The influence of Calvinism on South Africa's education system prior to 1994

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Abstract

In South Africa, Calvinism has exercised a profound influence on theology and this influence extended to education. Indeed, Calvinism played a major role in shaping a local education system which was adopted as a result of a specific political ideology. In this article, we intend to show how Calvinism was used to justify the superiority of one group of people over another through the education system. This article will look at the ideals of Calvin in South Africa in the context of formal education during the apartheid era, and offer a critique of formal education before 1994. It will be argued that, in his theology, Calvin himself emphasised healthy values such as accountability, communication, obedience, orderliness, lack of oppression, responsibility and the rule of law. However, these values were either ignored in the local version of Calvinist education, or applied from a racist perspective.

Introduction

Calvin's doctrine, philosophy and ideology had a great influence on South African theological circles. However, in South Africa, Calvinism also played a decisive role in shaping the education system which was, obviously, influenced by the pre-1994 political regime in South Africa.

This article focuses on the influence of Calvin's ideals, as embodied in local Calvinism, on South Africa's education system prior to 1994. Background information will be provided. This article argues that Calvin theologically visualised values such as accountability, communication, obedience, orderliness, lack of oppression, responsibility and the rule of law to be part of a child's upbringing. However, local Calvinism either ignored these values or used them in the service of a racist ideology.

Background information

Calvin (1509-1564) was born in Geneva, where he studied law, and only later became involved in theology; it was through his study of theology that he showed his keen interest in societal matters (Hams 1988; Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991; Van der Walt & Swanepoel 1995). He was to express his social ideals in his famous *Institutes of the Christian religion*.

As far as the democratic process within the church was concerned, Calvin stood for the creation of a church structure that avoided the oppression of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. However, he also retained, in his democratic structure, a degree of orderliness and maintained the necessity of the rule of law. In emphasising on the rule of law, Calvin claimed that each nation was free to tailor laws which suited its needs. However, he stressed that these laws needed to be based on eternal love. He further maintained that society needed civil government to help it to obey God's law (Hams 1988).

As part of his emphasis on the rule of law, Calvin identified three branches of civil administration: the magistrates, the law and the people. The former were regarded as serving an honourable calling. For example, a magistrate was regarded as "a father of the country, the shepherd of his people, the guardian of peace, the protector of righteousness, and the avenger of innocence" (Calvin, quoted in Hams 1988). That means that magistrates were, according to Calvin, the bearers of truth who could receive taxes and tributes, but who also passed sentences on ordinary citizens on behalf of God.

Calvin criticised the Catholic Church for its lack of accountability. His contention was that this lack of accountability among church leaders resulted in them directing people rather than leading them. In other words, Calvin believed that people should be led, not directed. In countering this problem, Calvin judged the clergy on the basis of whether they were helping to lead the laity to salvation (Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991). Calvin's approach, according to Zubly (2001), helped to reinstate accountability and

two-way communication into Christianity. The clergy's accountability to the people and the need for two-way communication, both features of Calvinism, contributed towards the political thinking of the day and encouraged the notion of political representation.

That said, Calvin was opposed to what might be called "direct democracy" (where each person has a vote). He was equally opposed to the appointment of clerical positions entirely at the behest of the church's hierarchy. Between these extremes, which tended towards either anarchy or oppression respectively, Calvin, according to Zubly (2001), advocated the election of the ministers and church officials. This was not direct democratic election as such, because the people themselves did not always have the sole right to elect whoever they wanted. However, those who were elected must be regarded as desirable appointees by the people themselves. In other words, according to Calvinism, electing officials helped to foster accountability and communication between the people and those who were elected.

Calvin understood and claimed that it was important to understand the "rule of law" (Pillay & Hofmeyr 1991; Zubly 2001). Although the rule of law was a relatively new idea during his era, Calvin formed his own conception of what it meant. He (somewhat vaguely) described the duties of both subjects (citizens) and magistrates. He also argued that Christians must uphold the rule of law by fulfilling their duty of being obedient citizens. This meant that they had to accept the status quo and not question it. Christians were expected to acknowledge their leaders as being ordained by God; in this way, they would show respect. Calvin's educational ideals should also be seen in the context of his time.

