RELIGION & STATE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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

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Responsibility in church and state: experiences between loyalty, willingness to compromise and conflict

South Africa's compromise: 25 years later

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Theological reflections on a political journey

1. It was 25 years ago that South Africans of all backgrounds agreed on the kind of society we all want to live in. The South African Constitution describes a society in which a life of dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality is attainable by all. This is, so to speak, the top prize for every person and institution in South Africa.

Groups that had previously been in conflict committed themselves to working together in pursuit of this goal, this main asset for all. However, it soon became clear that the 1994 South Africa had not yet been the top prize, but South Africans – regardless of origin and despite past enmities – pledged to work together to achieve this top prize for South Africa.

In reality, however, the people of South Africa merely reached a compromise: we promise (*promissio*) together (*com*). We said to each other: Let's settle for the second prize for the time being – for our negotiated agreement, for a young, fragile democracy that has the difficult task of moving from division and dehumanisation towards belonging and dignity, from injustice and oppression

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towards justice and freedom, from inequality and discrimination to equality and mutual acceptance. The excitement, or what some people referred to as euphoria, came from the community and the promise of what lay ahead; the appeal was in the compromise, in the shared promise, in the communal commitment.

It should also be noted that this promise played a role in the logic of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Much forgiveness was offered in South Africa. Martin Luther remarked emphatically that forgiveness was the first word in Christian logic. The terms that follow forgiveness are remorse and confession, insight and repentance, reconciliation and redemption, restoration and compensation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has therefore commenced with forgiveness, but according to the logic the other concepts of forgiveness should actually follow.

2. Compromises are often criticised. Various theologians have argued convincingly that a compromise can be morally wrong.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Germany argued that the danger lies in concentrating only on the penultimate and refusing to boldly say no where we ought to.

Duncan Forrester from Scotland argued that we run the risk of focusing so much on what is possible that there is no room for fantasy or hope – or even for surprises, as I would like to add.

Various critics of Reinhold Niebuhr's idea of a Christian realism which calls for compromises argue that the plight of the weakest could be forgotten and that justice could be delayed.

As Rubem Alvez from Brazil explains: "Some people give up the ideal and vision of a new society and argue that the attempt to fly should be abandoned. They start to live as fat, domesticated ducks who cannot even flap their wings. They perceive the contemporary world of suffering and injustice as the best possible world. They live with a kind of realized eschatology, as if the second coming of Jesus Christ had already taken place. One could say that these people live like chickens and have abandoned the attempt to be an eagle."

3. At first the South African compromise with its good intentions stood the test as morally acceptable. The challenge, however, was to control the progress made towards fulfilling the promise at all times on the way to the first prize for

everybody: a life of dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality for everyone. A life in which forgiveness is answered with compensation. Yet there are contradictory opinions on the state or level of this progress.

Some people criticise the compromise harshly and believe that progress has not been made where progress is most necessary, namely in the lives of the weakest. Among these critics are young people and student leaders like the son of our colleague Dr Frank Chikane, Rekgotsofetse Chikane, whose book is entitled *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation. The Politics Behind #MustFall Movements*.

Others believe that we need to constantly remind ourselves of where we would be if no compromise had been reached, namely in the midst of civil war and destruction. They argue that the compromise itself is already a convincing step forward.

Others, like myself, claim that our progress has been ambivalent. Great advances have been made, but there are also clear signs that there has been no progress at all in some areas and that there has even been some regression.

4. In the light of this ambivalence, I contend that churches, universities and other civil society institutions need to play a crucial role in contributing to the fulfilment of this promise. We need to assume this role in partnership with the business sector and the public sectors of our society. One way to describe this role is to jointly develop the community *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* of South African society.

4.1 *Logos* refers to the obligation towards intellectuality, rationality, reason, analysis, systematics, science, objectivity. Intellectual aspirations seek suitable pathways amidst complexity, ambivalence, ambiguity, plurality, contradiction (apparent but not actual contradictions), duality (as-well-as and not merely either-or approaches), tragedy, aporia (dead end).

We need intellectual work, we need to develop theories in a context in which, on the one hand, relativism and even nihilism are on the rise, and on the other, absolutism, stereotyping, stigmatisation, demonisation and annihilation of the other are increasing. We must stop the flight from intellectualism. We must stop anti-intellectualism and populism. We have to stop being satisfied with excessive simplification when we actually need to address complexity. We do indeed need

simplicity on the other side of complexity, but a simplicity that has grappled with complexity.

We need theories that demonstrate what Immanuel Kant said: There is nothing more practical than a good theory. We have to reproduce what hermeneuticists, producers of meaning, say: words create new worlds. We must re-establish the love for words. For logos. It is not without reason that our scientific disciplines are called sociology, psychology, theology, anthropology and ecology of the economy! We must also love God with all our intellect. We need to remember that the Christian faith is a faith that seeks insight. Faith makes life's challenges more understandable, and faith seeks to be intellectually accessible to all people. We must recall that one does not have to commit intellectual suicide to be a Christian or any other religious believer.

4.2 *Ethos* refers to

- the type of habitat we create (a society of dignity, healing, justice, freedom, equality);
- the habitus we live with (the civic and public virtues of faith, hope, love, justice, wisdom, moderation and civil courage);
- the “actions”, measures and methods we implement. An ethically informed citizenship and ethical leadership, even ethical heroism, are part of the definition of religious institutions and universities and parliaments as well as executive and trade union offices and newsrooms, as parts of the most valued, civilized and sophisticated institutions of society. This HHH (i.e. Habitat, Habitus, Handlungen [actions]) primarily demands attention in a society where corruption threatens to become part of our national identity or even its hallmark.

4.3 *Pathos* refers to the value of compassion. We are called upon to show personal and institutional compassion (*deernis* in Afrikaans). Pathos, which strives for the wellbeing of all, especially the weakest among us, should be a driving force for all our efforts as institutional partners in our society.

In other words, our work is far from over. After 25 years, we still have a vivid memory of our shared promise and are moving forward together. And this forward movement also includes our valued personal and institutional friends and partners in Germany. When we designed our own Constitution, we oriented

ourselves strongly in terms of the constitution of our partners. Over the decades we have worked together in a variety of ways. Our partnership has encouraged us to work even harder, to be more persistent in fulfilling South Africa's noble and valued promise and potential.