the gospel of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ".

There can be no doubt in view of the historical evidence that — apart from initial aberrations — early neocalvinists like Groen vehemently condemned and opposed on Christian principles what we would today call racism.

Groen's spiritual heir, Abraham Kuyper, had a more direct influence on South African neocalvinists than Groen himself, but this was an influence which was unfortunately much more ambiguous regarding race than that of Groen. Kuyper became the leader of Dutch neocalvinism after the abolition of slavery had been completed, and wholeheartedly agreed with this abolition. He tried to craft colonial policies which would justly prepare the Dutch colonies for their eventual liberation from colonial management. But in his communications with and about the Afrikaners (eg, in his *Planciusrede* and *La crise Sud-africaine*) he inconsistently showed an occasional willingness to appease their racism in a way which clearly contradicts the antiracism he voiced on other occasions. He certainly cannot be entirely exculpated for the support his South African followers gave to Afrikaner racism and apartheid, especially in its early formative years (Ericson 1987; Kuiper 1986: 51-78; Smit 1989: 45-55).<sup>18</sup>

18 Smit points out in particular the underevaluation of the indigenous African people in Kuyper's *Planciusrede* and *La crise Sud-africaine*. On the other hand Kuyper (1961: 34-8) argued in his Stone lectures that an essential part of the glory of Calvinism is its encouragement of interracial marriages and other relations and the "comingling of blood", which he considers an essential requirement for the cultural advancement of the human race! (cf in this regard also Hexham 1981: 188, Kuiper 1986: 64-78, and Smit 1989: 51). It can be argued — persuasively, in my opinion — that Kuyper co-sowed seeds which could later germinate in apartheid ideology exactly insofar as he himself retained non-neocalvinist historicist and organicist ideas, derived from German romanticism. These ideas were influential among early and proto-neocalvinists, leading to a strong (nonracial) Dutch nationalism (cf Dooyeweerd 1979: 181-2).

## 10. Bad traditions and blood transfusions

When thinking about the problem of neocalvinism and apartheid I cannot stand at a distance from my inheritance and consider it in a way unencumbered by tradition. According to Calvin Seerveld (1991: 15-6),

A person cannot experiment at a distance with a tradition or suspend [...] traditioning for a trial period, because any tradition, like blood, has a coursing, on-going, in-force, once-only presence [...] Once a tradition is broken off, discarded, or bled, and a person undergoes a complete replacement of an other type, the earlier tradition can scarcely ever be restored.

What then does one do when one finds oneself stifled or misguided by the intellectual tradition which one has inherited? Seerveld (1991: 11, 31) counsels that

if [...] traditions fall short of or run counter to the call of God for redemptive traditioning, then the carriers and custodians of the particular tradition, with the counsel of friendly observers from outside that tradition, need to consider policies of reformation, blood transfusion, or skin-graft surgery [...] if a person is handicapped by the traditions he or she has inherited [...] which resist reform, so that person cannot with others be redeeming its mishandled moment of truth, then that person may have to undergo the rigours of not traditioning that tradition but of changing his or her cultural blood stream. Entering a different specific tradition than a person has inherited is not a matter of traditioning goods anymore, but is the excruciating struggle of orphaning oneself until you become a newly adopted child in that side of your ongoing (cultural) life.

Has South African neocalvinism come to this? Is it necessary for a neocalvinist intellectual such as myself to divorce myself from the ways of thinking in which I have been academically reared? Is the stain of apartheid thinking too dirty to be washed out? Does all of South African neocalvinism resist reform?<sup>19</sup>

## 11. The meagre substance of Afrikaner calvinism

To determine the moral viability of neocalvinism in Africa after apartheid, it is important to determine correctly the actual place of calvinism in general, and neocalvinism in particular, in the intellectual and political

19 For a bracing example of the internal dialogue and openness to continuing reformation of neocalvinism see the debate evoked by Jacob Klapwijk in the 1986 and 1987 volumes of *Philosophia Reformata*, the leading neocalvinist theoretical journal.