What is generally known as "Calvinism" is not only limited to the teachings of Calvin, but also includes the interpretation of theology by Calvin and his followers. One of Calvin's followers, in a later age, was Abram Kuyper (1837-1920) who became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Kuyper founded the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands and, two years later, established the Free University of Amsterdam.

Abram Kuyper had a great deal of influence on the Afrikaners' religious life in South Africa. During the struggle against church liberalism in Holland, Kuyper and his followers adopted the slogan "In isolation lies our strength" (Hams 1988). This slogan was intended to win the Dutch people back to the original Calvinism. It was never intended to propagate racial differences, but was used in Calvin mission work. In its original form, in fact, this slogan referred to isolation from sin and the world in order to serve God.

However, when Calvinism came to South Africa, the slogan "In isolation lies our strength" was adopted, by Afrikaner theologians, to local conditions. As a result the slogan was interpreted not in terms of mission, but in terms of survival (Hams 1988). For the Afrikaners, this meant building walls of separation around themselves and not interacting with the "strangers", these being people other than the Afrikaners. This separation was seen as God-given – like the Israelites, the Afrikaners regarded themselves as a nation chosen by God. In other words, according to Afrikaners, their survival depended on racial purity and loyalty to certain distinctive Afrikaner social institutions.

In the 1930s, a number of Afrikaners went to study at certain universities in Germany. Some of these students, when they returned to South Africa, dominated South African politics and social circles. These people included Dr HF Verwoerd, Dr Piet Meyer, Dr NJ Diederichs, and Dr Geoff Cronje. All these men were impressed by, and embraced, the ideology of German National Socialism. They later attempted to bring it to bear on the politics of South Africa (Hams 1988). However, they blended it with Abram Kuyper's ideas of "nationhood", and thus gave it the character of Christian Nationalism. This ideology was to have a long-lasting influence on formal education in South Africa.

Contextualising Calvinism in formal education

Calvin's theology gained popularity in many parts of the world. As an ideology, it was applied by its proponents in an attempt to actualise and advance their various ideologies. Education was seen and used as one of the strategies that would successfully propagate this ideology (Schulze 1992).

For Calvin, education was very important: according to Calvin, children were the descendants of Adam and thus born with a fallen human nature (Hams 1988). In essence, Calvinist education was aimed at restoring the image of God in the child. This meant that education must be Christian, since the Word of God formed the basis for learning. Christian education should therefore be based on the Word of God, which had the authority to regulate all spheres of human life. At the same time, Calvin acknowledged that God had written two books: the book of nature and the scriptures (Hams 1988).

Calvin's argument, as far as the book of nature was concerned, was that this book could only teach humanity an imperfect picture of God. To be understood properly, the book of nature needs a corrective guidance – and this corrective guidance is the scriptures. Hams (1988) says that Calvin viewed both books as being from God. Children must be provided with education because children are

gifts from God. The education provided for the child must be such that it prepares the child for this world and the world to come. The content of education must include the language of instruction, the human sciences, the natural sciences, and religion; the intention of education is to mould children into being good citizens and believing members of the church (Hams 1988).

Consequently, the followers of a specific ideology give content to education, with the result that a specific relationship between ideology and education comes into existence. This means education without ideology is of no value, and vice versa. Education was regarded as a powerful instrument that facilitates the development of a child on his or her way to adulthood (Schulze 1992).

In 1559, Calvin helped to establish, among other things, the College and Academy of Geneva (Schulze 1992). According to Schulze, Calvin's engagement with education showed common ground with some of the humanist ideals of his time. However, there were identifiable, basic differences between the two – such as combining classical *artes liberales* with the study of "God's Word". According to Schulze, Calvin's ideal was not to create "better people" through education, but to use education to form men and women who could be used in the kingdom of God. In Calvin's thought, "the kingdom of God" is, according to Schulze (1992), church and society.

As I said earlier on, Calvin stood for the creation of a church structure that avoided the oppression of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. This means that Calvin refused to align himself with any form of oppression, including the domination of one culture over another. Calvinism also avoided any form of oppression in formal schools.

That said, Calvin believed in orderliness and the rule of law. Calvin understood and maintained that it is important to understand the "rule of law" which he contextualised to suit what he regarded as the needs of the people.

