

## RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES IN THE ORANGE FREE STATE REPUBLIC, C. 1896-C. 1898

PHIA STEYN\*

*University of Stirling*

**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this article is to explore the religious responses within the Orange Free State republic to the environmental crises in the period c. 1896 to c. 1898. During this time the state was subjected to severe drought, flooding, and the outbreak of various diseases. The article examines the way in which these afflictions were interpreted by the Christian and wider community in terms of God's wrath for unrepented sins. The persistence of synchronistic elements of folk religion was seen to have brought plagues like those found in Exodus which were visited upon the Pharaoh and his kingdom. This interruptive frame work led to calls for national repentance, but also a resistance to scientific and medical resolutions to the crises. It also reinforced racial divisions. Black Africans were perceived as the carriers of the disease so their movement was prohibited. The article goes on to show how the effect of this biblical frame of reference protected the concept of God as the ever-present active God in every aspect of life against the scientific rationalism of the age, while at the same time ironically hindering the work of mission and the life of the church.

**KEYWORDS:** crisis, environment, religion, response, Orange Free State Republic

### **Introduction**

On 4 January 1898, the editor of *The Friend*, the longest-running newspaper in the Orange Free State republic, commented on the year that had just finished:

[1897] will long be remembered as the black year which brought ruin and desolation to many a happy and prosperous home through the visitation of the dreaded scourge of rinderpest, aided by the terrible drought which accomplished what the pest had left undone... most strenuous efforts made to keep pest at bay... no avail... in 1897 pest advanced steadily in march to the coast... On its seeking out its prey in South Africa, it assumed a most virulent type... thousands of cattle died until it seemed as though there would be no cattle left... swept through 2 republics and by the end of 1897 had obtained a hold on Cape and Natal... as we said months ago, it seems as if nothing will stop its progress

\* PHIA STEYN (PhD 2003, University of the Free State, South Africa) is Lecturer in African Environmental History at the University of Stirling, Scotland, United Kingdom. E-mail: m.s.steyn@stir.ac.uk.

but the wide ocean... Unfortunately for this land, rinderpest accompanied by a most protracted and severe drought... indeed old inhabitants of this State compare it to the terrible drought which visited the country in 1862, and are even divided in opinion as to whether the present visitation is more severe, or as bad, as its predecessor. Happily... December brought refreshing showers of rain in some districts, which caused the land to recover somewhat, and it is hoped that the New Year will bring greater prospects.

The year 1898 did not start much better and eleven months later *The Friend* (31.12.1898) reported in their retrospective survey of the year that in the

Closing days of December 1897... much needed showers of rain [fell]... hoped that in 1898 prolonged drought would not continue. In Jan 1898, general rains fell throughout the country... heavens opened up... such a downpour that rivers were soon full. Unfortunately, this went hand-in-hand with flooding that caused much damage. But many parched areas got much-needed relief... but then locusts also made appearance...

The years c. 1896-c. 1898 were challenging times on the Southern African plateau where the Orange Free State republic (1854-1902, hereafter OFS) was located. Their local environmental conditions had always been inconsistent and driven by weather patterns that ensured major republic-wide droughts at least once a decade with smaller localised droughts occurring regularly in between. It did not help matters that this region was water scarce at the best of times, which situation worsened drastically during drought periods. What rendered 'normal' environmental conditions an environmental crisis in the OFS in the period under discussion was the addition of the dreaded cattle disease, rinderpest to the mix. This highly contagious bovine disease spread like a wildfire through the republic in a few short months, despite desperate attempts to contain outbreaks in specific areas. The numerous rinderpest restrictions enforced by the OFS government up till June 1897 brought the movement of people and livestock in the republic to a standstill, thereby removing the one option farmers had at times of severe drought, namely trekking with their livestock in search of grazing, making some cattle, especially in the western areas of the republic, just as likely to die a slow death from hunger and thirst, as the faster death inflicted by rinderpest. The situation was aggravated by the almost complete dependence on ox-drawn wagons to transport goods in the OFS, whether it was for the provision of basic items to far-flung villages in rural areas, the exchange of agricultural produce between the various agricultural zones in the state, or the export of agricultural produce which provided well over 90 percent of the income of the state and its inhabitants. Rinderpest regulations brought this transport to a standstill, leaving areas such as the western parts of the republic without access to basic grain supplies,

while the grain producing areas in the east were unable to sell their goods. Rinderpest itself, on the other hand, would kill off thousands and thousands of trained oxen teams, depriving transport riders of the means to make a living and farmers the transport facilities to move the goods to markets. All in all, life in the Orange Free State republic between the years c. 1896 and c. 1898 was not the easiest.

The purpose of this article is to explore the religious responses within the OFS republic to the environmental crises in the period c.1896 to c.1898. What makes this an interesting case study was the nature of this republic and its inhabitants: as an internationally recognised independent Boer republic the OFS was situated just outside the British Empire with its vast scientific and intellectual networks which meant that it did not directly participate in nor benefit from the numerous advances science had made in the second half of the nineteenth century. And neither was there a 'London' that could dictate certain actions to the OFS government in times of epidemic disease. Lord Bryce (1899) had famously called the republic a model of nineteenth century democracy since burghers (i.e. full citizens) influenced decision making on all levels, including the executive level, and no president could make decisions that were not supported by at least the majority of the population. This state of affairs weakened the powers of the executive, limited the options available to the president in times of crises and ensured that unpopular but necessary measures were seldom enforced (Scholtz 1937). The general lack of scientific expertise in the republic along with the independent, stubborn streak that ran through its farming community, with farmers regarding themselves as fully qualified to deal with all animal and plant diseases on their farms, meant that debates about the relationship between the natural sciences and religion and the origins of diseases that had come to dominate in Britain, never even entered the public discourse in republic before the 1900s when it joined with the other regions to form the Union of South Africa. Unlike the Western world where sciences increasingly provided the reasons why environmental calamities occurred, the Free Staters at the end of the nineteenth century still viewed natural and worldly processes through religious, mostly protestant Christian, lenses, and tried to make sense of hard times within the context of their faith, which the historiography informs us was a rather simplistic, unsophisticated system of beliefs (e.g. Hexham and Poewe 1997).

