

**The 16th of December
in the context of Nationalistic thinking
in colonial and apartheid South Africa**

Interpretation of South African history
as a source of divine revelation
manifesting God's relation to his people
and his will for the future of this people.

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The annual commemoration of the battle of Blood River originates from a vow which the *Voortrekker* took several days before they engaged in an armed conflict with the troops of the Zulu king Dingane on December 16, 1838. They promised that they would observe the day of victory for which they prayed, as a Sabbath day. They would tell the story of their deliverance to their children and cherish the memory of the great event for future generations.¹

The vow was taken in a situation of extreme emergency. The *Voortrekker* were aware of the valour of the Zulu warriors and of their immense superiority in numbers. The fact that the *Voortrekker* possessed firearms was not in itself a guarantee that they would be able to overcome or resist the Zulu army. Probably it was this emergency situation which caused Sarel Cilliers, the religious leader of the group, initially to hesitate when he heard the proposal of Pretorius. The latter had suggested that a vow should be taken according to the example of the saints in the Bible. Cilliers appears to have feared that the vow might be forgotten after the emergency had passed and after the victory had been gained. The people neglecting the vow would then incur God's punishment.²

The proposal of Andries Pretorius was discussed with the officers of the group and with the group as a whole. The members of the group were allowed to decide individually whether they were prepared to take the vow. Before reciting the vow and accepting the commitment of the members of the group to the vow in a solemn ceremony, Cilliers explicitly requested that those members who were not

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¹ Krüger, p. 6-7.

² Cachet, p. 196.

prepared to take part, should absent themselves.³ There is evidence that at least two members left the group. Their reservations against the vow appear to have been of a similar nature as those which Cilliers himself had initially indicated to Pretorius.⁴

In his discussion with Andries Pretorius Cilliers had pointed out that a **vow should better not be taken, if no certainty existed that it would be observed**. The attitude of the *Voortrekker* towards December 16 in the years following what later became known as “the battle of Blood River” therefore deserves attention. There is evidence that the battle of Blood River was commemorated in “Natal” in individual *Voortrekker*-families of which members had participated in the conflict. Sarel Cilliers and Erasmus Smit can be mentioned as examples. Cilliers meticulously observed the day every year as **a day of thanksgiving** for the deliverance which God had granted to his covenant people. In *Pietermaritzburg* Erasmus Smit invited people into his house for commemorating the deliverance in the battle of *Blood River*.⁵ December 16 was, however, not celebrated by the *Afrikaans-speaking white community* as such or by the *white Afrikaans-speaking congregations*. Possibly the vow was understood as a promise binding the individual *Voortrekker* who had partaken in the battle, and their families and descendants, without committing the *white Afrikaans-speaking community* as a whole.

In the then “Transvaal” December 16 was declared a public holiday by the government of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (1852-1902)* only in 1865. Even then the day was scarcely used for the commemoration of the deliverance of the *Voortrekker* in the battle of *Blood River (1838)*. This happened, on the whole, only after the first annexation of the “*Transvaal*” by the British [1880].

In the other *Voortrekker*-republic, the *Oranje-Vrystaat*, the elder Sarel Cilliers jr, a son of the *Voortrekker* Sarel Cilliers, proposed in 1869 to the synod of the Dutch Reformed Church that the battle of *Blood River* should be annually commemorated. His proposal was not accepted. In the *Oranje-Vrystaat* December 16 was never declared a public holiday as long as this state retained its independence. Only in 1903 was December 16 declared a holiday after the *Oranje-Vrystaat* had been subjected to British rule together with the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*. **The four South African territories that in the period since 1652 had in 1910 ultimately become subjected to British rule, the two former Boer republics (“Transvaal” and “Oranje-Vrystaat”) and the two former British colonies (“Cape Colony” and “Natal”), were united to form what became known as the “Union of South Africa”.** In the same year the Parliament of the Union of South Africa declared December 16 a public holiday for the whole area **presently known as the “Republic of South Africa”.**

Our very sketchy survey of the history of December 16 leads to a preliminary hypothesis which should be investigated more closely. It appears that the status accorded to December 16 among *white Afrikaans-speaking people* rose considerably with growing British pressure on the Boer-republics or with their subjection to British rule. One could ask: Was the emphasis placed on the

³ Cachet, p. 196.

⁴ *Die Huisgenoot*, 13 December, 1940, p. 63.

⁵ *Die Kerkbode*, 16 December 1959.

celebration of December 16 perhaps to a greater or lesser degree a reaction to British pressure on the *Voortrekker*-republics and the Boers' experience of being rejected by the English?

In considering this question it is necessary to mention a further development which might be relevant to our topic. Objections raised in the Afrikaans-speaking [white] Reformed Churches against the name "Dingaan's Day" - as they used to call it - resulted in the re-naming of the day. Towards the end of the 1940's it came to be called '*Geloftedag*' in Afrikaans or '*Covenant Day*' in English. It was suggested that the battle of *Blood River* should not be commemorated as a victory of the whites over the non-whites, but rather as a **victory of Christianity over heathenism**.⁶

It is doubtful whether the re-naming of the day had any deep effect on the Africans. The interpretation of the event of December 16 as a victory of Christianity over heathenism could not be convincing to the blacks in South Africa. In December 16, 1949, on the same day, when the *Voortrekker Monument* was dedicated in Pretoria, 'Dingaan's Day' was celebrated with a very different meaning at Bloemfontein by Africans. This happened at a conference of the African National Congress (ANC). Dr A.B. Xuma praised the Zulu king Dingane as the true hero of the day.⁷ He appealed to the Africans to persevere in their fight for justice and to be united. Possibly this interpretation of December 16 was also a response to a feeling of rejection.

