

MY JOURNEY AS AN RCA MAVERICK

In 1948, my wife and I got married and left Europe for the USA. Many of my relatives (including my father) had been murdered in Nazi camps, and my wife had survived several years in one. During my law studies at the University of Leiden, I had approached the US State Department arguing that, for a number of reasons, I should be allowed to claim American citizenship. It is a complicated story, but the end result was that I was indeed issued an American passport. The precondition for citizenship, however, was that I arrive in the States before my July 11 birthday. I set foot on the docks in Hoboken during the Fourth of July weekend.

By that time I had already decided to change not only continents but also my professional goals - (literally!) - and switch from law to theology. The year before, I had attended a lecture by Reinhold Niebuhr on the Leiden campus. His highly dialectical analyses were hard for me to follow, but I remember one thing very distinctly. Asked by a student whether he considered himself a neo-orthodox theologian, his reply was as follows: "I don't want to be put in a box. Once people have you neatly packaged, they can forget about what you are really trying to say." That bit of wisdom has stayed with me through the years.

We found our first home in Lansing, Illinois, where my Dutch maternal grandparents had settled before World War I. It is now a Chicago suburb, but at that time it was still a small predominantly conservative Dutch town. Almost all my relatives were members of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). I had begun reading the works of Karl Barth who, I soon discovered, was *persona non grata* in CRC theological circles. Professor Cornelius Van Til, originally also from the Lansing area and an arch critic of the Swiss theologian, had considerable influence among CRC seminary professors in those days. Although I planned to study for the ministry, and my father had studied at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I thought it the better part of wisdom to join the Reformed Church in America, believing that that denomination was more ecumenically inclined.

My journey as an RCA maverick covers two periods, each approximately thirty years long. First came the years of wooing and rewards, followed after 1978 by years of shunning and isolation behind a wall of silence.

The RCA had for some years been in union negotiations with a small Presbyterian denomination and, in 1950, the moment of decision had finally arrived. Having done my homework, I eagerly looked forward to the day when votes would be cast in our local congregation. As I recall, over one hundred men attended the meeting (at that time women did not have the vote in that church). As a warm-up, we were treated to a lecture by Dr. Harry Hager, who was known to be a fierce opponent of union. This kind of campaigning right at the polling place, so to speak, struck me as rather peculiar. Furthermore, he was obviously preaching to the converted; because when the ballots were counted, it turned out that my vote was the only one in favor. So much for ecumenicity! I feared that such a *faux pas* so early in my RCA journey might bode ill for the future, but the members of that congregation gave our family loving support during my years of study.

After a stint as a laborer in an East Chicago scrap and steelyard, I started a two-year study program at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, designed to adapt my European education to the American scene. Working with Dr. D. Ivan Dykstra on a philosophy major was one of the great delights of those years. We exchanged occasional letters till shortly before his death, and my wife and I named one of our sons Paul Ivan. A Reformation Day address by Howard Hageman in Dimnent chapel left a deep impression on me. Here I saw a pastor-theologian after my own heart. Between the two of us, we have produced a major portion of published RCA theological writings during the second half of the twentieth

century, in a wide range of magazines and journals.

During my senior year at Hope, I had to make a decision whether to attend Western Theological Seminary across the street or New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey. I eagerly accepted an opportunity to pay a three-day visit to the New Brunswick campus. My hosts during those days were Dr. and Mrs. John Beardslee, two of the finest Greek scholars in the denomination. I shall never forget the graciousness that was extended me during those intellectually stimulating days. Still, I chose Western for the first two years of seminary training.

Dr. Albertus Pieters, for many years retired as a Western professor, remained a formidable theological figure in the mid-west. His book, *The Seed of Abraham*, embodied all the key views on Israel theology that I rejected. He used to invite me for dinner and long discussions afterward. I can still see him bent forward and, with that wonderful twinkle in his eye, assure me that a good teacher does not expect students to swallow everything the professor tells them. He was eighty-four years old at the time, and I was twenty-four; one clearly the master, but both desiring never to cease being students. I feel blessed to have known him.

As to Karl Barth, the Seminary board always met during the final days of the school year, and would use the occasion to look through our final exam papers. My references to that Swiss theological giant were not favorably received; but aside from a few awkward moments of interrogation by preachers who had never read the man but had learned to use the word "existentialism," it did not negatively affect my future as an RCA pastor.

Encouraged by messages from New Brunswick Seminary President Stephen James that a transfer to that school would open opportunities for a student-pastorate with its much-needed income, and also eager to experience the eastern part of the church, I did graduate from that institution in 1955. Letters in my files testify to the friendships developed during that year, particularly with Drs. Justin Vander Kolk and Vernon Kooy (who also hailed from Lansing, as did onetime Western President Herman Ridder). My records (once archived) will show that I had similar long-lasting relationships with Western professors. Later, I was occasionally invited to teach systematic theology courses at New Brunswick, and in 1970 was asked to become the school's dean, which I could not then accept because of other commitments.