### **Background to the Orange Free State Republic**

The OFS existed as an internationally recognised independent Boer republic in Southern Africa from 1854 until 1902, when it lost its independence under the terms of the Peace of Vereeniging that ended the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and was annexed by Great Britain. From its inception, the

OFS was predominantly an agricultural country, which made farmers, and in consequence the state, very susceptible to the detrimental impacts of recurrent droughts, pestilence (e.g. locusts) and animal and plant diseases. The farmers had limited technical knowledge to deal adequately with these challenges and relied mostly on their Christian religion and prayer to get them through difficult spells. Their staunch religious beliefs hampered attempts to combat recurrent pestilence, in particular locust plagues which devoured whole fields and harvests on a fairly regular basis. In most cases farmers simply stood back as locust swarms devoured their crops, for example, in 1854, 1863, 1864, 1865, 1875, 1876, 1891, 1892, 1893, 1894, 1896, 1897, and 1898, since locusts were viewed as a punishment from God which in turn led to the general perception that farmers were not allowed to kill locusts under any circumstances (Jacobs 1969; Jacobs 1979; Bester 1946: 49-50, 261-263).

Agriculture continued to dominate the OFS economy well into the 1890s and by 1896 agriculture contributed 71 percent of the country's total exports. Agricultural exports consisted mainly of grain from the eastern regions, produced mostly by black sharecroppers since white farmers in general lacked the skills; and cattle and sheep from the northern and southern OFS. Despite the drastic increase of grain production after the Mineral Revolution (i.e. which followed the discovery of diamonds and gold in the South African interior) opened up new markets for agricultural produce, livestock farming still formed the backbone of the agricultural sector by 1896. By that time, the country was still relatively undeveloped with limited good roads, only 16 bridges despite an extensive network of rivers and side streams that made road transport a challenge during the summer rains, and only one railway line which connected the republic to the Cape Colony in the south and the South African Republic (Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, hereafter ZAR) in the north. Consequently, the OFS was extremely dependent on transport drivers who transported goods in a variety of wagons and carts, almost all drawn by oxen, throughout the republic as well as to the neighbouring states and colonies (Bester 1946: 96-135, 167-192; Kieser 1939: 37-38).

In 1896 Martinus Theunis Steyn, a staunch republican and Boer, was elected as the sixth president of the OFS. The February 1896 elections took place against the backdrop of the Jameson raid of December 1895, which entrenched anti-British, anti-English, anti-capitalist and pro-republican ideals in this small republic. The raid also highlighted the poor financial position of many of the burghers (i.e. males 18 years and older with full citizenship and the right to vote) and shortly after he came to power, Steyn ordered an economic survey of the burghers in April 1896. This found that one tenth of the registered burghers (2,363 males) were too poor to comply

with the Martial Law that required all burghers to provide their own guns and horses for service in the republican forces (Kieser 1939: 41-43, 50-100; Malan, 1982: 207-268).

By 1899 the OFS had an estimated population of 211,000 which consisted of around 71,000 white Dutch speakers/Boers, around 10,000 white English speakers or other Europeans, and around 130,000 black Africans. According to the OFS constitution, the official status of Africans within the republic was that of subjects, and they were subjected to stringent laws that severely restricted their freedom of movement within the republic (Van Aswegen 1977: 5-7). During the rinderpest epidemic, no African was allowed to move about without express permission of a state official. [Free State Archives (Bloemfontein, South Africa), GS 2219: Runderpest Commission, Proclamations; GS 2222.] Of the roughly 101,000 white people residing in the republic, 16,255 were listed as registered voters (i.e. burghers) on the 1897 List of Voters. The registered voters consisted of around 87 percent Dutch speakers/Boers, 10 percent English speakers and 3 percent other Europeans, and 85.73 percent resided on farms, and a mere 14.2 percent in the various urban settlements that ranged from the capital in Bloemfontein with approximately 6,000 inhabitants (of which 383 were registered voters) to the hamlet Bothaville in the north-west with only nine registered voters. The overwhelming majority of voters listed their occupation as 'farmer' (85.5 percent) of which the vast majority were cattle farmers. Individuals with training and expertise in non-farming occupations were limited to 124 legal experts (liberally interpreted), 64 medical experts (including pharmacists, nurses and traditional healers), 73 voters officially involved in school education, 45 voters occupying religious occupations that ranged from ministers, missionaries, to church caretakers, and 653 involved in commerce and trading, including agents and transport riders (Groenewald 1989: 47). [Free State Archives, OR 80: *Lyst van Stengerechtigde Burgers 1897.*] These statistics underscore the wholesale dependence of the inhabitants and the state of the OFS on agriculture for their survival, which in turn meant that the numerous environmental crises of c. 1896-1898 dealt severe economic blows to all the inhabitants and the government of this small republic on many fronts and restricted its development at a time when the republic was finally starting to come into its own economically.