The topic assigned to us requires us to examine and consider December 16 in the context of nationalistic thinking. Some understanding will be necessary as to what is meant by nationalistic thinking. The American historian Leonard Krieger has given the following definition of nationalism: 'Nationalism refers to those doctrines, movements and policies which confer on the values and authority of a nation consistent superiority over those of any other social unit.'⁸ Nationalistic thinking in terms of this definition is a thinking which tends towards or results from such doctrines.

Nationalistic thinking should be distinguished from national consciousness. The latter signifies an awareness of people of belonging together to a group on the basis of a common culture or language or on account of common experiences. It may also result from the living together of people of different cultural background within one and the same region. National consciousness is not necessarily limited to the nation-state and can comprise people of different nation-states. It does not necessarily confer consistent superiority to the values and the authority of the nation. Under conditions of pressure or rejection, national consciousness can easily change into nationalistic thinking.

In our survey we shall have to examine the context of the celebration of December 16 in the context of nationalistic thinking. I suggest that this be done under the following headings:

⁶ *S.A. Outlook*, 1 Augustus 1948.

⁷ Swart, p.98.

⁸ Cantor, p. 213.

Section 1: The Background of the celebration of December 16 as a day of the Dutch Reformed Church in “Natal”.

Section 2: The role of December 16 in the context of *white Afrikaans nationalism*.

Section 3: The role of December 16 in the context of *white nationalistic thinking*.

Section 1

On October 3, 1864 the [white] Pietermaritzburg Dutch Reformed minister Rev P.Huet submitted to his church council a petition which he wanted to be passed on to the synod. The synod met during the same month at Pietermaritzburg. Huet proposed that December 16 should be observed as a day of thanksgiving and prayer in commemoration of the deliverance of the emigrants from the Cape Colony in 1838. During the synod Huet eloquently commented on the proposal. He reminded the members of the synod of the deliverance which the *Voortrekker* had experienced in the year 1838. He also mentioned how individual families had cherished the memory of the day. In view of the diminishing number of original *white Afrikaans-speaking emigrants* from the Cape Colony, the Pietermaritzburg minister was concerned that the day of deliverance would be forgotten. The synod, he suggested, should feel obliged to counteract such development by accepting the motion he introduced. The synod accepted the motion and ‘Dingaan’s Day’ was recognised as an official festive day of the [white] Dutch Reformed Church in “Natal”.⁹

It is difficult to ascertain exactly the considerations which induced Rev Huet to make this proposal to the synod. There are several well-testified aspects of his life which can throw more light on his motives. In July 1863 he suggested to the church council at Pietermaritzburg that it might be necessary to introduce evening services in the English language in the Dutch Reformed congregation. This might be necessary on account of the diminishing *white Afrikaans-speaking population* and the increasing number of marriages between Afrikaans- and English-speaking partners. In such marriages the Afrikaans-speaking partner, as a rule, left the Dutch Reformed Church in order to join the church of the English partner.¹⁰

Rev Huet in his proposal to introduce English services mentions the same reason as in his motion to the natal synod on the celebration of December 16. The numbers of the Dutch Reformed Church members were declining. At the same time traditions in the piety of the families, such as the commemoration of the deliverance of the *Voortrekker* at *Blood River* in individual families, were gradually dying out. Huet considered this tradition to be a valuable one. He therefore moved that the Dutch Reformed Church in “Natal” should keep it alive by services on December 16. Traces of nationalistic thinking cannot be detected in the motion of the Pietermaritzburg minister. His poems and his writings show that he had strong misgivings against an identification of *Afrikaans-speaking white people* or of

⁹ Hough, p. 101-102.

¹⁰ Hough, p. 100.

the Boers - the “Afrikaaner” - with the people of God, an idea which decades later was frequently expressed in speeches on December 16.

A treatise by which Rev Huet became widely known among Afrikaans-speaking white people is entitled ‘*Eéne Kudde en éen Herder*’ - ‘One flock and one shepherd’. This treatise was published in 1860. It represents a passionate protest of Rev Huet and his revivalist piety against a decision taken by the Cape Dutch Reformed synod on the relation between white and non-white Christians. The decision reads as follows: “The synod considers it desirable and scriptural that our members from the heathen be received and absorbed into our existing congregations wherever possible; but when this measure as a result of the weakness of some impedes the furtherance of the cause of Christ among the heathen, the congregation from the heathen, already founded or still to be founded, shall enjoy its privileges in a separate building or institution.”¹¹

Huet’s book is an attempt to arrive at a biblical evaluation of mission work in South Africa and to refute prejudices against mission work prevailing in many white Dutch Reformed congregations. In our context we are concerned solely with Huet’s ideas on the relation between church and nation.

In his book Huet vehemently criticises and attacks the tendency to identify non-white people with heathens. ‘Before we continue,’ he writes, ‘we have to contradict a heresy out of which many wrong sentiments flow forth. We refer to the fact that people use the term “heathens” and “non-whites” as having one and the same meaning.’ - ‘The word “heathen” refers to the religious state and not to colour.’ - ‘However as soon as a heathen becomes acquainted with the Lord, confesses to believe in Christ and is baptised, he ceases to be a heathen and becomes a Christian, even if he is black and has curled hairs.’

