

## CHRISTIAN NATIONAL EDUCATION AS AN IDEOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

by

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Introduction

This paper has three sections and attempts to show that what may be termed the "received opinion" about the role of Christian-National Education (CNE) in the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism is inadequate. After explaining and criticizing the received opinion, an alternative explanation of the importance of CNE in Afrikaner history is offered. Section One of the paper outlines the received opinion. In Section Two a number of objections to it are raised. Finally, in Section Three, an alternative account of the importance of CNE is given.

Section One: the Received Opinion

In his book, The Rise of the South African Reich, Brian Bunting gives a clear exposition of what this paper describes as the "received opinion" on the subject of CNE in South Africa. While admitting the existence of over 200 CNE schools in the period immediately following the Second Anglo-Boer War, Bunting argues that CNE as a coherent educational theory was created by the cultural arm of the Broederbond, the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies (FAK), at a conference held in Bloemfontein in July 1939, and that essentially it is a technique for indoctrinating the young. (1)

To support this argument, Bunting analyses a document produced by the Institute for Christian National Education in 1948. He claims that this document represents the essence of Nationalist thinking on CNE and was the result of nearly ten years' work by the Institute set up by the FAK in 1939. In addition, he cites various spokesmen for CNE, such as Professors J. C. van Rooy and H. G. Stoker, and gives as his most important examples of the application of CNE principles the removal of the "conscience clause" at Potchefstroom University College in 1949 and the 1953 Bantu Education Act. (2)

While recognizing the existence of CNE schools prior to the conference in 1939, Bunting tries to show an essential discontinuity in the CNE movement. He does this by arguing that the CNE schools which sprang up following the Second Anglo-Boer War were nothing more than a form of political protest by the defeated Boers against British Imperialism. He goes on to say that these schools ceased to exist after the granting of Responsible Government in 1906. On this basis Bunting claims that between 1907 and 1939 the CNE movement did not exist. He is then able to assert his view that the use of the term Christian-National Education by the Nationalists in 1939 was a

clever way of evoking an emotional response among Afrikaners generally by reviving the memory of the post-war resistance movement and thus of justifying their new departure in education by affirming its historical continuity with the Afrikaner past. (3)

The appeal of the received opinion can be seen to rest on a particular interpretation of South African history in terms of a conspiracy theory. This view is supported by the evidence for a discontinuity of the CNE movement, the involvement of the FAK, and, it is alleged, the Broederbond, as well as supposed links between the growth of Afrikaner Nationalism and the rise of Nazi power in Germany. (4) The emotional force of such an argument need not be underlined. But, the question remains: does it do justice to the evidence?

### Section Two: Some Objections to the Received Opinion

The twin pillars of the received opinion are the arguments that: (i) the CNE movement following the Second Anglo-Boer War was inspired by a desire to resist British political domination and that it therefore vanished after the granting of Responsible Government (5); and (ii) the present CNE movement was created in 1939 to service the needs of the militant Nationalist movement. If these two claims can be shown to be mistaken, then the received opinion loses much of its plausibility.

An examination of the CNE school movement which emerged in the Transvaal following the Second Anglo-Boer War shows that to a large extent it was, as the received opinion claims, a means of expressing political dissatisfaction with British government at a time when open opposition to British rule was impractical. But, having said this, it is also clear that the CNE movement was not only a protest movement. Generals Botha and Smuts, and their supporters, may well have seen the movement as a means of applying indirect political pressure on the British authorities without provoking a direct confrontation. But others, like General Beyers and a number of Calvinist predikants, saw it as very much more. It is to these men, the believers in the theory of CNE, that we must look if we are to see the weakness of the received opinion. (6)

The idea of CNE was first introduced into South Africa by S. J. du Toit (1847-1911) in the 1870s and subsequently developed by Jan Lion-Cachet (1838-1912) and leaders of the Reformed Church. (7) In propagating CNE, du Toit was seeking to apply the teachings of Calvinism to all areas of life. Behind this activity lay the experience and example of the nineteenth century Dutch Calvinist revival which has produced a "Christian" school movement, trades unions and a political party in the Netherlands. Du Toit and other CNE enthusiasts acknowledged their debt to Dutch Calvinism, and particularly the works of Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). It was on the basis of these men's work that du Toit and his fellow Calvinists sought to introduce CNE to South Africa. (8)

