

# The Trauma of Secularisation in Afrikaans Reformed Churches

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## Abstract

On 18 July 2018, a column was published in a South African newspaper, *Beeld*, in which the authors present the results of interviews conducted with members of Afrikaans Reformed Churches in South Africa. The interviewees reported the trauma they had experienced with the church changing its symbols, which the interviewees experienced as “secularisation.” Where the church is regarded as a place congregants visit for support in times of uncertainty and anxiety, in this case it has become the source of trauma. Interviewees expressed trauma wherever the following occurred: 1) well-known liturgies, symbols, and songs are replaced with “worldly” ones; 2) electronic music replaces the organ; 3) the pulpit is removed; 4) the pastor becomes an entertainer; and 5) office bearers dress casually. This column was also published in affiliated Afrikaans newspapers *Die Burger* and *Volksblad*, which provoked massive reaction in letters to the newspapers. This article reports on the reaction from writers under the following headings: 1) feelings of discomfort and estrangement from the church; 2) feelings of lost holiness; 3) concerns that a sacred space has been violated; 4) anger because symbols as powerful expressions of faith connecting one to God, have been removed from the church; 5) ageing church-goers are being blamed for keeping the church from renewing; 6) accusations that liturgy pointing to the Word of God is being changed; 7) warnings that the church exists by virtue of being different from the world. The article concludes by situating the trauma presented by the letter writers in the tension between tradition and modernity, a tension that is reportedly experienced at present at high levels in Afrikaans Reformed Churches.

**Keywords:** secularisation; liturgical change; renewal in the church; trauma and change in the church; electronic music in the church; tradition and modernity



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## Introduction: Aim, Background, Literary Review<sup>1</sup>

### **Aim and Background**

One of the authors (Landman 2018) has been a columnist for the daily South African newspaper *Beeld* for more than 40 years. She publishes monthly under *Godsdiens-Aktueel* (Religion Actuality) on religious matters. While *Beeld* is published in the northern parts of South Africa, it is affiliated to *Die Burger*, published in the south of the country, and *Volksblad*, which caters for the central areas of the country—namely, the Free State and Northern Cape Provinces. Together, these three daily newspapers cover most of the country. The readership is Afrikaans-speaking White and Brown people who belong primarily to (mainline) Afrikaans Reformed Churches.

The aim of this article is to record and thematise the responses to a column published by this author on 18 July 2018 in *Beeld* and repeated in both *Die Burger* and *Volksblad*. The heading of this particular column was “Trauma vir Lidmate as Kerk Wêrelds Raak” (Trauma for Members when the Church becomes like the World). The column contained the voices of a variety of people interviewed by this author (Landman 2018, 13) on how they feel about the “secularisation” of the church, especially vis-à-vis electronics used in the church. The voices are not identified in the column, and in this article, they will remain unidentified. In the thematisation and interpretation of the data it is specified that the people’s voices, which were quoted, were mainly from White Afrikaans-speaking Reformed churches, especially from the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

The following are extracts from the column (Landman 2018, 13), provided here with subheadings:

- **A woman describes the negative reaction of her husband to electronic music in the church:** “My man het al hoe stiller in die kerk geword hoe harder en meer elektronies die musiek geword het. Toe het hy by die huis gesit en geweier om verder oor die kerk te praat. Iets is uit sy lewe weggeruk.” (My husband became more quiet in the church as the electronic music became louder. He now refuses to go to church or to discuss it. Something has been torn from his life.)
- **A young man of 30 describes the effect on himself of the removal of religious symbols from the church and the change in the presentation of sermons:** “Daar is nie meer 'n preekstoel in ons kerk nie. Daar is so 'n platform voor in die kerk soos in enige saal. Dis nie meer 'n kerk nie. Die dominee staan en grappies maak om ons te *entertain*. My pa sê hy luister liewers na 'n heruitsending van Spies en Plessis. Dis 'n groot verlies. Die kerk het homself by ons gesteel.” (The pulpit has been removed from the church. There is now a platform in front, as in any other hall. It

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1 This article is based on a paper delivered at the annual conference of the Church History Society of Southern Africa, held at the University of Stellenbosch from 11 to 13 August 2022. The theme of the conference was “The Church and New Technologies from Colonial Times to the Present Day,” and the title of the paper was “The Trauma of Secularisation in Afrikaans-speaking Churches.”

is no longer a church. The dominee tells jokes to entertain us. My father says he would rather listen to a rebroadcast of “Spies en Plessis” [two Afrikaans storytellers and comedians]. It is a great loss. The church has stolen herself from us.)

