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Ecumenical Theology in South Africa  
with particular reference to the  
development of Christian resistance  
to racism (1960 - 1985)

/ by 700  
Daryl Meirick Balia

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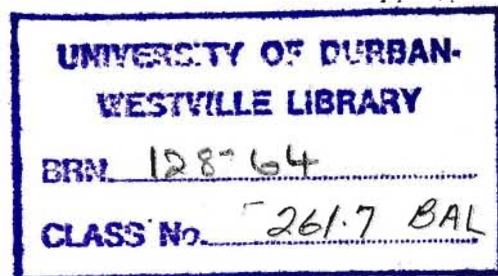
Promoter: Professor W.A. Krige

[S.I.] - [S.O.]

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACC	All African Conference of Churches
ANC	African National Congress
BCP	Black Community Programmes
BPC	Black People's Convention
CCSA	Christian Council of South Africa
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
DRMC	Dutch Reformed Mission Church
EPG	Eminent Persons Group
EPS	Ecumenical Press Service
FMC	Federal Mission Council
GMC	General Missionary Conference
IDAMASA	Interdenominational African Minister's Association of South Africa
JTSA	Journal of Theology for Southern Africa
NGK/	Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk
NGKA	Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika
NHK	Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk
NIR	National Initiative for Reconciliation
NUSAS	National Union of South African Students
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
PCR	Programme to Combat Racism
PSC	Programme for Social Change
SACBC	South African Catholic Bishop's Conference
SACC	South African Council of Churches
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
SASM	South African Student's Movement
SASO	South African Student's Organisation
SCA	Student Christian Association
SPROCAS	Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society
UCM	University Christian Movement
UDF	United Democratic Front
UNISA	University of South Africa
WCC	World Council of Churches
WPCC	Western Province Council of Churches
WSCF	World Student Christian Federation

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Purpose

There is a struggle in South Africa to break the bonds that have established the Church as an institution of the powerful and wealthy. It is a struggle that has been in process for some time, but its ideological implications are now becoming clearer. The writing is not as vague as it was before, and those who have eyes are beginning to see. It is a struggle in a situation where the poor and the exploited are moving toward a new integral and profound understanding of their existence and their hopes for the future. Their lives are inflamed with the presence of suffering and pain, yet they are now advancing to the development of a profound consciousness about their situation. Nowhere is this shift more evident than in their perceptions of the theological and ecclesiastical enterprises. The writing of the Kairos Document is but the initial spark in this theological ferment.<sup>(1)</sup> The leaders of the poor are identifying the actions of their people only to the extent in which they themselves participate. They have begun with the practical exercise of that which they want to learn. In this situation, the Church is just being born.

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1 Published as "Challenge to the Church." Hereafter referred to as the "Kairos Document." Published by the Institute for Contextual Theology, Johannesburg, 1985.

The purpose of this study is to critically reflect on the emergence of this Church in South Africa. To do this, I shall use a historical key to unlock the general but essential elements in the mass of ecclesial impressions and ecumenical phenomena received, and thus provide a clue by means of which we can find our Christian bearings in the labyrinth of apartheid reality. My task is not simply to make a faithful presentation of that which has happened, giving an objective photograph of the ecumenical scene, so that a casual observer will form a similar image. No. My concern is to sharpen our appreciation of the need to invoke the past, to understand the present and align it in a definite way with the social process as a whole. My purpose is also to prevent us from the danger of forgetting the peculiar character of the Church struggle in South Africa.

My attempt shall consist in explaining the historical features of the ecclesiastical struggle with apartheid in terms of its contemporary function. This means to locate these features, to see them as part of and even as due to, other features of their contemporary setting. In order to define them, and delimit them clearly, to make their ideological components more specific, it is best to begin with a more or less narrow- in our case historical- outlook. But I use the historical apparatus precisely to

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abandon the historical anecdote. In other words, the historical explanations I shall offer must be seen as part of the statement of that which is to be explained. My concern is, therefore, not to explain something as "persistence from the past", but to ask, "why has it persisted?"

The context for my discussion is the Church. I propose to examine in successive stages the development of Christian opposition to racism in South Africa over the last twenty-five years. It becomes a necessity for me in this endeavour to broaden my horizon by recourse to sociological tools. This is indispensable in view of the fact that tensions in the ecclesiastical realm poignantly reflect the conflicts of society. The Church is simply not the sacred society immune from pressures to conform to the status quo. I shall demonstrate this to be the struggle of one segment of the Church. My purpose is also to show that the struggle of the greater segment, the impoverished class, is dialectically opposite: to nurture faith in search of liberation from the status quo.

## 2. Method

The methodology employed involves a reformulation of the ecclesial problem in South Africa. This reformulation has a historical point of departure: the struggle of Christians

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for a just society. It is a reformulation based upon a political option that I have taken as a Christian. Lack of political options places one in an ideological vacuum which is pernicious to the revolutionary process. My method operates in the form of a "hermeneutical circle" comprising four elements posed as questions. The historical framework is subjected to the elements of my "hermeneutical circle" in the hope of discovering the similarities and differences, the ideological affinities and class conflicts, power struggles and racial tensions in the ecumenical discourse of apartheid.

The four elements are as follows:

- (1) What political and ecclesial factors contribute to form a climate for new theological discourse?
- (2) What is the nature of the theological discourse and how is it formulated for public consumption?
- (3) How is the theological discourse perceived by the state, the churches, and the people?
- (4) Does the discourse give us scope to criticize it, and more importantly, does the theological discourse point us to a new ideological mediation to concretize Christian faith in historical praxis?

In delineating the political factors that call forth a theological response, it will be observed that these arise out of apartheid's assault on the black population. In other words, it is the events of suffering, persecution and

oppression affecting Blacks in the country which determines the change in political climate and the subsequent necessity for theological reflection. The ecclesiastical factors, on the other hand, usually originate outside the country and are associated with the ecumenical movement. The concerns expressed by Christians under the auspices of this movement often determine the nature of theological discourse in churches worldwide. South Africa is no exception. Sometimes the local agenda is frequently influenced by particular political and theological currents originating outside the country.

The nature of the theological discourse usually involves an intense struggle between black and white leaders of the Christian churches. This is compounded by the fact that most white leaders occupy determinate positions in the societal class structure. There is consequently, a tendency for the dominating group to inculcate its own theological "pre-understanding" into the discourse. The format of the discourse is further couched in language that conceals class interests and hence is less threatening and more digestable for white group consumption. The interests of the lower class are usually noted but carefully subsumed under the rubric of Christian unity.

This thesis documents how the government almost always views ecclesial discourse on political issues as subversive to its interests, except when the discourse is undertaken by Afrikaans churches. For Christians in the historical churches, it is somewhat different. Sometimes the discourse is undesirable even though possible, tolerable but only up to a point, acceptable but only just barely, basic, important or urgent. From one social class to another, from the black lower class to the white upper class, there is variation of the theological tasks that are both possible and impossible. Hence the acceptance or rejection, selective interpretation or propagation (slow or rapid), and its expressions on the practical level, will differ significantly from the one social class to the other.

The discourse will be undertaken in the belief that the Christian gospel provides one with absolute certainties about the scope and limits of Christian involvement in a political struggle. The political process is thus relativized in the name of a gospel that one has come to know and interpret correctly. No attempt is made to balance such things as suffering and death against the results that one may hope for from the revolutionary process. Black theological discourse, however, is a notable exception. In this case, the ideological risk is made in favour of a



concrete actualization of faith in history. Depending on the ideological option, it will be decisive for Christians in giving efficacy to their beliefs.

### 3. Sources

That there is a plethora of information on the topic under consideration is certainly true. The churches' dilemma in South Africa has given rise to a perennial flow of literature, reflecting both local and international concern for the situation. Books, newspapers, journals, unpublished dissertations, interviews, conference reports, and pamphlets are the main source materials for my investigation. Much of the materials are usually written by clergy or persons who, for the most part, are oblivious of the socialist critique of racist capitalism. If they are conscious of it, they certainly do not reflect it in their accounts. There are, of course, exceptions and I attempt to take careful note of them. So too, some studies are more important to us than others, and therefore deserve special mention.

Four important contributions have been published in the last decade on the role of churches in the struggle against apartheid. John de Gruchy's, The Church Struggle in South Africa offers a limited perspective which has totally

disregarded the issue of class.(2) He assumes that race is the fundamental problem and offers no capitalist critique. The ecumenical context shapes much of his discussion; he once served as staff worker for the South African Council of Churches. In the postscript of the second edition of his work (1986), De Gruchy confesses that he had been affected by his church and cultural heritage as well as his class position as a white English-speaking South African. His pietistic talk about "white evangelical liberation" anticipates a theology of reconciliation with its concomitant ideological assumptions. De Gruchy, however, refuses to acknowledge the necessity for the Church to form a "strategic alliance" with ideology.

More resourceful but less articulate is Ernie Regehr's Perceptions of Apartheid.(3) Regehr begins with the interesting comment in his preface that the conflict be understood "in terms of incompatibilities rather than in terms of justice or human rights." He maintains that the Church has been the pivotal institution in forming political perceptions and, like De Gruchy, is confident that if the Church "puts its own house in order," the political process will change for the better. The Afrikaans churches are the object of much contempt, and so if Afrikaners renounce their egotistic perceptions, violent revolution will be averted.

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2 John de Gruchy, The Church Struggle in South Africa, S.P.C.K., London, 1979.

3 Ernie Regehr, Perceptions of Apartheid, Scottdale, Penn, 1979.

Race looms mainly as the basis for political problems, though the class factor is not completely absent. Regehr draws heavily from historical sources and offers no critical interpretation or novel method to impact the Church and its political agenda.

Peter Walshe's Church versus State in South Africa is an impressive improvement on the previous two works.(4) He covers most of the critical issues in the ecumenical conflict over apartheid, even though he writes from a historical perspective of the Christian Institute. He is one of the selected few to take the capitalist critique seriously, and does not fail to recognize the element of class conflict in his analysis. Walshe writes in his preface that the Christian Institute "failed to alter the politics of established white interests." However, Walshe assumes that "a major and sustained church-state confrontation" developed after Sharpville. This is highly questionable, especially if we understand his "Church" to be the institution. Further, the radical politics of a handful of white liberals from one Christian organisation do not put the Church at loggerheads with the state.

The most recent survey is Servants of Power. The Role of English-speaking Churches in South Africa: 1903-1930,

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4 Peter Walshe, Church versus State in South Africa, Orbis, New York, 1983.

by James Cochrane.<sup>(5)</sup> He concentrates on this period because to him, "it laid the foundation for the next fifty years." He also deals more specifically with the histories of the Methodist and Anglican Churches. Cochrane comes to some noteworthy conclusions concerning the role of churches in relation to the South African political economy. His "critical ecclesia" resists the notion of an abstracted "ideal" Church in favour of "a church of the poor." In developing his ecclesiology, he is much indebted to the influence of Latin American liberation theology. His critique of the capitalist underpinnings of most white theology is solid in outlook. Cochrane, however, does not inform his readers about the identity of the poor in South Africa. He conveniently sidesteps the race factor in predicting "a contemporary form of apostasy" as the crucial choice facing the Church. His "critical ecclesia" does not specify the liberating praxis for his own community vis-à-vis the black constituency.

#### 4. Format

The use of my "hermeneutical circle" basically determines the format and contents of the first six chapters. These chapters are arranged in historical sequence and expand on the contentious issues in the ecumenical movement from the

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5 James Cochrane, Servants of Power The Role of English-speaking Churches in South Africa: 1903-1930, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1986.

Cottesloe Consultation to the publication of the Kairos Document (1960-1985). This time span provides an historical framework to relate the ecumenical events to their roots and to their contemporary role in society. Ultimately, the historical significance of the events lies in the impact they have on Christians. Our concern extends to the current political context and so the contemporary significance of the ecumenical trends is not overlooked.

The discussion in these six chapters directs attention to and demands explanation of a fundamental ecclesiological problem. Chapter seven is my attempt to grapple with this problem against the background of my historical investigation. My basic argument in this entire study relates to some crucial concepts (ideology, capitalism, socialism) and their relevance to the South African context. It is extremely important that these be carefully understood, recognized and respected. My remarks in chapter eight, though brief and concise, are meant to ensure that this task is not side-stepped. An attempt is also made to identify a concrete option or agenda to undergird the churches for a prophetic ministry in a situation of political and social crisis.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE COTTESLOE CONSULTATION

#### 1. Ecumenical Background

To credit the historical churches for being in confrontation with the state in the years before Sharpville would surely be misleading. The English-speaking churches were largely absorbed into the country's cultural, economic and legal patterns of racial discrimination.<sup>(1)</sup> The turn of the century saw the country in turmoil over the Anglo-Boer war and this seemed to have set the political agenda for the churches' prophetic witness. Questions of social justice and human abuses were largely ignored at the expense of promoting "co-operation and brotherly feeling" among the different missionary societies. Churches simply drifted with the social and political currents of the day. Late after the Act of Union (1910), there was still no active opposition to government policies geared to separate and exploit the black population. Church pronouncements did not offer a consistent challenge to racist policies as they

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1 English-speaking churches or English churches refer to the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregational and Anglican Churches in South Africa. Afrikaans churches will refer to the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK) and the smaller Gereformeerde Kerk. The English equivalent of NGK is DRC (Dutch Reformed Church). Collectively Afrikaans and English churches shall be referred to as the "historical churches."

evolved at this time. It was no surprise then, that the ecumenical spirit was born in South Africa out of a need to engage the churches in a more effective evangelization of the "native races."

The first ecumenical gathering was the 1904 General Missionary Conference (GMC) formed by the Afrikaans and English churches.(2) The second GMC conference agreed to co-ordinate mission policies in trying to effect a speedy conversion of the black population, to watch over their interests, to influence legislation on their behalf and to foster the establishment of "self-supporting" and "self-propagating" black churches.(3) Yet, while the interests of Blacks were acknowledged, they did not provide the focus for the organisation of the conferences, nor did they ever feature prominently in its activities. The pragmatic needs of the "mission scene" were paramount in the minds of those who gathered for the conference, and these were identified as proclamation, education and medical aid.(4) These factors served as the impetus and main dimensions of ecumenical concern in the years that followed.

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- 2 See Minutes, First General Missionary Conference, Report, Johannesburg, July 13-20, 1904, p.3  
3 See Constitution, Second General Missionary Conference, Report, Johannesburg, July 5-11, 1906, p.129  
4 Elfriede Strassberger, Ecumenism in South Africa 1936-1960, Johannesburg, SACC, 1974, p.136. Eight GMC conferences were held: 1904, 1906, 1909, 1912, 1921, 1925, 1928, and 1932.

The GMC gatherings soon led to the formation of the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA), with the Transvaal and Cape Synods of the Dutch Reformed Church being foundation members.(5) They, however, later withdrew as there were fundamental differences of opinion on the "native question."

Though the main concern was again "missionary co-operation," the establishment of the Council did inspire a measure of hope and expectation among Blacks at a time when they were on the verge of despair. It was expected that the churches would now interest themselves in matters affecting their welfare.(6) Rev. Z.R. Mahabane, former president of the African National Congress and prominent Methodist churchman, expressed the hope that specific concerns of the Council would include the educational advancement of Blacks, and improvement of their economic conditions. He specifically pleaded with the Council to assume a prophetic witness and to challenge the injustices of racist legislation, as well as to study the effects of racial discrimination.(7)

The CCSA met again in 1942 at the University of Fort Hare

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5 Regehr, p. 154

6 Strassberger, p. 145

7 Ibid, pp. 139-167



to discuss the "Church's role in Christian Reconstruction in South Africa." It was only a matter of time before the world would be at peace again and there was a prevailing mood of optimism among white South Africans, even among those gathered at Fort Hare. (8) The conference presented the church in South Africa "with such an opportunity for united action as has never been offered in this land of many divisions." (9) Blacks were not unwilling to share in reconstruction, but found it "difficult to see how the Church could seriously influence society while it could not find a formula that would remove its own divisions." (10) The conference resolution on race relations affirmed that the true interests of black and white races in South Africa do not, in the long run, conflict, and that matters of segregation and colour be relegated to the individual conscience of the Christians. (11)

The Afrikaans churches, having isolated themselves from the ecumenical stream despite the repeated unity efforts of the Christian Council, were still intent on "co-ordinating" their

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8 De Gruchy, p.53

9 Christian Reconstruction in South Africa: A Report of the Fort Hare Conference, July 1942, CCSA, Lovedale.

See Forward by CCSA President, Rev. A. Arthur Wellington, p.4

10 Ibid, p.29, i.e., a comment from Rev. G.B. Molefe made at the conference.

11 Ibid, p.68

mission policy and formed the Federal Mission Council (FMC) in 1942.(12) The FMC held a large conference in 1950 in Bloemfontein, attended by its member church delegates, CCSA and government representatives, but excluded any black participation.(13) Blacks, the conference affirmed, were to have no rights in white areas and the policy of "separate development" was therefore to be implemented, in a just manner. The DRC policy of establishing separate churches for black Christians and the rapid spread of African independent churches were cited as evidence that nations would not remain content to have others make decisions for them. The conference was effectively rejecting any thought of integration and closing all doors to future democracy in a unitary state.

Prime Minister Malan was for once disturbed by some of the conference resolutions, as they clearly did not dovetail with white economic interests. He pointed out that "total territorial separation was impracticable under present circumstances in South Africa, where our whole economic

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- 12 Minutes of the Federale Sendingraad meeting, DRC Archives, Pretoria, May 6, 1942, p.154  
Its aims were listed as follows:  
"to study the results, application and intention of the mission policy; for joint planning of mission strategy; to organise mission conferences on a Union-wide basis and on a Regional basis."
- 13 Die Naturelle Vraagstuk: Referate gelewer op die Kerklike Kongres, Bloemfontein, 1950

structure is to a large extent based on Native Labour."(14) The Dutch Reformed Church was somewhat silenced by this retort, for seldom thereafter did it issue statements at variance with standing government policy. By 1952, the FMC was proposing that the ideal of separation "by no means excludes the employment of Native labour for the economic machinery of the whites for a long time to come." In 1953, the FMC organised its "Christian principles in multi-racial South Africa" conference and another inter-racial conference of church leaders in Johannesburg the following year.

One of the many concerns that found expression at the first World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in 1948 was the need for the churches to take a vigorous stand against discrimination or segregation on the grounds of race and colour.(15) In 1950 the Central Committee of the WCC proposed sending a multi-racial delegation to visit South Africa, but this was rejected by all the churches (including the CCSA) who favoured, instead, the visit of the WCC general secretary, W. A. Visser't Hooft.(16) According to

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- 14 Debates of the House of Assembly (Hansard), 20 January, 24 June, 1950, p.4141/2, Cape Town, Unie Volkspers Bpk, Parliamentary Printers
  - 15 The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 22 August - 4 September, 1948, Official Report, Ed. W.A. Visser't Hooft, New York, 1949, p.93
  - 16 W.A. Visser't Hooft, Christianity, Race and South African People. World Council of Churches, New York, p.4. The NHK, though, were happy to receive a white delegation.

Visser't Hooft, the "disintegration of Bantu Society" was the critical problem in South Africa, but he also found the country's political life dominated by a fierce "struggle for power" between sections of the white population. (17)

Visser't Hooft also came to the conclusion "that the Dutch Reformed Churches do not show sufficient evidence of that prophetic attitude to the State which is one of the most precious elements in the present Calvinist heritage." (18) Regarding the English churches, he noted "a discrepancy between the multi-racial principle these churches advocate and the realities of church life." (19) They did not seem ready to accord the franchise to Blacks and their pronouncements reflected the mind of church leaders rather than that of the European rank and file.

Prominent Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, and later Archbishop of Cape Town, Geoffrey Clayton, began a campaign in 1940 for a "new order" where human dignity would be paramount and government policy no longer based on the fear of economic competition and racial integration. He appointed a commission of clergy and laity who produced its "Church and National Report" in 1943, intended as a definition of "the mind of Christ" for South Africa.

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17 Ibid, p. 9

18 Ibid, p. 16

19 Ibid, p. 25f.

Segregation as a principle was not condemned, only enforced segregation. (20) On economics, the report called for the profit motive to be subordinated to human values, and stated that the control of industrial resources by a few was contrary to the will of God. (21)

For the time, the proposals may have sounded "revolutionary," but they were far from breaking the white monopoly of power. (22) It was essentially a white report, calling for a "white change of heart." Blacks may have heard or approved of the commission's findings, but they were powerless to effect changes. It was therefore not expected to have "much better luck" than previous reports submitted to the state. (23) Further, the report condemned only the inequality of funds and equipment, not separate schools for the different racial groups. (24) The report's credibility was certainly undermined by the Anglican Church's failure to make sufficiently clear "that Anglicans who were not white were welcome at any altar." (25)

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20 Alan Paton, Apartheid and the Archbishop. The Life and Times of Geoffrey Clayton Archbishop of Cape Town, New York, 1973, p. 118

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

23 Regehr, p. 157

24 Paton, p. 118

25 Ibid, p. 117

The church had not eliminated from within its own ranks what it was asking the government to remove from the nation. The Anglican Church had a majority black membership but remained firmly under white control.

Blacks were politically paralyzed in every sphere of South African life if they sought to oppose the forces of oppression before Sharpsville. Black Christians offered a faint voice of protest within the limited ecclesiastical structures open to them. There was simply no room or space to gain a level of participation and autonomy necessary to project a strong black role. Church leadership and control was firmly in the hands of whites, and church statements reflected, more increasingly, a liberal white perception of black suffering. The Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953 to control black education in such a way that it should be in accord with the policy of the state. (26) The measure was

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26 The Bantu Education Act placed control of "native" education, formerly administered by the Department of Education and the different provincial councils, in the hands of the Department of Native Affairs. This new act made the maintenance of any unregistered African school (including night schools) or the conducting of any unregistered class for Africans, an offence punishable by fine or imprisonment. The motif for the act was defined by Dr Verwoerd, the Minister of Native Affairs, when he declared: "My department's policy is that education should stand with both feet in the Reserves and have its roots in the spirit and being of Bantu society . . . . There is no place for him (the Bantu) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour." (Speech to Senate, June 1954. Cited, Edward Roux, Time longer than Rope, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, 1966, p. 394.

fully approved by the DRC but opposed by the English churches who further opposed the government conditions for assuming control of the mission schools. Albert Luthuli eloquently expressed the black view by calling "Bantu Education" a tool in the hands of the white master for the more effective reduction and control of the black servant. (27)

African independent churches were also seeking ways and means of expressing their prophetic concerns for the political problems of the day, and in 1946, formed the Interdenominational African Minister's Association of South Africa (IDAMASA). (28) One of its purposes was to create a forum through which black clergy could speak to topical ecclesiastical and political issues with a united voice. The 1956 IDAMASA Conference considered the findings of the government - appointed Tomlinson Commission (on which much Bantustan policy was based), and passed a resolution calling for a national conference of all the leaders of African thought. (29) This conference was subsequently held in October 1956 and issued a statement which was widely quoted in the

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27 Albert Luthuli, Let My People Go, London, 1962, p.49

28 See Appendix F in G.B.A. Gerdener, Recent Developments in the South African Mission Field. N.G.K., Pretoria, 1958, p.281.

29 The Commission was appointed in November 1950 and presented its report to parliament in October 1954. Its terms of reference were: "to conduct an exhaustive enquiry into and to report on a comprehensive scheme for the rehabilitation of the Native Areas with a view to developing within them a social structure in keeping with the culture of the Native and based on effective socio-economic planning."

Union and overseas. (30) The conference appealed to "the Christian churches in South Africa to take a clear and unequivocal stand in the defence of Christian and human values now being trampled underfoot in the name of apartheid. (31)

Now that supreme political power was thrust into the hands of the "rival" race through the National party victory in the 1948 white parliamentary elections, leaders of the English churches were more vociferous in denouncing the apartheid system. Motlhabi comments that "the reason for this sudden change was more English mistrust of the Afrikaners, who were now taking over the government, than concern for Black human rights." (32) If the changes wrought by the 1948 elections demanded alterations in the racial approaches of the Afrikaans churches, it was now a case of monitoring the implementation of the general principles they had so long been advocating. (33)

The CCSA convened its next conference in Rosettenville, near Johannesburg, in 1949, with the theme, "The Christian Citizen in a Multi-Racial Society." (34) This was the first of a series of ecumenical conferences initiated after 1948 by the English churches to discuss the "race" problem. It

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30 Christian Council Quarterly, December 1956, pp.2-3

31 Ibid.

32 Mogethi Motlhabi, The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance to Apartheid, Johannesburg, 1984, p.226

33 Regehr, p.7

34 See Report, "The Christian Citizen in a Multi-Racial Society," CCSA, Johannesburg, 1949



was now being recognized that God created all people in his image and that consequently, beyond all differences, remained an essential unity. Citizenship involving participation in responsible government should be accorded to all capable of exercising it, the conference agreed. But only individuals who had progressed from "a primitive social structure to a more advanced one" should share in the responsibilities and rights of their new status. (35)

This brief survey of the ecumenical scene before 1960 shows that the English churches had adopted a complaining but essentially passive mode of relating to the established culture of white power, economic privilege, and black suffering. The Afrikaans churches were displaying an uninterested attitude to the fundamental issues of social justice and were intent more on "converting" Blacks to become tools in their political aspirations. Together, this sum of "white paternalistic Christianity" was estranging Blacks from the Christian faith. The hypocrisy, double standards, and the "identification of white skins with Christianity" had the same effect. Still, Blacks knew that Christianity was not a white preserve and that they were therefore not inferior exponents of the faith. (36)

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35 De Gruchy, p.56

36 Luthuli, p.47

If there were provocative attacks on the political system, these were the efforts of individual clerics, like Anglicans Michael Scott and Trevor Huddleston. The latter showed much sympathy for the "Defiance Campaign" which began on 26 June 1952. This was the most successful organized resistance the ANC was ever to initiate with other groups. Many Blacks defied various petty apartheid laws over the next few months and hundreds were arrested. There was a degree of religious fervour infused in the campaign, especially in the Eastern Cape. This was not the undertaking of the churches, though, as they preferred to "watch from the sidelines," offering verbal warnings of the dangers of injustice and disorder while Blacks struggled to purge society of its racism. (37)

## 2. The Sharpville Crisis

Shortly before the crisis, both the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) movements were involved in a massive campaign against the pass-laws. (38) The whole question of influx-control was under scrutiny with the intention of stirring the indignation of all sections of the population, even Whites. They seemed plainly ignorant of the

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37 Walshe, p.37

38 The pass-laws required that all Africans carry "passbooks" at all times. These pocket-sized books record where they are allowed to live and work, finger prints, work record, tax and family status, tribal group and race. Similarly aimed at restricting freedom of movement were the influx-control laws that defined which Blacks may legally enter white areas, for what reasons, and for how long.

evils of the pass-laws affecting Blacks and some form of "consciousness-raising" was thought imperative for them. (39) Apartheid was proving itself to be a demonic form of oppression that was bringing the country no dividends.

Luthuli cautioned that Blacks were not without strength and that white South Africa was increasingly vulnerable. (40) The privileged minority's claim to govern the masses by divine right was recognized by Luthuli as a type of despotism doomed to destruction. Thus the need of the hour was a political appeal that would rouse black resentment over the pass-laws to new heights of protest. On 21 March 1960, the PAC called on the people to disobey the pass-laws. They believed that this action would cause the end of white domination. The abolition of the pass-laws (as a specific issue) was commensurate with the PAC's "positive action campaign," which until now was not the official PAC policy.

Robert Sobukwe, PAC President, had earlier announced the "status campaign," whose purpose was to exorcise the slave mentality inculcated by Whites in Africans during colonialism, and to instil in Africans a sense of independence that would cause them to choose to starve in freedom than have plenty in bondage. This campaign was abandoned in lieu of the former which created an avenue for

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39 Tom Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1983, p.201

40 Ibid, p.20

something more "spectacular." (41) Blacks were to leave their passes at home and offer themselves for arrest under the slogan, "No bail, no defense, no fine." Even if they were not arrested, the people were to persist in offering themselves until they were taken in. Furthermore, the pass-law violation was to be conditioned by absolute non-violence.

This pass-law campaign proved to be a turning point in the history of black resistance. Nearly 5000 people, including many women and children, gathered outside the Sharpville police station to peacefully protest the pass-laws. Some in the crowd threw stones, and the police responded by opening fire. (42) Bullets were fired spontaneously and indiscriminately into the crowd, with the majority of those killed being shot in the back. Before the shooting, "there was no warning to the crowd to disperse. There was no warning volley. When the shooting started it did not stop until there was no living thing in the huge compound in front of the police station." (43) More than 180 people were injured and some 69 mercilessly massacred. Some of the human bodies were loaded onto trucks and taken to the mortuary.

In the government-appointed inquiry that followed (its real purpose not being to apportion responsibility to any person

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41 Motlhabi, p.92  
42 Roux, p.406  
43 Ibid, p.407

for the incidents), it was acknowledged that there was no organized attempt by the crowd to attack the police on the day of the shooting. Some of the shooting was considered unjustified and unlawful. (44) Later at the trial of certain Blacks accused of violence and incitement at Sharpville, the regional magistrate is reported to have said there was, undoubtedly, insufficient justification for the very extensive firing that had taken place. (45) The events of Sharpville and Langa, Cape Town (where a similar confrontation led to two deaths and 49 injuries on the same 21 March), had the effect of arousing black South Africa to numerous demonstrations and protests.

The government responded by declaring a state of emergency and banning the liberation movements since they, as one government spokesman put it, "do not want peace and order; what they want is not one pound a day for all the Bantu in South Africa; what they want is our country." (46) Prime Minister Verwoerd was himself nearly assassinated while addressing a meeting by, ironically, a wealthy white farmer of little political persuasion. One Afrikaans newspaper

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44 South African Institute of Race Relations (S.A.I.R.R.), Survey of Race Relations, 1961, Johannesburg, 1962, p. 54

45 Rand Daily Mail, 23 June 1961

46 The Minister of Justice speaking in the House of Assembly debate on 29 March 1960, House of Assembly Debates, 29 March 1960, Column 4302-3

claimed that, "In this miraculous escape all the faithful will see the hand of God and thank him" for sparing the country "the greater horror" than the political turmoil.(47)

The English churches publicly deplored the Sharpville massacre, but their statements indicated no overall ecclesial policy or strategy to alleviate the explosive situation.(48) Indeed, the divisions apparent at previous ecumenical gatherings resurfaced strongly. The moderators of the four DRC provincial synods called on their congregations to observe 10 April as a day of prayer. Some prominent members of the DRC acknowledged the possibility of shortcomings in the government's handling of the situation, but they still approved of the apartheid system, provided it was implemented in a human way.(49) This contrasted sharply with an extended statement from twelve DRC clergymen rejecting apartheid as unethical and unbiblical, and expressing serious concern at the political crisis.(50)

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47 Die Burger, 11 April 1960

48 Survey of Race Relations 1959-1960, S.A.I.R.R., Johannesburg, 1961, p.94f.

49 Ibid.

50 Published as "Delayed Action," Ed. A.S. Geyser, N.G.K., Pretoria, 1960

### 3. The Cottesloe Consultation

The Sharpville crisis proved to be an extremely grave one in South Africa's history. Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Joost de Blank, believed that Blacks were now rejecting white oppression, and also refusing to identify with a Christianity that was too closely linked with the evils of apartheid. He confessed his own church's failures and claimed the future of Christianity in South Africa to be dependent on the churches "complete disassociation from the Dutch Reformed attitude . . . . . Either they must be expelled or we shall be compelled to withdraw." (51) This was his request to the WCC whose executive committee, however, was not sympathetic but believed that "the expulsion of the DRC would be in effect a kind of ecclesiastical apartheid adding one more scandal to an already scandalous situation". (52) As an alternative, they urged a gathering of Christians to discuss race relations and social problems in South Africa, and to clarify Christian witness in an extremely violent situation. It was to be primarily a meeting of white Christian males.

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51 A.H. Lückhoff, Cottesloe, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1978, p. 8

52 Ibid, p. 15

This was to be the much acclaimed Cottesloe Consultation held in Johannesburg, 7-14 December 1960, which both English and Afrikaans churches had unanimously called for. (53) It was to be the opportune occasion for the WCC "to come and investigate the situation in South Africa at first hand." (54) The DRC was optimistic that such a gathering would prove that "world opinion against South Africa was deliberately poisoned with false and mendacious reports which were continually sent abroad by people who knew they were untrue." (55) This was probably a veiled reference to the publicized views of Archbishop De Blank about the DRC, which had created some bitter feelings amongst the Afrikaans ministers before the consultation.

