

Johan Heyns and critique in the Dutch Reformed Church against apartheid: The moderator a prophet?

**Author:**Piet J. Strauss¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Church History and Polity, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Piet Strauss,
straussp@ufs.ac.za**Dates:**

Received: 14 Mar. 2018

Accepted: 24 May 2018

Published: 16 July 2018

How to cite this article:Strauss, P.J., 2018, 'Johan Heyns and critique in the Dutch Reformed Church against apartheid: The moderator a prophet?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), 4965. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4965>**Copyright:**© 2018. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Johan Heyns was the moderator of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church from 1986 to 1990. This church was known as a moral and theological supporter of apartheid until the 1980s. In 1980 Heyns was, for the first time, involved in public critique against the pro-apartheid stance of his church. He took an influential part in writing a new document that criticised apartheid and was accepted by the General Synod of 1986. Heyns was elected as moderator or chairman of this synod. The years from 1986 to 1990 became the busiest of his life. He became the leader in his church's defence of the new document *Church and Society* in and beyond South Africa. In order to get back into the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and to stay on in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, the Dutch Reformed Church decided to depart from its apartheid ways. Heyns' message on apartheid was shaped by his Reformed approach to life, in which he chose reform as the method for change.

Introduction

In the history of apartheid in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was known as a moral and theological supporter of this societal system until the 1980s. In 1986, eight years prior to the 'new' South Africa, the General Synod of 1986 withdrew this support. The critique of this synod on apartheid, however, was not unconditional but qualified. Since then, other churches and ecumenical bodies have addressed this qualified critique of the DRC to their own satisfaction. Without further conditions, the DRC was re-admitted as a member of the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) in 1992, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1998 and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2015. These actions proved that churches worldwide accepted the decision of the General Synod of the DRC to withdraw its support from apartheid. The DRC thus took up its 'normal' position among the Protestant-Reformed churches of the world (Strauss 2018:7, 15).

A form of apartheid in South Africa was implemented shortly after the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and his people at the Cape in 1652. As from 1948, the National Party Government legally and practically stepped up apartheid (Heyns 1989:54–57, 64–71; Stone 2014:12–21). In the 20th century the DRC officially gave moral and theological support to apartheid through its synods. By 1980, however, the separate development of independent black states along a white state in South Africa seemed impracticable and a failure. For the majority of Westernised whites in South Africa, apartheid was their guarantee of an assured future. Against this the vast majority of black people and mixed-race people experienced apartheid as forced separation, suppression and racism (Strauss 2015:67–69). Inequality before the law on the basis of race and the privilege of whites ultimately led to a moral crisis for apartheid South Africa and for the DRC in its support of apartheid. The Soweto riots in 1976 and the state of emergency in the mid-1980s, with its restrictive emergency measures, aggravated the crisis. Foreign economic and social sanctions exerted moral and physical pressure on the South African government (Strauss 2002:221; 2015:70–71).

The DRC reacted to this situation with the following documents: *Kerk en Samelewing* [Church and Society] 1986 (KS 1986) and *Kerk en Samelewing* [Church and Society] 1990 (KS 1990), in which it rejects a qualified apartheid – for the DRC the bad or negative side of apartheid (KS 1986:52, 1990:40; Strauss 2018:9). Some issues were more sharply and more clearly defined in the ensuing KS 1990 – more about this later.

In referring to these two documents, critics blamed the DRC for doing too little too late and for being reticent (Serfontein 1982:85; Strauss 2011:511–520).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Johan Heyns,¹ professor in Dogmatics and Ethics at the University of Pretoria, was the chairperson or moderator of the General Synod of the DRC from 1986 to 1990. Over time he was labelled 'Mr DRC' on account of his untiring enthusiasm in defending *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* locally and internationally. At this stage he was the strongest and often solely audible voice from the DRC to a local and international audience and in the centre of synodical change on apartheid in the DRC. In 1986 he became the symbol and barometer of change on apartheid in the DRC (Serfontein 1982:202–203; Strauss 2011:511; Williams 2006:160, 218).

This article investigates the role of Johan Heyns in giving the DRC Synod new insights into apartheid. Was he, in this process, a biblical-prophetic leader or merely an agent of change? The article focuses on the changes on apartheid in the DRC between 1986 and 1990 and Heyns' contribution thereto. It examines his theologically and philosophically orientated opinions on the subject as well as his style and effect as an advocate of change. Was he a prophetic voice? Was the change he advocated the result of his Christian Reformed convictions?

Heyns and the start of a critical disposition against the Dutch Reformed Church and apartheid

In his well-documented and judicious study on Heyns, the DRC and apartheid, Williams concludes that Heyns' first significant public criticism against the DRC and its support of apartheid South Africa was published in the *Reformation Day Witness* of 05 November 1980. Heyns was one of eight academics from Stellenbosch and Pretoria who expressed their deep concern at the apparent powerlessness of the DRC to effect reconciliation and provide spiritual guidance in South Africa. *Witness 1980* appealed for prayer for church unity where love and justice reign. The existing apartheid society must be 'reformed' by the power of God's reconciling grace (Van der Merwe 1990:221; Williams 2006:169).