- **A woman complains about the informal appearance of office bearers:** “Ons het hier in 'n gemeente ingetrek en gaan toe kerk toe met ons kerkkleren aan. Daar kry ons toe die dominee met sy sloffies en oopslaanhemp, en die kerkraad wat aan die Nagmaalstafel sit met kortbroeke. Ons wil nie hê die dominee moet soos ons lyk nie. Ons wil nie hê die dominee moet soos ons wees nie. Hy moet soos 'n gestuurde lyk en die kerk moet juis nie 'n *common* plek wees nie. Ons soek na 'n kerk waar ons soos gesalfdes kan voel.” (We moved into a new congregation and went to church wearing our church clothes. The dominee wears sandals and an open shirt. The church council sits around the eucharistic table wearing short pants. We don't want the dominee to look like us. He must look like somebody sent by God. Also, the church must not look like or be a common place. We are looking for a church where we feel like the anointed.)
- **A pastor says that they follow the usual practices in church, resulting in the congregation growing:** “Iemand vertel my nou die dag van 'n gemeente wat goed groei. Hy gaan toe die jongerige dominee besoek om te hoor wat is sy wenresep. Die dominee sê toe dat hulle die bekende liturgie volg wat almal spontaan ken. Die orrel speel en almal sing soos hulle kan. Hy preek uit die Bybel ‘So sê die Here’ so goed hy kan. So groei die gemeente. Mense sê hulle voel veilig daar.” (I visited a congregation that is growing well. The dominee says it is because they follow the well-known liturgy. An organ is played. People sing as well as they can. He preaches, “So says the Lord” [not any liberal stuff]. The people feel safe there. The congregation grows.)
- **Finally, the columnist (Landman 2018, 13) refers to research proving that secularisation can be traumatising:** “Wêreldwye navorsing bewys dat kerke wat roekeloos en desperaat moderniseer, traumatiseer meer lidmate as wat hulle lidmate wen.” (Research all over the world proves that churches which recklessly and desperately modernise, traumatise more congregants than winning new members.)

The columnist (Landman 2018, 13), in short, presents the voices of interviewees who expressed trauma wherever the following occurred: 1) well-known liturgies, symbols, and songs are replaced; 2) electronic music replaces the organ; 3) the pulpit is removed; 4) the pastor becomes an entertainer; and 5) office bearers dress casually.

## Literature Review and Unique Contribution

The issue of secularisation and the church is indeed not new, as is evident from one of the publications by Johan Heyns in 1969 on the history of secularisation and its impact on theology, *Sterwende Christendom? 'n Teologie in die Greep van die Tydsgees* (Dying Christendom? Theology caught up in the Spirit of our Age) and a follow-up publication in 1982 on the impact of secularisation on ethics, *Teologiese Eتيك* (Heyns 1982) (Theological Ethics). De Villiers (2018, 1) refers to Heyns's definition of secularisation

as a process whereby “human beings discovered the worldliness and laws of the world and became aware of their own power to use these laws to arrange the physical world and society according to their own wishes” (Heyns 1969, 21–22). Heyns further strongly expressed his view that one can refer to secularisation as “immanentism or horizontalism” in that “all relationships with a world transcending this reality must be regarded as completely severed” and unacceptable in Reformed theology (De Villiers 2018, 1; Heyns 1969, 21–22).

In 2015, Jaco Beyers published an interesting article on “Self-secularisation as Challenge to the Church” in which he referred specifically to the Afrikaans-speaking churches in South Africa. Beyers (2015, 2) observes that amongst these churches there are those who consciously change their practices from being sacred to becoming secular. Beyers (2015, 5), in particular, notes that the (franchising) church no longer preaches to further the formation of faith, but to entertain. Since the church is the culprit, Beyers (2015, 10) suggests that it is the church itself that “needs to stop turning itself into a secularised institution.”

