
The Ecumenical Struggle in South Africa: The Role of Ecumenical Movements and Organisations in Liberation Movements to 1965

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When we contemplate ecumenism in South Africa in the twentieth century, we often automatically think of the outstanding work of the South African Council of Churches during the years of apartheid. However, it had two precursors in the General Missionary Conference of South Africa (1904–36) and the Christian Council of South Africa (1936–68). Parallel yet integral to these developments we note the significant contribution of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference. These did not originate or exist in a vacuum but responded to the needs and currents in society and were active in the midst of para-movements such as the Christian Institute.

Keywords: Black Consciousness, black theology, Christian Council of South Africa, South African Council of Churches

INTRODUCTION

Ecumenism and the anti-apartheid struggle have a close, perhaps even common, symbiotic history in South Africa. Certainly, during the apartheid era the ecumenical movement was closely, but arguably not exclusively, aligned to liberal or radical voices for change in the Christian community. This largely intra-Protestant ecumenism in the struggle was enhanced but also complicated by growing Catholic–Protestant ecumenical co-operation against apartheid. It was enhanced because the Catholics brought with them a worldwide institution that had been engaged in public life for almost two millennia. The complication arose because the Catholic Church was (and still is) highly centralised in its administration and discipline; as a result, the Catholics in South Africa were and remain subject to central institutional constraints, not least the degree to which they could engage ecumenically.

Surprisingly little has been written about South African Catholic–Protestant ecumenism in the struggle. Tristan Anne Boer's comparative study of the activities of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Southern African

Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC)¹ is a notable exception. Her conclusion – that the SACC was far more radical than the SACBC in its opposition to apartheid – is both true in fact and briefly notes an important point, although it could be argued that that point is underemphasised. While the SACBC represented a church, the SACC was an ecumenical organisation. Thus decisions of the SACBC, subject to the central Roman authority of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church, were to varying degrees binding and implementable, whereas the SACC's predecessors' decisions were neither normative to its member churches nor really implementable without the consent of their members. Following the Protestant principle, individual clergy and church figures were freer to say what they liked – and other Protestants were free to accept or reject such judgements. Catholic figures, particularly clergy and bishops, were more constrained by church discipline but, paradoxically, more able to implement their decisions. In an authoritarian environment, a relatively 'authoritarian' church has the resources to act more effectively.

On another level, we should be clear that ecumenism meant different things for Catholics and Protestants. Until the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–1965), the Roman Catholic Church, holding that it was the one true church, was fiercely anti-ecumenical: the only point to ecumenism was the return of those considered to be heretical or schismatic (including Protestants and Orthodox Christians) to the correct faith. After the Council, although other Christians were seen as 'separated brethren' this rigid view was moderated by a sense of acceptance that historical faults existed on both sides. For Protestants, ecumenism was associated with 'church unity' and working towards a united Christian church. The Protestant approach embraced a spirit of compromise and steps towards full communion through processes such as intercommunion. This idea, that intercommunion was useful to build unity, was accepted by Catholic theologians such as Rahner and Fries, Küng and Schillebeeckx, but rejected by the Catholic Church's hierarchy, who saw intercommunion as the fruit of union, not its seed. Thus it should be noted that ecumenism in South Africa between Catholics and Protestants meant different things to the partners in dialogue. Where all could agree, however, was that they could, after Vatican II, co-operate in the struggle against the common enemy, apartheid, and – where possible – pray and study together.

This article attempts to sketch how Catholics and Protestants, SACBC and SACC, engaged in an ecumenical struggle against apartheid. While dogmatic and institutional constraints (both between Catholics and Protestants and between Protestant churches themselves) made religious reunion impossible, common revulsion towards apartheid made ecumenism essential. Even there,

1 T Borer, *Challenging the state: churches as political actors in South Africa, 1980–1994* (Notre Dame, IN, 1998).

however, the nature of church polity made the ecumenical struggle complex. At the base of the Church – in local communities, in youth, student and working-class organisations – the type of struggle waged was more radical and more ecumenical than at the level of church hierarchies. In addition, and despite institutional constraints, a small core of individuals – Denis Hurley (Catholic), Joe Wing (Congregational), Desmond Tutu (Anglican), Beyers Naudé (Reformed) – in many respects transcended their denominational affiliations (though not without constraints) and became truly ecumenical figures in the struggle.