Each member church prepared papers reflecting its views on the contemporary areas of discussion planned for the conference: the current situation in South Africa, the Christian understanding of the gospel for racial relationships, an understanding of contemporary history from a Christian standpoint; the meaning of the current state of emergency in South Africa; and the witness of the Church

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- 53 See Cottesloe Consultation, The Report of the Consultation among South African Member Churches of the World Council of Churches, 7-14 December 1960, at Cottesloe, Johannesburg, Ed. Leslie A. Hewson, 1961.
- 54 Correspondence, W.A. Visser't Hooft notes. Cited in Lückhoff, p.8
- 55 Survey of Race Relations, 1959-1960, p.96



regarding justice, mission and co-operation. For the most part, the English churches' reports showed apartheid to be unacceptable in its present form, while the Afrikaans churches' reports showed a tacit acceptance of the system if it was to be implemented fairly. (56)

The DRC saw the current unrest in the country as a longterm effort of the major black organizations aimed at "overthrowing the present ruling class and establishing a 'peoples democracy,'" not an attempt to change particular legislation, but "part of a general struggle for liberation, with the object of making the masses politically conscious and thus preparing them for future struggles." (57) The NHK memorandum called for a firm ending of the integration process, claiming scriptural basis for the separation of the races and quoting Genesis chapters 10 and 11, Deuteronomy 32:8 and Acts 17:20, 26. There was no mention of Sharpville, and statements critical of segregationist policy were construed as serving "demonic powers" in the world, like those of "atheist communism." (58) The final Cottlesloe

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56 Strassberger has reviewed the papers in some detail.  
See pp. 222-227

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

Consultation statement, though, was a repudiation of most of the NHK views. (59)

With the Sharpville crisis, white power and privilege had come under severe threat for the first time. But the ecclesial and ideological task now was to consolidate power in a different direction, possibly too, in terms of values demanded by the Christian gospel. Thus, if the Church could be a vehicle to preserve the culture of white paternalism amidst the mounting strife and disorder, it was the WCC - sponsored Cottesloe Consultation that offered this possibility. Some of the participants believed that they had a greater cultural, religious, and economic development and that they therefore had a moral duty to educate the less developed to full maturity. The thought was expressed by some of cultivating Christian leadership for the Bantu and even the government was requested to co-operate with the churches here. (60)

Throughout, the consultation seems to have been totally immune to the social upheavels and destructive changes that followed South Africa's advance into a racist capitalistic system. The communal values of African culture were further largely neglected as Blacks comprised only twenty five

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59 See the Cottesloe Statement in the Report, pp.73-78

60 Ibid, p.46

percent of the delegates. Thus Walshe observes that, "Had the white representatives been listening more closely to the underprivileged, to the protests of and alternative futures envisaged by blacks, Cottesloe would have had to confront the church and government establishments with a much more radical set of challenges than it did. There would have been talk of 'one man one vote,' of predominant political power for Africans, a major redistribution of land and the nationalisation of the mines." (61) The opportunity, sadly was missed, and the consultation reflected, instead, the "insularity of white-led churches formed by a smug white culture that was complacent in its Western world-view." (62)

Cottesloe did, nevertheless, offer some prospect of hope, especially to black leaders. For them, the consultation had reawakened the relevancy of the Christian message which now awaited some application or practical effect. Luthuli urged that it was not too late for white Christians to look at the gospel again and redefine their allegiance. But he also warned that the opportunity would not last forever and that time was running out. (63) Even his successor as President General of the ANC, Wesleyan minister Zaccheaus Mahabane,

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61 Walshe, p. 17  
62 Ibid, p. 18  
63 Walshe, pp. 18-19



continued to call the church to a more dynamic role in changing South Africa. His unquenchable hope urged him to call for another conference of magnitude similar to Cottesloe to "thrash out" the country's problems. (64)

The Afrikaans churches (DRC and NHK) did not experience a similar urge, as some had expected. The preparatory documents of the English churches challenged many of their baseless assumptions about the apartheid system and they now found themselves in a rather problematic situation. This was particularly embarrassing since their representatives co-operated in drawing up the consultation's final statement, which again, had sometimes been critical of apartheid. The first to offer his view on the new ecclesiastical development was Prime Minister Verwoerd, who charged that the DRC delegates had acted in their individual capacities and that the voice of his church had still to be heard. He further resisted foreign pressures in trying to influence South African thinking and decisions on how to act with justice. (65) The NHK subsequently rejected the Cottesloe statement and then withdrew membership from the WCC.

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64 Ibid.

65 DRC Newsletter, March 1961, pp.1-2

#### 4. Formation of the Christian Institute

The Transvaal synod of the DRC met in April 1961 in the aftermath of an organized campaign by some DRC ministers to reject the Cottesloe findings and to terminate the church's membership in the WCC. (66) The former acting moderator and delegate to Cottesloe, Beyers Naudé, addressed the synod on the positive findings of Cottesloe, and pointed to its obedience to the word of God, a factor which surpassed other considerations. The synod, however, succumbed to internal pressure and together with the Cape NGK Synod, rejected the Cottesloe report and called for an end to the church's membership in the WCC. (67)

Some of the reasons given for this decision were that the findings infringed on and undermined the policy of separate development; that they conflicted with the principle of differentiation since they advocated political integration;

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66 Susan Ritner remarks that this campaign was "allegedly directed by the secret Afrikaner Broederbond ... Intimidated by the ferocity of the attack, several Cottesloe delegates recanted. In synodal meetings, I was told by more than one minister, men voted against their known beliefs."

See her well-researched article, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid," Journal of Contemporary History, Vol 2, number 4, 1967, pp.34-35

67 Lückhoff, p.138f.

and that they dealt with practical politics on which the church should not express itself, unless some scriptural issue was involved. (68) The national synod of the NGK which met in October 1962, deliberately by-passed any further debate on the subject. This was proof again that real change could not be expected from within the formal structures of the DRC.

One who shared this conviction was Beyers Naudé and he attempted to focus the ecumenical debate on the implications of the gospel in church and society by launching, together with other sympathizers, a monthly journal called "Pro Veritate." (69) He was also responsible for initiating various Bible study groups that focused on social issues. Moves were also underway to establish an ecumenical and inter-racial organization of concerned Christians who would reflect positively on the grave racial situation in the country. This body was formed on 13 August 1963 and called itself the Christian Institute of Southern Africa. Naudé had in the meantime been elected moderator of the newly constituted Southern Transvaal NGK Synod and he was now also asked to direct the Christian Institute.

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68 Peter Randall. Not without Honour - Tribute to Beyers Naudé, Not Without Honour. The Life and Work of Beyers Naudé, Ed. Peter Randall, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1982, p. 23

69 Pro Veritate was published from May 1962 to October 1977.

Permission to retain his status as minister while being Director of the Institute was refused and so he was forced to resign the former. Naudé was now free to devote himself to the task of establishing the Christian Institute throughout the country.

From a foundation of Bible study and prayer, there were to be discussions, analysis and then service. The task ahead was to equip Christians for a life of doing, a life committed to reconciliation and to witnessing more clearly to the Kingdom of God in South Africa. The spirit of Cottesloe was undoubtedly a motivating hope in the formation of the Institute, since Naudé claimed it was born in faith, "Faith in the purpose of God to unite all its people in a renewed fellowship of love and service; faith in the healing power of Jesus Christ and his Gospel which is able to overcome the barriers of history, culture, tradition, language and race." (70)

From its inception, the Institute was subjected to numerous campaigns from DRC quarters mounted to discredit the organization and those Afrikaners associated with it. The official news organ of the DRC, "Die Kerkbode," declared as irreconcilable the presence of DRC members on the Institute's Board of Management together with the Roman

Catholics. (71) One university professor, A.D. Pont of Pretoria, told his students that the organization was a stepping stone for the infiltration of communist propaganda into the churches and also wrote a series of defamatory articles in the NHK paper, "Die Hervormer." Naudé and A.S. Geyser, chairman of the Christian Institute, took legal action against Pont and were awarded damages of R10 000 plus costs. (72) The 1966 NGK general synod resolved that its officials and members should withdraw from the Institute as it represented a false doctrine. The NHK threatened their members with disciplinary action if they did not resign membership. (73)

It is true that while some black church leaders were invited to serve on the Institute's management board, the Institute was primarily a white organization intended to inform white opinion. Much time and effort was spent in gaining support in Afrikaner church circles, leading to many ministers resigning their positions to take up membership in the Institute. (74) The Institute was still far from accepting

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71 SAIRR, Survey 1964, pp.12-13

72 Regehr, p.196

73 SAIRR, Survey 1967, pp.10-11

74 There were even resignations from NHK ranks. J.A. Swanepoel, in accounting to a NHK commission for his decision to resign, claimed that, "the church has become enamoured of group selfishness and has become the champion of sinful egoism and the avarice of those in a position of privilege." See his letter to the Commission, Confession and Witness, pamphlet, May 1967



the "centrality of the black viewpoint" for the future of Christianity in South Africa and the realization of justice. (75)

5. Significance of Sharpville and Cottesloe

The Sharpville crisis and the Cottesloe Consultation awakened the English churches to a new realization of the gospel's call to create widening forms of human fellowship. The Anglicans committed themselves to openly and fearlessly condemning all that they believed to be evil and false in the social, political or economic life of any nation. If this led to confrontation with the state, it was to God that obedience had to be given. (76) Despite these changes, the English churches were still dominated by a white hierarchy and remained a paternalistic organization where the black voice was rarely heard.

Where this situation was challenged, it was usually on the individual level. Joost de Blank urged in his farewell message of 1963 that racial discrimination was a form of blasphemy and that it was a major tragedy that some who claimed to be Christians still espoused gradualism and a

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75 Walshe, p. 35

76 Cape Times, 22 November 1963, quoting statement by Anglican bishops.

step by step amelioration in inter-race relations. Sin was sin and had to be repented of and forsaken completely here and now, he said. (77) Some did not lament his departure to England and seized the opportunity to condemn the Archbishop's "unpleasant, thundering, one-sided condemnations." (78)

The Methodist Church had also been forthright and persistent in their verbal condemnation of apartheid, and after Sharpville, called for a national convention that would be representative of the leadership of all major racial groups. (79) Prime Minister Verwoerd was little impressed and saw this as an attempt "to undermine the government's policy and justice for the white man." Having "conflicting groups together" would be nothing but a "breeding ground for communist conditioning," the Prime Minister said. (80) The same Methodist church had a predominantly black membership with church control firmly in white hands.

Methodist congregations were still racially segregated and black ministers received almost half the stipend set for

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- 77 Seek (Official publication of the Anglican Church), November 1963, pp.1-3  
78 Die Burger, 2 October 1963  
79 K. Carstens, Church and Race in South Africa, United Nations Unit on Apartheid, Doc. No. 23/71, May 1971, p.20  
80 Ibid, p.21

their white colleagues. The first black Methodist President, the Rev. S.M. Mokitimi, was elected in 1963 after white Methodists were called "to serve and not to dominate, to learn as well as to teach, to receive as well as to give." (81) While this may have been a major symbolic breakthrough, it was merely a "token gesture," for it was a full ten years later that a black was president again. (82)

The Presbyterian Church leaders were less harsh in their criticism of the apartheid system while the Catholics were more forthright. In 1957, the Catholic bishops strongly attacked apartheid as being fundamentally and intrinsically evil. (83) This was followed by further statements recognizing apartheid as blasphemy and calling for the value and dignity of each person, irrespective of race, to be respected. Thus, the bishops advocated abolishment of the migratory labour system, the Mixed Marriages Act, and the Group Areas Act, which destroyed free association and the growth of human fellowship. Despite this stand against apartheid by the Catholic hierarchy, Catholic parishes and even its seminaries themselves, remained segregated. (84)

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- 81 Rev. W. Illsley, Churches: Integrated or Divided?, Cape Times, 3 June 1963  
82 Walshe, p.40  
83 SACBC "Statement on Apartheid 1957," Apartheid is a Heresy, Ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, Cape Town, 1983, appendix  
84 SACBC Pastoral Letters: 1960, 1962

There is furthermore no evidence that the rank and file of white clergy were radically critical of apartheid. Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban was alone in issuing pastoral letters strongly condemning apartheid, and he even encountered opposition in his own church for his views. (85)

Politically, the significance of the Sharpville crisis was that it had inaugurated a period when protest finally hardened into resistance and when Africans were forced to begin thinking in terms of revolutionary strategy. There was a massive withdrawal of investors' confidence, giving rise to a short term business slump. (86) If the sense of crisis generated by the Sharpville shootings and their aftermath appeared to be a vindication of a program of armed insurgency, it was no coincidence that "Umkonto we Sizwe" (Spear of the Nation) was formed by the ANC, as its military wing, to fight apartheid.

The ANC's explicit intention was to awaken everyone to a realization of the disastrous situation to which the government system was leading. The hope seemed really to bring the government and its supporters to their senses before it was too late, so that policies could be changed

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85 Interview, Peter Walshe and Denis Hurley, 2 April 1965.  
See Walshe, p.41

86 Lodge, pp.225-226

before matters reached the desperate stage of civil war. There appeared to be no way open for black people to succeed in struggling against the principle of white supremacy except through violence. Lawful modes of expressing opposition to this principle had been closed off by legislation and Blacks had to choose between accepting a state of inferiority or defying the government.

By contrast, the government was now more determined to cripple black political resistance to apartheid. Prominent leaders in the liberation movements, such as Albert Luthuli, were banned after their acquittal in the Treason Trial of 1961. There were numerous other arrests and the repression was particularly intense on the Eastern Cape where over 1000 Blacks were arrested. Nelson Mandela was arrested and jailed for life at the famous Rivonia Trial of 1963. (87)

In 1964, the General Law Amendment Act was passed allowing the state to hold political prisoners in detention for ninety days without trial. A member of the defense team at Mandela's trial was Bram Fischer, a moving spirit in the

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87 Motlhabi, p.66f.

Communist Party of South Africa, who was later also arrested. Naudé believed that a man of Fischer's integrity would never have become a communist had the Church not refused to accept its call to work for social justice. (88) The Christian Council protested the ninety day provision of the new government law, but the Dutch Reformed Churches refused to sign the ecumenical document prepared for this purpose. They believed that the provision was necessary, "under the threat of a cold war that is being fanned by revolution and sabotage and which is a prelude to civil war and total war." The government's "unusual measures" were therefore justified. (89)

It is clear, then, that the Sharpville crisis had challenged the churches in South Africa to a new commitment to the abolition of apartheid and to the creation of a new non-racial society. The English churches were not slow in subsequently declaring publicly, their abhorrence to the evils of apartheid. The following practice, however, among white Christians even within church circles, left much to be desired. Positively, the Christian Institute was born at a crucial time, and though a white organization, was able to offer a disturbing prophetic voice amidst injustice and racism. It assailed complacency, challenged Christians to a

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88 Pro Veritate, 15 November 1965, pp. 12-13

89 Cape Times, 26 May 1964

more authentic future in South Africa, struggled to offer a new vision for society and functioned as a "confessing movement" in a state of increasing repression.

Political repression had created a vacuum in terms of black political leadership with the result that Church organizations were beginning to function as a residual matrix of white and black opposition to apartheid. (90) The Institute was one such organization that emerged as the vanguard organization in an inchoate, essentially spontaneous movement of Christian dissent. (91) Its most urgent effort was to wean Afrikanerdom from apartheid and to foster ecumenical understanding among various Christians in anticipation of a new society for South Africa. Church structures were to remain stained by racial considerations similar to those in the Afrikaans churches. White members proved themselves less enthusiastic about racial integration than were their leaders, who very often had been trained overseas. (92)

The Christian Institute also provided a catalyst for a rapprochement between the historical and independent churches. The clergy of the independent churches did not

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90 Walshe, p. 42  
91 Ibid, p. 43  
92 Regehr, p. 158

share similar recognition and status as their counterparts in the historical churches, and many did not have a formal theological education. David Thomas notes that, "Their deep suspicion of whites in the large multiracial Churches seemed to exclude hope of help from this source, but the formation of the Christian Institute ..... provided an opportunity for bridging the gaps." (93) The Institute was instrumental in funding and supporting the creation of the African Independent Churches Association (AICA). Its interaction with black organizations was to take a radical turn the next decade, forcing the Institute to a new understanding of the conflict in the country.

If the apartheid system was ever questioned, it did not mean that the churches became overnight champions for black aspirations, nor that they would in future adopt an uncompromising stance in the unfolding policy of apartheid. It did mean, however, as Hope and Young have observed, that each church "had its own history, its own vision, and its own way of compromising with ideals." (94)

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- 93 David Thomas, Councils in the Ecumenical Movement South Africa, 1904-1975, Johannesburg, SACC, 1979, p.39. This is an important source as Thomas served as editor of the SACC news service from 1971-1976.
- 94 Hope M. and Young J., The South African Churches in a Revolutionary Situation, Orbis, New York, 1981, p.49



## CHAPTER 2

### MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

#### 1. Background to the Message

In 1966, the World Council of Churches sponsored the famous "World Conference on Church and Society" in Geneva. This conference was unique in the history of ecumenical encounters and was charged with advising the churches and the WCC on its ministry in a world undergoing revolutionary social change. Racial discrimination was recognized by the participants as one of the greatest immediate dangers to humanity, based not only on fear and resentment but also upon economic self-interest. It was cited that since many Whites in Africa refused to accept Blacks as brothers and sisters, Blacks often failed to accept Whites on the same terms.(1)

The conference further noted that foreign investment in countries officially sanctioning discrimination made it easy for groups advocating discriminatory policies to entrench themselves and thus increase tension and hostility between

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1 World Conference on Church and Society, Geneva, July 12-26, 1966, Official Report, Geneva, WCC, 1967, p.136

nations and peoples.(2) The Church, and indeed every Christian was called upon to multiply efforts to ease tensions between local citizens and strangers in their midst, to encourage the legitimate aspirations of suppressed majorities and minorities, and to "support all practicable measures aimed at changing any political and economic order which reflects the denial of political rights or economic opportunity, segregation, discrimination, or other suppression." (3)

The South African delegates, Beyers Naudé and CCSA secretary, Bishop Bill Burnett returned challenged by the urgent necessity for Christian churches to strive for social justice and for the achievement of the abundant life for all. Subsequently, they initiated various regional consultations throughout South Africa to consider the Geneva conference recommendations within the South African framework. Geneva was to set the agenda for considerable theological debate and social action within the WCC member churches during the next ten years.(4) The WCC was also becoming a "hot topic" at this time in South Africa with the ecumenical movement often accused of being a communist front

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid, p. 137

4 De Gruchy, p. 117

or a playground of fairly harmless ecumenical enthusiasts. (5) The disintegration of families, secularization, increasing group tension and other problems called the churches to an urgent ecumenical confrontation. "Pro Veritate" pleaded in question, "must one crisis after another break on the church before in human despair we will give each other the hand in Christ?" (6)

British Christians were also concerned about developments in South Africa and sent a working party in 1964 to visit the country. This party completed its report, "The Future of South Africa," which was published at a time when Britain was taking fundamental decisions about her policy towards South Africa. This report concluded that "apartheid is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and that its continuance threatened world peace." (7) The British Council of Churches subsequently did not advocate economic sanctions, but asked the British government to take "appropriate measures" to ensure that Britain no longer encouraged apartheid practices. (8)

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5 See Pro Veritate, 15 July 1967, p. 11

6 Ibid, 15 February 1966, p. 5

7 The Future of South Africa, A Study by British Christians, Ed. T.A. Beetham and N. Salter, London, 1965 p. 92

8 Ibid, p. 9

The CCSA churches were finding themselves under constant pressure from government regulations restricting racial contact within the context of the Church. This concern resulted in a "summit meeting" of church leaders in Bloemfontein in May 1965 to discuss issues of "multiracialism" and the Church.(9) One of the major discussion points at this conference was the future of the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre. This ecumenical centre outside Johannesburg, was forbidden by government law to provide inter-racial residence to its guests. The church leaders decided that their "unity in Jesus Christ ... must find expression in our common life in society."(10) They were now ready to go on the offensive and take a tougher line in their protest against apartheid.

Ecumenically, the way forward was for a "National Consultation on Church and Society" and this was held in February 1968 in Johannesburg. Here again, the consultation turned out to be white orientated in its resolutions.(11)

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9 Thomas, p.7

10 CCSA, Minutes of the Meeting of Church Leaders, held in the Cathedral Hall, Bloemfontein, 4-5 May, 1965  
See executive Minutes of CCSA.

11 Walshe, p.59

The main purpose was to create a deeper level of compassion in South African society for black suffering. Whites were encouraged to participate in the existing political structures: political parties, municipal councils, Chamber of Mines etc., since this would bring them into a position of greater responsibility. Clearly, the consultation spoke from the other side of the racial and class divide as the voice of a troubled conscience among the comfortable, rich and powerful. From this viewpoint, South Africa's "greatest problem" was the apparent bankruptcy of compassion toward the under-privileged. (12) The consultation was the voice of a past era as it further rejected the notion that apartheid was a threat to world peace. (13)

## 2. Message to the People

Following the National Consultation, an ecumenical committee was appointed to provide a systematically formulated and theological critique of apartheid that would be irrefutable on biblical grounds. The Christian Institute co-operated with the Theological Commission of the South African Council of Churches (SACC, formerly CCSA) in formulating "A Message

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12 Ibid, p.60

13 Ibid, p.59

to the People of South Africa" which would serve as a basis for study and action. While the Message received unprecedented publicity, only 2000 signed the Message as a sign of general acceptance and of commitment to its concern. It was not intended as the "last word" but as a timely and necessary reminder to South Africans of the gospel and its implications. The Message was further not to be seen as an isolated statement which had appeared from nowhere, but that it emerged "from the perspective of events occurring during the last few decades of our country." (14) Nevertheless, it did claim to be "a serious attempt to interpret what the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ means and implies within our complex and difficult situation." (15)

The Message began by proclaiming the good news that in Christ God had "broken down the walls of division," set people "free from all false hopes of grasping freedom for themselves," "mastered the forces that threaten to isolate man and destroy him" and that by the work of Christ, all

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14 The Message in Perspective, Ed. J.W. de Gruchy and W.B. de Villiers, Johannesburg, SACC, 1968, p.6

15 Ibid, p.7. Though it contained no biblical references, it did not follow that the Message was unbiblical as some later thought. The writers were prepared to defend it on a biblical basis (p.6)

are "reconciled to God and to each other." The kingdom was already present in Christ and "therefore now demands our obedience to his commandments and our faith in his promises." (16) Apartheid was recognized and explained as a doctrine of racial separation that formed "a programme which is truly hostile to Christianity and can serve only to keep people away from the real knowledge of Christ." This doctrine was further falsely being offered as a way to salvation. (17)

The thrust of the whole Message was embodied in the concluding question which was put to every Christian person in the country: "To whom, or to what, are you giving your first loyalty, your primary commitment? Is it to a subjection of mankind, an ethnic group, a human tradition, a political idea; or to Christ?" The hope was then expressed for God to "enable us to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to be committed to Christ alone." (18)

The Message was made public at a press conference on 20 September 1968. Copies were sent out to more than 6000

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16 Message, first section  
17 Ibid, second section  
18 Ibid, section five.

ministers, both English and Afrikaans. It was subsequently translated into other languages (South Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, German, Portuguese) to meet individual and congregational demands. The leading newspapers gave the Message substantial coverage, with some even printing the text itself. There was an air of confidence that the Message would prove to be a challenging catalyst in the dialogue and dispute about Christianity and the race problem in the country. (19) This was not because it claimed the authority of the Christian Council or the churches but because the "only authority it dare claim which is of any ultimate consequence is the 'mind of Christ.'" (20)

To some the Message may have sounded absurdly utopian. The authors denied this on the grounds that the Christian ideal was reconciliation, not separation and disassociation as the model for human living. Full-scale integration was not demanded now, and hence "complete territorial segregation might be consistent with the theology of the Message if this were indeed the 'only' way to live in Southern Africa peacefully." (21) The authors seemed further content to

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19 The Message in Perspective, p.5

20 Ibid, p.7

21 Ibid, p.16



accept that "devout Christians" could support apartheid practices. To this end they quoted John Newton's composition of "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" on a slave ship as an example of how pious people allowed their judgements to be stamped by the customs of the world. (22)

SACC general secretary, Bishop Burnett, claimed that the Council had produced, through the Message, a challenge to the conscience of every Christian in the country, in the form of a denunciation of apartheid. (23) But some predicted that "it will turn out to be a challenge many members of the Christian churches in South Africa will prefer to sidestep for as long as possible." (24) White Christians had not distinguished themselves in the mass by standing up for a more just policy in recent years. The "Rand Daily Mail" therefore doubted that they "will be in a hurry to spread its meaning far and wide." On the contrary it prophesied that "many will wish to avoid mixing politics and religion. That is the standard pretext for avoiding practical

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22 Ibid, p. 17

23 Rand Daily Mail, 23 September 1968

24 Ibid.

application of Christian principles to the South African situation." (25)

The Message brought immediate reaction from many sections of the populace. Three weeks after its publication, Prime Minister John Vorster warned clergymen against trying what Martin Luther King had done in America with the words, "cut it out, cut it out immediately for the cloth you carry will not protect you if you try to do this in South Africa." (26) The white ministers of the SACC, together with some Christian Institute staff members, responded by setting forth their reasons for criticizing the government in an "open letter" and expressed sorrow that the Prime Minister had responded with a threat. They also assured him that their concern was for the "salvation of South Africa" and promised him support if he placed Christ at the centre of the life of the people. (27)

However, Prime Minister Vorster rejected their insolence in attacking his church, the DRC, and reminded them of "ministers of the Gospel and confessing members of other

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25 Ibid.

26 The Message in Perspective, p.35

27 Ibid, p.33

churches who do in fact believe in separate development." (28) He was particularly disturbed that his government and the National Party had been singled out for attack "under the cloak of religion and be made suspect and accused before the world." (29) Despite using their pulpits as political platforms for propaganda purposes, the "pious prattling" of the writers of the open letter did not impress him.

The English press responded positively to the Message and sided with the letter writers in attacking Mr Vorster. The "Star" newspaper pointed out that the SACC was winning the argument about apartheid too easily and that Mr Vorster was on shaky ground. (30) The Afrikaans press, on the other hand, concluded that "there will be a lot of sympathy for him, especially when he points to the great services which his own church has done for non-Whites." (31) The same newspaper argued that "if God had not meant to discriminate between different races, he would not have bothered to paint them different colours." (32)

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28 Ibid, p. 34

29 Ibid, p. 33

30 The Star, 12 October 1968

31 Message in Perspective, p. 24, in reference to Die Transvaler.

32 Ibid.

The English churches found the Message reasonable enough to commend it to their congregations for study and reflection. An exception were the Baptists who raised a fundamental problem of understanding. (33) They criticized the Message for confusing man's eternal salvation with the salvation of political issues. Separate development could never be a rival gospel, despite it being an unjust political policy. But the Baptists weakly asserted that "The views and attitudes of an individual in racial matters do not enter into the realm of his being justified by faith." (34) Indeed, the policy of apartheid had never been put forward as a "religion" in government circles, and it was more the Message that was confusing "gospel" with ideology.

The DRC was not excluded from the tide of ecumenical tension as they had already released their report "A Plea For Understanding," a DRC explanation of South African politics with numerous statements from a variety of sources. This 1968 document was published in the light of strong criticisms from England and North America about the DRC and apartheid. While it was worthy of study, it was seriously lacking in that it only provided a political apologia and

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33 The Baptist Union rejected the Message, and subsequently in 1970, changed their status from full to observer membership on the SACC.

34 Message in Perspective, p.40

not a theological one. (35) In some ways, the Message could be viewed as a response from within the country to what the Landman Report was saying. (36) The English churches, prevented from holding residential conferences on "multi-racial" lines by law and feeling the racial situation in the country unbearable, stirred the SACC to call for a commission of theologians (half from the Reformed tradition) to consider obedience in South Africa. It was this group that finally produced the Message. (37)

Over and against the ideology of apartheid, the Message categorically offered a theological antithesis and this must be seen as its major weakness. No alternative "historical mediation" to contextualize the gospel message in the political economy of South Africa was mentioned. The formulators of the Message were undoubtedly operating from a false theological premise. They were offering religious answers to strictly political questions, hence the subsequent misunderstanding and confusion in ecclesiastical circles. The challenge of the Message was directed mainly

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35 Message in Perspective, p.10. This was called the Landman Report, after Rev W.A. Landman of the DRC who wrote the report, as "A Plea for Understanding," Cape Town, N.G.K., 1968

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

at white Christians, not to "every Christian in the country." The Message offered a denunciation of apartheid and it failed to offer any ideological announcement or direction. It was therefore of little relevance to the black community.

Besides its poor use of punctuation and tenses, the Message was at times vague in argumentation. (38) The authorized summary of the Message, which was published later, was more an attempt to remove doubtful passages and improve the contents, rather than merely serve as a summary. (39) Considered in this light, it seems ludicrous to regard the Message as the product of a Church facing a crisis "as great as that which confronted her in Nicea or Nazi Germany." (40)

The SACC, while professing to speak on behalf of the black community, was at this time essentially a "white

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38 C.H. Atherstone, A Critical Examination of Theological Approaches to the problem of Race Relations by White People in some Christian Churches in South Africa, M.A. Thesis, University of Durham, U.K. (unpublished), 1978, p.286

39 The Message in Perspective, pp.12-15

40 Such was the view of the white liberal magazine "South African Outlook," vol.98, No.169, Oct 1968, p.1

organization." That it was unconsciously patronizing in its approach to Blacks, radiating goodwill but still hopeful of engineering social change through moral appeals, education and conversion of white South Africans cannot be overlooked. (41) The Christian Institute, on the other hand, though also a white initiative, was a smaller organization with individual membership. It thus enjoyed more freedom and flexibility, and its leadership seems to have been more outspoken in their criticisms of the apartheid system. Likewise, the Institute should be credited for helping to assail much political ignorance among white South Africans.

### 3. The Quest for Praxis: SPROCAS

Now that apartheid had been rejected as an anti-Christian ideology through the Message, liberal Christians were in search of some alternative society. If Christianity was to be taken seriously, some other union of South Africa was necessary to advance from the abstract Message. The study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPROCAS) was then launched in 1969 to offer some practical suggestions in this direction, but here again, it was a determined but

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41 Walshe, p.58

yet white-orchestrated effort.(42) This project involved six commissions with 150 leading South Africans as members. This group from the "upper crust" of society met regularly over a period of two years and prepared reports on the application of the Message in the different spheres of South African life: economic, educational, legal, social, political and ecclesiastical.(43)

Commissioners were appointed from the white sector of the population with mere token representation from Blacks and women. Most were people associated with the defunct

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42 The purpose of this project and its strategy was explained as follows: "Is it possible to create a social order in South Africa based on the integrative thrusts of love and association? Would the attempt result in such disruption and enmity that we would have a situation worse than it is now? If the attempt has to be made, how do we suggest realistic ways of bringing about integration in our educational system, our political structures, our economic system? Is some form of political and social integration inevitable, anyway, and should we be looking for policies and programmes which will bring about the transition to a common society enjoying the loyalty of all our people in ways that are as harmonious and orderly as possible? These questions which are implied by the Message provide the *raison d'être* for the project." Anonymous SPROCAS pamphlet, Johannesburg, c.1969.

43 The six SPROCAS commission reports were entitled: Power, Privilege and Poverty (1972); Education beyond Apartheid (1971); Law, Justice and Society (1972); Towards Social Change (1971); South Africa's Political Alternatives (1973), and Apartheid and the Church (1972)



Liberal Party, the Progressive Reform Party, National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the Christian Institute. There were suspicions in Afrikaner circles forecasting SPROCAS conclusions as support for Progressive Party policies.(44) The full impact of the entire SPROCAS project did contribute to informing the politics of white liberal groups, but in its attempt to address the central problem in South Africa, that of black freedom, the project proved to be a disastrous failure.

One SPROCAS report that was expected to arouse more comment in South Africa and abroad, "Towards Social Change," charged that those opting for violent change "whether carelessly, selfishly or knowingly, are guilty of cardinal irresponsibility."(45) Those working to advance organized black political development were encouraged along the "alternative path of change via bargaining and conflict along racial lines." The key issue was how greater power could be generated in black communities and so, government-created bodies were to be utilized since they offered Blacks the scope to exercise political leadership.

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44 Die Transvaler, 14 July 1969

45 Pro Veritate, 15 May 1972, p.13. See the report  
"Towards Social Change" (1971), p.184

The architect of this line of thinking, Lawrence Schlemmer, further noted the preoccupation of tribal leaders Gatscha Buthelezi and Kaiser Matanzima with living conditions of the Zulus and Xhosas respectively, and found this most encouraging. It seemed clear that the political institutions of separate development could become mouth pieces for the expression of the interests of thousands of voiceless Blacks in both rural and urban areas.(46) Yet because of their virtual powerlessness, such institutions were always rejected by the black progressive movements, notably the ANC. White interest groups, however, seem to have thought otherwise.