In the previous year, 2014, Pieter Kruger (with the study leader for his doctoral thesis, Johan van der Merwe) published his research in an article entitled “Die Invloed van Sekularisasie op die NG Kerk: ’n Kerkhistories-sosiologiese Perspektief” (The Influence of Secularisation on the DR Church: A Church Historical and Sociological Perspective). It contains a sub-section on “Verandering van die Institusionele Religieuse Ruimte” (Change in the Institutionalised Religious Space), which describes changes in liturgy and preaching as forms of secularisation, but not really as major ones (Kruger and Van der Merwe 2014, 652). However, it does point to the fact that it is difficult for congregations to find an ideal position between (secularised) renewal and the *status quo*, since the feeling remains that the religious identity of the congregation is weakened through change (Kruger and Van der Merwe 2014, 652).

In 2017, Kruger and Van der Merwe further published an article on “The Dutch Reformed Church as a Prominent, Established South African Church: In Transition towards the 21st Century.” In this article they refer to empirical research which indicates that the “DR Church members’ personal spheres of religion are more important than the collective, institutionalised sphere of religion” (Kruger and Van der Merwe 2017, 5).

If this “institutionalised sphere of religion” includes the church building as sacred space, the present article will tend to prove more or less the opposite by presenting voices that:

1. Claim to be traumatised by secular changes in the church as sacred space; and
2. Indicate that their personal spirituality is strongly connected to what is happening in the institutional church.

Research on the secularisation of Afrikaans Reformed Churches, such as the above, makes a powerful statement on the spiritual status of these churches today. However,

the research proves to be meagre in listening to the voices of the congregants who experience themselves as traumatised by secularisation in the church building itself.

It is in this regard that this article intends to make a contribution.

## Voices by Social Scientists on the Traumatization of Believers

The authors wish to refer here to studies on the socio-psychological effects of trauma resulting from religious change on believers. This is to profile the concept of *trauma* used in this article. No socio-psychological interpretation of the voices of the research population will be done in this article.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2023), trauma can be defined as any distressing experience that results in feelings of helplessness, detachment or disconnectedness, confusion, or fear. It also includes any other feelings that an individual experiences so intensely that it can have a long-lasting negative impact on his or her attitudes and behaviour. A traumatic event can be caused by, for example, nature, negative human behaviour towards a person or group, as well as any event that affects a person's concept of the world as fair, safe, and predictable.

Over recent decades, psychological studies have tended to focus on the positive impact of religion on mental health and well-being. However, limited studies report on the negative impact religion can have. Social science practitioners refer to this as religious trauma, or as has been coined by Winell in 2012 (cited in Stone 2013, 324) as the "religious trauma syndrome." This syndrome refers to the emotional distress and anxiety a person experiences due to factors that impact their beliefs and belief system (Stone 2013, 324). Religious trauma occurs when the safety, solace, and comfort that one's religion, religious practice, traditions, and church or institution used to provide, or are supposed to provide, change to such an extent that one is left with feelings of betrayal, hurt, and confusion (Johnston 2021, 11; Zarzycka and Zietek 2019, 1073).

South Africa (SA) is regarded as a traumatised country where citizens have to deal with various forms of trauma caused by high levels of crime, economic, financial and social challenges, and political tension on a daily basis (Dreyer 2020; Magezi and Manda 2016). During these times, the religious revert to what they know to relieve feelings of despair and helplessness, such as their belief system, church, fellow believers, and religious practices they share as a collective (Dreyer 2020, 5). Various studies, as reported, among others by Dreyer (2020, 3) and Magezi and Manda (2016), reveal South Africa as "a deeply traumatised community where each person has a traumatic story to tell about themselves, their friends, or their family" (Magezi and Manda 2016, 2).

So, where does one turn to if the known and trusted sacred space is what causes distrust and disbelief? What happens if the hurt and despondency are caused by fellow believers, indifferences and conflicting messages and practices in the church, and clergy? What if believers feel that they have no control over changes which can occur over time or due

to a sudden event, and as some experience it, the secularisation of their church traditions, religious rituals, practices, and symbols? These feelings of helplessness and discontent often result in anger towards God, the church as institution, and the church community (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019, 1073). The believers start fostering feelings of guilt and fear because of their anger towards God, as well as the church, the community they share their spiritual lives with, and what used to be cherished as special memories to them.