From late in the nineteenth century, a new class of black leaders began to emerge who had been educated at mission schools. As they became more confident, they began to assert their position in society and church. For instance, in the Presbyterian context, Rev Pambani J Mzimba, who was educated at the prestigious Lovedale Missionary Institution, seceded from the Free Church of Scotland Mission in 1898 largely as the result of racism and its attendant outcomes:

Mr Makiwane [Mzimba's colleague], who was not at that meeting, was greatly troubled when he heard that decision, so much so that he said this was the third session that statements were made selecting colour lines as the grounds of the unfitness of a Missionary.²

In due course this became a significant contributing factor in the formation of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa in 1923.³ The role of education should not be underestimated in this process,⁴ nor should its contribution to ecumenism, non-racialism and gender inclusivity.⁵ Within a few years of this event and other secessions, the mission community began to work together in a loose manner with the aim of promoting an authentic African church. There had been similar attempts from the 1880s but none endured until the beginning of the twentieth century.

THE GENERAL MISSIONARY CONFERENCE OF SOUTH AFRICA

This was all in line with a founding principle of the General Missionary Conference of South Africa (GMCSA), which was formed from representatives of the majority of Protestant churches and missions and which styled itself as a

2 University of Fort Hare, Howard Pym Africana Library, Presbytery of Kaffraria Minute Book, Meeting of 15 April 1898, P Mzimba, letter of resignation.

3 D Thomas, *Christ divided: liberalism, ecumenism and race in South Africa* (Pretoria, 2002), pp 61–62.

4 See G Duncan, *Lovedale – coercive agency: power and resistance in mission education* (Pietermaritzburg, 2003).

5 *Ibid.*, pp 102–106.

'Benevolent Empire of missionary endeavour'⁶ (with the exception of the Roman Catholics and the African Initiated Churches (AICs)) in 1904. The principle stated 'That the establishment of Native Churches is the true aim and end of Christian Missions, and these ought to be truly African in character, so as to become the authentic expression of African Christianity.'⁷ The GMCSA aimed 'To watch over the interests of the Native races and where necessary, to influence legislation on their behalf'.⁸ Yet black and female participation was restricted at first. The organisation's initial main interest was missionary and ecclesiastical matters; it was also concerned with 'heathenism' and 'Romanism'.⁹ We must not overemphasise the work of the GMCSA, because it was a venue for 'confering' about 'the social and political cause of the black peoples' and not an organisation.¹⁰ From 1912 it became involved in sociopolitical issues but there was no uniformity on matters of racial policy.¹¹ This was true throughout the churches of European origin (CEOs – often erroneously referred to as English-speaking churches), who came to be described as 'servants of power'¹² and 'trapped in apartheid'.¹³ Villa-Vicencio estimates that the role of the CEOs 'was at best ambiguous and inconsistent'.¹⁴ They combined the best and worst of South African liberalism: 'churches demanding equality before the law and yet showing conformity to certain imposed standards of Western individualism and achievement'.¹⁵ Although they demonstrated differences in theology and rhetoric, they certainly did not do so in *praxis*.

Alongside this development we note the advances made by the Dutch Reformed Church (the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk or NGK) and the Roman Catholic Church, which were able to allocate greater resources of personnel and finance, leading to substantial conversions. Parallel to this we note the continued growth of the AICs. For various reasons, the Dutch Reformed churches and the Catholic Church stood apart from the ecumenical bloc: the Dutch Reformed group of churches because they feared ecumenism would lead to greater racial integration, the Catholics for more complex reasons.

6 R Elphick, *Equalising the believers: Protestant missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*, (Pietermaritzburg, 2001), pp 110 ff.

7 General Missionary Conference of South Africa (GMCSA), *Report of the Proceedings of the First General Missionary Conference of South Africa, Held at Johannesburg, July 13–20, 1904* (Johannesburg, 1905), pp 109–133.