To Calvin, the rule of law was a way of maintaining order within a community and society at large. This obviously had implications for formal schools in that the latter (formal schools) – as part of the bigger society – were expected to accept guidelines which originated in the rule of law. Schools also had to adhere to these in order to maintain order (own opinion). Calvin argued that Christians must uphold the rule of law by fulfilling their duty of obedience – this meant accepting, and not questioning, the status quo.

Calvin's ideal was to foster accountability and communication between the people and those who were elected to rule over them. In contextualising this notion to formal education, learners, teachers and all other education officials had to be accountable and communicate with those who were elected as their seniors. They were expected to refer to and use accountability and communication as a two-way reciprocal process.

Calvinism in formal education in South Africa (prior to 1994)

When the National Party took over the governance of South Africa in 1948, the state made sure that it introduced and legislated apartheid policies in all sectors of government, including the education sector. The Nationalist government introduced legislated separate education system for the various racial groups in South Africa. The Acts passed included, among others, the introduction of Bantu Education Act of 1953 (www.gov.za accessed on the 10 September 2009). This Act was based on the principles of Christian National Education (CNE) – a brain child of the same government. However, it is also important to note that other forces such as the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB) are now suspected to have been the power behind the introduction of apartheid legislation (Van Zyl 2009).

Van Zyl (2009) also maintains that Calvinism was used to influence formal education in South Africa. The Nationalist apartheid government of South Africa used and tailored certain Calvinist ideals to suit its needs and to justify the implementation of an apartheid education system. These included the ideals identified and discussed below. No one in South Africa was expected to oppose the introduction of apartheid legislation. Instead, the rule of law was supposed to be upheld unquestioningly, just as Calvin had proposed and emphasised.

Abram Kuyper's slogan "In isolation lies our strength" was also used to justify the establishment of Christian National Education in South Africa. In fact, this followed immediately after the Anglo-Boer War: Afrikaners were encouraged to start their own private Christian schools (Hams 1988). After 1948, however, the idea of creating Afrikaans language schools was abandoned in favour of infiltrating existing public schools with the ideology of Christian National Education (CNE). After 1948, the Federasie van Afrikaans Kultuurveregening (FAK) (literally translated as Federation of Afri- kaans Cultural Independence) organised a Volkskongres (literally translated as "national congress") on Christian National Education. This, in turn, resulted in the foundation of Instituut vir Christelike Nasionale Onderwys (literally translated as Institute for Christian National Teachers). This Institute published a declaration document which laid down the principles of Christian National Education. The

document emphasised that education had to be Christian in nature and that is had to be based on Calvin's theology. To the Afrikaners of the time, this meant, in turn, that they were all obliged to be aware of themselves as a nation.

However, the South African government then viewed and interpreted this selectively to mean separate development on the basis of race, colour, creed and gender. This was endorsed through the Dutch Reformed Church and justified scripturally to mean that non-Afrikaners must accept the rule of law that discriminated against them, including discrimination in the sphere of education.

According to these principles, all learners and teachers in officially registered government schools were supposed to be Christians. They were further expected to uphold and behave in accordance with Christian principles. That is, as Christians, learners and teachers were expected to uphold the rule of law by fulfilling their duties of being obedient – accept things as they are without questioning.

To repeat: Calvin stood for the creation of a church structure that avoided the oppression of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. Calvin propagated the church order in Geneva which, centuries later in South Africa, was wrongly applied and, in fact, applied in a way that was in direct contradiction to Calvin's teachings.

Calvin also emphasised orderliness and the rule of law. In South Africa, these were understood as a way of maintaining the status quo (in this case racial division was viewed as part of order). In other words, the rule of law meant that people were to accept the social structure and the state of governance as they found it and not oppose it. In the schools the same structure was in place and both learners and teachers were not supposed to question it.

Calvin also believed in accountability and communication between the people and those who were elected. In Calvin's perspective, accountability and communication involved interaction between the people and those who governed. This meant that people must be prepared to account for their deeds and communicate with one another openly, as moral human beings.

Calvin understood and maintained that it was important to understand the "rule of law" which he contextualised to suit what he regarded as the needs of the people. The rule of law is meant to ensure that people (and Christians) must be the custodian of the rule of law and that all are governed equally by the same law. This law is supposed to be applied both to Christians and non-Christians in civil society. During the apartheid era, the South African government used this concept selectively to perpetuate division between civilians on the basis of race. The same principle was applied in the education system, with the introduction of Bantu Education and other education legislation (www.gov.za accessed on 30th October 2009).