These feelings of conflict can escalate to spiritual and religious trauma that negatively impacts on a person's well-being and even results in symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Koenig, Ames, and Pearce 2020, 19; Panchuk 2015, 506; Zarzycka and Zietek 2019, 1073). The trauma incurred by the changes mentioned in what a person regards as the one sacred, safe space can trigger symptoms that lead to various forms of emotional, psychological, and behavioural problems. With religious trauma it is more than often external factors beyond one's control that lead to feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and depression. Those factors accumulate in causing tension between the sacred and the profane, and a conflict between safety and unsafety that intensifies the trauma experienced by congregants.

Typical PTSD symptoms can potentially be highly debilitating. This can lead to emotions escalating beyond the church environment to family, work, and other social relations. Social scientists and social-cognitive theorists refer to this as religious harm where this form of trauma affects a person's identity, and more so, religious identity, self-belief, trust, and view of and position in the world (Wortmann, Park, and Edmondson 2011). These effects are experienced as harmful and painful, and due to feelings of helplessness can lead to the inability to effectively regulate and process emotions of, for example, fear and sadness, also referred to as "emotional dysregulation" (Panchuk 2018, 510). This can also lead to an inability to express or experience emotions, also referred to as "restriction of range of affective" and often results in guilt and self-blame (Panchuk 2018, 510).

Franks (2022, 7) expands on the many views and commentaries where secularisation, if regarded in a political sense, describes the "separation of church and state in a polity and perhaps also freedom of conscience, plus equality under the law regardless of religious faith." She further comments that secularity is "not so much the absence of *religion* as the absence of the *transcendent divine*." It is exactly when confronted with these different views that Christians find themselves confused. Where the safe, familiar space of one's religion and church has become estranged and conflicting, it can result in destabilising the individual's religious identity (Franks 2022, 5).

Religion and religious affiliation potentially assist in coping, alleviating anxiety, and promoting a sense of security in times of uncertainty and doubt. The opposite is, however, also experienced where, for example, the unwelcome secularisation of the church has a negative psychological impact on an individual, which can result in the incapacity to deal effectively with those adverse effects. In those situations, any

despondency and aggression towards the church can be regarded as anger towards God, and the believer has no way out and cannot revert to a “fight-or-flight” response (Panchuk 2018, 509). Often, believers feel trapped in the situation and revert to isolating themselves, refraining from engaging in the usual church practices, and becoming apathetic.

The trauma of the uncertainty and conflict of how to deal with the situation, and the inability to respond to these external factors, which disturb the known in one’s sacred space, can be the source of a continuous “internal struggle” detrimental to the individual’s mental health and well-being (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019, 1073). When trying to balance living according to one’s religious beliefs, traditions, and convictions with the new rules and practices introduced by that religion and religious institution, the situation often results in guilt and fear that God will not forgive one’s failures (Zarzycka and Zietek 2019, 1073).

## Research Population and Interpretation

The research population of this article comprises the writers of hundreds of letters received by *Beeld*, *Die Burger*, and *Volksblad* after the publication of a column on 18 July 2018 (Landman 2018, 13), which contained the voices of congregants reporting trauma as their church changed its symbols, liturgies, and preaching. Most of these letter writers are anonymous. Those containing names are treated in this article as being anonymous too. There is no information available, nor can it be retrieved, on the age or church affiliation of the letter writers.

Two presuppositions about the research population are made:

1. From the description of traditional church practices now lost, the letter writers belong(ed) to one of the Afrikaans Reformed Churches in South Africa, that is: the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika (Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa); the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk in Afrika (Netherdutch Reformed Church in Africa); and the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika (Reformed Churches in South Africa, popularly known as the “Dopperkerk”).
2. The letter writers wish to belong to a religious community that offers access through its traditional symbols (including the liturgy and preaching) to a transcendental reality. Changing/secularising these symbols leads to the church no longer being seen as the access point to God, leaving the congregants homeless and traumatised.