### **Environmental Crises of the 1890s**

The numerous environmental crises that devastated most of the OFS between c. 1896 and c. 1898 were not unique to this small republic in Southern Africa and afflicted most of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa at various points in the 1890s (e.g. Kjekshus 1977; Vail 1977; MacKenzie 1990; Wright 1985). This was a rather dry decade in most of East, Central and

Southern Africa with recurrent periods of drought that were often broken by heavy rain showers that led to severe flooding since the soil was too hard/solid for the rain to soak in (e.g. Nicholson 1981). Total rainfall in Bloemfontein (the only place in the OFS with consistent rainfall figures in the nineteenth century) in 1896 amounted to only 19.56 inches which was 5.01 inches below the average of the previous 17 years, and 13.52 inches below the total rainfall for 1895. The following year was even drier, with only 17.07 inches of rain measured in the whole of 1897 of which 8.65 inches fell in January 1897 alone resulting in widespread flooding and damage to crops (*The Friend* 6.1.1898; *De Express* 19.1.1897; *De Burger* 16.1.1897, 20.1.1897). The village of Ficksburg in the east, for example, was reportedly under five feet of water for at least a week in mid-January 1897 after the town's dam broke owing to the heavy rains (*De Express* 19.1.1897), while a correspondent wrote that the village of Parijs in the north had had so much rain in the past few weeks that one 'sometimes wishes for good [i.e. normal] weather' (*De Express* 5.2.1897). The drought continued throughout 1897, with little or no rain recorded in September and October 1897 to allow farmers to plough and plant crops in spring. From Harrismith in the east a contributor to *De Burger* (22.9.1897) reported that only 0.23 inches of rain had fallen between 1 February and 22 September 1897, while contributions to newspapers from all over the republic from districts and villages such as Hoopstad, Ventersburg, Ficksburg, Ladybrand, Winburg, and Fauresmith noted the severity of the drought in their regions. Widespread public calls for a public prayer day for rain led to the proclamation of Sunday 12 December 1897 as a Day of Humiliation and Prayer in which the public was requested to beg God for deliverance from the drought and that the republic would be blessed with 'mild and fertilising rain' (*De Express* 30.11.1897). The spread, intensity and duration of the 1897 drought was of such severity that Steyn declared in his opening speech to the 1898 session of the Volksraad that the drought caused much more damage in the republic in 1897 than rinderpest! [Free State Archives, *Notulen der Verrichtingen van den HEd. Volksraad, gewone zitting van het jaar 1898*, 5.]

The heavy rains in January 1897 once again highlighted the inability of village councils and the Bloemfontein municipality to provide safe, clean water to their inhabitants. Typhoid fever was prevalent for at least the first three months in Bloemfontein, filling up most of the available beds in hospital (*De Burger* 20.1.1897, 23.1.1897, 3.3.1897). The disease even broke out in Heilbron in the north in mid-January 1897, a village that had recorded no cases of any epidemic diseases amongst humans for very many preceding years (*De Express* 26.1.1897). Locusts also made their appearance, as they are wont to especially after periods of drought, devouring the new crops that sprang to life after life-giving rains. Red locust swarms were rec-

orded in most districts in the republic in September and December 1896, January 1897, January 1898 and January 1899, with the January visitations wreaking havoc with young crops shooting up after the rains. In the Harismith district, a contributor to *De Burger* (9.12.1896) noted that locusts caused huge damage to maize, oats and bean fields, while N. D. Geldenhuys from the farm Kareepan reported in February 1897 that the locusts had thankfully avoided most of the maize fields, but had completely devoured the bean fields in the Boshof district (*De Burger* 6.2.1897). Red locust swarms did not always find crops to feed their hordes: one A. W. from Heilbron district commented in a letter dated 14 December that 'Locusts have been here in big swarms but have trekked on in disgust in search of better veld' (*De Express* 18.12.1896).

From September 1896 onwards rinderpest (also known as cattle plague) was added to this mix of environmental crises that challenged the OFS republic and its inhabitants. Rinderpest is a highly contagious and fatal viral disease that attacks ruminants and swine, and spreads when healthy, susceptible animals are exposed to infected droplets, either in the breath of a sick animal or in its virus-rich secretions or excretions. There is no carrier state and the virus maintains itself by continual transmission among susceptible animals. The infectious agent is a *morbillivirus* in the *paramyxovirus* family. An incubation period of 3-15 days is followed by high fever, stomatitis and enteritis, and the disease normally terminates in death after 6-10 days. Mortality rates vary between 25 and 90 per cent, and recovery from the disease ensures a lifelong immunity for the animals (Monnig and Veldman 1953: 89). The rinderpest epidemic that broke out in the OFS was part of the Great African Rinderpest Pandemic that struck in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. This disease was first introduced into Africa in 1887 at Massawa (a port in Eritrea) through infected Indian cattle that were imported to feed the conquering Italian army. From the Horn of Africa, it spread westward towards the Atlantic, and southwards towards the Cape of Good Hope. The disease spread southward at an alarming rate and passed through Uganda and Kenya in 1890, Tanganyika in 1891 and entered into Northern Rhodesia in late 1892 killing an estimated 30-95 percent of all cattle and countless other ungulate in the wild (Wright 1985: 689-91; MacKenzie 1988). The Zambezi River held it back for a few years, but in early 1896 the disease crossed the river and spread into Southern Rhodesia and Bechuanaland. The spread of this disease through the states (OFS and the ZAR), Charter territories (the two Rhodesias) and colonies (Cape, Natal, Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland) of Southern Africa was particularly fast given the extensive transportation networks that existed in the region to facilitate trade and communication. Consequently, despite desperate attempts to halt its progress, it was only a matter of time before the disease

spread further south into the ZAR, the OFS, Basutoland, Natal, and finally the Cape of Good Hope (Van Onselen 1972; Phoofolo 1993; Gilfoyle 2003).

