

THE DRC'S ROLE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITION IN SOUTH AFRICA: BACKGROUND OF A RESEARCH PROJECT AND QUESTIONS FROM A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

Wolfram Weisse
University of Hamburg

Abstract

The paper introduces a broader research project at the University of Hamburg with the title 'Change (Umbruch) processes in African societies and the ways to cope with them'. Four of these projects are related to the question of the role of religions in the South African transition from Apartheid to Democracy. As theoretical stimuli socio-economic and socio-religious options are sketched in order to underline the necessity of discerning in which direction ongoing transition is likely to move. Halfway through the paper there is an analysis of two expert interviews (with Dr Fritz Gaum and with Dr Allan Boesak) on the role of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC/NGK) in the phase of transition. The differences in the interviews lay the foundation for the concluding remarks, some of which are sharpened by relating them to German experience.

1. Introduction

It may be asked whether it is not arrogant of researchers from Europe to think that they can make serious contributions to the research on *Umbruch* (change) in South Africa, especially concerning the role of the NGK (Dutch Reformed Church). I am in no position to give an answer to this question. I can only cautiously attempt to explain our guiding questions and the framework in which we seek to address them. The composition of the contribution is thus as follows:

- Questions, assumptions and the structure of a broader research project on change processes in African societies. It includes the questioning of the role of the NGK within such a process.
- Socio-political and socio-religious options as a horizon for predicting possible directions of change.
- A first and very preliminary investigation of our research is based on two expert interviews on the role of the NGK in the transition to democracy. This is an attempt to determine the Church's role on the basis of divergent self-reflections, and to formulate tentative questions on this basis.

Before I come to these points, some short clarifications are needed:

Firstly, I do not see myself in the role as someone who has the right to judge or condemn, but as someone who seeks to understand the role of the Dutch Reformed Church within the transition process from *Apartheid* to democracy. We in Germany had to grapple painfully with the role of the Church during the National Socialist period under the Nazi regime. This process of self-reflection continues to the present day. Therefore we do not see ourselves in the role of omniscience, but the starting point of our research process is *medelye*, compassion, in a deep sense as consisting of both sympathy and (self-) criticism.

And *secondly*, research today on relevant themes can only be conducted on an interdisciplinary and international basis – and it absolutely demands a cooperation. This is the reason why our research topic has been discussed with South African colleagues from the very beginning of the planning phase. In this process we tried to work out basic questions, to synchronize our research fields and to formulate a division of labour. This allows us to cover more research areas and to avoid the duplicating of research work. I would like to emphasize the importance of such co-operative research with our South African colleagues for enhancing the validity of the findings. Such a joint and ‘dialogical’ research approach could be characterized by being participatory, process-orientated and reciprocal.

On participation:

Research questions must be negotiated between the participating partners, and research methods must be co-ordinated – both must be done from the very beginning and not only after one partner has already formulated the leading questions. We have tried to do this. Co-operation will be successful only when the same data is interpreted from different perspectives and with different methodical approaches. That is exemplified in the contributions of Christine Anthonissen and Annette Rosenfeld.

On process-orientation:

In the exchange and the analysis of data, one can assume that the best results will emerge only during a research-process, which takes opposite points of view into consideration. This way of acquiring results emphasizes process and hence it does not put the main stress on quick and spectacular results.

On reciprocity:

This research work is best undertaken in a reciprocal way. To give you an example, I would like to mention the research work of John de Gruchy, who provides a good example with his research on Bonhoeffer. He made decisive contributions to the research on the struggle of churches in the time of National Socialism. He is an example of colleagues who have not restricted the focus of their study to South Africa. By this I would like to vote against a ‘one-way road’ of research import or research export and advocate a bi-directional, reciprocal approach to research.

Many have indicated the necessity of reciprocity in research, for example, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He advocates investigating the objects of research through the eyes of someone else. He writes: ‘This is impossible without a real conversion, a metanoia, a mental revolution, a change of the entire perspective on the social world’ (Bourdieu 1996: 284-85, own translation). He calls for a ‘break-up of the common sense’, a break with the common scientific reasoning. This means that ‘a revolution of one’s personal view is necessary, the breaking-down of pre-constructions’ (Bourdieu 1996: 285, own translation). What this requires is close co-operation in the abovementioned way and reciprocity which are the preconditions for such a ‘mental revolution’. It means breaking away from pre-constructions and a conversion in research perspectives. We should be encouraged through this suggestion of Bourdieu to view research as an open, innovative enterprise.

