Abstract
The role of churches in Namibia had investigated by researchers who aimed to document the history of various churches, as well as those who highlighted the role of black churches in particular, as mouthpieces for the disenfranchised majority in the struggle against apartheid. This article aims to shed light on a matter that had received relatively little attention, namely the church as an instrument of social justice and peace. An assessment of the role of various churches reveals to what extent these institutions were handicapped by ethnocentric concerns, which militated against the promotion of ecumenical cooperation. Except for a brief period in the 1970s and 1980s when the Council of Churches in Namibia served as an instrument for inter-church cooperation and promotion of social justice projects, little had arguably been achieved in establishing workable, enduring ecumenical ties. An attempt will be made to account for this state of affairs.

Introduction
Much is often made of the fact that Namibia is a largely Christian country, with about 90% of the population belonging to various Christian denominations. However, what strikes one when looking at the history of Christianity in the country and the role of the church, is the absence of evidence to support any claims that religion was a potent force for promoting the cause of human rights and mutual understanding and for eliminating ethnic divisions. In assessing the role of religion and the church in Namibian society, this article is concerned with three issues. The first section will present a brief overview of the establishment of Christianity in Namibia and an account of formative moments in the history of attempts at inter-church cooperation during the colonial period, particularly the 1960s and 1970s. This second section will feature a brief assessment of the role of the so-called ‘black churches’ in challenging the establishment churches’ hegemonic claims to truth and their complicity in sustaining the colonial order. This section also

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focuses on the role of the black churches as an instrument for opposing apartheid and promoting unity in both pre- and post-independent Namibia; the third section raises questions about the apparent inability of the church to serve as an instrument for transformative justice. Here, the focus is on the question why the church proved to be unable to speak truth to power, in the process failing to transcend the divisions generated by colonialism, apartheid and ethnic loyalties. Finally, it should be emphasised that this brief overview of the role of the church in Namibia largely reflects, with a few exceptions, empirical and theoretical paradigms that tend to stress western concepts and ideas, such a concern with civil rights, rationalistic approaches to religion and a division between the secular and spiritual. As such it lacks the African voices which would reflect particular approaches and an understanding of the spiritual world which is very different from that of western conceptions. Such a more holistic, African-centred perspective of the church in Namibia is urgently required.

Christianity in colonial Namibia

The two biggest churches in Namibia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELRCN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), emerged during the 1950s as products of the missionary endeavours of the Rhenish and Finnish Mission Societies, respectively. The first missionary initiatives were undertaken by the London Missionary Society, on whose behalf the Albrecht brothers established a mission station in 1805 at Warmbad in southern Namibia. Their efforts bore little fruit and LMS terminated the mission and relocated to the Northern Cape. A similarly ineffectual missionary enterprise was that of the Wesleyan Mission Society between 1820 and 1850. The work of the Rhenish and Finnish Missions dates from 1842 and 1870 respectively, with the Rhenish Mission active in Central and southern Namibia, working among the Damara, Herero, Nama and Baster peoples. From the beginning, the Finnish Mission in northern Namibia established itself as the dominant missionary enterprise among the Oshivambo-speakers. The Roman Catholic Church started working in Namibia in 1886, the Anglican Church in 1924 and the Dutch Reformed Church established its first church in Gibeon in 1902.

The Rhenish Mission Society, represented by Carl Hugo Hahn and Heinrich Kleinschmidt, continued its work until 1957, the date at which it gave way to the Evangelical Lutheran Church Africa (ELC). White missionaries tended to assume that their wards were not yet ready to accept responsibility for managing their own churches. They also favoured the idea of church formation being structured on a federal basis, which would have led to the creation of ethnic churches. Despite earlier

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1 The two churches were formally known as Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church (ELOC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC).
2 Gerhard Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia. The Politics of Reconciliation, Freiburg, Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, 2010: 46f.
3 Heinrich Vedder, for one, supported the idea of ‘tribal’ churches organised in a federal association, cf. Johan Jakob Kritzinger, Sending en Kerk in Suider-Afrika. N’ Onderzoek na die Kerk onder die Nie-Blankes van Suider-Afrika, Navorsingsverslag aan die Raad van Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing oor die kerklik-
disagreements over this issue, the conference of pastors and evangelists unanimously agreed in April 1956 to establish a unitary church. Hellberg argues that this decision came as a surprise to the Rhenish Mission. The Finnish Mission started the process of ceding control of the church to Namibians with the establishment of a synod in 1925 (though the missionaries still retained control of the synod) and in 1957 notice was given that the church was registered with the government, proof of its new autonomy.

According to G. L. Buys and Shekutaamba Nambala the church in Namibia’s evolution towards self-determination and independence from foreign control occurred in different ways among the various groups. Three systems can be identified: Mission churches, established by missionaries and controlled by church councils. Independence was achieved when an approved church order was introduced and an independent synod established. ELCRN and ELcin both evolved in this way and obtained autonomy and their own church councils in 1957. Episcopal Churches constituted the second type of church formation, of whom the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches were examples. The leadership of these churches was in the hands of European mission personnel – the first effective indigenous leadership only emerged in the 1970s, but they did enjoy a high level of autonomy in policy matters. Settler churches developed among the original German and Afrikaner farmers who had settled in Namibia. These people arrived as baptised members of existing churches in their mother countries and these institutions constituted local ministries of denominations in the countries of origin. Dependent on foreign control, supervision and support, the local congregations only achieved independence with the establishment of synods. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) established its synod in 1957 and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) in 1960. Further church formations, both variants of the settler and mission categories, evolved in Namibia. The Rehoboth Baster community settled in Namibia and established an independent congregation, though it emerged from, and continued to be supported by the Rhenish Mission Church in South Africa. Frustration with the slow pace of indigenisation led local leaders to secede from the Rhenish Mission. Examples of this phenomenon are the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) and the Oruuano Church, both developing from the Rhenish Mission, comprising local leadership, though in the case of the former the impetus for secession came from African-Americans. These were derogatively characterised as separatist or syncretic, because they retained


4 Kritzinger, Sending en Kerk: 69.


7 Ibid.: 160f.
aspects of the African culture and heritage as an “important framework for the structuring, life and practice of these churches”. They did retain the liturgy and church order of the original mother or mission church, though.

Division and discord: 1969-1990 — disagreements about the need for unity and the role of the church in society.

Towards the end of the 1960s initiatives were underway to promote closer cooperation and ultimately unity between the three Lutheran churches in Namibia. The ELOC and ELC leadership made it clear that they considered this to be eminently desirable and a definitive demonstration of the concept of Christian fellowship. The GELC leadership was cautiously supportive of the idea, but the initiative eventually foundered on growing resistance to what was perceived as the politicisation of religion by supporters of closer ecumenical ties. Nevertheless, this episode reflected intense internal debate and introspection in GELC that lasted for roughly a decade and was unprecedented in Namibian history for the manner in which white Namibians were forced to grapple not only with religious beliefs, but also with the matter of existential relations with fellow Namibians. This refers to what may be called a Kirchenstreit (church conflict), centring on intense debates in the German community in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which reflected opposing interpretations of the role of the church in a society divided by apartheid and South African domination. The internal debate in GELC began to take place just as the reality of the growing international pressure on South Africa over Namibia, a consequence of the escalation of the political-diplomatic and military struggle by Swapo and anti-apartheid movements, was brought home to a largely ignorant white population.

The church conflict pitting pastors from Germany and the local German congregations against each other, was a reflection of the situation in West German church circles where at least three approaches could be identified: opposition to apartheid from a strictly theological and biblical point of view, a second position that tied religious considerations with active political resistance and a third that shunned the politicisation of religious issues. The search for unity among local Lutheran churches was driven by the ELOC and ELC leadership and individual Lutheran pastors in GELC who arrived in Namibia in the late 1960s. The latter represented the generation of the mid- and late 1930s in Germany from whose ranks a church reform process emerged, while Landespropst Kirschner Reit, a central figure in the church conflict in Namibia, was born in 1921 and was socialised in the transitional and Nazi period in Germany. The foreign pastors were

8 Ibid.: 161.
9 I am indebted to Dr. Dag Henrichsen who first alerted me to the significance of this phenomenon. He also graciously provided information about some of the individual German-speakers who battled their own church leadership over the latter’s reluctance to embrace unity with ELC and ELOC.
preceded by missionaries who served a dual role of engaging in mission work as well as ministering to the white German congregations. The growing division between the Confessional Church in Germany, to which the martyred D. Bonhoeffer belonged, and the official German Church during the Nazi period foreshadowed the intense debates in German evangelical circles in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Buys and Nambala, a new generation of Lutheran missionaries emerging from Germany after WWII were critical against the classical Two Kingdoms doctrine and appealed for a reinterpretation. They were enthusiastic about political renewal and social justice as part of their missionary obligation.