Rinderpest broke out in the OFS on 29 September 1896 in the Hoopstad district, and on 1 October in the Fauresmith district. From there the disease gradually spread to other parts in the Hoopstad and Fauresmith districts as well as to the Kroonstad district in the north and by 22 October it was also prevalent on some farms in the Boshof district in the west. By 3 November rinderpest had breached the only remaining defence line in the republic when it appeared on the eastern side of the railway line on the farm Zuid-Kareebank that was situated on the road between Winburg and Senekal. From there the disease spread erratically and unevenly throughout the republic in the remainder of 1896 and first half of 1897. This is clearly illustrated in the proclamations issued on 20 May 1897: on that day restrictions were lifted (i.e. farms were declared disease free) on 12 farms in the Boshof district, four in Kroonstad, four in Caledonriver, eight in Rouxville, two in Winburg, one in Fauresmith, and three in Bloemfontein. On the same day, newly infected zones were declared on one farm in the Boshof district, 19 in Kroonstad, three in Caledonrivier, 17 in Rouxville, two in Jacobsdal, two in Heilbron, six in Wepener, 15 in Bethlehem, and two in Hoopstad. Rinderpest also lingered on many farms for more than one month, or revisited farms after a few months. On the farm Mooiplaats in the Kroonstad district, for example, rinderpest death were recorded on 6 January, 13 January, 5 February, 17 February, 24 February, and 16 March 1897. A. Hatting, the owner, lost 47 of his 108 head of cattle during this period. The distribution of rinderpest remained uneven until 20 July 1897 when it was prevalent in every district and ward in the republic at the same time. Ironically this enabled the Steyn government to lift some restrictions, and to allow for traffic with salted and/or gall inoculated cattle to commence again from 24 July 1897 onwards, and all restrictions placed on the movement of Africans were finally lifted on 26 July 1897. [Salted cattle are those that contracted rinderpest and survived, resulting in a lifelong immunity to the disease; gall inoculated cattle refer to cattle inoculated with infected gal to bring about immunity to the disease.] The disease gradually ran its course in the various districts in September and October 1897, and by 4 November 1897 all rinderpest restrictions were lifted. After 1897, rinderpest sporadically broke out on some farms until the early 1900s, but these tended to be isolated outbreaks that seldom spread to neighbouring farms and regions. [Free State Archives, GS 1688: R722/97, 4.11.1897; GS 1750: R387/98, 17.1.1898; GS 1766: R877/98, 5.2.1898; GS 1881: R3964/98; GS 2219: Runderpest Commission, Proclamaties; GS 2222: Runderpest Commission, Statistics, 1896-1897.]

### Popular Religious Responses

Setting aside special days for prayer, fasts and humiliation has a long history in Christianity and by the 1890s this practice was firmly established in the OFS. In line with article 66 of the Synod of Dort (1618-19) these Days of Humiliation and Prayer were generally held during times of war or environmental crises, especially when the republic found itself in the grip of extreme drought, and any neglect by the government to act in this regard during challenging times was openly questioned and criticised by the burghers in the press. Three Days of Humiliation and Prayer were appointed by the Steyn government in the period under discussion, namely 15 October 1896 (on account of rinderpest), 13 June 1897 (on account of rinderpest), and 12 December 1897 (on account of drought). The first was called with only one day's notice after the Chairman of the Volksraad (i.e. parliament) read in the newspaper that the Cape of Good Hope had appointed the following day a Day of Humiliation on account of rinderpest and drought. The bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Bloemfontein, the Right Reverent John Wale Hicks, had by then already called on all Anglicans in his Diocese to follow the Cape's example and observe 15 October 'as a Solemn Fast Day after the manner of the observance of the First Day of Lent' (*The Friend*, 13.10.1896). In his announcement he noted that

While we recognise that Almighty God works in Nature according to natural laws, and that we are bound to do all that human prudence and foresight can suggest to avert the terrible calamity which threatens us; let us not forget that it is His visitation: let us turn to Him in humble penitence, with true sorrow of heart for the sins which have called down His judgement, beseeching Him of His mercy to command the destroying Angel to cease from punishing, and to spare our cattle, on whose safety so many human lives depend. [Anglican Church of South Africa Archives (Historical Papers Research Archives, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa), 'Rinderpest Day of Observance', 5.10.1897, *Bloemfontein Quarterly Paper* 115, 25.1.1897, pp. 20-1.]

Hicks was not alone in suggesting that rinderpest resulted from the wrath of God for unrepented sins; his views were most probably shared by the vast majority of white and African Christians in the republic at the time. De Gruchy (1986: 20) commented in strong words on the religious propensities of the Voortrekkers, from whom the nucleus of OFS society was formed:

The Trekkers went north from the Cape, in search of a new land where they would build a republic on their own. They were devout men and women; avid readers of the family Bible, and able marksmen as well. But they went without the blessing of their church. In 1837 the Synod of the DRC denounced the trek, and refused permission for any of its ministers to leave the colony with the Trekkers. It is worth noting, then, that the Great Trek went ahead led by devout

laymen, and sometimes ministered to by preachers of other traditions, but without the DRC clergy. The theological interpreters of the events that were to shape Afrikaner tradition indelibly were not trained by Dutch or Scottish faculties of Calvinist theology, but by their own experience and reading of the sacred book. As they journeyed, the pages came alive with meaning and relevance. The exodus of the people of Israel and their testing in the wilderness were happening again. Any obstacle along the way to the promised land had to be overcome, by sheer grit and by the gun. Any doubt of divine providence was not only unthinkable, but blasphemy, a harbinger of disaster. The church at the Cape was no longer relevant, but the saga of Israel in the holy book was.