The DRC and the broader community reacted – for and against – on a great scale. The Synodical Board of the General Synod of the DRC (Broad Moderation or BM) rejected *Witness 1980* and regretted – as they put it – that the document did not follow the way of the church through its meetings. An Afrikaans newspaper headline announced in bold letters: *Die tweede Cottesloe* [The Second Cottesloe]. In this report

1. Professor Johan Heyns (1928–1994) was born in Tweeling, Eastern Free State. He graduated as a DRC minister from both the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE) and the University of Pretoria. In 1953 he obtained his doctorate in Dogmatics from the VU in Amsterdam and in 1962 his doctorate in philosophy from the PU for CHE. During his career, Heyns was a prolific writer and lecturer, a popular speaker and minister, as well as a leader in the church, academia, the broader community and organised Afrikaner culture. True to his background and education and as a self-confessed Calvinist and Afrikaner, Heyns sought the glory of God on all levels, justice to all people, nations and groups, and reconciliation with God and his commands and thus with each other. He developed a theology of the kingdom of God, which he considered a primary motive in the Bible (Botha 2008:457–458; Williams 2006:396–397).

F. E. O'Brien Geldenhuys was quoted as saying that this was the most important witness from the DRC in the 20 years since Cottesloe (Williams 2006:170).

The Cottesloe Consultation of 07–14 December 1960 in Johannesburg followed the ongoing unrest in South Africa after the events at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960. The gist of the Cottesloe message was as follows: apartheid is trapped in achieving its ultimate aim of 'separate but equal'. There is danger ahead! The policy does not make adequate provision for mixed-race, Asians or black people in 'white' South Africa (P.A. Verhoef pers. interv., 17 October 1981).

WA Visser 't Hooft, Secretary General of the WCC, on whose initiative Cottesloe was organised, corroborates this attitude among the DRC delegates to Cottesloe in their support of the final statement. According to him, apartheid for them was not a fixed principle, but a method. If this method caused injustice or was impracticable, it should have been substituted with a better method (WCC Archives 42.3.014/2.2).

Twenty years later, in *Witness 1980*, with which Heyns was involved from the start, the message read: Danger is ahead! Apartheid is trapped in its implementation and causes discomfort and injustice!

Afterwards Heyns alleged that the DRC would not have produced *KS 1986* and *KS 1990*, which reject apartheid, if it were not for *Witness 1980*. In Heyns' conscience and in the DRC, *Witness 1980* helped create a climate in which one could critically address the justification for apartheid. For him, *Witness 1980* was the first seed of a fundamental policy change in the DRC. Judging from his own opinions on apartheid in South Africa at that stage, his Reformed attitude to life as well as his schooling in the neo-Calvinist philosophy of HG Stoker of Potchefstroom, Heyns agreed with concepts such as the church's role in reconciliation; church unity, where love and justice reign; and the reformation of the existing order in South Africa by the grace of God. In fact, Heyns would generally advocate the principle and method of reform for changes in apartheid South Africa (Heyns 1989:71; Williams 2006:169, 171, 213, 231).² Heyns would seek contemporary answers based on the spiritual heritage of the

2. Heyns propagated reformation of the 'entire society' and of 'all groups and nations' in South Africa. This reformation was not only structural reform but also reformation of: 'individual and social life in structures or social contexts. An important condition for this is ... that we must all know whereto and must know that we all proceed thereto' (Heyns 1989:71). 'We' must all agree that 'we' must also reform (Heyns 1989:71). Heyns has an eye for the inequality of people in South Africa, not in being human, but in what he calls Western cultural achievement and opportunities. According to Heyns, there exists a myth of anti-apartheid in South Africa, according to which all the problems would be solved, if only one could get rid of apartheid (Williams 2006:327). He believed that the Afrikaner was facing a third Great Trek: the journey to the depth of his religious conviction, vocation and rich human relationships. The first trek was that of the Voortrekkers in 1835–1840. The second trek was the journey to the cities with its climax in the 1930s (Williams 2006:351). The Afrikaner's participation in apartheid could cause a crippling guilt complex that blinded him to the challenging possibilities facing him in Southern African society (Williams 2006:377). Like Heyns, *KS 1986* called reformation an ethical claim for the orderly change of South Africa (KS 1986:56). Referring to reformation as a method, Heyns and the then-South African Prime Minister, P.W. Botha, spoke the same language for change in terms of apartheid (Prinsloo 1997:98; Serfontein 1982:49, 51).

16th-century Reformation of Calvin.³ He did not wish to be called enlightened or ultra-conservative but anchored to principles (Williams 2006:299). Typical of Calvinism and of Heyns, in *Witness 1980*'s view the reconciling grace of God must influence all human actions in a reformatory manner, including relationships among groups and people in South Africa (Heyns 1989:71).