After 1950 Germans in South West Africa came to accept that the church would be the custodian of their identity. The church, according to Klaus Rüdiger, had been the single most important German institution in the post-war period. It was the driving force for unifying Germans in the religious sphere and for placing German private schools on a sound financial basis. It also campaigned energetically for the local administration to promote German teaching in its schools. Consequently, it was intimately associated with a hard won German sense of identity, shaped by the experiences of the previous fifty years of adversity. Gerhard Tötemeyer asserts that “[b]efore independence, many of the GELC congregational members considered the GELC to be primarily a cultural-ethnic institution more than a religious body. It was expected to protect and promote German culture and language.” Rüdiger quoted K. Dahlmann, editor of the local German daily, the Allgemeine Zeitung, who argued that irrespective of whether GELC chose to do so, it occupied a special position as the ‘carrier of the German soul’ of those Germans who

Dedering, Jürgen Kampmann und Dirkie Smit, (eds.), Umstrittene Beziehungen / Contested Relations - Protestantismus zwischen dem südlichen Afrika und Deutschland von den 1930er Jahren bis in die Apartheidzeit / Protestantism between Southern Africa and Germany from the 1930s to the Apartheid Era, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2015: 322.

11 The missionaries’ training included only rudimentary theological education, in contrast to the foreign pastors who received formal theological training. The missionaries often served both black and white congregations and were theologically profoundly conservative. With a few notable exceptions, they represented the dominant conservative element in GELC. Cf. Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 61.

12 Wolfgang Krüger, Schwarze Christen – weiße Christen. Lutheraner in Namibia und ihre Auseinandersetzung um den christlichen Auftrag in der Gesellschaft, Erlangen, Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1985: 23. The German Church’s increasingly close alliance with the Nazi state caused the Confessional Church to undertake a re-interpretation of Martin Luther’s Two Kingdom doctrine which stressed a division between church and state and unequivocal submission to the authority of the state in secular matters. The attempt to maintain the religious integrity of the Christian Church in Germany is ably recounted by Bonhoeffer’s biographer Eberhard Bethge, who traced the complex contours that Christianity in Germany experienced in the 1930s, alongside the moving and inspiring story of Bonhoeffer as an eventual Christian martyr. See Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography, Theologian, Christian, Contemporary (translated version), Collins, St. James Place, London, 1970.

13 Buys and Nambala, History of the Church in Namibia: 323.


15 Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 61.
have made Namibia their home. For German-speakers the question of unity would test their community’s self-perception and sense of identity. Wolfgang Krüger argued that a colonial and racist pattern of thought among German Lutherans in Namibia engendered in the Lutheran church divisions which later seamlessly merged into the policy of ‘separate development’ (apartheid). In contrast, for the oppressed African majority, church unity was an issue of singular importance, believing as they did that it would amount to an undertaking whereby the racist divides in the country could be overcome.

This then, represents the background to initiatives in the late 1960s to promote closer cooperation and ultimately unity between the three newly independent Lutheran churches in Namibia. When GELC was founded in 1960, contact with the newly independent Lutheran Churches (ELOC and ELC) was maintained through regular leadership conferences, with a focus on discussion and information-sharing activities. According to Tötemeyer consultative conferences took place in 1961 and 1962, as well as 1964, 1967, 1971 and 1973. Initially, the GELC leadership strongly supported the idea of unity. In 1964 Landesprost Hoeflich stated that the imminence of unity is grounded in a single God and one confession, which will find expression in a federation of churches. Soon, however, fundamental differences of opinion concerning the role of the church surfaced.

The first indication that doctrinal differences would prove to be an obstacle to attempts to achieve unity was seen in 1971 when the World Council of Churches decided to establish a fund, totalling $200,000, from which 19 organizations fighting against racism would be supported. Subsequently, Bishops Auala (ELOC) and P. Gowaseb (ELC) addressed an open letter to South African Prime Minister, John Vorster in 1971, in which the church’s opposition to apartheid and SA oppression was spelled out in no uncertain terms. These moves were roundly condemned by representative institutions of the white community in Namibia, political parties and churches in particular. According to Krüger a debate in GELC about the theological merits of financial support for the liberation movement was rendered virtually impossible due to two factors: the church leadership under first Landesprost Milk, and then his successor Kirschnereit, maintained an approach which was closely aligned with the SA government’s line that Swapo, and others, were terrorist organizations bent on causing chaos and bloodshed. Added to this, the editor of the Allgemeine Zeitung, Kurt Dahlmann, campaigned vigorously against support for the liberation movements. Rüdiger considers Dahlmann to be the prime mover in the campaign against church unity, calling him a “self-appointed

16 Rüdiger, Die Südwester: 148.
18 Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 49.
tribune”.20 Informed debate about the matter was rendered virtually impossible according to Krüger, since both German and Afrikaans daily newspapers were strongly opposed to what they perceived to be the churches’ political meddling. The only exception among the responses from the white community was the Windhoek Advertiser, whose editor Clive Cowley called the writers of the open letter “a legitimate voice of the people”.21 However, the parochial character of the German and Afrikaans communities effectively precluded these more enlightened perspectives from influencing their position.

The backlash against attempts to achieve unity among the Lutheran Churches gained momentum from 1972 onwards with the founding of the SOS-Christliche Not- und Arbeitsgemeinschaft among members of the GELC congregation of Otjiwarongo. Its principal aim was to block the proposed merger between GELC and the black churches. It also set itself the task of eradicating Marxist influences in and keeping politics out of the church.22 According to Krüger, what animated the SOS group and many Germans, was a perception that the growing awareness and rejection of the colonial past and the Nazi period, which was taking place in Germany, would have a similar effect to the merger of churches in SWA, namely to undermine German pride in their colonial past and their achievements.23 Most Germans supported the National Party and expected their church pastors to maintain a position of neutrality vis-a-vis the status quo. The SOS group campaigned relentlessly to convey its message to the church community and stated that 95% of German Lutherans opposed the merger. It threatened that if the church leadership ignored this groundswell of opinion and voted for unity, it would result in a mass exodus from the church.24 When the GELC leadership decided to approach the Executive Committee of the South West Africa Administration about the intended merger, the latter responded that it could not reject, nor approve of the matter. The effect was predictable: most GELC members of congregations saw it as a refusal by the authorities to endorse the proposed merger. The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of South West Africa (UELCSWA) leadership, in particular Präs Lukas de Vries of ELC, likewise started to openly express doubts about GELC’s willingness to embrace unity, pointing out that it tended to restrict itself to declarations of intent, without any concrete steps.25 In September 1972 the ELC Synod observed with regret the defamation of its overseas and indigenous co-workers, and especially its training institutions, which were portrayed to the white public, especially by the SOS-Christliche Not- und Arbeitsgemeinschaft as

20 Rüdiger, *Die Südwester*: 147: “die selbsternamte Rolle eines Volkstribunen”.
22 Tötemeyer notes that the SOS was established in reaction to the founding of the Arbeitskreis, the ‘left-synod’ as local Germans referred to it, which represented the local equivalent to the Kairos Group in SA which issued a strong challenge to ‘state theology’ in the early 1980s. Cf. Tötemeyer, *Church and State in Namibia*: 62f.
24 Ibid.: 88.
communist-orientated. Towards the end of 1972 it was evident that the possibility of unity between the three Lutheran churches was becoming increasingly remote.

There were however significant initiatives to support the move for unity, even though it came from a minority of German-speakers. The GELC leadership consequently oscillated between professions of intent to support unity and constant failures to take the required steps to achieve this objective. A few examples of this should suffice. In 1971 Landespropst Milk told a pastoral conference of the three Lutheran churches that his church had made a mistake in distancing itself from the open letter, but he failed to have the manuscript of his text publicly released. Two years later, under his successor, the statement was published in a small GELC church magazine, but by then divisions between the churches had had already overtaken this particular initiative. Prior to his retirement Milk stated in his report to the GELC synod in October 1972 that a process of awareness was taking place in the black churches of which they had to take notice. He mentioned that better understanding had been achieved for the causes underlying the decision to issue the open letter in 1971. The GELC leadership endorsed the Landespropst’s closing words, but the suggestion that it should be used as a basis for further discussions was not realised in practice.