8 GMCSA, *Report of the Proceedings of the Second General Missionary Conference of South Africa Held at Johannesburg, July 5–11, 1906* (Moriija, 1907), p 129.

9 C Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: a socio-theological history of the English-speaking churches* (Cape Town, 1988), p 72.

10 Thomas, *Christ divided*, p 118.

11 See *ibid*, pp 14–15.

12 J Cochrane, *Servants of Power: the role of the English-speaking churches, 1903–1930* (Johannesburg, 1987).

13 Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in apartheid*.

14 *Ibid*, p 73.

15 *Ibid*, p 76.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH BEFORE THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: AMBIVALENT ENGAGEMENT, BOTH ECUMENICAL AND POLITICAL

Having been prohibited from functioning in South Africa under Dutch rule, and growing only slowly as a mission to white settlers and colonial troops from 1806 to the 1830s, the Roman Catholic Church struggled as relative latecomers to evangelise local communities amid ongoing hostility to the *Roomse Gevaar* ('Roman threat') from other churches, notably the NGK.¹⁶ The 1948 National Party election victory was noted with fear by the Catholic bishops: with roughly 80 per cent of clergy being foreign-born missionaries, the newly established (1950) bishops' conference felt vulnerable.¹⁷

In addition, being part of a centralised institution, the Catholic Church in South Africa was subject to official positions on ecumenism promulgated from Rome, which until at least the 1950s was anti-ecumenism: Catholics were prohibited by the Vatican from participating in the ecumenical movement from 1910 until the 1960s. Draconian restrictions were placed by Rome on Catholic–Protestant interactions: marriage with non-Catholics (called, ironically for South Africa, 'mixed marriages') was deeply frowned upon; episcopal dispensation was needed for Catholics and Protestants to pray the Lord's Prayer together; Catholics were prohibited from entering Protestant churches; and intercommunion, of course, was prohibited. Catholic thinking, even among progressives such as the young Bishop Denis Hurley of Durban (31 at time of his consecration in 1947), still perceived 'others' as persons to be converted to the true faith, even though Hurley was among the most friendly of Catholics towards Protestants in practice.¹⁸

Nevertheless in South Africa, quite far from Rome and in an environment where Catholics felt the urgent need to build up ecumenical relations, low-key – often personal – contacts were maintained. The early twentieth-century Cape Town priest Monsignor Frederick Kolbe was a Catholic scholar-ecumenist and social commentator whose network of contacts included figures such as Jan Smuts;¹⁹ and through semi-official church newspapers such as the *Southern Cross* dialogues were being initiated. Notable among these early ecumenists were people such as the philosopher Marthinus Versfeld (a convert from the NGK), other lay Catholic intellectuals and Denis

16 W Brown, *The Catholic Church in South Africa, from its Origins to the Present Day* (London, 1960); G Abraham, *The Catholic Church and Apartheid: the response of the Catholic Church in South Africa to the first decade of National Party rule, 1948–1957* (Johannesburg, 1989).

17 Brown, *Catholic Church in South Africa*; Abraham, *Catholic Church and Apartheid*.

18 P Denis, 'Reunion of Christendom or ecumenism? Relations between Catholics and Protestants in South Africa before Vatican II in the magazine *Southern Cross*', (2011) 106 *Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique* 546–570; See also P Kearney, *Guardian of the light: Denis Hurley: renewing the church, opposing apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg, 2009).

19 K Boner, 'Dr FC Kolbe: priest, patriot and educationist', DPhil et Litt thesis, University of South Africa, 1980.

Hurley, all of whom saw the need to link ecumenism with engagement in public life.²⁰ Possibly because of anti-Catholic sentiment, these joint features were present in Catholic ecumenism from the beginning; in this they anticipated the particular form that ecumenism would take in South Africa during the twentieth century. At the same time, each existed in tension with the other: some felt that too strong a political stance would harm ecumenism (with the NGK) and could even lead to political backlash against the Catholic Church; others increasingly felt that attempts to curry favour with the Afrikaner elite would lead to rejection of the Catholic Church by the black majority and that, in any case, apartheid was moral indefensible.