## How should these Voices against Secularisation be Interpreted?

Solely based on the experience of the authors—one as an academic historian and the other as an independent researcher in the social sciences—three ways of interpretation are possible:

1. A first method of interpretation is to expose the agendas informing the letter writers as research population. These agendas may be political, spiritual, or any other agenda driving the writer. A political agenda may, for instance, be that the writer feels that by changing the symbols of the church, the church is adapting to a post-apartheid drive to paralyse the church and rob it of its identity of being Afrikaans and Reformed. The authors choose not to follow this route as a primary method of interpretation, being aware of the caveat “interpretation is colonisation.” Of course, eventually, the data will be placed in a historical and, therefore, slightly interpretive context.
2. A second method of interpretation is to give the data through to the reader without mediating the data. The authors choose this route.
3. A third method is to arrange the data according to themes that are present in the data itself. The authors choose to follow this route as well, combining it with the second method mentioned here, and thematise the unmediated data.

In short, then, the authors will present the data—that is, the letters from traumatised writers—unmediated, arranged under themes presented by the letters themselves.

Eventually, the unmediated but thematised data will be situated within the following tensions previously identified by researchers on the said churches:

1. The tension between tradition and modernity (Rossouw 2017).
2. The tension between the church as sacred space and secular space (Hofmeyr 2020).
3. The tension between doctrine and liturgy (Spoelstra 2004).

## Thematization of Responses

In this subsection, the responses of the letter writers are selected and arranged under seven themes.

These themes are based on Landman’s experience of Afrikaans Reformed spirituality, into which she was confirmed at the age of 15. She is now an ordained Minister of the Word in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, previously a “daughter church” of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa under the name NG Sendingkerk (Dutch Reformed Mission Church).

## Discomfort and Estrangement

Under this theme, the research population—that is, the letter writers—described feeling estranged, uncomfortable, and even dehumanised in the church where they had previously felt that they belonged:

1. Die kerk is bankrot. Die preekstoel is afgebreek. Die orrel is deur lawaaimusiek vervang. Die vrouehulpdiens is ontbind. Die onnodige veranderinge het ons ontuis en ongemaklik laat voel. Dit was 'n kerk met 6 predikante en drie vol dienste elke Sondag.



Nou is dit leeg. Op 70 is ek kerkloos. (The church is bankrupt. The pulpit has been broken down. The organ has been replaced by noisy music. The Women's Ministry has been disbanded. These are unnecessary changes that make us feel unwelcome and uncomfortable. This was a church with six dominees and three full services every Sunday. Now it is empty. I am 70 and without a church.)

2. Die kerk voel vreemd. (The church feels strange.)
3. Ek is ook een van die getraumatiseerde beswaardes. (I am also one of the traumatised, concerned congregants.)
4. Wanneer God ontgod word, voel ek ontmens. (When God has been un-Godded, I feel un-humanised.)
5. Hierdie trauma-ervaring van talle lidmate van die kerk is nie maar net van nou die dag af 'n werklikheid nie. Dit gebeur alreeds getuime tyd dat lidmate hierdie trauma van betekenislose en kunsmatige vernuwende veranderinge in hulle gemeentes probeer ontvlug. Hulle probeer wegkom deur net “stiller” te word, of om te “weier om verder oor die kerk te praat,” of om die “standup-comedian-dominee” met Trevor Noah te vervang. (This trauma experienced by members of the church has been a reality for a long time. For some time now members of the church have been trying to escape from this trauma of meaningless and artificial renewal and change in their congregations. They try to escape by becoming “quieter” or “not talking about the church” or replacing the “stand-up comedian pastor” with Trevor Noah).

### **Feelings of Lost Holiness**

Here, the research population complained that their church had lost its holiness:

1. Ons ervaar heelwat trauma. 'n Oorverdwende slagorkes maak geen samesang moontlik nie ... daar is geen voorlesing van die Tien Gebooie of die Geloofbelydenis nie, want dit sal die diens te formeel en outyds maak ... die erediens het nie meer die heiligheid en respek wat dit verdien nie. (We experience trauma. A deafening band makes it impossible to sing together. ... Neither the Ten Commandments nor the Confession is read because they apparently make the service formal and old-fashioned. The church service does not receive the holiness and respect which it deserves.)
2. Ek het nie meer 'n kerk nie, want ek voel nie daar tuis nie. Die gewydheid wat my altyd in die kerk omvou het, is weg. (I do not have a church anymore, because I do not feel at home there anymore. The feeling that I was on hallowed ground, is gone.)
3. Ek is keelvol vir Afrikaanse kerke wat weggedoen het met preekstoel, en konserte hou pleks van preke. En wat 'n kroeg het, en by basaars wyn- en brandewynveilings hou. (I am sick and tired of Afrikaans churches who got rid of their pulpits. And who give concerts instead of sermons. They have bars, and at bazaars they auction wine and brandy.)