2. Framework of the research project

In this section I would like to provide an overview of a larger research project based in Hamburg, the ‘SFB-project’ (an abbreviation for *Sonderforschungsbereich*, which is the highest and most comprehensive form of support from the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, the central and official German research agency). It is a special research

project entitled *Umbruch* (change/transition) in African societies and how people cope with this situation. Colleagues from seven different departments of the University of Hamburg participate in this special research project – they are namely from Theology, History, Education, Political Sciences, Sociology, Economics, Archeology, as well as Anthropology, African and Islamic Studies. The *Missionsakademie* and the Institute for African Studies in Hamburg also participate. In this project, basic perceptions and findings on change processes in Africa and the coping strategies will be explored. We focus on an understanding of change, which is reflected in the German expression *Umbruch*. In order to explain this, I quote from the project's outline: 'Our understanding of social *Umbruch* is a global change of established political, social, economic and cultural systems and their institutions, norms and values, all of which are perceived by individuals and groups as being discontinuous.'

The term *Umbruch* is located on a continuum between incremental social transformation and revolution. This term is interpreted differently by the various scientific disciplines participating in our research project. As an example, let us look at this term from a political science view, where *Umbruch* describes a situation where an out-dated system has come to its end and a new one develops, often under great dynamic force and with open perspectives and, not necessarily as result of intentional actions.' Furthermore, we also refer to the theological formulation of a 'rapid social change' (this has been the key word for an extended ecumenical project) in the sense of analysing the interrelationship of social, political, and religious changes. *Umbruch* is not a new phenomenon, or a phenomenon applying only to African societies. In Europe it has been studied again and again at different times. In the last decade social *Umbruch* (change/transition) surfaced in a more acute way and has also been noticed more seriously in the Northern hemisphere - this time as a consequence of the end of the East-West confrontation and growing globalisation, evident in the areas of economy and the ever faster growth of information and communication technology.

We don't want to restrict our horizon to the transformation processes in Eastern Europe. The processes of change in African societies give us the opportunity to learn more from contexts, structures, organisations and persons that seem far away from us in Northern Europe. And sometimes it is easier to learn from other backgrounds than one's own, and only in the process of investigation is one able to recognise challenges to our own problems and even similarities in possible solutions. Furthermore, Europe is inevitably involved in the social developments in Africa due to the history of colonisation as well as current international political and economic structures. For this reason the connections between Africa and Europe - including the fact that African immigrants coming to European countries fosters a closer link between African and European societies - have to be thoroughly analysed in order to better understand the complex interplay of causes and consequences of transformation processes.

In order to give you an overview of our entire research project I would simply like to enumerate our different sub-projects:

The first group of projects is related to Africans living in Hamburg. The titles of these projects are:

- *Coping with new socio-cultural environments.* (A project which identifies social competences of Africans in Hamburg and strategies for inner self-organization, integration into the receptor society, communication with the society of origin, retention of old and formation of new identities);

- *Educational institutions as reflected in the biographies of young African refugees.* (An examination of competencies and strategies these youth apply, develop and acquire to assert themselves despite adverse living conditions; and a study of the relation between repressive legislation and the human rights and freedoms propounded by our society);
- *Biographical processes of 'Bildung' of young African migrants in Germany: A case study of students from Cameroon.* (The project focuses on young Africans who move to begin or to further studies in Europe where they are confronted by severe changes of socio-cultural condition against the background of social changes in their country of origin).
- Another project is directed to Ghana as well as to South Africa and is entitled: *The development of social space in African cities: Between structural adaptation of the economy and sustainable urban development: The examples of Accra and Cape Town.* (The objective of this study is to identify - along ethnic, religious, and social contours - different social and economic trends in the regional structures and developments of cities and to elaborate visions for future scenarios).