Once it is realized that CNE neither originated in South Africa following the Second Anglo-Boer War, nor was simply an extension of the pre-war educational system (9), but that it was first developed and put into practice in the Netherlands, then the claim that it arose out of and was inspired by a desire to resist British rule becomes untenable. At the same time the recognition of its Dutch origins enables the investigator to recognize its distinctive features and to see the continuity between the theory used to promote CNE prior to 1907 and the theories propounded in 1939. It also provides a basis for tracing the historical continuity of the movement between 1907 and 1939 through the role played by the Reformed Church in promoting the CNE cause. (10)

Through his prolific writings S. J. du Toit gave wide publicity to CNE theories, but, despite his work as Minister of Education in the Transvaal, he achieved very little in the way of creating a viable CNE system in South Africa. The

Reformed Church, however, had among its members the social basis upon which a CNE system could be built. In fact, the Church established a number of CNE elementary schools prior to the Second Anglo-Boer War, a secondary school in Burgersdorp in the Cape, and a "Literary Department" attached to its Theological School, which was also in Burgersdorp. At this latter institution candidates were prepared for the BA examinations of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, as a preliminary step before training for the ministry or becoming teachers in the Church's schools. Thus, towards the end of the nineteenth century there existed in South Africa a system of CNE which educated people from the most basic level right up to degree standard. (11)

Following the war, members of the Reformed Church joined with their fellow Afrikaners to establish a CNE system in the Transvaal as a means of resisting the Anglicization policies of Lord Milner. In taking this action they hoped to extend their own CNE system, and seem to have believed that men like Botha and Smuts had been converted to a belief in the value of CNE. But when Het Volk came to power they soon discovered that Botha and Smuts no longer needed CNE schools as a political tool and were bent upon merging the CNE and State school systems. This action bitterly disappointed true CNE supporters, who felt betrayed by their former allies. But they soon adjusted to the new situation and continued their "struggle" for CNE with renewed vigour. (12)

The means used by CNE leaders in the Reformed Church, at a time when the other Dutch Reformed churches (13) were abandoning the CNE cause, were those of written propaganda, conferences and, most important of all, their ability to keep going a small number of their own CNE schools from their own resources and at great financial sacrifice. These schools consisted of a good number of farm schools, supported by local congregations, high schools in Burgersdorp, Potchefstroom and Steynsburg, and a "Normal School" (Teacher Training College) in Steynsburg which were supported by the local congregations assisted by the Church as a whole. They also maintained the Literary Department of their Theological School, which was growing in importance as an institution of higher education in its own right rather than as an appendage to the Theological School. Both of these moved to Potchefstroom in 1905. In 1919 the Literary Department broke its formal links with the Theological School to become an independent liberal arts type of college. In 1921 it received official recognition as Potchefstroom University College, and in 1951 it became Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. (14) Most of the Church's smaller schools were absorbed into the State system by 1915 or simply ceased to function through lack of financial support. But the Church, realizing that it had limited funds, did not lose heart, and took the strategically important decision to maintain its institutions of higher education rather than a host of smaller schools. This strategy paid dividends, and although the Normal School collapsed in the 1930s their college in Potchefstroom has continued to grow until today it caters for more than 7,000 students. In this way the Reformed Church played a key role in the training of teachers and other leaders of the Afrikaner Community in the theories of Christian-Nationalism who were devoted to furthering the cause of CNE. (15)

An indication of the success of this policy is the fact that the main sources for Bunting and other writers who deal with the subject of CNE are predominantly the result of the Reformed Church's activities in higher education. Thus Professors van Rooy and Stoker, both cited by Bunting, and the much quoted Chris Coetzee were all educated at and employed by Potchefstroom University College. In addition, Potchefstroom University College campaigned for the removal of its conscience clause. Jan de Klerk, who was the moving spirit behind the CNE elements in the Bantu Education Act and other acts with a CNE bias, is also a member of the Reformed Church. (16)