Besides the fact that *Witness 1980* was a springboard for public criticism from within the DRC against its support of apartheid, it divided the DRC into two camps: advocates and opponents.

Consequently, Heyns was suspected by the BM of the DRC of an undesirable progressiveness – in Afrikaans *verligtheid*.

Three events increased the tension in the run-up to the DRC's General Synod of 12–22 October 1982. In the same vein as *Witness 1980*, an open letter of 123 ministers and academics in the DRC was published on 09 June 1982. This letter called the church God's testing ground for the world. Typical of Barth, the letter requested the church, which was of another order (grace vs. nature), to show unity, love, peace, generosity and justice as an example for society. Heyns was the only member of the BM of the DRC to support the open letter. Thus, these emotional events saw Heyns again in another camp (Williams 2006:178–179). On 17–27 August 1982, the General Assembly of the WARC met in Ottawa, Canada. Apartheid dominated the agenda. The WARC condemned the DRC's theological and moral justification of apartheid as heresy and took up the strongest possible position for a church against it: a *status confessionis*. According to the WARC, this theological and moral justification put the reformed confession at stake. In addition, the membership of the DRC was suspended (detailed report in NGK 1982:1020–1024). In October 1982, the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church – a member of the DRC family – accepted the draft of the Belhar Confession. Belhar focused on church unity, justice and reconciliation (detailed report in NGK 1982:1069–1087; confession in Cloete and Smit 1984:7–10).⁴

Against the background of apartheid in crisis and under siege, the condemnation and isolation of the DRC by the WARC and individual churches worldwide (Strauss 2002:221–241) and other intense events against apartheid in

3.The method for change in South Africa as suggested by *Witness 1980* is reformation through the power of God's reconciling grace. This method originates from other reformers who advocate 'reformation' instead of revolution or transformation as a method for change. The latter two cause a situation in which the existing order is substituted with an unstable, non-spiritualised and externally experienced alternative. Reformation leads to a situation that grows evolutionarily on those concerned and that they themselves perpetuate out of conviction. In 1987, Heyns stated that a new dispensation *through reformation was the only alternative for violence in South Africa*. Heyns called *KS 1986* and its implications 'steps to reformation'. In order to achieve structural unity in the DRC family, he provided a 'dynamic evolutionary model' (Williams 2006:229, 231, 232, 282, 299). Heyns used the biological concept of evolution to describe continuous, stable development through reform.

4.Some advocates of Belhar denied that this was a situation-bound anti-apartheid document against a Reformed confession that exceeded its time with its formulation of key truths of the Christian faith (Heyns 1977:156; Pont 1981:9). They argued that the word 'apartheid' did not appear in Belhar. Synonyms such as 'forced separation' and 'separate church formation', however, belie this endeavor (Cloete & Smit 1984:7–10).

1982, the General Synod of the DRC met in October 1982 in Pretoria. In Heyns' words, this was a reactionary synod that thwarted every attempt at reformation. It was as if the DRC had its back to the wall in defending its support for apartheid. Proposals by Heyns and his colleague Willie Jonker to repeal the *Immorality Act* and the *Mixed Marriages Act* were swept off the table (Williams 2006:185). According to Jonker, the atmosphere at the synod was 'polemic' against everything that seemed moderate in church relationships (Jonker 1998:164).

The synod voted Heyns out as a sitting member of the BM. According to colleague P.B. van der Watt, the DRC hierarchy rejected his 'explicit enlightened opinions'. To them, Heyns was a *persona non grata* (Van der Watt 1988:7).

Heyns and Kerk en Samelewing 1986 and Kerk en Samelewing 1990: Qualified apartheid is turned down

It was a foregone conclusion for journalists such as Hennie Serfontein: if the DRC did not disapprove of apartheid and cancelled its support for the government and the conservative opposition, a peaceful solution for South Africa would not be likely. As such, the DRC would fail the country and its biblical call to reconcile whites and blacks in South Africa. For Serfontein, the DRC was strategically placed⁵ for this and Heyns was a key figure (Serfontein 1982:202–203). Meanwhile, Heyns opined that the General Synod of the DRC should officially reject apartheid (Williams 2006:190). As a church prophet for reform on the failure of apartheid in South Africa, Heyns was, however, subjected to humiliating rejection by the synod of 1982.

Heyns wanted to get involved in changing or, in his own words, reforming the DRC on apartheid. The General Synod of 1982 appointed a Study Commission, affording Heyns the opportunity to take part in an urgent revision of *Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif* (1974). Because this synod missed the opportunity to guide a struggling and faltering apartheid in a prophetic-critical way, the new document planned for the General Synod of 1986 would be Heyns' last opportunity. The Commission for Commissions proposed Heyns as a dogmatist and he was appointed by the synod (NGK 1982:97, 1182, 1183, 1203).

