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(114) AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY AND PARTNERSHIP WITH MIDDLE EASTERN CHURCHES: THE PALESTINE KAIROS DOCUMENT

Edwin Arrison

This chapter seeks to explain the significant role played by the South African churches and the world church against apartheid in South Africa, and why the South African church community is now well placed to support Christians in Palestine struggling for an end to apartheid as expressed through the Israeli Occupation. In 2017, Palestine commemorates both the centenary of the British-imposed Balfour Declaration and the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 occupation by Israel of the West Bank and the Syrian Golan Heights.

Introduction

In 1994, South Africa emerged from the nightmare of apartheid. The words used to describe apartheid by the UN and international church bodies were words such as ‘crime against humanity’, evil, inhuman, heresy, etc.

When Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President of the new South Africa in May 1994, he used the words ‘never, never and never again...’ in his inaugural speech.¹ Those who were present and who listened carefully would have recognised the words ‘never again...’ but this time it was placed firmly within an African context and also given greater and triple emphasis.

However, before this speech could be made, apartheid first had to be defeated by humanity.

Sections of the South African church were particularly active against apartheid, especially in the thirty years before its demise, led by people such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane, Beyers Naudé and Denis Hurley. This was extremely important, as the apartheid government always justified its policy on the basis that they were the last bastion of Christianity against Communism. The presence of Christian leaders in the struggle against apartheid was therefore particularly important.

At a global level, Archbishop Trevor Huddleston also led the global anti-apartheid movement from London, and the Rev. Barney Pityana headed up the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) at the World Council of Churches (1988-1992), succeeding Baldwin Sjollem.

There was another reason why this church involvement in the thirty years before apartheid fell was important: the fact that, by 1960, the ANC and other liberation movements had given up on the idea of a purely non-violent struggle and formed an underground military movement called *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the Spear of the Nation.

The mainline churches could not with any authenticity express their displeasure at such a move (which they did) without appearing to be hypocritical, since many of them were supplying chaplains to the apartheid army. It simply had to find creative ways of becoming involved in non-violent action against apartheid to retain, first, its credibility in South Africa but, more importantly, the credibility of the gospel. The fact that many of the churches had links with the global church meant that the message against apartheid could also be expressed on global platforms.

From 1960 to 1990, much of the world church attention was focused on the issue of apartheid in South Africa, especially the theological justification for it provided primarily by Dutch Reformed Church theologians in South Africa. This probably reminded some European theologians too much of the

¹ See Nelson Mandela ‘Statement of Nelson Mandela at his Inauguration as President’, *African National Congress*, www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3132 (accessed 25 June, 2016).

theological support given to Nazism by most of the church in Germany, and the resistance to that by the Confessing Church.

Besides, theologians and church leaders, ordinary Europeans, Americans, Africans and other citizens of the world showed their displeasure of apartheid by boycotting South African goods and sport, advocating sanctions and divestment despite the fact that their government leaders, particularly Reagan, Thatcher and Kohl, were reluctant to do so.

Sadly, even some churches were reluctant to heed the call for sanctions against South Africa. Despite the fact that Archbishop Tutu headed up the Anglican Church in Southern Africa, the Church of England synods during the 1980s consistently voted against sanctions and divestment in South Africa, claiming that it would hurt ‘the Blacks’ more. Ordinary Christians and other citizens were, however, not convinced by these arguments and mobilized against apartheid, even on the streets of major cities of the world.

What is therefore happening today in Israel and Palestine reminds South African and other theologians of the church struggle against apartheid. This memory is what Kairos theologians called a ‘dangerous memory’ when we celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the 1985 Kairos Document in South Africa (see further below). It was at this conference that a call was made for the intensification of Boycott, divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel.²

Besides the memory of apartheid, the reality on the ground has been investigated by a South African research body (the Human Sciences Research Council), and its research found that the situation in the West Bank today can be compared with apartheid in South Africa.³ The Russell Tribunal on Palestine, meeting in Cape Town in 2011 under the leadership of Stéphane Hessel, found that not only the West Bank situation can be compared with apartheid, but also what is happening in Israel today – since something like fifty laws discriminate between Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis.⁴ Both Desmond Tutu and Jimmy Carter have also described the situation in both the West Bank and Israel as apartheid.