In their Orange Free State republic, the burghers continued to live very typical frontier lifestyles after permanent settlement with the vast majority living in relative isolation on their farms, situated as they were many hours by horseback from the small hamlets, villages and the single town with its access to more modern and worldly amenities, cultural and educational opportunities, and established churches who promoted more orthodox versions of the protestant faith. According to Hexam and Poewe (1997) this state of affairs ensured that folk religious practices (which included what they termed ‘sympathetic magic’) continued amongst the rural white communities in the nineteenth century, much to the chagrin of the established church in the republic. From numerous letters published in the three contemporary OFS newspapers it was clear that the arrival of rinderpest, coupled with the continuing drought and frequent locust visitations, ensured that the Israel analogy still retained strong traction within Free State society by 1896 as they looked to passages on Moses, the Pharaoh and the plagues in Egypt to make sense of the environmental crises with which they were confronted. P. J. Prinsloo from Ficksburg wrote in *De Express* (2.10.1896) that the OFS found itself in the same position as the Egyptians: ‘pestilence in the country; dust becomes lice; locusts troubles us, and there is the drought’. The solution for Prinsloo, and many of his fellow contributors in the initial months of the rinderpest outbreak (e.g. *De Express* 8.9.1896), was for the Free State to follow the example of Moses, since the same God he worshipped was still in control and could take away the environmental calamities if society prostrated and humbled itself in front of Him, and begged Him for deliverance.

The God of the Free Staters was an active, all-powerful God who intervened in everyday life in the republic; He was both the First Cause of environmental calamities, and the Ultimate Deliverer who answered prayers and took away hardship and suffering. As one correspondent from Reitz commented: ‘Thankfully God answers many prayers here [OFS] and in the colony [Cape]’ (*De Express* 23.10.1896). For some the blame for God’s refusal to hear prayers fell squarely on humans. One W.B. from Ventersburg

commented on the efficacy of the Day of Humiliation held on 15 October 1896

As expected the Day of Humiliation was a total failure...rinderpest continues to spread and the drought is still with us. It looks rather like our plagues have become worse since... We cannot expect any better because we did not do what the Lord requested of us, namely that everyone in the state as one man humiliate themselves before the Lord. That was impossible since the Raad only declared the Day in haste and tried in vain to spread the news via telegram. What about the farmers living 4-5 hours from villages and hamlets? How could they act on such an important request? The government should have provided 3-4 weeks' notice of the Day of Humiliation to allow everyone in the state to prepare themselves properly. I believe that if the state were to declare another Day of Humiliation and they [sic] follow my advice, then I am convinced that the Lord will hear His people's cries for help (*De Burger* 14.11.1896).

Religious views also influenced how individuals approached state initiatives to combat the spread of rinderpest, and scientific experimentation by bacteriologists, veterinary scientists, medical experts, and farmers and folk medicine practitioners who regarded themselves skilled in developing remedies to treat and sometimes cure the numerous animal and human diseases prevalent in the republic. Radical religious views that condemned all attempts to combat rinderpest as sinful because God had sent the disease to the republic as punishment for societal sins were not uncommon in the first few months, before the German bacteriologist Dr Robert Koch and other scientists started to make breakthroughs from February 1897 onward in terms of developing inoculations that provided immunity to cattle against rinderpest, provided the initial treatment was survived (e.g. *De Burger* 2.12.1896; Gilfoyle 2003). In these first few uncertain months when rinderpest had no cure and the only solutions on the table were strict stamping out (i.e. shooting of all cattle on a farm, both infected and uninfected, once a contagious disease breaks out amongst the herd) and quarantine policies, many burghers also misused religion to brand practices they disagreed with as sinful and therefore against God's will. Particular scorn was reserved for the stamping out policy that was practised for all of one month with one Winburger (i.e. letter writer from the Winburg district) warning that God would not leave the sin of stamping out unpunished (*De Burger* 10.10.1896). The relative failure of stamping out in containing the spread of rinderpest meant that the Volksraad voted against the continuation of this policy in their special session in October 1896, though some wards and districts opted to continue with this practice nonetheless (*The Friend* 5.10.1896, 16.10.1896; *De Burger* 17.10.1896). [Captain Paulus Mopeli, the head of the Basutho living in Witzieshoek, for example, refused to inoculate his cattle, and opted for prayer instead. As a consequence, most of his followers initial-

ly refused to have their cattle inoculated, many leaving it till it was too late. The Dutch Reformed Church missionary to Witzieshoek, Reverent Ross commented afterwards that most inhabitants of this reserve had lost almost all their trek oxen without which they could not plough. Free State Archives, GS 1262: Inkomende Stukke—Kommandant Witzieshoek 1892-1897; Ross (1930).]

