RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

*A German-South African dialogue on
historical and current challenges*

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Introduction

The relationship between religion and the state is a subject that has often been revisited and analysed within different time frames of global political and economic changes – the current times of increased secularization (in some parts of the world, in some societies) are no exception. It is a relationship of constant tension: oscillating between cooperation (in areas of health, social and educational services), cooption (an attempt to instrumentalize religion to legitimate certain political programmes), disagreement – and even conflict.

The founding of the international Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) in Berlin in May 2016 is not only an acknowledgement that “religion matters”, that it is shaping the lives of many people, but that it plays a key role in advancing the aims of the United Nation’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

This collection of contributions – drawn from different events, in a dialogue between Germany and South Africa, the global North and the global South – focuses on the challenges, obstacles and opportunities related to cooperation between religion and the state in matters of development.

The international impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 poses much more than just a health challenge – the economic, social, political consequences have accentuated the existing fault lines and disparities within countries, and between countries across the world.

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In South Africa, and many other countries of the South, poverty and unemployment have increased, and the most vulnerable citizens are more affected than other sectors of the population. COVID-19 and lockdown measures to curb the rapid spread of the virus triggered a serious economic crisis – mostly impacting on the vulnerable sections in society (informal workers, women-headed households), who lost their basic income overnight, which in turn resulted in an immediate food crisis.

Whilst national health systems are under pressure to cope with succeeding waves of infections, resources have been re-directed to cope with the sharply increased demand for immediate medical services – disrupting the testing and treatment protocols of other pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and TB, as well as routine medical screenings and operations. Reflection on what a new post-COVID world would look like has only just started.

In many countries worldwide the state and religion, church(es) and the state are separate. In Germany a model has been developed that not only allows cooperation between these entities, but also explicitly promotes it. The complementarity of state action (cooption) and explicit liaison with the state is based on careful consideration and past experiences, according to which the state expressly supports the forces of civil society – including the churches – or rather draws on their expertise and experience. Through partnership agreements and cooperation, the state at the same time creates a basis for its citizens to freely choose between the services offered by secular and ecclesiastical institutions. This model has proven to be successful in Germany.

Religion is a factor, and will remain one, in countries of the Western world regardless of advancing secularization and loss of membership that churches are experiencing. Religion was and is (and will remain) a factor in South Africa as well. Without the influence of the church in the country itself and without the international network of churches, the abolition of apartheid would not have been possible. With the end of apartheid in 1994 a new South Africa emerged, with one of the most modern constitutions in the world. Yet even a quarter of a century later South African civil society – including churches and religious communities – is still in the making. This also applies to the “public theology” role of churches in analysing and commenting on the socio-political challenges facing society.

A substantial part of this collection of contributions (included mainly in Section II) is based on the joint conference of the *Evangelische Akademie Tutzing* (EAT) and the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) that took place in February 2019 in Tutzing under the title “Religion and the State: Between Cooption and Cooperation. South African and German Experiences in Dialogue”.¹ Some of the contributions have been lightly edited for this publication. The conference coincided with celebrations commemorating 25 years of democracy in South Africa and 70 years of the Federal Republic of Germany after WWII.

EFSA and EAT are linked through a long-standing cooperation of 21 years, which was strengthened in a new partnership agreement in 2011. “Tolerance and Christian responsibility are the foundations of our work” is a motto that connects both institutions, which extend invitations for annual consultations in Germany and in South Africa. Both institutions provide a forum for discourse in civil society through their respective commitments.

Although churches and faith communities are part of the broader “civil society”, there are also fundamental differences between churches and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).² Yet their roles in civil society may sometimes be similar – like responding to specific challenges facing citizens in society, e.g. in delivering social services, responding to the needs of local communities, or strengthening the voice of marginalised groups in advocacy.

The fundamental difference could best be illustrated by an example: during the apartheid years, when former Archbishop Tutu led a march of a broad coalition of civil society and political organisations to the undemocratic Parliament, he was confronted by a government official who asked: “Where did you get your mandate from?” His response to this implied lack of legitimacy was “from God”. The rationale for the church’s role in civil society is its understanding of being part of God’s mission (in all its facets) in this world in the first place – it is not dependent on democratic or grassroots support.

¹ The German conference report “Religion und Staat – Zwischen Koooption und Kooperation: Südafrikanische und deutsche Erfahrungen im Dialog”, was published by the *Evangelischer Pressedienst* (epd), *Dokumentation*, Nr. 33, 13. August 2019.

² See contribution by R. Koegelenberg: “The role of churches and NGOs in civil society – a South African case study”, in: *Church and Civil Society – German and South African Perspectives*, edited by M Welker, N Koopman & J Vorster, published by Sun Media Metro and EFSA Institute, 2017.