The ideology of apartheid challenges the fundamental belief that all human beings are created equal, in the image of God, and are equally loved by him. In order to show its displeasure at this heresy, the world church had no option but to clearly distance itself from it. But this was not easy and many ‘church theologians’ tried a milder approach to end apartheid, but ultimately the Kairos moment was felt so strongly that, by 1988, most church leaders took part in the ‘Standing for the Truth’ campaign and even called for prayer for the downfall of apartheid.

Again, it is not easy for many to recognise the situation in Israel and Palestine today as apartheid, but most South African theologians have identified it as such.

Background of the Church Struggle against Apartheid

For readers who are unaware of the worldwide church focus on the issue of South African apartheid, it is worth recounting some of the salient events over a thirty-year period.

² See Kairos Southern Africa, ‘Kairos SA 30th Anniversary Conference Ttatement: Dangerous Memory and Hope for the Future’, <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/kairos-sa-30th-anniversary-conference-statement> (accessed 25 June, 2016).

³ See Virginia Tilley ‘Report: Israel practicing Apartheid in Palestinian Territories’ in *Human Sciences Research Council*, www.hsrc.ac.za/en/media-briefs/democracy-governance-and-service-delivery/report-israel-practicing-apartheid-in-palestinian-territories (accessed 25 June, 2016).

⁴ See Russell Tribunal on Palistine (RToP), www.russelltribunalonpalestine.com/en/sessions/south-africa/south-africa-session-%E2%80%9494-full-findings/cape-town-session-summary-of-findings (accessed 25 June, 2016).

The Cottesloe Consultation (1960) in Johannesburg

In December 1960, the World Council of Church convened a consultation on the church and apartheid in a Johannesburg suburb called Cottesloe. This was primarily in response to the Sharpsville massacre that had taken place the preceding March, where white policemen shot and killed black protesters, most of them in the back.

It is interesting to note that this was also the year that Chief Albert Luthuli received the Nobel Peace Prize. He was the leader of the African National Congress (ANC) but also a Christian leader in South Africa.

At the Cottesloe Consultation, Beyers Naudé began to emerge as what Eberhard Bethge described as the 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer of South Africa'.⁵ He was an Afrikaner leader and was being groomed to either become the Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church or even Prime Minister of apartheid South Africa. He could not justify apartheid theologically (not even a mild version of it) and decided to leave the white Dutch Reformed Church and join the black Dutch Reformed Church. He also became the leader of the Christian Institute of South Africa.

'The Message to the people of South Africa' (1968)

By 1968, the Christian Institute published a document called 'The Message to the People of South Africa' in which it distanced the gospel of Jesus Christ from apartheid. This was widely read and accepted and was the precursor to what was to happen in the 1970s, particularly the church's support for the Black Consciousness Movement.

The banning of Beyers Naudé and other church and theological figures:

Dr Beyers Naudé established the Christian Institute in 1963, after he had resigned from the Dutch Reformed Church. By 1977, Beyers Naudé and others such as Brian Brown were served with banning orders and the Christian Institute was closed down by the apartheid regime.

Desmond Tutu became the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches in 1978, a post he held until 1984.

The Establishment of the Programme to Combat Racism of the WCC (1970)

In 1970, the WCC established the Programme to Combat Racism, with a major focus on apartheid in South Africa. Even though it was seen as controversial by some, this body adopted the 'Lusaka Statement' in 1987, which called upon the churches to support the liberation movements with humanitarian aid.

Expulsion of the Dutch Reformed Church by the WARC (1982)

By 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted the statement that 'Apartheid is a heresy', and expelled the white Dutch Reformed Church from its membership, and at the same time elected Alan Boesak as its moderator.