It is not surprising that the vast majority of burghers writing to the OFS newspapers tried to make sense of the confluence of events that brought about the environmental crises between c. 1896 and c. 1898 in religious terms: their society was one in which modern science was yet to make an impact; where there are no recorded discussions in the consulted sources before the 1900s between the sciences and religion of the variety that had come to dominate the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe; where ‘natural sciences’ meant one school subject that was taught in exactly two schools at secondary school level, both of which were situated in Bloemfontein; and in which no actual scientists beyond medical doctors (of which there were probably less than ten trained medical doctors) resided up till the arrival of two veterinary surgeons in October 1896 who had to be borrowed from neighbouring Natal and the Cape to confirm that the mystery cattle diseases in Hoopstad and Fauresmith were indeed rinderpest (e.g. *The Friend* 5.10.1896). B. C. Greijling, a member of the Rinderpest Commission in the Hoopstad district, who was one of the first individuals in the republic to deal extensively with the rinderpest outbreak, referred to the pestilence as one that was truly in accordance with Psalm 91:6: there is no sign of your cattle being ill, and they all seem healthy until suddenly many are very ill and on the verge of dying (*De Express* 1.12.1896). The sudden nature of a rinderpest outbreak; the illogical distribution pattern that resulted in isolated outbreaks in regions located hours by horseback from the closest points of infection; haphazard infection patterns on farms itself that left some cattle infected and others not; the complete inability of traditional folk veterinary practices to provide possible treatments in the initial months; the high mortality rates in those districts where the disease broke out first in the republic (i.e. 59.6 percent in Hoopstad; 47.5 percent in Fauresmith; 60.5 percent in Kroonstad and 48.5 percent in Boshof); the initial high mortality rates of cattle subjected to inoculation from February 1897 onwards; competing claims of efficacy by adherents of the three dominant inoculation methods used in the republic, and continuing deaths being recorded amongst cattle herds that had been inoculated and that were supposed to have developed a short-term immunity, at the very least, to the pest, left little choice to Free Staters but to seek answers for and make sense of their hardship in the Bible and in God (e.g. *De Express* 5.1.1897, 8.1.1897; 2.2.1897; *De Burger* 6.3.1897; *De Express* 31.8.1897, 10.9.1897; 14.9.1897).

How could these crises they were confronted with not be compared to those passages in Exodus 7-10, Deuteronomy 28:15-64 and Joel 1 given the context in which they lived?

### **Institutional Religious Responses**

The established churches active in the OFS tended to be slightly less enthusiastic than their members to draw direct analogies between the environmental crises in the republic and the Old Testament. Of the three Dutch Calvinist churches, the Dutch Reformed Church (i.e. Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk, hereafter DRC) and the Reformed Church (i.e. Gereformeerde Kerk, also known as the 'Doppers') were active in the republic. The DRC was by far the biggest church amongst the white community and had 36 congregations with a total of 30,010 members by 1895. The members represented roughly 35 percent of the total number of white 'souls' that the DRC administered to, mostly within the Dutch/Boer community. The remainder of the Dutch/Boer community belonged to the Reformed Church who had eleven small congregations in the state (this church had a total membership, full members and baptised children, of 23,835 in the whole of South Africa by 1899) (Oberholster 1964: 100; Van der Walt 2011). The synods of both the DRC and Reformed Church met in 1897 amidst the environmental crises. The Reformed Church made no mention of rinderpest, drought or locusts in any of their discussions at the synod, and neither is there any reference to this church or its congregations in the consulted popular press. [Reverent Kobus van der Walt, Reformed Church Minister, private communication with author, 2011.] The DRC paid more explicit attention to the matter: Reverent C Fraser made brief reference to rinderpest during his opening address to the 1897 DRC Synod (22 April-7 May 1897), and the synod decided on 1 May to petition Steyn to appoint a Day of Humiliation and Prayer on account of the continuing pestilence. The Steyn government was not open to granting the requested weekday, but did agree to appoint Sunday 13 June 1897 as a Day of Humiliation and Confession of Sins. [Dutch Reformed Church of the Orange Free State Archives (Bloemfontein, South Africa; hereafter DRC of the OFS Archives), *De Fakkel*, 6.5.1897, p. 438; *De Fakkel*, 3.6.1897, pp. 480-1; *Notulen van de Twintigste Vergadering der Synode van de Ned. Gerf. Kerk van den Oranje Vrijstaat*, 1897, p. 25.]

The 13 June 1897 Day of Humiliation was noteworthy in terms of the general lack of observation of this day on account of farmers and other cattle owners being too busy inoculating their cattle with the required fresh gal to attend church services in urban settlements. By June 1897 inoculation had become the norm in the republic and everyone that could help was involved with inoculation in some way or another, from securing and trans-

porting fresh gal to areas where it was required, to helping with the actual inoculation processes itself. The same applied to the urban settlements where large numbers of cattle on commonages had to be inoculated. Perhaps more noteworthy is the general silence in the consulted documentation on this particular Day of Humiliation and the lack of its observation. The Methodist Church documentation makes no mention to it beyond noting that such a day was appointed. [Methodist Church of Southern Africa Archives (Cory Library, University of Rhodes, Grahamstown, South Africa), *The Methodist Churchman* 2(44), 3.6.1897, p. 275.] The Anglican Church makes no reference to this specific day in their records, though they do note that a full congregation was in the cathedral in Bloemfontein the following Sunday (20 June) to commemorate Queen Victoria's Jubilee. [Anglican Church of South Africa Archives, *The Church Magazine of the Diocese of Bloemfontein* 4(7), 15.7.1897, p. 53.] One rare comment and explanation appeared in the DRC publication *De Fakkkel* which published a short anonymous contribution from an unnamed OFS village. The author wrote: 'Very few from the rural areas attended the services; numerous urban inhabitants were busy inoculating cattle for many hours. Their excuse why they were doing so on the Sabbath was because the gal was ready to be used [and had to be used before it went off]'. [DRC of the OFS Archives, *De Fakkkel* 1.7.1897, p. 532.]