Heyns' intention to reform the DRC on apartheid from the 'inside' – this is in line with the principle of reform as a method for change – would thus finally be realised and accepted. Initially, Heyns was assigned to the section on principles or norms (Chapter II) of *KS 1986*, but later he also contributed to the practical section (Chapter III). A comparison between *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* and Heyns' documented opinions indicates that Heyns is responsible for *approximately 40 paragraphs in both these issues*. Members of the

5.According to the South African census of 1982, the DRC had, at that stage, an estimated 1694 000 members, that is, 37.4% of the white population of the country. Of the Afrikaners 63% belonged to the DRC (Serfontein 1982:58).

Study Commission also bore witness to Heyns' distinct formulations in finalising *KS 1986* as a whole – a pioneering document for a new attitude on apartheid in the DRC (Strauss 2011:518; Williams 2006:196–198, 405–406).

Heyns' reinstatement as prophet precursor in the DRC was fulfilled when he was elected chairman or moderator of the General Synod of October 1986 (NGK 1986:577). Both this position and his crucial role in *KS 1986* would make him the 'natural' bearer of *KS 1986* and its successor *KS 1990* (Strauss 2002:228–229; Williams 2006:220).

A key element in *KS 1986* is the rejection of a qualified apartheid. *KS 1986* calls apartheid 'a political and social system that aggrieves people and benefits one group over another wrongfully ...'.⁶ It clashes with the principles of love, justice and human dignity (*KS 1986*:52).

In the same vein, *KS 1990* refers to:

the policy of apartheid as political system in practice ... that started to function in such a way that the vast majority of the country's population experienced it as a suppressive system which, by way of forced separation, benefits one group over another wrongfully. This affected the human dignity of one's fellow human being and was in conflict with the principles of love and justice.⁷ (*KS 1990*:39–40)

In 1989, Heyns called apartheid:

a legally regulated political and social model ... that, by way of forced separation, was directed at the welfare of all those involved, but, in the process of implementation, could not fully realise the initial objectives; on the contrary, it not only benefited one population group at the expense of the other, but also aggrieved individuals ...⁸ (Heyns 1989:50; my emphasis, PS)⁹

Heyns' description in *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* of the effect of 'bad' apartheid or apartheid as applied¹⁰ versus apartheid whose 'aim was the welfare of those involved' is similar to conceptions like 'political and social model', 'forced separation', 'process of implementation' and 'aggrieve'. In *Witness 1980* and elsewhere, Heyns and company identify the principles of love, justice and human dignity in relationships between people and groups (Heyns 1989:73–75).

In addition, both *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* reject apartheid as a biblical instruction (*KS 1986*:52) or a biblical requirement

6. In Afrikaans: die hantering van apartheid as 'n politieke en maatskaplike sisteem wat mense veronreg en een groep onregmatig bo 'n ander bevoordeel

7. In Afrikaans: ... die beleid van apartheid as 'n politieke sisteem in die praktyk ... wat op so 'n wyse begin funksioneer het dat die grootste deel van die landsbevolking dit ervaar het as 'n onderdrukkende sisteem wat deur gedwonge skeiding ... een groep onregmatig bo die ander bevoordeel. So het dit die menswaardigheid van die medemens aangetas en in stryd gekom met die beginsels van liefde en geregtigheid.

8. In Afrikaans: ... 'n wetlik gereglementeerde politieke en maatskaplike model ... wat deur gedwonge skeiding van groepe mense, inderdaad die welsyn van al die betrokkenes beoog het, maar in die proses van implementering die aanvanklike oogmerke nie tot volle realisering kon bring nie; intendeel, dit het nie alleen die een bevolkingsgroepe ten koste van die ander bevoordeel nie, dog ook individue veronreg

9. Heyns preferred the word *veronreg* to *verontreg*; cf. a similar tendency in *KS 1986*:52.

10. Since 1975, Heyns had talked of apartheid as causing exploitation and injustice as *apartism* (Williams 2006:397).

(*KS 1990*:39). The DRC should have distanced itself from this view¹¹ or error earlier and confessed its negligence. *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* concur with the 'holy, general (catholic) Christian' church in their decision that the only norm for church membership is Christian faith (Jonker 1998:191). *KS 1986* thus stipulates that membership of a DRC congregation is 'open' (*KS 1986*:46); however, *KS 1990* expands on this more like a church and clearly when it stipulates that this membership is open to 'any believer who accepts the confessions' of the DRC (*KS 1990*:35). The key truths of Christian faith as expressed in the DRC's articles of faith,¹² seen from the human point of view, are the agreement or basis of real communion in the church and of members united in faith (Bouwman 1985:556).¹³ Heyns designated articles of faith – on the human side – as the most fundamental expression of the identity of a church as a Christian community of faith (Heyns 1977:159).

KS 1986 and *KS 1990* also acknowledge the 'God-given dignity' and rights of every individual – a constant that must have a definite influence on church and society. *KS* refutes this understanding of its humanist garb that typifies it as an innate, natural human right, by building human dignity on the fact that every individual is created in the image of God and that this image is reinstated through God's redemption. It is for this reason that *KS* links rights to duties and responsibilities that must be performed to the glory of God. The acknowledgement of human dignity does not exempt any South African – bearing in mind the coming new democratic constitution in 1996 – from obeying the laws of the country (*KS 1986*:24, 33–34, 53, 1990:19, 26–28, 40; my emphasis, PS).