### Section Three: CNE as an Ideological Commitment

If it is granted that the received opinion does not accurately reflect the historical development of the CNE movement in South Africa, then an alternative understanding becomes necessary. Briefly, this consists of the realization that



rather than being a tool produced by the Nationalists to further their political objectives, the theory of CNE is one of the more important elements in the creation of the Nationalist ideology itself. Therefore, instead of being a product of Afrikaner Nationalism, CNE may fairly be described as one of the factors which helped create that Nationalism and give it its distinctive features.

The importance of CNE as an ideological factor in the creation of Afrikaner Nationalism can be seen in the way in which belief in the theory of CNE affected members of the Reformed Church and led them to identify themselves with the Nationalist cause. This belief developed out of the Church's understanding of Calvinism, which was orthodox in its theology but not reactionary in its practice. The Church did not seek to re-create a sixteenth century form of religion, as is often claimed (17), but, while appealing to the Reformation to legitimate its claims, in practice it was prepared to innovate to meet the challenge of a new age. These innovations were adapted from the experience of Dutch Calvinism, where they first appeared in what became known as the Anti-Revolutionary movement and were applied to South African conditions by the leaders of the Church. (18)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Dutch Calvinism had reached a low ebb and had developed a rationalist mode of religiosity. But, in the early decades of the century a change occurred which affected both the aristocratic and lower classes and revived an orthodox form of Calvinism. Under the guidance of Groen van Prinsterer, the aristocratic wing of this revival developed a new interpretation of history which found the cause of contemporary social unrest in theological uncertainty and the "revolutionary spirit". Calvinists were therefore recalled to the source of their religion - the Bible - and challenged to apply Biblical thinking to every aspect of life. (19)

Van Prinsterer set out his basic position in his classic book Unbelief and Revolution, which was first published in 1847. In this work he argued that the ancient unbelieving spirit of apostasy, which is opposed to the Spirit of Christ, had reached new heights in the terror produced by the French Revolution and, because of its easily disguised nature, had taken root in all western nations, even among those most opposed to the French revolutionaries. Thus, both revolutionaries and reactionaries were the product of the revolutionary spirit of unbelief which led avowed conservatives to create conditions which made revolution inevitable. Against this triumphant world power, van Prinsterer set the Gospel of Christ. In his view only a thoroughly Christian way of life which involved all areas of life, including politics, could resist the spirit of unbelief and its revolutionary effects. But such resistance would involve a long hard struggle because the battle was for the minds of men, and especially the minds of the young. Therefore, if Christian parents wanted their children to grow up as true Christians they could not entrust their education to deceptive "liberal" teachers who would undermine the power of the Gospel by their rationalism. It was the duty of Christian parents to ensure that their children were educated in accordance with their own Calvinist faith. To neglect this obligation would mean that the parents were betraying their baptismal promise to rear their children in the knowledge and fear of God. (20)

The history of the Dutch Calvinist movement during the latter half of the nineteenth century is largely an account of how Calvinists fought the State on what became known as the "school question". In their desire to fulfil their Christian duty, the Calvinists resisted the pressure to send their children to State schools and campaigned for government subsidies for their own private schools. As taxpayers they claimed the right to have their taxes used to educate their children in the manner they chose and not in a way prescribed by remote government officials. They argued that schools should be controlled by the parents of the children who attended them because, in sending a child to school, a parent delegated his God-given authority over the child to the school teacher. (21)

The liberal middle class which dominated Dutch politics throughout most of the nineteenth century did not take kindly to the rejection of its progressive, liberal education by what it considered to be the reactionary forces of Calvinism.