By 1972 the leadership had begun to concede that the open letter, though it had a strong political impact, had emerged from the deep spiritual concerns of the black churches (ELC & ELOC). The church does have the right and obligation to address issues of political and social concern, it was stated.

Tötemeyer also mentions the initiative of certain missionaries employed by the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) in Germany, the former Rhenish Mission, who were concerned about GELC’s attitude. Having convened in Swakopmund in 1971 they issued a “confession of guilt statement” for failing to speak out on the suffering and oppression of black people in Namibia.

Tötemeyer argued that by 1976 the prospects of unity were endangered by “a minority of German-speaking Lutherans”, who actively opposed it. He nevertheless postulated that there was still a possibility that “at least a part of the German Lutheran Church will incorporate with the black Lutheran Churches, especially on an overall organizational level”, but mentioned that the rift between the black churches and the Dutch Reformed

26 Ibid.: 99: “Die Sinode het met diepe leedwese kennis geneem van die belastering teenoor sy inheemse en oorsese medewerkers, en veral teenoor sy ‘SOS Christliche Not- und Arbeitsgemeinschaft’, as kommunisties georiënteerde mense en gemeenskappe bestempel word.”

27 Ibid.: 53. A matter that clearly weighed heavily in GELC’s ‘better understanding’ of the matter, was pressure exerted by the foreign office of the EKD and the threat of withdrawing funding to GELC.

28 Ibid.: 54.

29 Ibid.: 55. In 1972 the leadership of ELC and ELOC proceeded, in the absence of GELC, to establish the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa (UELCSWA).

30 Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 74. This assessment proved to be accurate in both respects, since GELC subsequently joined UELCSWA, only to withdraw at a later date.

The internal conflict in GELC came to a head in 1973 when the visas of the GELC pastors from Otjiwarongo and Mariental were not renewed. In September 1973 four other pastors asked to be recalled by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), stating accusations against them of being promoters of communism, as well as personal and practical differences with Landespropst Kirschnerheit, as the principal reasons for their decision. A report by Klaus Kremkau, at the time African representative of the EKD’s foreign office, contained the views of all interested parties. It stressed the confidence crisis that divided pastors and their congregations over the proposed unification between GELC and the two black Lutheran churches, as well as personal and official theological disagreements about the political task of the church in Namibia between Landespropst Kirschnerheit and the pastors. These developments did not spell the end of attempts to achieve unity. After an unsuccessful attempt to join UELCSWA in 1975, GELC became a full member of UELCSWA in 1977, but opposition from congregations caused it to withdraw in 1989. GELC also joined the Council of Churches (CCN) in 1978, the year that CCN was established, only to withdraw in 1987 following a decision by its synod. Rüdiger argues that the decision to join UELCSWA in no way meant a change in ideological orientation on the side of GELC. Whether it was because of external pressure by the EKD, a fear of losing prestige and trust or other reasons, the GELC church leadership consistently maintained its position of avoiding any form of political confrontation with the state. Nevertheless, the fact that GELC did manage to join UELCSWA in 1977 raises the question as to whether there was indeed the 95% opposition to church unity that the SOS-Christliche Not- und Arbeitsgemeinschaft previously claimed.

It is interesting to note that even in the so-called left-Protestant Maksa group in Germany, there was no unanimity over the issues that had affected relations between the EKD and German congregations overseas. Wolfgang Krüger, one of the expelled pastors, joined MAKSA in September 1976, but expressed reservations about church support for the West German Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAB). According to Sebastian Justke, this signified not only a focus on factual matters, but revealed the importance of personal contacts as an issue that influenced positions. Krüger’s refusal to embrace the anti-apartheid campaign would suggest that his personal involvement in the affairs of GELC during his period of service in Namibia caused him to develop a more nuanced
understanding of the situation in the church. Activities within GELC, with individuals and groups attempting to maintain and promote contacts with the other Lutheran churches, reinforce this view.

Rolf Friede, later director of the Christian Centre in Windhoek and an ELC co-worker, established a working group (the so-called Arbeitskreis), to express its concern over the activities of the SOS-Christliche Not- und Arbeitsgemeinschaft. In March 1973 the group met in Otjiwarongo to discuss the spiritual situation in GELC. They drafted a number of proposals requesting the church leadership to approve practical measures that could promote cooperation between black and white Lutheran churches, for example through exchanges of preachers, contact on youth level, common celebration of Holy Communion and joint visits to farm labourers. Pastor Dunze of Mariental succeeded in getting his church council to agree to accept these points, though the matter of communion was treated as an immediate objective. Dunze soon reported a backlash against the initiative. In May 1973 the church leadership of GELC recommended that communities should take practical steps to celebrate Pentecost jointly with the black churches. Landesprobst Kirschnereit delayed sending out the letter, but in Otjiwarongo the church had already made arrangements and the pastor N. Nakamhela of ELC preached to the local DELC congregation and the white pastor reciprocated in the ELC church. Some church members afterwards congratulated Nakamhela. In Tsumeb Pastor Shilongo preached to the GELC congregation, whereupon a petition was drawn up and submitted to the church council, setting out the signatories’ complaints. The council referred the petition back to them. Those who objected to the idea of pulpit exchanges, a total of 44 members, adopted a resolution in which they criticized the decision and argued that such a move would undermine, rather than promote good relations between DELC and ELC.

An earlier initiative, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kooperation (working group for cooperation), undertaken by a group of younger German pastors and co-workers in ELC, aimed to promote cooperation by drawing up a list of practical steps which was sent to all GELC congregations in May 1971. A last initiative to bring black and white Lutherans together worth mentioning was the annual meeting of the Christian Academy in Southern Africa, which met in Swakopmund. Up until 1972 this gathering had been attended exclusively by white Lutherans, but in that year three black representatives attended. The next year 30 black Lutherans participated, joined in discussions, lunched together and jointly celebrated Holy Communion with white Lutherans. There was much criticism of these occasions, which continued to attract more black participants in the following years. On the one hand black Lutherans argued that this was at best a token gesture and that it would only be meaningful if it gave rise to concrete steps to achieve ‘practical progress’. DELC members objected that such occasions merely focused on political and social issues, rather than the core areas of Christian belief. A notable development in the Southern African context was the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in

38 Krüger, Schwarze Christen, weiße Christen: 105.
39 Ibid.: 106.
Southern Africa (FELCSA) meeting at Hammanskraal in 1971, where representatives of Lutheran churches expressed the view that the church has a critical function and should concern itself with the suffering of its members. This meeting, according to Rudolf Hinz, represents a direct link with the meeting of FELKSA at Swakopmund in 1975 where an appeal ‘to Lutheran Christians to strive for unity and to bear witness’ was made. In the absence of concrete achievements in the realm of church unity and closer cooperation, Krüger is probably correct to state that a commitment to continue talking was all that was achieved.

Nevertheless, a retrospective assessment of developments in the 1970s does reveal nuances that may have been lost in the heat of debates and disagreements at the time. The venerable Pastor Peter Pauly, who as a member of GELC in the 1970s recalled disagreeing with the refusal to cement formal ties with ELC and ELOC. Yet he took issue with the German pastors who chose to go back to Germany, being of the opinion that they had forsaken their duties to their congregations. For him the true criterion of a committed life would be to strive for the good and just and even if one is repeatedly frustrated, it is incumbent on the individual to persevere. He mentioned the example of the Reverend Beyers Naude, who came from a Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) tradition who, when he could no longer continue within the church itself, carried the ideals and beliefs associated with this tradition into his new vocation, in a peaceful and conciliatory manner. By implication, then, finding new ways of living according to your beliefs and values is more important than outright confrontation.