The report of the Economics Commission, "Power, Privilege and Poverty," was also hampered in its understanding of what a "responsible society" ought to resemble. It displayed a tacit acceptance of capitalistic interests, with much importance being attributed to government agencies. The commission failed to explore any structural alternatives to the existing capitalistic system. One white commissioner who did take the challenge seriously was Richard Turner, a university lecturer who contributed to the debate via

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46 Ibid.

his own work, "The Eye of the Needle." Since the commission did not represent the oppressed black majority, it was not unnatural for it to find Turner's contribution potentially dangerous, worthy of little consideration.

Turner believed that one could not go forward to freedom with mere facts and figures. Previous reports had started from fairly abstract moral principles such as "the dignity of men" or the "freedom of the individual" as their point of reference. They offered no vision of an ideal future society, no long-range goal towards which change could be directed. (47) Turner preferred a "participatory democracy" akin to a Christian socialism which is concerned with people and based on "freely expressed love." In terms of the changing power relationships, one had to construct a strategy for bringing about change towards a more just society in South Africa. (48)

The vision of the Economics Commission was limited to bleaching racism out of the existing system in the hope that this would release political forces which may subsequently insist on gradual changes in the country's economic structures.

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47 Pro Veritate, 15 September 1972, p. 12

48 Richard Turner, The Eye of the Needle, Johannesburg, 1980, p. 151

Turner, however, was a step further in challenging the capitalistic model of white culture and its drive to accumulate wealth and seek personal satisfaction in the consumption of material goods, rather than, and often at the expense of, relations with other people. (49)

Of particular significance for theological reflection in the struggle with apartheid was the report of the Church Commission called "Apartheid and the Church." (50) It described how apartheid affected the Church through "internal ideological captivity" and pointed that all discrimination, denominationalism and paternalism undermined the witness of the Church. (51) The commission noted the failure of the churches to promote inter-racial contact, communication and dialogue on a large scale, and cross-racial worship. It even called for symbolic acts of protest against racial discrimination and raised the question of conscientious objection. (52)

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49 Turner, p.33 and Walshe, p.107

50 Apartheid and the Church, Ed. Peter Randall, Johannesburg, 1972

51 Ibid, p.18

52 Ibid, p.75

The Church Commission document was prepared by a majority of white ministers in the historical churches, so all that could be hoped for was that it should contribute to the debate, challenging and enabling the churches to become more faithful in criticizing apartheid. The black theology movement was at a nascent stage, and the commission was not oblivious of this development. It subsequently called for crash training programmes that would enable Blacks to assume greater leadership positions, especially in church structures. (53)

The shift in the orientation of white thinking, as was evident in this last report, was further developed in the final SPROCAS report, "A Taste of Power." (54) The writer was the project director, Peter Randall, who brought together the major findings of the previous reports and "extended these to relate to current trends - the emergence of Black Consciousness, White Consciousness and the marginal changes in Government policy - on the one hand, and the basic rigidity of the White Power philosophy on the other." (55) The urgent need was recognized as radical change, to achieve a fundamental distribution of power and wealth and to enable

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53 Ibid, p.72

54 Peter Randall, A Taste of Power, Johannesburg, 1973. This report has subsequently been banned.

55 Pro Veritate, October 1972, p.7

Blacks to function more effectively in the decision-making process.

Randall claimed that "Blacks have begun to have a taste of power and whites are not going to be able indefinitely to prevent them enjoying the full meal." (56) Still, this did not mean that the human right of "one person one vote" was realistic in the present circumstances. The ensuing years, however, did not cause many to examine apartheid, and white power coupled with white privilege, continued unabated. Since the entire SPROCAS focus was on raising the level of white consciousness rather than on working with the oppressed for their liberation, it was doomed from its inception and not surprisingly, was overtaken by events in the country.

In the early seventies, SPROCAS organizers believed that South Africa was on a short road to radical change. It was thought imperative for a significant white grouping to emerge which would be based on the "new liberalism" and with clear strategies, it could play a valuable role in a future crisis situation. Liberal Whites also believed they could

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56 Randall, p.6

be in a useful bargaining position in a future racial confrontation, with certain insights, skills and resources to contribute. (57) Whites would now prepare themselves to co-operate with and support black leadership by providing some of the necessary skills and resources. Nonetheless, SPROCAS was understood as a predominantly white initiative designed to help Blacks.

#### 4. New Consciousness and New Strategies

A new recognition was now emerging with the belief that "to change our society we must ally ourselves with those in the community who are now the vanguard of social change, in an attempt to develop an overall strategy." (58) SPROCAS II emerged out of this new consciousness in 1972 and displayed a marked commitment to give power to the oppressed through support of the black consciousness movement.

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57 The thought was echoed in the "Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Certain Organisations," p.128. The government instituted the commission to investigate the activities of the Christian Institute, the UCM, NUSAS and the SAIRR. The report was presented to parliament in 1975. (hereafter referred to as Schlebusch Commission)

58 Ibid, p.129

SPROCAS II began by wisely accepting that fundamental change in South Africa in the sense of a radical redistribution of power, land and wealth, would ultimately be initiated and actualized by Blacks. (59) Thus, in seeking change, white resources were to be used in a dual thrust into both black and white communities. These two thrusts were then developed into two separate sub-projects, known as Black Community Programmes (BCP) and the Programme for Social Change (PSC). Those prominent in the BCP leadership were Bennie Khopa, its director, and Steve Biko. Various offices were opened and many projects (Worker's, Women's, Literacy, etc.) were initiated throughout South Africa. BCP was to become the central thrust of SPROCAS in the later years with the white PSC staff deciding increasingly to phase out white programmes in favour of black ones.

The Programme for Social Change was intended primarily for the white community with the hope that it would help to create a new "white consciousness." This meant that Whites had to be assisted in coming to terms with the fact of being white and with the inevitably privileged position this gives

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59 Ibid, p. 132



one in a society structured to maintain white power and privilege.(60) It also meant working to influence the attitudes of Whites towards total liberation and to modify those structures controlled by Whites which had been impossible to change.(61) While this attempt to raise white consciousness was again largely futile, it did encourage a small minority of Whites to countenance passive resistance, and to reject the capitalistic underpinnings of apartheid.

The white liberal affluent establishment was the main target for consciousness-raising, since this group practiced racism daily through its institutions. There was even a forecast of the birth of a new political movement for Whites, since white consciousness was expected to rise. Little was, however, accomplished. There was to be, in fact, "an open, in practice amorphous and ultimately hopeless attempt to regenerate the culture of white society." (62) The 1974 general election proved conclusively that Whites had "other" interests, as the National Party won with a more than comfortable majority. Some scattered efforts were made to assist black self-help projects and to raise funds for black

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60 Ibid, p.140

61 Ibid.

62 Walshe, p.141

detainees. With funds in short supply, it was only a matter of time before the white programme was abolished.

The attempt to challenge white privilege and racism did not have any significant impact in comparison to the more successful black attempt to move with the currents of black consciousness. BCP, it must be noted, did not initiate a new protest movement but sought rather to provide a significant boost for black organizations. Its more important function, as Walshe has noted, was to serve as a "conduit for the flow of ideas from the black consciousness movement into the Christian Institute, a factor which when allied to the appointment of black staff members in the Institute helped to transform the thinking of Naudé and his colleagues." (63) The SACC also gradually changed during the seventies from being a white dominated institution to becoming more widely representative of the black Christian community.

The SPROCAS reports did not become the official reports or policy of any church or ecumenical group, despite many of its constitutional proposals finding refuge in Progressive

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63 Walshe, p. 149

Party circles. (64) The entire SPROCAS enterprise does remain a monument to the conviction held by leaders in the English church that social issues were too important to be left to believers and theologians alone. (65) But since the "experts" responsible for most of the SPROCAS recommendations were politically powerless, the entire effort hardly seems to have mattered more than a sustained white attempt to accommodate black interests within the framework of a capitalistic determination tempered by the Christian sentiment.

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64 Regehr, p.263

65 Calvin Cook, An Alternative to Complicity or Conspiracy? in Journal of Theology in Southern Africa, (JTSA), June 1979, p.12

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HAMMANSKRAAL RESOLUTION

#### 1. Creation of the Special Fund

Though the World Council of Churches' statements at various occasions reflected a growing concern about the policy of apartheid in South Africa, it was not until 1969 that the ecumenical movement effectively responded to the challenges. In the Notting Hill Consultation on Racism held in that year, W.A. Visser't Hooft observed that there was too much a belief in persuasion by declaration and a neglect of the irrational factors of a racist situation.(1) He noted that the race issue had not yet reached the grass roots in such a way that it could become a decisive motive in the life of the local congregations. Visser't Hooft also referred to the traditional concept of the right of

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1 World Council of Churches' Statements and Actions on Racism 1948-1979, Ed. Ans J. Van der Bent, PCR Information, WCC, Geneva, 1980. The WCC Assembly (Uppsala 1968) had urged the Council to embark on a vigorous campaign against racism. (See The Uppsala Report 1968, WCC, Geneva, 1968, pp.65-66)

resistance to tyranny, a right explicitly recognized by the Church since the Reformation.(2) The consultation subsequently called on the WCC to begin struggling against racism and urged that, "all else failing, the Church and churches support resistance movements, including revolutions, which are aimed at the elimination of political or economic tyranny which makes racism possible."(3)

When the WCC Central Committee met a few months later at Canterbury, England, it recommended the formation of an ecumenical programme to combat racism. They believed this to be part of humanity's dedicated response to human sin, as the human struggle was "against the deeply entrenched demonic forces of racial prejudice and hatred that we must battle. Ours is a task of exorcism. The demons operate through our social, economic and political structures."(4) The Central Committee further called upon the churches to move beyond charity grants to "relevant and sacrificial action" that would lead to new "relationships of dignity and justice" among all. It also recognized that "There can be no justice in our world without a transfer of

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2 Ibid.  
3 Ibid, vii  
4 Ibid.

economic resources to undergird the distribution of political power and to make cultural self-determination meaningful." In this transfer of resources, it was therefore necessary that "a corporate act by the ecumenical fellowship of churches" provide a significant moral lead. (5)

Such a gesture also involved the creation of a special fund which was to be used to financially support organizations that combated racism, rather than welfare organizations that alleviated the effects of racism. The WCC Executive Committee met at Arnoldshain, West Germany, in 1970 and adopted the recommendations for the special fund from the WCC International Advisory Committee. The focus of the grants was to be "on raising the level of awareness and on strengthening the organizational capability of racially oppressed people." Southern Africa was recognized as a priority area due to the overt and intensive nature of white racism and the increasing awareness on the part of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. The committee also accepted that the grants should be made with due regard to where they can have maximum effect. (6)

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5 Ibid, p.29

6 Ibid, p.31f.

In August 1969, the SACC Executive Committee responded critically, if not rather negatively, to the recommendations of the Notting Hill Consultation. The SACC accepted that the social order in South Africa was already, to a considerable extent, based on the use of violence. It also acknowledged the Canterbury Consultation conclusion, which stated that force may be resorted to by Christians in order to dislodge entrenched injustice and that this conclusion had been reached, at least in part, on account of the failure of the churches.(7) What was, however, particularly disturbing to the SACC was the way the WCC had called on Christians "to initiate the use of means usually associated with the civil power in the struggle against racism. These are the weapons of the world rather than the Church."(8) This appeal was carried to the WCC Central Committee through the SACC general secretary, Bishop Bill Burnett. The WCC was, however, unsympathetic to these pleas from the isolated white hierarchical structure of the SACC.

Before the Arnoldshain recommendations were accepted, the WCC sent its general secretary, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, on a consultative mission to South Africa. Blake held

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7 De Gruchy, p. 129

8 Ibid.

discussions with member church leaders and also met DRC leaders in the hope of renewing links.(9) Relatively little account was taken by the South African churches and the South African public of the events and discussions in the ecumenical conferences that led to the formation of the Program to Combat Racism (PCR). When the list of organizations designated to receive financial support from the special fund were announced at Arnoldshain, South Africans only learned about it when the decision was splashed across newspaper headlines. The ANC and PAC were two of the main recipients listed for WCC support. Understandably, the South African church leaders remained sadly ignorant, not having had information at their disposal to answer questions, correct distortions in the media, or respond to the threatening remarks of Prime Minister Vorster.(10)

#### White Uproar

The WCC was intent in making the grants to the liberation movements for strictly "humanitarian purposes," in keeping

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.



with the aims and policies of the WCC. (11) The majority of white South Africans remained completely oblivious to the merit of such Christian solidarity. The WCC was now accused of supplying guns instead of Bibles to the world. The WCC action was further interpreted as a sign that its leaders "had given up the hope of the churches' own struggle for change through working for justice and reconciliation." (12) Some even saw the action as "supporting in the name of Christ subversive movements which stand for violence and violent attacks on law and order." (13) Little background information was accessible and so church leaders could not adequately respond to such attacks and, instead, joined the South African government and its allies in portraying the South African recipients of the grants as blood thirsty killers who were out to disrupt law and order. The later revelation, that many of the atrocities announced in

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- 11 The WCC had insisted that a distinction be drawn between expressing solidarity with the oppressed and support for violence. The grants represented the former, not the latter. This subtle distinction was very easily brushed aside in the heated and emotional debate. (Thomas, p. 73)
- 12 De Gruchy, p. 130
- 13 See report in Cape Times, 4 September 1970



screaming headlines as the work of "terrorists" were in fact committed by the armed forces of the Whites, had minimal impact. (14)

One of the first churches to officially respond to the WCC solidarity gesture was the Presbyterian Church. They expressed their concern at the grant of R143 000 and immediately discontinued their token grants of R500 to the WCC. (15)

Prime Minister Vorster sought to coerce some member churches to withdraw their membership from the WCC, and he even went to the extent of entertaining four Presbyterian clergymen to dinner. The clergymen subsequently put a motion to the Presbyterian Assembly to withdraw from the WCC but this was defeated by 75-57 votes. (16)

The Presbyterians did, however, indirectly comply with Mr Vorster's demand when they decided by way of resolution that it was "a very serious matter and it cannot be tolerated that money contributed and collected in South Africa should be sent out of the country for the purpose of supporting terrorists." (17)

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14 B. Rogers, Race No Peace without Justice, WCC, Geneva, 1980, vif.

15 W. Weiße, Südafrika und das Anti-Rassismus-Programme Kirchen in Spannungsfeld einer Rassengesellschaft. Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 1975, p.82

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

White liberal Christians were often at odds with the Prime Minister, but over the WCC action, there seems to have been a considerable degree of common interest. Whites believed that the WCC put a seal of Christian approval on organizations committed to the violent overthrow of the the South African government, while they preferred some reform through peaceful means. By implication, member churches that supported the WCC initiative were anti-South African and had opted for a revolutionary course in fighting apartheid. Such was the view of those who might have had sympathies for the government, and they included many within the churches. (18) The SACC was further in a quandry, as it could not be expected to withdraw its WCC links if the Afrikaans churches decided to maintain links. Mr Vorster was somewhat encouraged by the church's negativism toward the WCC, and was hoping for the churches to withdraw completely in protest from the world body. (19)

Newly-elected SACC general secretary, John Rees, was equally negative toward the WCC action and wrote a bitter letter to the WCC which prompted its director of communications, Albert

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18 De Gruchy, p.131

19 Star, 2 October 1970

van den Heuvel to respond publically in an "open letter to a friend in South Africa." Van den Heuvel complained, "you write as if our Executive Committee were made up of fools and revolutionaries and as if people who are combating racism in Africa are bloodthirsty animals, criminals and outlaws." (20) Van den Heuvel further cautioned Rees that Blacks were "more and more speaking a language different from yours. They have become impatient because in their eyes the white liberals don't deliver the goods. They respect you and love you, but they are not impressed by the results of your strategy." (21)

The SACC first responded to the Arnoldshain resolutions by dissociating itself from them and repeating its rejection of violence as a solution to the racial problem in South Africa. (22) The whole PCR question was given considerable attention at the next conference with the SACC President, Archbishop Selby Taylor, urging the delegates to interpret the WCC resolution of 1970 as a challenge to the churches

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- 20 IDOC International (New York Edition), 12 December 1970, pp. 14-28  
21 Ibid, p. 17  
22 W. Kistner, Response of the SACC to the WCC Programme to Combat Racism (1969-1979). A documentation, Johannesburg, 1980, p. 7,

for action with a view to overcoming racial injustices in South African society. He claimed that, "Our task is to show in the most conclusive terms, not only in words, but by our actions, that our churches condemn racial prejudice." (23)

Archbishop Taylor had on an earlier occasion called on Whites not to blind themselves "to the reason that lies behind this resolution. It is an indication of the abhorrence with which Christians throughout the world detest the racial inequalities which are inherent in the policy of apartheid." (24) Such a "contextual" understanding of the WCC resolution was, however, not shared by the ecclesial power structures, as all member churches criticized the WCC for its "implicit support of violence" [sic] by making their grants to the liberation movements." (25)

Wolfram Weiße has some interesting observations in his doctoral dissertation on the Programme to Combat Racism and its reception in South Africa. (26) He concludes that in general, the initial and later resolutions on the WCC by the English churches tend to be influenced by the composition of

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23 Ibid.  
24 Ibid, p.2  
25 De Gruchy, p.132  
26 Weiße, pp.215-233

the church constituency. The larger the white constituency in a church body, the stronger is the expression of reservations against the PCR, and especially against the decision to support liberation movements. The stronger the black constituency, however, the more outspoken is the statement on the challenge which the PCR presents to the South African church to remove racial discrimination in its own ranks and to contribute towards fundamental change in South African society. Even though white churches accepted the WCC resolution as a challenge to action, they still tended to regard it, at the same time, as an obstacle to reformist steps towards reconciliation and justice in South Africa. (27)

Not many black church leaders had their views about the PCR grants published. When they did tend to express their views publicly, these were invariably favourable to the WCC resolution. (28) One black, Bishop Alpheus Zulu, who was later to indulge in the much despised "homeland politics," moved with the tide of white opinion and likewise regretted the PCR grants. He was wise enough to acknowledge, though, that WCC member churches in South Africa had not been fully

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27 Ibid.

28 Walshe, p. 115

consulted, "because they are 'white' and cannot seriously desire a change in black-white relations." (29) That an increasing number of black South Africans would have offered forthright support for the WCC Special Fund resolution cannot be denied. (30) When the grants were announced, Beyers Naudé spoke of a "sigh of relief" from many thousands of Blacks who now believed that "at last the church was taking its mission more seriously to identify itself with the lot of the wronged and oppressed." (31)

Naudé himself cautioned Whites against "throwing up our hands too high to heaven in 'righteous' indignation as though we had no guilt to confess, no wrong to right, no complicity in the conditions that led to the decision." (32) This point was taken up by the Anglican priest Fr. Mercer who called on Whites not to display that "righteous indignation" towards the WCC and so defend the status quo in which they had a vested interest. (33) The former Bishop of Kimberly and Kuruman, Edward Crowther, went far beyond

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- 29 Kairos (SACC Newsletter), November 1972, p.8
  - 30 Walshe, p.98
  - 31 Schlebusch Commission, p.108
  - 32 Ibid, p.107
  - 33 Walshe, p.97

his colleagues after being deported from the country, and called for the "power of the churches" to be employed in support of the movements of liberation now struggling for freedom in South Africa. These were still faint voices in the plethora of outrage that white Christians generally felt toward the WCC decision. (34)

Through the PCR and especially through the grants to the liberation movements, the commonly accepted understanding has been that the Church was, at last, doing something concrete. Thus Moltmann remarks that the WCC decision to start the PCR "converted into deeds the words against racism which it had been uttering with increasing sharpness since Evanston in 1954." (35) It remains unclear whether and how those who had previously done the talking were now engaged in direct action or "deeds," especially if we remember that the entire budget of the PCR was not enough to purchase a single military tanker. It should also be remembered that giving donations can often be a way of avoiding the necessity for direct action.

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34 Pro Veritate 15 May 1972, p.3

35 J. Moltmann, Racism and the Right to Resist, WCC Study Encounter, vol. viii, No.1, (Translated), Geneva, 1972, p.1



Peter Hinchliff notes that, "What the WCC was doing was really, in response to the needs of Christians actually caught up in a desperate situation, to declare its sympathies and to provide a channel whereby donations could be made for non-military purposes." (36) It was therefore not a case of the world-wide Church actually doing something of dramatic significance. The more fundamental issue was this: white South African Christians were put to the real test, as to whether their sympathies lay with those with whom the WCC was solidly identifying.

One white clergyman at a church synod spoke out against continued membership of the WCC on the grounds that his son was at that time in the army defending the borders of South Africa against attacks by "terrorists" funded and supported by the WCC. (37) This was the real issue for many, but Whites generally preferred to conceal their "hidden motives" for opposition to the grants. In response, a black clergyman called for continued membership as his nephew was fighting on the other side of the border as a member of the liberation army. De Gruchy has observed that while black Christians have remained united in their support of the PCR,

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36 P. Hinchliff, Holiness and Politics, London, 1982, p. 132

37 De Gruchy, p. 137

"the white members of the churches were divided down the middle and this division has continued since."(38)

The real vehemence against the grants was to come from DRC circles. The Prime Minister's brother and moderator of the DRC general synod, Dr. Koot Vorster, accused the WCC of being "not a church of God, but a church of the revolution."(39) He later made the pejorative charge that the WCC was "the most powerful leftist organization in the world." Prime Minister Vorster subsequently refused to allow a WCC delegation to visit South Africa to discuss the Programme to Combat Racism with church leaders.(40) In 1973, Dr. Koot Vorster went even further and labelled the WCC a "communist-front organization," playing into the hands of Soviet world domination.(41) A liberal Afrikaner and co-author of "Delayed Action," professor Ben Marais of Pretoria University, shared a similar view in implicating the WCC as now being "a subsidizer of violence."(42)

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38 Ibid.

39 Southern Africa Information Service (SAIS), news service of the International Defence and Aid Fund, 1970, p.400

40 De Gruchy, p.134

41 DRC Newsletter, September 1973

42 Regehr, pp. 208-209

PCR director, Baldwin Sjollema, responded to these and other criticisms by providing a detailed account of the process and rationale by which the special fund was established. (43) He called attention to the WCC's long tradition of condemning the sins of racial arrogance and its realization that to overcome unjust structures, a radical redistribution of power was necessary by (when all peaceful means were exhausted) resorting to violence. Grants from the PCR special fund to the liberation movements did not imply unqualified endorsement of their specific tactics, but rather, general support for their long-term goals. If these organizations believed they had no other option but to resort to violence, they were no longer automatically excluded from the moral and practical support of the WCC. In his words, the WCC would "continue to work for reconciliation, for an end to the violence of the oppressors as well as the violence of the oppressed." (44)

The WCC was continually engaged in helping its member churches towards greater understanding, deeper commitment and more courageous action in the struggle for racial

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43 B. Sjollema, A First Answer to Comments Received after the Decision by the WCC Executive to Support Organizations Combating Racism, mimeographed letter distributed by the SACC, 1970

44 Ibid.

justice. The grants from the special fund were but a small step in breaking with traditional Christian charity and risking a new form of solidarity. The WCC wanted to recognize the dignity and self-determination of the liberation movements, and avoid the usual "paternalistic approach" by placing no strictures on how the grants were to be used. The actual amounts donated were relatively insignificant, as they were more of symbolic than monetary value, demonstrating the churches' commitment to justice and solidarity with the oppressed.

The SACC and the churches had repeatedly interpreted the WCC resolution of support for the liberation movements as a challenge to give more priority to the area of social justice in South African society. Many new programmes were initiated in the various churches, and committees on racial justice were established. In this context a request of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was considered by a consultation of church leaders on establishing an ecumenical committee that would deal with issues of justice and reconciliation. The SACC decided to set up this "Justice and Reconciliation Committee" and affirmed that theirs was a creative response to the controversial WCC grants.(45) The SACC thus forsook the opportunity to solidly identify with those seeking the liberation of the poor and oppressed and,

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45 Kistner, p.8

instead, adopted a more passive, reconciliatory approach to social injustice.

### 3. The Hammanskraal Resolution

In 1974 the third assembly of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) was held in Lusaka, Zambia, with several participants from South Africa in attendance. The starting point of the conference was the life of humanity, created and saved by God and Jesus Christ. It grappled with the subject of people in need and under oppression: it tackled the problems of the Church, society and tribal life, marriage and family life, education and development in the "New Africa," and it tried to find out more about the Church's identity and to determine its mission.(46) For white South Africans attending the assembly, the "writing was on the wall" - the structure and the system of government and society in South Africa had to be radically changed to a more just, free and open society.(47) Were they going to join the African delegates in a common struggle to "set the captives free" or would they allow themselves to be trapped by ideological differences? This was the burning issue at the conference.

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46 Pro Veritate, June 1974, p.3

47 Ibid.

Representatives of the liberation movements had been present at this conference and seemed to have made a deep impression on the white South Africans present. John Rees, general secretary of the SACC, found that many ANC members were still hoping for peacefully negotiated, although radical, change in South Africa. (48) He further acknowledged that they had been "forced into a situation of countering internal, structural violence and dehumanization of black people in South Africa, by the use of 'counter-violence.' They believe that Whites only come to the conference table when they are confronted by Blacks as full and complete persons on an equal level." (49) At the conference, Rees and the other white delegates made known their blanket opposition to the use of violence. Rees was told in turn that, while he was respected for his view, "there were many Whites who could not be trusted because their belief in non-violence was merely an overnight growth." (50)

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48 Kairos, July 1974, p.3

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

The churches of Africa acknowledged the guerillas' cause and decided to support them in all fields. Their rationale for refusing to condemn violence was spelt out by AACC general secretary, Burgess Carr, who claimed that violence was a means of self-defence for the oppressed and that the freedom fighters had "helped the Church to discover a new and radical appreciation of the Cross. In accepting the violence of the Cross, God, in Jesus Christ, sanctified violence into a redemptive instrument for bringing into being a full human life." (51) In speaking on his "Engagement of Lusaka," Carr pointed to the "selective violence" of the liberation movements to be in sharp contrast to the "collective vengeance" perpetrated by the South African, Rhodesian and Portuguese regimes in Africa. (52)

For Rees, Carr had misinterpreted scripture in the substantiation of a political position and had thus "fallen into a trap." Others claimed in turn that "the Gospel of Jesus Christ taught us to turn the other cheek and had clearly stated that all who take the sword shall perish by the sword." (53) White South Africans were meeting practicing

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51 Pro Veritate, June 1974, p.9

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid, p. 19

Christians in the liberation movements who did not see a contradiction in replying to "collective vengeance" by the use of "selective violence." Some guerillas had even formed a Methodist preacher's association in one area to serve the needs of the freedom fighters. (54)

The report on the AACC Conference was presented to the member churches at the SACC Hammanskraal Conference of 1974. Among the participants were some whose sons had left the country and joined the liberation movements. Under the impact of the "Engagement of Lusaka," the conference had good reason to consider how best to respond to the expectations of the liberation movements. Several participants were of the opinion that the churches had little power in effecting changes. They therefore proposed changes in matters where there was a realistic possibility of action. One of these possibilities was the encouragement of conscientious objection in the churches. (55)

White South Africans could be encouraged, the conference believed, to refuse military service in view of the

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54 Kistner, p.9

55 Ibid, p.10



injustice and violence inherent in the structures of South African society. It is imperative to insist, again, that white Christians were seeking a "third way" i.e., refusing to defend the status quo since it was unjust, but also, refusing to counter the violence of the system by radical means. A way was being sought between the violence of white oppression and the power of black liberation - a pacifist protest of conscientious objection. The two existing political options were rejected in favour of a "special Christian contribution" to the liberation struggle.

This contribution came in the form of the famous "Hammanskraal Resolution," proposed by Rev Douglas Bax, a Presbyterian minister and seconded by Beyers Naudé. Most of the black delegates at the conference supported the resolution despite its mildness and it was only accepted after heated debate. (56) The resolution began by acknowledging the one and only God who delivered the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt and by regurgitating

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56 De Gruchy, p.141 and Pro Veritate, August 1974, p.7. Note that the resolution deplored violence as a legitimate means in political crisis. Bax was initially "rather diffident" and indicated that he would be "almost relieved" if the motion was not adopted. But he still went ahead with it, and it was passed after a five-hour debate. (Thomas, pp.90-91)

the old cliché, "We must obey God rather than man," in those areas where the government fails to fulfil its calling. Christians were called "to strive for justice and true peace," and not to automatically engage in violence and war whenever the state demanded. (57)

Member churches of the SACC were further reminded that the taking up of arms could be justifiable, "if at all, only to fight a just war," but that this excluded "war in defence of a basically unjust and discriminating society." South African society was recognized as being unjust and discriminating and its defence was therefore questioned. White Christians were therefore asked to "consider" conscientious objection in this situation. The churches were requested to re-examine the problem of sending chaplains to the armed forces, and the SACC, to further explore methods of non-violent action. (58)

The white press was immediately hostile to the resolution except for the "Rand Daily Mail." It claimed the resolution

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57 See the resolution in Thomas, p.114

58 Ibid. White emotional outrage over the resolution possibly intensified as a result of Bax prematurely leaking its contents to the press. He even tried unsuccessfully to block the report in The Rand Daily Mail. The Afrikaans newspaper "Hoofstad" picked on this lead and printed a lead article on the same day to the effect that Beyers Naudé was urging young men to refuse military service. (Thomas, p.90)

to reflect, "very vividly, the thinking of some black South African Christians and their white colleagues." (59) According to the "Sunday Times," it was a "grave error of judgement." (60) "The Natal Mercury" wondered if the SACC was expecting Christians to "sit positively and wait to be overrun by terrorists who have not had the benefit of pacific counsel." (61) "Rapport" thought the SACC resolution implied acceptance of "the terrorists with their record of murder of innocent people." The attitude displayed was "not far from the aid which the World Council of Churches gives the terrorist movement," the paper noted. (62)

Prime Minister Vorster was quoted by "Die Burger" as saying that the resolution was an attempt to bring about a confrontation with the government. He said, "I want seriously to warn those who are playing with fire in this way to rethink before they burn their fingers irrevocably." (63) Even the liberal Progressive Party strongly disagreed with the resolution, since in the words

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- 59 Rand Daily Mail, 5 August 1974
  - 60 Sunday Times, 11 August 1974
  - 61 Natal Mercury, 11 September 1974
  - 62 Rapport, 8 August 1974
  - 63 Die Burger, 3 September 1974

of its spokesman on defence, F. van Zyl Slabbert, "it promotes a spirit of defeat about peaceful change and draws attention away from the most important political issues which are negotiable in our society." (64)

The United Congregational Church offered total support for the resolution and interpreted it as "a call to a form of patriotism which is motivated not by the preservation of the status quo, but the greatest good of the greatest number." (65) Even though the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia supported the resolution, it emphasized that the Church could not approve of any form of violence. (66) Methodists did not support the resolution specifically, but called on the government to reconsider its policy of prison terms for those refusing to wear any military uniforms. The executive commission of the Presbyterian Church reacted similarly in calling on the government to consider the moral right of an individual to conscientious objection. (67)

Several Presbyterian congregations, though, rejected the resolution. One minister, Rev J.N. Diederichs, threatened

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64 Star, 5 September 1974

65 Regehr, p.274

66 Ecunews (SACC News Service), 20 November 1974

67 Ibid, 25 September 1974

to leave and join the DRC unless the Presbyterian Church officially rejected the resolution. (68) Anglican Bishop of Pretoria, Bishop E.G. Knapp-Fisher, publicly expressed his indignation about the resolution. Bishop Philip Russel of Port Elizabeth had tried unsuccessfully at the Hammanskraal Conference to have the motion dropped. (69) The Baptist Union argued that selective conscientious objection could not be supported by the Bible and officially dissociated itself from the resolution. (70)

White reaction to the resolution was, therefore, far from unanimous. Furthermore, there seems to have been a basic misunderstanding as the SACC was accused of bringing about a confrontation with the state, of closing the doors of fellowship with the DRC, and of drawing attention away from the crucial political issues. (71) The SACC was, however, merely asking Christians to consider conscientious objection and churches to re-examine the status of their chaplains in the armed forces. This consideration process is still in progress and nothing radical or new had been done in the years thereafter, except for a handful of objectors. It is therefore difficult to comprehend white opposition to the resolution.