Two further factors complicated matters: though the Catholic Church in South Africa was overwhelmingly black in membership, power (both clerical and financial) rested in white Catholic hands, with the majority of clergy being foreign-born and vulnerable to deportation by the state.²¹ Many white Catholics – indeed probably most – were racist, though it has been suggested not overly so. In addition, many Catholic leaders feared the influence of Marxism on African nationalism and – with the global Catholic Church being staunchly anti-communist – were more than a little cautious about identifying with the anti-apartheid struggle as it took off in the 1950s.

It is within this context – struggling between the Scylla of white domination, Protestant hostility and their own anti-ecumenical prejudices, and the Charybdis of realising the moral need to act against racism and in co-operation with non-Catholics and other people of good will – that the SACBC was founded in 1951.

The first occasion when ecumenism and politics collided for the Catholic Church was the result of a relatively innocuous SACBC statement on ‘race relations’ in 1952. Drafted mainly by Denis Hurley it effectively distinguished human dignity from democracy, using Thomistic reasoning. The right to dignity was inherent to everyone whereas democracy was an acquired right. By implication, it was possible following such logic to deny blacks the vote (at least until they had attained a certain level of ‘civilisation’²²) but not to treat them in any way as lesser human beings. Despite such tortuous finagling of the issues, intensified by the ANC-led Defiance Campaign at the time (something the SACBC regarded with unease, fearing communist influences), the response of the Dutch Reformed churches confirmed all the worst fears of

20 A Egan, ‘Catholic intellectuals’ in J Brain and P Denis (eds), *The Catholic Church in Contemporary Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1999), pp 314–348.

21 Brown, *The Catholic Church in South Africa*; Abraham, *The Catholic Church and apartheid*.

22 This was reminiscent of nineteenth-century Protestant thinking: for example, that of Dr James Stewart, a prominent and influential Free Church of Scotland missionary statesman, the principal of Lovedale Missionary Institution and a founder-member of the GMCSA, who expressed the vision which led to the foundation of the South African Native College at Fort Hare in 1916.

the Catholic conservatives (including the Apostolic Delegate from the Vatican). The NGK promoted a pamphlet attacking the *Roomse Gevaar*, which included four proposals: state control over all church-run schools, hospitals and orphanages, to be run along strictly Protestant lines; prohibition on immigration of all Catholic clergy, sisters and others immigrants into the country; deportation of any Catholic clergy or church workers who challenged the apartheid order; and the banning of all importation or publication within South Africa of Catholic propaganda.²³

Some of the Catholic Church's fears came to fruition when in 1953 the government effectively nationalised *all* church schools, instituting Bantu Education, designed to keep blacks in a subservient position. Although the Catholic Church submitted its mission schools to the Bantu Education Department after 1953, its decision was rooted in pragmatism: it was felt that the Church could maintain an influence (both religious and political) by working within the system.²⁴

Hurley, however, refused to be intimidated. As the 1950s progressed he became increasingly impatient with the conservative and cautious approach. Through his pressure, the 1957 SACBC Statement on Apartheid provided a far more radical response than that in 1952.²⁵ Though it still advocated a 'qualified franchise', it included a stinging critique of racism, white supremacy and apartheid:

The contention [that separate development is morally just] sounds plausible as long as we overlook an important qualification, that separate development is subordinate to white supremacy. The white man [sic] makes himself the agent of God's will and the interpreter of His providence in assigning the range and determining the bounds of non-white development. One trembles at the *blasphemy* [our italics] of thus attributing to God the offences against charity and justice that are apartheid's necessary accompaniment.²⁶

Apartheid was thus 'intrinsically evil',²⁷ the first time that it was named as such by any Christian Church in South Africa. With these few lines the Catholic

23 Kearney, *Guardian of the light*, pp 66–68.

24 H Chamberlain, M Pavlecivic and B Tiernan, 'Catholic education' in Brain and Denis, *Catholic Church in Contemporary Africa*, pp 190–195; B Flanagan, 'Education: policy and practice', in A Prior (ed), *Catholics in apartheid society* (Cape Town, 1982), pp 85–88; D Bixby, 'The Roman Catholic Church and apartheid in education: a study of the African school system', BA Honours research essay, University of Cape Town, 1977.