In the second group, the transition process in South Africa is related to the role of religions:

- The first sub-project is: *Churches in the process of social, political and cultural transition in South Africa.* (Here we focus on the NGK and the African Independent Churches. Emphasis will be laid on the churches' self-understanding, role and changing function within society under the Apartheid government on the one hand and in the process of transition since 1990 on the other hand).
- The second sub-project is: *Islam in the South African Transition Process.* (At the centre of this analysis are the different political, social and religious structures, the scope of action, and the different Muslim groups and organizations and their influence on society).
- The third bears the title: *Magic and witchcraft in the democratisation and development process in African societies.* (The project aims to promote understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of the transition process in South Africa by concentrating on the micro-politics surrounding the belief in witchcraft and its interplay with the ongoing efforts for democratisation and development).
- And the last project in this group deals with *African Traditional Religion in the transformation process of the new South Africa.* (Although African religion has been stigmatized during the Colonial and Apartheid eras and although it was judged as 'static' and 'backward' by ethnocentric science right into the 80s, it has achieved a new status and widespread public esteem during the 90s. The debate surrounding 'African Renaissance' and the public discourse on Post-Apartheid nation building illustrate the necessity of investigation of autochthonous values and forms of social life in the new South Africa).

The third and last group of projects is related mainly to East Africa:

- *Maintenance and loss of political options in the context of transition from colonial dominance to independence as seen by eye-witnesses from Zanzibar* is one of them. (The project deals with autobiographical narratives related to the political objectives and options of the heterogeneous elite in Zanzibar during the transition from colonial domination to political independence in 1963/64).
- The title of the next project is: *Historical transformations in the 'Orbis aethiopicus'. Causes and repercussions of religious and ethnic conflicts.* (The project analyses three

of the most important historical conflicts and transformations in Ethiopia which up to this day shape historical consciousness in that region).

- The last project is *State consolidation or state collapse in Central and Eastern Africa: Determinates of state-conditioned integration in Tanzania and in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. (The leading question for this project is: Why is the Democratic Republic of Congo disintegrating, and how was it possible for Tanzania to continue consolidating in the 1990's? Why have two African states in Eastern and Central Africa been developing so differently over some decades, although they had comparable points of departure on becoming independent at the beginning of the 1960's?).

In our SFB project we are trying to draw the hidden potential contained in these African developments. During the past years, Africa as a continent, seems to have been left in the cold, at least as far as the world economy is concerned. Politically, Africa has also been branded with rather stereotypized descriptions or depressing impressions of what is currently happening on the continent. In order to illustrate this I will quote just from two headlines which are not from the tabloid press but in fact stem from a rather reputable newspaper. The first headline is: *War, Greed and Aids force Africa to its knees. The Dark Continent threatens to tear itself into pieces, because, in the long run, without peace there will not be any improvement in sight*. The article was written by Hans Brandt and printed in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* dated 29 May 2000. And the very same day, an editorial from Brigitte Kols appeared under the title *Failure in Africa*. Such headlines have a dominant tone which relegates more hopeful nuanced headlines to the backstage. In dealing with Africa we have to do with contradictory developments. Seen from Europe, Africa on the public scene is on the one hand a continent which is partly forgotten, partly ignored, and partly written off. On the other hand, South Africa is considered a bridgehead for a world power such as the USA which wants to obtain access to the whole continent through a strong influence in South Africa. So much for the political framework. In our SFB project we are interested in analysing processes of *Umbruch* which are part of generally positive developments rather than absorbing uncritically scary news of the destructive potential on the African continent. For these reasons we have chosen South Africa as one focus for our research.

I need not go into detail as to why South Africa especially is of high importance for the study of transition processes. Contrary to all those expectations which only saw one set of alternatives, namely, either to hold onto Apartheid or to engage in a long and devastating civil war (Hanf 1990, Giliomee 1997), a relatively peaceful transition has been achieved in South Africa. Whereas in other studies the political and economic sphere is the focus, we have the impression that it is worthwhile to analyse specifically the role of religions in the South African transition process. This could contribute to a better understanding of the reasons, dynamics and hindrances to the process of change in South Africa. Additionally our own perspective could be enlarged: At least in Northern Europe the role of religions in the public sphere has been either neglected or underestimated. The motive for this attitude lies in the assumption that religion has increasingly diminishing influence in a secular state and that the remaining benefits of religion are restricted to the private sphere and reserved for old and sick people.

We realise in the meantime (see my next section) that this assumption could be at best one-sided or even wrong. The investigation into the public role of religions in South Africa could sharpen our overall analysis. The second factor relevant for us is in connection with the analysis of the NGK, as an illustration of the danger of being a self-confident, dominant

church, more aware of its linkage to the political system than appreciating the potential of its own prophetic voices and of dissenters. In this regard it could also be challenging for churches in Germany to see the danger of a religious organization that restricts itself to its 'own' interests and therefore running the risk of contradicting its basic message: love of God and of the neighbour with respect of 'the other'. Such an obligation cannot be restricted to those of one's own confession without the God of the earth being diminished to a provincial hero. Finally, the case study related to South Africa allows a perception of how difficult, dangerous and at the same time unavoidable it is for religions to find a way between the poles of politics and escapism.