Another person who recalls the church struggle as characterised by ambiguity is Eberhard Hoffman, former editor of the Allgemeine Zeitung. He does not deny that the disagreements had a negative effect on church relations and that the cause of unity had been damaged by GELC’s refusal to take the required steps to implement a formal merger. However, he also recalls that efforts continued to retain links, for example between the women of the churches, and that it is wrong to consider the lack of formal church unity as a termination of contacts. He also recalls the difficulties for many people in GELC, who considered cooperation with their black and brown brethren to be important, in reconciling the use of violence to secure objectives deemed impossible to obtain in peaceful ways, with their strongly held belief in solving problems in a peaceful manner. Hoffman also mentioned that the image of Allgemeine Zeitung editor, Kurt Dahlmann, as an implacable foe of unity is exaggerated. Dahlmann had in fact in 1970

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41 Krüger, Schwarze Christen, weiße Christen: 104.
42 Pastor Peter Pauly, personal communication, Windhoek, 11 August 2011.
43 Eberhard Hoffman, personal communication, 12 August 2011.
expressed an opinion about the situation in Namibia that was remarkably objective for the time. Dahlin, whom Krüger depicted as a major force in obstructing closer ties with the black churches, was not a reactionary, according to Hoffmann. He later conceded that he did initially support the National Party, willing to allow its declarations of good faith to be tested by experience. Gradually, however, he became convinced that its policies were based on “division and hegemony”. By the mid-1970s his changing views were reflected in the Allgemeine Zeitung and he began to experience strong opposition from within the German community. When he criticized SA’s involvement in Angola an edition of the paper was banned and the Allgemeine Zeitung was excluded from an agreement between the Minister of Defence and the Newspaper Press Union. In 1978 he was asked to vacate the post of editor by the new owner of the Meinert Group, D. Lauenstein. From 1978 to 1992 the Allgemeine Zeitung was an outspoken supporter of South Africa and its military involvement in Namibia.

Another noteworthy initiative from the German community was the NADS-sponsored conference in 1993 to debate the contributions by German-speakers to independence in Namibia. Particularly significant were the remarks of one black participant. He called on Germans to reduce their almost exclusive focus on German affairs and metropolitan Germany and to reach out to each other. He cautioned against “copying the horrifying model of some of the Germans in Latin-American countries, who opted for an isolation with fairly catastrophic consequences.” Nevertheless, he concluded:

At least there is something taking place. The German-speaking people are speaking together. They are debating. They are throwing stones at each other, but they are trying to reach something with it. That is something very good. There is not that much happening in other communities in this country. But there is really a need for it all over the country.

The Dutch Reformed Church in Namibia: from cooperation to division

In the pre-1950 period regular contacts were maintained between the DRC of Namibia and the Rhenish Mission and in the 1950s and 1960s also with the Finnish Mission. This state of affairs continued when the missions were transformed into independent churches (ELOC and ELC). At the beginning of the 20th century the Rhenish Mission supported fledgling DRC congregations in the territory. In return the DRC offered financial support to the Rhenish Mission during World War II when several pastors were

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44 Ibid.  
45 Ibid.  
49 Ibid.: 108.
interned and there were even rumours of the DRC taking control of the mission. Although the Rhenish and Finnish Missions had by then already been well-established, an area for inter-church cooperation was opened when it was realised that the spiritual needs of Oshivambo-speaking contract labourers were not catered for. The task of ministering to these workers was initially undertaken by Rhenish missionaries, later to be followed by Finnish missionaries. It was from within the ranks of the DRC that calls for placing the ministry to the contract workers on a more permanent, structured footing came. In 1947 a conference in Otjimbingwe accepted the Triangular Agreement which was renewed in 1957 and continued until 1968.

According to the agreement Finnish-trained evangelists would be paid by the DRC and the physical infrastructure in the form of church buildings would be supplied by the Rhenish Mission. The idea was to render services to contract workers wherever they were present in sizeable numbers. The agreement appeared to have worked well, although there were occasional instances of disagreement, particularly as the DRC proved to be unable to provide funding for all the evangelists supplied by the Finnish Mission (later ELOC). The agreement was managed by a committee representative of the three churches. Local committees met to coordinate religious services to the migrant labourers and to identify potential problems. The period covered by the Triangular Agreement represented what DRC church historian Johan Jakob Kritzinger called the predominantly ecumenical phase of the DRC’s relations with fellow Protestant Churches in Namibia.50 Even when the DRC embraced the task of establishing its missionary presence in Namibia, with Kaokoland the first area of activity and Kavango, Caprivi and Ovambo to follow, the DRC stressed its desire to avoid encroaching on the terrain of the other churches. Although the decisive moment in transforming the DRC’s mission work into an initiative with clear expansionist aims appeared to have been the publication of the Odendaal Report in 1963, plans to establish a DRC missionary presence in Kaokoland were already discussed in the early 1950s. At the time administrator David Gideon Conradie had requested the DRC to consider establishing its own missionary presence in Kaokoland, but a lack of resources and personnel ensured that the DRC could not move beyond expressions of intent.

While the DRC’s dedication to cooperation with fellow Protestant denominations cannot be doubted, there are a number of pointers to what may be termed as turning points in the transformation from ecumenical cooperation to a more independent-minded unilateral approach concerning such relations. The Cottesloe Conference in Johannesburg in 1960 can be viewed as a watershed in this regard. The DRC initially appeared to have favoured the idea of ecumenical cooperation but intervention by Prime Minister Hendrik F. Verwoerd signalled the government’s intention to pressurise the church into abandoning the idea. A key recommendation of the Odendaal Commission in 1963 was

50 Kritzinger, Sending en Kerk in Suidwes-Afrika: 162. According to him the thinking within the DRC was that ecumenical cooperation would achieve more for the Kingdom of God than separate initiatives. For a discussion of the appreciation among DRC pastors of the spirit of ecumenical cooperation, limited though it was, see ibid.: 152-171.
the establishment of ‘homelands’, ethnically-based enclaves designed to provide a degree of autonomous local government and administration for Namibia’s previously marginalised black majority. It was the moment at which the desire for an expanded, independent mission enterprise was aligned to a firm embrace of the SA government’s apartheid policy. In 1974 the DRC in South Africa published a document, titled “Ras, Volk en Nasie” (Race, People and Nation), which aimed to provide a theological justification for apartheid.\(^{51}\)

In Namibia these developments found practical expression in the decision to terminate the Triangular Agreement, a decision that evoked disappointment among the other signatories to the agreement. Although the agreement did not lapse at once, with payments for the salaries of evangelists continuing for at least three, and occasionally five years, there is little doubt that representatives of ELOC and ELC viewed the decision as having been politically inspired.\(^{52}\) The extent to which the DRC was moving towards a politically-inspired theology which defended apartheid, was apparently not universally supported. Kritzinger mentions a significant number of church leaders who pointed to the danger of “kerkisme” and “separatism”, hoping for a “realistic new understanding that could accommodate the missionary thrust of the church”.\(^{53}\) Writing at a much later date, Buys and Nambala presented a more positive view: “The triangular agreement established a positive ecumenical relationship between the three denominations, which continued on a personal level after 1969. The triangular agreement can be seen as the first effective project between various denominations in Namibia.”\(^{54}\) This is a questionable assertion, judging by the DRC’s continued, subsequent resolute refusal to enter into closer ecumenical arrangements with other churches and ecumenical institutions in Namibia, such as members of the Lutheran family on the one hand and the Christian Centre and CCN, on the other.\(^{55}\) Tötemeyer argues that UELCSWA accused the DRC of selfishness, lacking a serious interest in ecumenical cooperation and that by actively supporting the government in silencing critical voices in the church, it hoped to further its own interests, particularly in the mission field.\(^{56}\) The period following the termination of the Tripartite Agreement indeed witnessed deliberate steps by the DRC to expand its missionary reach in the northern regions of Namibia.

\(^{51}\) Ras Volk en Nasie. Dokument van die Ned Geref Kerk oor Rasse- en Volkereverhoudinge, <kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/GD_RVN.pdf> [accessed September 13, 2016]

\(^{52}\) According to Kritzinger it was esp. among white missionaries in ELC and DELC that he encountered this view and a pastor informed him that “black brothers were beginning to think that the DRC was an instrument of the state”. Cf. Kritzinger, Sending en Kerk in Suidwes-Afrika: 172.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.: 173. “Kerkisme” refers to an obsession with promoting the church as an institution, as opposed to its spiritual function.

\(^{54}\) Buys and Nambala, History of the Church in Namibia: 362.

\(^{55}\) The Christian Centre had amongst its goals the establishment of a “lay-training centre [...] which could offer judicial and social information to the black community and to organise conferences, seminars and ecumenical worship services for Christians from all confessional and racial orientations” (Buys and Nambala, History of the Church in Namibia: 367).