25 SACBC, *The Bishops Speak*, vol 1 (Pretoria, undated), pp 13–17, available at <<http://www.sabc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/STATEMENT-ON-APARTHEID-.pdf>>, accessed 18 June 2015.

26 *Ibid*, p 14, emphasis added.

27 *Ibid*, p 15.

Church surged ahead and, at least to some degree, shed its caution about offending the apartheid authorities. It would also shed some of its ecumenical inhibitions during and after the Second Vatican Council.

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL'S IMPACT ON CATHOLIC ATTITUDES TO APARTHEID AND ECUMENISM

The renewal, or *aggiornamento*, of the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council had a major impact on Catholics in South Africa,²⁸ not least through its many reforms, and on the ecumenical response to apartheid. A number of South African bishops, notably Hurley but also Archbishop (later Cardinal) McCann (Cape Town) and Gerard van Velsen (Kroonstad), a Dutch Dominican in charge of the SACBC Afrikaans-language apostolate, made interventions at the Council. Of the interventions, the most forthright and progressive on ecumenism came from van Velsen.²⁹ Hurley spoke strongly about liturgical reform, social justice, greater collegiality between bishops and the Pope, and religious freedom.³⁰

Even before the Council began, some Catholics in South Africa – mostly students, intellectuals and ordained theologians – were hopeful that it might spell renewal. They had imbibed the reformist *nouvelle theologie* of Congar and De Lubac, even as these innovative theologians were being silenced by Rome. These groups were also the first venue for the celebration of the newly tolerated 'dialogue Mass' – the Tridentine Latin liturgy but celebrated by the priest facing the congregation – before it became common in parishes.³¹ In the *Southern Cross*, the semi-official Catholic newspaper, opinions were more cautious at first, often attempting to strike a 'balance' between conservative and progressive. Among the issues that struck a chord, being deemed essential to Catholic reform, were ecumenism, greater participation by ordinary Catholics and a new orientation of church to world in the public sphere. As news filtered out from Rome at the end of 1962 that major changes were likely to follow, the editor of the *Southern Cross* rather defensively observed on 24 October that 'Everyman [sic] may be misled by what he reads in [the secular press] about the Council' and suggested that:

28 M Abrahams, 'The Second Vatican Council', in Brain and Denis, *Catholic Church in Contemporary Africa*, pp 213–245; A Egan, 'How Vatican II renewed South African Catholicism: as perceived by *The Southern Cross*, 1962–1968', paper presented to the Joint Conference on Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, June 2012.

29 Abrahams 'Second Vatican Council', pp 219, 224; P Denis, *The Dominican Friars in Southern Africa: a social history* (Leiden, 1998) pp 184–185.

30 P Denis (ed), *Facing the Crisis: selected texts of Archbishop Denis E. Hurley* (Pietermaritzburg, 1997), pp 25–47.

31 Egan, 'How Vatican II renewed South African Catholicism', p 2.

The prudent reader should be slow to believe first news of the Council's doings and decisions. His paper may be an excellent one. But its prime concern is not religion. With all deference, therefore, on its reports of this great gathering the sensible Catholic will wait to see whether what he reads fits in with what he already knows, or is confirmed by a good Catholic source.³²

The following year the newspaper had an anonymous special correspondent – Denis Hurley – whose reports confirmed that reform was indeed at hand.

In South Africa, the time of the Council also reinvigorated Catholic interest in social justice. Lay people debated the pros and cons of apartheid in the pages of the *Southern Cross*, while a few set up a liberal magazine, *Challenge* (not to be confused with the 1990s ecumenical publication of the same name edited by Albert Nolan). *Challenge* looked at church renewal and apartheid forthrightly, and included articles by leading figures in the (mainly white) liberal (and Liberal Party) establishment.