Of special interest is the passage in Huet’s treatise in which he contradicts the argument that Africans are a special nation and that separate churches should be established for them.¹² He writes: ‘The gospel changes all people who believe in the Lord Jesus, in the religious sense, into one nation. They have one king: Christ. One law book: the Bible. One banner: the Cross. One fatherland: the new Jerusalem. One language: the language of spiritual experience, the language of Canaan. In this way they all become one people. “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people” (1 Peter 2: 10) - “Here there cannot be Greek and Jew” (Col. 3:11). “So there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:4).’

I have not been able to find sermons or speeches held by Rev Huet in connection with the commemoration of the battle of Blood River. We therefore have to rely on his treatise on mission work in South Africa. His very outspoken views on the gospel and its implications for human relations in the church and in society suggest that he cannot have understood the battle of Blood River as a victory of Christianity over heathenism. Nationalistic thinking was foreign to his outlook. The deliverance of the Voortrekker in a state of extreme emergency appears to have been the event which he wanted to have commemorated on December 16.

¹¹ Dutch Ref Churches, p. 4.

¹² Huet, p. 39-40.

In the Natal synod the motion of Rev Huet was supported by his friend Frans Lion Cachet. He also was an ardent supporter of mission work of the Dutch Reformed Church. Like Huet, Cachet was deeply imbued by the piety of the religious revival. Nevertheless his motive for supporting the proposal of his friend, and his interpretation of December 16 seem to have differed to some extent from that of Rev Huet.

Rev Frans Lion Cachet had been brought up in the Netherlands in a family of Jewish origin which had come under the influence of the revival and adopted the Christian faith. He received his theological training in the Scottish seminary in Amsterdam. Soon after his arrival in South Africa he was ordained in the Scottish Church at Alice in October 1860. In 1862 he succeeded the Rev Huet at Ladysmith after the latter had accepted a call to the congregation in Pietermaritzburg.

It does appear that Rev Frans Lion Cachet was inclined to associate the role of the *Afrikaans-speaking white people* in South Africa closely with the role of Israel in the Old Testament as the people of God in what they regarded as a “heathen” surrounding. Possibly the background of Rev Cachet strengthened this inclination. The very same year in which the Natal synod decided to commemorate the battle of Blood River annually, Rev Cachet organised a commemorative service on the battlefield of Blood River. Cachet gave a sermon on Exodus 17:15 taken from a passage describing the victory of the Israelites over Amalek. The passage chosen from Exodus 17 clearly lends itself to reflection on the role of God’s chosen people in relation to “heathen nations”. Exodus 17:15 reads as follows: ‘And Moses built an altar and called it: The Lord is my banner.’”

In his sermon Rev Cachet is reported to have said: ‘28 years ago this place was impregnated with blood. Hundreds of people were lying dead or were in death pains. **The river was red with blood**. The surrounding hills were covered with **fleeing Kaffirs**. How different it is now. No other sword than the sword of the Spirit. No other banner than the banner of the Cross. No other danger than to be deficient in gratitude’¹³ The people participating in the service responded to the sermon by collecting stones and piling them up to a heap.

The thinking which induced Rev Cachet to attribute such high value to the commemoration of the battle of *Blood River* is also evident from the celebration of the day in 1867, again on the battlefield. Cachet at this time was minister at Utrecht. *Afrikaans-speaking white people* from “Natal” and the “Transvaal” took part in the ceremonies. A laager of 40 to 40 wagons was formed and the divine service was held under a tent. Hundreds of Africans were present.

The sermon of the commemoration service was translated for Africans. In connection with the thanks-giving day discussions were held about mission work. The ceremony of heaping up stones already introduced in 1864, was repeated.¹⁴

Cachet negotiated with the **owner of the farm** on which the battlefield was situated to sell the site to the Dutch Reformed congregation at Utrecht. He

¹³ Krüger, p. 13.

¹⁴ Cachet, p. 201.

wanted to prevent it from falling into the hands of a stranger, possibly an Englishman.¹⁵

The words quoted from the sermon of Rev Cachet on the battlefield in 1864 bear a striking resemblance to the passage on the relation between church and nation which we quoted from the book of Rev Huet. Both ministers were intensely concerned about the proclamation of the word of God to non-Christians. Nevertheless there was a significant difference. Rev. Cachet tended to associate the cause of Christian mission with the victory of the *Voortrekker* at *Blood River*. The military victory of the *Voortrekker* over King Dingane was regarded by him as an event which God had used to introduce a new age, an age of the Spirit and of mission.

Having accepted a call to the Dutch reformed congregation at Utrecht in 1865, Rev Cachet was to play a prominent role in the church life and in the political life of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*. He soon gained support for his proposal that the battle of *Blood River* should be celebrated in the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*.

In 1865 the *Volksraad* of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* decided that December 16 should be a public holiday in its territory. In the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* thus it was **the state, not the church**, which took the initiative in providing for the commemoration of the battle of *Blood River*. Its decision, however, was of little effect. Though December 16 was recognised as a public holiday, the people of the *Transvaal* on the whole made no efforts to commemorate the battle of *Blood River* on this day.¹⁶ It was only the first annexation of the *Transvaal* in 1880 which brought about change in their attitude towards December 16.