I became deeply involved in the life and ministry of the denomination. One of my first major appointments was as a member of the Christian Action Commission, when it was formulating the *Credo on Race Relations* that was eventually adopted as official RCA policy. Then I served as the author of a draft document for the Theological Commission on the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, during a time when a debate on the so-called "Adam question" was raging in the church. I was also a frequent contributor to the denominational magazine and theological journal and, in 1967, served as the host pastor of the General Synod meeting in Bristol, Tennessee, as the denomination was once again engaged to be married—this time to the Presbyterian Church US. This proposed union, too, was voted down by the RCA constituency. My views on the "Adam question" led certain RCA activists to charge that this maverick had now been revealed as a heretic; and my response in an "Open Letter," printed and mailed to all RCA ministers at my own expense, produced a file of interesting reactions.

In 1968, the unexpected happened. I was asked to join the RCA bureaucracy in New York City. For years I had talked and written about what I called the "pastor-theologian social activist model for ministry." In 1958, with the help of the Dutch scholar Hendrikus Berkhof, I received a World Council of Churches' grant to engage in a research project at the University of Utrecht under the personal guidance of Professor Arnold Van Ruler. We would meet in his study and, after blowing smoke

from his pipe followed by moments of silence, he would bombard this nervous novice with questions. Among the theologians I have known, he was by far the deepest thinker. Berkhof once told me that his esteemed colleague had exhausted his brain power to the point of a premature death. Out of that project emerged my 1964 book on the theology of history. published by Westminster Press. I am proud of what the *Red Bank Register* in New Jersey had to say about my social involvements in a farewell editorial when it announced that I was leaving the pastorate to join the ecclesiastical establishment. Such a move had not been anticipated in my model for ministry! In a way, I had let myself be seduced; but in truth, it must also be said that those ten years were in many ways exciting times. Church bureaucracies attract many escapees from the local parish for which they have little respect, but also creative minds who know how to manage programs without losing the charisma of dreaming dreams of God's kingdom. Some have become my lifelong friends; others I remember with deep affection and admiration. I made a habit of referring to myself as a "bureaucrat," believing that as long as one takes the job, one should wear the badge unabashedly.

My days as a church executive came to an abrupt and explosive end in 1978, only days after the General Synod meeting during which the 350th anniversary of the denomination had been celebrated. This is a complicated story, and a little historical context may prove helpful. It took me decades to put the pieces together, because some details of this strangely deceptive tale were not made public until years later. It was like chasing a moving target. This particular firing of an executive who had never been accused of any kind of misconduct was surely unique in the RCA's long history. Much of what I have to say in what follows will find further documentation when all my files have been deposited in the archives in Holland, Michigan.

Let us start in 1968—the year the RCA underwent one of its most famous reorganizations. Arie Brouwer came in as the top program executive, while Dr. Marion (Mert) de Velder exchanged the title of Stated Clerk for that of General Secretary. Al Poppen, Marvin Hoff, and I became Arie's top lieutenants. I had been hesitant to join the team, because friends had warned me about Brouwer's heresy hunting activities while in seminary – aimed mostly at Dr. Lester Kuyper, a beloved professor to many of us. I soon discovered that Arie had indeed changed in a number of respects, but had never lost his lust for power plays which would eventually lead to his downfall.

The four of us, plus our spouses, developed into a close-knit friendship circle. The husbands had all gone through sensitivity training seminars (as had Mert de Velder, who told me once that the experience had been like a second conversion). When the 1969 movie *Bob&Carol&Ted&Alice* came out, the eight of us went to see it together, and shared many a knowing laugh about the gentle mockery of our new-found sensitivity beliefs. For a time, the four men even became a sort of investment club, meeting weekly in Arie's office with a stock broker (that one ended up as a losing proposition). The ties between us grew as we went through the years of the denomination's evangelism, family, and mission festivals.

Marv, Al, and I, recognized Arie's considerable gifts for leadership, and felt that his ambition to reach the top of the ecumenical establishment was justified; and all of us spent countless hours strategizing how we could make that come true. The National Council of Churches filled the next vacancy with a woman candidate, and the World Council picked a South American theologian for its next leader. However, in due time Arie did become the head of the NCC, whose board did eventually fire him as summarily as he had fired me – except that he negotiated a generous severance package for himself.

By 1978, the happy dreams of the late 1960s had long faded away, and the tensions between Arie and his three assistants had grown to the point that even two professional conflict consultants could not

resolve them. The interacting issues and agendas were no doubt many and complex. Grand Rapids lawyer Carl VerBeek served as chairman of the so-called liaison committee at the time, and Arie increasingly sought an outlet for his frustrations in behind-the-scenes maneuvers with his new friend and attorney (VerBeek even continued to provide legal services for him after he had assumed his position at the NCC and had to deal with labor negotiations).

