

BEING AFRIKAANS AS A PRESUMED IDENTITY: A RESPONSE TO ADAM

Hermann Giliomee

Dear Heribert

Thank you for your comments.

In my ATKV speech the ethnic identification rests specifically on a sense of common descent and of uniqueness. Opinion polls show that the majority of the white Afrikaans-speakers are sharing certain views and values with respect to the political order, social hierarchy and the secular implications of religion. They are not “traditional” or “static” but are redefined by every new generation. Indeed if there is no intellectual self-renewal the group will become irrelevant to new generations. In the case of non-ethnic Afrikaners (say a Van Zyl Slabbert) there are only a few areas of shared views with a Constand Viljoen, although it is not co-incidental that Viljoen attaches great importance to Van Zyl as an adviser. I guess there is a greater shared conception of how politics works and greater mutual trust than there is between say Viljoen and Allister Sparks.

All this is not fundamentally different from the position with respect to Jews in America and the differences within this community between orthodox and reform Jews. Ultimately I suppose a group is held together by a shared sense of where they are coming from and a shared commitment to ensure the survival of the group’s culture. This is why history as a discipline is important within an ethnic group. Unless they find historians who can reinterpret and revise the past of the group in the light of contemporary or present-day needs there is little likelihood that the group will cohere in future.

I feel strongly that you misinterpret me where you depict my position as one which wants to dictate a particular version of historical understanding and enforces that through conformity pressure. Historians have to compete in the free market of ideas and historians whose interpretations have no resonance are failed historians. The same goes for school histories. We have talking of *presumed* identities. Unless a history appeals to a large number of people in the

group it is a dead history. In the post-apartheid South Africa there is no possibility at all of an ethnic (Afrikaner) elite imposing their views and conception of history on an unwilling younger generation. It is the identity market that will decide.

In the speech I am not propagating an (exclusive) ethnic Afrikaner identity. I am proposing a new common identity for all Afrikaans-speakers regardless of colour. To do that one must imagine a new community, as I argue in my *Die Burger* article. Whether there are to a significant degree shared values within such a group, we shall investigate. If there is none, my effort will fail.

The one thing you miss in your discussion of the Afrikaners is the perspective that the Afrikaners form only a very small group. Furthermore it has (i) no territorial base at home; (ii) no supportive diaspora abroad; (iii) and no ultimate refuge as the Jews since 1948 have had in Israel. To cap it all they have (iv) just lost a state built around them and are (v) perceived to have conducted an unjust war to defend it. This is why the views of Van Wyk Louw, which I cite on page 531 of my article on Survival in Justice, remain terribly relevant.¹ How can a small group survive who has almost always faced the prospect of the “best and the brightest” defecting by becoming anglicised or cosmopolitan and in the process shedding any ethnic identification?

Now, as in the days of the Milner Administration, the national government actively encourages denationalisation. I fail to see how a sense of ethnic cultural/communal identity can be cultivated for parents who demand it for their children without the availability of at least some schools which inculcate a certain cultural heritage. Of course this should complement, no contradict any sense of universality. I am a communitarian in the spirit expressed by Michael Walzer: “Our common humanity will never make us members of a single tribe. The crucial commonality of the human race is particularisms”.

Of course you are right to say that liberals should endorse voluntary identification. Nothing in my speech could be read as a proposal for subjugating individuals to the ideological imperialism of

Hermann Giliomee, “Survival in justice? An Afrikaner debate over apartheid”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36, 3 (1994), pp. 527-548

an ethnic elite. In my presidential address I strongly endorse the position of Tamir's *Liberal Nationalism* talking of *individuals demanding that their children be taught in a particular cultural tradition*. This accepts that other parents may reject cultural schools for universalistic schools, which they have every right to do. Again it is the market which will decide. As I indicate in my address, I find myself in sympathy with the views of Charles Taylor but I have little hope that an ANC government will be sympathetic to that.

You actually want me to present as "good news" to an Afrikaner audience the fact that significant numbers of Afrikaners no longer consider themselves as Afrikaners. Almost like a Jew telling a Jewish audience in New York they should celebrate the fact that growing numbers of Jews are becoming Christians. Your characterisation of my views is little more than a caricature.

I in fact want Afrikaner views and values to be modernised so that a new generation could feel themselves attracted to the group and its culture. You are working with a false dichotomy: one is either cosmopolitan and modern or ethnic and traditional/reactionary and outmoded. Why cannot the group renew itself ideologically and culturally? Why can one not balance ethnic particularisms and universality? *Die Burger* has been successful over the past ten years in attracting a large new "coloured" readership exactly because it has succeeded in modernising the Afrikaans cultural outlook.

The new cultural wars are fought over issues like access to television. That Afrikaans is now reduced to a minute proportion of prime time is not something that you can dismiss as the position a few SABC idiots. This is now official policy and there is no hope that it will change soon. Those Afrikaners who are in the process of anglicising and shedding their ethnic identity will not concern themselves much with this. But I do not think that those who feel that Afrikaans should survive have got a just grievance.

On your last page you misrepresent my view. I did not propagate that school children be taught exclusively in their mother tongue before learning any other language. In my view (and also that of Neville Alexander) mother tongue as medium of instruction (whilst also studying English and Xhosa as subjects) are pedagogically preferable to being taught from an early stage in a medium not spoken at home. The book edited by Neville Alexander contradicts

your views. For obvious reasons it is wrong to compare Afrikaans as a language spoken by a mere 5 million people and written perhaps by only half that figure to a world language like French or to think that the immersion experience has any relevance for the issue of whether Afrikaans should be used as a medium of instruction.

I don't consider the Afrikaners as the Jews of Africa. Nevertheless. The Jews of South Africa like those in the USA have benefited from organising. Why not the Afrikaans-speakers? I shall soon discover whether there is support for that. Even Mandela has said that if the Afrikaners feel aggrieved they must organise and stand up for their rights. For once I agree.

Finally at the conference you said that "the Afrikaners have lost no rights with respect to formal Afrikaner rights only privileges." I think this is a highly formalistic view which conflicts with your view on Affirmative Action. You have always taken issue with opponents of Affirmative Action who take the position that there must only be a formal equality to compete. Your position with respect to formal Afrikaner rights would be valid only if individual equality overrides everything else in the constitution (which of course is not the case). There may be a formal equality with respect to all 11 languages, but there it ends.

The state and para-statal bodies are strongly promoting English and Affirmative Action in both the private and public sectors and the ANC will reject the view of a Charles Taylor that cultural groups have the right to use the school in such a way that it ensures linguistic and cultural survival. To talk in such circumstances of the Afrikaners having lost no rights such as a fair chance to compete for work or a fair chance for their culture to survive is to miss the essence of what has transpired over the past two and a half years.

Yours sincerely

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