RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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

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Religion and state: between separation and cooperation – a South African perspective

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On mutual support, so that we become tools of God's plan

When I was invited to attend this conference, I initially assumed that I was coming here to simply observe and learn. However, when I was invited to speak, I had no idea what topic I should actually talk about. It was then suggested to me that I might consider talking about the instrumentality of all things in God's plan. This means that God is able to harness a variety of entities and beings, whether they be secular or religious, living or inanimate, whether joyful or painful. One can also say, to clarify things, that everything is a sacrament of God. God is the maker of all and everything can therefore reflect God and can in turn be used by God to serve his purpose.

Based on the criteria of consciousness and freedom, one could even speak of a hierarchy of the instrumentality or sacramentality of creation, in which the individual elements of God's creation serve the sacramental purpose to varying degrees. Among all these entities, it is the people who enjoy the greatest possible involvement in God's being, whether they are aware of it or not. They have a great

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sacramental capacity to serve God's plan. The Church is particularly aware of the fact that, through revelation, it is invited to take part in the life and mission of God. Therefore, it should endeavour to be an instrument of God and to serve his plan. If we want to be meaningful instruments or sacraments of God, our work must be contextual and concrete.

When asked to present this address, I was asked not to speak too academically but to give a talk that would lead to a discussion on practice. The practical context I am most familiar with is that of my own country, South Africa. I would therefore like to start by creating a small picture of South Africa.

In 1994 South Africa emerged from a past that had the potential to unleash a protracted civil war. One indication of this was the murder of three white militiamen from the white right-wing party founded by Eugène Terre'Blanche, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) (the Afrikaner Resistance Movement) in Bophuthatswana. They were shot in front of news cameras and the event was broadcast all over the world.

At the same time there were isolated massacres in Natal (as the province was called at that time), in men's hostels in the Vaal Triangle, as well as railway murders in and around Johannesburg. Among all these violent and deadly incidents, the murder of Chris Hani in 1993 was the one that almost plunged South Africa into civil war. This was thankfully successfully averted by Nelson Mandela. After these disturbingly brutal incidents, we finally experienced a peaceful change-over of power from an illegitimate apartheid regime to a legitimate majority government.

Since those first historic elections in 1994, powerful mechanisms have been introduced to secure democratic structures. With the exception of the law against abortion on demand, which arbitrarily deprives the unborn child of the right to live, our Constitution guarantees a broad spectrum of rights, freedoms and entitlements. We implement the rule of law and that means that no one is above the law. This rule of law, which is complemented by independent legal bodies such as public protection agencies and the Human Rights Commission, has resulted in some of the most powerful people being prosecuted and sentenced, and others being suspended or dismissed for lack of efficiency and for corruption. Unlike some other African countries, people in South Africa have the freedom to join

political parties of their choice to represent them in parliament, where legislative proposals are discussed intensively without fear of intimidation.

With this peaceful transition from apartheid to a democratic dispensation and an independent judiciary, and with the establishment and implementation of surveillance mechanisms for the preservation of democracy, we have succeeded in restoring the dignity of the majority of our people, something that the apartheid regime had prevented. Without wanting to be the mouthpiece of the ruling party, I would like to point out that the statistics relating to the construction of houses, provision of water and electricity, the construction of roads, the creation of health facilities and the introduction of social benefits are impressive and have changed the lives of the majority of people for the better. Our capacity for peaceful political negotiation and the country's continued political stability have given our country a favourable reputation as a catalyst for peace and progress. For this reason, South Africa has been at the forefront of peace initiatives in many African countries and also in Europe.

Good progress is also being made towards gender equality. With 42% female parliamentarians, South Africa ranks second in Africa in terms of gender equality in parliament. Both in domestic and foreign policy, South Africa has made good progress since 1994, on which we can congratulate ourselves. In comparison with the apartheid period, we have achieved a great deal to improve our lives. But we should not become complacent, because there are still many things that are not going well.

We are a country that continues to be classified as highly corrupt. At the moment, two commissions are working on this problem: one led by Judge Zondo, who is trying to establish facts related to allegations of state infiltration, and another led by Judge Nugent, who is investigating irregularities within the tax administration. If these committees reveal one thing, it will be evidence that we are a country with a high rate of corruption. These indications of corruption are not only applicable to the government but also the private sector. There is evidence that in the business sector vast amounts of money from profits made in South African businesses are being diverted away from the country rather than being invested in job creation.