In terms of the Christian view of marriage as a faithful, legal commitment of love between a man and a woman, both *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* reject the South African laws against racially mixed marriages and immorality as well as adultery and homosexual relationships (*KS 1986*:63, 1990:44–45).

Heyns felt accomplished in *KS 1986* and *KS 1990*. He was also convinced that the General Synod placed apartheid in the correct church perspective – a biblical approach or ethic principles in the light of the scriptures and a Christian conscience (cf Heyns' 'Preface' in *KS 1986*) – and that he drove a good trade to sell to the critics of the DRC.

KS 1986 and *KS 1990* also echo *Witness 1980*'s claims of love and justice and the acknowledgement of the human dignity of all people (*KS 1986*:53, 1990:27).

Heyns in stormy waters following the General Synod of 1986

By 1986 the DRC was ecumenically isolated on an international level. It did not belong to any other international

11. This view came to fruition in the 1940s (Strauss 1983:38–52).

12. Heyns called confessional truths the 'core of revelation truths' (Heyns 1977:156).

13. Note the DRC's acceptance of the so-called *Three Formularies of Unity* in the title of NG Kerk Publishers 1982.

ecumenical body, except the REC. Neither did the DRC maintain bilateral relations with an overseas church. The DRC was restricted to sporadic contact with individual churches. The main reason for all this was that the DRC gave theological and moral support to apartheid (Strauss 2002:213).

Because of DRC's isolation and negative image, and after the General Synod of 1986, Heyns was 'driven' to market *KS 1986* both locally and internationally. On several overseas visits, Heyns and others in the DRC propagated *KS 1986*. He too often acted as an 'unofficial ambassador' for South Africa. The South African government was never prescriptive. Yet there was a negative side to the DRC's link with the government. The suspicion that Heyns acted as the 'court jester' of the discredited apartheid regime continued to pursue him (Strauss 2002:229; Williams 2006:276).

The next 4 years became some of the busiest and most difficult times in Heyns' life (Williams 2006:212, 231, 298). He was under fire from both sides (Strauss 2002:229).

Some circles in the DRC mistrusted him as a 'traitor'. His direct style or way of doing things also influenced the breakaway of the Afrikaans Protestant Church (APK) from the DRC in 1987. In May 1987 a Continuation Committee reacted to *KS 1986* with *Faith and Protest* (cf. Voortsettingskomitee 1987). Thousands of members left some Afrikaans churches to form the APK (Strauss 2015:74). According to Meiring, this breakaway hurt Heyns the most in his entire career. As moderator, he believed that he was personally responsible for what happened; this issue tormented him tremendously (Meiring 1994:181–182). Because culture and not matters of faith, according to Heyns, was the motive behind the rise of the APK, he did not provide a future for this church (Williams 2006:227).

At this stage Heyns was referred overseas as the unreliable court minister of the South African government, which would not relinquish its power and projected a softer image of apartheid through the moderator. Heyns referred to himself as a builder of bridges in the situation. According to him, such a person runs the risk of others tramping on him. Reformation is not easy: a movement from within in which one takes one's people along, and a movement outwards whereby one wishes to build bridges (Strauss 2002:229). Heyns experienced a lack of understanding and acceptance by foreign churches and instances (Williams 2006:231).

Heyns met 'on all sides ... at times with bitter resistance'. Black churches in South Africa mistrusted his relationship with the South African government¹⁴ and Afrikaans cultural organisations.¹⁵ In churches overseas he came up against a

14. Prime Minister P.W. Botha (1978–1984), who was also state president (1984–1989), mentioned his cancellation of some apartheid laws and the broadening of democracy in South Africa as 'reform'. He shared this concept with Heyns (Kapp 2008:131).

15. Until 1994, Heyns was chairman of both the South African Academy for Arts and Sciences and the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisations. He was also vice-chairman of the Afrikanerbond (Strauss 2016:5).

lack of understanding and preconceptions based on unilateral, distorted information. Some black churches in South Africa contributed to this (Williams 2006:298).

Heyns often found himself on the ecumenical tightrope, with pressure from both sides. Advocates for and opponents of the situation in South Africa saw him as a public ecumenical figure. Both groups listened to him with antennas and drew conclusions. Critics in the DRC opine that they often observed an impulsive mood in Heyns. This drove him to take other acceptable views overseas or to conferences that differed from those of the DRC. Such opinions were often corrected by the BM or, under its later name, the General Synodal Commission (GSC). Kobus Potgieter remarked: 'The Heyns who writes hits the mark. The Heyns who talks makes people cross' (quoted in Williams 2006:230).