Between Council sessions, Denis Hurley also took a more active part in public life. Having been a member of the South African Institute of Race Relations since the 1950s, in 1964 he found time to deliver its Hoernlé Lecture. Entitled 'Apartheid: a crisis of the Christian conscience',³³ it was both a critique of apartheid and in effect a call to ecumenical action (mirroring the call to conscience of the Reformed theologian Beyers Naudé and the Christian Institute, of which Hurley was a member). Hurley noted that 'one looks in vain for the influence of the Christian law of love in South African legislation'³⁴ and he linked Christian involvement in politics directly to Pope John XXIII's idea of humanising and Christianising the world. In South Africa this called for a thoroughgoing critique of apartheid and the promotion of social justice. He concluded that:

Apartheid is a challenge to every Christian worthy of the name to see the whole South African situation in the light of the law of love, to realize that the salvation in which we believe includes deliverance from everything that is mean and unworthy and restrictive, everything that unlawfully hinders the full flowering of a God-given capacity, its contribution to the human treasury and its enrichment of the universe. Apartheid is a challenge to a crusade of love, of love bursting through the shell of old fears and prejudices to meet the love that has been waiting all these years in the hearts of Africans and Coloureds and Asians, love withered by interminable delay, love almost extinguished by disappointment and despair, but love that

³² Ibid, p 6.

³³ Denis, *Facing the crisis*, pp 58–76.

³⁴ Ibid, p 62.

still survives and hopes and waits for the day when Europeans will be Christians at last.³⁵

The language of this text is fascinating, insofar as it mirrors a combination of 1960s cultural optimism, a hopeful anthropology and a sense of a God seeking to include all. Hurley speaks of Christians, not just Catholics, and roots his argument less in Catholic Thomism than in Scripture. Insofar as the Church has a role in social change and the promotion of political rights, it is the whole Church and all Christian people (not simply a clergy elite) that have the task. The ecumenical spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which saw non-Catholics as ‘separated brethren’ and expressed the deep need to work towards real Christian unity, is also one of striving and journeying together (the ‘pilgrim people of God’ of the Vatican II dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*) to God’s just future. Scholarly and rigorous, yet passionate and driven by a vision of action, this speech points to the trajectory of Denis Hurley’s own future as a fearless and outspoken public figure, a committed practitioner of the values of Vatican II (even when it was no longer fashionable in the Catholic Church and possibly cost him the cardinal’s hat) and – in both these things – a strong practitioner of ecumenism.

By the end of Vatican II, to Hurley’s delight and the delight of progressive Catholics everywhere, a new mood was in the air. Through Council documents such as *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), *Nostra Aetate* (1965) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), the Catholic Church opened up dialogue between Catholicism and non-Catholic churches and even initiated interfaith conversations, with emphasis on co-operation in areas of common interest, particularly justice. Moreover, *Dignitatis Humanae* endorsed the principle of religious freedom and called on Catholics to promote the religious freedom of all, no matter what their beliefs. The final document, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), proclaimed the Church to be at the service of humanity as a whole, with justice being once again integral to the Christian life. Within four years of the Council the SACBC set up a national Justice and Peace Commission that worked ecumenically to challenge the injustices of apartheid. Similarly, an Ecumenical Research Unit was set up, led by an Anglican canon, at the National Seminary in Pretoria.³⁶ The Catholic Church established joint commissions with Protestant churches and the SACC in later years to examine seminary formation; indeed, it gained observer status in the SACC. Finally, the SACBC set up a Commission for Ecumenism that continues to this day.³⁷

35 Ibid, pp 74–75.

36 B Hinwood, ‘Ecumenism’, in Brain and Denis, *Catholic Church in Contemporary Africa*, p 352.

37 Ibid; G Daniel, ‘Ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue: the work of the SACBC from 2002–2012’, in S Bate and A Egan (eds), *A Story Worth Telling: essays in honour of Cardinal Napier* (Pretoria, 2013), pp 59–77.