\(^{56}\) Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 58.
It should also be noted that cooperation between the DRC and the two Lutheran mission churches occurred at a time when the Finnish and Rhenish missionaries exercised leadership in these bodies. Early impressions of the new (black) ELOC leaders were favourable: Bishop Auala was lauded for his charisma, willingness to speak Afrikaans to the DRC pastors and his apparent refusal to mix religion and politics. The bishop’s strong stance against apartheid and identification with those on the receiving end of apartheid, as signified by the open letter, must therefore have come as a rude shock to the DRC, committed as they were to maintaining the status quo.

At a joint meeting of the ELOC and ELC church management it was mentioned that since the introduction of partial self-government in the late 1960s white administration officials had attempted to end theological training of Oshivambo-speakers at Ojimbingwe. They also tried to destroy the link between the Finnish and Rhenish missions, citing the former’s status as a foreign institution. The idea was that the DRC should rather take over in Ovambo through its own missionary activities. In fact, in the mid-1970s the DRC had managed to establish congregations in Caprivi, Kavango and Ovambo, apart from its older one at Orumana in Kaokoland. GELC too, continued to avoid committing itself to a union with its fellow Lutheran churches. Central to the ‘white churches’ objection was the alleged subjugation of the gospel to political considerations. This may have accurately reflected a particular theological interpretation of the bible, but this did not prevent white churches from embracing a religious perspective similarly infused with political convictions, namely the endorsement of apartheid. The difference was, of course, that the DRC elevated its theological defence of apartheid into a dogmatic creed, as demonstrated by the 1974 document, “Ras, Volk en Nasie”. GELC’s position was more nuanced, with its embrace of unity in principle counter-balanced by the fear that unity would threaten the church’s cultural autonomy.

At the time the DRC was working towards transforming its missions into congregations and eventually, the establishment of a church. In 1972 a Bible College for training evangelists was established at Orumana, Kaokoland. In 1975 this was expanded to include pastoral training and the institution was renamed the Orumana Theological College. Twenty six evangelists completed their training from 1974 to 1979, when financial constraints led to the college to close its doors. A second DRC mission was established at Mashare in Kavango in 1960, from where it later moved to Takuasa and in 1961 the DRC decided to start a mission in Caprivi. The Reformed Church of Caprivi was founded, with only one church at Nwezi. Work among the San was initiated in 1961 and between 1982 and 1985 five congregations were established. An outpost was formed in Uukwanyama in Ovambo in 1973 leading to the formation of a congregation linked to the DRC group of churches. Between 1975 and 1980 seven DRC mission churches were founded in the northern belt which formed an independent branch of the DRC in Namibia, called the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa (ERCA). After the closure of the Orumaana Theological College, students of ERCA were trained at the Stofberg College in Witsieshoek, South Africa. In 1997 ERCA joined the Uniting Reformed

57 Kritzinger, Sending en Kerk in Suidwes-Afrika: 180, footnote 357.
Church (URC — the former DRC Mission Church for so-called Coloured people). The San congregations stayed with the DRC in Namibia.

The DRC’s manipulation of its ‘daughter’ churches to ensure their adherence to the ‘mother’ church’s conservative theological position has been well-documented. A persistent thorn in the flesh of the DRC in Namibia was Prof. Christo Lombard, formerly head of the Department of Biblical Studies at the former Academy and later Director of the Ecumenical Institute at the University of Namibia. As a member of the Uniting Reformed Church he was uniquely positioned to witness the DRC’s interventionist strategies. He recounted examples of threats to withdraw financial support directed at individuals such as Rev. S. Mmambo of Kavango, Rev. Boas Tjingaete (Head of ERCA) and various other persons. An URC pastor, Dr. William Julius Daniels similarly testified how issues such as church unity (concerning the DRC and its ‘daughter’ churches), dogma and criticism of apartheid were constantly avoided by the DRC. According to Daniels by 1994 the ‘official’ DRC position on church apartheid and Dutch Reformed unity had been exposed as little more than advocating cosmetic adjustments, window dressing and deception.

Lombard refers to a document drafted by the Rev. P. Straus, former Mission Secretary of the DRC and senior church official, in which he lifted the lid somewhat on the extent to which the DRC subjected EGKA to ideological control, calling it “frightening reading”. Another matter on which the DRC failed to commit itself is the Belhar Confession, adopted by the URC in the 1980s as a ‘status confessionis’, according to which any doctrine that supported apartheid had to be rejected as a false doctrine and ideology.

The DRC’s failure to build bridges to other churches reflected its inability to accommodate dissenting voices within its own ranks. A single example of its intolerance in this respect dates from the mid-1980s when a church member of a Windhoek DRC congregation expressed his concern over the church’s failure to accommodate people of colour. At issue was a discussion which between the pastor and a member of the church board, with the concerned member. The latter recounted in a letter to the church board the views expressed at the meeting, which amounted to an admission that the only principle according to which people are refused admission to the congregation and the DRC as a whole, was skin colour. Citing biblical references about the unity of believers, he challenged the pastor and board member to explain why apparent political

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58 Ibid.: 251f.
61 Examples of sources presenting a critical view of the DRC’s role, are the following: Lombard and Hunter, Kom ons word een, particularly chapters 3 and 12; Christo Lombard and Boas Tjingaete, “Wat het met EGKA gebeur?”, pp. 21-40 and Christo Lombard, “Kom ons word een’: wat is hier op die spel?”, pp. 162-178; Daniels, Van Sendingkerk.
considerations should be allowed to influence membership of the church. Only one biblical reference was cited to justify a policy of division in the ranks of the church (Acts, 17:26). The church board’s subsequent response, in a letter to the church member, stated that it was convinced that the latter’s views and interpretation of scripture was not the “only theologically accountable interpretation” and also did not enjoy meaningful support from the congregation. It further stated that the church board did not see its way open to elevate a minority demand to a point of dispute which could damage the hard won unity of the congregation. This failure to defend its position on principled grounds, largely explains why the DRC did a complete turn-around when apartheid in South Africa collapsed. Its doctrinal defence of apartheid was patently informed by political considerations and in the new democratic dispensation it was impossible to maintain its old position.

Church opposition to apartheid

In the absence of a viable opposition inside Namibia it was from churches that the first significant criticism of SA’s policies in Namibia came. The open letter of Bishop Aula and Pastor Gowaseb to Prime Minister Vorster of South Africa in 1971 elicited heated responses in the local media. The Allgemeine Zeitung devoted extensive space in its editorials and columns to cast doubts on the motives behind the letter. Die Suidwester, by contrast, treated the letter with less urgency, but also cast aspersions on the authors’ motives. The Windhoek Advertiser was the only newspaper that displayed a critical attitude towards particular aspects of colonial rule during the editorship of Clive Cowley and his successor, Hannes Smith. Cowley stated that the church leaders had raised doubts about South Africa’s oft-stated assertions that Africans would enjoy full rights and freedoms in their ‘homelands’. Anglican Church leaders regularly drew attention to the injustices suffered by black people under the prevailing system, but in the process alienated most white members of the church. The latter accused the bishops of engaging in politics and regularly took to writing accusatory letters in the Windhoek Advertiser. In 1972 bishop Colin Winter said the authorities withdrew his permit to enter Ovambo to minister to 50,000 black Anglicans, in what he believed to be a deliberate attempt to weaken and curb his ministry. He refused to accept the ideology of apartheid and had been outspoken about the suffering it caused. “I believe the present situation in Ovambo is critical and deteriorating daily”, he observed at the time. He said the missionaries are blamed for incitement, but Africans themselves reject the contract labour system, which at the time was already proving to be an issue around which political opposition to the colonial

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63 Krüger, Schwarze Christen, weiße Christen: 50.
authorities was coalescing.\textsuperscript{64} An article in the \textit{Advertiser} about David de Beer, Anglican priest who ministered to spiritual needs of Oshikwambo-speaking labourers at Brakwater, set the tone for the paper’s subsequent generally sympathetic treatment of church leaders harassed by the government and the police.\textsuperscript{65} The Roman Catholic Church also added its voice to support the open letter of 1971 and in 1975 five priests issued a statement on reconciliation, which in essence condemned white minority rule and oppression of the majority.\textsuperscript{66}