May I now try to summarise the first part of our discourse in three tentative findings:

1. The proposal of Rev Huet, that the Dutch Reformed Church in *Natal* should annually commemorate the battle of *Blood River*, was evidently not motivated by nationalistic thinking.
2. The way in which Rev Cachet associated the victory of the *Voortrekker* over King Dingane's army with the mission task of the church, already foreshadows a nationalistic interpretation of South African history which later became a prominent feature of many sermons and speeches delivered on December 16.
3. Since the *Voortrekker* and their descendants in the interior of South Africa were used to compare their situation with that of Israel in the Old Testament, the way in which Rev Cachet interpreted the significance of the battle of *Blood River* and in which he organised the services and ceremonies on the battlefield, was bound to appeal to them.

¹⁵ Cachet, p. 201-202

¹⁶ Swart, p. 17.

Section 2

December 16 in the context of white 'Afrikaans nationalism'.

It has been maintained that the **Afrikaans-speaking whites** in the *Transvaal*, the *Transvaaler Afrikaner*, could not have started the First War of Independence (1880-1881), if there would not have been 'Dingaan's Day'.¹⁷ Probably this statement is correct. One could, however, just as well assert: if there would not have been a British annexation of the *Transvaal* (1880), 'Dingaan's Day' would probably not have been commemorated in 1880. Probably there would not be a Day of the Covenant in our time.

Sir Theophilus Shepstone initially encountered little resistance when he annexed the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* in 1877. Gradually, however, the sentiment against the British administration gained force. In December 1879 a considerable number of *Transvaal Afrikaners* assembled at *Wonderfontein* to consult on the step to be taken. The battle of Blood River was commemorated. It inspired the men to take courageous decisions. In the next year 5 000 *Transvaal burgers* participated in a similar meeting at *Paardekraal*. Again the battle of *Blood River* was commemorated on the battlefield. According to Rev Lion Cachet, the symbolic action of piling up stones on this occasion signified that the men had made **a covenant with each** other 'to maintain shoulder to shoulder as one people the independence of the country and to support the government, whatever the price to be paid might be'.¹⁸ On December 16 the First War of Independence started. The *Transvaal Afrikaners* gained a victory at Amajuba. They regained their independence from British rule.

After the restoration of independence the people's gathering at *Paardekraal* of 1880 received a new interpretation in the thinking of the people. **The stone ceremony was understood and interpreted as a renewal of the vow of 1838.**¹⁹ The victory was attributed to this renewal of the vow by the *Transvaal Afrikaners*. They now also found an explanation why the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* had lost its independence in 1877. Its people had for many years neglected to thank God for their independence. They had forgotten the vow. There was a strong feeling that December 16 should now be celebrated regularly.

The Afrikaans historian Prof F.A. van Jaarsveld has devoted in his studies special attention to the white *Afrikaners'* interpretation of history and to *white Afrikaans nationalism*. In one of his articles he points out that the First War of Independence (1880-1881) shaped Paul Kruger's interpretation of history.²⁰ This view can be substantiated by numerous quotations from Paul Kruger's speeches. The history of the *Transvaal Afrikaners* to him had become a source of revelation.²¹ He identified his people with the Israel of the Old Testament. **They were God's people.** In his speeches he used to exhort the *Transvaal Afrikaners* not to deviate again from God, but to give him the honour. God remained always the same. He

¹⁷ *Die Kerkbode*, 16 December 1959.

¹⁸ Cachet, p. 525.

¹⁹ Du Plessis, p. 95.

²⁰ Van Jaarsveld, *Lewende Verlede*, p. 202.

²¹ Du Plessis, p. 92-93.

could castigate his people in times when they lost sight of him, but he would never forsake them. The people could rely on God in their distress. He would remain faithful.²²

Of special significance in our context are the speeches which Paul Kruger held in various years on December 16 at *Paardekraal*. He exhorted the Transvaal Afrikaners to give God alone the glory for their restored independence and not to neglect the vow. They should remove obstacles to God's glory in their social life. Paul Kruger pointed out very clearly which practices he considered to be such abuses. He regarded December 16 as a day of thanks-giving. At the same time this day was an occasion for confessing the sins of the people.²³

Gratitude for God's gracious protection, penance for evils prevailing in the national life, trust in God's guidance for the future were the main elements in Kruger's theological interpretation of the history of the *Transvaal Afrikaners*. From God's guidance as he saw it revealed in the history of the nation, Kruger derived consequences for his own actions and for his policy. When he was sworn in for the fourth time as president of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* in 1898, he said in a speech, that he would not tolerate the independence of the territory under his command to be endangered to the slightest degree, 'for I shall bring over me judgement if independence is violated by me. God has, after all, guided us visibly, so that the most blind heathen and the most unbelieving creature must admit that it was **God's hand** which presented independence to us.'²⁴

In his speech held at the dedication of the *Paardekraal* monument on December 16, 1891 Paul Kruger makes a clear distinction between the outer and the inner calling. The outer calling pertains to the nation as a whole and comprises all its members. One here gets the impression that Paul Kruger in making this distinction was influenced by neo-Calvinistic ideas which, like the fore-bearers of most of the *Voortrekker*, had come to South Africa from the Netherlands.