culture of the Afrikaner. Certainly both Moodie and Hexham overvalue its influence. A more historically persuasive evaluation is to be found in the work of Schutte and Du Toit. André du Toit (1985: 233-4) writes that

in the complex story of how proponents of modern Afrikaner nationalism came to power in 1948 and set out to restructure South African society in terms of the ideology of apartheid, the Potchefstroom variant of neo-Calvinism played a distinctive but minor rôle [...] neither the National Party nor the main Dutch Reformed Church was ever greatly swayed by the neo-Calvinist strain in modern Afrikaner nationalism, and the ideological and material roots of apartheid as well must be sought elsewhere [...] We must conclude [...] that in comparative and historical perspective the reputation of Afrikaner Calvinism is quite overblown: it is meagre in substance and its historical foundation is shallow [...] to the extent that we do find Calvinist notions among leading Afrikaners [...] this Calvinism was not particularly representative of, or influential on, contemporary political thinking.

Apart from a narrow soteriologically focused calvinism similar to that of the Puritans, calvinism when it can be found among Afrikaner supporters of apartheid — probably exemplified most typically by the late theologian and politician Andries Treurnicht (Schutte 1987: 402-3; Treurnicht 1975: 6-20) — is an ethnically captive calvinism, loosely described by De Gruchy (1991: 29) as follows:

Afrikaner Calvinism [...] is the product of an uneasy amalgam of nineteenth-century evangelical piety and an adapted Kuyperian neo-Calvinism forged in the fires of the Afrikaner struggle for cultural identity and economic power. In the process it drew its symbols and inspiration from the Old Testament struggles of the people of God, but it appropriated them in the interests of the folk and thus gave them a character and significance different from their original intention [...] Throughout the process of attempting to legitimate apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism, the Dutch Reformed Church made no appeal to Calvin or the historic Reformed confessions of faith.

As early as the very first years of the institutionalisation of apartheid, Dutch neocalvinists repudiated the claims of Afrikaner politics to be calvinist. A contributor to the leading Dutch neocalvinist political journal at the time commented that:

while nationalists do commonly identify themselves as calvinists, Dutch people who are familiar with calvinist politics as it is practised in the Netherlands would hardly recognise a similar movement in South Africa. Sure: most Afrikaners (followers of Smuts no less) go to church, and many hold to a Biblical faith, but to suggest that the Malan cabinet practices a calvinist politics — as opposed to the supposed liberalism of Smuts — is simply not accurate, at least not in the Dutch sense. Spiritual commitment does not play a decisive role in the politics of most Afrikaners — except maybe for the Doppers, who hold views somewhat closer to ours. Let's illustrate my claims with an example:

the Smuts government has been accused of caring way too much about black people, and of being liberal. Now, whatever its opponents might say, the Smuts government did not in the least have in mind putting black and white people on an equal footing in society. Yet — in my opinion — the strenuous effort by this government to help black people get ahead was an effort giving evidence of a deep insight into the emerging worldwide understanding of social justice. This understanding of social justice is far more acceptable to the Dutch calvinist than the patronising relationship between white and black advocated by Afrikaner nationalists. Again: these nationalists grew up in Christian homes, but — from a Dutch point of view — the one thing their politics is not, is Christian (Middelberg 1949: 27-8; my translation, GS).

According to another Dutch neocalvinist, Bob Goudzwaard (1984: 39-48),<sup>20</sup> apartheid failed — in a deeply unbiblical way — to observe the “most elementary norms of justice and love and increasingly [...] brushed harder against the grain of reality”. Goudzwaard argues that the desire to protect the life of the Afrikaner ethnic community, overextended to an unlimited value, had become a source of ruin for all South Africans. It seduced Afrikaners into the practice of unscrupulous injustices, adding daily to the huge pile of sins committed against black South Africans.

Herman Dooyeweerd, as the most influential neocalvinist of our century, took a less overtly critical stand in the *New Critique* (1984, 3: 89, 497), where he wrote that:

the exaggeration of racial differences is only due to racial ideologies which lack a scientific foundation and are anti-Christian and inhuman in their political application [...] [In South Africa] the ruling white race is confronted with a majority of primitive ethnical groups of black race, of mixed breed, etc. It is difficult to see how in the near future a real national political unity could arise in which all of those different racial groups are integrated. And here again it appears that the natural law ideas of freedom and equality of men cannot be legally realised without an adequate historical political basis. Such a basis is certainly not present so long as a majority of black people are still in a condition of primitive culture. At the same time it must be established that the condition of such a body politic in which the majority of the people are placed under the guardianship of a white minority and are not really integrated with the latter into a national unity, is extremely precarious.