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68 Thomas, p.92

69 Ibid, pp.90-92

70 Star, 16 October 1974

71 Pro Veritate, August 1974, p.12f.

The government reacted in more subversive ways to the spirit of discontent in the aftermath of Hammanskraal. The Defence Further Amendment Bill was introduced in parliament two weeks later to deal with persons or organisations guilty of advocating conscientious objection. (72) More sophisticated was the government-funded formation of the Christian League of Southern Africa, to be led by Methodist minister Fred Shaw. The League's task was to specifically counter the influence of the Christian Institute, the SACC and the WCC. In its propaganda war, the SACC was even accused of distributing kits with direction on how to make bombs. (73)

Now a serious theological inconsistency becomes apparent if we closely examine the two different positions adopted by the English churches to the PCR and conscientious objection question. The PCR special funds resolution was rejected because it sanctioned violence, and violence was totally unacceptable as we have seen. Now, however, in proposing the conscientious objection resolution, the English churches asserted that Christians may participate in a "just war," which obviously involved organized violence. They condemned violence per se as immoral in one context, while approving

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72 Thomas, p. 91

73 Walshe, pp. 181-182

of it in another, as though their own understanding of each context was a sufficient guide.

The Hammanskraal resolution was undoubtedly drawn from the "just war" tradition. Was it saying that violence is usually wrong but sometimes right, depending on the circumstances? Was it usually immoral but sometimes morally justifiable? The PCR resolution was criticized corybantically because it seemed to condone violence, while the Hammanskraal resolution was proposed with a preamble premitting the use of violence in "just war." Or, was the South African liberation struggle regarded as an "unjust war" when the PCR resolution was rejected?

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CHALLENGE OF BLACK THEOLOGY

#### 1. Students in Crisis

Towards the end of the sixties, Blacks were finding themselves caught in an extremely frustrating political situation. Most platforms for expressing their intolerance of the apartheid system were closed. Memories of the Sharpville days may have faded as an air of silence and apathy seemed pervasive. Some Blacks were willing to co-opt themselves onto government-created institutions like the "bantustan" system (homelands). For the majority, however, there was no advantage to be gained by maneuvering in government circles. The temperature of resistance was still intense, though, among student activists who were now tired of having had "liberal" Whites plead their cause in student bodies thus far.

One such student who was finding little focus in his involvement in the liberal National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was Steve Biko. Born in King Williams Town, Eastern Cape, he was the son of a government-employed



clerk and had his first rude political awakening when his brother was jailed as an activist in 1963. Biko attended a Catholic school in Marianhill, Natal, before starting at Natal University's black medical school in 1966. He developed an early resentment to white authority; he was impressed by the Christian non-racial, communal society. Undogmatic but highly disciplined in his thinking, Biko further possessed a rare insight into human and political situations.(1) Biko became active in student liberal politics for a while, but the artificial integration of racial interests led him to believe that the time had come for Blacks "to stand on their own."

Student Christian movements were themselves in crisis during the mid sixties. The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) had approved a letter in 1964, asking member movements to study the South African situation, which was described as a threat to world peace, and called on them to support the campaign for economic sanctions against the Republic. The liberal Student Christian Association (SCA) of South Africa reacted angrily and decided to immediately disaffiliate from the world body. The SCA had been formed more than sixty years before with a truly evangelical character, with the emphasis on bringing students "into a

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1 Gail M. Gerhart, Black Power in South Africa, Univ of California, 1978, p.260

knowledge of Christ as personal Saviour." Though the movement comprised membership of all race groups, it offered little opportunity for a realistic Christian confrontation with social problems. (2)

Previously wrecked on the rocks of apartheid, the SCA now faced a momentous task in rethinking its whole evangelical responsibility and was exhibiting "visible cracks." (3) The WSCF accused the SCA of being less involved politically because it was using political power to preserve the privileges of the dominant party and race against the demands of those who were without power and privilege. (4) Not unexpectedly, the SCA subsequently dissolved in 1965.

In the aftermath of this disintegration, some seventy students gathered in Grahamstown in July 1967 to form the University Christian Movement (UCM). This white initiative was undertaken after consultation with leading members of the various churches. Those involved seemed to have taken

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- 2 Pro Veritate, February 1965, 1
  - 3 Ibid. See also, August 1965, p.9
  - 4 Ibid, February 1965, p.12

the WSCF critique more positively, of "accepting life in the world as it is, subject as it is to the powers of death, as the place where the Lord of the Church is calling us to witness to His victory over death." This they could do only by "making themselves vulnerable to the anguished cries of men in South Africa for dignity and freedom to be men." (5)

The character of the UCM was both that of an "umbrella" enabling denominational societies to meet and co-ordinate their activities, as well as an organization to which individuals could belong. Thus it was "concerned not only with individual, but also with the corporate aspect of ecumenical relations." (6) The organizers recognised the socio-political and cultural divisions but assumed the possibility of Christian fellowship and aimed to realize this objective in the present circumstances of South Africa.

During the next two years the UCM formed various branches throughout South Africa at universities and colleges. Black students took a particular interest in its activities and emphasis, and the movement became increasingly unpopular among Whites. Blacks had become frustrated by the "narrow

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5 Ibid, p. 11

6 Ibid, 15 September, 1967, p. 11

spiritualism" of the SCA movement and they also found NUSAS to be too "white" dominated. The UCM offered a more radical interpretation of the gospel and its social implications and it therefore gained easier acceptance by Blacks. Basil Moore was UCM's first president and Colin Collins became first secretary. (7) They aligned themselves with the black caucus and were together able to foster intense discussions on radical political change. As the UCM gradually evolved under the influence of the black presence, white membership slowly declined. Many members were severely harassed by state authorities who found the UCM responsible for inciting much "unrest" on black university campuses. (8)

The real break with the "liberal alliance" of white students came in 1967 when NUSAS organized their annual conference at Rhodes University. Black delegates were segregated and asked to reside some miles away from the conference centre. (9) This naturally angered black participants who were now ready for the establishment of an all-black student movement.

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7 Walshe, p.81

8 Ibid, p.82

9 Steve Biko, Letter to SRC Presidents, Steve Biko - I Write What I Like, Ed. Aelred Stubbs, London, 1978, p.10

When the UCM met for their annual conference of 1968, a caucus of Blacks who attended formed the nucleus of what was shortly to become the South African Students Organization (SASO). The first SASO conference was held at the University of the North at Turfloop in July 1969, and Steve Biko was elected the first president. (10)

The UCM made one highly significant decision in 1970 in expressing its wish to make no comment on the WCC grants to the liberation movements. Nonetheless, the organization offered some points of clarification that deserve mention. The UCM questioned the motive for the wholesale rejection of the grants on the grounds of "violence" by church leaders. They noted that the same church leaders and members of their churches had paid taxes to the white government and thus contributed to its defence budget. (11) The government used such money to buy weapons and to train even white Christians to engage in acts of violence as soldiers.

The UCM went even further and asked, "which church leaders have condemned the morality of South Africans raising money to send food and other forms of relief to the Portuguese

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10 Steve Biko - I Write What I Like, p.3

11 Schlebusch Commission Report, p.106

soldiers in Mozambique and Angola?(12) The real issue then may not have been violence, "but whether support should be given to maintaining the white-controlled status quo ('law and order') or those struggling for change and black liberation ('violence')." (13) The UCM wondered if it would not have been wiser for the church leaders to have remained silent on WCC grants, or was it "their intention to make it perfectly clear which side they are on in the escalating struggle in Southern Africa." (14)

In 1971, the UCM conducted a series of seminars on black theology in various parts of the country. The purpose of these seminars was to bring black theology to the attention of the public and the churches, and some of the seminar papers were published. This publication was subsequently banned together with many leaders of UCM, including Basil Moore and the director of the UCM's black theology project, Sabelo Ntwasa. (15) The radical approach that had been adopted by the UCM in its politics, liturgy and lifestyle created much tension in student circles. The government was

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, Ed. Basil Moore, Atlanta, 1973

also subjecting the movement to severe pressure by police intimidation and informers, even deciding to investigate its activities via the Schlebusch Commission of 1972. But by this time, the UCM had already decided to cease activities under the UCM banner and to channel energies into other organizations. (16)

## 2. The Ideology of Black Consciousness

The formulators of SASO's ideology (Biko in particular) brought a new sophistication and insight into the analysis of Africa psychology. In this, the influence of Franz Fanon's "Wretched of the Earth" was particularly apparent.

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- 16 A statement from the final UCM meeting in 1972 read: "We no longer believe in multiracialism as a strategy to bring about change." (Ecunews Bulletin, 21/73, 14 August 1972, p.2) This outlook was, however, not shared by the upper echelons of ecclesial leadership in South Africa, as an incident in 1973 illustrates. Christians were planning on hosting a congress on mission and evangelism in Durban, to be addressed by Billy Graham. In preparation, "long and delicate negotiations" had succeeded in obtaining from the government special permission to house black and white delegates in a white hotel. Thomas comments that this sight "of the two groups eating, relaxing and swimming together in the hotel's pool was a rare one, so much so that it prompted the SACC to take a resolution the same year to have all its National Conferences on a multi-racial residential basis. (Thomas, p. 67,123)

It would have been difficult for SASO ideologues to have found another work more pertinent to the South African scene, both in analyzing root causes and in suggesting possibilities for future change. The need to recognize the self-serving definition of good and evil, to destroy pretense and reject the gradualist solutions of the powerful, and to inculcate a distrust of bourgeois Blacks were all Fanon features that frequently appeared in SASO writings. Even as SASO moved toward increasingly sophisticated explanations of its emerging ideology of self-reliance and self-definition, the term "non-white" was found inconsistent with efforts to portray a positive image of oppressed peoples in South Africa, and hence the affirmative switch to "black" was made. (17)

SASO leaders had learned some sound ideological lessons from the Pan Africanist movement of the early sixties. Patience, it now seemed, was more important than heroics and the need to lay a firm psychological foundation for future liberation was more important than trying to artificially create a situation of immediate confrontation. (18) The goals of orthodox nationalism had not changed but there was a clear shift in perception back to the earlier view of nationalism

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17 Gerhart. p.277

18 Ibid, p.285



as an intellectual construct and a psychological device rather than a "natural law" of politics. Black Consciousness sought, in Biko's words, "to challenge the pent-up forces of the angry black masses to meaningful and directional opposition." (19) Black anger was present and the function of the black ideology was to give it coherence and direction.

For as Gerhart has observed, "The aim of Black Consciousness as an ideology was not to trigger a spontaneous Fanonesque eruption of the masses into violent action, but rather to rebuild and recondition the mind of the oppressed in such a way that eventually they could be ready forcefully to demand what was rightfully theirs." (20) Blacks were therefore to reject African aspirations intent on accepting the fragmented thirteen percent of the country set aside by the government, as tribal bantustans. Instead, the attention of the masses were to be focused on majority rule and African rights to full citizenship in one hundred percent of the land. If black leaders had allowed themselves to be censored by political limitations in the past, the new word was to keep the masses in state of "continuous agitation." (21)

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19 SASO Newsletter, September 1970

20 Gerhart, p.286

21 Ibid, p.287

Black Consciousness provided a very important context for black theologians to begin developing new theological insights. It challenged them to take seriously the particularity of the black experience. Its most significant impact was in the area of praxis. Black theologians were forced to wrestle with the challenge of how they could meaningfully participate in the ongoing struggle for liberation. (22) As an ideology of the black struggle, Goba mentions that Black Consciousness was not totally embrassive as it was more an urban phenomenon, unable to penetrate the mass of rural Blacks living in the homelands. (23) Still, we must concur with Gerhart, that "even where the nuances of the message failed to register, a mood was communicated which could not fail to stir new thinking in the minds of many ordinary people." (24) The message of the revolutionary ideology must have therefore been wide in its appeal.

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22 Bonganjalo Goba, The Emergence of Black Consciousness Movement and its Impact on Black Theology, (Unpublished paper), "Black Theology Revisited" Conference in Wilgespruit, 16-18 August 1983, p.44

23 Ibid, p.45

24 Gerhart, p.295

The ideology of Black Consciousness was itself a blisterous critique of white liberal ideas. It was concerned with those "who argue that they are not responsible for white racism," and who claimed to feel the oppression just as acutely as Blacks and should therefore be jointly involved in the black person's struggle. In Biko's words, "these are the people who say that they have black souls wrapped up in white skins." (25) Liberal Whites had always prescribed integration as a means and an end of solving the country's problems. This was, however, an artificial integration with the Blacks standing at the touchlines and the Whites doing all the talking. (26) They traditionally claimed a monopoly on intelligence and moral judgement and set the pattern and pace for the realization of the black person's aspirations. (27) There was an inherent hypocrisy in this position and for this, liberals had to be confronted and exposed.

If integration meant "a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an

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25 S. Biko, Black Souls in White Skins, SASO Newsletter, August 1970, p. 15  
26 Ibid.  
27 Ibid.

already established set of norms and code behaviour set up and maintained by whites," then Biko was decidedly against it. (28) This did not imply that SASO was against integration in principle, or that black political approaches were racist. In any case, if Blacks were being racist they had no power to subjugate. Blacks were merely responding to a situation in which they found themselves to be objects of white racism. Whenever Blacks want to "do their thing" the liberal establishment seemed to detect an anomaly. It was now time for liberals to understand that "the days of the Noble Savage are gone for their own emancipation." (29) Their role was rather to direct their communities in preparation for majority rule.

The basic problem in South Africa was identified by liberal ideology as being apartheid and that to oppose it, the formation of multi-racial groups was necessary. If apartheid was the thesis, non-racialism was the antithesis, and the synthesis was rather feebly defined. (30)

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28 Ibid, p. 17-18

29 SASO Newsletter, August 1970, p. 20

30 S. Biko, Black consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity, The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, Ed. Basil Moore, Atlanta, 1973, p. 39

Black Consciousness defined the situation differently. Its thesis was a strong solidarity among Blacks. Out of these two situations, Biko was hoping for some kind of balance, a true humanity where power pollution will have no place. The liberals, he further asserted, had already failed in that "their antithesis is already a watered-down version of the truth whose close proximity to the thesis will nullify the purported balance." (31) This also accounted for the failure of SPROCAS whose commissions were designed to find "alternative models" acceptable to Whites. The people involved knew what was right but were looking for ways of dodging the responsibility of saying what is right. (32)

The concept of freedom had some important implications for the ideology of Black Consciousness. Biko defined freedom as "the ability to define oneself with one's possibilities held back not by the power of other people over one but only by one's relationship to God and to natural surroundings." (33) Black persons were therefore on their own to explore surroundings and test possibilities, to make

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31 Ibid.  
32 Ibid.  
33 Ibid, p.41

freedom real by whatever means they deemed fit. Blacks had to realize that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed. (34) By thinking along the lines of Black Consciousness, Blacks could see themselves as being complete entities and thus less dependent and more free to express their humanity. They would eventually gain group pride and determination to rise and attain the envisaged self, to be free indeed. (35)

Black Consciousness must have constituted an important ingredient in the process of the "consciousness-raising" of the black communities in the early seventies. It called attention to an immediate problem which it believed was psychological: Blacks had to overcome their inferiority complexes engendered by oppression and paternalism. Liberals could not be trusted since they could not fully identify with black political aspirations. In effect, Blacks were creating a social identity to replace concepts generated by liberal notions of black integration into a Western capitalist society.

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

Most of the reactions from white South Africans to the emerging black ideology were harsh and bitter, accusing SASO of being "racist" for the most part. (36) Liberal Whites were experiencing a sense of isolation and weakness unknown in South African history as they were now being rejected from black circles, in addition to their exclusion from political power. The "Daily Dispatch," under the heading, "Sad About SASO," accused the SASO promoters of "entrenching the ideal of racial exclusivity" and therefore, of doing the government's work. (37) Some classed the new black awakening as "the product of disillusionment" over liberal ideology, and expressed thanks that Bantu homelands had been "created in advance for the realization of the new ideas." (38) The Schlebusch Commission thought SASO was promoting a dangerous philosophy that would cause racial war in South Africa. (39)

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- 36 Biko explained SASO "exclusivism" as follows: "While, as a matter of principle we would reject separation in a normal society, we have to take cognizance of the fact that ours is far from a normal society. It is difficult not to look at white society as a group of people bent on perpetuating the status quo. The situation is not made easier by the non-acceptance that black students have met with in all the so called open organizations both religious and secular. All suffer from the same fault basically of accepting as a fact that there shall be white leadership and even worse, that they shall occupy themselves predominantly with problems affecting white society first." (Steve Biko, Letter to SRC Presidents, p. 12)
- 37 Daily Dispatch, 10 August 1971
- 38 Cape Times, 9 July 1971, in reference to a comment in the Afrikaans newspaper Die Burger.
- 39 Schlebusch Commission Report, p. 146

### 3. Black Theology and Black Freedom

The new emphasis on "black" filtered through to black theological thinking which had its own rationale for choosing similar terminology. (40) Blacks had been collectively referred to as "non-whites," suggesting an identity of non-persons who existed only as negative shadows of Whites. This meant that they were created in the image of the white person and not of God. (41) The consequences of this was a "non-white" theology with the belief that "non-whites" can be satisfied with the "shadows" of things which the white person took for granted when it came to his or her needs. Buthelezi justified the substitution of a "non-white" theology with a "black theology" or a theology of the image of God in order to put the question of human

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40 Manas Buthelezi, The Relevance of Black Theology, Johannesburg, 1974. Mimeographed booklet by the Christian Academy of Southern Africa.

41 De Gruchy comments that "in an important sense black theology in South Africa began with the revolt of black Christians at the turn of the century, a revolt which found institutional expression in the African independent churches." (p.156) I have examined this revolt in the context of the Methodist Church elsewhere. See my Master's thesis, "A study of the factors that influenced the rise and development of Ethiopianism within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (1874-1910). Submitted to the Faculty of Theology at the University of Durban - Westville (1985).



dignity in a proper theological perspective. (42)

"Black" was nonetheless frequently misunderstood by many liberal Christians who accused black theologians of racism in reverse. Because the word "black" had been given such a negative connotation throughout history, it was further assumed that black theology cannot be a good theology. Such critics, however, did not question their own theologies which were usually identified with specific cultures and national identities. (43)

Black theology concerned itself from its inception in South Africa with the liberation of women. It acknowledged that black women suffered under a double yoke, since they were oppressed not only as Blacks, but also as women in a male-dominated society. They were often either "white

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- 42 Ibid. Motlhabi has pointed out that "Black Theology in South Africa stands with one leg in Africa and the other in Black America." He notes that if Black Theology proved meaningful in America, "it could equally be adapted to produce similar fruits in South Africa." Through the pioneering effort of Basil Moore of the UCM, "Black Theology" was "imported from the United States and placed under a separate project bearing that name." See his essay, The Historical Origins of Black Theology, The Unquestionable Right to be Free, Ed. Itumeleng Mosala and Buti Tlhagale, New York, 1986, pp.38-56
- 43 E.K. Mgojo, "Prolegomenon to the Study of Black Theology," JTSA, December 1973, p.27

men's nobodies" or black men's property bought at a "lobola" price to function as obedient servants at home. (44) Younger black women did not receive the same priority for education and employment as young black men. Besides Blacks being kept out of leadership positions in the churches, black women were never even considered. Decision-making authority was a white male privilege. Black theology, as it struggled to formulate a theology of liberation relevant to South Africa, could not afford to perpetuate any form of domination, not even male domination. If its liberation was not human enough to include the liberation of women, it could not be a liberation theology. (45)

This theme of liberation was central to the contextual nature of black theology. Since black people in South Africa were in bondage in a variety of ways, they faced a situation of privation and oppression. The Church they looked up to in hope was an imprisoned Church enslaved to the South African way of life with all its ideological assumptions. (46)

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- 44 Sabelo Ntwasa and Basil Moore, The Concept of God in Black Theology, Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, p.25  
 45 Ibid. p.26  
 46 Simon Gqubule, What is Black Theology? JTSA, September 1974, P.21

The only theology, therefore, of meaning to a black person was one that spoke of liberation. This was all written in the Bible where God spoke to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt in terms of liberation and used the Hebrew prophets to speak to the concrete situation of the people. This is what black theology was seeking to do in South Africa. (47)

This liberation also involved the liberation of the oppressor whose bondage was greater because, "being privileged and being in control of affairs, he is not aware of his incipient bondage." (48) The black theologians further prayed and worked for the liberation of the Church whose structures, speech and actions were imposed in the culture and presuppositions of white superiority. (49) Liberation was a total process from sin of every person and the redemption of the South African political, social and economic life.

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47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid, p.22. Basil Moore's comments about white church ideology are worth noting here: "The Jesus message to the poor black is, 'Be patient, friend. We will try to squeeze some more money out of the rich whites for you with our moralizing sermons and study groups. But don't expect too much. If you expect us to get all messed up trying to change the total structures of your economic enslavement, you have come knocking at the wrong door.' They are right. How could white churches do anything more? They themselves pay their black staff half the wages paid the white staff for the same work. So the Jesus message as it peeps out through the filter of the white church in words, attitudes, and actions is a message which has no hope inside it for the black man with his nose in the dung." (Jesus and Black Oppression, A New Look at Christianity in Africa, WSCF Books, vol.11, no.2, WCC, Geneva, 1972, p.53)

Buthelezi explained that life preceded humanity as God was "the ground of Life and before whom we live and exist, is there before us waiting for His gifts." (50) The theological consciousness of the givenness of the social, economic and political structures of life could therefore never be one of fatalistic resignation, but an awareness of an inevitable responsibility in those structures. The struggle against unjust structures co-existed with the consciousness of victory as a realized eschatological event. The delay in the manifestation of the fruit of the kingdom in South Africa did not detract from the intensity of a genuinely Christian ethical endeavour. (51)

Faith and hope were to be held together in tension for, in Buthelezi's words, "while faith affirms the reality of the present, hope affirms the future reality and is already present." (52) It was only "within the given social structure of human existence that God's gifts of life were received." It was at this point that, "God gives us food, children, health, protection, the means of grace and so on.

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50 Manas Buthelezi, Theological Grounds for an Ethic of Hope, The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, p. 151

51 Ibid, p. 150

52 Ibid.

Because of this the world around us becomes alive with God." (53) Black theology here directed black people's hopes for the "good life" not to the after life but to life "here and now," thus giving itself a concrete historical character by its involvement with the present. (54) The black search for a true and authentic human dignity and liberation caused the black person to acknowledge that "one's Africaness is a God given blessing to delight in rather than a fate to be lamented." (55) This reflection was necessary since the early missionaries were often guilty of advocating a global validity of the Western value system and a corresponding denigration of things African, and by definition, of things black. (56) Blacks were now expected to lead the way to an interpretation of Christianity which best suited the new black understanding of culture. Black theology aimed at "letting the Gospel be 'purifier' of customs instead of being a creator of customs; of 'influencing' and

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53 Ibid, p.155

54 See also, D.D.L. Makhathini, Black Theology (1), Relevant Theology for Africa. Ed. Hans-Jurgen Becken, Durban, 1973, p.11

55 Allan Boesak, Farewell to Innocence, New York, 1977, p.40

56 Desmond Tutu, Viability, Relevant Theology for Africa, p.36

enriching culture instead of changing culture." (57)

Black theologians believed that African ideas of corporate personality could contribute to a unique sense of dynamic community, a caring concern that sought to embrace all, a love that suffered selflessly for others and in turn formed a social consciousness that rejected and transcended individualism. (58) Black solidarity was vital, and so denominationalism was rejected in favour of instilling into black people the understanding that they were first black before they were Christians and not vice-versa. (59)

The relevance of Christian worship to the life and interests of black people was also questioned in the concern to bring symbolism "down to earth." True worship was to be expressed in less mysterious and less metaphysical symbols. The forms of worship were to be challenged at every turn and every opportunity. Hence the question, "Are we in worship communicating with an aristocratic or capitalistic God who wants the little people to be very well behaved or even

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57 Makhathini, p.11

58 Bonganjalo Goba, Corporate Personality: Ancient Israel and Africa, Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, p.69

59 Makhathini, p.11



muted when they approach his majesty?" (60) More indigenous symbols would reduce the role of foreign concepts while retaining a sense of awe and mystery in worship. This radical departure involved a negation of the belief that withdrawal into self can result in any kind of moral excellence, sanctity or holiness. The traditional aims and methods of spirituality as elements in worship were to be concomitantly questioned. (61)

The quest for a new black theology involved rejecting "Master" images of God. Blacks now affirmed a suffering God who identified with the oppressed and struggled with them to lift the burden of oppression. He was thus neither master nor servant, but a comrade and friend in the struggle for freedom. (62) Western theology had all too often stressed images of God's absolute authority, power and knowledge and this provided support for the status quo. Many tyrants appealed to their "hot line" of communication with God to justify their tyranny. In this situation, black theologians

60 Mongameli Mabona, Black people and White Worship, Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, p. 107

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

had to be iconoclasts of the "white God." They had to tear down images and symbols which, by presenting God "white," re-inforced a sense of human inferiority and worthlessness. (63)

Not only were white images of God to be removed, but also, the thoughts of some Whites "who seem to believe that it is their whiteness that places them closer to God and thus to the source of the truth and ability." (64) New images of God were needed which gave content and direction to the "spaces between people" i.e., relational images of God. One such image was, "God is Freedom," freedom made know in history, a freedom that would "call us out of our chains of oppression into a wholeness of life." God was understood as this wholeness which existed in the spaces between the people when their dignity and worth was mutually affirmed in love, truth, honesty, justice and caring warmth. (65)

#### 4. Black Theology versus White Fear

Opposition to apartheid policies increased within English churches after 1948, as did a demand for more "multi-racialism." This was, however, a limited call as it

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63 Ntwasa and Moore, pp.24-25

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid, p.27



did not aim at the power structures of the churches. The authority still rested in white hands. The religious rationale for this multi-racial contact was "reconciliation." This reconciliation between black and white was artificial and limited, as it was restricted to upperclass Whites and the black elite, revolving mainly around tea parties. Biko called on Blacks to therefore resist being socialized into a corrupt system, and to instead, seek to gain control of church structures that was rightfully theirs. (66)

Although Whites had proved themselves to be "brothers in Christ," they had failed to prove themselves "brothers in South Africa." (67) White Christians were guilty, in Biko's mind, of preventing the Church from assuming its natural character in the South African context, and therefore, of preventing it from being relevant to the black person's situation. Biko believed that Whites were in power within the churches only because the churches were modelled on

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66 Steve Biko, The Church as seen by a young Layman,  
Steve Biko - I Write What I Like, p.58

67 Ibid.

Western structures which the Whites knew best. Blacks were therefore to gain ascendancy over Whites in the white Western model and thereafter turn that model into one that Blacks would love and cherish. Blacks were thus encouraged to caucus in voting Blacks into power positions, as Whites had long been doing. (68)

South African society was functioning with authoritarian social structures which gave some people the right to make decisions for others. (69) Blacks could not merely call for the rejection of racism, while leaving problems of authoritarianism basically unchanged. Furthermore, this did not mean that the names of those in "office" would change while the lot of the people at the bottom of the power pile remained unchanged. (70) The primary concern was to speak a word to people without power. This word of hope could therefore not "contain any promise that one day they (Blacks) will have power over others - even those 'others' who oppress them now. It must be a hope that one day we

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68 Ibid, p.59

69 M. Motlhabi, Black Theology and Authority, Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa, p.121

70 Ibid, p.123

will live together without masters or slaves." (71)

There was considerable confusion at first about the aims and content of black theology among Whites in South Africa. Some were feeling baffled, uncomfortable and helpless at being accorded no role but to bear the new black aggression. Liberal Whites were being subjected to scathing denunciation for their hypocritical and irrelevant role in the ecumenical movement and Blacks were threatening to go "separate ways." (72) White dominated ecclesial bodies like the SACC were being challenged to restructure leadership on more democratic lines. General secretary John Rees was himself under pressure to resign his position in favour of a black appointee. (73)

Brian Johanson, director of the SACC Justice and Reconciliation Division, wrote positively of Black Consciousness as something "to be encouraged and supported by churches, helping Blacks to overcome and throw off

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71 Motlhabi, p.126  
72 Thomas, p.69  
73 Ibid.

oppression by consent." (74) The general tone of white reaction, however, was that of censor and criticism. Carel Boshoff accused black theologians of reducing the gospel to socio-political liberation and neglecting the biblical emphasis on sin, salvation and conversion. He warned that black theology could lead to the destruction of communication between black and white, and to a possible violent confrontation. (75) Boshoff's views cannot be taken seriously, for as Louise Kretzschmar has observed, "His emphasis remains firmly fixed on North American Black Theology, and when he does turn his attention to South African Black Theology he evaluates it on the basis of some articles by Moore, the collection of essays edited by Moore (i.e., *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*) and Boesak's *Farewell to Innocence* ... he remains convinced that Black Theology obscures the kernel of the Gospel (which he sees as being the forgiveness of sins and personal salvation) and threatens the Gospel by completely politicising it." (76)

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74 See Thomas, p.68

75 C.W.H. Boshoff, *Die Betekenis van Kerk en Sending in Suid-Afrika: Die Swart Teologie as Bevrydingsbeweging*, Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif, 14:1, 1973, pp.5-20

76 Louise Kretzschmar, *The Voice of Black Theology in South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1986, p.101. These remarks relate more to Boshoff's "Swart Teologie van Amerika tot in Suid Afrika," N.G.K., Pretoria, 1980

Boshoff's views were not totally dissimilar from those apparent in the government's "Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Mass Media" (1982), under the chairmanship of Judge M.T. Steyn. The second volume of the report deals at length with aspects of black theology but its interpretation often appears too dogmatic or the result of gross misinterpretation.(77) Not surprisingly, black theology was too readily and simplistically interpreted as being Marxist-oriented and violence-inspired. These views were again similar to those expressed in the Schlebusch Report which noted the "alarming aspect" of Black Consciousness and, "the fact that it is based on Marxist dialectics."(78)

The quest for black solidarity involved a certain degree of black exclusivism, as we have seen. This was purely strategic, a working method to achieve definitive objectives. Blacks had indicated that the inclusion of certain Whites, so called liberals, either retards or never allows full development of the liberation and complete appreciation of the black man or woman as person.(79) While the black person was being internally freed, the white person was still bound by ideological and racial thinking, a fact that was being ignored.(80) This was even evident in

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77 Ibid, p.102

78 Schlebusch Commission Report, p.156

79 Pro Veritate, Editorial, 15 August 1972

80 Ibid.

theological circles where black exclusivism was classified as a dangerous form of "polarization," hardly esteemed to be a mark of the Church.

Blacks were urged, instead, to move beyond polarization towards "that maturity which should characterize the new humanity in Christ." (81) When Blacks who had participated in the government's homeland policy were turned away from Black Consciousness meetings, the approach was deemed naive. This sign of black "incompetence" endangered Christianity. Blacks were further warned to think over their policy of complete divorce from all Whites. If they didn't "have the gumption to stand up for themselves," then they should "cancel" their exclusive conventions and go back to the chapel!" (82) Black attempts in striving towards a just society without oppression was also questioned. One liberal Afrikaner, David Bosch, asked if "the dreams these black brethren are dreaming are utopian. The world has never known a society in which authority was absent and it will never know such a society." (83) Bosch saw black

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- 81 Kairos, Editorial, October 1971, (Editor: John W. de Gruchy)  
82 M. Maasdorp, The Root of the Matter, Black Liberals, Pro Veritate, February 1975, p.20  
83 David Bosch, "The Case of Black Theology," Pro Veritate, 15 August 1972, p.3

theologians as "people who are in danger of seriously underestimating the reality of the power of sin in human life." (84) Bosch still recognized that "whatever whites have to say about Black theology must be said in subdued tones. They will have to learn especially to submit their unquestioned assumptions to a severely critical test." (85)

Black theology was a human undertaking and it naturally reflected the limitations of those who were its spoke persons. James Cone notes one overt weakness of nascent black theology to be negative over-reaction to white racism: "We allowed our definition of black theology to be too much a reaction to racism in the white churches and society." (86) He also mentioned black theology's lack of social, economic and sexual analysis as other weaknesses. Racism was certainly over emphasized to the exclusion of a thorough class analysis in South African black theology. Black theology interpreters further did not substantiate their "blackenization" attempts by penetrating social or economic critiques. Sexism was counted as a problem but

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84 Ibid.

85 David Bosch, Currents and Crosscurrents in South African Black Theology, Black Theology. A Documentary History 1966-1979, Ed. Gayraud D. Wilmore and James H. Cone, Orbis, New York, 1979, p.235

86 James H. Cone, For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, New York, 1984, p.86

there was no progressive or prophetic vision here to impact society. The ideological component of Black Consciousness was not so fully developed, but again, this was no excuse for theological discourse not to risk the relativity of faith in naming political alternatives. Black theology thus failed to develop its ideology beyond blackness, or set a prophetic direction for the black struggle.