To a large extent the responses of the various established churches to the environmental crises in the OFS between c.1896 and c.1898 were characterised by very worldly concerns that centred round the limited funds that were collected in the offerings, the prohibition on the movement of all Africans in the republic, which brought church activities amongst African communities to a standstill, relieving hunger and need in some of the white communities, especially in the Boshof district and amongst children in the east, the impact of travel restrictions on church attendance, and the normal day-to-day running of the various congregations. The Church Council of the Bethlehem DRC, for example, rejected the proposal at their meeting on 6 September 1897 by J. J. Prinsloo not to hold the next council meeting, as usual, on the first Monday of October 1897. This date coincided with lambing season and Prinsloo argued that farmers needed all the lambs they could save after suffering huge losses in livestock and crops in the drought and rinderpest epidemic in the past year. The Bethlehem Church Council, on the other hand, decided that too much business would need to be postponed and transferred to an already full November church council agenda, and therefore opted to hold the meeting as planned on 4 October. Had the minutes of their September Council meeting not referred to this proposal by Prinsloo or the unsatisfactory offerings in the past year, a researcher would not have been able to deduce from the minutes that this congrega-

tion was experiencing a time of severe environmental crises. No mention was made of the spiritual needs of the congregation in this time of need, nor of any guidance on how to deal with these crises on a religious level. [DRC of the OFS Archives, GBK 1/1/2: Bethlehem Kerkraad, Notulen Boek no 2, 1893-1905.]

The reduction, sometimes drastic, in church offerings was a constant source of irritation to the established church during the environmental crises. For example, H. Crosthwaite, from the Anglican mission in Thaba 'Nchu reported in 1897:

Perhaps the least satisfactory feature about the work here is the matter of almsgiving and fasting. I wish I could devise a remedy. The receipts from collections and contributions during the past year from the native amount only to £62, which hardly averages half-a-crown a head per annum. It is true that we have had two bad seasons, even before rinderpest came, which in a measure excuses them. Last year many of my people didn't harvest a single grain of mealies or Kaffir-corn. Drought and locusts were responsible for this. It is working on an unhealthy basis to allow the heathen to accept Christianity without teaching the convert to support his Church. The older Christians are responsible for setting a bad example to the converts of late years. The defects in the matter of almsgiving and fasting are perhaps more injurious than the percentage of defects in morals... [Anglican Church of South Africa Archives, *Bloemfontein Quarterly Paper* (118), 25.10.1897.]

The exception to this rule seems to have been the Lutheran missions run by the Berliner Mission Society at Bethanien, Katdoorput, Adamshoop and Bloemfontein. Despite the entrenched poverty and hardship of the local African communities they ministered to, various missionaries attested to their touching generosity and astonishing hospitality not only towards the church, but towards the missionaries personally. Comments regarding church offerings make regular reference to the relatively large amounts received given the poverty of their flock and the dismal state of their crops. Reverend Arendt of the Bloemfontein mission reported, for example, an encounter with one of his parishioners who showed Arendt after the service his 'shrivelled maize' before proceeding to break off a few cobs for the missionary to take home for his children. [*Berliner Missions-Berichte*, November 1896, pp. 456, 466, 469; April 1899, p. 167.]

The major concern of all the established churches involved with missionary work amongst African communities, was the prohibition on the movement of Africans in the OFS. Restrictions were first placed on the movement of Africans in the border regions of the republic in September 1896, when it became impossible for Africans to cross the OFS borders if not in the service of white employer. Even this concession was abolished in the 21 September 1896 proclamation. Restrictions placed on the movement

of Africans both within the republic, and between it and its neighbouring states and colonies, along with the disinfection of all goods and possessions of Africans arriving from infected areas, stemmed directly from the widely held belief amongst white people that the disease was spread by Africans. From 10 October 1896, all movement of Africans within the republic was restricted and no African could move around freely, either alone or with livestock and dogs within any part of the state unless in the service of a white employer. These restrictions were only lifted on 26 July 1897. [Cape of Good Hope (1896), *Rinderpest Conference held at Vryburg, August 1896*, G.82-96 (Cape Town: Government Printer), 3, 17-18; Free State Archives, GS 2219: Runderpest Commission, Proclamations.]

White employers, however, did not include churches and missionary societies, which brought missionary work amongst the African communities in rural areas to a standstill between September 1896 and the end of July 1897. The issuing of passes by employers to African workers to allow them to attend church services in urban settlements were also banned in terms of the rinderpest regulations. Collective petitioning by the Anglican, Methodist, DRC and Lutheran ministers in Bloemfontein (through 'memories', i.e. petitions, which was the normal method by which burghers communicated their wishes to the OFS government) to allow African missionaries, evangelists and catechists to right to travel around to minister to Africans, who were stuck on farms from which numerous regulations prohibited them to move, failed consistently. [See, for example, Free State Archives, VR413: Bylae tot VR Notule 1896, Part XIV, pp. 16-18.]

Consequently, all the denominations active in missionary work amongst the African communities in the OFS reported a drastic reduction in their missionary activities during the rinderpest epidemic. The Anglican missionary Reverent Canon Bevan, for example, noted in 1897 that he was not able to visit the St Denny's outstation for a number of years owing to rinderpest regulations, which meant that no ministering had been done here in the mean time because 'people, even the Boers themselves, have been forbidden to leave the farms they were living on'. [Anglican Church of South Africa Archives, *Bloemfontein Quarterly Paper* (199), 25.1.1898, p. 13. See also DRC of the OFS Archives, *Bijlagen to de Notulen der Twintigste Vergadering der H. EW. Synode van 22 April 1897 en Volgende Dag*, pp. 47-72 for the reports on missionary activities undertaken by the various DRC congregations in the OFS in the period 1895-1897, and Methodist Church of Southern Africa Archives, *The Methodist Churchman* 2(27), 4.2.1897, pp. 4-5.]