### **Sacred Space Violation**

Under this theme, the research population expressed their belief that the physical church building constitutes a sacred space, and that what is happening inside needs to be holy:

1. Niks anders in die week is so belangrik soos hierdie ontmoeting met die Here nie. Daarom trek jy jou beste klere aan om jou eerbied te toon. 'n Terugkeer na die eenvoud en erns van hoe die Here gedien moet word, is nodig. (Nothing else during the week is as important as meeting with the Lord. Therefore, you put on your best clothes when going to church to show your respect. What is needed is to turn back to the simplicity and seriousness of serving the Lord.)
2. Ons verlang terug na 'n stigtelike erediens. (We are longing for a truly devotional church service.)
3. Ons huil oor die vlakheid van die kerk wat wêrelds geword het ter wille van valse populariteit. (We are crying because the church has become shallow and worldly for the sake of false popularity.)
4. Ons ervaar lidmate kom oor na ons gemeente van gemeentes wat *with it* wil raak omdat ons nog behoudend is maar nie konserwatief nie. (Congregants are coming over to our congregation, because we are traditional, but not conservative.)
5. Die beoefening van die Christelike godsdienst is inspanning, nie ontspanning nie. (To practice Christianity is hard work, not leisure.)

### **Symbols are Powerful Expressions of Faith, Connecting One to God**

Here, a letter writer pointed to his belief that symbols connect us to God and can never become “old fashioned”:

1. Liturgieë, simbole en liederes is kragtige eienskappe wat saam met geloofsbelydenisse kerke laat groei en gedy het, 'n naelstring tussen hulle en hulle Skepper. En toe kom slim mense en bevind God outyds. So gaan hulle skamel geklee kerk toe en verkies oorverdwende klanke. ... Respek is met grapjastery en jolmusiek uitgewis. Ek hou liever by die verouderde put. (Liturgies, symbols, and songs are the umbilical cord between us and our Creator. Clever people came and found God to be old-fashioned. They go to church indecently dressed and prefer deafening music. Jokes and jolly music have extinguished respect. I would rather stay old-fashioned.)
2. Daar is gesonde en ongesonde simbole (in die kerk). Gesonde simbole help ons om God se misterie te verstaan, en ons aan die dinge om ons te verwonder. Ongesonde simbole laat ons wegvlug van ons verantwoordelikhede. (There are healthy and unhealthy symbols [in the church]. Healthy symbols help us to understand the mystery of God and to appreciate the wonders in everyday life. Unhealthy symbols make us flee from our responsibilities.)

### **Ageing Church-goers Blamed for Keeping the Church Old**

A few of the research population took an alternative position and blamed older people for keeping the church old and “old-fashioned,” which, according to these writers, is unchurch-orderly and unbiblical:

1. Die wit bevolking verouder teen 'n snelle tempo. Die gemeentes se kerkrade is oorlaai met ouer lidmate wat die anti-sekularisasiesentimente deel en emeritus-predikante op

kontrak verkies, eerder as jonger dominees. Dit pas ook hulle sak beter. (The white population is getting older. Church councils are full of old people. Congregations give contracts to emeriti [retired dominees] and do not call young dominees. This is to save money.)

2. Jesus het nie trekkerige Psalms en Gesange gesing nie, maar lofprysing vol dans en energie wat Hom behaag en tot Sy eer strek. Hy het nie 'n snyerspak en das gedra nie. En Hy het nie vir homself 'n preekstoel gebou nie. (Jesus did not sing long-winding Hymns, but he praised God in dance and joyful singing. He did not wear a tailored suit and tie. He also did not build himself a pulpit.)

### **A Change of Liturgy Points to the Word of God being Changed**

A letter writer suggested that electronic and unchurchly music is a sign that God's word is no longer truthfully proclaimed:

Mense is juis getraumatiseerd in vandag se lawaaierige modern kerke omdat die evangelie verdraai word, die Bybel bevraagteken word en sonde goedgepraat word. (People are traumatised because in today's noisy churches the gospel is changed, the Bible is questioned, and sin is approved.)