During the strike trial of migrant workers in February 1972 Winter had as a guest a ‘Negro’ judge W. Booth, who was instructed by the International Commission of Jurists to attend the trial. According to Winter the “dehumanisation of Namibia was established by law”, while the general public (whites) showed no interest in what was going on, observing perceptively that “one of the agonies was the failure to build bridges”. He mentioned that he had been chosen by the African leaders in Namibia to be their spokesman.\textsuperscript{67} The trial was attended by C. Kapuuo, D. Meroro and a “third African observer”.\textsuperscript{68} Winter’s high profile involvement in human rights issues clearly proved to be an irritant to the authorities and a deportation order was served on him in February 1972. On March 1, 1972 the regional director of the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, Theo Kotze visited Namibia to express support for the expelled bishop, saying that “there is a real persecution of the church in South Africa”.\textsuperscript{69} At Winter’s farewell service the church was packed with mostly black people who sang ‘we shall overcome’ and ‘Nkosi Sikelele Africa’. Adv. Bryan O’Linn appeared in court for Winter and two other church officials to obtain a stay of the execution order. He argued that “no proof existed that the expelled people’s presence in South West Africa was a threat to peace or to security of the Territory”. The applicants requested reasons for the expulsion order but these were refused. Likewise, an appeal declaring that the “expelled people (were) ready to be examined and cross-examined”, was to no avail.\textsuperscript{70}

During his visit in 1972 Alfred Escher, special envoy of the UN Secretary-General was handed a petition condemning South Africa’s policies by 24 people who were not identified, but included Canon Richard Wood of St. George’s Cathedral in Windhoek. It emphasized that black and coloured people did not support the policy of separate development and racial discrimination and continued: “any person who speaks out against the government is immediately victimized and intimidated by officials and by Government supporters”. After listing the various forms of discrimination suffered by black people, the petition concluded that “whites have no contact with us. We are bitter.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Windhoek Advertiser}, 2 February 1972.  
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Windhoek Advertiser}, 6 February 1970.  
\textsuperscript{66} Tötemeyer, \textit{Church and State in Namibia}: 52f..  
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Windhoek Advertiser} 19 October 1972.  
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Windhoek Advertiser}, 15 February 1972.  
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Windhoek Advertiser}, 1 March 1972.  
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Windhoek Advertiser}, 2 March 1972.
They do not want to know anything. The few caring for us are rejected by the rest of the Whites and termed ‘communists’ or ‘fellow travellers’ and are prosecuted such as pastor Althaus, bishop Winter, D. de Beer, S. Hayes, Bishop Mize and many others. This contrasted sharply with the views expressed by the Dutch Reformed Church delegation to Escher. In the memo presented it was stated that all people are equal before God and the DRC could support the policy of separate development (apartheid), provided it was applied in a “fair and honourable way without affecting or injuring the dignity of a person”. It was conceded that there were instances of discrimination and social injustice, but it was not government policy. The memo, in conclusion, revealed its ideological affinity to government policies by stating that they could not accept a one-man-one-vote policy, since it will “lead to suicide of minority groups”.

The Advertiser followed up these reports with a statement by Escher in which he said the churches had told him that they were experiencing increasing pressure. They affirmed their support for the unity of all racial groups and requested voting rights for the whole population so that democracy could prevail. He referred to Canon R. Wood who deplored the lack of dialogue between white and black. According to Escher, Bishop Auala stressed their opposition to the fragmentation of territory into homelands and insisted that whites have nothing to fear if they take into account the wishes of all people in Namibia. Contrary to South Africa’s allegations there were always friendly relations between the various groups. Bishop P. H. Shilongo said South Africa was stirring ethnic hatred by saying that the Ovambo people would dominate other groups. Most white Anglicans were at loggerheads with their bishops whom they accused of practicing politics and neglecting their spiritual duties. Sympathetic reports reflecting the harassment of the church leaders were regularly met with acrimonious responses by letter writers to the Windhoek Advertiser.

Five years later the paper reported about a memorandum that was presented by three churches to envoys of the Western Contact Group. (The memo was signed by J. L. de Vries, Evangelical Lutheran Church, H. Hunke, Roman Catholic Church and Bishop Morrow of the Anglican Church). According to the churchmen UN supervised elections would be the only solution, pointing to the fact that the three churches represented two-thirds of the black population, with the latter making up 90% of Namibia’s population. They conceded that South Africa had done some good and generous things, but these were “overshadowed by discriminatory political policies which had been callously implemented” and the “ever-increasing rule of terror which had been inflicted on the people.”

Towards the end of the year ELC president J. L. de Vries was reported to have confirmed that church leaders had talks with Swapo (internal) “in an attempt to create the right atmosphere for an election in SWA/Namibia.” The churches referred to

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71 Windhoek Advertiser, 16 October 1972.
72 Windhoek Advertiser, 26 October 1972.
73 Windhoek Advertiser, 28 November 1972.
74 Windhoek Advertiser, 11 May 1977.
were ELC, Roman Catholic, Anglican and African Methodist Episcopal Churches. Swapo had reportedly responded positively to this initiative and welcomed talks with church leaders. It furthermore affirmed its support for elections, provided certain conditions were met, such as the withdrawal of SA forces. De Vries mentioned that they aimed to talk to the Namibia National Front and were prepared to talk to the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), too.75

In October 1977 exiled bishop Colin Winter blasted white members of the Anglican Church who had constantly opposed him and his successor, portraying them as a tiny minority within an overwhelming black diocese. According to Winter these people would appear to be amongst the most reactionary forces in Namibian society.76 In early 1978 it was reported that suspicion in white minds about ‘black’ church leaders clouded their judgement and inhibited attempts to establish dialogue. ELOC bishop Leonard Auala stated in a memo that Administrator-General M. T. Steyn had brought about many significant changes, but there was still much to be done. He portrayed Swapo as enjoying much support in the north and mentioned that people were being intimidated by army soldiers. In the same memo Heinz Hunke stated that torture was taking place, causing people to say that they felt safer with Plan (People’s Liberation Army of Namibia – PLAN) forces than SA troops, though both were feared.77 Two aspects are of significance as far as such reports about church opposition to SA rule were concerned. Firstly, it gave whites an inkling of what was happening in the territory at a time when most newspapers and the radio supported South Africa’s presence. If such views were reported at all they were either given little prominence or accompanied by comments accusing the churches of meddling in politics. Secondly, the Windhoek Advertiser usually gave reports of discontent prominence by displaying it on the front page, or commented on it in the editorial column.

In March 1978 three-quarters of a page was devoted to a speech by a DRC minister, the Rev. P. D. Strauss, which editor Hannes Smith called “brilliant and courageous”. At the time a highly unusual occurrence, Strauss highlighted developments in the black community, mentioning that churches are teaching black people to rid themselves of their inferiority complex. To black people, he said, the term black is not a racial epithet, but a sign of racial oppression. He quoted Bishop Zephania Kameeta who stated that from the perspective of black people the white God is one who oppresses and he spoke of people’s anger at the bombing of the Onippa church press. He touched on several sensitive issues by pointing to views among black people according to which the SADF constituted an illegal occupation force, the Turnhalle was viewed as a fraud and Swapo was not feared by people belonging to the various Lutheran Churches. Finally Strauss, who spoke to the exclusive Afrikaner group, the Rapportryers (mounted messengers), stated that the news media was distrusted for spreading lies and voiced his opinion that

75 Windhoek Advertiser, 2 December 1977.
76 Windhoek Advertiser, 4 October 1977.
77 Windhoek Advertiser, 20 February 1978.
a lasting political solution could only be achieved if there was cooperation with UELCSWA.\footnote{Windhoek Advertiser, 3 March 1978.}

The opposition to apartheid derived from a specific understanding of the role of the church in a particular socio-political setting. The black Lutheran churches operated as the vanguard in formulating a theological position opposed to the status quo theology of the white churches. As mentioned earlier, the emphasis on a vertical dimension (God and humans) to the exclusion of the horizontal, was rejected by the black Lutherans. According Krüger this response was “neither a theological expression of human rights, nor a recourse to a doctrine of the two kingdoms”. It was rather “concerned with an independent social criticism taken from the gospels in single acts of confession and in the terminology of a liberation theology, which, as a politically relevant and actual biblical theology, they considered more suitable to define their socio-political mandate.”\footnote{Krüger, Schwarze Christen, weiße Christen: 239 (English summary).} It is in the language of liberation theology that the oppressed in South Africa and Namibia defended and explained their opposition to a theology supporting and underpinning the official apartheid policy.