Again, Calvin had argued that Christians must uphold the rule of law by being obedient to those in authority – and accept things as they are without questioning them. Calvin also advocated the principle of Christian government through the order of the church; however, this was misinterpreted, in South Africa, by the proponents of his ideology to entrench or enforce obedience, upon society, into accepting racial division both in society and the education system.

In Calvin's time, the ideology of Calvinism was freely accepted by many and thus gained both momentum and increasing popularity. As an ideology, it was applied by its proponents in an attempt to actualise and advance their respective ideologies. Education, among other things, was used as a way of doing this.

As a result, education became a vehicle for ideology and this, in turn, means the establishment of a specific relationship between ideology and education. In short, education without ideology is of no value – and vice versa. In Calvinist thought, education was regarded as a powerful instrument that facilitated the child's development on his or her way to adulthood.

A critique of Calvinism in South Africa's formal education system prior to 1994

Calvin did not advocate a specific lifestyle. That is, he did not dictate how people should lead their lives. However, he did set forth a set of ideals, and these ideals centred on accountability, communication, obedience, orderliness, lack of oppression, responsibility and the rule of law (Pretorius 1986; Hams 1988; Tolsma 1989; Schulze 1992; Zubly 2001; www.gov.za accessed on 17 July 2009).

South Africa's apartheid education system propagated some of these ideals. However, some it adopted and tailored to suit the ideals of the government of the time (www.gov.za accessed on 17 July 2009). South Africa's education system was, as I have said above, based on Christian National Education (CNE) principles which, its proponents claimed, originated in Calvinism. However, even a casual examination of the Christian National Education (CNE) policy shows that this system was a serious distortion of Christianity. Apart from anything else, this system merged Christianity with nationalism and thus made the two inseparable. In other words, it created the impression that whoever

rejected Afrikaner nationalism also rejected Christianity. It also created the impression that God was no more than the Volk-god of the Afrikaner nation, and thus made God the author of segregation (Hams 1988).

When I elaborate further on Calvin's ideals, I shall discuss some of them as one unit, simply because their meanings are so similar. For example, accountability and responsibility will be discussed as one ideal, as will the rule of law and orderliness.

Accountability and responsibility

The apartheid South African education system emphasised, among other things, accountability and responsibility. For example, the Bantu Education Act, which was interpreted in accordance to the "doctrine of Calvin", had to be adhered to. Black African teachers were allowed to teach Black African learners in Blacks-only residential areas. They were also provided with syllabuses over which they had had no say and which they were expected to teach unquestioningly. School boys were expected to learn, for example, wood work and gardening, while girls had to learn sewing and domestic science (www.gov.za accessed on 27 July 2009).

This arrangement was obviously a double-edged knife: one that was based on gender discrimination as well as racial discrimination. For example, those who studied wood work, gardening, sewing and domestic science were being prepared to accept positions of subservience in the labour market. Blacks were not encouraged to study school subjects such as accountancy, mathematics, physical science, etc. Teachers who carried out these instructions unquestioningly and learners who learnt unquestioningly were regarded as accountable and responsible. Anyone who questioned the syllabus or its content was regarded as anti-Christian, revolutionary and thus relegated to the category of "communist".

Communication

During the apartheid era, communication was understood in a very specific way. It was very much top-down communication. It was also referred to as "one-way communication". That is, announcements, directives, instructions, etc. were disseminated from senior government officials to subordinates and people in South Africa in all spheres of society, which obviously included schools (www.gov.za accessed on 27th July 2009). This communication was, in many instances, discriminatory in nature as a result of the racial segregation between the different education departments. Black Africans were, for example, forced to accept and trust, without question, the origin and objectivity of the information contained in the syllabus. Anyone who rejected this form of communication was considered to be unruly and, by extension, a communist. This view led to the life sentences given out to people such as Dr Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and many others (Mandela 1995). Certain biblical texts, such as Mark 9:38-50 and Matthew 5:13-16, were cited to justify this type of top-down communication.