When investigating the relevance of religion in South Africa's process of *Umbruch* (change) we have the following guiding questions:

- Are religious communities in processes of *Umbruch* catalysts for social and political emancipation processes, or are they allied with reactionary/resistant forces that render them static?
- Can religions help to cope with conflicts that are emerging or intensifying during an *Umbruch* or, on the contrary, do they contribute to fuelling the conflict?
- Do religions/religious communities contribute to dialogue and understanding or to isolation and polarisation?

3. Socio-political and socio-religious options

In dealing with transition processes we cannot turn our view only towards what has been overcome but also have to look for future prospects. The aim of achieving 'democracy' has been effective inasmuch as the Apartheid system suppressed the majority in the country. With the formal introduction of a democratic system a lot has changed, but it seems necessary to take into account possible hindrances and options for the ongoing transition process. New problems must be faced, new options be dealt with; for example it could be necessary to make decisions whether or not to adapt to the world trade model under the World Bank's conditions or to find a different way.

Working towards an analysis of the actual dominant social background, the explanatory attempts of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are impressive. In an article entitled 'Neo-Liberalism. The Utopia of Unlimited Exploitation Becomes Reality' Bourdieu (1998) criticises the increasing power of the world-wide dominance of neo-liberalism and that it is characterised by the absolute supremacy of a specific economic system, which until now has not been specified or analysed. He points to a contrast between a competition-based economic logic and a social, justice-oriented standard of value. Through a global development where economic logic detaches itself from social conditions, an unguided and uncontrolled development arises by its own dynamics. As a consequence, the education system for example is not anymore taken account of, as it should be, although nowadays it has a determining role in the production of goods and services. Mobility of capital and a profitability squeeze - meaning always expecting higher profits - set the political system itself under pressure and produce unemployment - even in fields with surplus. This is what led Bourdieu to the following characterisation:

Thus we see how the neo-liberal utopia (that of profit maximisation and boundless exploitation, W.W.) tends to embody itself in the reality of a kind of infernal machine, whose necessity imposes itself even upon the rulers... like the Marxism of an earlier time, with which, in this regard, it has much in common, this utopia evokes powerful belief - the free trade faith - not only among those who live off it, such as financiers, the

owners and managers of large corporations, etc., but also among those, such as high-level government officials and politicians, who derive their justification for existing from it (Bourdieu 1998: 114-115.).

I would like to add that those people also canonise the present economic system as the only salutary one, because after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc it is unrivalled, and in consequence they overlook the victims of the system. An alternative approach is only possible if related back to a social theory that does not mean designing decision-making as unilateral top-down, but much more from bottom to top. This matter of concern must be understood within a socio-political framework where it is not clear anymore whether the knowledge and practice of experts is for the benefit of the whole population, and where the credibility of political representatives is dissolving, and where people no longer believe in hierarchical political structures – including the predominant Western democracies – and that the pressing problems of economics and peace policy can be resolved. It is therefore necessary that non-formalised social groups participate more in social life. Despite the habit of relying on directives and the wisdom ‘from the top’, now it is necessary to integrate greater parts of the population, including organisations on a middle-range level. Therefore, voices ‘from below’ must be taken into account more.

In this way one's eyes are directed towards institutions and people that initiated changes out of a position of powerlessness, such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. They have shown that it is possible to overcome public injustice, even when the system was surrounded by an aura of eternity. In view of increasing social problems, at the moment proposals from the fields of political science and sociology are increasingly warning against an uncontrolled and flagrant power of elites. This necessitates a stronger involvement of the population that goes beyond the still common institutions of parliamentary democracy.

As an example of such a voice one can refer to the British social scientist Anthony Giddens. In his book ‘Beyond Left and Right’ (Giddens 1994) the idea of a dialogue-orientated democracy as a framework is developed in order to give social movements and self-help organisations a share in political decision-making. This requires a moment of participation and taking of responsibility by those concerned, by fringe groups, unconventional and small groups. Through this a socio-political horizon is created which is not built on the dominance of fixed power structures in democratic systems, but gives space and lends weight to a perspective ‘from below’. A democratisation of democracy therefore seems necessary. Although Giddens doesn't touch on the possible role of religious groups, such a framework elucidates and underlines the tasks of religious bodies in the public sphere. It is important not to ignore the mandate of religion in a democratic state and perhaps to emphasise the relevance of prophetic theology and approaches of Liberation Theology.