At grassroots level, ecumenical prayer services were held in parishes. The previous prohibitions on attending non-Catholic services were lifted. Many seminarians studied with their Protestant contemporaries. For a short period in the late 1960s Intersem – an ecumenical movement of seminarians, some of them connected to the National Union of South African students (NUSAS), the University Christian Movement (UCM) and later the Black Consciousness movements – flourished. The National Seminary build up its ties further with the University of South Africa and later the University of Pretoria, whose faculty sometimes gave guest lectures – and even taught courses – to the seminarians. The young Dominican friars in Stellenbosch and their professors went further, accommodating in their community the *oop gesprek* ('open discussion') group of dissident Afrikaner intellectuals led by the philosopher Johannes Degenaar and his colleagues Jan van Eck and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert. This group welcomed critical dialogue on politics and religion, so much so that they attracted non-religious activists too, such as Rick Turner and the University of Cape Town NUSAS leader Raphael Kaplinsky.³⁸

Enlivened and emboldened by the Vatican Council, lay Catholics took on an increasingly vocal role in the Church. Though *Challenge* magazine lasted only a few years, it took a strongly independent line theologically and politically. Other Catholics used the *Southern Cross* as a vehicle for politico-theological debate. Slowly, too, black Catholic laity started to develop a voice of its own; when Black Consciousness emerged, many of its members were Catholics, including seminarians and young priests. An age of silence and inhibition had ended. At the forefront of this new voice was Denis Hurley.

PROTESTANT INITIATIVES

During this period, differences became clear and divisions among churches were most distinct in the area of race. In particular, two responses emerged. The 'assimilationist' response was aimed at unitary church structures, such as the Presbyterian Church of South Africa, formed in 1897. This might be described as a somewhat liberal response. Then there was the 'segregationist' response, where ethnic difference was claimed to have been ordained by God and required separate structures, as seen, for example, in the Dutch Reformed Churches. However, it was not so simple as that, for the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa (BPCSA) had been formed in 1923 as a logical and natural development of the Free Church of Scotland Mission, and as the result of a pragmatic and realistic approach to the race issue, especially in countering the effects of the rise of the African Initiated Churches (AICs).

38 I MacQueen, 'Resonances of youth and tensions of race: liberal student politics, white radicals and black consciousness, 1968–1973, (2013) 65:3 *South African Historical Journal* 365–382.

This 'Ecumenical Bloc'³⁹ of CEOs was officially involved in the ecumenical movement, both nationally and internationally. That it was a dominant Protestant bloc precluded significant Catholic involvement, despite its significant missionary activity, until after Vatican II.⁴⁰ Later, in 1967, the Roman Catholic Church became an observer member of the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA). In addition, there were three other blocs. The Dutch Reformed Bloc (consisting of both black and white members) of Afrikaans-speaking churches was linked to the state by its close association with the *Broederbond*; in 1959 these churches bonded together in a Federal Council of Dutch Reformed Churches. Its constituent were separated ethnically until 1994, when the NGSK and the NGKA (the black and coloured Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk mission churches) united to form the United Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA). The AIC Bloc was formed as part of the search for African selfhood. Its approach to ecumenism began with the formation of the African Independent Churches Association in 1965, which was created through co-operation with the Christian Institute, largely on the initiative of Beyers Naudé, and came to include the CCSA.⁴¹ It has become pro-ecumenical in its involvement with other denominations. The Zion Christian Church is the largest AIC in South Africa, based at Moriah in Limpopo province. Finally, there is the Pentecostal Bloc, which has often been designated as racist; 'officially they claimed to be a-political'.⁴²

The Christian Council of South Africa (1936–1968)

While bodies such as the GMSA are described as first-phase ecumenical instruments, organisations such as the CCSA 'were stronger and more effective vehicles of united Christian action than their first phase counterparts'; nevertheless, 'they remained essentially pragmatic and co-operative efforts'.⁴³ In establishing the CCSA, through handing over the work of the GMCSA, 'The missionaries hoped that that body would be a more effective instrument for defending their values than the loose and unrepresentative structures of the GMC'.⁴⁴ The aim of the CCSA was 'to unite Christians and to make Christianity more of a living force in society'.⁴⁵ Beyers Naudé described it as 'a fellowship of Christians who seek individually and together to be used by God to give practical expression to the growing desire for fellowship and understanding between

39 Thomas, *Christ divided*, p xix.

40 *Ibid*, pp xx–xxi.