From the outset, liberation theology was interpreted as deriving, not from the colour of people’s skin, but from the common experience of suffering, striving to free people from a “slave mentality and inferiority complexes, in the process of re-discovering one’s humanity, dignity and colour”.\footnote{Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 76f.} Kameeta, arguably the most eloquent advocate of liberation theology in Namibia, argued that western theology did not take into account the actual conditions under which black people lived.\footnote{Quoted by Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 80.} In Kameeta’s definition of a black theology of liberation, two features are of special relevance: a holistic approach and a perspective from below.\footnote{Per Frostin, “The theological debate on liberation”, in: Peter Katjavivi, Per Frostin and Kaire Mbuende, (eds.), Church and Liberation in Namibia, London, Pluto, 1989: 51-92 (62).} According to Kameeta people should not withdraw into a spiritual sphere, but be actively involved in the world, “sacrificing themselves for the liberation of their neighbours”. As such he rejected the so-called two kingdoms or two spheres theology and asserted that political and socio-economic issues are an integral part of spiritual life. “The struggle against injustice is seen as an essential dimension of a ‘confessing church’ in Namibia, implying that a church that stands aloof of this struggle betrays the confession in God.”\footnote{Quoted in: Frostin, “Theological debate”: 63.}

The white churches’ rejection of a holistic theology demonstrated the unstated political assumptions underpinning their position. Per Frostin quotes Nolan who had argued that the ideology of the national security state had begun to replace Afrikaner nationalism in

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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\bibitem{Windhoek Advertiser} Windhoek Advertiser, 3 March 1978.
\bibitem{Krüger} Krüger, Schwarze Christen, weiße Christen: 239 (English summary).
\bibitem{Tötemeyer} Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 76f.
\bibitem{Frostin} Quoted by Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 80.
\bibitem{Frostin2} Quoted in: Frostin, “Theological debate”: 63.
\end{thebibliography}
the 1970s, displacing the emphasis on apartheid with that of security and survival.84 Whereas the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia maintained a theological position according to which the religious/spiritual spheres should be treated as separate from the socio-political dimension, the Dutch Reformed Church postulated a racial/ethnic basis in defence of its theological position. The National Party’s growing emphasis on security was not informed by a concern with religious doctrines as such, but with the existential challenge by the agents of ‘godless communism’, which was believed to pose a threat to the God-ordained and proclaimed dispensation prevailing under white rule. In this perspective, the status quo of order and stability was threatened by communist and liberation movements which were seen as acting in unison.85 In retrospect, the threadbare nature of the theological defence of apartheid was explicitly demonstrated by the almost indecent haste with which the DRC’s defence of apartheid as formulated in its 1974 document (Race, People and Nation) was replaced by a rejection of apartheid theology in the next decade. This rather spectacular collapse of a discredited theological system might have been expected to give rise after independence to a new theological and sociological dispensation that reflected the more holistic, justice-based approach postulated by the black churches. It did not quite turn out that way and to understand why, a brief exploration into developments in the 1980s and 1990s is required.

The church: principled opposition or political expediency?

The discussion so far largely demonstrated principled opposition to apartheid and South African rule in Namibia from the side of the ‘Black Churches’ and either active support for or silent assent to opposition to South African policies. The bravery displayed by the churches representing the majority of Namibian people in the period before independence is well documented.86 The Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), in particular, played an important role in accepting and channelling humanitarian assistance before 1990. Gerhard Tötemeyer, quoted by Siegfried Groth, stated that the church was the most powerful horizontal power in Namibia, having penetrated all other groups in society.87 Between 1973 and 1978 the Christian Centre (formerly the Ecumenical Centre), supported by the Black Lutheran Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church, aimed to promote cooperation among

85 Frostin, “Theological debate”; 58f.
86 For detailed discussions of the oppositional role of individual churches, as well as through organised church bodies such as the CCN, see Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia; Peter Katjivivi, Per Frostin and Kaire Mbuende, (eds.), Church and Liberation in Namibia, London, Pluto, 1989; Colin Leys and John S. Saul, (eds.), Namibia’s Liberation Struggle – the two-edged Sword, London, Currey, 1995; Jörg Baumgarten, (ed.), Zephania Kameeta – Towards liberation. Crossing boundaries between Church and Politics, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2006.
churches. Church leaders from all these denominations were, however, mercilessly hounded by South African security agencies. With the establishment of the CCN in 1978 it “found itself in the forefront of internal resistance against the state”, a position it assumed by default, because of “repression of black opposition and the absence of a liberal white lobby.” Apart from exposing South Africa’s oppressive policies and actions and formulating a liberation theology, the CCN performed a variety of services: assistance to the opponents of the state, including legal aid, support for dependents, financing prison visits and promoting the economic and social development of black communities. Of particular significance was the involvement of the church in politics, for example by protesting against torture and assisting the victims of apartheid. This made it the target of state repression: the movement of church workers was restricted, visas of foreign church personnel were withdrawn or denied and attacks on church premises took place, such as the ELOC printing press in Oniipa in 1973 and the Anglican Church building and school in Odibo.

At the time it was easy to understand why the CCN obtained significant international financial and moral support. Even governments and activist civic organisations in the western world provided concrete assistance to the church, though occasionally concern was expressed over support for Swapo’s military struggle. By and large this did not significantly affect support to the CCN. Internal divisions were, however, experienced within certain churches. As mentioned, GELC had experienced serious internal disagreements, but most members of its congregations supported the status quo, as did the DRC. ELC, with its mixture of various ethnic groups, was particularly susceptible to dissenting arguments about the question of support for violence. By contrast, the homogenous character of ELOC largely precluded internal divisions, with its members strongly identifying with and supporting the liberation struggle.

Steenkamp’s argument that the CCN supported Swapo by legitimising its struggle and discrediting its opponents, and that it was an elitist organisation, divorced from the grassroots, is considered by Tötemeyer to be “a harsh statement and not fully deserved”. Tötemeyer’s position is arguably influenced by the fact that the churches continued to debate the matter of violent resistance against apartheid and South Africa rule and consistently qualified their support for the liberation of Namibia by insisting that though opposed to violence per

88 See Tötemeyer, *Church and State in Namibia*: 84 for a list of church leaders who were either expelled in this period or whose residence permits were withdrawn.

90 Ibid.: 96.  
91 Ibid.: 97.

92 Steenkamp, “The Churches”: 103. He mentions that the “CCN executive’s efforts to foster democratic, grassroots organizations were not self-generated, nor did they reflect a concern with democracy.” It was, he argued, a response to the “pressure of its liberal donors for a more inclusive and participatory policy.” (Ibid.: 101).

93 Tötemeyer, *Church and State in Namibia*: 87.
se, they operated from a theological position directed against prevailing fundamental injustice. However, a retrospective assessment makes it possible to trace a pattern of, at best silent assent or at worse, acquiescence to Swapo actions. A few examples to support this assertion should suffice.

It was already becoming evident in the 1980s that the church did not express criticism of Swapo for its actions, in marked contrast to its position on South Africa. Pastor Siegfried Groth asserted that it failed to criticise Swapo openly for its shortcomings, something that its international ecumenical partners, for example the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, were also guilty of. The test case for demonstrating the potentially independent role of the church came in 1996 with the publication of Siegfried Groth’s book dealing with detainees in Swapo camps in exile, and a subsequent appeal to the CCN to undertake its publication. Because it was considered to be a “commercial venture”, the CCN decided against publishing, but the executive thereafter decided to plan a conference to discuss the detainee issue. In the same year Bishop Dumeni of ELCIN twice met with the president at the time, Sam Nujoma, who cautioned that the CCN should avoid damaging the reconciliation process. On another occasion Nujoma stated that Swapo had not done anything in exile that “demands remorse”. Soon, it became evident that the church leadership was divided on the decision and eventually decided to postpone the conference and dedicate 1997 as the “Year of God’s Grace”. This followed fierce attacks on Groth and Prof. Christo Lombard by Sam Nujoma during a live television address, and a lively public debate about the issue. By then even CCN General-Secretary, Abisai Shejaivali, had admitted that he had been misled by Swapo’s counter-propaganda and that the time had come to address the issue. The outcome of this dramatic episode was that the former president insisted that the church confine itself to addressing issues such as poverty, alcoholism and violence. Since then the church had resolutely avoided tackling controversial public issues. Upon assuming his position as Namibia’s third president, Hage Geingob appointed Bishop Zephania Kameeta, together with Bishop Leonard Auala, arguably the clergyman with the highest profile during the colonial period, as Minister charged with poverty eradication and social welfare. While avoiding controversial