It refused, therefore, to relinquish its control over Dutch schools without a fight. The resistance of the liberals to their demands led the Calvinists to form a united political front which contained both the aristocratic and working-class elements of the Calvinist movement. The struggle, which was a long one, led to the formation of the first modern political party in the Netherlands, the Anti-Revolutionary Party, in 1879 under the able leadership of Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper developed the theories of van Prinsterer and gave them a cutting edge by creating and organizing massive popular support. He gave his followers a sense of unity and the conviction that victory would be theirs, thus enabling him to lead them to power in the Dutch parliament in 1901. As a result of this and earlier victories Kuyper was able to get the school legislation so dear to his heart passed by Parliament, and so change the whole structure of Dutch education. (22)

The effect of the Calvinist revival on Dutch society was to reshape completely that society by creating the verzuiling, or pillars, which even today give Dutch society its distinctive features. These pillars are interest groups based not on class but confessional divisions which embrace all areas of Dutch life. Thus the school question in the Netherlands became the focus for a whole range of developments which profoundly changed the character of Dutch society. No doubt the issues raised by the school question gave expression to other forms of social unrest, but for the Calvinists the control of their children's education was identified with their freedom of religion and therefore any opposition to it came to be seen as an attack upon their Faith itself. In this way an ideological issue had far-reaching social effects in nineteenth century Dutch history. (23)

In South Africa a similar process occurred. Prior to the Second Anglo-Boer War, the need to create "Christian" schools became an accepted part of the Calvinist faith for the Reformed Church, and with it the belief that "liberal" forces were at work intent on destroying the Calvinist religion. This belief was strengthened by the memory of the progressive political policies of President Burgers of the Transvaal and the fact that in 1864 he had been tried for heresy by the Dutch Reformed Church Synod in the Cape for his views about the Person of Christ, which rejected the traditional Christian formulas. There was, then, a situation already in existence in South Africa which supported van Prinsterer's interpretation of history by providing evidence of a relationship between liberal theology and progressive politics. Such a situation encouraged Calvinists, who may be identified with members of the Reformed Church (24), to accept Anti-Revolutionary theories and see the need for their own CNE schools.

Once it had been introduced, South African Calvinists took up the CNE cause with enthusiasm. As in the Netherlands, they did not immediately seek to found their own political party but remained loyal to the existing authorities and political groupings. (25) After the war they continued to work within the existing political framework but placed increasing emphasis on the need for CNE. It was this issue which led them to break with Botha and Smuts and support Hertzog when he founded his National Party in 1914. In joining Hertzog's forces they brought with them their Anti-Revolutionary ideology which soon became an integral part of South African nationalism, and a solid block of voters whose loyalty to the Nationalist cause was unswerving because of the identification between the interests of the Nationalist cause and those of Calvinism itself. (26)

Many members of the other Dutch Reformed Churches joined the National Party and other Nationalists, like Hertzog himself, were without strong religious convictions. But the defection of the Reformed Church to the Nationalist camp was a great boon to the party and blow to its opponents. Not only did the Calvinists provide the Nationalists with an ideology with which to legitimate its political stand but they also provided, through the organizations of the Church, a communications network and propaganda machine. This is not to say that the Reformed Church, as a Church, became involved in politics but simply that, as its members were Nationalists, its organization inevitably assisted the Nationalists, particularly through their continual demands for CNE, with which the Nationalists appeared to agree. (27)

In response to the support which the Church gave them, the Nationalists made concessions to the convictions of Church members. Thus the Programme of Principles published by the National Party in January 1914 is clearly influenced by Anti-Revolutionary ideas and contains references to the Party's support for CNE. Clause 2 speaks of "the guidance of God" and the "people's life along Christian national lines". And the education section of clause 10 stresses the "right of parents to choose the direction" of their children's education. The "sphere of work" and "sovereignty in each sphere", both typically Anti-Revolutionary phrases derived from Kuyper's theory of "sphere-sovereignty" with which he justified his political stance, are also used in clause 10, sections b and i. More importantly, there is the typical Anti-Revolutionary stress on "principles" rather than pragmatic policies in clauses 11 and 12. All of this evidence for a strong Calvinist influence in the founding of the National Party is not surprising when one realizes that the Programme of Principles was first drawn up and published by Willem Postma in 1913 and adopted by the Party after being revised by a small committee which included Postma and Professor Jan Kamp, who before he emigrated to South Africa in 1897 had spent ten years working on the editorial staff of Kuyper's daily newspaper, De Standaard. (28)