Yet it must also be said that Black theology emerged forcefully at a critical period within South African church history, a period characterized by the failure of the white - dominated churches to effectively respond to the political problems in the country. Born out of the awareness that Blacks were not poor and powerless by accident or divine design, black theology was a sustained protest against the inhumanity inflicted on Blacks by the settler Whites. It forced the black Christian community to take seriously the challenge of Black Consciousness and to interpret the meaning of Christian faith in the context of the black struggle for freedom. Ultimately, black theology in South Africa was a strong signal to the powerful to accept that the oppressed would no longer be passive agents for exploitation and had, instead, opted for a radical change of the political system.



CHAPTER 5  
APARTHEID IS A HERESY

1. Soweto and Church Politics

The ideology of Black Consciousness was often criticized for its sociological shallowness and internal inconsistencies. It did not seem to share a passionate concern for strategic and tactical questions regarding the future of South Africa. The activism of the Black Consciousness movement was undoubtedly limited to initiating community development programmes. Even its theological component, black theology, did not register itself in any formal, or organizational way. Leaders tended to be introspective and only later attempted to popularize their ideas and evolve a political programme. (1) Black Consciousness, nevertheless, proved to be the dominating intellectual influence in black political thinking in the seventies. It is also certain that it

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1 Lodge, p.322

helped induce a climate for resistance and confrontation and explains, more than any other factor, the origins of the Soweto uprising. (2)

The main features that formed the background to the Soweto uprising were economic recession, a more politically assertive and aspirant African bourgeoisie and consecutive waves of labour unrest. (3) The initial spark that was to develop into an almost "communal insurrection" was provided by the police who opened fire on a demonstration by school children on 16 June 1976. The pupils were protesting against the government's insistence that arithmetic and social studies be taught in Afrikaans. The pupil leaders had insisted on the need for a peaceful demonstration. The police presence, their habitual authority and threatening behaviour were, however, to produce tragic consequences.

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- 2 J. Kane Berman, Soweto: Black revolt, white reaction, Johannesburg, 1978, p.48. Shortly before his death, Biko indicated that Soweto was evidence enough for the support of the Black Consciousness movement: "In one word: Soweto! The boldness, dedication, sense of purpose and clarity of analysis of their situation - all these things are a direct result of Black Consciousness ideas among the young in Soweto and elsewhere." (Donald Woods, Biko, Paddington, New York, 1987, p.98)
- 3 See Lodge, p.321f.

The Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, claimed that the police had done everything in their power to bring the pupils under control and were eventually forced to fire warning shots over the children's heads. But a police colonel declared, "We fired into them. It's no use firing over their heads." (4) One of the first victims of the shootings was Hector Peterson, who died by a shot fired directly at him. The police claimed that they were attacked with stones first, but eyewitness accounts indicate a "hundred percent certainty" that the police fired before the stones were thrown. There was, further, no verbal warning before the firing started. (5)

The "cry of Soweto" was heard in every part of South Africa and throughout the world. The days thereafter passed in a fevered rush of demonstrations and shootings, arson and sabotage, strikes and boycotts. Many had the confused impression that Soweto symbolized "riots" and "disturbances" while others saw the uprising as a "heroic battle" and a

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4 Financial Times, 17 June 1976

5 A. Brooks and J. Brickhill, Whirlwind Before the Storm, London, 1980, p.26

campaign in the struggle for liberation. (6) Prime Minister Vorster responded by warning, "The government will not be intimidated" and that "orders have been given to maintain order at all costs." Soweto in his eyes, was not a spontaneous outburst, but "a deliberate attempt to bring about polarization between whites and blacks." (7)

Justice Minister, Jimmy Kruger, interpreted the children's raised fists as a sign of the Communist Party. When Whites were being threatened, he welcomed the formation of white vigilante groups who began a wave of killing innocent Blacks. In the Soweto aftermath, the government made a few minor "concessions" aimed basically "at appeasing the aspirant black middle class, but as the main impetus of the uprising was not coming from this section, they did nothing to lower the temperature." (8)

The NGK responded to the Soweto explosion by first noting "with sorrow and dismay the riots in recent times in which not only buildings, and especially church buildings, were burned down and damaged, but in which people also lost their lives." (9) It called its members "to a worthy plan of

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6 Ibid, p.29

7 House of Assembly Debates, 17 June 1976

8 Brooks and Brickhill, p.31

9 Ecunews, 7 July 1976, p.8

action in which the example of the Lord can be followed, and the Christian demand of love of God in one's neighbour can be practiced." (10) They also called for attempts to get "in touch with developments and their background," but nothing was done to discover the "hidden motives" for the uprising. Not unexpectedly, no blame was attributed to the government or to the police for their brutality.

Likewise, Methodists also spiritualized the harsh political reality by calling for greater "scriptural holiness" and greater efforts at building bridges between black and white Christians. (11) Solidarity was expressed by one synod for SACC general secretary John Rees and Christian Institute director Beyers Naudé who were served with orders by a magistrate, warning them to disassociate themselves from the "disturbances." (12) The Natal Synod was more outspoken in calling on all South Africans to recognize Black Consciousness, and "to promote wherever possible this consciousness of dignity and worth." (13) Methodist student ministers were also critical in calling for a more dynamic

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid, p.2

12 Ecunews, 30 June 1976, p.2

13 Ibid.

approach by their church lest its witness be damaged by its present inaction. (14)

The SACC immediately interpreted the events of Soweto as "a tragic reflection" of the government's apparent inability to comprehend or cope with the frustrations and bitterness among Blacks. An appeal was made for bold and swift action, and for the government to seize the opportunity for negotiation and reconciliation. (15) The deep societal division became apparent at the SACC National Conference in 1976, when two caucus groups offered their interpretations. One group preferred the yardstick, "Love God and love your neighbour as yourself" and called for methods of non-violent opposition to violence to be investigated. The DRC, it said, should be approached to seek "a united Christian appeal to the State in the matter of worsening race relationships." The SACC was asked to appeal to individual Christians to "show your brotherhood in the streets ... to discover the details of righteousness and the purpose of prayer." (16)

The other caucus group at the SACC conference affirmed the right of the pupils to have protested non-violently on the

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- 14 Ecunews, 7 July 1976, p.2
  - 15 Ibid, 11 August 1976, p.10
  - 16 Ibid, 4 August 1976, p.24

language issue and expressed their solidarity with the black youth in their struggle for liberation. Support was expressed for officials of SASO, BPC and SASM (Soweto-based South African Students Movement), who were regarded as legitimate mouthpieces of the black people of South Africa. The continuous reference to black youths as "things" and "tsotsis" was deplored. Money spent in re-erecting beer halls and bottle stores should instead be used for black education, the group urged. (17) These suggestions came from the group comprising most the the black delegates of the conference. (18) The Christian Institute acknowledged the new

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17 Ibid, p.16

18 For one white female person at the conference, "the saddest thing of all" was that Whites had not used the opportunity to form a white caucus. Blacks chose to meet in a closed group while Whites preferred a mixed group, where some Whites heard for the first time, Blacks articulating the brutality and hardship under which Blacks in South Africa lived. While it was an education for white ignorance, the woman urged that, "this kind of awareness ought to have come long ago. Why did Whites not emerge with solid resolutions that would take the form of action after the conference to show Blacks that although white, they could understand some of the oppression so that what happened at the Conference was not just council brotherhood." She also asked, "Why did a white caucus not resolve that they at least, as individuals, would boycott cinemas and restaurants as an expression of solidarity with the oppressed? Or refuse to own TV sets until all Black townships are electrified? Blacks, she concluded, are "looking for a sign that white people were willing to share their privilege in action rather than hypocritical talking." (Pro Veritate, August 1976, p.10)

urgency in the liberation struggle, which the Soweto uprising had introduced, even bringing considerable activity within its own ranks.(19) The Institute was becoming increasingly aware of the new courage, a new determination and new hope among the oppressed masses. Blacks loathed apartheid and would "no longer stand meekly with their necks beneath its yoke; they are determined to be rid of it. They are quite sure they can do it now."(20) For Beyers Naudé, it was abundantly clear that the government was no longer in a position to determine the course of political events, not only in Soweto but also in South Africa as a whole, nor was it capable of guiding in any way the nature, direction or pace of change.(21)

The Institute recognized that as a matter of great urgency, the black community be given the freedom to elect truly recognized black leaders, even from among those in prison and exile. The way forward should be for them to participate in a national convention with a view to dismantling, in the shortest possible period, the unjust political and social structures of the land.(22) The government, however, turned its back on such proposals and,

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19 Pro Veritate, August 1976, p.8

20 Ibid, p.9

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.



instead, banned the Christian Institute and numerous Black Consciousness organizations in October 1977. Naudé and some other staff members were banned shortly before the "father" of Black Consciousness, Steve Biko, died while in police custody. Prime Minister Vorster thereafter, called a general election and was returned to power by a "comfortable" white majority.

The Catholics were particularly disturbed by the arrest of two of their black priests and in expressing sympathy with them, protested the "unjust and oppressive laws" which the church had encountered for almost three decades (i.e., since the National Party came to power). They requested that "it be recognized that the phenomenon of Black Consciousness correctly understood is an inevitable demand by the Black Community for recognition of their human dignity and legitimate aspirations. We appeal to the government to relieve the present tension." Hope was not only entrusted to the government but also, again, in the white constituency. Archbishop Denis Hurley was intent on a "mobilization for peace," and called for the "total mobilization of White opinion in the cause of peace, a Christian response to the agonized Black voices that tells us that peace is still possible." (23)

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23 Ecunews, 4 August 1987, pp.18-19

Hurley saw the main problem to be one of communication in approaching the white community, "to get it to face the facts." The important consideration was to draw up a description of the South African situation, even though "given a minimum of receptivity on the part of Whites, it should get across. Whites should be convinced to do something about Black resentment or else violence would be inevitable. Culpability for the violence, whether realized or not, falls squarely on the shoulders of the white population." (24) Hurley was wise to point out that "all this sounds fine on paper, the problem is to get it off the paper and into the people." (25)

The overall Christian response to the Soweto uprising was positively critical insofar as the root cause was identified by the churches as apartheid itself. Brutality on the part of the police and the strict security laws were often blamed for the escalation of violence. Black Consciousness was now afforded a more positive role in ecclesiastical circles, but there was no positive acknowledgement of its future role. If it was blamed for polarization between black and white in the past, the blame for such polarization now shifted to the apartheid system. (26) Some Christians were beginning to see

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Kairos, 10 November 1977, Editorial

Black Consciousness as being in line with the biblical doctrine of creation.

Though it was supposed to have its "dangers," Black Consciousness did come across to white Christians as a challenge to liberate themselves from being captive to their own interests, culture and ideologies. The question that was now also pertinent for Whites was what kind of society would they really engrave in the future South Africa. They were now forced to face the implications of the Christian faith for their own existence, and therefore for the structures of social life, human rights and economic justice. (27)

## 2. Tensions in Church Unity

For political and strategic reasons, the DRC recognized that ecumenical links with the English churches were now imperative. Because of the gravity of the present day and the dangers lurching from many places, "the DRC decided that a "penetrating analysis" should take place between itself and other Protestant churches with a "conservative

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27 De Gruchy, pp. 176-176

confessional basis" at a conference planned for August 1981 in Pretoria. (28) Some saw this move as an attempt to drive a wedge between the SACC and some of its member churches, and also between black and white radicals and conservatives, with the ultimate aim of splitting the SACC. (29)

Most of the English churches sent representatives to the conference which one black delegate, Ds. Sam Buti of the NGKA, claimed ignored the deep differences between the churches on theological and social issues. In his words, delegates were simply "talking here cosily with each other whilst millions of South Africans are not represented here. We agree on trivialities while South Africa is burning." (30) The Roman Catholic Church was not invited, and this disturbed the other churches. Presbyterian minister, Douglas Bax, questioned the purpose of such a conference and warned against hiding behind a superficial unity, more so as, "Our credibility with our black brothers will be affected." (31) In any case, this whole DRC "offensive", proved futile as no new ecumenical body was formed.

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- 28 J.H.P. Serfontein, Apartheid Change and the NG Kerk, Taurus, Emmarentia (S.A.), 1982, pp.128-131  
29 Ibid, p. 30  
30 Ibid.  
31 Ibid.

The churches in the eighties remained under the powerful control of white hierarchical structures. Criticism was now on the increase, both of apartheid and the DRC. The year 1982 had scarcely commenced when an interdenominational theological conference was held in Pretoria under the theme, "The Church in the Eighties." Though attended by around 500 clergypersons and theologians (mainly male), only ten percent were black and they took very little part in the discussions. The conference was important in that it focused attention on the old problem of "liberal" white theology versus conservative Afrikaner theology, but, as before, this had little relevance to the real political issues in the country.

The DRC was again repeatedly attacked for its racial policies and practices. UNISA professor, David Bosch accused his church, the DRC, of propagating a "heresy" and of not listening to what the New Testament really said about the unity of the Church. He claimed that the Afrikaans churches have devised a dogma for the churches and its institutions which had the function of strengthening the status quo in society. (32)

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32 Serfontein pp.176-181 and Ecunews, 5 February 1982, p. 18

He further maintained that whilst cultural diversity could not be ignored, it should not be used to prevent the unity of the Church. The "closed-door" policy of preventing Blacks from attending white services was detested. University of Durban-Westville professor, Willem Krige, thought Bosch spoke "too mildly" and cautioned that Blacks were more harsh in their criticisms of the DRC. (33)

The real furore at the conference that nearly brought its collapse resulted from a speech by NGK theologian Dr Pierre Rossouw. He seemed to have convinced the delegates, more than ever before, that the real obstacle to renewal and change in South Africa was the DRC. He claimed sound, biblical rationale for believing "that in Christ's work of redemption, the diversity of creation is sanctified, preserved, and in no way annulled." (34) There were some pronounced attacks on his position in the discussion that followed. Some delegates tried desperately to get Rossouw to renounce his position, but he remained adamant. He preferred to keep to his text and spell out in clear and unambiguous terms the official policy of the Dutch Reformed Church.

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33 Ecunews, 5 February 1982, p. 18

34 Serfontein, p. 177

The conference did not seem to appreciate Rossouw's candid attempt to avoid "verligte" language in presenting his church's case. His colleague, Carel Boshoff, questioned the sense of ecumenical discussions if "what people say with great earnestness and sensitivity is met with anger and insults." (35) It seemed to Boshoff as if one's credibility depended on the extent one attacked the DRC and the Afrikaner. Black theologian Simon Maimela was earnest in telling delegates that words like "election," "mission," "calling," and "vocation" were nothing more than theological rhetoric, a sort of "cover-up" for political survival and self-salvation for Whites. He warned that white theology would liberate neither the Whites nor the Blacks. (36)

This Pretoria conference was significant in that it exposed many ecclesiastical problems that the churches had been slow in confronting. Donald Cragg of the Methodist Church called for the elimination of racism within the English churches before the Church could become one. Fellow Methodist, Charles Villa-Vicencio, said that until the socio-political conflicts of the country were resolved, there was little hope of church unity. (37) Black theologian, Gabriel Setiloane, pointed out to what extent the white minority in

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35 Ibid, p. 179

36 Ecunews, 5 February 1982, p. 19

37 Ibid.

the Methodist Church was using its position to control and manipulate the black majority. He was further deeply distressed by the attitude of Whites with regard to joint worship and decision-making within his own Methodist Church. (38) Thus, while the conference as a whole saw the DRC as the main obstacle to change in South Africa, the English churches were equally responsible for their shortcomings.

3. Be not overcome by evil

One who vented his theological fury more on government policy than on DRC doctrine and practise was Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu who succeeded John Rees as general secretary of the SACC in 1978. Tutu lost no time in establishing himself as a controversial spokesman for justice and peace. He often attacked the government's homeland policy and condemned the violence of the freedom fighters; he supported the ordination of women and the right to conscientious objection, and was largely instrumental in creating an international audience for the church's struggle with apartheid. His repeated calls for international economic pressure on South Africa sometimes caused the

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38 Ibid, p.20



government to deprive him of overseas travel. Though not all things to all people, Tutu's prophetic vision was the prime motivation behind much SACC life and political initiative.

The SACC National Conference, meeting in June 1982, was highly significant. It decided that ecumenical links with the Afrikaans churches were to be abandoned until they were willing to reject apartheid as a sin and "heresy." (39) Delegates were officially informed that the government had appointed the Eloff Commission to investigate the workings of the SACC and its finances. Before the conference ended, former general secretary, John Rees, found himself in jail facing fraud, alternatively theft charges for the sum of R295 000. Many white liberals rallied around Mr Rees in the ensuing months, expressing their "love, concern and prayers," often to the discomfort of Bishop Tutu. SACC President, Peter Storey, resigned to avoid a conflict of interest, as he was also Methodist minister of the congregation to which Rees belonged. (40)

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39 Ecunews, July 1982, p.8

40 Ibid. Interestingly enough, John Rees had once submitted a secret report to the government security department Bureau for State Security (BOSS) while in office. He did this after hearing of a plot to kidnap rich capitalist Harry Oppenheimer until wages for Blacks were improved. (Gordon Winter, Inside BOSS, Penguin, London, 1981, p.323)

The Eloff Commission began investigations in 1982 and published its findings in February 1984. The commission considered that the SACC has "clearly manifested its disassociative approach towards evolutionary change in South Africa in that it has become increasingly involved in the socio-political arena with action programmes attempting to force change." (41) Over the years, the SACC was accused of demonstrating "an ever widening association with bodies and organizations which see themselves not only as being in opposition to the Government, but also as promoting and contributing towards their ideal of black majority rule in a unitary South Africa." (42) If the *raison d'être* of the SACC was the co-ordination of efforts to spread the gospel, it had now developed into an organization "largely concerned with political, social and economic issues, and having specific objectives in those fields." (43)

In working for political change, the commission charged that the SACC had opted for the revolutionary rather than the evolutionary process. (44) The SACC was further accused of

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41 Report of the Commission of Inquiry into South African Council of Churches (hereafter Eloff commission), Pretoria Government Printers RP74/1983, p.132

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid, p.427

44 Ibid.

engaging in a "massive psychological warfare" to discredit the state, of covert encouragement of disinvestment and of supporting civil disobedience, which was considered contrary to the national interest. The commission did not wish to eventually render the SACC financially ineffective since "innocent people" would have suffered. The commission also concluded that the SACC had developed into a bureaucratic organization, kept alive by overseas donors, and being distanced from its own member churches. (45)

Yet, while being subject to such vicious and malicious attacks from the government, Desmond Tutu had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was testimony enough, in his words, "to the fact that some in the world think we are a powerful instrument for justice and peace." (46) Tutu pointed out that the commission offered an entirely "white perspective" since no black commissioner was present in its constitution. It further did not possess any theological competence whatsoever and so, "how could it be expected to pass fair judgement on an organization whose every reason for existence is theological from beginning to end?" (47) The commissioners shared a vested interest to maintain the status quo, allowing a white minority to enjoy the vast

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45 Ibid, p.429

46 Ecunews, March 1984, p. 14

47 Ibid, p.11

privileges of their whiteness and benefit from the exploitation of Blacks. (48)

In responding to the Eloff report, Methodist President, Fremont Louw, was similarly alarmed that a secular body had passed judgement on a Christian organization, pointing out that "what is regarded by the Commission as being the national interest does not necessarily correspond to the dogma of the word with regards to justice and love." (49) Despite the commission's conclusion that the SACC had opted for a revolutionary process of change, Anglican Archbishop Philip Russel expressed his church's continued trust in the SACC. (50) The Catholic bishops found the Eloff Commission findings to be based on different perceptions between Blacks and Whites. It noted the SACC problem to be not so much in

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48 Ibid, p.12. Methodist theologian, Charles Villa-Vicencio has evaluated reports of both the Eloff and Steyn Commissions in an interesting article. He concludes that there is a "selective use of sources, virtually devoid of any serious grappling with the classic texts on the topics under investigation. There are non sequiturs, involving long commentaries from select sources, followed by conclusions which do not necessarily follow, and substantial contradictions. From the perspective of serious academic debate, the reports constitute poor scholarship." Theology in the service of the state: The Steyn and Eloff Commissions, Resistance and Hope, Ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, Cape Town, 1985, p.115

49 Ibid, p.10

50 Ibid, p.11

being prophetic about the evils of apartheid, but in communicating that vision. (51) Presbyterians were also sympathetic to the SACC, pleased that it was not declared an "affected organization." Their general secretary Chris Aitken expressed no objection to SACC funds being examined since they had always been open to scrutiny. He was disturbed that the state assumed the right to decide which church programme qualified as spiritual work and which did not. (52)

The Eloff report received mixed responses in Afrikaner circles. One large pro-government newspaper, "Rapport," was fairly balanced in its comments, even speaking of the Church's right of resistance and protest against political systems. (53) "Beeld," a morning newspaper, warned the SACC to seriously reflect on whether it could obtain the best for the country and its members through confrontation with the state. "Die Kerkbode," the DRC newsletter, noted that the commission's findings offered few reasons for the NGK to seriously consider joining the SACC, especially since its theological premise was doubtful. (54) DRC official, Dirk Fourie, hoped that the SACC would be declared an "affected

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51 Ibid, p.9  
52 Ibid, p.10  
53 Ibid, p.2  
54 Ibid, p.8

organization," while Northern Transvaal synod moderator Johan Heyns believed otherwise, and preferred DRC links with the SACC. (55)

The executive committee of the SACC responded to the 450 page report of the Eloff Commission by publishing its own document, "Be not overcome by evil." That there were financial irregularities in the SACC administration was not denied. In the government's appointment of the commission, however, the document asserted, "we are dealing with an attempt to exploit the situation for political gain, regardless of whether its actions are in conflict with the justice demanded by God." (56) Thus every aspect of SACC activities had been judged by one criterion - not the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the national interest as perceived by the government. The document claimed that the SACC was not subverting the peace, but calling people out of the illusion of peace. The Christian faith placed the Council under obligation to resist evil by those who legalized injustice. (57)

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55 Ibid, p.9

56 Be not overcome by evil, SACC, Johannesburg, 1984, (unpaged)

57 Ibid.

#### 4. Apartheid is a Heresy

In what was seen as an exercise tantamount to "nothing more than buying time," 123 white ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church family published an "Open Letter" on 8 June 1982 in the "Kerkbode" condemning government policies on scriptural grounds. (58)

This action was an attempt by Afrikaans-speaking theologians to question the very *raison d'être* of the apartheid system vis-à-vis the customary criticism of certain racial laws. It was also the first united effort by the "verligte" group in the DRC to subject apartheid to a searching analysis. Previous attempts were undertaken by scattered groups and individuals. (59)

Part of the Afrikaans press may have welcomed the "Open Letter" by urging that the church dare not withdraw itself from social matters, which included race relations and politics. (60) The DRC broad moderation found the letter unacceptable in terms of its rules of procedure, thus

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58 Serfontein, p. 182

59 Serfontein has documented some of these attempts, the most significant of which was the decision by Stellenbosch theology professor Nico Smith, who resigned in December 1981 in favour of becoming a minister of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Africa (NGKA) in a Mamelodi congregation, outside Pretoria. (pp. 149-181)

60 Beeld, 9 June 1982

concealing its opposition to the letter's contents on technical grounds. (61) The timing of the letter may have been a ploy to mute expected criticism of the DRC from the forthcoming World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) assembly. DRC theologian, Johan Heyns, was candid in admitting that the letter "will be seen as a sign of a church which is struggling with fundamental matters." (62) It thus offered hope to restore broken ties with overseas churches and to end the lonely ecumenical road of the DRC.

That the DRC attached much importance to retaining its membership in the WARC was evident from the fact that it sent its three top leaders to the WARC assembly meeting in Ottawa, August 1982. They were Ds. Kobus Potgieter, acting moderator of the DRC general synod, Pierre Rossouw and Johan Heyns. These men argued passionately in defence of their church, even denying that it closed its doors to Blacks or that it was indifferent to issues of suffering and oppression in South Africa. They even claimed that their church had raised a number of questions relating to the position of Blacks. (63) Significantly, two conservative black delegates of the NGKA abstained from voting on a move to suspend the DRC and the NHK from membership of the World

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61 Serfontein, p.185

62 Rapport, 13 June 1982

63 Ecunews, September 1982, p.6



Alliance, proving themselves out of touch with their black colleagues who initiated this step. More importantly, Ottawa represented the first time in more than 30 years that the black DRC "daughter" church did not support the white DRC by pleading that no action be taken against it, and that it be given more time. This occasion saw no "rescue operation," as they did not speak in mitigation nor did the majority vote against suspension. (64)

The most decisive lead that led to the suspension of the DRC and NHK was given by Dr. Allan Boesak, minister of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). He and some of the other South African delegates refused to participate in a communion service along with delegates of the white DRC early in the proceedings of the assembly in Ottawa. Boesak later led a Bible study, stating that an exegesis of Exodus 20 showed that God was on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the voteless. In his address to the assembly, Dr. Boesak called on the WARC to reaffirm that racism was a sin, to encourage member churches in their "prayerful support" of the WCC Programme to Combat Racism and to effectively declare apartheid a heresy, irreconcilable with the gospel of Jesus Christ. (65)

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64 Ecunews, November 1982, p.8

65 Ibid. See Apartheid is a Heresy, Ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, Cape Town, 1983, pp.1-9 for text of Boesak's address.

Apartheid was an issue too long deferred by the world body for critical evaluation. Boesak's stand evoked strong criticism in South Africa where he was attacked for "naked racism" and for adopting an approach reminiscent of the "theology of revolution." The refusal to have holy communion with the white DRC leaders was condemned as "religious terrorism" by some Afrikaners. (66) Views such as these, however, carried little weight in the WARC assembly which voted overwhelmingly for the DRC and NHK suspension, and also, for Dr. Boesak as future leader of the world body. (67)

Theologically, the important outcome of the WARC assembly was its unanimous decision to heed Boesak's call of declaring apartheid a "heresy." The assembly attacked apartheid for being a pseudo-religious ideology, a political policy supported to a large extent by theological and moral

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66 See Ecunews, September 1982, p.6

67 In other developments, the NGK announced in January 1985 that it had suspended membership in the Grand Rapids-based Reformed Ecumenical Synod, a worldwide grouping of Reformed denominations (EPS 85.01.51). Serfontein comments that this was part of a long term strategy to organize a new, conservative ecumenical body in South Africa to rival the SACC and an international body to be known as the International Conference of Reformed Churches (The Reformed Journal, vol 35, no. 3, March 1985, p.9)

justification. (68) It should be noted that this declaration was preceded and followed by numerous other churches and ecumenical organizations in South Africa and abroad similarly declaring apartheid a heresy on moral and theological grounds. This, however, is no grounds for us to conclude that the Ottawa events were the most significant affecting the churches in South Africa, as De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio have done, despite the widespread media coverage and heated debates that followed. (69)

The extent to which the Ottawa criticisms of apartheid can be theologically justified is questionable. The PCR and the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC held an important consultation on "Racism in Theology and Theology against Racism" in 1975, where the delegates concluded that the concept of "heresy" is not in practice a very helpful standpoint from which to consider racism, especially since this could mislead into academic discussions of what is or is not formal heresy. The Christian concern should not be to denounce groups or churches as morally heretical, "but rather to be consistently attentive to possibly negative effects of certain beliefs and practices, and to help each other to discover and overcome them." (70)

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68 See Ottawa statement in Apartheid is a Heresy, p. 168f

69 Apartheid is a Heresy, p. xv

70 Racism in Theology and Theology against Racism. Report of a Consultation, WCC, Geneva, 1975, p. 15

The consultation further noted that the concept of moral heresy was originally intended to make a preacher's point and that "endless complications and difficulties arise when it is transplanted into formal theological discourse, particularly in the context of the ecumenical movement." (71) Indeed, "moral heresy" is Donatist language. It may be possible to distinguish moral from immoral heresy. But a moral heresy in the sense of deviation from orthodox morality is not possible. There can only be sin and this is what apartheid is, in theological language. To call apartheid a heresy is further a dubious exercise in semantics. (72) It was therefore the theological justification of apartheid that constituted a heresy, not the ideology itself. It is strange that the WARC with its assortment of refined scholars did not express itself more unequivocally. Loose logic for the sake of catchy phrasing is not something one expects in theological discourse formulated to suspend membership of churches.

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71 Ibid.

72 James Gaffney points out that "Apartheid is a heresy" is a curious piece of language. It is not a loose metaphor but merely a poor choice of words. By coining the term, critics of apartheid seem to be indulging in a kind of "theological contumely," saying in a refined style that "Apartheid stinks." Gaffney is convinced that it is "a misunderstanding that distorts an important message." (The Month, January, 1987, pp. 11-13)

Ottawa's focus on the issue of doctrinal heresy was understandable. Heresy has always been a particular concern for those churches which are marked by a tight confessional stance. Its use of "heresy" presented apartheid as a theological problem which the Church had to address internally. Andre du Toit comments:

"Had the Ottawa decision been taken 25 years ago it might have confronted the official ideology of apartheid head on, and would have found a DRC leadership and some theologians committed to apartheid in these very doctrinal terms. Meanwhile the government has repeatedly shifted the ideological basis of official policy: it no longer describes that policy in terms of "apartheid," and there is some doubt whether, or to what extent, its policy may still be termed one of "separate development." Many of the true believers and fervent ideologists who used to set the tone in the National Party have been replaced by verligte pragmatists who will have little stake in "apartheid" as some kind of doctrinal position. Five years ago some of them were even squaring up to those conceptual and moral cornerstones of apartheid policy, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and section 16 of the Immorality Act. In the event the politicians shirked this difficult decision and put the ball in the court of the (Dutch Reformed) church when Mr P.W. Botha declared that the theologians should first agree among themselves about the religious and moral principles involved, before the state could act. To some extent it is just this challenge to the church which the Ottawa

decision has now repeated and the politicians will be quite happy to wait for the outcome." (73)

Theology, or religion for that matter certainly has its political uses and abuses, in the history of the Church. The dominant political passions that propel people to their particular behavioural patterns originate from other (non-ecclesial) and more material interests. It is therefore a dubious exercise to expect a theological critique to shake the foundations of apartheid ideology. The most it can do is serve as a "salutary process of internal education" with a certain group or groups of ecclesial bodies. Churches may have their individual agendas informed and solidified by recourse to their theological traditions, but this is only the "second step." The other urgent business of engaging in the "work of the kingdom" for the establishment of justice and peace in the midst of suffering and exploitation remains.

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73 Andre du Toit, The Philosophical and Religious implications of the present polarization in South Africa - from the white perspective, unpublished, I.C.T., Johannesburg, 1983, p.49

## CHAPTER 6

### THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

#### 1. Reform and Repression

The political development that triggered the spiral of violence and current unrest in South Africa was the introduction of a new constitution in 1984, the main feature of which was to incorporate segments of the black community ("Indian" and "Coloured") in a new tricameral parliament. Africans were excluded on the spurious grounds that they were not and could not be citizens of South Africa. They were citizens of the Bantustans where they were "free" to elect their "own" government. (1) Notwithstanding the almost universal opposition of Blacks to the new constitution, the

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1 National Party policy is that "it is neither desirable nor practicable to accommodate all communities in the same way," and so the government only "accepts the permanence in the RSA in large numbers of members of Black population communities who find themselves outside the National States." (Speech by the State President, Mr. P. W. Botha on the occasion of the opening of the Second Session of the Eighth Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 25 January 1985, P. 10, 13). Issued by the South African Consulate, Hamburg, Germany.

government secured majority support for it in a white referendum. Whites evidently believed that it was a "step in the right direction." (2)

The new constitution did not "broaden" democracy as some claimed. Critics saw it as an attempt to transfer administrative functions to lower levels of government while concentrating more power in White-controlled central government. It "co-opted" some Blacks by giving them joint responsibility for segregation while not allowing them to challenge it, drawing them into the white "laager" as junior partners. The fundamental objection was ideological - the constitution allocated political rights on a "group" or racial basis, in accordance with an ideology that entrenched white control. This control allowed Whites to dictate the terms of consensus and to set the limits within which certain Blacks could manage their own affairs. The only power which consensus offered Blacks in this framework was the right to endorse, confirm and help implement - white decisions. (3)

In direct opposition to the new constitution, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983, comprising some 600 organizations, mainly black. The UDF said that the only

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2 SAIRR, Survey, 1983, Johannesburg, 1984, p.1  
3 Steven Friedman, The Limits of Co-option. The 1984 Constitution and Strategies for Change, SAIRR Confidential Briefing 20/1/87, Johannesburg, 1987, pp.1-3



acceptable constitutional solution for SA was a non-racial, unitary state, "undiluted by racial or ethnic considerations as formulated in the bantustan policy." (4) Apartheid had to be dismantled, not reformed. The UDF therefore pledged itself to unite the people in the fight against poor housing, high rents, low wages, poor working conditions, forced removals and inferior education for Blacks. In this, a new unity between Blacks and some sections of the white community was forged.