Sometimes rinderpest regulations even went as far as to cut mission stations in parts and prohibited the movement of people and livestock from one area to the other. From Bethanien Reverent Windisch reported on Sunday 17 October 1896 'as from today all railway border crossings will be

closed off, so as to prevent the spreading [of rinderpest] to the easterly parts of the state that lie on the railway route Capetown-Johannesburg'. Since the railway ran through the grounds of the Bethanien mission station, it meant that Bethanien was literally cut in two parts with no movement across the railway allowed. [*Berliner Missions-Berichte*, September 1897, p. 539.]

The fact that missionary work came to a standstill for almost a year, may have resulted in much lower church attendances, or sometimes no soul in attendance to minister to, but conversation rates increased exponentially during this period of environmental crises. The editor of the *Berliner Missions-Berichte*, for example, wrote in his reflection on 1896 that 'The *rinderpest* 'Seperre', which is now severe, has rather awakened than diminished the yearning for the wealth of the House of God'. [*Berliner Missions-Berichte*, June 1897, p. 316.]

The Native Section of the Kimberley and Bloemfontein District Synod of the Methodist Church noted in 1898 that notwithstanding the rinderpest, drought, pass laws, that 'there has been an increase of more than a thousand new members'. [Methodist Church of Southern Africa Archives, MS 15 621: Minutes of the Meeting of the Kimberley and Bloemfontein District Synod, 19 January 1898, p. 79.]

### **Concluding Thoughts**

It was not surprising that the African sections of established churches in the OFS registered increased numbers of converts between c. 1896 and c. 1898: at times of environmental crises religion can provide the causation answers that people so desperately seek, as well as guidelines on how to react, especially when traditional cosmologies fail. Phoofolo (1993) found that the rinderpest epidemic did not incite Africans in Southern African to rebel against white domination as examples from Europe would suggest they should have.

Evidence from the Orange Free State sources point towards many Africans finding solace in the Christian religion instead. In much the same ways as their white counterparts did since society in the OFS during the republican era lived so very close to nature which exposed everyone to the vagaries of the African environment.

In such situations, the answers for society's multiple questions and needs resided in what they perceived to be an ever-present active God who was involved in even the most minute of an individual's existence. The environmental crises of c. 1896-c. 1898 merely strengthened these views within Free State society, despite established churches seemingly paying more attention to this-worldly matters than the spiritual needs of their flock in this time of need.

## Bibliography

- Bester JJH (1946) *Die Ekonomiese Ontwikkeling van die Oranje Vrijstaat 1888-1899*. MA dissertation, University College of the Orange Free State, South Africa.
- Bryce J (1899) *Impressions of South Africa*. London: Macmillan.
- De Gruchy JW (1986) *The Church in South Africa*, second edition. London: Collins.
- Gilfoyle D (2003) Veterinary Research and the African Rinderpest Epizootic: The Cape Colony, 1896-1898. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29(1): 133-154.
- Hexham I and Poewe K (1997) The Spread of Christianity among Whites and Blacks in Transorangia. In Elphick R and Davenport R (eds) *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*. Oxford: James Currey, pp. 121-134.
- Jacobs DJ (1969) Landbou en Veeteelt in die O.V.S. 1864-1888. In *Archive Year Book for South African History* 32(1): n.p. Johannesburg: Government Printer.
- Jacobs DJ (1979) *Die Ontwikkeling van Landbou in die Vrystaat 1890-1910*. DLitt et Phil thesis, University of South Africa.
- Kieser A (1939) *President Steyn in die Krisisjare 1896-1899*. Johannesburg: Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Kjekshus K (1977) *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika 1850-1950*. London: Heinemann.
- MacKenzie JM (1988) *The Empire of Nature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- MacKenzie JM (1990) Experts and Amateurs: Tsetse, Nagana and Sleeping Sickness in East and Central Africa. In MacKenzie JM (ed) *Imperialism and the natural world*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 187-212.
- Maddox G, Giblin J, and Kimambo IN (eds) (1996) *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania*. London: James Currey.
- Malan SF (1982) *Politieke Strominge Onder die Afrikaners van die Vrystaatse Republiek*. Durban: Butterworth.
- Monnig HO and Veldman FJ (1953) *Handboek oor Veetiesktes*. Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Murray C (1992) *Black Mountain: Land, Class and Power in the Eastern Orange Free State, 1880s to 1980s*. Washington, DC.
- Nicholson SE (1981) The Historical Climatology of Africa. In Wigley TWL, Ingram MJ and Farmer G (eds) *Climate and History: Studies in Past Climates and Their Impact on Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 249-270.

- Oberholster JJ, et al (1964) *Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk in die Oranje-Vrystaat. Uitgegee deur die NG Kerk in die OVS ter herdenking aan honderjarige feesviering van die kerk in Sinodale verband (1864-1964)*. Bloemfontein: NG Kerk.
- Phoofolo P (1993) Epidemics and Revolutions: The Rinderpest in late Nineteenth-Century Southern Africa. *Past and Present* 138(\*): 112-143.
- Ross JJ (1930) *Die Sending te Witziesshoek: Paulus Mopeli en Andere Sake Rakende die Sending*. Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers.
- Scholtz (1937) *Die Konstitusie en die Staatsinstellings van die Oranje-Vrystaat 1854-1902*. Amsterdam: N. V. Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Vail L (1977) Ecology and History: The Example of Eastern Zambia. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 3(2): 129-155.
- Van Aswegen HJ (1977) Die Verhouding tussen Blank en Nie-Blank in die Oranje-Vrystaat, 1854-1902. In *Archives Year Book of South African History* 34(1): n.p. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Van Onselen C (1972) Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa 1896-97. *Journal of African History* 13(3): 473-488.
- Wright M (1985) East Africa, 1870-1905. In Oliver R and Sanders GN (eds) *The Cambridge History of Africa*, volume 6: from 1870 to 1905. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 572-79.