94 Groth, Namibia: 153.
95 For a discussion of earlier attempts by former detainees and Groth himself, to direct attention to the abuses in Swapo camps in exile, through appeals to ELCIN and the CCN, see Lombard, “The detainee issue: an unresolved test case for Swapo, the churches and civil society”, in: Ingolf Diener and Olivier Graefe, (eds.), Contemporary Namibia. The first Landmarks of a Post-Apartheid Society, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2001: 161-184. Such reports already started to circulate by 1984.
96 Tötemeyer, Church and State in Namibia: 136.
98 Lombard, “The detainee issue”: 177-182.
99 Ibid.: 177.
political matters like the detainee issue, Kameeta did criticise certain deficiencies in the Namibian social fabric sharply, drawing comparisons with the evils of the colonial period. Referring to nepotism, corruption, racism and dishonesty, he argued rhetorically: “Does it not mean that we were not really honest in our fight against colonialism, exploitation and racism and that this was just a matter of selected morality?”

Books recently published, written by people formerly closely associated with Swapo, tend to support the view that the organisation consistently exhibited an authoritarian character that rendered it intolerant of dissension. The church’s failure to address this matter casts further doubt on the perception that it served as the ‘voice of the voiceless.’ Although it may be argued that the earlier fight against foreign oppression and racial discrimination represented a much more morally unambiguous position, it is difficult to defend widespread corruption and the appropriation of state resources as representing a lesser evil. Widely publicised cases of fraud did not seem to have been dealt with the severity that was required.

Chris Tapscott pointed to the weakness of civil society in Namibia, which he ascribes to the policies of the colonial government and Swapo’s political strategies during the independence struggle, “both of which inhibited the development of NGO’s, community-based organisations and other organisations outside of formal politics”.

It is perhaps indicative of the diminishing role of the church in Namibian society that several observers commenting on Namibia’s post-independence achievements and shortcomings barely mention the church as an institution capable of contributing towards finding solutions for problems such as corruption, violence and poverty. Even those who do feel the church can play such a role, such as Tötemeyer and Kameeta, were critical of the CCN’s failure to be the catalyst for moral renewal. On various occasions founding president Nujoma lashed out at particular individuals and groups in displays of intolerance that certain observers considered to be instances of hate speech. In 1996

100 Quoted in Baumgarten, Zephania Kameeta: 218.
102 Henning Melber, a Swapo member since the 1970s and former director of the Namibia economic policy research institute (Nepru), as well as the Dag Hammerskjold Foundation in Sweden, is a persistent critic of Swapo, particularly over issues such as corruption, appropriation of state resources for private or sectional gain and the failure to seriously address the continuing gap between rich and poor in Namibia. His latest book presents disquieting direct and circumstantial evidence to support this argument: Henning Melber, Understanding Namibia. The Trials of Independence, London, Hurst, 2014.
he attacked gays, as well as individuals connected with the detainee issue. In 2009 he accused whites of being responsible for poverty among black people and robbing them of land. He further accused them of being untrustworthy and of being criminals. He put the slow pace of land reform down to sabotage by the white community. The Namibian newspaper reported in 2009 that he claimed that whites were like having a poisonous snake in your bedroom. On sensitive issues like these, the church has been largely silent. Tötemeyer’s most recent assessment is quite damning. He reasons that the church

relies more on compromises and evasion than taking a firm stand on issues that concern society. One gets the impression that the church and her office bearers are often more concerned about tribal, class, ideological and political affiliations and concerns than religious norms and values.

Conclusion

The history of the church in Namibia, and for that matter the world at large, makes for sober reading. Over thousands of years the church had been elevated to a position of authority in pronouncing on eternal truths and guiding people in matters both spiritual and material. More often than not, the institution has demonstrated an inability to live up to its exalted reputation, reflecting human fallibility rather than offering proof of divine guidance. This raises the question: should the church not be treated like ordinary human institutions rather than claiming to be divinely inspired and instituted? More pertinent, why did the church in Namibia (the black churches in particular) so closely associated with the struggle for liberation, fail to live up to expectations that it would act to defend and promote the struggle for justice and equality? Recently, commentators, Tötemeyer in particular, have expressed grave disappointment with the inability of the church to embrace this role. It is easy to see why. There is precious little evidence to suggest that the church has meaningfully assisted in overcoming the legacy of ethnic division and prejudice bequeathed by colonialism and racism. The former white churches (GELC and the DRC) are still almost exclusively based on their former core ethnic constituencies and there are very few indications that this will change. The CCN and the former black Lutheran churches have largely embraced a position of relatively harmonious co-existence with the current government. Occasional expressions of concern with issues such as racial hostility, poverty, the gap between rich and poor and gender-based violence, are more directed at perceived deficiencies in society than at government policy as such. Statements reflecting what can at best be described as intolerance

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108 Tötemeyer, Namibia Today: 131. Hunter argues that there is evidence suggesting that leading figures within the CCN appear to have developed a comfortable relationship with those in power and are therefore unlikely to openly challenge government abuses. J. H. Hunter (personal communication).
against gays and lesbians, particular ethnic groups and individuals, were occasionally met with mild expressions of concern by church leaders.\textsuperscript{109}

The limits of the church’s transformative powers in society are reflected in the brief rise and decline of Black Liberation Theology. As mentioned earlier, it was often stressed that the term black was to be understood in this context as synonymous with a condition of joint suffering. In Kameeta’s theology of liberation the holistic approach and the perspective from ‘below’ was given special emphasis. A spiritual life, according to this perspective, should be closely associated with political and socio-economic issues.\textsuperscript{110}

Kameeta is still active in the national campaign against poverty and hunger, but absent is the strident condemnation of structural violence and injustice that constituted an integral part of liberation theology. This raises the question as to whether the need for political freedom eventually proved to be more decisive for liberation theologians than the potential to contribute to a restructuring of society on the basis of justice and equality.

An alternative way to understand this state of affairs is to focus on the human origins of organised religion. From a secular perspective, it makes sense to understand religion as derived from human initiative, but predicated on an (invented) all-powerful, all-knowing and all-just God. The problem is that most religious believers do not accept such an explanation. Richard Lewontin provides a telling illustration of this attitude by quoting the reverend Ron Carlson, “a popular preacher, lecturer, and author”. He offers his audiences two stories and let them decide whether it is important which one appears to be true. According to the secular story “you are the descendant of a tiny cell of protoplasm [...] You came from nothing and are going nowhere.” The Christian view holds that “you are the special creation of a good and all-powerful God [...] He gave the life of His only Son that you might spend eternity with Him.” It should come as no surprise that the Christian view provides for people “for whom the ordinary experience of living does not, a seductive relief from what Eric Fromm called the Anxiety of Meaninglessness.”\textsuperscript{111}

From this perspective it makes sense to understand religion as the expression of a deep psychological imperative, designed to provide comfort to ethnic communities, bourgeoisie sensibilities or people harbouring any number of existential fears. There is no doubt that

\textsuperscript{109} See Tötemeyer, \textit{Church and State in Namibia}: 161-163, for examples of intolerance displayed by founding president S. Nujoma.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.: 62f.

\textsuperscript{111} Richard Lewontin, “The wars over Evolution”, \textit{The New York Review of Books}, 20 October 2005: 53. The full quotation is as follows: “\textit{secular:} you are the descendent of a tiny cell of primordial protoplasm washed up on an empty beach three and half billion years ago. You are a mere grab-bag of atomic particles, a conglomeration of genetic substance. You exist on a tiny planet in a minute solar system [...] in an empty corner of a meaningless universe. You came from nothing and are going nowhere. \textit{Christian:} you are the special creation of a good and all-powerful God. You are the climax of his creation [...] Not only is your kind unique, but you are unique among your kind [...] Your Creator loves you so much and so intensely desires your companionship and affection that [...] He gave the life of His only Son that you might spend eternity with Him.”
the church can be a powerful force for good, but history suggests that this is more dependent on human initiative rather than supernatural inspiration.

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