The government reacted to the growing opposition and resistance to its new constitution by harassing, arresting and detaining UDF leaders. Meetings were often banned and literature confiscated. Protests, boycotts, demonstrations and violent unrest began in the Vaal Triangle, south of Johannesburg, in September 1984, and spread rapidly throughout the country. There were numerous attacks on black town councillors and other government agents, resulting in severe repression by the police and army. Those killed in the unrest during 1984 and 1985 numbered over 1000, mainly as a result of police action. Detailed allegations by various

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4      SAIRR Survey, 1983, p.82

people of indiscriminate shootings, brutal assaults and abuse were made against the security forces. Government attempts to stifle dissent did not succeed as the unrest continued unabated. (5)

The limited reforms that President Botha initiated found little support among Blacks. They were widely viewed as cosmetic, an attempt to give apartheid a more rational and human appearance without addressing the central issue of political rights for the disenfranchised majority. "Too little, too late" was the constant criticism. In one breath, the government would speak of reform and in another enforce the "manifest evil" of apartheid laws, inflicting "unmitigated cruelty." (6) The once monolithic Afrikaner Nationalist Party was split by the resignation of Dr. Andries Treurnicht from his cabinet position. He quickly moved to consolidate the ultra-right wing white voters into the new

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5 Interestingly enough, the unrest in the country was viewed by the DRC Plenary Executive as the result of "widespread behaviour of adolescents and others committing deeds of violence, demonstrations and the causing of damage..... Instead of causing incalculable damage to themselves (Blacks) and many other unoffending fellow men, we call on all concerned to seek approved and orderly ways in bringing their problems to attention." (DRC News, Vol.9, no. 9-12, Sept - Dec 1984, p.1).

6 See comments by Anglican Archbishop, Philip Russel, Cape Argus, 21 October 1983.

Conservative Party. The government was thus "plunged into an ideological vacuum with no new articles to knit together." (7)

Most of the English churches reacted to the new constitution negatively. Methodist Church President Dr. Khoza Mgojo noted that while some saw limited merit in it, its implementation would entrench the sin of apartheid and lead to increased polarization, unrest and violent conflict. (8) The Methodist Church supported Dr. Mgojo's position and called on voters to reject the constitution and pray for genuine change. Catholic bishops similarly saw it as an unsatisfactory step on the road to peace in South Africa. The white NGK and NHK both decided against advising their members on how to vote in the November 1983 referendum for the constitution. (9) In spite of ecclesiastical opposition, the referendum results exceeded the government's "wildest expectations," showing a distinct majority of Whites in favour of government policy.

On the international level, diplomatic pressure on South Africa to change its political course increased. In the

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7 Star International Weekly, 31 October 1983  
8 SAIRR Survey, 1983, p.636.  
9 Ibid.

United States, a process of political disengagement was underway to send a strong signal to South African Whites that their ultimate salvation did not lie with the United States "cavalry." Some major U.S. companies gradually pulled out as the SA economy slumped. "Constructive engagement" had reached an impasse without achieving any of its main goals.(10) The signing of the Nkomati Accord between Mozambique and South Africa in March 1984, gave the impression that the government was seeking peace with its neighbours. The crossborder raids into neighbouring territories by the army and the devastating consequences proved that this was false.(11)

In 1985 Desmond Tutu became Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg and was succeeded as general secretary in the SACC by former Christian Institute director, Beyers Naudé, whose banning order had recently been lifted. In a dramatic show of civil disobedience, many church leaders took to the streets in protest marches. Naudé and Boesak led a march of some 300 protestors to parliament in

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10 John de St. Torre, South Africa Embattled, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 65, No.3, New York, 1986, p.539.

11 Ibid, p.554

Cape Town, demanding the government keep police out of the black townships and speak to authentic leaders about change. (12) Similar marches were led in Johannesburg by Bishop Tutu and in Durban by Archbishop Denis Hurley of the Catholic Church. Ecclesial opposition to apartheid had seldom reached such proportions.

The World Council of Churches, in consultation with the SACC, called an emergency ecumenical meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in December 1985. More than sixty world Church leaders came together "to seek God's guidance at this time of profound crisis in South Africa." The Church leaders affirmed that the "moment of truth" (Kairos) had come both for South Africa and the world community. They saw the apartheid structure to be against God's will, and "morally indefensible" and that in this view, "The Government has no credibility ..... We understand and fully support those in South Africa who are calling for the resignation of the Government." (13) The leaders further acknowledged the transfer of power to the majority of the people, based on universal suffrage to be the only lasting solution to the crisis.

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12 EPS 85.04.02.

13 Harare Declaration, Harare, 6 December 1985, PCR Information, 1986/no.23, WCC, Geneva, pp.16 - 17

Having heard the cries of anguish of people "trapped in the oppressive structures of apartheid," the ecumenical gathering adopted the "Harare Declaration" which called for an immediate end to the imposed state of emergency, the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, the return of exiles and unbanning of liberation movements. In addition, the gathering implored the international community to apply "immediate and comprehensive sanctions" on South Africa and demanded the implementation of the United Nations Resolution 435 on Namibia. They expressed support for developments in the trade union movement and all churches worldwide were called to work with South African movements for the liberation of the country. (14)

The "resolution vis-à-vis action" dilemma was apparent at the Harare conference once more. South African church leaders were reported to have told the other delegates that "it was time to do more than pass pious resolutions." In the words of Sol Jacob, representing the Black Ecumenical Church leaders, "you think ..... that when church people pass resolutions, they are making a revolution ... we're sick and tired of resolutions and rhetoric." (15) It is not at all clear what "more" church leaders could do, and how they could "make a revolution," if this was in fact desirable.

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14 Ibid.  
15 EPS 85.12.45.



## 2. Isolating Apartheid.

The following statement of the fourth assembly of the WCC which met at Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968, is of historic importance in its relation to the question of foreign investments in South Africa:

"In order that victims of racism may regain a sense of their own worth and be enabled to determine their own future, the churches must make economic and educational resources available to underprivileged groups for their development to full participation in the social and economic life of their communities. They should also withdraw investments from institutions that perpetuate racism." (16)

This challenge formed the basis of immediate study and analysis of Church involvement in the support and perpetuation of racism. In 1972, the WCC Central Committee, meeting in Utrecht, Holland, adopted a definite policy of disinvestment in Southern Africa. It concluded that "the effect of foreign investments in Southern Africa is to strengthen the white minority regimes in their oppression

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16 Uppsala Report, p.66

of the majority of the people of this region" and that such investment be terminated. The minority regimes included those ruling in Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia at the time. Member churches, associated organizations and multinational corporations with investments in these regions and South Africa were urged to disinvest. (17)

The English churches, taking the classic liberal position that increased investment and economic growth were likely to help undermine apartheid, resented the WCC resolutions. In the aftermath of the Soweto uprising, delegates at the 1976 National Conference of the SACC decided that an "urgent and careful study" of investment and disinvestment was imperative, after being implored by John Rees "to declare themselves on the whole question of investment." (18) This required Study led to the preparation of a report entitled "Investment in South Africa," which was approved by the 1977 SACC National Conference. The report acknowledged that apartheid will not be abandoned unless some form of pressure is exerted on the government. Still, the option of

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17 WCC Statements and Actions on Racism 1948 - 1979, p.35  
18 Eloff Report, p.202. The SACC was also under pressure from the German Protestant churches to decide on the issue of disinvestment.



disinvestment as advocated by the WCC was rejected in favour of a code of ethics for business operations in South Africa. (19)

In 1978, under black leadership, the SACC began to adopt a slightly different approach to disinvestment, one that possibly strengthened the hand of the disinvestment campaign overseas. Yet, because of security legislation, no open discussion of the problem was possible and so the SACC was cautious, if not ambiguous, in its resolutions. The SACC called on countries and organizations to revise their investment policies radically so as to benefit the total population of South Africa. (20) The Council was also keen to monitor the practices of firms and to educate workers about their rights. The most strongly worded resolution on comprehensive sanctions against South Africa came from the WCC Central Committee, at its meeting in Geneva, 1980. Apartheid was declared a sin and perversion of the Christian gospel and those struggling for a just society were to be encouraged and supported. The Committee called on all Christians "to press governments and international

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, p. 207

organizations to enforce comprehensive sanctions against South Africa, including a withdrawal of investments, an end to bank loans, arms embargo and oil sanctions, and in general for the isolation of the state of South Africa." (21) The SACC responded in March 1981 by calling investors to vigorously question whether their investments facilitated and promoted the establishment of full human rights for all inhabitants of a united South Africa, and so, to base their decisions on a commitment to this goal. (22)

There was always a strong division of opinion within the ranks of the SACC on the investment issue. One of the early advocates for support of WCC resolutions on sanctions was Mrs. Sally Motlana, a SACC executive member who made no secret of her views. SACC President Peter Storey was strongly against supporting a campaign of disinvestment throughout. (23) Bishop Tutu was constantly calling the

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- 21 WCC Central Committee, Minutes of Thirty-Second Meeting, 14-22 August 1980, Geneva, WCC, Geneva, 1981, p.71  
22 Eloff Report, p.211  
23 Storey's view would have been welcomed by the government, as it always used, "the sanctions threat to appeal to white South Africans' sense of patriotism to unite behind it and defy the world, a tactic that has already achieved considerable success." (Foreign Affairs, p.549)

world to attention over the sanctions issue. "Those who invest in South Africa", he said, "must do so with their eyes open. They must not delude themselves that they are doing anything for the benefit of the blacks." Tutu often spoke of "economic pressure" and always avoided any direct call for "comprehensive sanctions." (24)

Those who argue against economic sanctions generally believe that economic growth will result in the dismantling of traditional social structures and that it is a real beacon of hope for those trapped in the shackles of apartheid. The argument goes that as the economy expands, pressures for a more efficient use of black labour will grow. If economic influence is to be effectively used to bring pressure for change, businesses should adopt a code of reformist ethics,

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24 Eloff Report, p.220. In an article written specially for the African-American Institute in July 1981, Tutu said that the "Multi-national corporations with their codes of conduct are not yet involved in the business of helping to destroy apartheid. They have done good things for their employees, but all within the framework of apartheid and really no more than what a good employer should have been doing. Ultimately their efforts are improvements not change." (See D. Tutu, Hope and Suffering, Collins, London, 1983, p. 128)

like the Sullivan principles.(25) Corporations should practice selective investment, for example, moving into manufacturing fields that make products in demand in the black community.(26) Those favouring this "constructive engagement" vis-à-vis sanctions claim to be advocates of peaceful change and the alleviation of black suffering.(27)

Now the role of foreign investments in South Africa must be seen in the context of the supply and control of cheap black labour, which is embedded in the apartheid policy. Notable here is the system of African reserves, which restricts African land ownership and occupation to thirteen percent of the country's land area. This has meant, as a PCR study has noted, "that African subsistence farming has been confined to a land area too small to provide for the needs of the rural population. Land shortage and land poverty together with the imposition of a money economy and of compulsory taxes, have ensured the flow of Africans into the labour market controlled by Whites."(28) The study further observes that, in the long term, foreign investments result

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- 25 Charles C. West, Perspectives on South Africa, Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, 1985, p.40  
26 Ibid, p.14  
27 Ronald Reagan, for example. See New York Times, 26 September 1986.  
28 Time to withdraw, Programme to Combat Racism, WCC, Geneva 1973, p.13

"inevitably in the process of strengthening the military machine in order to protect the interests of both the white minority and the foreign investors." (29)

Don Morton has charged that the advocates of gradualism or reformist change seem to forget that the only fundamental allegiance that multi-national corporations have is to profit, and if a system is geared in such a way as to provide maximum profit (even if it is by overt exploitation), then companies will use it for maximum benefit. (30) Even if the companies are moved to change policies, the pressure for such change does not grow within the business community itself. (31) The South African government depends on foreign capital to maintain the economy, to legitimize and undergird the apartheid system by providing resources to stifle dissent, engage police in torture and brutality, and maintain the forced separation of the different races. This necessarily establishes a mutual "ideological alliance" between foreign companies and the government, each serving the other's interest.

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29 Ibid, p. 14

30 Don Morton, Partners in Apartheid, United Church of Christ, New York, 1973, p. 42

31 West, p. 42

Blacks seem convinced that it is the system of apartheid, like slavery, which must be broken. It is not a question whether some will enjoy temporary and false hopes from higher wages and better working conditions. Releasing slaves from serfdom may indeed create mass unemployment; imposing comprehensive sanctions will possibly bring some hardship and deprivation. But the argument is that sanctions is a method which can shorten the days of bloodshed. The momentary suffering it may cause is a price Blacks are willing to pay. In any case, Blacks are already suffering.

Most black leaders believe and support this logic. Human life in South Africa cannot be set free for justice and peace without the "demon" of the land and power inequalities being bound for destruction. Solidarity gestures, such as resolutions for sanctions, inspire Blacks to greater heights of resistance in their struggle for freedom. Only in this light is the Harare Declaration, for example, meaningful. The SACC 1985 National Conference, for the first time, called on foreign churches to promote disinvestment and similar economic measures as a peaceful and effective means of pressuring the government to initiate political change. (32) Even though many Whites dissented, the sanctions issue was now settled.



### 3. Day of Prayer

In addressing the 1984 SACC National Conference, Allan Boesak called on "all Christians and churches to set aside a day on which to pray for the downfall of this government." (33) What the poor needed in his view, was not "meaningless reforms but a new government that will love justice, hate evil, and do what is right for all the people of South Africa." (34)

The conference responded to Boesak's plea by subsequently calling on the churches to pray for the "abolition of all apartheid structures" and later, for "the end to unjust rule." (35) These developments soon gave birth to the formation of an ecumenical group for the purpose of producing a theological statement or rationale for such prayer. The Western Province Council of Churches (WPCC), of which Boesak was a member, was instrumental in the writing process of the statement called "Theological Rationale," which carefully excluded the word "downfall" as it was considered obnoxious by some. (36)

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- 33 When Prayer Makes News, Ed. A. Boesak and C. Villa-Vicencio, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 16  
34 Ibid.  
35 Ibid.  
36 Ibid, p. 17

The statement began by pointing to the calendar of oppression and resistance in South Africa, more particularly the 16th of June. In remembrance of this day, Christians were summoned to pray "that God will replace the present structures of oppression with ones that are just, and remove from power those who persist in defying his laws, installing in their place leaders who will govern with justice and mercy." (37) The statement's continuity in "a firm theological tradition" was established by reference to Tertullian, St Thomas, Luther, Barth, Kuyper and Catholic popes. The rationale ended by a pledge to work for Lukan liberation (Lk. 4:18-19) and with an invitation to prayer for a new and just order in South Africa. (38)

In Boesak's words, "The Theological Rationale spoke the language of the tradition of the church." (39) That it was a moderate and deliberately cautious document is evident from its inclusive and ecumenical character; it was clearly intended as a consensus document of challenge to the churches. Yet, few theological documents produced public outrage of the magnitude engendered by the Theological Rationale, in the weeks before the Soweto anniversary in 1985. It was largely misconstrued as a call for the violent overthrow of the South African government, as the

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37 Theological Rationale, When Prayer Makes News, p.26  
38 Ibid, p. 10  
39 Ibid.



work of a bunch of radicals (more particularly, Allan Boesak) and so, of not representing SACC-membership views.

Most of the controversy surrounding the document seemed to be the stirrings of journalists, who now assumed a high degree of theological expertise in evaluating its contents. The authors of the document were accused of "prescribing to God" the way justice and peace should come to South Africa. University of Witwatersrand professor, Ben Engelbrecht, set the tone for the debate in an alarmist fashion by coupling the document with "downfall," "overthrow," and "revolution." (40) He claimed no fundamental difference between praying for the downfall of the government and a commitment to revolutionary action to bring this about. The "Star" newspaper preferred that churches pray "for conversion of those who have not yet seen the light concerning real reform." (41)

The bias and "theology" of the press (both English "liberal" and Afrikaans) was naturally, not ironically, consistent with government views on the Church's role in South Africa. The Natal Witness expressed the matter succinctly: "The SACC, and the churches in general, would be better advised to try to change the hearts and minds of their followers -

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40 Alan Brews, When Journalists Do Theology, When Prayer Makes News, p. 61  
41 Star, editorial, 4 June 1985

and to let the political process take care of itself." (42)

In terms of a black press response, a totally different perception of the document surfaced. It appeared in the columns of the Sowetan, which saw the rationale as an alternative to violence, finding its appeal to God to bring down the evil of apartheid sensible. (43)

In their campaign to discredit the Theological Rationale and Dr. Boesak, the press exploited a joint press statement from Methodist Church President Peter Storey and Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Philip Russel. Their concern was to pray "for an end to oppression and violence in our land and for the establishment of justice and true peace." (44) No mention was made of "government." Their other concern was to distance themselves and their churches from the Theological Rationale. The matter was further compounded by Archbishop Russel drawing a distinction in his pastoral letter between ceasing to pray for the government over against praying for its removal, as if the one was less subversive than the other. (45) Prayer for government by implication excluded prayer for the removal of unjust government.

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42 Natal Witness, 4 June 1985

43 Sowetan, 4 June 1985

44 See joint press statement, When Prayer Makes News, p. 164

45 Ibid. See text of the letter, p. 173

More "impulsive and less theological" in his response was Rev. Peter Storey who argued that a person can pray for people to change, but not for the removal of people. (46) Yet, his own church had on occasion called for the removal from office (resignation) of government ministers. Despite and in spite of his misgivings about the Theological Rationale, the Methodist Cape of Good Hope synod voted to adopt it, and in doing so, categorically rejected any interpretation implying support for the violent removal of government. The outgoing President Storey was further isolated in his views when the Methodist Conference accepted and referred the document to its congregations as a basis for prayer. (47)

SACC general secretary Beyers Naudé was overseas at the time, but telephoned to offer "full support" for the Theological Rationale. The SACC expanded presidium noted its 1984 resolution in favour of the principle that a day of prayer be called, but that the Theological Rationale was not adopted by its executive committee as a statement of the SACC. (48) The Dutch Reformed Mission Church

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46 C. Villa-Vicencio, Some Refuse to Pray, When Prayer Makes News, p.51  
47 When Prayer Makes News, p. 159  
48 EPS 85.06.12

moderation rejected the statement as unbiblical and spoke of a lack of consultation. The DRC itself subsequently "unanimously identified" itself with this position. The Catholic, Presbyterian and Congregational churches were all cautious in endorsing the call for a day of prayer, for the abolition of apartheid and its evils, while not offering any solid support for the Theological Rationale. (49)

From its early beginnings, the Church has exhorted its members to pray for those in authority. To pray for the government expresses both the acknowledgement of their role and the conviction that they exercise their authority under God. The need for such prayer, however, does not preclude Christians from opposing those in authority if they choose to rule contrary to the interests of all the people. The Theological Rationale was written in the light of this understanding and in the context of extreme political crisis. But it did not seek to transcend the boundaries of religious exclusivism, as it was addressed to Christians only. People of other religions, equally opposed to apartheid, and who may have also wished to participate in compiling the rationale

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49 When Prayer Makes News, p.159. For the detailed resolutions, see pp. 159 -177.

or joining the day of prayer, were unfortunately forgotten. (50)

#### 4. The Kairos Document

In the middle of the political upheaval in South Africa following the implementation of the new constitution, black theologians were gravely concerned and decided to meet in July 1985, in Soweto, to reflect on the new "situation of death." They found themselves caught in a struggle to discover the theological significance of the political crisis; they wanted to use their theological insights to "read the signs of the times" and offer a decisive challenge to the Church. This came in the form of the Kairos Document

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50 Being involved in a political struggle leads one to discover new meanings of prayer. Allan Boesak cited this one example: "Once when I was arrested for going to a funeral in a black township, I was arrested along with some other clergy, Christians and Muslims. Among the Muslims were also two clergy persons. When we were in jail, the police refused to let us have food. One of the men had a sandwich with him, a cheese sandwich, and he said, "Can you share this?" There was another woman who had a chocolate bar with her. And in the end we had the sandwich, the chocolate and I think some chips and the 'Iman' turned to me and said, "Will you share this among us?" And we prayed and I broke the bread and gave it to each of them. And it was one of the most profound experiences of my whole life." (Interview, Allan Boesak and Wolfram Wieße, Johannesburg, 15 February 1986)

which they wrote as "a Christian, biblical and theological comment." Though initiated in Soweto, the document was finally produced in dialogue with Christians countrywide, some white. (51)

The document was born in the experience of a struggle of suffering, of humiliation, of death. It was an attempt to put into words, "what we have already discovered in the struggle with our people." (52) Thus, it was viewed as "a documentation of the experience of ordinary Christians who are involved in the struggle" for freedom. (53) The Kairos theologians intended the document to "stimulate discussion, debate, reflection and prayer, but above all, that it will lead to action." (54) They were convinced that all Christians bear responsibility and are challenged by God to take appropriate action in times of political crisis. Though the document suggested various modes of involvement, "it does not prescribe the particular actions anyone should take." (55) This was to be decided in the context of a group and its situation.

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- 51 The preface describes how the document came to be finally written. See Kairos Document, p.1  
52 Interview, Allan Boesak and Wolfram Weiße.  
53 Ibid. Boesak recalled one such experience: "I spoke to a father whose child had been killed in 1980 by the police. His other child had been killed in 1985 by the police. What does theology or the church say to such a father?"  
54 Kairos Document, p.25  
55 Ibid.



The Greek word Kairos was used as a biblical symbol to try and adequately describe the political crisis. It designated a critical time requiring decisive response and action by the Church in an apartheid society. In the words of one Kairos theologian, "it is a moment in which the critical challenge of faith in Jesus Christ has dawned" as a challenge "to express concretely our obedience to the imperatives of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." (56) Eternity impinges as promise and judgement, and the "kairos" had to be grasped in faith or rejected through lack of discernment. The important point here, as Bonino has observed, is "the relation between the awareness of the time of 'crisis' which demands commitment and the theological interpretation (including the socio-analytical and/or ideological mediation) which shapes the nature of that commitment." (57)

The Kairos Document is in substance and content a critical appraisal of three theological positions peculiar to the South African situation. The critique of "state theology" is a protest against the sacrament of the "status quo, with

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- 56 Bonganjalo Goba, The use of Scripture in the Kairos Document, JTSA, No. 56, September 1986, p.61. Goba cites Tillich here: "Kairos points to unique moments in the temporal process, moments in which something unique can happen or be accomplished." (P. Tillich, A handbook of Christian Theology, New York, 1958, p.194)
- 57 Jose Miguez Bonino, Challenge to the Church: A Comment on the Kairos Document, Challenge to the Church, WCC, PCR Information, 1985 p.55

its concomitant racism, capitalism and totalitarianism". It shows powerfully how the Bible, the cry for law and order, the name of God, fear of communism, can all be used to condone injustice, suppress the poor or justify false consciousness. (58) In promoting this "theology," the state (and the Afrikaans churches) legitimizes what is manifestly evil; it becomes ideological in the pejorative sense of justifying the vested interests of the white minority. In classical language, the state has become the hostis boni communis - an enemy of the common good.

The designation "state theology," as a theology used to justify the policy of apartheid, is problematic for some as it obscures the sharp lines between ideology and theology. (59) One wonders if the label "theology of the status quo" would be more appropriate. (60) If the document shows signs of "short cuts" from exegesis to political analysis, it is in its use of apocalyptic language.

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- 58 James B. Torrance, Listening to its Challenge, JTSA, No. 55, June 1986, p. 43.
  - 59 John S. Pobee, A Time to Speak and Act in God's Light, Challenge to the Church, WCC, PCR Information, 1985, p. 39.
  - 60 Lothar Bauersch, Der Kairos für die Evangelikalen, Junge Kirche, 48 Jahrgang, 2/87, p. 95



The Kairos analysis of "state theology" shows conclusively that the state thinks apocalyptically. But the use of similar categories in offering a theological alternative to undergird a choice of political position is of little import. (61) Indeed, apocalyptic language can convey a feeling of determinism and compulsion which may rob one of sober reasoning in political matters. (62) The question is therefore whether such language should be part of the Christian response to the question of truth in South Africa. (63)

"Church theology" represents the reflection and attitudes of the English churches, especially their white leadership. The document challenges the distorted way in which they use certain biblical paradigms to respond to political conflict. The gospel concern according to the document is not to reconcile good and evil, justice and injustice, God and the devil. Reconciliation may not be used as an

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- 61 Bert Hoedemaker, The Kairos Document: A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement, Challenge to the Church, p.54.
  - 62 Letter from German Christians to authors of the Kairos Document, 4 April 1986. (unpublished)
  - 63 Bonino on the other hand, is content to speak of a spiritual struggle against the "anti-Christ" and a political struggle against a tyrant, though he would have preferred more unity and distinction on these motifs in the document. (p.57) Boesak has developed some apocalyptic themes in his Comfort and Hope, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1986.

absolute principle in all instances of conflict, especially structural, neither can it be realized without injustice being removed. The ideological use of the issue of violence and its contradictions is carefully noted, without any overt attempt to "justify " violence. The oppressed can no longer appeal to the conscience of their oppressors for their liberation, nor should they see hope in reforming apartheid, as "church theology" does. (64)

The Kairos Document has been criticized for its low doctrine of forgiveness. There may be a bad specimen and a good specimen of the Church, but no group should, says one critic, appropriate the word Church to itself alone. (65)  
The Church offers room for people to repent and for

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64 Bishop Tutu refused to sign the Kairos Document for three reasons:

- (1) He felt that the document tended to caricature the work of precisely those church leaders like himself who had been in the vanguard of the church's fight against apartheid.
- (2) He had the impression that the document criticized leaders like himself for speaking to the head of state at all. He said that like Moses, he must speak to Pharoah.
- (3) He thought the document's theology of reconciliation was "less than biblical" because it seemed to give up on Pharoah altogether. Tutu said the church should witness to reconciliation at all costs.

(See H Paul Santmire's, South African Testament, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1987, p.29)

65 Pobe, p. 40

conflicts to be solved constructively; sin must be called by its name without repudiating the sinner. (66) Forgiveness cannot be made conditional upon repentance for it would imply that we are not expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner. (67) Repentance is the necessary response to forgiveness, not its condition. Whites should therefore receive black forgiveness, thereafter "repent and hand back the land ..... Reparation is not a condition of grace, but it may be a necessary response to grace." (68)

To overcome the shortcomings of both "state" and "church theology," the Kairos theologians provide an alternative theology which they call "prophetic." They discover the dimensions of "prophetic theology" through a reading of the reality of South Africa which demands not moralizing or neutrality but active engagement against the forces of oppression. Their "hermeneutic of suspicion" leads them to conclude that the basic problem in the churches is a conflict of two irreconcilable interests, one just and the other unjust. (69) The document goes further in re-reading the Biblical text from the perspective of oppression and a

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66 Letter from German Christians.  
67 Torrance, p. 43  
68 Ibid, p. 44  
69 Kairos Document, p. 15

God who is liberator. The government has become a tyrant, forfeiting its moral right to govern and the people thus acquire the right to resist it. (70)

"Prophetic theology" is offered as a theology of hope and challenge. The document itself, however, does not address itself to how tyranny and oppression are to be overthrown. In the words of one critic, "it is not enough for prophetic faith to correctly understand the social reality or to make powerful denunciation of tyranny and oppression. It must become an agent of powerful and significant actions to overthrow tyranny." (71) The question therefore arises whether institutions other than churches are better equipped to practice solidarity with the oppressed. If the Kairos "prophets" are not called to be voices of "caution and moderation," the guilt of ambiguous actions and "third way" solutions is overcome. Should one then still hesitate to spell out and engage in decisive action aimed at bringing the downfall of the apartheid regime?

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70 Ibid, p. 17

71 See comments of former PCR director, Anwar Barkat, in the introduction of Challenge to the Church, p. 7

The Kairos Document was written by South African Christians in a very specific historical and political context. It is not the product of a denominational synod or an officially representative ecumenical conference. It arose out of the struggle to discover a Christian response to the intensification of civil war in South Africa. Since its publication, it attracted extensive support from marginalized Christians, black township people, political and youth groups countrywide. In the international community, the document was translated into several languages, initiating a wide-spread theological debate. (72) Most Christians overseas responded by expressing solidarity with black South Africa and also, seeking to discern signs of their own "kairos." Its implication for ecumenical faith was thus profound and challenging.

There are two further penetrating critiques of the Kairos Document that warrant serious and immediate attention. The first is a Muslim perspective: "The Kairos theologians have not understood the universal nature of what they have

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72 Charles Villa-Vicencio, A Reluctant Response: Has the Challenge Been Heard? *JTSA*, No. 55, June 1986, p.56



produced and so they offer it only to Christians. Their inability to do so does not stem from 'Christian humility' or a fear that adherents of other faiths may reject it. It comes from a deep rooted Christian (European) arrogance that leads to ignorance of other faiths and indifference to the possible contribution of their adherents to the creation of a just society." (73) Muslims and Christians can and should therefore be partners (together with other minorities) in striving for liberating justice in South Africa.

The other critique comes from a South African "womanist" in exile. Given the fact that some of the signatories to the document are prominent exponents of liberation theology in South Africa, she finds it fitting to enquire if:

1. they have abandoned the basic tenets of the theology of liberation and the meaning of black liberation in the context of such theological discourse,
2. a qualitatively new reality militates against the continued adherence to black liberation theology,
3. academic theological exchange with white well-wishers has now replaced the ever urgent task to translate

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73 F. Esack, A Muslim Perspective on the Kairos Document, Newsletter, World Conference on Religion and Peace, South African Chapter, 3:1, 1986, p.2. Cited in Gerrie Lubbe, Christians - Muslims in South Africa, JTSA, No.56, September 1986, p.32.

black liberation theology into practice thereby advancing the liberation of the whole South African populace to decisive heights." (74)

This last point, in particular, raises a more urgent question: Do attempts to reach theological consensus in cross-racial circles not run the risk of overlooking vested ideological differences?

The Roman Catholic Church bishops gave cautious approval to the document soon after its publication. They welcomed its vision of Christian hope and its essential message of "urging us to address ourselves more forcefully and clearly to the black population of South Africa." They called upon the church to "indicate that we are in solidarity with the oppressed while bringing to all the people of our country a vision of how justice can be achieved in a spirit of love, justice and reconciliation." (75) Judging from the initial responses of other church spokespersons, one is led to ask if churches should not be silent and listen to the "Kairos" as historical judgement. Hurried attempts to identify the weaknesses of the document may well result in its

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74 Oshadi Phakathi-Mangena, The Kairos Document: A Response, Unpublished paper delivered at Kairos seminar in Hamburg, June 1986

75 SAIRR, Survey, 1985, p.77

"essential message" being obscured. (76)

The DRC plenary executive charged that the Kairos Document originated from a "one-sided, contemporary, situational world view" that shifted the "critical moment of liberation in Jesus Christ" to a political liberation, where Jesus became "a false Christ with an anti-church purpose." The DRC coupled the document with an "unyielding attitude of blatant lovelessness" where the "commandment of love is trampled upon." It further displayed "an unwillingness to recognise and admit that many good things have happened in SA and are still happening." The document's ultimate goal, the plenary executive said, was to secure collaboration among people "in the attempt to overthrow the current political dispensation." For these reasons, the executive declared itself unwilling to enter into discussions with the compilers of the Kairos Document. (77)

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- 76 Villa-Vicencio, p.57. Anglican Bishop Godfrey Ashby welcomed the document's challenge but concluded, "I see Jesus neither in State theology nor in Church theology (as it is portrayed in Kairos) nor in Kairos theology. No wonder we Christians are part of the problem. We have not yet found Jesus' theology in the South African context." (Seek, November 1985) One is tempted to ask which Jesus this is: the revolutionary, the pacifist, or the political agitator?
- 77 DRC News, Special Edition, Vol. 11, July 1986, pp.1-4



### 3. Theology of Reconciliation

In September 1985, an evangelical group of 400 Christians from 47 denominations met in Pietermaritzburg to pray and discuss the political crisis in South Africa. Bishop Desmond Tutu and UNISA professor David Bosch were, among others, the main speakers at this conference. Africa Enterprise, and more particularly its leader, Michael Cassidy, was instrumental in promoting this gathering for people he believed called to a "ministry of reconciliation." Too many were becoming socio-politically preoccupied and evangelism was turning out to be a casualty. Cassidy therefore believed that the Church's primary responsibility was an evangelistic one, that of reconciliation and helping Christians to be "agents of peace." (78) In search of this evangelical reconciliation, the Pietermaritzburg gathering met and called itself the National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR). It published a "Statement of Affirmation" in the national newspapers announcing the initiative and revealing a strong commitment for healing in a broken and divided South Africa. (79)

This "gathering of Church unity" in a "context of polarization" was interpreted as "a sign of hope for our

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78 Interview, Eternity, vol. 38:4, April 1987, p. 13  
79 Sunday Times and Rapport, 15 September 1985.

nation." The delegates gathered "in humility and deep repentance" in order "to listen to God and to discover one another in new ways." The NIR statement expressly rejected a "statement of words" and offered instead "a commitment to action." Regional gatherings of Christian leadership were encouraged "to initiate concrete changes in South African society." The statement further called for a day of repentance, mourning and prayer, instead of attending usual employment. Though supported by Bishop Tutu, the call was rejected by most workers. It went, by and large, unheeded except in Uitenhage where there was a positive response. (80) The NIR also resolved that a delegation visit President Botha to present a series of political demands. (81)

Now for evangelicals to spell out concrete political requirements for change is almost without precedent in apartheid's history. The primary motivation for this new development must surely be, as Brian Brown pointed out, "that the theological lesson of Kairos has filtered through;

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80 SAIRR, Survey, 1985, p.576. The call was also rejected by the DRC general executive who thought that it had "the appearance of a 'strike' in a religious cloak." The DRC asked, "If a day has to be set apart, why can it not take place on Sunday, the God-given day of rest?" (DRC News, vol.10, No3, Jul-Dec 1985, p.20)

81 See Statement of Affirmation.

there can be no true reconciliation and no genuine peace without justice." (82) White evangelicals allowed themselves to be exposed to the hurt of their black colleagues in South Africa's escalating violence, and had in the process come to reappraise their stance. In the "situation of death," they were forced to "politicize the faith," albeit in a way that raises some serious inconsistencies.