41 C Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: pilgrimage of faith* (Cape Town, 1990) pp 102–103.

42 Thomas, *Christ divided*, p xxv.

43 *Ibid*, p 16.

44 *Ibid*, p 90.

45 R Birley, 'Introduction' in International Commission of Jurists, Geneva (ICJ) (eds), *The trial of Beyers Naudé: Christian witness and the law* (London, 1975), p 9.

Christians in our country'.⁴⁶ He gave an account of the aims and objectives of the CCSA at his trial in 1973:

In the first place, to give a more visible expression of the biblical truth of the unity of all Christians. In the second place, to relate the truth of the Gospel more immediately to the questions of our daily existence and to make its meaning more clear to its members and to all who wish to know it. In the third place, to act as a group of Christians who wish to help bring about reconciliation between the widely divergent, divided and conflicting groups of Christians of different Churches and colours in our country. And in the fourth place, to offer the services of our members to any Church or group of Churches who wish to make use of them to give a better expression to the Kingdom of God in South Africa.⁴⁷

The CCSA widened the gap between the CEOs and the family of Dutch Reformed churches as it became 'an effective platform for united Christian action'.⁴⁸ In 1942, the Christian Reconstruction Conference held at the University of Fort Hare 'gave the "liberal forces" their first opportunity to express the ideological underpinnings of their position through the CCSA'.⁴⁹

The Christian Institute (1963)

In 1963, the Christian Institute was formed, sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC) to provide a forum for discussion of biblical witness in the area of race relations. This arose out of the publication of the journal *Pro Veritate*. Birley describes the context in which this became necessary:

An Afrikaner writer once said that his people throughout their history had escaped from political and social problems by moving away from them, especially with the Great Trek. Now they could move no further, so what could they do? They moved the problem. That is what Apartheid essentially is, a desperate attempt to push the racial problem of South Africa out of sight. The Christian Institute has forced South Africans to look at the problem.⁵⁰

The Institute replicated the aims of the CCSA to a degree, particularly in its support of an association of African Initiated Churches and its desire to provide theological education for black students.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p 11.

⁴⁷ ICJ, *Trial of Beyers Naudé*, p 55.

⁴⁸ Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in apartheid*, p 75; Thomas, *Christ divided*, p 95.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p 97.

⁵⁰ Birley, 'Introduction', p 11.

From 1948, the Nationalist government began to emphasise the danger of liberalism. The State President, Dr Diederichs, said: 'The fight in South Africa is between Nationalism and Liberalism – this doctrine of liberalism that stands for equal rights for all civilized human beings is almost the same as the ideal of communism.'⁵¹ The issue of liberalism therefore loomed large in Afrikaner thinking.

Following 1948, with the coming to power of the Nationalist Party, and in addition to the decline in liberalism and the rise of neo-liberalism and a post-missionary generation of church leaders, the aims and objectives of the CCSA and allied bodies were confronted with failure. The CCSA also failed to heal the breach between the CEOs and the Dutch Reformed family at the disastrous WCC-sponsored Cottesloe Consultation in 1961. Furthermore, this period witnessed the rise of black leadership in churches to replace the dominant white leadership. Finally, they had had no significant contact with the African National Congress. As a result of these factors and of changes in ecumenical emphasis towards church unity, the CCSA adopted a new constitution and changed its name to the South African Council of Churches in 1966.

CONCLUSION

The period under review covers the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. It begins a few years prior to the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh (1910) and concludes with the end of the Second Vatican Council (1965), on the eve of the birth of the SACC. It was an era of intense ecumenical activity, largely occasioned by the growth and development of racist attitudes and later legislated policies. It is a story of resilience, versatility and adaptability within a deteriorating social, political and economic climate. It is also a story in process. The church struggle was yet to be intensified in different ways and at varying levels through the rise of Black Consciousness, black theology, the inauguration of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa (1963) and the Church Unity Commission (1968). It is a truism that the best of the Church as the one body of Christ is brought out during a period of threat and potential persecution of its members, who were all created in the image of God.

51 Birley, 'Introduction', p13.