

**Van der Walt, B J & Naudé, C F B – Christianity and democracy in South Africa: A vision for the future**

Potchefstroom: PU for CHE. Institute for Reformational Studies. 37 Pages. Price: R35,00 p.a.

**Reviewer: Rev M J Manala**

In the three chapters – which represent three lectures, the first two by Prof B J van der Walt and the final one by Dr C F B Naudé, – the booklet reveals a serious effort toward finding a way in which Christianity could play a role in assisting the building and sustenance of a viable democracy, and establishing a clear vision for the future. The three lectures presented at the conference on Christianity and Democracy in South Africa, hosted by the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education from 10th to 12th July, 1996, give useful insights into required political responsibilities of Christians in the new South African political dispensation.

**CONTENTS**

Prof B J van der Walt, in his first lecture, answering the question: “Why Christianity”, suggests a not too close church-state relationship which he calls a “critical constructive engagement”. Christianity can and must play a role in politics through the presence of individual Christians in political matters like salt, leaven and light, equipping Christians for political responsibility and ecumenical co-operation in Christian political organisations.

At the hand of the question “Why democracy”, Prof Van der Walt examines the kind of state that is envisaged, based on Christian perspectives. He distinguishes a common religion state, a common language state, a nation state, a welfare state and a power state. Rejecting the first four kinds, he opts for what he terms a limited power state.

Although democracy in South African is based on sound democratic principles, Prof Van der Walt rightly observes a serious problem for Christians, in that the sovereignty of God over government has been replaced with the will of the people. The absolute power of God, he argues, must be affirmed in the South African democracy.

Taking the matter further the writer, after arguing against the autonomy and absoluteness of the people's authority, power or will, points out that the recognition of the God-placed limits to the exercise of power is the most effective safeguard against the degeneration of state power into tyranny. Such absolute authority, albeit that of the majority, may lead to rebellion against God. Christians' involvement in politics as watch dogs to ensure public justice is thus highly necessary.

Prof Van der Walt pleads for a rejection of statism and a depoliticisation of society. By this he means allowing other societal relationships like those involving the family, school, church et cetera to flourish independently of state intervention and dominance. The state must play an empowering rather than a dominating role. The presence of God in the democratic dispensation lies in a movement from human rights towards concrete restoration of people to their full humanity, through socio-economic and developmental intervention, observes Prof Van der Walt, rightly.

In the last part of his first lecture Van der Walt asks the question “Why South Africa” and points to South Africa as the address to which not only words but also action must be directed in attempts to build capacity for democracy.

In his second lecture, Prof Van der Walt (using diagrams) brings out in a vivid manner the essence of his first paper, to which enough attention has already been given above.

The last chapter is the conference's closing paper by Dr C F B Naudé, in which he shares his vision for the future.

Dr Naudé starts by identifying two factors which in his view could become obstacles in the way towards the concretisation of the vision of a just and peaceful democracy. These potential obstacles, which need to be recognised and addressed effectively, are:

1. The differences between the traditionally African and Western concepts of Christianity and democracy; and
2. The differences between the various confessions of churches who all subscribe to the same Christian faith.

The vision that Dr Naudé shares is:

1. A vision which has to be shared with other Christians and with other faiths. He argues that the vision of a new South Africa based on sound religious and moral values can only become real when it is shared with the clergy, the grassroot Christians as well as with other faiths.
2. A vision of the prophetic role of the church in a new South Africa: the vision of a situation in which the united church in obedience to its task, supports state policies and programmes which are in agreement with values of truth, justice and peace, but also without reservation condemns in loving concern the state violation of these values.
3. A vision of economic justice: the bringing about of a reasonable economic balance (reduced gap) between the rich and the poor; the spread of wealth beyond racial boundaries. This Dr Naudé believes could reduce the potential for tension and ensure a peaceful democratic dispensation.
4. The vision of a non-racist society: racism is the surest obstacle to a successful democracy. It must be recognised that it takes long to ultimately overcome racism even in an institutionalised non-racial society.
5. A vision of truth, reconciliation and restitution: the church should be involved in assisting the process of discovering the truth about the past perpetration of political violations that caused deep hurt and pain to others, and in efforts to determine the nature and extent of restitution. This is necessary because the process will help diffuse anger, bitterness and remove despair, and thus help create a country of peace, tolerance and justice as well as a conducive environment for the proclamation of the Gospel.
6. The vision of a united Christian witness: unity in spirituality and witness, inspired by the Holy Spirit is vital for the church in her proclamation of the Kingdom of God, taking advantage also of modern technological and scientific developments which help bring the world together (into a global village).

## ***Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews***

### **COMMENTS**

First, I would like to express my appreciation for the seriousness about and enthusiasm for a better and more equitable South African political dispensation revealed in the book from both writers. One discerns a remarkable balance of thought in the book. The simple language and style makes it accessible to many people, which is a real advantage in an attempt to share the vision of a better South Africa with a wide spectrum of people. It is not religiously offensive and can thus also be used by people of other faiths.

My points of criticism are:

1. Although acknowledged, no apology is offered for Christians' past use of the Bible to promote and defend the evil system of Apartheid.
2. No reference is made to non-sexism.
3. Formation of Christian political parties is in my view a form of societal division and smacks of religious discrimination. I believe Christians should exert influence within existing and new all-inclusive political parties. No form of escapism will produce the desired results.

This notwithstanding the book is a good source of guidance on Christian involvement in political activities as part of their task and responsibility.

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