The reaction of the South African Party was to identify the Nationalists with the language issue and ignore or reject the "Christian" elements in their policies. This, together with Smuts's general attitude to religion and enthusiasm for evolutionary theory, further alienated the Calvinists and confirmed them in their belief about the necessity of establishing CNE schools. By 1917 the theme of CNE had been taken up by a number of leading figures in the Dutch Reformed Church, including J. D. Kestell and D. F. Malan, and had the wholehearted support of Hertzog. Yet, despite the propaganda value of CNE, no Nationalist Government before 1948 attempted to bring in CNE legislation, nor did the Nationalist opposition ever make a great issue of CNE in Parliament. When CNE legislation was finally introduced it was done on a selective basis, which satisfied the more immediate demands of the Calvinists but did not affect the South African education system as a whole. (29)

### Conclusion

Belief in the value of CNE is an important element in a general Calvinist interpretation of the world and as such has been of the greatest importance in spurring Calvinists in the Netherlands and South Africa to political action. While it is true that it is intended to promote the interests of the Calvinist religion, it is not true that it is simply a device to indoctrinate the young in terms of the theory of apartheid. In South Africa, through its close association with the Nationalist cause, CNE has lent itself to the legitimation of certain aspects of apartheid and in some ways may be said to have contributed to the development of Afrikaner racial attitudes. But, if this is so, it is a side effect of CNE and not, as is so often suggested, its primary purpose. The intention behind CNE is the preservation of the Calvinist religion and, to the extent that this is identified with the survival of the Afrikaner People, it has been a factor in the development of apartheid. (30)

The importance of recognizing the ideological function of CNE is illustrated by the "modernisation" debate initiated by Heribert Adam in his book Modernising Racial Domination. As Maud points out, the "instrumental (means-end) rationality" of Adam is based on a western liberal interpretation of rationality which fails to take ideological factors into account. (31) What is "rational" to a British or Canadian observer may not be "rational" to an Afrikaner Nationalist, and still less to a Calvinist. (32) Facts are not self-evident but are always seen within a framework of interpretation. Adam's empiricism separates him from the Calvinist who believes in the God-given destiny of the Afrikaner people, and because of this his understanding of Afrikaner thinking is inadequate. (33)

British scholars produced by a century of secular education may scorn the outlook of the Afrikaner Calvinist and look for the "true significance" of CNE in economic and political manipulation, refusing to believe that an explanation in terms of religious beliefs is possible. But, just as religious beliefs may be traced to



social relationships, so too social relationships may be affected by religious beliefs. The connection between ideology and social conditions is a complex one, which involves a constant interaction between the ideology and the society in which it emerged. When this is recognized an understanding of Afrikaner Nationalism in general, and CNE in particular, which gives consideration to ideological factors as values in themselves and which departs from the crude empiricism of earlier studies by non-Afrikaner writers becomes necessary. It is to such an end that this paper is devoted. (34)