We are being forced to accept a shortage of services as a way of life. Municipalities fail to do their job: they do not clean the city, lawlessness prevails and the police only watch, poor roads in rural areas are the order of the day and lead to high transport costs in these areas. Violence is also a way of life in South Africa. The horrific stories of child abuse, rape, domestic violence and murder are so numerous that we have become deaf to them – they no longer shock us. Life has become worthless, thousands of unborn children are casually aborted. People are even killed just for their mobile phones. We also have the highest rate of fatal road accidents in the world.

We pride ourselves on being a rainbow nation where we live peacefully together like the colours of the rainbow. And yet this image is far removed from the reality of our everyday life. Racial unrest, intolerance and lack of understanding of other views continue to characterize us. Xenophobia and even homophobia persists to this day. Time and again these lead to violent deaths and murders of people who are different, foreign or considered queer.

We are still half-hearted when it comes to environmental protection. While we are publicly committed to the development of clean energy, we continue to invest in nuclear and coal power plants. Recently I learned that the German government is working with our government to develop another coal power plant instead of participating in clean energy projects.

In comparison with other African countries and even some European countries, we invest a large amount of money in education. And yet the quality of education is poor and the infrastructure for education inadequate. Many school buildings are not only of poor quality and overcrowded, but are also unsafe. In his State of the Union speech last week President Ramaphosa announced the names of young children who have fallen into and drowned in latrines in schools.

While money is earmarked for education, the politicians in leading positions in the Ministry of Education are not able to spend the money appropriately. A civil society organisation called Equal Education reports that neither the ministries of education in the individual provinces nor the national ministry of education have fully utilised their infrastructure budgets. In 2017 the National Department of Education received 1.57 billion rand from the Ministry of Finance to “build

schools in the Eastern Cape... However, this budget was underspent by 415 million rand” (*Business Day*, 25 May 2018).

While we appear to be performing well from an economic point of view, the unemployment rate remains unacceptably high. Officially, the unemployment rate is 28% nationwide – and 38% in the Eastern Cape. But in reality the rate is higher. We see that there are many things we can be proud of as a country, but there are just as many things that are not going well.

It would not be correct to claim that the government is doing nothing about these problems, but the responses are half-hearted and there is no clear vision. Although the quality of life has improved since 1994, when apartheid was officially ended, it is still far from what is desirable. Most people remain recipients of government benefits and social services instead of being encouraged to actively contribute to the economy. More and more people look up to the government as if it were Santa Claus who does everything for them. People seem to believe that when they vote for the government, they vote for the government to provide them with everything they need free of charge, rather than believe that the government wants to empower them to do things for themselves. Politicians exploit this mentality to make people feel indebted to them. And they use social services to compel people to vote for them. While social services are necessary and fulfil a good purpose, relying solely on them is not sustainable and on their own they do not lead to the empowerment of people.

In the face of these challenges we must ask ourselves how we as churches can be God’s vehicle to alter the situation. At the moment, the most effective way seems to be to work prophetically with the authorities.

Clearly, engaging with authorities who do not see themselves as instruments in God’s hand to be of service to people, but only to themselves, often leads to frustration. Since 1994 the relationship between the churches and government has been fragmented. In the process, some churches have been used, if not appropriated, by the government and have to follow suit, while other churches try to maintain a proclamatory attitude. The government takes advantage of this divide and often undermines and discredits the proclamatory position.

It is the government that chooses which church or group of churches to work with. Those churches that agree with everything and are therefore almost seen

as partners of the government often receive financial support and are the ones with whom the government is in contact. However, those who think differently are marginalized. If they then raise an issue, the focus is usually on the question of “Who are you?” rather than the issue they are addressing. If you adopt an outspoken point of view, you must be persistent as you will be confronted with resistance. During the discussions, I hope to have the opportunity to talk about how persistence eventually brought us into contact with the local and regional authorities of the Eastern Cape. After all, they had initially ignored us when we raised issues.

Moreover, the fragmentation of the churches is the result of doctrinal differences. Some churches focus on teaching personal salvation rather than social justice. In addition, there are different interpretations of ethical issues such as same-sex marriage, euthanasia, marriage, divorce, sexual ethics, etc. The issue of whether or not to endorse the government’s views, and the opposing positions on ethical issues, have weakened the ability of Christian churches to engage prophetically with government.

One wonders why these differences did not seem to play a role during apartheid in persuading the churches to share common witness. Maybe the sin of apartheid was so stark and obvious that most churches could not help but interfere. Perhaps this question can be examined further during the discussion panel. However, in the context of this talk I would like to propose one or two principles that could lead to the churches bearing effective witness together.

The first principle stems from Jesus’ answer to the devil when he led him into temptation to turn stones into bread, whereupon Jesus replied to the devil: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). People survive on bread, but not just on bread. They survive on bread and on every word that comes out of God’s mouth. If a person is properly provided for in material terms and enjoys this and is in a proper relationship with God, which in turn puts him in a proper relationship with his fellow human beings and the rest of creation, then this person is truly alive.