As indicated in the introduction, religion has for some decades not been taken into consideration for public developments in Western countries, but there seems to be a new interest in this question. Two publications might serve to illustrate this new development. On the one hand the approach of Samuel Huntington recognized the importance of religions in the public arena. His book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996) attracted much attention. In this publication the US political scientist explains his thesis, that in the not so far future political-ideological discussions will increasingly be replaced by cultural-religious ones. Huntington starts from a fixed understanding of culture, which, because of corresponding values he equates cultures and religions. In my opinion his approach is dangerous, because his analysis is based on culturalistic and religious

blame. Furthermore he provokes exactly that he is warning of: conflicts and war. Such a classification of religion in connection with this approach is problematic. Nevertheless, it draws attention to a factor which nowadays - at least in Germany - is still far too underestimated, namely religion. In consequence, over a short time, a new interest in the relevance of religion in the public domain has emerged. The second approach which should be taken into consideration, is a quite extensive report of the Bertelsmann Foundation addressed to the Club of Rome, entitled *The Limits of Social Cohesion* (Berger 1997). This study was edited by the Austrian-American sociologist Peter L Berger and aims at an analysis which gives greater consideration to cultural resources of society. He warns against a neglect of basic factors of social cohesion besides the dominating macro-structures of society, especially the economic and high-level political. With regard to these ideas, the questioning of the position of culture and religion and the correlation between them is of great importance. In contrast to Huntington, he doesn't suggest a 'clash' of cultures but underlines the necessity of *dialogue* between cultures. In contrast to a method that defines the culture's boundaries based on cultural and religious fundamentalism, this book advocates a 'tolerant dialogue' which should be expressed at an intermediary level of our society and this could be within the framework of religions and religious communities.

This approach gives precedence to cultural and religious aspects for a process of mutual understanding in our society. It indicates the relevance of educational institutions and underlines the importance of efforts for understanding, generally in the cultural domain and therefore especially in the religious domain too. He makes clear that not competition and fighting determine relations between cultures, but dialogue. He does not mean dialogue between economic and political top officials, but dialogue on a medium and lower level; for instance the dialogue between members and representatives of religions (In this connection I cannot more than mention the approach of the ecumenical theologian Hans-Jochen Margull who developed the idea of inter-religious dialogue on an everyday level, which he regards as being theological constitutive).

Although I could only touch upon the different theoretical approaches we see the following: For understanding the direction of transition processes and the quality of democratic systems the dominance of world wide political structures must be taken into account. And in this regard new problems must be faced. Where solutions cannot be found only on a socio-economic macro-level, institutions on a meso-level need to play an increasingly important role. This is relevant background for looking at the possible role of religions in transition processes where suppression is overcome but where the structure and function of democracy have not yet been decided upon definitely.

4. The role of the DRC in the process of transition

In our research project we are dealing with the churches' role during the process of transition in South Africa. I would like to give you a quick insight into this work. I am concentrating on the NGK during the final stage of the Apartheid era by means of the question: Did this church contribute and if so, how did it contribute to the changes in the last days of Apartheid?

Essentially, in Europe the Dutch Reformed Church is understood as the institution that developed the concept of Apartheid and therefore gave the National Party its legitimisation for its politics of Apartheid since 1948. The close social relations between members and executives of the NGK with members and executives of the South African Government are interpreted as extremely intense possibilities of mutual influence. Assuming that this is not a total misrepresentation, the real and complex questions arise after this generalisation, for example: How is this interrelationship to be seen and estimated in the crucial years of the

80s and the beginning of the 90s? Was the NGK a monolithic power bloc, as widely assumed in Europe, or were there cracks within the church in regard to priorities in the public field? Did the NGK encourage the government to go for change or did the church opt for the maintenance of the political system of Apartheid? Has the church been leading or lagging behind in this regard? And what were the reasons for the Afrikaners to give up power at a time when they still had military and police control over the country?