The NIR statement reflects an earnest desire for justice in South Africa and its challenge is both admirable and encouraging. Still, it seems to underestimate just how massively difficult it is to achieve genuine reconciliation at a national level. The burden of the bitter apartheid legacy cannot be wished or prayed away. The strong build-up of negative factors, in the form of armed privilege on one side and enforced deprivation on the other militates against immediate peace and calm co-existence. (83) The NIR may thus be deluded in their premature exultation concerning the experience of reconciliation between vastly alienated

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82 Brian Brown, South Africa - Theology and Political Analysis, The Month, 20:1, January 1987, p.9.

83 Martin Prozesky, Can Christian Overcome Apartheid, JTSA, no.54, March 1986, p. 53. Prozesky says "a white DRC minister may well embrace a politically radical bishop. But will the embrace materialize in the society outside such meetings? The radical challenge is to make reconciliation work in the big, bad and unrepentant world outside, and that is another story altogether." (p.54)

people. The NIR penchant to see its statement as "commitment to action" over against mere words still leaves evangelicals ideologically suspended in the historical process. Pious talk that one needs "a courageous and contagious assertion of faith that under God everything is not lost" to defend the NIR position is neither comforting nor challenging. (84)

Prozesky notes a second problem with the statement. There is an unintended contradiction between the NIR's political vision and its doctrinal position. The statement proclaims Jesus Christ "alone" as one offering "that newness of life" to be desired. In effect, other religions do not provide salvation and their beliefs are morally inferior. The NIR "wants to end political apartheid while in effect retaining spiritual elitism or baaskap in the public arena. This is not the path to genuine national reconciliation in a culturally plural society." (85) Prozesky's solution is to "keep sectional dogmas out of the public, political arena" as the greater need in the country is "dedication to a common humanity, not religious beliefs promoting sectional interests." (86)

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84 See Klaus Nürnberger, Can Christians Overcome Apartheid Except as Christians, JTSA, No.54, March 1986 p.57.

85 Prozesky, p.55

86 Ibid.

In comparing the Kairos Document with the NIR statement, De Gruchy comments that "whereas the Kairos Document makes social analysis a priority and criticizes the churches for failing to engage adequately in it, the NIR statement avoids any attempt to do so." (87) Racism is nevertheless implicit in it as the main social problem. Kairos theology seeks to confront the churches and the state, while the NIR statement offers no critique of either state ideology or the churches. (88) The Kairos theologians see the government as the "enemy of common good" while the NIR statement assumes that the government is capable of initiating political change to avoid catastrophe. Finally, De Gruchy notes that whereas the NIR statement sets out a special contribution (third force) for Christians and churches in the interests of reconciliation, the Kairos Document rejects this approach in favour of a common struggle for liberation. (89)

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- 87 John W. de Gruchy, The Church and the Struggle for South Africa, Hammering Swords into Plowshares, Ed. Buti Tlhagale and Itumeleng Mosala, Grand Rapids, 1986, p. 199
- 88 Ibid, p. 200
- 89 Ibid, p. 201 In spite of these radical differences and the mutually exclusive nature of the two theological discourses, De Gruchy tells us that, "If I (he) has been present at the NIR conference, I would undoubtedly have signed its statement even though critical of some aspects of it, just as I signed the



Evangelicals may discover that the path to attain a black unity of response is fraught with violence. Whites and Blacks may theologically agree that "apartheid is a heresy" and must be dismantled. The white dilemma is to face the

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Kairos Document despite some reservations." (p.203) Now how does one arrive at such a bi-partisan position? It seems possible if one chooses to view negotiation with a tyrant as not antithetical to confrontation, "liberation" and "reconciliation" in the South African context as "two sides of the same coin," and violence as a "problem" to be overcome by a normative "non-violence." (pp.204-205) Cedric Mayson, a white Methodist minister who fled South Africa pending charges of high treason writes in a different voice: "There is only one struggle in South Africa and this is the struggle of the people for liberation and it is our task to join in that struggle. The struggle is not to find ways in which to talk to the South African government: they will always turn such strategies to their advantage. The struggle is to find ways in which we may compel the South African government to talk with us. There is no other struggle except the struggle to be rid of oppression and bring all the representatives of South Africa to the round table to decide our future together. Liberation is a pre-requisite of reconciliation not the result of it." (A Certain Sound, The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa, Orbis, New York, 1985, p.101) To take Mayson seriously here would further demand that we reject attempts to work for "forceful yet non-violent change," of the type proposed by the Roman Catholic bishops in the document "The Things That Make For Peace." Pretoria, 1985. The bishops are not only guilty of idealizing a political strategy, but also, of pre-determining the nature of the Christian contribution to the revolutionary process.

consequences of their alignment with black expectations. The new order will offer little hope to Blacks if it does not strike at the root of the capitalist system, which is maintained in South Africa by racist legislation. Nothing less than the universal "one person, one vote" will resolve the question of political power for the masses. "Reconciliatory politics" as advocated by Chief Gadsha Buthelezi, for example, may have regional appeal but lack national recognition and acceptance. The primary violence of apartheid promotes the dismal belief that South Africa will not advance to a true democracy, despite and in spite of the churches, except through an escalation of violent conflict.

## CHAPTER 7

### CHURCH AS EMPIRICAL REALITY

#### 1. Church as People of God

The discussion in the preceding chapters pointed out the inherent dichotomy apparent in most ecclesiastical assemblies - the voting power of a large caucus of white male clergy over against the token representation of a few black clergy, and laity. The powerful group has dominated most of the ecumenical meetings and its administrative structures. Nearly all the resolutions and statements, and all the theological documents written before the advent of Black Consciousness in South Africa are products of the theology of the dominant group. The conflicts and prejudices, the confrontations and contradictions, the injustices and internal struggles reflect in most succinct terms the ideological struggle in the country. The struggle of the ecumenical "Church" in South Africa must therefore be understood as a power struggle between two opposing groups having divergent class interests: a White Church and a Black Church.



The present political crisis is evidence to the Kairos theologians that the above claim is valid, although, in their words, "many of us have known it all along." (1) Both oppressor and oppressed share membership in the same body of Christ (Church). Both may sit in the same church building while outside, "Christian" policemen beat up and kill Christian children or torture Christian prisoners to death, while yet other Christians stand by the sidelines and vapidly plead for peace amidst strife. (2) It is a situation that calls forth "the moment of truth" for Christians. It seems that the task now is to uncover the "hidden truth" about the identity of the actual Church. In this attempt the language of classical theology must be abandoned in favour of a contextual and liberating anecdote of Church as people, rather than Church as institution or leadership.

In the course of life and in the midst of the human race there exists people who know the mystery of love, who are willing to meet those who are working for peace, justice and the integrity of creation, and who are critically struggling with questions raised by Christian love. They constitute that part of the world called Church, which in the strength of the Spirit, have accepted the kingdom made explicit

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1 Kairos Document, p.1  
2 Ibid, p.2

in the person of Jesus Christ. In Boff's words, this Church "preserves the constant memory and consciousness of the Kingdom, celebrating its presence in the world, shaping the way it is proclaimed, and at the service of the world". (3) The Church is therefore the people of God, a community of faith, hope and love inspired by Jesus' message of complete fraternity. By its active participation in the historical process, the Church both signifies the anticipation of and the preparation for the kingdom of God. (4)

The majority of the members of this Church in South Africa are black and poor. They have been born black and racial laws have been enacted to maintain them in subjugation. They are often physically weak due to the harsh exploitation of their labour. Their poverty is an indictment of the injustice of a political system that is designed to expropriate almost everything from them. Blacks are very often involved in some form of dispute regarding their ancestral lands from which many have been uprooted. Hundreds and thousands of black Christians have suffered

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3 Leonardo Boff, Church: Charism and Power, New York, 1985, p.2

4 Ibid, p.117

persecution, torture and imprisonment for being opponents of injustice. Most black Christians do not share sacred power. Most belong to African independent churches where members are reported to be "the poorest of the poor, the people with the lowest jobs or with no jobs at all." (5) In the words of one leader, "We are what they call the 'working class'." (6) The Church as the people of God in South Africa is thus mostly black, poor, working class, and lay.

The above remarks do not, however, constitute the only definition of Church in current usage. "Church" is used in our day to refer to a particular denomination, with its institutional structure and bureaucratic organisation. It is also used in a more limited sense to designate the ecclesiastical leadership of a given denomination or denominations collectively. This is undoubtedly an improper rendition of "Church." Nevertheless, it is one that is in vogue especially when the relationship of Church and politics is considered. It is often the case that political action on the part of certain Church leaders is misconstrued as action of the denomination the leader may

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5 Speaking For Ourselves. Members of African Independent Churches Report on their Pilot Study of the History and Theology of their Churches, Institute for Contextual Theology, Johannesburg, 1985, p.30  
6 Ibid.

represent. Political statements and resolutions accepted by clergy at ecclesiastical meetings are unwittingly interpreted as reflecting the views of the real Church.

Now the Church does exist in local manifestation, i.e., as a congregation or community fellowship. Congregations with a similar confessional basis usually form themselves in union as a denomination. The leadership of a certain denomination serves on a denominational body that defines its policy (Baptist Union or Methodist Conference or Presbyterian General Assembly). Leaders of these denominations may also serve on a national body such as a council of denominations (South African Council of Churches). The function of these bodies is not to pass legislative decisions that would result in definite action. They do not have parliamentary powers neither do they have coercive powers at their disposal if action does not follow their recommendations. The proper function of a body of ecclesiastical leadership is as Hinchliff has noted, to "administer the denomination, or to speak to or on behalf of the organisation as a whole." (7) The business of ecclesiastical assemblies is to speak. The pressure to stop talking and do something, as applied to bodies of this sort, is in fact totally misconceived.

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7 Hinchliff, p. 125

The most that clergy can do (whether individually or collectively in leadership capacity) in relation to their congregations is to exhort their members about what they believe to be the morally responsible action at a given time. Their statements ought not to be criticized for being words and not actions.(8) For it is not the function of a synod, for example, to do politics. Its proper function is to say what it believes to be the moral truth about a certain political problem.(9) Exhortations of a political nature, however, do not have to be vague generalisations about human suffering and structural disorders. They should, instead, be products of serious reflection to read the "signs of the times" or discern the will of God in the historical process. Their function is to guide the community of faith to concerted praxis. The potential of a resolution leading to congregational action will vary and depend on a number of factors, both related and unrelated.

Hinchliff further observes that it is very difficult to envisage any way in which the actual Church could take

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- 8 There may be, under certain circumstances, some form of action, but this will usually affect the internal machinery of the Church eg. in financial or administrative matters. Church legislation may result in the closure of a congregational building or the dismissal of clergy. It is action applicable to its own internal network.
- 9 Hinchliff, p.126

political action: "When one can envisage some form of action- as opposed to speaking- which it might do, one discovers that it is only part of the actual Church, or certain members of it, or something which only represents or approximates to it, that one is dealing with." (10) Unable to take political action, the actual Church is, however, not excused from failure to propose practical alternatives to its critique of social problems. (11) Inability to act is not to be equated with inability to speak. In its involvement in history and in solidarity with the oppressed, the Church leaders will discover the authentic praxis among the people and will then speak on its behalf and for its realization.

In view of the repressive realities in South Africa, it may become necessary for congregations (church) to engage in special social activities. In some instances, this may be the only channel for popular expression and mobilization, e.g. community projects, support for prisoners, preventing uprooting and resettlement, etc. If the community organisations already exist, the local church will not try

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10 Ibid, p. 128

11 Hinchliff comes to the curious conclusion that the Church ought to resist pressure to offer positive solutions to practical problems in the political sphere. His argument here resembles more a plea for neutrality which is simply impossible. (p. 127)



to compete. It will identify with those movements engaged in the project of liberation, sharing membership and resources, support and criticism. The Church's primary concern in South Africa is not the organisation of social movements of political protest but the strengthening of these movements. This is of capital importance in understanding the proper role of the Church in society.

The following excerpt from the document "Speaking For Ourselves" is worth noting in this context:

"Our people, therefore, know what it means to be oppressed, exploited and crushed. Those who come from the 'White Churches' will tell you how even in the church they felt humiliated and discriminated against and dominated just as they are at work and in the rest of society. But we also know that God does not approve of this evil and that racial discrimination and oppression is rejected by the Bible. And so what do our people do about it? They join political organisations or trade unions and take part in the struggle for our liberation. But it is a matter of individual choice. Members of the same Church will join different political organisations or trade unions and some will choose not to join anything. Politics is not a Church matter. People meet together in our Churches to pray and to worship and to experience the healing of the Spirit. They go to political organisations in order to take action against the government. Our Churches are not powerful institutions that can make statements to influence the government or the struggle. The 'Churches of the People' and the political organisations

or trade unions of the people have different roles to play. It is often the same people who belong to both." (12)

In speaking for themselves, these leaders of the independent churches tell us that their people know what it is to suffer. But the people also know that God does not will their oppression. He desires their liberation and for this reason they organise themselves in political movements for action. Politics is not something they do as Church. The Church is the family, its building is the place for them to feel at home, to receive spiritual sustenance in fellowship. There are no councils or assemblies to pass resolutions urging the people to act for political justice. There are no calls for an "alternative society," "confessing community," "prophetic witness," "mobilisation for peace," or "church of action." There is little talk about a new praxis, little reflection on violence, little speculation on the "ideal" Church. There is, instead, physical suffering, political oppression and economic exploitation in the "crushed" lives of the people. Politics offers them the platform

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12 Speaking for Ourselves, pp.30-31



to engage in the struggle for liberation. The limited powers of their church structures is acknowledged, and so no attempt is made to "evangelise" the political struggle.

The Black Church, understood as the composite of black Christians in South Africa, is an expression of the true creation of an ecclesial reality, of communal witness, of organisation and missionary responsibility. It is a Church of the laity where sacred power is distributed, especially in the independent churches. Church tension is experienced not as between the actual Church and the ideal Church, but between the Church as the institution of the ruling classes and the Church as the people of God. The Black Church is a Church of the lower class in the struggle for ecclesial justice; its leaders are called to styles of ministry that are simple, practical and expressive of the concerns of the black people. The popular exegesis of the people is one that captures the living, spiritual meaning of the biblical text. This is the Church of the people, of the black people, of the poor. It has always existed but its history is only now being told.

## 2. Church as Institution

The SPROCAS Church Commission report, published in 1972, listed three fundamental problems that served to obstruct the mission and life of denominations in South Africa. (13)

These were:

- (1) ecclesiastical self-concern evidenced in the disproportionate money, effort and time invested in preserving the institutional forms of the Church.
- (2) pragmatic pietism - by which was meant an individualistic, inward attitude to religion at the expense of Christian involvement in society.
- (3) Clericalism - a tendency to see Church as constituted by professional ministers only.

These problems breed conflicts that affect the fellowship and structures of the denominations themselves, with little bearing on the real conflict between Church and

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13    Apartheid and the Church, pp.61-68

state in the country. It is thus the ecclesiastical institutions themselves that are signs of deep contradiction as they remain captive to the dominant structure of the political economy. (14)

Ecclesiastical self-concern is unwittingly expressed in the guise of "Church Unity," which usually concerns questions of uniformity of doctrine, common liturgy and morality. Morality is defined personally as the way in which Christians conform to denominational discipline. Those who criticize or propose structural changes in power relations are branded as "communists." Hours and hours of pastoral time is taken up in committee meetings, doctrinal commissions, social gatherings, denominational celebrations, etc. Millions of rand are invested in maintaining church buildings and grounds, and in erecting new ornamental ones. The whole ecclesiastical realm is structured to bureaucratic norms thus limiting the movement of the Spirit for fraternity, participation and communion of the masses. Harmony is usually the ideal, hence the denial of the legitimacy of internal struggle for radical change.

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14 Cochrane, p.223

Pragmatic pietism is blatantly evident in that most Whites believe that Christianity is primarily a matter of conversion and sanctification of the individual. The need for active participation in the struggles of society is negated in favour of denominational events. There is a strong tradition, on DRC ministers especially, to "stop preaching politics" and to preach only "the Word of God." The argument is that if all of society converted to Christ then the problems of apartheid would disappear. (15) Indeed, some have resorted to extreme forms of pietism in escaping the urgency of social responsibility. The renewed interest in the "charismata" in white congregations is but one manifestation of this tendency. Pietistic theology has undoubtedly provided many Whites (and some Blacks) with an ideological rationale for their pacifist stance in politics. It seems clear, however, that this approach chooses to underestimate the pervasive power of social conditioning and must therefore be rejected as offering realistic political hope.

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15 This is in substance the "ideology" of Africa Enterprise, the evangelistic organisation based in Pietermaritzburg, Natal. In the words of its leader, Michael Cassidy, "the church's primary responsibility is an ongoing evangelistic one ... A lot of people now are becoming socio-politically preoccupied that evangelism is becoming a casualty." (Interview, Eternity, April 1987, vol.38, no. 4, p.13)

The Church (understood as the institution comprising clergy and leaders) presides over worship services, "witnessing to Christ," showing concern for individual and family morality, explaining apartheid ideology in racial terms and condemning it in outworn clichés and stale rhetoric. Its repeated attempts to expose the irrationalities of racial prejudice is now psychologically futile, since it is not being internally affected by moral logic or rational thought. Bringing people together of different races in church "tea party" situations to overcome ignorance and superiority complexes is further ineffectual. It is not a vital activity that will stimulate fundamental change in the repressive political structures. (16)

Ecclesiastical integration of races, exhortations, sincere protest and arguments of rationality may convert a few, but they cannot influence the attitudes and behavioural patterns of most Whites. It is therefore purposeless to assume that Whites generally will ever be moved by appeals, protests or ecclesial pressure to the extent where they will change their opinions and threaten their capitalist

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16 Atherstone, p.408f. Atherstone is often very critical of the English churches but still believes them capable of engineering social change on a national scale.

interests. This fact raises the crucial issue to understanding the basic conflict in South Africa.

In the course of this study, I have examined numerous statements and resolutions by Christian leaders protesting the evils of apartheid legislation. They have repeatedly called on white Christians to recognize the fundamental unity of humankind, the dignity of all, and the need for love and mutual fellowship. Throughout, the leaders have implored their members to take seriously the gospel message of love and reconciliation and to regard Blacks as brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of God. So potent has the ideological captivity been, however, that many have generally welcomed the ecclesial pronouncements on political issues, have displayed a willingness to accept Blacks as equals, but have behaved to the contrary in crucial political events. (17) Indeed, as Atherstone has observed, "increasing calls for better race relations have been paralleled by an increasing indifference to them among church people." (18)

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17 The voting pattern in white elections since 1948 is a case in point. Each time the government has been returned to power by a handsome majority.

18 Atherstone, p.395

It is now appropriate for us to ask what factor or factors explain the failure of white clergy to influence their congregations into a total rejection of the apartheid system. Marx said, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness." (19) White conceptions of meaning, goals, truth, historical and social reality, social roles, etc. are not external entities but, rather, are products of human creativity in the social order. The concepts that Whites have of the political reality in South Africa settle for them the form of experience they will have of apartheid society. This is not to say that their concepts may not change, but when they do, it means that their understanding and practice of Christian responsibility has changed too. Put simply, Whites are products of conditioning processes operative in society, in addition to various other sociological and historical factors. White clergy do not have the sociological arsenal of power to change human behaviour, in spite of their strong convictions about the Christian faith. The most they can do is engage in moral rebuke and "consciousness-raising" in the limitation zones of white ideological interests.

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19 Fredrick Engels, Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Karl Marx Frederick Engels, Collected Works, vol. 16, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980, p. 469



That Whites fear loss of their interests is true. Apartheid, understood as racial prejudice, has preserved the security of the white group and has safeguarded their material privileges. Blacks have been kept "in their place" and so prevented from being in a position to threaten the dominant group. Racial legislation has proved pivotal to Whites in "justifying" their right to treat Blacks as inferior human beings. The obligation to discriminate has provided the prejudiced person, who has claimed to be unprejudiced, with a convenient rationalization for conformity and private discrimination. Racial prejudice has thus extremely important functional and survival value for white society.

Racial legislation ensures their position of domination and also solidifies group consciousness. Hostile impulses are directed at the black group who might otherwise weaken the unity of the white group. If Whites changed their attitudes towards black people they would definitely face the prospect of losing their supremacy. Such a loss would have political consequences - in South Africa it would radically alter the social and economic structure. It simply does not serve the interest of Whites to change their apartheid attitudes and practices. Some racial laws may change to "improve" race relations or to accommodate certain black aspirations, so long as white power and privilege is not threatened.



This must obviously be true, since the greater the privileges of a particular group, the greater will be the incentive for that group to struggle in defence of those privileges. White privilege has depended mainly on retaining political and economic power exclusively in their own hands. Whites own most of the land, including land in all developed areas, cities and large towns, embracing all the economic resources in the country. The economic benefits from the vast reserve of cheap black labour have been enormous. The situation is thus one in which distinctions of power and authority, status and living standards dovetails completely with racial differences. The problem of race or colour has tended to obscure the underlying self-interest of the white privileged class. The realization of this vital fact, however, does not seem to have filtered through to the theology of the English and Afrikaans churches.

The English churches, for their part, have demonstrated a "functional dependency" upon the dominant economic system despite their public image of a people struggling to overcome apartheid. In Cochrane's words, it is a picture of "a Church, as a rule, unable to accept the validity of

the struggle between employer and employee, fearful enough of conflict which might threaten the dominant social order that it preaches personal regeneration and state reform but not independent struggle by workers." (20) The English churches have thus had little awareness about trade unions, strikes and worker's battles in general. They remain content in believing that a general orientation of the economic structure is necessary, without any specific direction here. Not surprisingly, a group like the Communist Party which advocated an unrestricted equal franchise for all people never gained many white supporters.

The voice of one prominent member of the White Church perhaps best explains the theological failure of the English churches:

"Theology remains the most misunderstood, misrepresented and twisted word in our English-speaking ecclesiastical vocabulary. The laissez-faire attitude towards theology is totally impotent against Afrikaner 'civil religion'; it is incapable of responding relevantly to the challenge of Black Theology, which has arisen largely from within the English-speaking Churches, and it is inadequate to the social crises through which our nation is presently going. It is a

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20 Cochrane, p.222

'theology' which allows individualism, apathy, cynicism, secularism and self-centred, as distinct from a truly evangelical pietism to run rife." (21)

It is a moot question, of course, whether a "truly evangelical pietism" would resolve the dilemma of the English churches. On the contrary, it seems more likely that its members will continue to buttress and perpetuate the present socio-economic system. Theology may thus remain the discourse of the powerlessness of ecclesiastical bodies.

Something must further be said about the failure and future of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Nederduits Herformde Kerk. That these churches will continue to reinforce government policy by their "reformist" approach to political turmoil seems inevitable. Having distanced themselves from the world communion of Christians by their refusal to judge apartheid an abhorrent evil and its theological justification a heresy, the ecumenical journey ahead must of necessity be one of isolation. Theology will retain its static and ethnic thrust, serving the interests of Whites in general, and the government in particular. The lines

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21 J.W. de Gruchy, English-Speaking South Africans and Civil Religion, JTSA, June 1977, p.49

separating theology from ideology will continue to converge as these churches "reform" themselves at a pace determined by those in power and political authority. Changes in its structures will reflect a similar tendency. Enslaved by their history and ideological option, it is preposterous to therefore expect the DRC and NHK to seek a confrontation with the state.

### 3. Unity and Mission

In the course of this study, mention has often been made of the impact of the ecumenical movement on the churches' struggle in South Africa. Most of the problems related to the unity of the Church and its mission which are present in the ecumenical movement as a whole, have been experienced in South Africa to some degree. It is important to note that on each occasion, from the Cottesloe Consultation to the Harare Declaration meeting, the WCC has set the ecumenical agenda in the ecclesial battle against apartheid in close collaboration with the historical churches in South Africa. Most of the ecumenical statements expressing concern and pleading social change for the country have concealed the

brutal fact of class exploitation.(22) Ecumenical discourse interpreting apartheid as purely a conflict of races must now broaden its base in the interests of a penetrating class analysis. It is imperative that religious leaders adopt the category of class in their analysis of apartheid. This will ensure that the evils of apartheid society are construed not merely as the outcome of racial politics, but a specific form of those politics - white settler capitalism.

For this reason also, I do not concur with Willem Saayman that the unity and mission of the Church in South Africa can "only be formulated by all God's people in South Africa,

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22 The most recent representative WCC statement affirms that, "institutionalized racism in South Africa continues to be the central problem of justice and peace in the region." (Gathered for Life, Official Report, VI Assembly, WCC, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July - 10 August 1983, Ed. David Hill, Geneva, 1983, p.151). In fact, the Council "assures the white people of South Africa that its opposition is to apartheid as a system and that it loves them as brothers and sisters made in the image of God and prays that they may seek an end to apartheid and work for the establishment of a just and caring society." (p.155) This assurance was given after Bishop Desmond Tutu's request that, "the loving care of the Church embraces whites in his country as well as blacks," was considered. (p.151) Is this another case of an ideological appropriation of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation?

in communion with all his people worldwide." (23) That mission and unity must be undertaken in ecumenical consultation is certainly true. But "all" Christians in South Africa do not share Saayman's grasp of the ecclesiological problem: "What does it mean to be the Church in a society institutionally divided along racial lines?" (24) Precisely because his diagnosis of the problem is questionable, his solution will lack credibility: "The visible unity of white and black believers in the Church is of utmost importance in South Africa." (25) It seems that this has in fact been the traditional struggle of the historical churches, that is, seeking refuge in a platonic and racial unity at the expense of exposing the inherent class differences between black and white. Sharing the benefits of God's grace in united Christian fellowship is not tantamount to sharing the material benefits of God's land in the interests of mass prosperity.

Throughout, I have been calling attention to particular and specific issues that raise questions for the mission of the Church in South Africa. I have actually been discussing the

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23 W.A. Saayman, Unity and Mission, Pretoria, 1984, p.125  
24 Ibid, p.123  
25 Ibid, p.126

whole mission and unity of the Church in the context of these issues. I shall now elucidate and clarify my perspectives here by identifying the features of a stagnant Church in political confusion and sterile institutionalism. (26) This thesis shows that such a Church will duplicate itself and exhibit its image in the following mode:

- (1) It will produce a religious discourse couched qualitatively and quantitatively in terms that are innocuous and alien to the basic conflicts of a class society. The report of the Cottesloe Consultation may be critiqued from this viewpoint.
- (2) It will assign priority to struggles that are distinct from the fundamental social conflict of the division of classes. In this respect, the entire "apartheid is a heresy" debate must be viewed as misdirected.
- (3) Even though it criticizes the government for its injustices, it usually attributes to them the ability and authority to correct the "negative aspects" of its policies. Here we note the numerous appeals made to the government's "conscience" by Church leaders.

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26 In this effort, I have been much helped by the sociological insights of Venezuelan Otto Maduro. See his Religion and Social Conflicts, New York, 1982, pp. 127-8



- (4) It will regard those in power as despositories of a sacred and eternal authority. Here we mention the rationale of some Church leaders in opposing the Theological Rationale.
- (5) It will sanctify the presence, showing tacit or explicit approval of official Church representation in activities and institutions whose purpose is the expansion and commendation of the established order. Here we note the presence of military chaplains in the South African Defence Force.
- (6) It will carefully refuse tacit or explicit approval of official Church representation in activities and institutions whose purpose is the overthrow of the established order. Here we recall the debate over the Hammanskraal resolution and the conspicuous absence of chaplains in the liberation movements.
- (7) It will engage in the non-production of religious discourse which seeks mutual penetration and challenge from ideological alternatives. The churches' indifference to Black Consciousness is a case in point.



- (8) It will produce a religious discourse that views Church as institution and in a unique position to offer a special contribution to the political struggle. The whole thrust and appeal of the Message to the People confirms this suspicion.
- (9) It will proliferate a religious discourse that sees the problem of violence as the response of the dominated, without first understanding it from the point of view of the people, i.e., as a structural problem. The uproar over the WCC grants to the liberation movements may be mentioned here.
- (10) It will produce a theological discourse that appropriates Christian doctrine to conceal blatant class exploitation. The theology of reconciliation is the product of one such discourse.

The unity of the Church as people of God is precious. It is a sacred reality that God cherishes for the people of the kingdom, those who are engaged in the business of establishing justice and peace on earth. The fact of class struggle should serve to challenge the unity of the Church and renew its understanding of unity. It is simply part of our social, economic, cultural, political and religious

reality. To advocate class struggle should imply a rejection of a situation of dominant and dominated, and that to attack it at its roots, the evolution of class consciousness is vital. To participate in the creation of a just society demands active involvement in the attempt to overcome all class differences. Indeed, class struggle is a fact and neutrality on this issue is not possible. But for the Church to accept class struggle in its pronouncements means to decide for Blacks and their interests and against Whites in South Africa. This is the challenge of faith in search of a liberating praxis.

The insertion of feminist concerns into theological reflection warrants immediate attention to foster the full participation of women in the liberation struggle. Ecumenical discourse in South Africa has painfully disregarded the sexual contradictions and has acted as a agent in solidifying the dominant cultural ideology. Part of the challenge facing the churches is to move away from intransigent male manipulation of hierarchical structures. The WCC Sub-unit on "Women in Church and Society" has emphasized four areas of concentration that

can help initiate the necessary shift here:

1. advocate for a more just participation of women within the WCC and the member churches and to draw attention to their concerns;
2. enable women, who often are not adequately prepared emotionally, educationally or politically, to participate fully;
3. examine the theological assumptions which underlie the attitudes of churches and individuals and limit the participation of women,
4. communicate with churches, individuals and other organisations the concerns of women, thus strengthening the advocacy role. (27)

The unity of the Church is not a possibility in an ecclesial web of sexist oppression and injustice. Male dominated structures cannot promote the fundamental equality and responsibility of all humanity. Women must therefore be empowered for the task of purifying ecclesial structures and renewing human community.

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27 Nairobi to Vancouver, 1975 - 1983, Report of the Central Committee to the Sixth Assembly of the WCC, Geneva, 1983, p.204

The central proclamation of Jesus was his message about the kingdom of God. He announced this message as someone who not only tried but managed to sharpen the main conflicts latent in first century Palestine. The gospel of the "kingdom at hand" promised something that would bring blessedness to the poor and woe to the rich, pointing up the contradictory situation of the two groups in Palestine, and also, undermined the very basis of their co-existence. The gospel was thus good news for some and bad news for others. Life in the kingdom meant a negation of the pursuit of selfish, racial and nationalist interests. It required that those who shared Jesus' vision were willing to share "everything in common." The vision of Jesus was thus one of solidarity with the poor, realization of justice and peace, and the liberation of the oppressed in history.

This is the theological vision for the liberation of Blacks in South Africa. It requires that Christians recapture the historical Jesus of Nazareth who favoured the lower classes and felt them to be first recipients of his kingdom. The Church is called to bear witness to this vision by empowering the poor to be agents of their own destiny, to undergird their "secular" struggles in humble service, to participate in fostering class consciousness, to "work with

human hands" in the construction of the kingdom. The people are rooted in a common struggle to overhaul the present capitalist, sexist and racist system in anticipation of a new society with the greatest possible participation. The mission of the Church is to discover itself and discern the will of God and the direction of history in this struggle.