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Only after the end of WWII was it possible for a civil society to emerge in Germany. For its proper development, civil society needs open spaces to discuss differences and contrary views, and to jointly find solutions, sometimes even merely partial solutions. Through the *Evangelische Akademie Tutzing*, founded in 1947, the church provides the space for such discourse. And this means that the church is involved in trying to jointly find solutions to the urgent issues of today.

It has provided many impulses that have had an impact on politics and society. In 1963, for instance, Egon Bahr coined the phrase “change through rapprochement” at EAT, which came to dominate Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik and became the guiding idea that helped to unite Europe 30 years ago.

Only four percent of the world’s population live in countries with an open civil society. This is the finding of a study conducted by *Brot für die Welt* in cooperation with CIVICUS, a global network for civic participation.³ The overall development of civil society is divided into five stages: closed, oppressed, limited, confined, open. The people who live in Germany are consequently privileged, since they live in an open civil society.

Thus, in a global context a great deal remains to be done in order to demonstrate that the state and its citizens can benefit from a well-functioning civil society. Non-governmental organisations, including the churches, take on the role of intermediary institutions. Their task is to mediate between the state and its citizens and in this way make an extremely valuable contribution to the common good. States with a well-developed civil society benefit considerably from the diversity of contributions by different actors. After all, many non-governmental organisations have a wealth of experience at their disposal that can be applied fruitfully through activities advancing information through education.

Since 1990 (i.e. for 30 years) the EFSA Institute has provided a forum for dialogue in South Africa’s civil society – in close partnership with academic, religious and church networks. In 1997, EFSA established the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD), an association that supports social initiatives at all levels of society and promotes cooperation between the church, the religious sector, the state and public institutions.

³ Presseinformation: Zivilgesellschaft auch in Europa unter Druck, Brot für die Welt, Berlin, 6.02.2019 – “Atlas of Civil Society”.

Overview of contributions

Section I includes several German and South African contributions from diverse events that are relevant to our general theme – reflecting on global political changes (Horst Köhler); a South African perspective on the political impact of COVID-19 (Mcebisi Jonas); the health impact of COVID-19 in South Africa (Zwelini Mkhize); the challenge of dealing with pandemics such as COVID-19, HIV/AIDS and TB (Thabo Makgoba); public theology in the context of COVID-19 (Heinrich Bedford-Strohm); the quest for a global solidarity to respond to COVID-19 (Reinhard Marx); and finally, “Tsantsabane Cares” – a case study of food security at Kumba/Kolomela mine and the faith communities (Marlene Mahokoto).

Section II consists mostly of contributions to the 2019 conference and includes the following contributions from different church perspectives: Holistic development: requirements for development cooperation in the age of globalisation (Reinhard Marx); 25 years of democracy in South Africa: The role of churches and religious communities in overcoming apartheid, reconciliation and nation building (Thabo Makgoba); The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) approach to diaconal work (Nelis Janse van Rensburg); and Religion and state: between separation and cooperation – developments and perspectives of the church (with contributions from Heinrich Bedford-Strohm and Sithembele Sipuka).

Political and government perspectives on religion and state cooperation include the following contributions: A German perspective (Johannes Singhammer); Opportunities and limits of cooperation (Bernhard Felmberg); Cooperation between state and church in South Africa’s healthcare system (Lindiwe Makubalo); Lessons learned from 70 years experience of the Federal Republic of Germany (Hans-Jürgen Papier).

Contributions focusing on the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals include the perspectives of the World Council of Churches (WCC – Isabel Phiri) and the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ – Joachim Goeske).

Key personalities involved in German-South African consultations shared their experiences under the theme “Between loyalty, willingness to compromise and conflict”: South Africa’s Compromise: 25 Years Later” (Nico Koopman); German church-state relationship: participation and contradiction (Volker Faigle); and The Protestant churches, boycotts and mistakes (Renate Wilke-Launer).

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The perspective from leading national and international church development organisations on the theme “Opportunities for and Limitations on Cooperation” include: A perspective from Misereor, Aachen (Peter Meiwald); A perspective from Bread for the World, Berlin (Cornelia Füllkrug-Weitzel); and a perspective from the international ACT Alliance, Geneva (Rudelmar Buena de Faria).

The conclusion reflects on the key rationale for development cooperation between states and faith networks – as expressed in the welcome address and input to the General Annual Meeting of the international Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) by Sithembele Sipuka – which was scheduled to take place in South Africa, but due to the outbreak of COVID-19 was hosted by the Von Humboldt University and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in Berlin, highlighting the urgency of the need to implement agreements that advance human dignity and human development.

The 2019 consultation in Tutzing was supported by the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) hosted by the Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), the “ENGAGEMENT GLOBAL GmbH” on behalf of BMZ. The *Evangelische Akademie Tutzing* and Catholic Misereor – as well as by all the speakers and participants who also covered costs.

The cooperation between the Cape Development and Dialogue Centre (CDDC) Trust, and its affiliates the EFSA Institute and the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD), as well as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in South Africa, focusing on the strengthening of constitutional democracy and accountability, made this publication possible.

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