The great Dutch theologian and initiator of the neo-Calvinist school, Abraham Kuyper distinguishes between the common grace and the particular grace of God. The particular grace of God is the grace of salvation. It pertains to God's saving acts in his church and through his church. God's common grace on the other hand comprises the whole of creation. God in his common grace determines the structure of creation and protects it against destruction. The believer by virtue of being reborn in Christ discovers the laws which God has ordained for the different spheres of creation and society. The Bible is used as an instrument to discover these laws.

In South Africa Kuyper's theology paved the way for a close association of **church and nation** in the white Afrikaans Reformed churches. In terms of this theology the nation could be regarded as a divinely established entity which had to be developed according to pre-ordained laws. The self-preservation of the nation could be regarded as a task for which the church was responsible. This theology had something to offer for the *Afrikaans-speaking white people* at this time when they felt that they were despised, persecuted and oppressed by their powerful

²² Du Plessis, p. 105-106.

²³ Du Plessis, p. 106-107.

²⁴ Du Plessis, p. 56.

“enemies” in South Africa and overseas: the English. It could confirm and encourage them in their efforts to understand their own past and to find the values of their own culture. On the other hand this theology strengthened the tendency to infer from historical events in the own group, divine instructions for the nation and for its internal and external policy.

The awakening of *Afrikaans national consciousness* or nationalism in the *Transvaal* and the acceptance of neo-Calvinist theological concepts in the white Dutch Reformed Churches were simultaneous processes which mutually supported each other. They stimulated a feeling of unity comprising all *Afrikaans-speaking white people*. At the same time they weakened and counteracted the revivalist piety which since the late 1850's had led to a great missionary awakening and to ecumenical interests in the Dutch Reformed churches. Revivalist piety, represented by ministers such as Andrew Murray jun. or Rev P. Huet, for various reasons at this time was not strong enough to offer resistance. Whereas neo-Calvinist theologians tended to recognise elements of God's general revelation in the history of the nation, theologians of the revivalist piety were inclined to evaluate spiritual experiences of the individual as revelations of God's will. A certain similarity thus existed in the two types of theology which made it difficult for the one to correct the other. In its individualism, revivalist-piety tended to understand sin merely as pertaining to the individual. There was little awareness of the power which sin can obtain over groups, such as expressed in pride or in the self-centredness of a nation. Revivalist-piety, it is true, survived as a strong force, especially in the missionary-enterprise of the Dutch Reformed churches. The framework within which it survived, however, were churches which had become associated with *national* ideas. The close link between the white Afrikaans churches and “*the nation*” found its clearest expression in the celebration of December 16 after the First War of Independence (1880-1881).

President Kruger's great political opponent in South Africa, Cecil Rhodes, had very similar views on the divine calling of *the nation*. In his belief it was the *English nation* which had received a *divine calling* to establish *peace and justice* in the world.²⁵ In the second half of the 1890's it became clear that an armed conflict was inevitable. Even the British officials were aware of the tremendous impact which the theological interpretation of the history of the *Transvaal Afrikaners* had on their thinking and on their decisions. Lord Milner knew that Paul Kruger would not hesitate to engage in an armed conflict with the British Empire, if necessity arose. He wrote: ‘The Higher Powers seem twice in the past to have directly intervened and wrought a miracle for the *Afrikaners*. Why not a third time? It is small wonder that the pious parsons of the Dutch Reformed Church really believe that the Lord of Hosts is always on the look-out and will get them out of any tight place.’²⁶

During the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) December 16 was celebrated on commandos, in concentration camps and in prisoner-of-war camps. The commemoration of the day proved to be a source of strength and perseverance to the *Afrikaans-speaking white people* in their suffering. When, however, the situation of the *Voortrekker*-republics became more and more serious the question arose why God permitted his people to suffer and to be defeated by *the enemy*.

²⁵ William, p. 50.

²⁶ William, p. 50

One explanation was often given for the setbacks of the nation which had far reaching consequences. It was held that God punished his people because they had neglected their mission task. Thousands of non-Christians had lived in their midst. Nevertheless an aversion against mission work had existed in many a congregation. In this situation the heritage of the great religious awakenings in the Dutch Reformed Church which had occurred several decades before again broke forth with great strength. Religious revivals occurred on commandos and in prisoner-of-war camps. People made vows to enter the mission service after the war was ended or to send money regularly for mission purposes. A number of new missionary enterprises of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and even outside Africa resulted from these revivals.

Being aware of the tremendous impact which the celebration of December 16 had on *Afrikaans nationalism* and on *Afrikaans resistance* against Great Britain, Lord Milner ordered - during the Anglo-Boer War in 1900 - the heap of stones, piled up at *Paardekraal* and interpreted as a reminder of the renewal of the vow, to be removed. They were loaded on a goods' train and transported to Durban. There they were **thrown into the sea**. His measure, however, proved to be of no avail. It hurt the feelings of the *Afrikaans-speaking white people* not only in the *Transvaal* but also in the *Orange Free State* and *Natal*. Their attachment to December 16 was intensified by Milner's action.²⁷

Of special significance was the celebration of December 16 in 1900 at *Nooitgedacht* in the *Transvaal*. At this time the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* was already partly occupied by British troops. A rally at *Paardekraal* was no longer possible. The commandos of General Beyers and De la Rey assembled on a farm at *Nooitgedacht*. The festive day was marked by an attitude of prayer and penitence. The men were resolved to renew the vow of 1838. They assembled at the foot of a hill. The following text from Exodus 19 was read to them: **'Moses brought the people out from the camp and took their stand at the foot of the mountain.'**

An extract from a report on the ceremonies of this day reads as follows: 'Rev Kriel now stood up, held a short speech, and read out the covenant which we had formulated as accurately as possible according to the original which had been made at Blood River and renewed at *Paardekraal*, in which the whole people had been involved. The covenant should be read once more. Thereafter everybody who as prepared to remain faithful to the covenant, was expected to rise.'