## CHAPTER 8

### FAITH IN SEARCH OF EFFICACY

#### 1. The Necessity for "Ideology"

It is now imperative to consider and clarify the meaning of the term "ideology" and its implications for theology. The earliest approach to ideology was undertaken by the French Ideologues of the latter part of the eighteenth century, namely Etienne Bonnet de Condillac, Pierre J.G. Cabanis, Antoine Loise Claude Destutt de Tracy and Claude Adrien Helvétius. (1)

The earliest use of the term "ideology" was coined by Destutt de Tracy, whose book "Elements d'ideologie" first appeared in 1801. By ideology, Tracy meant the science of determining the origin of ideas and he espoused the view that all thought is a reflection of and is determined by sense experience. (2) Tracy went further by directly viewing ideology as part of zoology - human psychology (the science of ideas) should be analysed in biological terms.

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- 1 Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Ed. Philip P. Wiener, vol. 11, New York, 1973, p.554
  - 2 Dante Germino, Beyond Ideology, Harper & Row, New York, 1967, p.48

The political and moral implications of this sensationalism were developed largely by Hèlvetius.(3)

The watershed in the study of the ideology concept was reached in the work of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, "The German Ideology." (4) It is the only part of Marx's writings where the notion of ideology is discussed at some length. Marx nowhere simply identifies ideology with error or untruth. Ideological consciousness is taken throughout to be identical with "idealism" and Marx's use of ideology is subsequently polemical and mostly pejorative. Marx's charge against the "German ideologists" is that, "It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings." (5)

Because of this failure there arises the "illusions of philosophy, the ideological, speculative expression of reality divorced from its empirical basis." (6)

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3 Dictionary of the History of Ideas, p.554

4 Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, The German Ideology, in Karl Marx Fredrick Engels, Collected Works, vol.5, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1976

5 Ibid, p.30

6 Ibid, p.282



Marx goes further in accusing ideologists of setting men and their relations upside-down as in a camera obscura, "they inevitably put the thing upside-down and regard their ideology both as the creative force and as the aim of all social relations, whereas it is only an expression and symptom of these relations." (7) In general, ideology refers to the process of the production of meanings and ideas within a particular social formation or social class. One's ideology is therefore a function of the class to which one belongs. "The ideas of the ruling class," wrote Marx and Engels, "are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force." (8)

The class struggle is, however, invisible to most members of all classes as a result of effective dissemination, of the "Weltanschauung" of society, of the ideas and beliefs of the group wielding economic power in that society. (9) Thus the quest for reality underlying appearance, as it were, the critique into ideology, is an imperative step in search for truth.

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7 Ibid, p.420  
8 Ibid, p.59  
9 Ibid, p.60



In a situation of actual or potential conflict, capitalism's claim to be simply "the way things are" is questionable. It can be perceived to be merely one way in which a country's economy is organised. Marx would charge, says Lash, that a capitalist economy does not embody the "general interest," but the interest of a specific and dominant group. In this situation, the work of the political economist becomes ideological as his task shifts from being, or apparently being, that of providing theoretical explanation to that of providing theoretical justification for particular social interests, and a particular state of affairs. (10)

Marx therefore attached a derogatory connotation to ideology, viewing all ideological thought as the dishonest use of reasoning, as the conscious or unconscious distortion of the facts in order to justify the position of the ruling class. Ideology in its broadest sense would represent a "false consciousness." (11) If Marx based ideas in social and economic determinisms, he raised an important issue that, at the hands of Karl Mannheim, came to be known as the "sociology of knowledge": the study

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10 Nicholas Lash, A Matter of Hope, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1981, p. 128

11 Dictionary, p. 554

of social bases, conditions, varieties, and distortions of ideas. Mannheim's approach may have been reminiscent of the earlier epistemological effort of de Tracy, but he sought to elevate the enterprise to a truly scientific status devoted to the "unmasking" of ideological biases in thought. (12)

Mannheim used ideology to refer to conservative ideas. Like Marx, he tended to imply that conservative ideas are always distorted. But he differed from Marx and followed Max Weber in the view that although one's ideas may to some extent be related in various possible ways to one's social position, these ideas may or may not be distorted in the sense of being unscientific, and that the same criteria of truth and validity apply regardless of the social origin of ideas. (13) Mannheim also drew an important distinction between ideology and utopia. If ideology (in the sense of being a particular conception historically preceding a total conception) is an idea system congruent with the status quo, utopia by contrast, is an idea system opposed to the status quo and supportive of an alternative

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12 Ibid.

13 International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, Ed. David L. Still, vol vii, Macmillan & Free Press, London, 1968, p.77

order. (14) Ideologies are "situationally transcendent ideas" which do not always succeed, de facto in the realization of their historical project while utopias transcend the social situation, orientating conduct towards elements which the situation, in so far as it is realized at the time, does not contain. (15)

In conjunction with Mannheim, we may say that ideologies are blueprints of the future made by a certain ideologue or group within a community to activate the masses. Each ideology usually comes with a set of strategies and methods by which those who conceived it hope to bridge the gap between the idea and its fulfilment in history. The ideologue often tries to find in contemporary history the cause of present grief and then proceeds to draft a blueprint for a new future devoid of such troubles. (16)

Furthermore, an important feature of an ideology is its "strong collective stamp." In the words of Dutch missiologist Johannes Verkuyt, "Ideologies are children of wholesale revolutions." (17) The rise of ideologies is

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- 14 Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, New York, 1964, pp. 194-196  
15 Ibid.  
16 J.H. Verkuyt, Contemporary Missiology, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1978, p. 374  
17 Ibid, p. 374

often accompanied by the rise of the masses in its quest for the realization of a state of affairs which, its proponents will usually allege, never existed previously. Masses burn with a fervent desire to participate in the future shape of society. Ideology therefore serves as an aid in bringing about a social consensus as a specific group of people will employ it for specific purposes. In this light Verkuyl cautions that "Christians ought to be taking their norms and criteria for what should be, not from the ideologies, but from God's demands and promises." (18) The demands of the gospel as it comes to Christians in Jesus Christ constitute the criteria for evaluating the ideologies. (19)

It should be stated that the conception of ideology now regnant in theology is thoroughly evaluative, that is, pejorative. If theological thought flows like a pure stream, crystal-clear and transparent, ideological thought flows like a dirty river, muddied and polluted by the impurities that have flooded into it. From the one it is healthy to drink; the other is poison to be

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

avoided. (20) Now in the midst of a revolution, it is often the case that emotional appeals to be "one in Christ" abound and the pervasive power of ideological differences overlooked. Most people, including Christians, do not act according to religious norms and values only but also, and

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- 20 Alan Boesak's treatment of ideology can be mentioned here. See his Farewell to Innocence, New York, 1977, pp.99-122. James Leatt, also in the South African context, mentions the disfavour white liberal Christians would show in having their liberal ideology identified as such. (J TSA, March 1978, p.31.) Leatt has recently edited, together with Theo Kneifel and Klaus Nürnburger, a volume entitled "Contending Ideologies in South Africa," (Cape Town, 1986). Though the editors see their work as a product of what they term "confrontational study," they adopt a "soft phenomenological" approach to ideologies, i.e., describing ideologies in their "own terms" and bracketing their own judgements. It is hardly surprising to find them presenting the reader with two contrasting theological critiques of ideology: one to undergird the conservative bourgeois ideology of the white class and the other for those committed to a theology of liberation. The editors seem to tread the terrain of ideological neutrality in that they signal "left" but leave space for a "right" turn. Clifford Geertz has a useful discussion on the place of ideology in American sociology, and observes a similar tendency. He also notes two main approaches "to the study of the social determinants of ideology: the interest theory and the strain theory. For the first, ideology is a mask and a weapon; for the second, a symptom and a remedy. In the interest theory, ideological pronouncements are seen against the background of a universal struggle for advantage, in the strain theory, against the background of a chronic effort to correct sociopsychological disequilibrium. In the one, men pursue power, in the other, they flee anxiety." Geertz favours the strain theory for being "less simplistic," "more penetrating, less concrete, more comprehensive." (The interpretation of Cultures, New York, 1973, p.201)

increasingly, according to their vital ideological interests. There is therefore a dialectical tension between faith (values, norms, convictions - religion) and ideology (means, strategies, methods of structuring faith - politics).

Let me now recall Verkuyl and his concern to evaluate ideologies by the gospel message of Jesus Christ. His evaluation presupposes that a reading and understanding of the gospel provides one with absolute certainties. One is supposed to relativize the ideological components of a revolutionary struggle (that is the context of his remarks) in the name of a gospel message that one has somehow come to know and interpret correctly. Verkuyl offers no attempt to balance out such things as human suffering, poverty, and death against the positive results that can be hoped for from the realization of ideological criteria. In the historical process, Christians would therefore hesitate over their participation in the struggle, making that dependent on a prior reading and interpretation of the gospel.

The above option in resolving the faith and ideology tension is to me untenable. So is Hugo Assman's position

that instead of consulting the gospel message to see how they should put through a revolution or what means they should employ, Christians should join fighting groups and re-examine the gospel from within the revolutionary struggle. (21)

My problem here is that Christians have always been suspiciously known for imposing "evangelical determinisms" on the revolutionary process, forcing history to dance to its tune. Ultimately, the Christian contribution tends to go off on its own and looks for some "third way" or middle road between the status quo and the revolution. It subsequently betrays the revolution by often being reabsorbed by the status quo. (22)

How then may we overcome the tension between faith and ideology if at all possible? Ideology based on faith takes on absolutist features and tries to impose conditions on everything else while any faith adopted prior to an ideological commitment will of necessity exert a conservative influence on ideology. The remarks of Juan Luis Segundo may help us here:

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21 Discussed in J.L. Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, Orbis, New York, 1976, p.99f.

22 Ibid. Segundo discusses a concrete case of the "Falange," a Christian group in Chile. (p.91f.)



"Even though endowed with absolute value, the Christian faith totally lacks any precise instrument for measuring the historical life of Christians by pre-established standards. And since the human sciences also lack any such value standards, Christians cannot evade the necessity of inserting something to fill the void between their faith and their options in history. In short, they cannot avoid the risk of ideologies." (23)

The capital importance of relating faith to ideology is here made explicit. So is the understanding of faith as a plane of external certitudes, which is negated.

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." (24) This eleventh "Thesis on Feuerbach" is one of the most succinct witnesses of the Marxist passion to deal with the problem of human nature. It is not convincing, however, to assume as Marx did, that Christians have no good reason to affirm their theism in their struggle to change life. But, equally, as Denys Turner has cogently argued, "it is not convincing if Christians suppose that they can unproblematically live out their relationship with the world via concepts of God which are at once ideological and

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23 Ibid, p. 109

24 Karl Marx, Thesis on Feuerbach, Karl Marx Frederick Engels, Collected Works, vol. 5, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1976, p. 5



theologically unjustified. In short they cannot count on even their own best prayers when their theology renders them self-contradictory and the practices entailed by them are demonstrably ideological." (25)

It seems to me that this is the key to understanding the predicament of Christians in South Africa. In their stance against the ideology of apartheid, vague Christian notions of "reconciliation," "peace," "justice," "human dignity," and "equality" have been annunciated. These "ethical precepts" totally lack any rigorous historical mediation and have therefore resulted in political inefficacy. The historical churches have simply not recognized that a concrete and specific form of analysis (ideology) is necessary to give effect to their anti-apartheid sentiments. The Bible itself does not offer solutions to the apartheid problem which its authors had never heard of and could not have foreseen. These must be discovered elsewhere.

## 2. Toward a Political Option

Roger Garaudy has the following remarks in his attack on the capitalist system:

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25 D. Turner, Marxism and Christianity, Totowa, New Jersey, 1983, p.207

"Capitalism is not simply an economic system. It necessarily implies a social structure, a hierarchical social relationship in which the minority who possess power dominate those who do not own the means of production. It implies a political structure that reflects this social and economic dependency. Finally, it is a model of culture and civilization in which men are moulded by market demands, competition, and profit and are manipulated by those who, along with capital, control most of the communications media (press, publishing, films, radio, television, advertising). A society ruled by the blind law of competition among all and profit for a few, in which investment is not a social but solely a private enterprise, is devoid of any conscious governance of its ends." (26)

That problem, of maintaining or ensuring consistency between faith (ends) that one may profess and the ideology or ideologies one fashions or adopts to live out one's faith in history is the one that I shall now turn to. I propose to reinforce Garaudy's basic thesis before offering an alternative model (ideology) as a guarantee for greater efficacy against the backdrop of a Christian "Weltanschauung" (faith) in the South African context.

Christianity is not a political system. It does not have the political institutions which are necessary in modern society for ordering the complex inter-relationships between people and between countries. Neither does it

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26 Roger Garaudy, The Alternative Future, Translated by L. Mayhew Simon & Schuster, New York, 1972, p.29 (Emphasis added)

have its own method of analysis, which is necessary to determine the true nature of a given historical situation. The Christian faith does not inform us on how to organise a particular society; it does not tell one much about the actual mechanics, for example, of dismantling a vast financial empire and of redistributing wealth for the benefit of the whole of society. It remains my Christian responsibility to seek the best way of doing this since holding the intellectual belief that capitalism is immoral does not constitute a valid Christian response. (27)

Christians in the modern era are increasingly coming to realise that there are usually structural reasons for economic failures and that exploitation, discrimination, and powerlessness are material consequences of the internal logic of the capitalist system. The fundamental causes of socio-economic problems in many countries can usually be traced to the capitalist mode of production where ownership, control and profits remain in private hands. Most social concerns, in fact, all, are secondary to the drive to accumulate profit. Expansionism, higher profits and monopoly management do not arise as consequences of individual greed but belong inherently to the modus operandi of the system. Inevitably, capitalism

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27 Cosmos Desmond, Christians or Capitalists, Bowerdean, London, 1978, p.118

bears its own inner contradictions as crises after crises generate mass unemployment, inequality, class divisions, sex and race discrimination, environmental pollution, etc. In the face of these social ills, Christians and churches are challenged to move beyond descriptions, impressions and moral outcries to searching analyses of the political systems. In this exercise the scientific tools of a more human approach to the mode of production is absolutely necessary to avoid vague generalizations and idealistic rhetoric.

It cannot be denied that capitalism today sacrifices humanizing work to efficiency and profit - maximization. In traditional South African societies, one's work meant one's life. Work, play and social life intertwined. Work simply meant tasks to be done, without much division of labour or supervision. The advent of industrial capitalism has, however, brought with it increasing specialization where each worker is assigned to a smaller yet smaller portion of a task. The finished product is for the most part "out of sight and out of mind." The possibilities for job satisfaction are minimized to such an extent that few jobs challenge the human mind or spirit for creativity. The demand to follow exact routines in a disciplined way for the sake of efficiency bears heavily

upon the worker. Not unexpectedly, in this world of mechanized labour, Blacks have always found themselves working in order to live and rarely living for their work. The "joyless economy" of racist capitalism further offers Blacks no real incentive to contribute to its growth or stabilization. For it is they themselves who turn out to be its immediate victims through retrenchment and unemployment.

Here we can go a step further and seek an alternative view of labour as a summons for Christians to seriously examine their ideological presuppositions and function in the matrix of human history. The problem of human labour in a dehumanizing system of social relationships must be addressed with greater magnitude and intensity. Labour comes to be decisively important for Christians seeking to understand the human being as a "conscious species-being." The world of labour is a specifically human world where humans produce not only for their immediate or individual needs alone. Humans produce creatively out of freedom and fashion things out of the "laws of beauty." It is in a person's labour that he or she and the world of nature unite to achieve a common purpose. The power of conceptual thought is present when true human labour unites mental and material action.

This vision of work negates a perverted system of production that necessarily produces perverted human relations. Buti Tlhagale has said that "Labour in the service of capital runs contrary to the Christian understanding of justice." (28) This being the case, it becomes obligatory for Christians to seek a new humanist orientation of labour where the worker is the free subject of his or her own economic and political history, the free creator of his or her own product.

The capitalist understanding of person and society stands in direct opposition to the Christian urge for "collective humanism." Concern for others is a cardinal Christian virtue and capitalism, in my view, does not provide the most efficacious means (ideology) to give this practical effect and historical concreteness. "Concern for individual freedom" may arise as a problem, as Desmond observes, but only "in a society where material gain is the ideal, and this ideal can only be attained at the expense of others. It has nothing to do with Christianity, which is concerned with forming mankind into a community because the common destiny of mankind is sharing in one Kingdom." (29)

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28 Buti Tlhagale, Towards a black theology of labour, Resistance and Confession, Ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, p.130

29 Desmond, p.122

It is true that Christianity does not affirm society to be more important than the individual. It affirms that all human beings are essentially constituent parts of society and that their social relationships are intrinsic parts of themselves. It is only possible, therefore, to be concerned about individual persons by being concerned about society. It seems that people only emphasize separateness from and independence of society when they consider society a threat to their interests. (30)

I shall now refer to the life and thought of a famous Christian theologian to substantiate my critique of capitalism. (31) Karl Barth was a German Social Democrat who believed that, "A real Christian must become a socialist (if he is to be in earnest about the reformation of Christianity!). A real socialist must be a Christian if he is in earnest about the reformation of

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30 Ibid.

31 Though Barth's interest in socialism as an alternative to capitalism declined from the early 1920's in favour of involvement in the "Bekenntnisfront," I maintain Marquardt's contention that Barth never really left the social movement. Frederick-Wilhelm Marquardt, Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth, Karl Barth and Radical Politics, Ed. & trans. by G. Hunsinger, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1976, pp.47-76

socialism." (32) Barth joined the Social Democratic Party on 26 January 1915. From then on, workers in Safenwil, an agricultural and industrial community where Barth ministered, called him "comrade pastor." (33) His position led him to be involved in socialism, and especially in the trade union movement. Class warfare which was going on "in my parish, before my eyes," introduced Barth, in his words, "Almost for the first time to the real problems of real life. The result of this was that my main study was now directed towards factory legislation, insurance, trade union affairs and so on, and my energies were taken up in disputes sparked off by my

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32 E. Busch, Karl Barth, His life from Letters and Autographical Texts, Fortress, Philadelphia, trans. J. Bowden, 1976, p.83

Ebehard Jüngel comments that Barth became "a socialist and a Social Democrat precisely because he is glad to be a pastor, not because he is more or less bored with his calling. The 'great cause' for which he lives and for which he works as a pastor, is also that which allowed him to become a socialist. The path which leads into the Social Democratic Party does not lead away from that cause, which 'is and remains the main thing' for him." See his Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1986, p.90

33 Busch, p.82



support for workers." (34) For the young pastor of Safenwil, the Christian thing then was to come to the aid of workers with theoretical instruction and practical support, and to give them advise about organised action.

Barth's socialism extended to the domains of his theological writings. He saw his commentary on Romans as a symptom of "a kind of cultural awakening through the achievement of an improved socialist philosophy or theology." (35)

The second edition of "Der Römerbrief" (1921), though completely revised, revealed a Barth still committed to the left. Christianity, he wrote, "displays a certain inclination to side with those who are immature, sullen and depressed, with those who 'come off badly' and are, in consequence, ready for revolution. There is, for this reason, much in the cause of socialism which evokes

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34 Ibid, p.69

35 Karl Barth, Revolutionary theology in the making, trans. J.D. Smart, Richmond, John Knox Press, 1964, p.95

Christian approval." (36) Christianity loved "the poor and the oppressed, the sorrowful, the hungry and the thirsty," and for this reason "more closely related to the 'Russian Man' than to his western brothers." (37) Barth came to the conclusion that "In all probability, then, the man 'down there' is blessed whereas the man 'up there' is not blessed." (38)

Barth argued that the socialist means of attaining the end of capitalist productive relationships, organisation, is justified by Jesus. With reference to the closing exhortation of the Communist Manifesto of 1848 ("Workers of the world, unite"), he identifies solidarity as the law and gospel of socialism, "concluding that the 'Our Father' means that 'for Jesus there existed only a social religion of solidarity.'" (39) The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is, as the risk of one's own life for others, the highest value that one can conceive of in life. Barth saw the ultimate expression of the "consciousness of solidarity" in this risk: "Let whoever can understand

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36 Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, trans. E.C. Hoskyns, London, 1957, p.463

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid, p.464

39 Karl Barth, "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung," Der Freie Aargauer 6, no.155 (Dec. 28, 1911); p.2, col. 2. See Jüngel, p.87

this: that one must lose one's life to find it, that one must stop being for oneself; one must become a member of the human community, a comrade, if one is to be human at all." (40)

Barth believed that Jesus demanded the abolition of all private ownership. Jesus was, considering all historical differences, "more socialist than the socialists." He rejected the basis of all property: whatever is mine, is mine. Indeed, he even stripped away private family ties, actually implying a "stripping away of everything that is private." For Jesus "tells us: You must become free of everything that begins with 'I' and 'my' absolutely free, in order to be free for social aid." (41)

Jüngel thinks that Barth also believed that if social democracy is to have a future, it must develop a new social disposition. He offers three basic principles for the content, means and goal of Barthian socialism.

- (1) The essence or the content of socialism must be identified as justice for

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40 "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung"  
(Dec. 30, 1911), second section, page 1, col. 2.  
41 Ibid, "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung"  
(Dec. 28, 1911)

humanity, and not merely as improvement of the lot of the working class.

(2) The means of socialism must reflect a definite trust in the power of its truth for victory. For that reason, socialism must not draw its strength from the struggle for economic and political power, but from an entirely different source.

(3) The aim of socialism must be the free, pure personality, and the future state can be a means to the attainment of that end. This personality is to be "redeemed" from bourgeois egoism, with its false idealism and half-serious Christianity, and it is to be grasped by the power of socialist truth, which Barth explicitly called transcendent. (42)

Writing in his monumental "Church Dogmatics," Barth attacks the Christian Church for falling prey to the "fire of Marxist polemic" and for allowing its faith to

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42 Jüngel, p.89

be denounced as a "relic of capitalism." He asks:

"Has it not always stood on the side of the 'ruling classes'? At any rate, has it not always been the surest guarantee of the existence and continuance of an order of classes which technically cannot be understood otherwise than as the order of superiority of the economically strong? And has it not with its doctrine of the soul and body at least shown a culpable indifference towards the problem of matter, of bodily life and therefore of contemporary economics? Has it not made a point of teaching the immortality of the soul instead of attesting to society, with its proclamation of the resurrection of the dead, that the judgement and promise of God compass the whole man, and therefore cannot be affirmed and believed apart from material and economic reality, or be denied or pushed aside as ideology in contrast to material and economic reality." (43)

To mitigate prevailing injustice and its consequences, the Church had therefore to "espouse the cause of this or that branch of social progress or even socialism," keep to the

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43 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 111/2, T and T Clark, Edinburgh, 1960, p.389

"left" in opposition to the champions, and identify with the victims of human disorder. (44)

Barth's understanding throughout was that the system of capitalism is intrinsically an unjust and spiritually debilitating order of society, which needed the socialist option as correction. In sermonic language, the evil of capitalism was the consequence of a world without God. (45) Though this conviction lost its "theological status" when he turned from religious socialism to dialectical theology, Barth never lost his revolutionary drive against capitalist pretensions and the complacency of bourgeois society. In this, Barth was in a deeper sense, a contemporary of Karl Marx. (46)

Karl Barth's "socialism" should thus be viewed as an ideology, ideology in the sense that "it is the instrument through which our Christian obedience gains coherence and unity." (47) Miguez Bonino notes that the ideological option must be undertaken "in the context of active engagement, in relation to real questions which are posed in the praxis itself." (48) Barth's solidarity with the

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44 Church Dogmatics, 111/4, p.545

45 Busch, p.80

46 Charles West, Communism and the Theologians, Philadelphia, 1958, p.188

47 Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1975, p.95

48 Ibid, p.99

worker's struggles and his commitment to their interests undoubtedly served to sharpen his appreciation of the gospel message. His "ideological projection" provided the terms for a significant criticism of the Church's praxis which, in turn, led him to orientate his ministry as pastor to a rational realization of socialist possibilities.

I have argued that the capitalist person is marked by the outlook of the individualist who makes his or her approach to the meaning of humanism in terms of the individual and finds the consummation of humanism in the individual personality. In the way of a dialectical negation, socialism in the new phase of the modern age has developed a concept of humanity in terms of community, a truly humanized society being the goal of human progress. For as Lochman has observed, "The Marxist and Christian view of man emphatically states, to start with, that man is a social creature. Man is not an abstract, isolated creature content in himself. He lives in association with others. He is a social being. This is fundamental qualification of his existence and that is the delimitation of his being as a man."(49). Capitalist

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49 J.M. Lochman, Church in a Marxist Society, Harper and Row, New York, 1970, p.119



individualism is therefore to be disfavoured in this scheme.

The richness of an elite minority is as obscene as the poverty of the majority. Christian community appreciates that for a person to be fully human his or her material needs must be met. It also appreciates, however, that human fulfilment cannot be found in the blessings of material prosperity at the expense of widespread poverty. Work in the socialist sense is intended to be what it was in its original human function: a spontaneous and creative unfolding of human competence and possibilities. The work ethic anticipates the original dream of human fellowship. The tacit acceptance of capitalist values has unfortunately made many Christians oblivious of the dehumanising effects of the capitalist system on both the capitalist and worker alike. Capitalism therefore does not perform a service to humanity in general or to Christianity in particular.

The Church and Christians alike have a prophetic role, part of which consists in the public denunciation of the evils of society. For this denunciation to be socially valid, it is not sufficient for church leaders simply to denounce what they think is evil. A moral judgement on political matters cannot avoid being based on a



particular social analysis (ideology). I have tried to reason that capitalism does not offer a viable basis to avoid the danger of the Church being assimilated into the dominant culture which seeks certain reforms without a comprehensive critique. I introduced Karl Barth to undergird this thesis as an example of one who knew that "faith without ideology" is "bad faith" in the struggle for social justice. His political option can be the "Christian" response for a faith in search of praxis in South Africa. This, however, presupposes the evolution of class consciousness in a society preoccupied with the issue of race.

### 3. Agenda for Churches

The political vision of Karl Barth was based on the assumption that capitalism is fraught with inconsistencies and is prone to operate contrary to the Christian understanding of community. It is a political vision that I believe is necessary and relevant in the struggle for greater justice today. Its application in South Africa, though, would have to be conditioned by the full participation of the black working class. Black workers in the broad trade union movement constitute the main vehicle of black resistance. Their often-stated demand

for a living wage is an indictment of the abhorrent inequality of wealth in the country, and it is an attempt to change precisely that. The workers have ushered in a new strategy to opposition politics: careful grassroots organisation and mobilization over specific issues rather than mass protests. This is based on a solid ideological shift that makes the workers the vanguard of the political struggle and transforms the movement to end white minority rule into an effort to replace it with a new government that would rule in the interests of the working class. The growing strength of the black worker on the factory floor or in the gold mine, on a white farm or in a business office, points to the single most important source for a revolutionary transition of power in South Africa.

The political reality is such that the ruling class will not give up power voluntarily or peacefully. The pace of political reform will probably hasten, but only insofar as this reform is a sophisticated and formative defence of the status quo. The mobilization of the black working class is therefore of utmost importance if this deadlock

is ever to be broken. In the words of an exiled group of South Africans:

"It is the black working class that carries the burden of history. It is on the shoulders of this class that the wheels of industry lie. This is the class that is the mainstay of the socialist revolution in South Africa. The mobilization of this class is a necessity and it would be a dream to think of bringing down the South African racist regime without the greatest role being played by this class." (50)

The working class is today stronger than ever before. From the series of worker strikes in Durban in 1973 to the recent crippling miners strike, black workers have demonstrated their momentous ability to organise themselves in the interests of their own class. Black workers are simply the most exploited group in apartheid society and their political muscle in fighting the present economic system is crucial for the future.

Something must further be said about the triangle of oppression endured by black women workers. The working experiences of black women in South Africa is quintessentially one of low wages for monotonous work,

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50 From interview obtained by Ernest Harsch in Gaborone, Botswana, December 1978. First published in Intercontinental Press/Inprecor, February 5, 1979. See E. Harsch, South Africa: White Rule Black Revolt, New York, 1980, p.324

extended working hours, and disgusting conditions in a morbid world of race, sex and class discrimination. That they continue to assert themselves as a "surviving force" determined to overthrow shackles of their oppression in a situation of extreme deprivation and harassment is a human miracle! The system of racist capitalism has subjugated black women to the status of minors who have no stake whatsoever in the control of the means of production or in the distribution of capital. Black women remain the "pillars of capitalist exploitation," the silent majority who though often unpaid, must toil harder than the employed in order to survive.(51) The systematic non-inclusion of black women in the social, political and professional structures for black emancipation demands an urgent correction of this sexist imbalance. Knowledge that the average urban black woman is employed as a domestic worker for almost twelve hours a day, seven days a week, in conditions of extended family separation with no social security or proper wage, should challenge artisans of the new humanity to see oppression collectively as well as individually.

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51 Essy Letsoalo, The Changing Role of Women in Employment, Hammering Swords into Ploughshares, Ed. Itumeleng Mosala and Buti Tlhagale, p.229

It becomes imperative for the churches in this context of worker's struggles to develop an adequate theology of black labour that will take seriously the fact of class. It cannot be denied that black workers and their trade unions represent the poor working class and that their hopes and aspirations differ sharply from the ruling élité. Historically, with rare exceptions, the historical churches have displayed an apparent inability to respond to the challenges of the trade union movement or to deal with labour and industrial relations. (52) Solidarity and support must assume more concrete forms of intervention if the churches are to retain their credibility of efficacious ministry in working class struggles. Buti Tlhagale has opened up room for a theological discourse that can undergird the churches in this effort. He remarks:

"In the eyes of the black worker, work ceases to be the 'place of human growth' or the 'clearing' where the absolute manifests itself. Sheer drudgery and

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52 James Cochrane, The churches and the trade unions, Resistance and Hope, pp.174-188. This is one of the few accounts concerning the churches' involvement (or lack of it) in the labour movement. Cochrane had also written a booklet, "The Church and Labour in South Africa," Institute for Contextual Theology, Johannesburg, 1987, which is a timely piece of work for Christians to consider.

confinement to subsistence levels negate the concept of work as the continuation of the creative-redemptive work of God. The dimension of work as a 'liberating force' is completely subordinated to the negative dimension that shows human labour as the 'topos' where punishment is unleashed in its most painful form ... Work, instead of building those engaged in it, brutalizes them and reduces them to the level of servitude. The reduction of black workers to parts of the productive machinery, and the alienation of their products, form a counterposition." (53)

It is the task of theology to reverse the dehumanising black experience of work by tapping the revolutionary awareness of the workers themselves, not the gratuitous options of white Christians. Work will become a redemptive instrument to enhance the image of God if workers are free to labour in response to their material needs. (54) Theological discourse can subvert the misuse of capital if it is undertaken as solidarity with the struggles of the working class.

There is a third distinctive bloc in the vanguard of political resistance in South Africa, a bloc that

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53 Tlhagale, p. 129

54 Ibid, p. 130

continues to confront the police and challenge the authorities, and in many cases, has kept the onslaught on apartheid vibrant. This is the Soweto generation of black youth who since 1976 have played a crucial role in organising students and pupils in raising fundamental questions for society's well-being. Most of their grievances have focused on educational issues in the broader context of political freedom. The youth have perennially demanded free and compulsory education for all, with the introspective qualification that "Education is in itself good but the first school of an oppressed people is a revolution." (55) It is a conviction for which black youth pay a high price - torture is routine for many, indefinite detention normal, imprisonment usually unavoidable and death a dire possibility. Resilience, courage and determination, nevertheless, persist as hallmarks of the black youth as they struggle for a just educational system in a climate of terror. The political experiences and educational aspirations of oppressed students must be assimilated into the collective effort of the liberation project. To accept this task raises urgent questions for any theological reflection which to date remain unanswered.

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55 From a student pamphlet distributed in Soweto during September 1976. See Brooks and Brickhill, p.66

The churches are summoned to therefore actively engage themselves in the common effort to overthrow the present bankrupt system of education in favour of a liberating pedagogy for the masses. This collaboration is important since the unmasking of false perceptions of society and the world in general is a necessary step in restoring human dignity. The struggles of the workers, the suppression of women, and the pedagogical hope of the students confront both the historical and independent churches with a tridimensional triage for prophetic ministry in an extremely repressive society. Involvement in this praxis is paramount to any church seeking to effectively minister in solidarity with and commitment to the oppressed. The brutal nature of the oppression certainly undermines the slightest degree of impetus churches may share in appropriating this tridimensional triage. Political factors present Christians with the possibility and probability of imprisonment, torture and sometimes, even death. It is certainly no easy walk on the road to freedom. Yet, it is in locating ourselves in such a praxis that we discover and define the nature of the Christian vocation in the world. For the Christian is called not to oppress but to free, not to dominate but to equalize, not to stifle but to educate for liberation. It is only in opting for such an authentic praxis that the risk of faith is placed at the service of humanity.



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