

Kuyper Harnessed to African Development

A Book Review

This article is a review of Bennie van der Walt's *Kultuur, Lewensvisie en Ontwikkeling: 'n Ontmaskering van die gode van onderontwikkelde Afrika en die oorontwikkelde Weste* (1999). Written in Afrikaans, the title translates as "Culture, Worldview and Development: An Expose of the Gods of Underdeveloped Africa and the Overdeveloped West." For an introduction to Prof. Bennie, I refer you to our memoirs, *Every Square Inch* (vol. 2, p. 452; vol. 4, pp. 29, 48; vol. 5, pp. 22-23) in the Bibliography of Section 2 on this Boeriana page.¹

This is one heady book for Reformed lovers of Africa, for wholistic Reformed missionaries with interest beyond church growth, for those interested in the theory and practice of development and, finally, for those concerned with the meaning of and relevance to Africa of the so-called "Reformational" thinking associated with Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd. As per Van der Walt's own admission, I should hasten to add that this relevance is not applied to a practical alternative in this book. That he hopes to work on in the future.

The opening salvo on the inside front cover is the question: Why do most development projects in Africa fail? And then the promise: This book seeks to answer this urgent question out of a "totally new perspective." The new perspective is that of Reformational theory. It may not be a new perspective in general, but it certainly is new in the way it is applied here to Africa.

Van der Walt begins in typical Reformational fashion by emphasizing that development, whether in theory or practice, is not a simple neutral common sense kind of concern. Repeatedly he insists that all developmental theory or practice have a religious and worldview foundation. In fact, that's where the crunch occurs, for many of the practices and theories have their origin in the secular West but are applied to a continent with traditional African worldviews—and these two are often stark opposites. Western individualism and African communalism make uneasy bed partners. True to Reformational thinking, Van der Walt focuses his searchlight on the

¹ For further reference to this book and review: Wetenskaplike Bydraes van die Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoer Onderwys. Reeks F: Instituut vir Reformatoriese Studie; Reeks F2: Brosjures, No. 76. Potchefstroom: Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoer Onderwys.

reigning worldviews of secularism and African tradition not only, but also on such major institutional players as the World Bank and IMF. Such organizations do not need to be conscious of their underlying religious foundations for the latter to control them. In fact, lack of such awareness almost guarantees such control.

Another theme is that these various approaches or responses to development are based on problematic worldviews that have one-sided truthful elements mixed with distortions and just plain false ideas. It is really a mixed bag of antithesis and common grace. You cannot get more Reformational than that! And all of this focused on Africa! A delightful menu.

As for those who tend to dismiss this Reformational perspective as overly conservative, try reading Van der Walt's critique of capitalism and its major institutions, especially the World Bank. Here is fresh thinking and imaginative critique, but very little that can be considered traditional or conservative. In fact, this perspective leads to fresh and novel insights that can stand scrutiny in any forum and resists casual dismissal. It leads Van der Walt to accuse the World Bank of dominating the development agenda in Africa and of encouraging recolonization. World Bank style of development, characterized especially by its structural adjustment programmes, has led to little more than further deterioration and increased suffering. The social consequences of its policies are crushing. Such critiques are a far cry from the fearful and hesitant bourgeois stance of my own Reformed church that drinks more from the fountains of the free market and globalization than from the Reformational tradition that always goes for the root problem, for the jugular, and can thus be termed radical in the positive sense.

Ah, it would be so easy to jump to the conclusion that the World Bank should be dismantled. But no, that's not Van der Walt. He recognizes the mismanagement of many African governments that has also contributed seriously to Africa's pain. He recognizes there is a need for some sort of international institution that has the authority and wherewithal to change the directions of many countries. His Reformational perspective keeps him from easy one-sided prescriptions. His solutions usually tend towards reforming rather than dismantling. However, the reforming Van der Walt recommends always focuses on the foundation, on the worldview underlying structures, on the root. Again, the radical approach of Reformational thinking. Once that foundation has been realigned, the way has opened to true correction.

Thus Van der Walt ends up recommending the radical approach of Reformational thought as the sine qua non for hope for Africa. Now that may sound narrow and provincial, unless you realize that it is typical of the Reformational tradition not only

to recognize the shortcomings of other schools of thought (the antithesis) but also to recognize and draw from their strengths (common grace). While Abraham Kuyper roundly condemned the basic perspectives of his opponents, he simultaneously adopted various aspects of their worldview and methods. While the whole was considered rotten, some of the parts were useful. While some consider that approach contradictory, I hail it as a unique combination of strength and openness. A conscious and sensitive balance of antithesis and common grace.

I do have a question about terminology, especially of the sub-title. Can one legitimately make such a clear distinction between “underdeveloped Africa” and “overdeveloped West?” Is the West really overdeveloped in general or only in certain aspects, such as science and technology? That happens to be the area where Africa has not developed very well. Having moved to the USA after three decades in Africa, I am appalled, for example, at the deterioration of human relationships in the West. Technology and, not to forget, warped legal developments have joined forces to depersonalize almost all human relationships. I agree that the West is not merely developed in science and technology, but *overdeveloped*. It does not really know how to handle these developments. In human relationships, in my estimation, it has degenerated. And it is totally at a loss as to what to do with its agenarians. Perhaps the term “skewed development” would be more accurate.

Likewise, I doubt that one can speak of an “underdeveloped” Africa. That also is too static and one-sided. For decades, while Africa was referred to as “underdeveloped in technology, economics, and healthcare; it was actually *underdeveloping*, what with the West continuing to suck it dry with its corporate profits and interest payments on criminal foreign “loans.” At the same time it is *respectably* developed in sports and *highly* so in those of music and human relationships.

All in all, we have here a delightful menu for this missionary who spent much of his career experimenting with this perspective but seldom enjoyed the understanding or active support of his missionary colleagues or supervisors. But, praise God, Nigerians recognized its power and provided the encouragement. That says something for both this perspective as well as this book written by a South African White.

Professor Bennie, please carry out your intention of doing an English translation. You will be doing us all a tremendous favour. In the meantime, I urge personnel of mission boards and development organizations to use this book to design more Biblical, more realistic and more culturally sensitive policies by fine-tuning the worldview that shapes your organization. *There is nothing so practical as an appropriate worldview. There is nothing so impractical, not to say so damaging, as a*

skewed, unbiblical worldview, especially the kind that is held without awareness such as that of many missionaries. It is a guaranteed recipe for failure, something of which Africa has had more than its share.