It doesn't seem possible to refer to the broader discussions on the most decisive factors for the political change in South Africa. As a matter of course questions of international developments (e.g. the boycott of South African goods, the financial restrictions, the changing position of France, England and USA, the breaking down of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe) and internal political and military strategies on the side of the government and the ANC have been of utmost importance. But this doesn't necessarily mean that the role of social institutions like churches, especially the NGK, is to be neglected. Although relevant research has already been done in this field (Kinghorn 2000, Kuperus 1999) there is a need to look closer at the facts and to investigate the understanding of people who actively were involved in the NGK at that time. In the context of a survey of official statements of the NGK and relevant secondary literature, we try to come to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of different groups, shifting alliances, inconsistencies and general developments within the NGK. This is done by means of a close reading of *Die Kerkbode* applying hermeneutical and socio-linguistic methods, as in the contributions of Annette Rosenfeld and Christine Anthonissen in this volume. In addition, expert interviews with politicians, church leaders, and academics will serve to shed light on the field of investigation.

In the following section I would like introduce you to the most central information from two interviews with leading Reformed theologians. They might serve to show how different the opinions of people can be and how difficult and dangerous it is to be satisfied with a simple explanation in regard to the questions mentioned above. I conducted both interviews in March 2000.

I start with the interview of Dr Frits Gaum (Weisse 2000b), editor of *Die Kerkbode* since 1976, general secretary of the General Synod of the NGK from 1990 to 1998 and moderator of the Western Cape Synod of the NGK from 1995 to 1999. I asked him about the NGK's relevance to the transition in the fields of society and politics. I would like to present briefly four themes from the interview:

The government listened to the advice of the NGK:

According to Dr Frits Gaum the NGK was an important factor in the state, because the government listened to the church's advice. But one should not, he said, overestimate the influence of the NGK. Nevertheless, most members of the government were members of the NGK, and they listened to the NGK's advice, even if they did not do what the church wanted them to do.

The church took the lead:

Gaum pointed out that De Klerk's speech at the beginning of 1990, announcing the release of Nelson Mandela which marked the beginning of a decisive process of political liberalisation in South Africa, can be traced back to an interpretation of the development in South Africa, which had already been pre-formulated in the draft for the revised form of the declaration *Church and Society*. That means, according to Gaum, that it was not the church that followed De Klerk, but the other way round. The break of the church with Apartheid happened first, the church encouraged the government to abandon Apartheid.

Reasons for change:

Gaum gave the following explanation for the processes of socio-political change. The external pressure was of great relevance. As one component of the growing reorientation that led to changes, Gaum named the dialogue with German churches. However, apart from that, the actual situation of South Africa at that time was important too. It became clearer and clearer that Apartheid was not the solution to the increasing political problems of South Africa.

Reasons to give up power:

Finally I would like to clarify the internal factors which, according to Gaum, brought about change. He said that during the sixties and seventies the NGK's mistake was to view the politics of racial segregation more in relation to theory than in the political and concrete reality of Apartheid. In the eighties the Afrikaner saw that politics must be changed after a time, if they wished to be a Christian community. It seemed to be better to strive for justice, even if it would be disadvantageous for them personally rather than to maintain privileges in a society of injustice. Thus far, the voice of Gaum.

The second interviewee is Dr Allan Boesak (Weisse 2000a). He exercised an extraordinary influence in church and society from the seventies onwards, especially in the eighties. I just want to recall a few facts: Allan Boesak was ordained and inducted into office in 1968 as a very young pastor. In 1970 he went to Kampen in the Netherlands to further his studies and complete his doctor's degree. In 1976 he became students' pastor at the University of the Western Cape. There he worked for nine years. After that he became pastor of a church in Bellville. At the same time he participated in several synod committees where he was very active, both nationally and internationally. I only mention his presidency of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. During the nineties his function changed. He increasingly became a party politician, and in 1995 he was appointed South African ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva. He never took up this position because at the time he was accused of having used large sums of donor money for private purposes. Since then he has been under permanent pressure. In May 2000 he was convicted on charges of embezzlement and received a gaol sentence – he was released in May 2001.

Now I would like to refer to the points that Allan Boesak stated as his perspective and interpretation of the role of the DRC during the final years of Apartheid.

The relevance of the NGK in the political field:

This is, according to Boesak, was the most difficult and terrible chapter of history. Today, he says, the NGK 'has become one of the most irrelevant institutions in the country.' During the forties through until the sixties and seventies it was a different case. At that time the NGK was the most powerful organisation which undergirded Apartheid and decisively shaped the politics of the government. Furthermore, the NGK gave the South African police a clear conscience. The Calvinistic theology of the NGK's interpretation should have been the first to be dismantled. However, that did not happen, because 'white solidarity in order to maintain white power was stronger than anything else'.