South African neocalvinists — mostly based in Potchefstroom — have in recent decades begun to re-investigate their intellectual heritage, and have emerged as initially cautious but eventually consistent and principled critics and opponents of apartheid. This South African neocalvinist

<sup>20</sup> Goudzwaard unfortunately buys into the ‘Calvinist paradigm’ of Afrikaner history. This does not diminish his criticism.

critique of apartheid began with the later work of L J du Plessis (cf Hexham 1981: 190-1; Potgieter 1981a & 1981b; Du Plessis 1981), then developed significantly among some of the supporters of the Afrikaanse Calvinistiese Beweging (later known as the Reformational movement of South Africa) as expressed in their journal *Woord en Daad*, and reached an early peak in the 1970's among the contributors to the journal *Loog* and the signatories to the Koinonia Declaration (Hexham 1981: 191-9; De Klerk 1989: 249-71).

Unfortunately this neocalvinist critique had very little effect among Afrikaners in general — a measure of the true influence of calvinism among Afrikaners, according to Du Toit (1985: 238-9). He points out that during the decades of apartheid dissident Afrikaners had very meagre means by way of indigenous intellectual resources with which to counter apartheid. Had this ideology grown out of the sturdy stock of an historically entrenched and culturally directive 'worldview' calvinism, such a calvinism might have served as a source for an effective immanent critique of apartheid. Since no such calvinism existed, the religious, moral and intellectual resources of the calvinist tradition simply were not conveniently at hand in Afrikaner culture. This is the fundamental reason for the limited impact of the neocalvinist 'Potchefstroom critique' of apartheid.<sup>21</sup>

South African neocalvinists certainly abused ideas such as sphere sovereignty in ways inconsistent with their original and internationally accepted meaning, and erred most seriously in exalting the ethnic community beyond its proper place in the array of human relationships. Yet, while most South African neocalvinists failed shamefully to stand up strongly against apartheid, it would appear that neocalvinism was by no means the primary impetus behind the development of apartheid; that neocalvinists have historically been a small and relatively insignificant intellectual minority in South Africa, and that neocalvinists have significantly turned to a critique of apartheid in recent decades.

While early neocalvinism certainly contained elements — derived from non-calvinist sources — which played some part in providing South African neocalvinists with arguments in support of apartheid, interna-

tional neocalvinism has not been complicit in the development of apartheid for a long time. Neocalvinism rather provides a particularly powerful critical apparatus against idolatrous excesses such as apartheid.

There can be no doubt that a young South African neocalvinist like myself has to avoid acquiring a lot of locally manufactured ethnicist intellectual baggage, added as an unbearable burden on the shoulders of local heirs of this otherwise intellectually regenerative tradition. It does not appear to me as if South African neocalvinism is irredeemable. Certainly it requires reform — but not renunciation. That would be to burn the wheat with the tares.

## 12. Tradition translation

Traditions are inherited, rather than bought and sold in the cultural marketplace. Unless one is irrevocably convinced of the need to rid oneself of the burden of a particular tradition, such an inheritance is the most influential factor when appropriating a tradition. The measure for traditions — in Africa as elsewhere — is to be found in the scandalous claims of the Bible. Claiming to be the reliable message of God to us human beings, the Bible challenges human traditions to surrender to the reign of Jesus Christ — the skandalon, or stumbling block — to be a renewing presence in the lives of people, enabling us to love and serve God and our fellow human beings with greater care and commitment, and enabling us to open up the possibilities which God folded into creation in continually more exciting and life-giving ways.

If, then, neocalvinism has a place — even a renewing potential — in the intellectual life of Africa, how can our generation continue in it?

Seerveld (1991: 28-34) suggests that the craft of literary translation may alert us to the right way when transferring a tradition from one generation to another:

There is a mystery, not to say something miraculous, in fine translations of literature, because the translation is giving birth to more of the same — which is, strictly speaking, impossible — extending, midwifing, bodying forth new life to the original text in a different world concourse.