Launch of the South African Kairos Document: 1985⁶

The Kairos Document was the 'straw that broke the camel's back' and built on statements against apartheid, but went further by analysing the way in which, particularly the English-speaking missionary

⁵ See De Gruchy John, 'Beyers Naudé: South Africa's Bonhoeffer? Celebrating the Centenary of the birth of Beyers Naudé - 1915-2015', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* Vol. 1, no 1, (2015): 79–98.

⁶ South African History Online, 'Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa: The Kairos Document, 1985' <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/challenge-church-theological-comment-political-crisis-south-africa-kairos-document-1985#sthash.V65DU0HC.dpuf> (accessed 24 June, 2016).

church leadership, carefully approached the issue of apartheid, thereby leading Christians to a notion of ‘false reconciliation’ and ‘false peace’.

*Adoption of the Belhar Confession⁷ by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church
(now called the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa – URCSA): 1986*

Because of its confessional nature, and its link with the white Dutch Reformed church, the ‘coloured’ section of the Dutch Reformed Church adopted the Belhar Confession in 1986 and urged the white Dutch Reformed church to do the same. More than twenty years after the end of apartheid, it has still not done so on a national level even though some of its regional synods have urged the national church to take this step.

I highlight the development of all these church statements and actions in order to:

1. Explain the similar ways in which churches across the world were both supportive of the struggle against apartheid while some saw it as controversial and wanted to proceed cautiously;
2. To argue why the situation in Israel and Palestine is reminiscent – with some interesting differences – of what happened in South Africa during the church struggle against apartheid; and,
3. Underline why I believe that the church in South Africa is well placed to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine, and to explain the situation in Palestine to the world church.

There is, however, one important difference: the majority of South Africa’s population was Christian, while the majority of the people of Israel and Palestine are Jewish or Muslim. The small but significant Christian population of Israel and Palestine therefore holds the key to global Christian involvement towards creating a just solution in Israel and Palestine. They have now done this through the publication of the Palestine Kairos Document – and the world church is once again asked to respond to this new Kairos.

South African Christians, because of their experience against apartheid, are therefore ideally placed to lead this global solidarity movement with both the Christians and, ultimately, with all the people of Palestine and Israel.

The Israel-Palestine ‘Sharpsville’ Moment (2008)

In 2008, Israel invaded Gaza and killed more than 2,000 Palestinians. In 2014, Israel repeated this and once again killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, this time mostly civilians.

The Palestine Kairos Document (2009)

At the adoption of the Palestine Kairos Document⁸ in Bethlehem in December 2009, a letter of support from Archbishop-emeritus Desmond Tutu was read out. Delegates expressed great appreciation for this letter, coming as it did from South Africa. The South African delegation, consisting of the writer of this article, Edwin Arrison, Dr Stiaan van der Merwe and the Rev Solomuzi Mabuza, together with some members of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), was also warmly welcomed and several references were made to the South African Kairos Document and the South African church struggle against apartheid. A call to support BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) was also made at the adoption of the Palestine Kairos Document.

Another message of support was read by the delegates of the All Africa Conference of Churches. It was recognised that, while there was strong support coming from Europe and the USA, support from the African Church would prove to be especially significant over the coming years.

⁷ See The Belhar confession letter, http://www.upcsa.org.za/docs-archive/belhar_confession_with_letter.pdf (accessed 24 June, 2016).

⁸ See ‘Kairos Palestine’, www.kairospalestine.ps (accessed 24 June, 2016).

Concerns about the African Church

Some concerns about the role of the African Church were expressed in both public and private.

The major concern was that African Christians were coming to Israel on pilgrimage to visit ‘dead stones’ but they rarely interacted with the ‘living stones’, i.e. Arab Palestinian Christians, living in the land where Jesus was born, died and rose again, and where our most sacred texts were written. A group called ‘Kairos Nigeria’ has now arisen in Nigeria to counter this narrative about Israel and Palestine within the Nigerian church context.