The church lagged behind:

Boesak said in an interview that the NGK isolated itself, even in situations where church leaders knew that this would be unsuccessful. By the end of the eighties politicians well understood that change was inevitable. The church did not follow their ideas, or the church did not understand what it was about and was not prepared for it. Politicians were much more progressive. PW Botha knew that changes were necessary. The NGK 'never

understood that'. Only a few persons understood the situation and developed a new concept of church.

Pressure from outside:

During the eighties the government itself was not anymore open to the NGK. FW De Klerk knew that he could still hold his position for 10 years, but he also knew that the costs would be far too high. The South African government had been set under pressure, for example at the Kuala Lumpur conference. There Boesak himself was present and called for sanctions and stronger financial pressure on South Africa's government. In 1990 De Klerk knew that banks would strengthen their pressure and that South Africa would be unable to withstand such pressure forever. De Klerk knew that but the NGK did not. A man like Desmond Tutu was conscious of it. The NGK did not know what was going on. The NGK was unable to advocate a total war. And also within the church people were confused about the course of Apartheid. A separated development of the Afrikaner could not anymore be biblically justified.

The quality of change in the NGK:

Boesak assumes that nothing of significance has changed. The Church's language has changed, but not its support for Apartheid. Only a few changes happened. From a retrospective point of view he says that the ecumenical program to combat racism had a central meaning to the NGK. The programme to combat racism meant a change of basic paradigms. The churches' reaction to the anti-racism programme should be re-investigated historically, especially the implications for the ecumenical movement. Boesak emphasised the importance of the programme to combat racism, putting it into relation with the riots of Soweto in 1976. Leaving aside all these discussions about 'violence', Soweto 1976 meant that the government murdered children in the streets. Now they knew that the time had come.

The extent of rage of the black population had become clear together with its determination to carry out a revolution. On the one hand there was the topic of 'violence' discussed within the framework of the programme to combat racism. On the other hand there were demonstrations of unarmed children and the fact that they were shot dead. The NGK could not ignore this, and was even threatened by it. For the white churches this situation should have been one of the initial moments to bring about necessary changes: unarmed children were being shot! This confronted churches with the need for their own self-reflection. At that time the NGK should have said: 'Enough is enough!' However, on the contrary: 'They hardened their hearts'. They chose to maintain their privileges. They preached love but hardened their hearts when children were shot dead. The NGK did not change. In 1976 the Soweto riots provided pressure from inside while the anti-racism programme was pressured from outside. The year 1976 was the watershed.

There is a wide gap between the views of Frits Gaum and those of Allan Boesak. Only both in a similar way view the fact that there was pressure from the outside. However Frits Gaum recognizes the pressure as coming from the church, for instance from the EKD (Protestant Churches in Germany), while Boesak describes the political and ecumenical pressure as being decisive. Apart from that, they only agree on the high political relevance of the NGK until the early seventies. While Gaum underlines that also during the eighties the NGK had a strong influence and played a pioneer role in calling for the necessary process of change, Boesak does not share this opinion at all. Following Boesak's opinion the NGK undoubtedly lagged behind, sometimes even did not know what was going on. Both opinions cannot be harmonised. However, they form cornerstones for our ongoing research process. The analysis of other interviews has to be added, for example those

conducted in March 2001 with politicians such as FW de Klerk, General Constand Viljoen, Roelf Meyer and Carl Niehaus. All these in turn have to be related, as already mentioned, to existing research results, to the analysis of official statements of the NGK and especially to *Die Kerkbode*.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion I would like to present you with some preliminary findings in condensed form, meaning that they are more tentative and exploratory.

Differences and different angles of interpretation

- *Differences should not be harmonized:*

The role of the churches in South Africa during the transition process cannot easily be estimated. The range of and the contrasts between a self-interpretation as expressed by Dr Frits Gaum and the judgement of Dr Allan Boesak cannot be assessed and reconciled in a rapid or easy way. Other interviews and other material have to be added.

- *International frame for interpretation:*

The international influences for transition have been extraordinarily important for the changing attitude of the NGK. On this point Gaum and Boesak agree with each other. Therefore it is important that the role of the South African churches should be examined in an international and in an ecumenical context. In relation to this one should not generally speak of 'globalisation' but work on a concrete analysis of international bilateral relations, on both a state level as well as on a church level.