When the NCC, in 1973, received a Lillie Endowment grant to open an Office on Christian-Jewish Relations, Arie asked me to represent the RCA on its executive committee, and I became its first chairperson. How this led to wholly new perspectives on the Judaism/Christianity dynamic; brought me into conflict with certain NCC practices, and got me to fight for the removal of the murderous Archbishop Valerius Trifa from the NCC Governing Board, has all been discussed extensively in my book *The Turbulent Triangle: Christians-Jews-Israel*. A cowardly NCC leadership allowed that phony priest to "honorably" remove himself, but the U.S Justice Department eventually booted him out of the country.

One could argue that sensitivity training and conflict lab seminars should have made me more aware of how Arie perceived some of my activities as a threat to his ecumenical ambitions and, hence, as a form of betrayal on my part. But, in a somewhat naïve way, those same experiences tend to reinforce the idea that in the end, honest confrontation will resolve the situation. My job description stipulated that one of my functions among staff was to serve as a gadfly—or, in the jargon of the well-paid consultants who put the 1968 re-organization together, I had a critical quality control function. My maverick inclinations were well-known when I was hired, but apparently became less and less appreciated as the internal dynamics changed.

Incidents surrounding the so-called "Spoolstra affair" during the 1978 General Synod are also discussed in the aforementioned book. In short, on the issue of a pastor's right to know the charges that have been brought against him/her, I had a bit too passionately sided with attorney David Alford against the Brouwer/VerBeek coalition. The latter advanced the peculiar theory that parties in an ecclesiastical court do not have the same rights as those charged in a civil court. Alford spent a good part of the night writing an opinion that should still be part of the Synod's record. Law had been my first love, and I was proud of my role in that case, but a colleague warned me the next morning that the wrath of my two superiors would soon be visited upon me.

Still, my sudden dismissal, and particularly the brutal way in which it was executed, was a life-shattering and deeply depressing experience. I have recently described how I was summoned to a meeting at Newark Airport with Arie, Carl and several executive committee members – a meeting I attended against the advice of my doctor, and during which not one relevant issue was dealt with. I have only myself to blame for the way my mental state was exploited that day, although unknowingly in the case of most of those present. Only later was I able to raise some critical questions. Why was the 1977 policy on executive dismissals totally ignored one year later? Why was the promise of severance package broken without further explanation – till this day? How could Carl VerBeek years later publish charges about an alleged revolt against Arie's specific instructions – charges I, nor my colleagues, had ever heard before?

Looking back, I am better able to understand the dilemma Arie faced when, in a moment of emotional turmoil and anger, he felt compelled to fire an old friend whom he was incapable of confronting, and for reasons that had to be fabricated out of thin air – a statement I will retract with apologies the moment just one page of documentation supporting the charges later brought against me is produced. Till this day, Carl VerBeek defends the purity of his motives and the righteousness of his actions by claiming that he was just giving objective professional advice to a friend. That strikes me as justification by way of self-deception. I never asked for that kind of vindication. I knew that later

church leaders could not be expected to unscramble the psycho-organizational omelet of the 1978 events. What I hoped for was something much more modest, namely the appointment of three trusted RCA leaders who would be willing to review a few troubling questions. I even suggested Chicago attorney Harry DeBruyn as a moderator whom I thought all parties could trust.

For instance, the 1977 policy on executive dismissals was formulated after the firing of Millie Green, a female Black executive, had led to a very messy situation. From then on, transparency and solid documentation were going to be required, thus guaranteeing fairness and justice in the process. Instead, arbitrariness, the source of much injustice, prevailed. It happens when the people who write the laws behave as if they themselves are not bound by those laws. Would it be so hard, I wondered, for RCA leadership to admit that things would have turned out very differently if those procedures had been followed in 1978? No need to cast all the blame on one party or the other! Another question: Would some fair severance arrangement not have been the decent thing to do – not to speak of what might have been the *Christian* thing to do? My head told me a long time ago that I was engaged in a Quixote style battle against windmills. But my heart, the seat of faith, could never really believe that. After all, we are the Church – aren't we? So, year after year I have been looking for a General Secretary, a president of General Synod, a salaried social justice staff member, or any responsible RCA leader to show an openness to deal, albeit belatedly, with a few, troubling questions-- simply out of a sense of basic fairness and justice.

While we were engaged, my wife gave me a book for my birthday with her inscription: *ni regret du passé, ni peur de l'avenir*. After surviving a Nazi camp, she married the man whom she expected to be a lawyer, but who prepared for the RCA ministry instead. It would cost her dearly, and that saddens me deeply. We were young and reckless at the time, but from the perspective of a more mature faith, and as we walk together through that dark valley of Psalm 23, we still hold on to the core truth of that French saying. Despite all... Jesus is Lord!