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#### Notes

- (1) Bunting, 1969, pp 244-58. This argument, with slight modifications, is to be found in many works on South Africa: e.g. Patterson, 1957, pp 220-27; Vatcher, 1965, pp 100-107.
- (2) Bunting, 1969, pp 245-51 and 256-61.
- (3) Ibid., pp 249-50.
- (4) This is the theme of Bunting's book. Vatcher, 1965, pp 58-75.
- (5) The schools are said to have merged into the State school system in 1907.
- (6) CNECM, 1902-1907, especially entries for: 22/10/02, 30/10/02, 25/12/03, 14/9/05, 9/4/07, and the Annual Report for 1907. Denoon, 1973, pp 89-92.
- (7) The Reformed Church, Gereformeerde Kerk, which is strictly Calvinist, is not to be confused with the Evangelical Dutch Reformed Church, Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk. Members of the Reformed Church are known as "Doppers". Hexham, 1974.
- (8) Almanak, 1905, pp 31-35, Fac et Spera, 1/10/05, Het Kerkblad, 1/8/11, p 5 f. AVTV 1909, art. 32. Davenport, 1966, p 51 f.
- (9) Patterson, 1957, p 220.
- (10) Langedijk in Stoker and Vorster (eds), 1940, pp 377 ff. Woltjer, 1887. Hexham, 1974.
- (11) Almanak, 1887, pp 18-26; 1893, pp 23-25, 40-44; 1899, pp 65-73. Jooste, 1958, pp 111-121, 294-309. Van der Vyver, 1969, pp 15-94. Davenport, 1966, pp 31, 176, 322 & 326.
- (12) Almanak, 1908, pp 73 ff; 1910, pp 74 ff. Postma, 1909. Nienaber, 1973, pp 11 ff.
- (13) These were the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Herformde Kerk.
- (14) van der Vyver, 1969; van der Vyver, 1958; Aucamp, 1949.
- (15) AVOVS, 1917, art. 24 & 50; AVTV, 1913, art. 23 & 43. CED, letter Spureway to Muir, 22/11/15.
- (16) Bunting, 1969, pp 256 ff; Vatcher, 1965, p 105.
- (17) Hexham, 1974, p. 1.
- (18) Kistemake, 1966, pp. 49-51; AVTV, 1903, art. 30.
- (19) Bratt, 1968, pp 92-101; Zylstra, 1956.
- (20) Van Prinsterer, 1848; 1860; 1863. Vlekke, 1945, p 309 f.
- (21) Vlekke, 1945, pp 313, 319. van den Berg, 1960, pp 80-83, 101-114, 169, 231-42. Kuyper, 1875. van Prinsterer, 1863.
- (22) Vlekke, 1945, pp 317, 323. van den Berg, 1960, pp 79-100, 218-257.
- (23) Bagley, 1973, pp 8-12. Vlekke, 1945, pp 318-19. Verkade, 1945, p 41.
- (24) du Plessis, 1919, pp 208 ff. Hexham, 1974, p 6.

- (25) Spoelstra, 1963, pp 274 ff. This statement needs to be modified by the fact that in the Cape they considered the Afrikaner Bond to be a Calvinist Political Party and in the Transvaal they saw in Kruger a Calvinist politician. But in neither case did they found a Calvinist party as such, devoid of any non-Calvinist elements like the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party. Cf Davenport, 1966.
- (26) PMP correspondence between F. C. Eloff and General Botha, 21/2/13, 25/2/13, 3/3/13, 7/3/13 and 15/3/13. Nienaber, 1973, p 64f, pp 74 ff, 84 ff.
- (27) Potchefstroom Herald, 31/7/14, 9/7/15, 8/10/15. SSC, letter D. Postma to T. v. d. Walt, 21/6/15, letter H. J. van Wyk to T. v. d. Walt, 17/8/15.
- (28) Kruger, 1960, pp 69-72. Het Westen, 10/12/13. de Kock & Kruger (eds), 1972, p 356.
- (29) Potchefstroom Herald, 15/10/15, 13/6/16. The Friend, 5/7/17. Bunting, 1969, p 251.
- (30) It is significant that the Calvinist movement in the Netherlands has increasingly dissociated itself from apartheid. Verkuyl, 1971.
- (31) Adam, 1971. Maud in Leftwich, 1974, pp 287 ff.
- (32) Wilson, 1970. For a Calvinist account of rationality, see Dooyeweerd, 1953.
- (33) Adam, 1971.
- (34) Berger and Luckmann, 1967.

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CNECM - Christian-National Education Commission Minute-book 1902-1907  
 Almanak - Almanak van die Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika  
 AVTV - Algemene Vergadering: Transvaal (Provincial Synod)  
 AVOVS - Algemene Vergadering: Orange Free State  
Fac et Spera (student magazine)  
Het Kerkblad (Church newspaper)  
 SSC - Steynsburg School Correspondence

To be found in Potchefstroom High School:

#### Potchefstroom Herald

To be found in the Transvaal Archives Depot, Pretoria:

PMP - Prime Minister's Papers

To be found in the Orange Free State Archives Depot, Bloemfontein:

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CED - Cape Education Department, Superintendent General of Education Papers

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