General De la Rey, Beyers and Smuts on this occasion held impressive speeches reminding the people of the covenant. There was much searching for the reasons why God had punished his people and for steps which should be taken to remove the obstacles to peace with God. General De la Rey spoke about the origin of the Republic which had been the fruit of oppression. The people had violated the covenant. It was now to be renewed.

The ceremony of piling up a heap of stones was again renewed at *Nooitgedacht*. Each burgher individually went to place whence the speakers had addressed the commandos and in passing put down a stone in confirmation of his participation in the covenant. Rev Kriel gave the stone heap the name

²⁷ Swart, p. 36-37.

'Ebenezer',²⁸ probably in imitation of Samuel's action, as described in 1 Samuel 11: 'There Samuel took a stone and set it up as a mountain between Mizpah and Jeschanah, naming it Ebenezer, "for to this point," he said, "the Lord has helped us".'

After the Anglo-Boer War the celebration of December 16 became an important factor in the strengthening of *Afrikaans national consciousness* and in the emergence of a new *Afrikaans nationalism*, adapted to a new political situation. This new *Afrikaans consciousness* aimed at comprising Afrikaans-speaking white people, "*Afrikaners*", in all parts of the country.

May I now summarise the second part of our discourse in four tentative findings:

1. The awakening of the national consciousness of the *Afrikaans-speaking white people* in the *Transvaal* and of *Afrikaans nationalism* is to be explained largely as a reaction against British pressure and against the British annexation of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*.
2. The reminiscences of the battle of *Blood River* encouraged the *Transvaal Afrikaners* to take up arms against the British Empire and to rely on God's guidance and protection.
3. Paul Kruger's interpretation of South African history as divine revelation played a great role in *white Afrikaans nationalism* in the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*.
4. The setbacks and the suffering endured during the Anglo-Boer War led to a searching self-examination of *Afrikaans-speaking white people* and to religious revivals with an intense missionary zeal.

Section 3

December 16 in the context of white nationalistic thinking.

Lord Alfred Milner had hoped that the military defeat of the two *Voortrekker-republics* and the Anglo-Boer War would be a death-blow to *Afrikaans nationalism*. In order to ensure this end he devoted his attention also to the cultural aspects of nationalism. Not only did he take care that the stone heaps of Paardekraal were removed during the war, *Afrikaans nationalistic thinking* itself was to be replaced by a new type of thinking. After the war an *English-orientated education-system* in the former *Voortrekker-republics* was to guarantee that *Afrikaans nationalism* could not revive.

Milner's measures against *Afrikaans nationalism* were based on nationalistic presuppositions. He himself declared: 'I am a British (indeed primarily an English) Nationalist.' - 'I am an Imperialist and not a Little Englander, because I am a British Race Patriot.'²⁹ Therefore it is not surprising that Milner's measure to

²⁸ Krüger, p. 45-47.

²⁹ Marais, p. 172.

overcome *Afrikaans nationalism* did not have the desired effect. They resulted in an unprecedented revival and growth of this nationalism. Rev H.S. Bosman, the minister of the *Hervormde Kerk* in Pretoria, said in 1903: ‘The oppression (*verdrukking*) of our people must bear fruit in the compression (*samendrukking*) of our people. We have heard of concentration camps. I trust that we shall be concentrated.’³⁰ The poet Langenhoven describes the same process as follows: ‘The second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) has shocked *Afrikaans national feeling* for more reasons than merely for its pretences and methods. The *Afrikaans people* have seen it as a consciously intended attempt and entrapping of their national soul. And from this nationalism which was on the point of dying out, was reborn to a completely new vitality.’³¹

After the *Voortrekker republics* had lost their self-determination, the rebirth and reorientation of *Afrikaans nationalism* started as **a cultural movement**. It comprised *Afrikaans-speaking white people* in the whole of South Africa and was supplemented by efforts to strengthen the participation of the *Afrikaans* section in the economy of the country. The long-term political goal was political independence pertaining not only to the former republics, but to the whole of the Union of South Africa (1910-1961), under **white Afrikaans leadership**.

The celebrations of December 16 played an important role in the reorientation of *Afrikaans nationalism* after the Anglo-Boer War. It was used for the **interpretation of South African history as a source of divine revelation manifesting God’s relation to his people and his will for the future of this people**.