- *Local and ecumenical angle of interpretation:*

As a matter of course the different interpretations result partly because of the different positions of the two interviewees in church and society. Fritz Gaum as member of the NGK and of the Afrikaner community, Allan Boesak as member of the 'daughter-church' of the NGK and member of the oppressed community in South Africa. But there is also an ecumenical factor that should not be neglected: The differences in the two interviews should also be regarded in view of the isolation of the one and the ecumenical contacts of the other. Whereas Frits Gaum faced the limitations of a church that had withdrawn its membership in almost all international church bodies since the beginning of the 1960s and had been excluded in 1982 by the last one, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, because of its involvement in the theological legitimisation of Apartheid. Allan Boesak gained entry and became more and more prominent in ecumenical bodies, such as becoming the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. These different vantage points have consequences in the way in which they interpret the past.

- *Questions and considerations to deepen the analysis:*

- We should take seriously the fact that, totally different and sometimes even contradictory forces act within religious communities such as the NGK. We should concretely analyse, who tends more towards inertia and who tends more to change - and the reasons for this, and the time.
- We should be able to detect differences by contrasting and relating authentic materials of that time (for example in *Die Kerkbode*) to current receptions or interpretations, such as in interviews.

- We should take into account that the process of *Umbruch* (change) in South Africa took place at different times in different socio-religious arenas and political groupings. Finally, we should consider the process character of the changes, which clearly started before 1990 within socio-political or religious groups, and ask whether these changes in the end contributed to the political changes of the years 1990-1994 and the following years? And most certainly, one must add, the transformation process and the churches' involvement in it have not come to an end yet.
- *Questions from a German background:*
 - Our own experiences in Germany, namely the identification of the 'Deutsche Christen' with the Nazis and the experiences of the NGK show us the dangers of a politicisation of the church. Is the appropriate alternative to avoid any public resolutions, any social engagement? Apart from the question, of whether this is possible, the abovementioned analyses of Bourdieu, Giddens and Berger remind us of the necessity for institutions like the church, to actively engage in the social field in order to help people have their voices heard, thus contributing to the democratisation of democracy (Giddens). In so doing to bring in the perspective 'from below', and to stand for the needs of the poor in a world society (Bourdieu) that tends more and more to serve the needs of an economic system with its elite beneficiaries instead of the needs of the whole population. Churches cannot wash their hands clean by ignoring such challenges. Neither escapism nor politicisation is the answer. Churches have to tread the narrow path of trying to be independent, being the conscience of the society, exercising a prophetic task and being the agents for the poor instead of the allies of the rich. This is a difficult task. Perhaps this is more a task for individual people in the churches than it is for the church institutions themselves. The answer to the question as to whether a church meets those needs is dependent on whether it allows dissenters to go their way and grants them freedom of speech - as members and not as outcasts of the church institution.
 - On the basis of the abovementioned background it may be easier to recognize the potential danger for a church that concentrates on its members only. The church must be prepared to respect others, not only the dissenters in its own institution, but also people of other religions, ethnicities and world regions. The church is the church not for its own sake, but for others (Bonhoeffer) and, on a concrete level, *with* others. The church has to recognise the reality of the existence of other religions and world views, and has to respect people with different backgrounds as children of the one God. If this is ignored, then exclusivist tendencies might become strong as seen in the NGK. The churches have to face others and their interests - and they have to share power, if they are in a dominant position in their country, in order to prepare the way for an inter-religious dialogue. This is a lesson to learn worldwide. The critics of Apartheid in our country have led our churches to a position critical of the NGK and its support of the status quo. This has been an important experience for the churches in Germany. But now it is time for them to apply that lesson to their own context: That is, to share power with others in time and not to wait till there is no other alternative. In spite of a reduction in their own membership and a growing number of people of other religions the predominant pattern of our big Roman Catholic and Lutheran/Reformed Churches still is determined by an implicit or explicit attitude of power. In this regard our churches

are perhaps not so far away from the NGK in recent decades as they would like to see themselves.

- My German background also inspires my last question. I would like to ask whether the function of the NGK as a legitimating authority of Apartheid, on a theoretical base, was perhaps the guarantee that the option of the total destruction was not seriously considered. Maybe this is the fundamental difference between the Nazi and the Apartheid regimes. National Socialism ignored religious and humanitarian appeals as a whole. The National Party identified itself as being Christian and could be addressed (despite all existing perversions) on a minimal level of humanity and on its self-reflection as reformed Christians. Could this be a reason why the option of a war of total destruction did not gain acceptance within the government of South Africa as it was at one stage feared by the Western world?

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