One of the South African delegates, the Rev Moss Nthla, on a visit to the Palestinian Christians in August 2008, discovered that something he had done a few years earlier was directly detrimental to his Palestinian sisters and brothers. He was completely unaware that planting a tree in what the Israelis called the ‘South Africa Park’ was actually a former Palestinian village called Lubyia. It was only on his visit in 2008 that he discovered how the Jewish National Fund was playing on the Judeo-Christian link and using it to undermine the story of Palestinian Christians and other Palestinians. Soon after this visit, a film was made by Dr Heidi Grunebaum, a South African Jew, about the village of Lubyia.⁹

The Intensification of Support for Palestine from Christians in South Africa since 2009

The three delegates returning from the launch of the Palestine Kairos Document returned to a South African ecumenical movement that was both weak and divided.

However, in April 2010, Kairos Southern Africa drafted a statement in support of Kairos Palestine and more than sixty South African church leaders and theologians signed this statement.¹⁰ This was the first major statement by the South African church on the question of Palestine.

Desmond Tutu, even though he was retired, is the one South African church leader who has consistently supported Kairos Palestine.

In 2011, he opened the Russell Tribunal on Palestine in Cape Town in the presence of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba. Allan Boesak also gave a testimony at this session of the Russell Tribunal.

Various church leaders’ delegations have visited Palestine, and at the end of 2012, a church leaders’ delegation from South Africa released a statement calling their experience of apartheid in Palestine and Israel as having a sense of being tormented by the reminder of being in an apartheid state.¹¹

Dr Mitri Raheb again visited Cape Town in 2013 to deliver the Steve de Gruchy lecture. This put him in touch with the well-known South African theologian, John de Gruchy who, in his morning meditations at the Kairos 30th anniversary celebrations, referred to the Gospel of Mark as ‘the first Palestine Kairos Document’ because of the words in the first chapter of Mark: ‘The time is now.’¹²

In 2013, South Africa hosted a event initiated by Sweden called the ‘Moving Mountains Global Youth Event’ where young people from at least eight African countries attended and pledged to do all they could to support the struggle for justice in Palestine through their churches.

Two Anglican diocesan synods (Natal and Saldanha Bay) have adopted resolutions on Israel and Palestine at their respective synods. While this is only a small start, it is likely that other synods will follow

⁹ See Village under the Forest, <https://www.uwc.ac.za/Announcements/Pages/The-Village-under-the-Forest.aspx> (accessed 24 June, 2016).

¹⁰ See ‘A South African Christian response to the Palestinian Kairos Document’, www.voltairenet.org/article164794.html (accessed 24 June, 2016).

¹¹ See South African Church delegation to Palestine, <http://marthiemombergblog.com/tag/south-african-church-delegation-to-palestine> (accessed 24 June, 2016).

¹² Mark 1:15.

and ultimately a Provincial Synod is likely to do the same. This will be a powerful signal for the rest of the South African church to follow.

In 2014, after the latest Gaza war, the biggest march in democratic South Africa was held in Cape Town on 9th August 2014. Archbishop-emeritus Desmond Tutu and the current moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, addressed this mass gathering of support for the people of Gaza.

Finally, Kairos Southern Africa has now initiated an art project called 'Via Dolorosa' to paint 8m x 2m paintings of the fourteen Stations of the Cross from a Palestinian perspective. Once this project is completed, the painting will travel throughout the world, allowing Christians across the world to reflect on the suffering of the Palestinian people in the light of the Passion Story, and to make decisions about how to engage with that situation, which has been described by Mitri Raheb as one of 'empire'.

Conclusion

This chapter begins to show how the 'Kairos moment' of South Africa in 1985 has inspired the Palestine Kairos Document of 2009 and how this has now re-inspired sections of the South African church community, particularly Kairos Southern Africa, to draw comparative theological lines between apartheid in South Africa and the occupation of Palestine by the state of Israel, a state that is often lauded by many Christians throughout the world. It pre-empts the possibility that the world church will once again be awakened to the reality of evil and how theology may be used to justify oppression of one people by another. While South African apartheid was a form of localised racism, the occupation of Palestine can only be seen as a form of globalised racism and a global theology of Christian Zionism that informs much Christian thinking about the state of Israel. The narrative of Israel as an apartheid state is therefore an important first step in distancing the world church from the theological justification of the oppression of the Palestinian people.

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