With this in mind a crucial conference of the Family of Dutch Reformed Churches in Vereeniging – the *Vereenigingsberaad* – was held in March 1989. Boesak and representatives from the younger DRC churches were initially given to understand that apartheid was rejected unconditionally by the whole conference – the delegates of the DRC included. The following day the DRC delegates indicated in a written report that they, like *KS 1986*, simply meant 'discriminating apartheid'. Negative reaction by Boesak and his fellowmen ultimately led the DRC to withdraw its report. At the end of the conference and with a possible resistance from the DRC congregations in mind, the DRC delegation issued another declaration in which they pointed out that they rejected the '*ideology of apartheid*'. According to them, this ideology led to a politico-social system that affected human dignity and enabled one ethnic group to suppress another. The ideology was un-Christian, a sin and in conflict with the 'most profound significance' of reconciliation, love of one's neighbour and justice. Any ecumenical attempt to justify this ideology was heresy and contrary to the message of the Bible.

After a long debate, the GSC of the DRC accepted this declaration. Heyns was in a difficult position, but the outcome favoured him (Williams 2006:263–266). The moderator could align himself again with the declaration of the DRC delegation. Not only was a qualified apartheid turned down again, but the system was also in conflict with reconciliation, love and justice. Heyns applied these principles to South Africa. In addition, the terms 'most profound significance' are from Heyns. Furthermore, the concept 'ideology of apartheid' corresponds with the declaration of the REC – the DRC's reformed sisters worldwide – in 1984 in Chicago (REC 1984:90; Strauss 2004:114). The DRC delegation thus attempted to walk a tightrope with pressure from both sides. This was Heyns' way of addressing and not alienating his critics both locally and internationally and taking the DRC along with him.

According to the Presbyterian Douglas Bax, the *Vereenigingsberaad* showed that the DRC ceded the initiative for the discussion with its younger churches to these

churches. As far as he was concerned, the DRC would remain on the defensive until it rejected apartheid, in all its forms, unequivocally and finally. According to Bax, *KS 1986* was already dated (Williams 2006:269).

The time for *KS 1990* had come. Heyns was still in the centre of the DRC's struggle with apartheid. He did not lack influence and controversy on this issue. His conduct would draw the attention of church historians because he was not the usual church figure or moderator.

Heyns' 'most profound' motives in life and his involvement in other issues explained the investigation into the question as to whether he was a church prophet.

Heyns among his people and in his time

In light of the above, the following can be said of Heyns' approach to the church and to life in general. He was a Christian Afrikaner and Calvinist who sought God's glory in his time on all levels. Therefore, the social order in South Africa had to be reformed through the 'power of God's grace' – *KS 1986* and *KS 1990* introduced 'reform steps' for change.

For Heyns this had to do with a biblical approach or an undertaking of moral or ethical principles that was exposed or accounted for by the Bible or in the light of the scripture. The requirements of justice and love and the acknowledgement of human dignity in the South African set-up had to be decisive for structures, groups and individuals. Heyns not only wanted a reform of structures and laws but also of the people who manned the structures efficiently, that is, stabilising and reforming. For Heyns, this endeavour was the biblical concept of total sanctification (Heyns 1992:284–288) as well as a spiritual inheritance of the reformation under the banner of *Soli Deo Gloria*. He was aware not only of the injustice, alienation and hate created by legal apartheid, but also of the differences in 'Western cultural achievement and opportunities' among the South African population. Therefore, he aimed reform in South Africa onto the people and the structures within which they lived.

In addition to reform as evolutionary development, Heyns pointed to the ethical (biblical) requirement of orderly change in South Africa. He drew his opinions from the philosophy of the creation idea of H. G. Stoker, the reformed doctrine of Calvin, neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth, and from his own theology of obedience or of the kingdom of God (Heyns 1977:22).

With these motives Heyns became involved in his environment, in church and society, church and world. Heyns achieved above average results as an Afrikaans theologian, dynamic churchman, cultural and social leader as well as a respected Christian. Based on the facts of his moderatorship, the name 'Mr DRC' was not far-fetched.

For Heyns, F.W. de Klerk's address on 02 February 1990 at the opening of the South African Parliament and the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and Nelson Mandela had far-reaching consequences for the country. According to him, this was the beginning of a new South Africa. However, a changed South Africa was not yet a new South Africa. Whatever makes a country new does not reside in apparent political reforms, but – this is typical of Heyns – in deeper new values, norms, views, attitudes, ideals and devotion. It is about new eyes that look at each other and new hands with which people treat each other. The focus is on love and service. This all comes 'most intensely' from God, and the Holy Spirit, who uses people for this function (quoted in Williams 2006:278).

From the perspective of the kingdom, Heyns was, of course, correct. The question, however, is how does one bring a country that has witnessed high crime rates, continuous poverty, lowered standards in all fields and a profound mistrust, division, corruption and mess to make the requirements of God's kingdom true and even familiar in 2018? How does one create heaven on such an earth? Such can only be the work of the Holy Spirit!