The great historical monuments which were dedicated in the course of the years on December 16 in different parts of the country illustrate the impact of this interpretation of history. They became centres of great rallies of the people on “*Covenant Day*.” On December 16, 1904 Paul Kruger, who had died during the Anglo-Boer War in Switzerland, was reburied in Pretoria. On Church Square a crowd of 15 000 people was gathered. General Schalk Burger in his address spoke about the unity which Kruger’s death had brought about. On December 16, 1913 the *Women’s Monument* at Bloemfontein was unveiled. In connection with the centenary of the Great Trek the first monument at Blood River, representing the ox-wagon as the mobile home, the fort and the church of the *Voortrekker*, was unveiled on December 16, 1938. On the same day the foundation stone was laid for the *Voortrekker-Monument* at Pretoria. 200 000 people participated in the ceremony. On December 16, 1949 the monument was dedicated. On December 16, 1971 **the new Blood River monument** was dedicated.

A prominent feature of the new form of *Afrikaans nationalistic thinking* after the Anglo-Boer War is the intensified emphasis on the calling of the ***Afrikaans nation***. Probably it is to be understood as a reaction against the suffering and humiliation during the war and to the feeling of frustration after the war. The calling of the *Afrikaans nation* was now understood not merely in its South African or African context, but **in world-wide perspective**. Two statements of South African Prime Ministers can illustrate this intense awareness of the national calling. Dr Malan stated: ‘The history of the Afrikaner reveals a determination and definiteness of purpose which make one feel that ***Afrikanerdom* is not the work of**

³⁰ Pienaar, p. 43.

³¹ Pienaar, p.43.

man but a creation of God. We have a divine right to be *Afrikaner*, our history is the highest work of the architect of the centuries.’ Dr Verwoerd stated in 1961: ‘South Africa has a greater task than that of establishing Christian civilisation in Africa. It must become the firm base for the white man when he has his back to the wall from which he can again advance ... Our strength lies not in our numbers, but in our faith.’³²

Dr Verwoerd introduced a new phase in nationalistic thinking. He aimed at widening *Afrikaans nationalism* so as to comprise also the English-speaking section of the white population. At the same time he tried to confine the awakening national aspirations of the black population to the different ethnic groups and to offer them opportunities for satisfaction in the “homelands.” In this way he hoped to satisfy the longing of whites for security and the longing of blacks for possibilities of development and progress. In his time the celebration of December 16 offered an opportunity for explaining these political aims in terms not only of a nationalism of the Afrikaans-speaking white people, but in terms of a *white nationalism* in South Africa.

On December 16, 1958 Dr Verwoerd delivered a remarkable speech at *Blood River*. He rejected the policy of ‘so-called Integration’ which would lead to the downfall of civilisation and of the inherited religion of the whites. At the same time he emphasised the preparedness of white South Africans to fight for their convictions.

‘Therefore,’ Dr Verwoerd said, ‘even if we are no longer able to trek, we say like the *Voortrekker* of olden times: “We can still fight”. And we shall fight, even if we have to perish, but we shall remain fighting for the continued existence of the whites at the southern point of Africa and for the religion which has been given to him in order to propagate it here. We shall fight for our existence and the world must know it. And we shall do it exactly as they did - husband, wife and child. We cannot do otherwise. We are standing like a Luther at the time of the Reformation, with the back against the wall. We do not fight for money or possessions. We fight for the life of the people.’

At the end of his speech, Dr Verwoerd pointed towards the significance of white South Africa for the salvation of mankind. He said: ‘Western civilisation and whitedom (*blankedom*) go through a crisis, even if they do not realise it. Never in history, at least not in the history of the past 2 000 years, was the position of whitedom (*blankedom*) in danger to such an extent as now. It is not in danger because of the lack of knowledge or power, but it is in danger because of what happens in its own mind, its inner degeneration and its wrong understanding of its task on earth. And sometimes there must be small groups offering a resistance which is to be extended until it comprises the whole fellowship of peoples (*volkeredom*).

‘Perhaps this is the aim we serve in being placed here at the southern point, in the midst of a place of crisis, in order to provide for victory to be developed, taking this resistance group as starting point, through which everything which has been built up since the days of Christ, will remain in existence for the salvation of

³² Van Jaarsveld, *The Afrikaner's Interpretation*, p. 21-25.

mankind. May you, people of South Africa have the power to serve the aim for the sake of which you have been planted here.’³³

It appears that Dr Verwoerd’s arguments and philosophy had a considerable appeal to many *English-speaking white South Africans*, even though some of them generally as a matter of family-tradition opposed his government and his party. An investigation into books of South African history written by *English-speaking white South Africans* would probably show that with a few exceptions, they shared the belief in the special calling of the whites in South Africa on behalf of a Christian civilisation and on the necessity of protecting the privileged position of the white section of the population of post-colonial South Africa. The impression that the white population, with the exception of a small minority, accepted the general presuppositions of *white nationalism*, is evident from the following statement which the leader of the then opposition-party made before a party congress in 1956: ‘We believe that European should, in the interest of Western civilisation, retain the leadership, but ... we must get the confidence, goodwill and cooperation of the non-European population. If we deny them their place, they must turn their backs on white civilisation. Our policy is not equality. It never has been and never will be our policy.’³⁴

In spite, thus, of the loud proclamation of the differences between the two great political parties a secret alliance existed between them. It was based on a common acceptance of *white nationalism* and on the resolution to safeguard the whites in South Africa against the economic and political competition of the non-white majority. *Afrikaans nationalism*, as we have tried to point out, had originally gained force from the resentment against *British nationalism* in South Africa. Being on the verge of obtaining its goals in relation to *British nationalism*, the hidden agreement which existed between the two types of nationalistic thinking became more prominent. It was in turn bound to evoke resentment on the part of the other sections of the South African population.