### **The Church Exists by Virtue of Being Different from the World**

In almost all of the research population members, the belief was expressed that the church is sacred ground and different from the world:

1. Die kerk moet juis 'n bymekaarkomplek wees vir hulle wat soekende is na veiligheid en geborgenheid. Die Kerk moet vir mense sê: "Vat hierdie pad en nie daardie een nie." Die Kerk moet nie Sy heilige grond met gewone grond gelyk maak nie. Hy moet nie probeer inpas by die hedendaagse wêreld nie. (The church should be a place where those who are looking for safety and security come together. The church should tell people: "Take this road and not that one." The church should not level its ground with common ground. The church should not try to fit in with the world of today.)
2. Soms sal die wêreld sê: "Maar die kerk se Lig maak my oë seer." Die kerk is eietyds in 'n donker wêreld waar hy moet hoop gee en sy gemeentelede met liefde omarm. Die kerk kan nie sê wat die wêreld wil hoor nie. (Sometimes the world says: "But the Light of the church damages my eyes." The church is contemporary in a dark world where it must give hope to its people and put its arms around them. The church cannot say what the world wants to hear.)
3. Eendag as ek my kop neerlê, sal ek in die hemel weer gelukkig wees. Daar sal 'n dominee wees wat op 'n preekstoel staan. My immer geliefde orrel sal speel. En ons sal sing wat my gelukkig maak! (When I lie down my head, I shall be happy in heaven. There will be a dominee standing on a pulpit. My beloved organ will be heard. And we shall sing the songs that make me happy!)

## Findings

The above statements by the research population point to a duality between sacred and secularised, between church and world. Within this duality, the research population experiences trauma. Trauma is expressed when the following stand in tension to one another:

- Feeling spiritually at home versus feeling spiritually estranged.
- Holiness versus worldliness.
- Sacred space versus secularisation.
- Devotion versus entertainment.
- Connected to God versus disconnected to God.
- Tradition versus useless change.
- Tradition versus modernity.

To profile the trauma experienced when dualities are in tension, these findings will now be placed within the perspectives of three articles written by South African religion researchers focusing on Afrikaans Reformed Churches. This is done to understand—not to evaluate—the trauma experienced in the tension between the duality of sacred and secularised. These three articles have been chosen because they have been written by authors whose point of departure—and partial support, at least—lies with traditional forms of liturgy. This is deemed here as a fair and informative way of profiling the statements of the research population.

Johann Rossouw, a philosopher from the University of the Free State, engages with the struggle between tradition and modernity in South Africa's churches. He focuses on liturgy as the site of this struggle in an article, "The Politics of Liturgy between Tradition and Modernity in South Africa" (Rossouw 2017). Traditional liturgies, such as those in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches, would be described by Rossouw as a "site of resistance." This resistance is against a changing society and politics, but also against modernity that is constantly disrupting these traditional liturgies (Rossouw 2017, 113–117). Rossouw (quoting Goosen 2015, 375–391) argues that the liturgies in "Afrikaner" churches are traditional in the sense that they have remained within the heritage of European liturgies that came to South Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, Rossouw finds that "Afrikaner" churches have embraced modernity in the early 20th century, *inter alia*, by excluding (Black) Africans from their sacred space. Twentieth-century modernity entailed individualism and exclusion. This, then, is the historical reason for the struggle of "Afrikaner" churches between tradition and modernity. The present site for this struggle, as said, is the liturgy where tradition is fighting against charismatic forms of worship in a space where modernity still excludes "the other."

The outcry of the research population in the above is indeed against a liturgy that expresses itself charismatically. Sacred space as a safeguard for an exclusively "Afrikaner" identity is not explicitly pronounced. However, what is clear from the above

voices is not a selfish individualism, but a personal spirituality that is very much linked to the church as sacred space.