With the coming of the Belhar Confession in 1982, Heyns pleaded that this should not result in polarisation, but rather in reconciliation. The DR Missionary Church's confession must be heard and understood. The issue must lead to dialogue and discussion. By implication this suggestion of Heyns, namely ecumenical acceptance, was ignored when Belhar as a proposed confession was drawn up and accepted by the Missionary Church solely. Heyns nevertheless viewed Belhar as based on scripture (Jonker 1994:16, 18, 20; Strauss 2005:563–565; Williams 2006:184).

Heyns used an expression throughout to describe his connection with those with whom he shared specific issues but often criticised: *critical solidarity* (Heyns 1977:98–108). He implied that he criticised the DRC, apartheid South Africa and institutions such as the Afrikanerbond as a cultural organisation from within in order to take them along with him; these institutions should be obedient to God and embody the kingdom (Heyns 1977:98–108). Heyns again used the principle of reform or reformation as a method for change – a change that must summon God's kingdom.

From his critical solidarity with the DRC, the Afrikaner, South Africa and Africa, Heyns wanted to build bridges to move towards a greater obedience to God in his all-embracing kingdom. Heyns was also respected as a peacemaker. Nelson Mandela called him a 'true patriot' and a 'soldier for peace' (quoted in Williams 2006:383). In a tribute following the mysterious assassination of Heyns on 05 November 1994 at his house in Pretoria, Jonker mentioned that Heyns had to pay the highest price for his endeavour towards reconciliation and peace in South Africa. His witness as a martyr was thus sealed with his blood (NGK 1996:326).

A colleague, A.B. du Toit, summarised the case spot on. He called Heyns a prophet from within: in, with and among his people. According to him, Heyns thus 'finally' achieved more for reconciliation, peace and church unity than well-known sideline critics (quoted in Williams 2006:388). Heyns was convinced that a true leader yields to the prophet within him. He occasionally had the courage and power of his conviction to talk against his people, because he believed in the truth of his message. He could be vilified and trampled on, but some people would follow him. He would start a movement and, if this movement was borne out of truth, he would gain power in time. A prophet is not only a prophet when his people accept him. The Bible abounds with examples of prophets who were considered traitors, because they spoke the truth. Christ is an example. Being accused of treason is often an indication that someone is a prophet (quoted in Williams 2006:401).

A prophet speaks the truth timeously. A tribute, entitled "'n Woord op sy tyd' ['A Timeous Word'], on Heyns' 60th birthday, confirms this conviction of Heyns (Wethmar & Vos 1988). And Williams corroborates this: 'Heyns was such a prophet' (Williams 2006:401).

Conclusion

Johan Heyns was, more than anyone else, the prophet who led the DRC to renounce its support of apartheid. This was made possible because as a prophet from within or for the sake of a critical solidarity, he wanted to take his people with him. For him, the correct principle for change was reform. As a true spiritual child of the DRC and the Afrikaner community, it is likely that Heyns believed to the end that apartheid had a bad or negative side to it that must be rejected. However, he also realised towards the end of his life that the DRC, persevering with its disapproval of a qualified apartheid, was by 1994 biding academic time, whereby it could miss the more important issue of 'general human values' such as love, reconciliation, human dignity, 'devoted and conscientious labour' and the new 'post-apartheid era' (Heyns 1992:399). At the REC 1992, the DRC delegates unanimously rejected apartheid that was formulated by others and handled to the satisfaction of Reformed churches kindly disposed towards the DRC. This matter was reported without detail of contingencies and thus accepted by the General Synod of the DRC of 1994 (NGK 1994:2, 429). Following a similar solution, the DRC was welcomed back into the WARC in 1998 (NGK 1998:412–413).

From his all-embracing perspective on the kingdom of God, Johan Heyns prophetically showed that people and structures in South Africa must reform for the sake of peace, reconciliation and justice. Heyns was a prophet with a sound and timeous Christian message. His motivation and personality enabled him to set aside sharp and irrelevant criticism and to proceed. In the 1990s Heyns greyed visibly. His emotions would often get the better of him in intense church debates and personal discussions. His busy life showed (Strauss 2013:7–8). Jonker's opinion is still relevant:

Heyns' unusual death could be linked to his prophetic voice through the DRC against apartheid.