The new monument which has been erected at high cost on the battle-field at Blood River reflects the shift of emphasis in the celebration of December 16 which has taken place since the end of the Second World War. The focus of attention is no longer Paardekraal, but *Blood River*. No longer is the British Empire considered to be the greatest challenge to *white nationalism* in South Africa, but the emerging *black awareness* which can easily turn into a powerful *black nationalism*. The monument represents the defensive ox-wagon laager formed by the *Voortrekker* when they expected an attack from the army of the Zulu king Dingane.

May I now summarise the third section in five findings:

1. The efforts of British authorities after the Anglo-Boer War to overcome and repress *Afrikaans nationalistic thinking* were based on nationalistic presuppositions and contributed towards the revival and strengthening of *Afrikaans nationalism*.

³³ Pelzer, p. 192-194.

³⁴ Robinson, p. 186.

2. The celebration of December 16 after the Anglo-Boer War played a decisive role in the revival of *Afrikaans nationalism*.
3. Since the end of the Second World War the divine calling of the *Afrikaans nation* came to be interpreted in world-wide perspective.
4. British opposition to *Afrikaans nationalistic thinking* was not effective since its basic presuppositions were shared by a large section of the English-speaking white people in South Africa.
5. The widely accepted principles of *white nationalism* among whites in post-colonial South Africa, supported by a feeling of political and economic frustration among the non-white majority, can tend to turn the emerging *black consciousness* into a strong *black nationalism*.

Conclusion

Prof F.A. van Jaarsveld in an essay on the ideas of the Afrikaans-speaking white people in post-colonial South Africa, the “*Afrikaner*”, on his calling and mission, raises the following question: ‘is there not a danger that a people may become wrapped up in itself - to the point of **self-deification**?’³⁵ Nationalistic thinking can aptly be described in the terms of this question. It is a thinking which leads a people to become wrapped up in itself and to deify itself. Various factors contribute towards the appeal which nationalistic thinking can have for convinced Christians: in countries with a strong Christian tradition nationalistic thinking tends to base its claims on God’s revelation in the history of the nation. It further tends to emphasise the special talents and experiences of a nation. These experiences and talents may be valuable gifts for which a nation should be thankful to God. Nationalistic thinking derives its demonic and destructive power from the fact that it subordinates such gifts and talents to the self-elevation of the national group.

The celebration of December 16 has contributed considerably towards nationalistic thinking. On the other hand there have been warnings on the part of Afrikaans theologians against a nationalistic trend in the proclamation of the word of God. Occasionally a speech or a sermon held on December 16 has rather been a call to penitence than an encouragement to self-deification of the own group.

The revivalist tradition of the [white] Dutch Reformed Church with its concern for missionary outreach and ecumenism has been a corrective to nationalistic thinking in the white Afrikaans Reformed churches. A number of ministers, rooted in this tradition, have become aware of its weaknesses, especially in its concept of the church. In their studies they have devoted special attention to the biblical concept of the church and of mission. They have pointed out that the church is the church of Christ and not the bulwark of the nation. They have also stated that self-preservation of the nation may not be an ultimate aim in the church. At the same time they have stressed the biblical understanding of the unity of the church which transcends national and racial differences. At the grass-root level of the congregations and perhaps also at the synodical level an

³⁵ Van Jaarsveld, *The Afrikaner’s Interpretation*, p. 28.

understanding of the church associated with nationalistic thinking has, however, remained a potent force.

English-speaking white Christians and church leaders have vigorously warned against the dangers of nationalistic thinking. There is reason to assume that the **hidden nationalistic thinking** is still a strong force in the white membership of English-orientated white churches. Warnings against nationalistic thinking have frequently been understood as being directed against Afrikaans-speaking white people.

Vigilance in South African white churches against nationalistic thinking has been impaired by a trend in the proclamation of the word of God to understand sin and God's forgiveness nearly exclusively as pertaining to the individual. Little attention has been paid to sin as a power which can get control of groups and subordinate their thinking and actions to the self-elevation and pride of the group. Members of the congregations regularly visiting the church services and partaking in religious instruction, have only to a limited degree been made aware of the reflections which group-idolatry, proclaiming to be guided by God's word and calling, can find in the institutions and structures of church and society.

In our survey I have tried to indicate that **nationalistic thinking has an inherent reproductive trend**. Each type of nationalistic thinking tends to contribute to the birth of its counterpart. The conflict between the different types of nationalism is as a rule connected with great human suffering, frustration and loss of life. Where nationalism claims to rely on the guidance of God, it easily can lead a nation into committing **national suicide** by encouraging it to wait until the end for a miracle by which the nation would be saved from destruction.

If a survey of the history of December 16 is not to be a futile exercise, it should motivate us to re-examine the proclamation of the word of God in our churches. We have been entrusted with the message of man's acceptance by God for Christ's sake. This acceptance by God for Christ's sake emancipates us from the need to elevate our own persons or the groups to which we belong. It emancipates us from the need to re-act to experiences of rejection by the self-deification of our group. How do we relate this message to human relations in our churches, to the relations between the different churches and between the groups of different origin in our country to the social, political and economic structures in our country? May I refer, in concluding, to a passage in the third chapter of the letter to the Colossians: 'And above all these, put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which, indeed, you were called in the one body.'

Wolfram Kistner.

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