Obedience

Both Black African learners and students from other race groups were told to obey unquestioningly. Students were expected to obey all instructions, which were usually imparted in the form of one-way communication. Du Plessis (1935) and Janssen (1940) were among those who maintained that one of the ways of inculcating obedience in South African society was to Christianise "natives" (Black Africans) through education. They also believed that education would help Black Africans abandon their "heathendom". Du Plessis and Janssen also argued that Black Africans needed to be acculturated and converted from heathendom to Christianity through the introduction and implementation of Christian National Education (CNE) policy.

Critical thinking, which involves asking questions such as "what?", "when?", "who?", and "why?", etc. (Freire 1972), was unacceptable according to those officials in charge of the various departments of education at the time. Students had to accept and learn subject content without questioning it. The notion of "ask no questions and you'll be told no lies" was emphasised. For example, neither teachers nor learners were allowed to question the selective choice of learning content in South African history and literature. Any learner or teacher who questioned the authority, authenticity and system of education was seen as disobedient: teachers who did so risked job loss, and learners who did so risked dismissal.

Orderliness and the rule of law

In Calvin's context, orderliness and the rule of law were key principles in Christianity (Hams 1988; Sinnema in Swanepoel & Van der Walt 1995; Zubly 2001). Both these values were embraced by proponents of the apartheid regime. However, both these values were very much distorted to suit the ideals and needs of the apartheid system (www.gov.za accessed on 28 July 2009).

      The rule of law in the South African education system was based on racial discrimination. That is, learners from different racial backgrounds were expected to attend racially segregated schools. They were thus expected, as part of the process, to adhere to the rule of law and follow the rules and regulations laid down by the different education departments.

      Orderliness and the rule of law, in turn, reinforced racial discrimination in the South African education system. For example, Bantu education offered, among other school subjects, those which encouraged Black people to take up subservient positions in the labour market. These included domestic science, gardening, sewing, woodwork, and so on (www.gov.za accessed on 28 July 2009). Mathematics and natural science subjects were, like certain other school subjects, not promoted in Black schools. On the other hand, the department of education for whites offered subjects such as accountancy, economics, science, technical subjects (electricity and metal work), electronics, and so on at an early stage of schooling (www.gov.za accessed on 28 July 2009). In short, the South African education system used Calvin's values of orderliness and the rule of law to exacerbate and maintain an oppressive regime. In fact, Calvin's ideal was the exact opposite of this; the use of the rule of law to create and establish a non-oppressive and non-discriminatory society.

A non-oppressive society

As I have said repeatedly in this article, Calvin put forward the notion of a just and non-oppressive society. He specifically did not justify a society that practised the oppression of one person by another (Hams 1988; Zubly 2001), notwithstanding the fact that he was not explicit in his ideals as far as equality was concerned. The South African education system, of course, was designed to establish and maintain white supremacy (Hams 1988). This was obvious when one looked at the different curricula on offer from the different departments of education. According to Tolsma (1989), people educate their children according to their philosophy of life. These philosophies are based, says Tolsma, on preferred norms and values. In South Africa, however, many learners had no option but to enrol and study what was offered in a particular school. This also included accepting the school's medium of instruction.

      A critical analysis of Calvinism in South Africa's formal education system prior to 1994 leads to the conclusions discussed below.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above research, one can conclude that, prior to 1994, Calvinism was misinterpreted by the apartheid government to justify legal racial segregation in South Africa's education system. Calvin himself never encouraged oppression, racism, separate development and lack of accountability.

      Instead, Calvin's system was based on accountability and responsibility. That is, all citizens are required to be accountable and exercise responsibility in all that they do. Calvin also believed in the establishment of a non-oppressive society. In his view, no group of people in a society was supposed to oppress another. Orderliness, the rule of law, communication and obedience were indeed his ideals, but Calvin advocated a society whose members were obedient to, and communicated respectfully with, each other. Calvin also advocated a society which was orderly and which observed the rule of law – but this was to happen on all levels of society and at all times. All the above factors were, in Calvin's ideal, interwoven and all worked to constitute a progressive society based on accepted norms and values. These values also constituted the core of an ideal education system in Calvin's vision of society.

      If it had applied Calvin's teachings appropriately in South Africa, the government of the time could have established a non-oppressive society, a society based on equality for everybody and the rule of law. Orderliness, communication and obedience could have been propagated in government policy and this, in turn, would have facilitated the creation of a quality education system.

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