According to Seerveld, a good translator must (apart from being able to plumb the depths of significance of both of the concerned languages) be a "compleat listener" to the source text, intent on lovingly recapitulating

21 Tentative neocalvinist critiques of apartheid from South African centres other than Potchefstroom only came to the fore as late as the 1980's.

this text in ways which will enhance the idiom of the receiving language.<sup>22</sup>

The easing of relatively reliable habits into the care of a new generation must be faithful to the essence of the source tradition. It must enable those who receive it to do justice to what they receive. New ways — peculiar to the times in which they live — must be found in which to make the inheritance serviceable.

Normative tradition translation does not transmit the heritage in cold storage, but places it, pulsing with life, in the new circumstances, so that it may grow in new directions. Tradition must not narrow down the possibilities facing a young generation, but must rather enrich the opportunities facing them with the wisdom of received experience. Every generation must pass on the tradition richer than they received it, with the imperative of further renewal by the receiving generation.

It is my conviction that if we measure the neocalvinist Christian tradition against other intellectual traditions available in Africa, its potential to bring grace into the lives of people, to bring new life to this continent, is considerable. Considerable enough to require consideration from all African intellectuals, and certainly enough to persuade me of at least a provisionally continued adherence on my part.

While neocalvinism was mediated to Africa via Europe, it stands in a line stretching back to Augustine of Hippo, in North Africa, and shaped by the Biblical religion originating outside Europe. I can comfortably, if tentatively, subscribe to the view that neocalvinism is a particularly appropriate intellectual position south of Hippo — rather than simply a European import inevitably subverting the integral development of a

22 While the need for such translation of any foreign derived cultural goods into a contemporary African idiom should be obvious to even intellectually unawakened African teenagers, making sense in particular of neocalvinism — especially its philosophical expressions — in Africa only began to appear possible to me upon reading the following in an article by Jacob Klapwijk (1986: 150-1): "If we genuinely desire to philosophise in the spirit of Christ, then we shall have to do as He did, that is, seek people out where they are to be found [...] Christian philosophy [...] must direct itself to real people, as they express their experiences in the language and thought patterns of particular cultures [...] A Christian philosophy that would take root in Africa must take into account the autochthonic cultural awareness present there." The realisation of this possibility gave the impetus to my first halting explorations of the topic of the current essay in my unpublished 1990 M A thesis at the University of the Orange Free State: Christian philosophy and the transformation of African culture.

rich indigenous culture in Africa by means of a subtle entrenched eurocentrism.

I would claim that the following assessment of Western Christianity in the contemporary world context by Calvin Seerveld (1991: 33-4) might have some bearing on the situation of neocalvinism in postcolonial Africa:

As Western civilisation undergoes the crisis of reaping its secularised cultural whirlwind, Bible-believing thinkers may hold on to the scandalous fact that the son of God, Jesus Christ, was a real Jesus whose sinful disciples happened to move predominantly westward at the time. That is no longer so. Within decades it seems there will be more followers of Christ in Africa and the East than on Western continents. But we Western Christians have a thesaurus of traditions whose encumbered words of life, often taken to be stigmata by current secularists, need reforming transmission, or we caretakers and philosophical chefs will have defaulted on being faithful to Christ's historical sacrifice under Pontius Pilate [...] We do know, as a motley band of Chaucerian pilgrims en route to the new earth, that even our theoretical tracks are able to be covered and saved by the blood of Jesus Christ who is a-coming.

John Kromminga (1982: 182-9) commented similarly on the influence of the Calvinist tradition at large:

A tradition so understood — at least such a tradition as this — is not a limiting but a liberating force. It is so because it is a tradition not of narrowness but of breadth. It limits itself to the understanding of and obedience to the will of God — but since the whole world is understood as God's world, that is no limitation at all. A narrow person may operate within this tradition, and undoubtedly some have. But if he understands it, which may be doubtful, he will not feel comfortable in it.