Johan Heyns was an eccentric church leader in his time. As a church (non-party political) prophet, his message was that a new South Africa must be built on biblical ethical principles without him or the church working out the detail or formulating and negotiating social and political models. He was true to his own statement: the church (as institute) puts forward the 'that' of the reform of society, but leaves the 'how' of other fields to the faithful (the church as organism) in the specific field (Heyns 1977:199–200). In his commentary on Article 36 of the *Confessio Belgica*, Heyns repeats his conviction that church and state should neither be associated with nor subordinated to each other. Every institution is 'sovereign in his own circle' (a concept of Kuyper and neo-Calvinist Philosophy) but united with others in his task or call in society (Heyns 1992:399).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Botha, W.J., 2008, 'Heyns, Johan Adam', in F.E. Gaum (ed.), *Christelike Kernensiklopedie*, pp. 457–458, Lux Verbi, Wellington.
- Bouwman, H., 1985, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht II*, Kok, Kampen.
- Cloete, G.D. & Smit D.J., 1984, *n Oomblik van waarheid*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad.
- Heyns, J.A., 1977, *Die Kerk*, NG Kerk-Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Heyns, J.A., 1989, *Teologiese Etiek 2/2*, NG Kerk-Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Heyns, J.A., 1992, *Inleiding tot die dogmatiek*, NG Kerk-Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Jonker, W.D., 1994, *Bevrydende waarheid*, Hugenote-Uitgewers, Wellington.
- Jonker, W.D., 1998, *Selfs die kerk kan verander*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad.
- Kapp, P.H., 2008, 'Botha, Pieter Willem', in F.E. Gaum (ed.), *Christelike Kernensiklopedie*, pp. 130–131, Lux Verbi, Wellington.
- Kerk en Samelewing* (KS), 1986, 'n Getuigenis van die Ned Geref Kerk, NG Sendingpers, Bloemfontein.
- Kerk en Samelewing* (KS), 1990, 'n Getuigenis van die Ned Geref Kerk, NG Sendingpers, Bloemfontein.
- Meiring, P.G.J., 1994, 'Johan Heyns – Man van die kerk', *Skrif en Kerk* 15/1, 177–184.
- Ned Geref Kerk 1982, 1986, 1994, 1998, *Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode*, Sl:sn.
- NG Kerk-Uitgewers, 1982, *Ons glo... Die Drie Formuliere van Eenheid en Ekumeniese Belydenisse*, NG Kerk-Uitgewers, Wellington.
- Pont, A.D., 1981, *Die historiese agtergronde van ons kerklike reg I*, HAUM, Pretoria.
- Prinsloo, D., 1997, *Stem uit die wildernis. 'n Biografie oor oud-president PW Botha*, Vaandel, Mosselbaai.
- Reformed Ecumenical Synod (REC), 1984, *Acts*, Sl:sn.
- Serfontein, J.H.P., 1982, *Apartheid change and the NG Church*, Taurus, Emmarentia.
- Stone, H., 2014, *Weerskant van die Rubicon*, FAK, Brandfort.
- Strauss, P.J., 1983, 'Die Ned Geref Kerk en die Gereformeerde Kerke in Nederland: Betrekkinge rondom die Suid-Afrikaanse rasvraagstuk', Ongepubliseerde DD-proefskrif, Universiteit van Pretoria.
- Strauss, P.J., 2002, 'Die NG Kerk en sy ekumeniese bande', in Du Toit et al. (eds.), *Moiesame pad na vernuwing – die NG Kerk se Isolasië en soeke na nuwe relevansie 1974–2002*, pp. 183–241, Barnabas, Bloemfontein.
- Strauss, P.J., 2004, 'Die teologiese en morele regverdiging van apartheid en 'n status confessionis: 'n Vergelyking tussen die Wêreldbond van Gereformeerde Kerke en die Gereformeerde Ekumeniese Sinode se hantering van die saak', *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 6, 96–121.
- Strauss, P.J., 2005, 'Belydenis, kerkverband en Belhar', *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 46/3 en 4, 560–575.

- Strauss, P.J., 2011, 'Kerk en samelewing in die dokumente "Kerk en samelewing" na 25 jaar', *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 52/3 en 4, 511–520.
- Strauss, P.J., 2013, *Kerkwees in die branding. Die Ned Geref Kerk in algemene sinodale verband 1994–2011*, Sunmedia, Bloemfontein.
- Strauss, P.J., 2015, *Gereformeerdes onder die Suiderkruis 1652–2011*, Sunmedia, Bloemfontein.
- Strauss, P.J., 2016, 'Die Ned Geref Kerk en die Afrikanervolk kerkordelik verwoord', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2(2).
- Strauss, P.J., 2018, *Wat het die Wêreldgemeenskap van Gereformeerde Kerke in 1998 en die Wêreldraad van Kerke in 2015 beweeg om die Ned Geref Kerk as lid terug te neem?* Ongepubliseer.
- Van der Merwe, J.M., 1990, "'Ras, volk en nasie" en "Kerk en samelewing" as beleidstukke van die Ned Geref Kerk – 'n kerkhistoriese studie', Ongepubliseerde DD-proefskrif, Universiteit van Pretoria.
- Van der Watt, P.B., 1988, 'Prof dr Johan Heyns – *anno sexagesimo*', in C.J. Wethmar & C.J.A. Vos (eds.), *'n Woord op sy tyd*, pp. 1–8, NG Kerk-Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Voortsettingskomitee, 1987, *Geloof en protes*, Aurora, Pretoria.
- Wêreldraad van Kerke Argief (WCC Archives), File 42.3.014/2.2.
- Wethmar, C.J. en Vos, C.J.A., 1988, *'n Woord op sy tyd*, NG Kerk-Boekhandel, Pretoria.
- Williams, H.H., 2006, 'JA Heyns en die Ned Geref Kerk en apartheid', Ongepubliseerde DTh-proefskrif, Universiteit van die Vrystaat.