If we now consider this biblical passage in relation to the contradictory church traditions, one of which emphasizes personal spiritual salvation but pays little or no attention to social justice, and vice versa, then you have two positions which

are both extreme. In the first case, a spiritualistic view of humankind is taken in which the physical and social aspects are not acknowledged as an integral part of human existence. In the second case, which emphasizes social justice, the risk is that the work of the church is limited to humanitarian activities so that the church simply becomes an NGO unable to offer complete salvation.

As someone said: “If the church sets personal redemption against concern for social justice or concern for social justice against personal redemption, is that partly because its understanding of salvation is truncated? Theology must not only ask, What is the true gospel? but also, What is the whole gospel? What is the breadth and the length and the height and the depth of the love of God in Christ (Eph 3:18-19)?” (Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Cambridge 2014, pp 13-14). We know that Christ forgave sins, but we also know that he healed those who were sick, gave food to those who were hungry, and condemned those who did not care about the poor and marginalized.

So the differences in doctrine or religious tendencies, far from preventing us from sharing witness as churches, ought to enrich us because, when we share witness, we begin to acquire the holistic view of salvation, just as Christ did. In ecumenical studies a new concept of ecumenism is emerging, which is referred to as receptive ecumenism. It focuses not so much on what each individual church contributes to the ecumenical dialogue, but rather on what each church can learn from other churches.

With this attitude towards receptivity, the quality of our shared witness can only improve. The turbulent social conditions of our time are indeed a fortunate coincidence, for the churches are called upon more than ever to share witness together. They are otherwise merely isolated small islets that cannot hope to bear effective witness. For example, in the area where I come from Catholics make up only 2% of the population and therefore cannot expect to be able to effectively preach on their own.

However, the problem is that – contrary to the time of apartheid – there is no obvious reason for us to share witness. If we look for a reason that can be summed up in a single word which could lead to a common proclamation, then that reason could be expressed with the word “dignity”. While apartheid was enshrined in

and enforced by law, we now have clear legislation in support of human dignity, but it is enforced inadequately.

There is a contradiction between the legal affirmation of human dignity and what actually happens in reality. Therefore, the second principle for shared witness of the churches (the first was that people do not live on bread alone) is that people indeed have dignity, but in practice this dignity is undermined. Therefore, the reason for churches to share witness is to address the issue of human dignity being violated.

As a church we do not have the expertise to formulate economic systems, tax systems, systems for agrarian reforms, etc. However, what we know from Revelation and what we are interested in is the dignity of humankind, which was created and redeemed in the image of God through the death and resurrection of Christ. Therefore our benchmark for dealing with economic, political, cultural, anthropological and sociological systems is the extent to which they foster human dignity or not.

In short, our criterion in terms of involvement is the following: does this system, this policy, this action or this legislation affirm or deny human dignity? If the answer to this question is positive, then we support it; if it is not, then we reject it and propose changes or modifications that respect human dignity. If we as churches can agree on these standards, then still today we can establish a common platform for cooperation with governments, civil society and contemporary culture.

We as churches are units that are conscious of being God's instrument for his plan. Nevertheless, this is not a role we can claim exclusively for ourselves, because all creation, all people, all entities and institutions – whether they are aware of it or not – are God's instruments to realize his purpose. Secular and civil entities can also play a prophetic role and raise awareness of God's purpose in the church. Secular and civil authorities can also play a prophetic role towards the church and make it aware of God's purpose.

The most recent example in which civil society, the media and governments have played a prophetic role towards the church is the harrowing phenomenon of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. Without the media and civil society, the church would still today continue to cover up the sexual abuse of children by clergy.

Thanks to the media, civil society and governments, however, the church was forced to admit this evil and to address the issue. From this conference I will travel to Rome to join the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences from all over the world to speak to the Pope about this problem.

Another area in which civil society has taken on a proclamatory role towards the church is that of finances. It is widely known that the next scandal of the church to be exposed – following the scandal of sexual abuse of minors – is financial mismanagement and waste of church funds. In fact, the South African government is now taking action to prevent people from earning money through religion. For too long the church has enjoyed the tacit trust that the money it collects will be used for the common good. However, there is evidence that even in the major churches there have been cases and instances where leaders have used church money to enrich themselves and lead comfortable lives. Thanks to government intervention, the church is urged like any other institution to use its financial resources for what they are meant for, and also to balance its income professionally and legitimately.

As much as the church has a proclamatory role towards the government and society, government and society also play a proclamatory role towards the church. For everything is created by God and therefore able to reflect on God and be used by God to serve his plan.

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