### 13. Traditioning neocalvinism in postcolonial Africa

Richard Mouw (1990: 271-87) writes that

we are [...] convinced — those of us who claim the neo-Calvinist heritage as our own — that as the spiritual daughters and sons of those Netherlandic towns we have inherited memories that can, if used properly, provide important insights into what has been happening, and what continues to happen, in other locales [...] I am [...] employing the neo-Calvinist label in such a way that it points to a community of Christians who believe that the efforts of such people as Groen and Kuyper and Bavinck and Dooyeweerd contributed to the revival and maintenance of a very important project, namely, the attempt to promote broad patterns of Christian discipleship in accordance with an all-encompassing vision of Christ's lordship over created reality, and with a special sensitivity to the ways in which such a vision must be shaped by the biblical themes of Creation, Fall, and Redemption [...] Those of us who eagerly own up to the neo-Calvinist label credit the revivals that began in nineteenth century Dutch villages with providing us with some important reference-points for viewing,

sorting and assessing the issues of the spiritual life. But we also insist that one way in which neo-Calvinism has shaped our sensitivities is by teaching us not to define the realm of the 'spiritual' too narrowly [...] neo-Calvinism is a profoundly contemporary approach — more contemporary, in fact, than many Christian approaches that are closer to us in time and are therefore treated with more respect by those who attempt to regulate our styles of thought in the Christian community.

How then do we express this neocalvinism in postcolonial Africa? Seerveld's metaphor of translation is particularly apt when we consider the challenge of traditions received under postcolonial circumstances. We can learn how to transmit a tradition from one geocultural context to another by paying attention to the proper transmission of a tradition from one generation to another.

The global condition today is shifting away from the situation in which colonial intellectuals — according to Du Toit — had to work. It is no longer inevitable for intellectual and cultural lag to malphase cultural unfolding in postcolonial societies like South Africa. Postcolonial African intellectuals also have greater intellectual and other resources by means of which to interact critically with cultural — particularly intellectual — material originating in the Old West. The postcolonial intellectual is no longer at the mercy of his or her erstwhile imperial masters. Decolonisation, in the providence of God, has enabled us to listen — with epistemological vigilance (cf Mudimbe 1988: 36) — past the voices of our past masters all the way back to the creation-voicing Word of the one good Master.

Theory in Africa today can step beyond a colonial marginality in which the imperial metropolises determine discourse. African theory need not practice an ersatz exoticism — curio shoppe scholarship — but can freely borrow from and contribute to discourses from elsewhere and -when (Appiah 1992: 115). It is even possible to speak of a post-postcolonial discourse, for which there is no longer an "antecedent practice whose claim to exclusivity of vision is rejected". In a sense African theory, in an analogy with 'world music', can now be part of an emerging 'world theory' — a reciprocity of contextual discourses — marked but not isolated by our context, easily in conversation with theory in other contexts without submitting to the hegemony of metropolitan theories intent on subjugating the African voice.

The position of the African neocalvinist today is similar to that of H Evan Runner as described by Bernard Zylstra (1981: 14) — we are unlikely to be reformers in the sense of Calvin or Kuyper. More likely, we are pre-reformational voices, similar to those of Huss, Wycliffe, or Groen van Prinsterer. This makes our task both exhilarating and exhausting. At the same time it allows us a gracious humility and anti-triumphalist dependence on the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over the history of Africa as well.

Traditioning neocalvinism in postcolonial Africa requires of the Christian intellectual a thorough and critically experienced knowledge of both the international neocalvinist heritage and the contemporary African cultural — and intellectual — milieu. This is a considerable challenge: to listen attentively to the neocalvinist sources so as to grasp their nuances faithfully, and to voice anew in a trustworthy manner the truthful message of this tradition with an African lilt of tongue — speaking of hope to the ears of an Africa unable to return to its premodern paganism, and wearied and disenchanted by its experience of modernity (cf Bartholomew 1995).

Replanting the neocalvinist plant in African soil — to shift metaphors — is not worth it if done only for conservationist purposes: artificially prolonging the lifespan of a fruitless weed. If, however, this plant can bring shade and sustenance to the people of Africa, then we who carry its seedlings had better set about planting — awaiting the watering and pruning at the master Gardener's hand which will grow it into a sturdily rooted indigene.

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