In a study of the worship styles in Afrikaans Reformed Churches in South Africa over the past 30 years or so (“Die Afrikaanse Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika en hul Aanbiddingspraktyke 1990–2020”), HOFFIE HOFMEYR looks at the changes in liturgy and preaching in these churches from an ecclesiological perspective. He asks whether these changes affect the nature of the church, which is to give a “getroue, deernisvolle en relevante getuienis oor die evangelie” (truthful, compassionate, and relevant testimony of the gospel) (HOFMEYR 2020, 2). The worship practices of a church represent the more visible side of the church, and it is, therefore, important to ask whether secularisation and charismatisation are leading to a shallow Reformed liturgy and theology. Hofmeyr describes the history of the renewal of liturgy and preaching in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches by analysing their synodical pronouncements on renewal. He finds that during the past 30 years, the Dutch Reformed Church, in particular, has opened the door to a variety of visible renewals in the church. Eventually, Hofmeyr (2020, 15–17) calls for liturgy and preaching in Afrikaans Reformed Churches to express themselves (not in a modernist, but) in a postmodern world that invites variety. This renewal should not disturb services and make congregants restless and should stay within the principles of the Reformation.

While Hofmeyr bases his research on the decisions of synods and not on empirical research, the voices of the research population of this article can make an important contribution to how congregants are reacting to the renewals allowed by synods.

While ROSSOUW entertains the binary relationship between modernity and tradition, and Hofmeyr between Reformed and charismatic worship practices in the visible, postmodern church, SPOELSTRA (2004, 271) questions whether the Reformation itself honoured the relationship between liturgy and doctrine, and “that liturgy must be subservient to what the congregation believes (doctrine).” Spaelstra argues that it was Zwingli—not Luther or Calvin—who disregarded the link between liturgy and doctrine by, for instance, underplaying the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper—the doctrine that the Lord’s Supper was a communion between Christ and his congregation (Spaelstra 2004, 275). It was Zwingli’s separation of liturgy and doctrine—and not Calvin’s integration—that was taken over by the churches in the Netherlands. They, in turn, eventually transferred this to the Afrikaans Reformed Churches in South Africa. This—more than secularisation and postmodernism—is the reason why these churches can open up their liturgies for “renewal” (Spaelstra 2004, 280–281). Afrikaans Reformed Churches should be reminded that the liturgy is a space where God and humans meet. It is not a space where the church entertains people, where people meet the church and not God (Spaelstra 2004, 273).

Unaware of the complicated history of the Reformation as presented by Spaelstra, it seems that the research population reflects the sentiment that the liturgy, in their

congregations, has become a human affair in which the communication with God has been derailed, and that the God in which they believe is no longer present in the renewal of the liturgy.

## Conclusion

In this study, the voices of a research population (presumably) from the Afrikaans Reformed Churches against the changing of liturgies, preaching, and religious symbols in their congregations have been recorded. This research population reported trauma for the following reasons: 1) They have been estranged from the church as sacred space because religious symbols—such as the pulpit as a symbol of the centrality of the preaching of the Word of God—have been removed. They report that the removal of symbols from the church is experienced as an infringement on the sacredness of God. 2) The church has been robbed of its devotional character (“gewydheid”) with loud electronic music and other entertainment stunts, especially by the dominee. It has become a shallow and unholy place where even its formal confessions are not taken seriously anymore. 3) Consequently, the church is no longer a place where you can meet God. 4) The change of liturgy and its replacement with loud, unchurchly music has opened the way to the Word of God being changed and becoming shallow entertainment. 5) The church is no longer different from the world. It is no longer a safe place for believers to meet God in a special way.

In terms of method, the voices of the research population have been thematised, but not mediated through interpretation. Beyers (2015) as well as Kruger and Van der Merwe (2014, 2017) have been brought into the discussion to confirm the extent of the changing of liturgy, preaching, and symbols in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches (especially the Dutch Reformed Church), which these authors see as part of a broader secularisation movement that may, but need not, be inevitable.

To broaden and complicate the notion that secularisation is the cause of liturgical and other changes in the church, further reasons for the tension between old and new, leading to the trauma experienced by the research population, were investigated. The tension between tradition and modernity (Rossouw 2017), the tension between Reformed and charismatic (Hofmeyr 2020), and the tension between doctrine and liturgy (Spoelstra 2004) shed light on the present situation in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches, which could have led to the trauma experienced by the research population.

The article aimed to present empirical research—albeit limited—on the effects of liturgical and other changes in the Afrikaans Reformed Churches on the congregants themselves. This article acknowledges the effects of secularisation and the trauma it can cause on congregants and invites further research to be conducted in this regard.

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